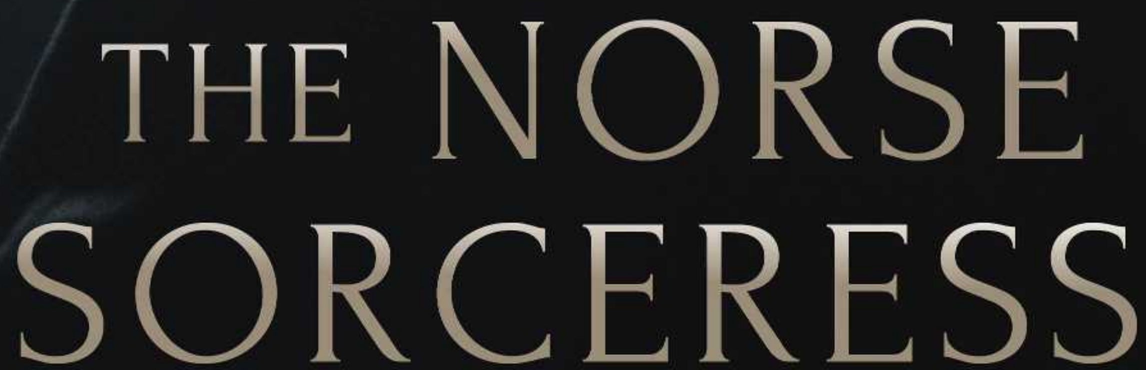

MIND AND MATERIALITY IN THE VIKING WORLD

Edited by Leszek Gardeła, Sophie Bønding, and Peter Pentz

THE NORSE SORCERESS

MIND AND MATERIALITY IN THE VIKING WORLD

Edited by

LESZEK GARDEŁA, SOPHIE BØNDING *and* PETER PENTZ

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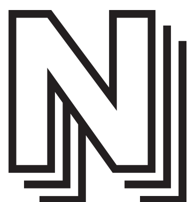

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The *Vǫlva* and Her Sisters: A Foreword by Neil Price

The god Óðinn stands at the doors of Hel, the realm of the dead. His ride there has been long and difficult, through cold and mist, past the blood-covered hound that guards the way. He has travelled down into the dark on his eight-legged stallion, Sleipnir, the horse sliding between the realms. The lord of the Æsir has come here for information, to discover the cause of the nightmares that have been troubling his son, Baldr. East of the gates he finds a grave, a patch of turned earth in the fog, and he wakes its occupant (Óðinn is a god of death, after all, and he knows spells to make corpses walk and talk with him). A woman sits up, shaking off the soil of her burial, irritably demanding to know who is disturbing her long rest: 'I was snowed upon, I was rained upon, dew fell on me, dead I've been a long time'. And so Óðinn begins his questions. It is an unpleasant conversation: the god is insistent, urgent, and forceful; the woman is angry and reluctant to answer, and her news is bad. When he finally leaves, perhaps Óðinn wishes he had never come, for he has learned that his son will die – slain by trickery, in a murder that will ultimately set in train the events that lead to the Ragnarǫk, the end of all worlds.

This episode, related in an Old Norse poem called *Baldrs draumar*, 'Baldr's Dreams', is one of the rarest of the tales that have survived from the story-world of the time we call the Viking Age, but for our purposes there is one key element to note. Óðinn is one of the highest gods, the All-Father, patron of kings and elites, the supreme master of the treacherous magic known as *seiðr*, and the ruler of Ásgarðr – and yet in order to know the future, he must ask a human, in fact a dead human, and specifically a woman. Think about that, the *power* she must have, that even the lord of gods must seek her counsel.

The woman at the gates of Hel was a *vǫlva*, a sorceress, one of many such weird sisters. The book you are now reading marks a significant milestone in our understanding of their world, and of the realities behind the later sagas and poems.

***

The *vǫlur* – the plural form of *vǫlva* – have a strange and complex history in the study of the Northern past, repeatedly fading from view and blazing back to varying degrees of prominence as scholarly fashion and popular taste have shifted over the past couple of centuries. It is not that magic has ever entirely disappeared from the perception of Viking Age belief and ritual, but the same cannot be said of its practitioners. This is especially curious, given how much of what we know of Norse mythology ultimately comes from texts in which these women play a central role – the most obvious example being *Vǫluspá*, the apocalyptic poem with a title that literally means 'The *Vǫlva*'s Prophecy'.

There are many reasons for the historical invisibility of the *vǫlur*, including tensions between the textual and material study of the period (something which this present book does much to resolve). The various abuses perpetrated on Viking Age heritage during the twentieth century, and continuing today, certainly did not help – not the least of which was the Nazis' misappropriation of Norse spirituality as a vector for their racist fictions of white 'Nordic' superiority. Their ideological crush on the Vikings was aided and abetted by a number of deeply compromised academics, including several specialising in studies of sorcery, and scholarship took decades to recover from the contamination.

After the war, serious works on Viking Age magic slowly began to be published again at intervals from the late 1960s onwards, but studied almost solely from the perspective of the medieval texts in which traces of these rituals survive. However, it was not until the turn of the present century that the *vǫlur* themselves reappeared, again due to an intersecting confluence of factors. In part this was caused by a

resurgence of archaeological approaches to the intangible aspects of past societies, including religion, spirituality, world-view, and the mind. This was a particularly fruitful development in Norse studies, and one in which my own work played a part (including my book *The Viking Way*, which first appeared in 2002), but I was far from alone in this. Above all, this was a field of research that credited the *vǫlur* and their kind as having had an actual reality in the Viking Age as lived and experienced, rather than merely as mediated through the writings of Christians centuries later. The same applied to the whole ritual world of sacred places, cultic centres, and the extraordinary complexity of mortuary behaviour – all of which left a material trace, detectible in the archaeology. A kind of deep time perspective also arose in these new studies, as it became clear that the *vǫlur* and their sorcery, and the traditional beliefs of the North, are much, much older than the Viking Age setting of the stories that have survived of them.

For the *vǫlur* in particular, their gender also played a role. It is now generally acknowledged that access to the supernatural, especially through magic, was very much the domain of women, one of several arenas of feminine power with ramifications throughout Norse society. Men were not excluded from this, primarily in roles connected to secular status as chieftains and elites, but the male practice of sorcery was seen as both troubling and problematic. The disturbing, entangled condition of *ergi* that attached to men who performed these 'feminine' rituals brought with it a form of social death – with connotations of shameful unmanliness, cowardice, and homosexuality – but also a terrible power that marked such people as forever different. Until perhaps the last 30 years or so, the myriad facets of gender were under-studied in archaeology generally, and at times seemed almost absent from Viking research. The *vǫlur* were among the many victims of that situation, but this too has now fundamentally changed, with more work appearing all the time, addressing gender, sexuality, and identity across the broadest of spectrums.

In short, the *vǫlva* and her sisters are very firmly back, restored to their rightful places at the core of Norse spiritual life and practice. The chapters in this book, written by the leading experts in their fields, provide a complete, accessible guide to where we are now in the study of late Iron Age myth and ritual, including its material manifestations as revealed by the latest archaeological discoveries. We encounter humans and animals alike, including the occasionally rather vague border between the two, and the ways in which they interacted in the numinous landscapes of the Norse. At the heart of the book are the ritual specialists themselves, the sorcerers and the tools of their trade, up close and personal as we find them in their burials.

The *vǫlva* shaken from her slumber at Helgrind was not the only woman of power roughly treated by Óðinn in this way, and she understandably resented him for it. Archaeologists, and textual specialists too, have also brought the *vǫlur* back to a kind of life, but with respect and astonishment at how much they have to tell us about their long-vanished world. The people of the Viking Age had a concern for how they would be remembered, clearly expressed in poems and runic epitaphs all over Scandinavia: this book does *all* of them justice.

Uppsala, in the late summer rain
June 2022

Introduction

Leszek Gardeła, Sophie Bønding & Peter Pentz

The anthology *The Norse Sorceress: Mind and Materiality in the Viking World* aspires to generate new insights into the mental and material universes of the people who inhabited Scandinavia and Iceland between the eighth and eleventh centuries AD. Although focused on the so-called Viking Age, this book explores not only the lifeways and world-views of vikings engaged in raiding and martial expeditions, but also those of other individuals who played central roles in different areas of Viking Age society. As the title suggests, the spotlight is placed on 'wise women', the *vǫlur* and their kind, whose remarkable performances are vividly portrayed in the rich corpus of Old Norse textual sources and whose physical remains and tools of trade can be identified in the archaeological record.

In 2021, the National Museum of Denmark received 30,336 handcrafted archaeological artefacts for evaluation under the treasure trove scheme 'Danefæ', almost all of these exclusively due to the intensive use of metal detectors in Denmark. Objects found by metal detecting are challenging to interpret, the majority being small and often fragmented pieces of jewellery, dating from the late Iron or Viking Ages. The form, design, and decorations of many of these artefacts reach beyond what is necessary for purely functional purposes, and it is characteristic of such specimens that they carry symbolic significance. To experts, these objects can be immediately recognised as special, and it is apparent that the methods of their creation, the choice of material, and their evocative decoration, all held *some* meaning. Using an array of methods, it is possible to 'read' them and unravel at least some of the intentions and aspirations of their creators.

The ability to employ symbols is characteristic of the sapient mind of humans. Decoding the symbolic meaning of an artefact is an interpretative endeavour which requires perspectives from a broader range of scholarship than can be offered by archaeology alone. Consequently, the material presented in this book is approached from interdisciplinary angles, often combining Old Norse literary scholarship, archaeology, history, and religious studies. While each of these disciplines traditionally prefers specific sets of tools and methods, a critical blending of academic approaches can contribute new and valuable insights into the topics of this book.

At the end of 2019, the National Museum took up discussions with the Krogager Foundation, which immediately showed interest in discussing a possible project about late Iron Age and Viking Age art, archaeology, and the symbolic content of the vast and increasing number of artefacts from this period in the Museum's collections. At the beginning of 2020, an application was submitted to the Krogager Foundation, and in February 2020, a cooperation agreement was signed by the two parties, and the project 'Tanken bag tingene' – literally 'Thoughts behind Things' – was born.

The main objectives of the project were to ensure that the potential of the Danefæ material is properly recognised and investigated, to produce new insights into the 'Viking mind', and to generate fresh interpretations of how the world was conceptualised in late Iron and Viking Age Scandinavia. Another goal was to create an academic backbone for the National Museum's exhibition in 2024, centered around the iconic *vǫlur* of myth and reality, the time in which they lived, and the stories created about them.

In the course of the project, which ran between 2020–2023, its core members took up the task of analysing and publishing different categories of Viking Age artefacts pertaining to the sphere of pre-Christian religion. Among these finds were miniatures in the form of coiled snakes,[1] weapons,[2] and square-shaped pendants with nine studs.[3] Substantial attention was also dedicated to the constantly expanding corpus of anthropomorphic figurines resembling armed women conventionally labelled as 'valkyries'.[4] Other themes investigated by the project members centered on warfare and supernatural aggression,[5] female empowerment,[6] as well as the presence, usage, and symbolic significance of exotic paraphernalia in the Norse cultural context.[7] In addition, broader perspectives such as the cognitive underpinnings of pre-Christian Norse practices of magic and divination, as well as the ontological assumptions underlying

pre-Christian Norse cosmologies, have been explored within the framework of the project.

The main outcome of the 'Thoughts behind Things' project, however, is the present book. It is intended as an up-to-date introduction to and an in-depth exploration of diverse themes pertaining to *vǫlur*, *seiðr*, and other forms of ritual behaviour in the Viking world. No book could possibly cover these complex topics in their totality, but an effort has been made to considerably broaden the existing discussions and create a platform for further investigations. In so doing, we have invited collaborators from across Europe and the United States, counting established experts in the field as well as younger researchers of exceptional promise.

The book is divided into five parts, each of which revolves around a specific theme pertaining to Norse religious practices and practitioners. The first part serves as an introduction to the 'Viking mind', covering aspects like the *vǫlva*'s ritual repertoire, the relationships between material and immaterial spheres, nuances of gender in the Viking Age past, and reflections of old traditions in folklore. Part two concentrates on the places and spaces of ritual activities, whereas part three explores the roles of animals in these various acts. Parts four and five offer in-depth explorations of some of the most iconic graves of presumed ritual specialists as well as their different paraphernalia. Those particularly hungry for knowledge can read the book cover to cover, while the more selective readers can choose only those topics that interest them most. To facilitate navigation through the volume, the chapters include cross-references marked with an arrow symbol (→). Wherever this symbol is included, this means further details on and discussions of a given theme can be found in the indicated chapter.

The editors wish to acknowledge the support and assistance received towards the completion of this book. First, we extend our heartfelt thanks to all of the contributing authors for willingly accepting the challenge to take part in this publication. Special thanks are due to Karen Bek-Pedersen for providing invaluable comments during the editorial process. We also wish to thank Kaja Szewczyk-Słonina and Luiza Działowska for producing the atmospheric photograph for the book cover. In addition, we want to acknowledge the efforts of Lasse Sørensen, former Head of Research at the Department of Ancient Cultures of Denmark and the Mediterranean, National Museum of Denmark, and Michael Andersen, Head of Research at the Department of Prehistory, Middle Ages and Renaissance, National Museum of Denmark. We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the board members of the Krogager Project 'Tanken bag tingene', Professor Emeritus Anders Andrén, chairman of the Krogager Foundation Rune Knude, Professor Neil Price, and Director of the National Museum of Denmark Rane Willerslev, for their never-failing interest and support. Finally, we are grateful for the patience and support of the editorial team at Oxbow Books, particularly that of managing editor, Jessica Hawxwell.

Although adhering to the principles of scientific rigor, the papers in this book are intended to appeal to a wider non-academic readership. The book is thus addressed not only to professional scholars but also to all kinds of history enthusiasts around the world. *The Norse Sorceress: Mind and Materiality in the Viking World* is our response to the *vǫlva*'s iconic phrase, found in the famous eddic poem *Vǫluspá*: 'do you want to know more?' We sincerely hope that seekers of knowledge will find many answers in this book.

Notes

1. Gardeła 2020.
2. Gardeła 2021a; 2022a; in press-a; Pentz 2021.
3. Gardeła 2022b.
4. Gardeła *et al.* 2022.
5. Gardeła 2021b; Pentz 2023.
6. Gardeła 2021c.
7. Gardeła 2022c; in press-b; Pentz 2020; 2022.

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Part 1

Rituals, Myths, and Material Culture

1

The *Vǫlva*'s Ritual Repertoire: Between Magic and Divination

Sophie Bønding

The *vǫlur* (sg. *vǫlva*) are enigmatic and ambiguous figures. They appear in the Old Norse story-world, in settings among the gods as well as in saga accounts of the human social world. Old Norse texts portray the *vǫlur* as liminal characters, who possess abilities far surpassing those of ordinary humans, and who perform various ritualised acts, allowing them to see into the past, predict the future, and manipulate the world around them. This chapter offers an exploration of central parts of the ritual repertoire of the *vǫlur* and their kind. Drawing on recent insights from the cognitive study of religion, it approaches the divinatory and magical practices of the *vǫlur* as a form of ritualised action. Focusing especially on the inherent 'strangeness' of ritualised behaviour, as opposed to ordinary, non-ritualised behaviour, it explores in particular the representations of ritual agency connected to superhuman beings, that divination and magic both rely on. In addition, the perceived potency of ritualised persons and objects is investigated. It is argued that, by taking these features of the *vǫlur*'s ritual repertoire into consideration, we may open up new trajectories for understanding such important aspects of Viking Age religion in Scandinavia.

What is addressed in this chapter is the reality of divination and magic as practices carried out by real-life ritual specialists in the Viking Age. In the past twenty years, archaeological research on so-called 'deviant' or 'atypical' burials (the assemblages of which include peculiar artefacts such as iron staffs and various objects with presumed 'amuletic' functions) has lent support to the possibility that diviners and magic workers did, in fact, exist beyond the stories on the pages of medieval manuscripts.[1] Investigating the ritual repertoire of the *vǫlur* and their kind is a challenging endeavour that can only be pursued through combining archaeological and textual sources. Time-depth and Christian influences are ever-present concerns when investigating Viking Age religion on the basis of medieval written texts; the information we tease out of them is only indirect and can never be more than an interpretation. Each piece of information must be scrutinised against its concrete context of transmission and preservation and evaluated against the backdrop of the accumulated scholarly knowledge about pre-Christian Norse religion. What we find in this literature are echoes of the ideas and practices that once existed, and we must take the various influences of medieval Christian world-views and agendas on the texts into account. However, while we cannot aspire to gain a full and nuanced image of the ritual repertoire of the *vǫlur* and their kind, we may aim to produce probable explanations of the sources at hand. That is the closest we can ever get to Viking Age realities.[2] Whereas some scholars reject the possibility of saying anything substantial about real-life practitioners of magic and divination in the Viking Age,[3] this chapter adds to the growing choir of voices which argue that the *vǫlur* and their kind were more than fantastic embellishments and literary devices of medieval texts.

Concepts and Terminology

Before moving on to the exploration of the ritual repertoire of the *vǫlva*, a discussion of the terminology and concepts employed in this chapter is necessary. The term *vǫlva* is only one of many terms used in the Old Norse literary corpus to denote individuals versed in forms of ritual practice that we can construe as magic and divination. Other terms include *seiðkona* ('*seiðr*-woman'), *spákona* ('prophecy-woman'), *galdrakona* ('*galdr*-woman'), and *vísendakona* ('wise woman', 'woman who possesses knowledge'), to mention a few.[4] Given the nature of our written sources and the diversity of pre-Christian practices, precise classification

seems impossible.[5] This does not mean, however, that we cannot distinguish some different types of practitioners and practices, and as such these designations should not be understood as interchangeable. The terms *seiðkona* and *galdrakona*, for example, are connected to *seiðr* and *galdr*, respectively, which are different types of ritual practice. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that a *seiðkona* would be unable to perform *galdr* and vice versa. Sometimes the same practitioner is referred to with more than one of the above designations. One example is the ritual specialist Þorbjǫrg in *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 4, who is referred to as *vǫlva*, *spákona*, and *vísendakona*, while it is specified that she performs *seiðr*.[6] It follows from these terminological entanglements that linking the various designations of ritual specialists and their associated practices, as these are found in the Old Norse textual corpus, with the material remains of 'atypical' burials, perhaps belonging to *vǫlur* or similar ritual specialists, is fraught with complications and challenges. It therefore seems most fruitful when investigating real-life *vǫlur* to employ a broader phrase, designating these practitioners as '*vǫlur* and their kind'.

Scholars translate the term *vǫlva* in various ways, for example 'seeress', 'prophetess', 'magician', or 'sorceress'. This plurality of concepts applied reflects the fact that, in Old Norse texts, women referred to as *vǫlur* are portrayed as engaging in a range of different ritual activities. Such activities are translated and interpreted variously as 'divination', 'prophecy', 'magic', 'sorcery', or 'shamanism', depending on the theoretical views, approaches, and terminological preferences of the individual researcher. All these categories are scholarly constructs, heuristic tools we can use to conceptualise and analyse the complex of practices found in the textual and material corpora. In the Old Norse texts, in addition to *seiðr* and *galdr* (mentioned above), practices such as *gandr* and *útiseta* are linked to the *vǫlur* and their kind. Each of these phenomena seems to consist of sets of ritual techniques, yet it remains unclear what these techniques are.[7] *Seiðr* may differ from the rest of the terms in the sense that it appears to sometimes denote a specific type of ritual practice, while at other times it is employed as a broader term akin to 'magic' in modern parlance.[8] In addition, Old Norse literature sometimes employs the more generic terms of *fjǫlkyngi*, *fróðleikr*, and *trolldómr*, all of which belong to the semantic sphere of magic and divination.[9]

Religion, Magic, Divination

Magic and divination are understood here as aspects of religion. Pre-Christian Norse religion was woven into the fabric of people's reality and intertwined with all aspects of social life, including domestic, political, and martial affairs. Importantly, religion in the pre-Christian Nordic world was never a consistent and dogmatic orthodoxy – a set of beliefs and practices shared and systematically understood by all individuals in society. Instead, pre-Christian religion is better conceptualised as a conglomerate of ideas, practices, and their expressions in terms of social organisational structures. There was considerable diversity and variation (along temporal, geographical, social, and cognitive axes), and as such we cannot speak of 'the' pre-Christian Norse religion, as though it comprised a monolithic, consistent entity.[10] This has caused some scholars to question the utility of the concept of religion when investigating the Viking Age North. For instance, some choose to place the term in quotation marks, signalling that 'religion' in pre-Christian Scandinavia was not truly religion in the full sense of the term, while others prefer to use alternative concepts, such as 'cultural practices', 'ritualised traditions', or simply 'customs', as an attempted translation of the Old Norse word, *siðr* ('custom', 'tradition').[11]

As scholars, we are obliged to question our concepts and address their inherited baggage in order to assess whether they remain useful as analytical tools, or if they need to be adjusted or even replaced. In this chapter, the concept of religion is used as a heuristic tool that can be applied in order to better understand aspects of the past under scrutiny. Religion, then, can be said to designate '[s]emantic and cognitive networks comprising ideas, behaviours and institutions in relation to counter-intuitive superhuman agents, objects and posits'.[12] This concept is intentionally broad; it is an abstract, scholarly third-order, etic category, denoting a motley assortment of phenomena, all of which are subsumed under the definition quoted.[13] A third-order, etic category differs from first-order (local insiders') categories, such as Old Norse *siðr*, and from second-order (emic) categories, i.e. an observer's generalisations of tradition-specific categories (e.g. of *siðr*), which is not the same as any given insider's perception of that category.[14] Thus, when applying religion as a third-order concept, it is not a problem that people in pre-Christian Scandinavia did not have a corresponding notion; they still had a variety of phenomena that we today can analyse as aspects of religion.[15]

To investigate the ritual repertoire of the *vǫlur* and their kind, this chapter employs the concepts of 'magic' and 'divination', preferring these to, for example, 'sorcery'.[16] This is above all for pragmatic reasons. Magic and divination are established (although contested) concepts in the cross-cultural study of religion and in anthropology, including the cognitive theories of ritualised actions drawn on below. Using these heuristics eases engagement with scholarly debates, while it must be borne in mind that the utility of any concept rests on its ability to open up vistas of theoretical reflection that are helpful in investigating one's subject matter.[17]

Of the two concepts, magic has caused the greater amount of controversy in the research history. The relationship, boundaries, and overlaps between magic and religion have been hotly debated, but today there is a growing acceptance

that magic is not an entity discernible from religion, but rather a form of ritual behaviour and related beliefs, which constitute an element of religion.[18] Yet, even if no unified view of the character and role of magic in the Viking Age exists, magic remains a useful heuristic tool for analysing this particular multifaceted aspect of religious life.[19]

In Old Norse texts, the *vǫlur* and their kind engage in practices that can be described as occupying the intersection of magic and divination. This matches various empirical studies in anthropology and the study of religion, where the two phenomena are often entangled. Thus, magic and divination are partly overlapping phenomena belonging to the same conceptual world. Both diviners and magicians are ritual specialists with specific skillsets and capacities of intermediating between humans and superhuman agents, and often the roles of magician and diviner may be assumed by the same individual. This is one reason why it is inherently difficult to distinguish between practices of magic and divination in historical analysis. For analytical purposes, however, it is useful to differentiate between the two concepts, especially since the cognitive mechanisms underpinning divinatory and magic practices, respectively, seem to differ, even if they share central salient traits. Moreover, without our scholarly conceptual tools, we would not be able to see what was entangled in the first place.[20]

Drawing on cognitive studies of ritual, magic and divination can be conceptualised as sets of cultural techniques that manipulate the superhuman or nonmundane domain but with different aims.[21] Magic is used here as denoting a range of different practices found in a variety of cultures, geographically and historically. Magic denotes practices performed in order to cause changes to aspects of the phenomenal world, changes that are otherwise beyond the instrumental capabilities of the acting agent.[22] Divination is used to denote practices performed in order to acquire and transmit otherwise hidden or undisclosed information through extraordinary means. Typically, this information is understood by insiders to originate from the superhuman domain; i.e., it is obtained from superhuman agencies. This knowledge can relate to the past, present, and/or future. Divinatory practices encountered empirically vary across cultures. Along with such inductive methods as *sortilege* (manipulation and observation of smaller objects such as twigs), mediumistic divination such as prophecy (often but not always performed in an altered state of consciousness) is a common type of divinatory practice. Inductive and mediumistic procedures often appear alongside each other in the same ritual and can be intermingled.[23]

The fact that magic and divination are often found together in empirical observations is linked to the logical relationship between them, in which divination is often employed to achieve a diagnosis or a prognosis relating to a specific problem, after which magical rituals are performed to act upon this knowledge and bring about change through manipulation, alleviative or protective. Yet, this is a somewhat simplified description, and often the two sets of techniques are intermingled in far subtler ways.[24]

Divining the Future in *Eiríks Saga Rauða*

Apart from the famous eddic poem *Vǫluspá* ('The prophecy of the *vǫlva*'), the most iconic text concerning the ritual art of the *vǫlur* is ch. 4 of *Eiríks saga rauða*, which will serve here as an illustrative entry-point into the present complex. This text contains the most elaborate textual account of a ritual performance by a *vǫlva*. *Eiríks saga rauða* is an *Íslendingasaga* probably put to parchment at the beginning of the thirteenth century.[25] The episode is set in Greenland in the late tenth century. The value of the account as a source on tenth-century ritual practice is controversial. Not only was the saga written more than 200 years after the described events purportedly took place, but the narrative is also clearly shaped by thirteenth-century agendas. Thus, scholarly assessments vary greatly. While some researchers (mainly literary scholars) have argued that the entire account in ch. 4 is mere literary construction,[26] others (especially archaeologists) have highlighted the many similarities between objects in certain (atypical) burials and the ritual attire of the *vǫlva* described in the text. Based on this, they have argued that the text at the very least reflects aspects of the reality of ritual specialists in the Viking Age (see further below).[27] When the episode is read in the context of the saga narrative as a whole, it is quite clear that the *vǫlva*'s divinatory ritual serves as a literary device to build suspense. Yet, this needs not entail that all elements of the account are figments of the medieval imagination. Instead, it is quite likely that a ritual of this character, including some of the elements described, could have been performed in the tenth century. In other words, several elements are consistent with our accumulated scholarly knowledge about such practices, which is as close as we can realistically get to the reality of Viking Age religious activity.

The episode takes place at the beginning of winter. The community is in crisis, as a dire famine threatens its survival. It befalls Þorkell, the leading farmer ('mestr bóndi'), to find the means to solve the situation. To do so, he calls on Þorbjǫrg, an old woman who lives in the district and who is a *spákona* (literally 'prophecy-woman' or 'prediction-woman'). It is added that she is called *lítil-vǫlva* ('little *vǫlva*') and that during winters she travels between farms from ritual feast to ritual feast (*veizla*), invited, mostly, by people who are curious to learn about their fates ('er forvitni var á at vita forlǫg sín') or about the coming year's yield (*árferð*). Thus, Þorbjǫrg arrives at Þorkell's farm where she spends two days and the intermediate night, performing a series of ritualised acts. When the ritual has ended, she is collected by an envoy from another farm. The purpose of the ritual, according to the text, is for the community to obtain otherwise hidden

information about their future; information that can only be obtained through extramundane means.

Þorbjǫrg is the main acting agent of the ritual, taking centre stage in its performance and orchestrating its key elements. The text does not describe in detail how the ritual is performed, but it mentions sufficient elements to make it possible to discern a whole ritual sequence with a separation phase, liminal phase, and reintegration phase, each comprised of several 'rites', i.e. smaller ritual acts within the overall frame of the ritual.[28] The separation phase – during which participants are separated from the context of the everyday world, thus bringing them into the liminal phase – consists of a series of ritualised (i.e. non-ordinary) acts. Upon her arrival, Þorbjǫrg is greeted in a ritualised manner by the gathered community members, who are expected to greet her respectfully, while she returns their greetings according to how each of them appeals to her. In an equally ritualised manner, Þorkell leads Þorbjǫrg to a specially prepared high-seat (*hásæti*), equipped with cushions that are stuffed with chicken feathers, and asks her to survey his household, 'flock, servants, and buildings' ('hjú ok hjǫrð, ok svá hýbýli') – presumably while seated in the special seat. She is served a ritualised (non-ordinary) meal, consisting of porridge made with kid's milk ('grautr af kiðjamjólk')[29] and of the hearts of all kinds of animals that lived there ('hjǫrtu ór ǫllum kykvendum, þeim er þar váru til'). She consumes this using a special set of cutlery, a brass spoon and a knife with an ivory handle and a broken tip. She sleeps there overnight, which is apparently necessary in order for her to acquire the desired insight.

The next evening, Þorbjǫrg is provided with the equipment (*umbúningr*) needed to perform *seiðr* ('fremja seiðinn'), although it is not stated what this equipment is. In the liminal phase (i.e. the central phase of the ritual, where the participants are wholly separated from the everyday world), a series of rites take place, including Þorbjǫrg's performance of *seiðr*, to which we shall return. This performance enables her, in the reintegration phase (where the participants transition back into their everyday-mode of life), to impart knowledge about the future. First, she is able to assure the community that the famine will soon end and the spring will bring a better yield. Second, she answers questions from individual community members about their respective futures. As such, the act of *seiðr* performed must be understood as (or as including) a rite of divination.

Little detail is given concerning the ritual actions in the liminal phase. Þorbjǫrg is the central ritual agent, but a group of women take part in the performance, forming a circle around her while she is elevated on a *hjallr*, which is either a platform of some sort or possibly the seat previously prepared for her.[30] In addition, Þorbjǫrg has secured the help of a young woman, Guðríðr, who (despite being a Christian) knows the songs called *varðlok(k)ur*[31] without which Þorbjǫrg cannot perform her divinatory act. The text addresses the conceptual level of the ritual when Þorbjǫrg refers to what she has experienced during the performance:

> Spákonan… kvað margar þær náttúrur nú til hafa sótt ok þykkja fagrt at heyra, er kvæðit var svá vel flutt, – 'er áðr vildu við oss skiljask ok enga hlýðni oss veita. En mér eru nú margir þeir hlutir auðsýnir, er áðr var ek dulið, ok margir aðrir…'

> The seeress… said many spirits (*náttúrur*) had come there who thought it beautiful to hear a song so well-delivered – 'though previously they stayed away and would not grant us obedience. And many things are now clear to me which earlier were concealed from me and many others…'[32]

The *náttúrur* (a loan word from Latin) refers to superhuman entities of some kind, although how exactly they should be understood is unclear.[33] The text does not state explicitly that the information Þorbjǫrg obtains and is able to impart to the community stems from the *náttúrur*, but this seems to be implied, and at least this is apparently how the saga author understood the ritual. Thus, on the conceptual level, it seems that superhuman beings come to her and impart information about the future of the collective and the individual futures of the community members. It is, of course, possible that the author simply relates some of the details of a tradition that he did not fully understand.

It has been suggested that the *náttúrur* be interpreted as helping spirits, and that the *seiðr* performed by Þorbjǫrg is to be understood as a form of, or at least as heavily influenced by, shamanic ritual practices. This implies that Þorbjǫrg, while seated on the *hjallr* and encircled by the women, entered into an altered state of consciousness and went on a soul journey. This is a possible interpretation, although not the only possible one, and it shall not occupy us further here.[34] Recently, Andrea Maraschi has suggested in passing that perhaps the *náttúrur* actually caused the famine, and Þorbjǫrg coerced them into complying with her will, thereby turning the situation around.[35] This would imply that she manipulates the future through magical means, enabling her to reassure the community that she has solved the problem. This interpretation does, however, not seem to find support in the text, which appears to be focused on Þorbjǫrg securing 'objective', strategic knowledge about what is in store for the community, information which has a bearing on people's decisions about how to act in the face of crisis.

Despite the problems connected to using this text as a source to tenth-century affairs, it is quite evident that the episode reflects the conditions of life in the Viking Age, where people had radically different perceptions of reality than modern-day Westerners do, as well as very different ontological expectations to the world around them. Arguably, the ability to manipulate superhuman agencies in order to attain strategic information was necessary in a world where life was perceived to be in the hands of a great many agents and forces beyond human agencies. Divination rests on the conviction that the happenings of this world are not

coincidental but are managed by agents and forces of the superhuman domain.[36] In this sense, the need for divination was triggered by human uncertainty about what the future would bring. But it was also understood that the source of that uncertainty was human ignorance of superhuman affairs. As such, divinatory practices were required in order to help people navigate through life – to cope with contingency and reduce anxiety about life's uncertainties. Superhuman beings were in possession of the required knowledge, which was not ordinarily available to humans. But such information became accessible through mediation by a ritual specialist who was able to communicate with superhuman beings by means of ritualised behaviour. Old Norse mythology attests to a worldview where even the gods sometimes need assistance in unveiling otherwise hidden knowledge about cosmic events, as reflected, for example, in the eddic poems *Vǫluspá* and *Baldrs draumar*.[37]

Divination and Magic as Ritualised Action

When approaching divination and magic in terms of practices, it is noteworthy that they are highly ritualised, as also reflected in *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 4. What constitutes the distinguishing features of ritual and what characterises ritual behaviour has been a topic of scholarly debate for more than a century. Theories of ritual abound, but two main types of approaches have shaped scholars' understandings of ritual: one intellectualist, the other symbolist. In different ways, they strive to dissolve the observable 'strangeness' of ritual behaviour to understand the meaning behind ritual. Intellectualist approaches aim to uncover the underlying beliefs in superhuman or nonmundane agencies and forces, understood to motivate ritual action. In this line of reasoning, ritual action is special, because the underlying beliefs are special. Symbolist approaches perceive ritual as (primarily) symbolic behaviour, based on nonapparent meaning, and they strive to decode and unveil this symbolism in order to identify an underlying symbolic system.[38] For both groups of approaches, ritual is meaningful in light of contextual knowledge. Both of these perspectives have their merits and are diligently employed in analyses of religious rituals in the Viking Age.[39] However, what neither explains is what it is about ritual behaviour that makes it appear so special and non-ordinary to begin with. If religious ritual is a mode of symbolic communication, as is a common perception,[40] then it is a form of communication that breaks with our standard requirements of successful communication between human parties.[41] Thus, ritual communication with superhuman agencies is radically different from ordinary communication.

In the past few decades, cognitive approaches to the study of ritual have investigated how ritualisation influences human action representation, highlighting the fact that ritualised behaviour is 'special' and non-ordinary behaviour. As summarised by the scholar of religion Jesper Sørensen:

> Rituals are characterized by redundancy, iteration and exaggeration; they are stipulated and defined by tradition; and they are usually both intentionally underdetermined and causally opaque, that is, the actions performed are not defined by the intentions of participants but by tradition, and there are no intuitive causal relations connecting the actions performed and their purported result.[42]

Rituals are 'causally opaque' and 'goal demoted'. What this means is that a ritual is comprised of a sequence of ritualised acts, but the causal relation between the individual acts is nonapparent (causal opaqueness), and it is unclear how the action sequence is related to the purported outcome of the ritual (goal demotion). The functional act of drinking coffee is related to a causal schema enabling prediction of the entire sequence of action: you hold the cup, lift it, tilt it, and then drink. Here, the individual elements of the action sequence are casually related and evidently lead to the desired result, which is drinking coffee. Rituals do not work on the basis of such causal schemas, and this precludes strong predictions of the outcome. Based on empirical studies, ritual handling of an object will often include iteration, redundancy, and exaggeration, for example: hold the item, lift it, turn it, lift it again, turn it again, etc. Interestingly, experimental studies indicate that observers and participants of ritual actions 'direct their cognitive attention to a finer *perceptual* level of an action performed, when no causal schema is available for processing the full action sequence'.[43]

These features of ritualised behaviour create (at least) two circumstances relevant for the investigation of the ritual repertoire of the *vǫlur* and their kind. First, it seems that people, when processing ritualised actions, are more attentive because they cannot rely on causal schemas to understand the actions and predict their outcome. This enhanced attentiveness, in turn, means that in a ritual, special (ritualised) persons and objects will appear particularly salient (see further below).[44] Second, the fact that ritualised actions are causally disconnected from their purported result seems to affect the representations of the agencies involved in reaching this result, thus creating a displacement of agency. This means that it is not the agent performing the acts (the ritual specialist) who is generally represented as responsible for the outcome. Instead, agency is displaced to agents or forces outside the acting individual, typically located in the superhuman domain. In a Christian baptism, for example, the priest carries out the ritual acts, but it is God who ensures that the child is redeemed from sin. As such, the ritual displacement of agency to the superhuman realm is what guarantees that a link is formed between the ritual actions and the wanted result. From the insider perspective, it is the evocation of God that ensures the desired outcome, and participants thus rely on their knowledge of the (socially established) symbolic systems and religious beliefs in order to understand the actions performed.[45]

Both diviners and magicians are generally understood to rely on superhuman agents and forces. Concerning diviners, the veracity of the information they allegedly acquire depends on its stemming from an external, extramundane source.[46] Magic practices likewise depend on the understanding that agencies outside the performing agent are activated. As Sørensen and Petersen note, this is the case, even though magic also clearly empowers the performing agent to ostensibly assume control over aspects of reality that are otherwise non-controllable to (ordinary) humans.[47] In short, divination and magic both work by enabling human agents to manipulate the superhuman domain, but this manipulation is achieved through ritual displacement of agency to superhuman agents. As such, divination and magic constitute different but intersecting cultural techniques.

In Þorbjǫrg's ritual performance, treated above, she is the one performing the central ritual acts during the liminal phase, but it is the superhuman entities evoked (the *náttúrur*) who provide the information needed for the ritual to be successful. The lack of contextual information provided by the text inhibits our understanding of the ritual as outside interpreters. However, participants in a ritual like the one described would surely possess sufficient contextual knowledge of the established cultural models to help them connect the actions to the purported outcome. Interestingly, experimental research demonstrates that participants' experiences during a ritual tend to differ significantly, but they are subsequently streamlined according to authoritative cultural models.[48]

The Ambiguity of the *Vǫlva*'s Ritual Agency

A recurrent theme associated with diviners, cross-culturally as well as in Old Norse literature, is the question of whether they only transmit knowledge in an objective way, or if they, in fact, have the power to manipulate the future. According to Old Norse sources, diviners were looked upon with reverence but also sometimes with suspicion and mistrust.[49] The eddic poem *Hávamál*, st. 87, interestingly advises caution against a *vǫlva* who prophesies good ('vǫlu vilmæli', 'a *vǫlva*'s pleasing words').[50] Other texts, in which *vǫlur* and their kind are expected to foretell only good fortunes and remain quiet about misfortunes, can shed light on this seemingly perplexing piece of advice. One example is *Víga-Glúms saga*, ch. 12, where a woman, Oddbjǫrg, travels around the district and delivers predictions. She is referred to not as a *vǫlva*, but as being *fróð* ('wise') and *framsýn* ('in possession of foresight'); the text does not mention how she acquires her special (otherwise hidden) knowledge. Thus, no rituals are mentioned, except that the welcome she receives on the farms appears to be ritualised. The saga relates that much care is taken to give Oddbjǫrg the proper reception, since she tailors her predictions to the level of hospitality she receives. Upon welcoming Oddbjǫrg to her farm, Saldís (the lady of the house) requests a prediction about her grandsons' futures, asking that it be something nice ('ok spá vel', 'make it something nice'). Oddbjǫrg responds that she cannot see whether something good is in store for the boys, and Saldís complains that she deserves better after her generous hospitality, but asks Oddbjǫrg to remain silent if she does not have anything positive to predict. She even threatens to have Oddbjǫrg chased away, should she foretell something negative ('ef þú ferr með illspár'). Oddbjǫrg responds that the quality of the reception does not affect her predictions and then, brought to anger, she unveils her true insights into the boys' future, foretelling misfortune and death.[51]

Thus, diviners appear to have been perceived as possessing a genuine ability to predict the future, yet they were expected to censor their insights.[52] Apparently, it was understood that revealing these insights could somehow bring the events about. While the mistrust in diviners reflected here might be explained (away) as a result of the saga authors' (Christian) distrust in and condemnation of pre-Christian practices, this possibility does not appear an adequate explanation – especially given the prevalence of this theme cross-culturally. Moreover, the Viking Age runic inscription on the Björketorp stone (DR 360) in Blekinge, Sweden, that seems to contain the words **uþArAbA sbA**, *uþarba-spá*, which has been interpreted as 'harm-prophecy', indicates that a prediction could, indeed, reflect an aspect of ill will from the diviner.[53]

The Strangeness of Ritualised Actions and Ritual Objects

Many rituals employ a plethora of sensually stimulating elements (i.e. visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory elements), which shape the participants' experiences. Ritual specialists dressed in peculiar (non-ordinary) attire and handling special ritual props are recurrent features of religious, ritualised actions cross-culturally, and such elements seem also to have been present in pre-Christian Scandinavia.[54] Interpreters of Old Norse texts have noted that there are certain anomalies connected to *vǫlur* and other performers of *seiðr* and related practices, who are often described as exotic, odd, or non-ordinary concerning, for example, their clothes, age, and what they eat, as well as sometimes their ethnicity or geographical origin. By such features, they are clearly marked off from other people and generally associated with an aura of alterity.[55] In other words, the liminality connected to the ritual practices they perform seems to follow them outside of the narrow context of ritual acts, meaning that they are more permanently associated with 'liminality' and the 'strange'.[56]

Eiríks saga rauða, ch. 4, is a case in point. The passage containing a detailed description of Þorbjǫrg's ritual attire has attracted much scholarly attention. Her clothes and paraphernalia comprise of a number of remarkable items:

a dark cloak adorned with stones; a necklace of glass beads; a black lambskin hood, lined with white catskin; a staff (*stafr*) with a brass knob and set with stones; a belt with a large pouch in which she kept the *taufr* ('charms' or 'amulets') necessary for her ritual crafts (sg. *fróðleikr*); a pair of shaggy calfskin boots with long straps ending in brass knobs; catskin gloves, white and furry on the inside.[57] The level of detail in this passage is unusual for the sagas, which rarely provide such meticulous accounts concerning a person's attire.[58] This has fuelled scepticism among interpreters, some arguing that the passage is largely fictitious. Thus, Jens Peter Schjødt has suggested that the description of the *vǫlva*'s outfit is more likely based on a thirteenth-century magic worker, although he acknowledges the possibility that some elements may be authentic.[59] In a different line of reasoning, Clive Tolley suggests that the description is a parody of thirteenth-century bishops, with the *vǫlva*'s staff being the equivalent of a crozier.[60] Others, especially Neil Price and Leszek Gardeła, suggest that the passage is a relatively trustworthy portrayal of what a *vǫlva* may have looked like. As mentioned above, their arguments are substantiated by reference to the contents of 'atypical' or 'special' graves, containing non-ordinary artefacts such as staffs and miniatures which might possibly have functioned as amulets, along with other paraphernalia. It is quite possible that such graves belong to ritual specialists, and that knowledge about their kind of attire became part of cultural memory and is reflected in the sagas (→ **Parts 4 and 5**).[61]

If these 'atypical' burials are, indeed, graves of *vǫlur* and their kind, it is quite likely that at least some of the objects contained in them were employed in ritual performances. Interpreters, rightly, scrutinise such artefacts for their possible symbolic meaning, trying to decode their perceived symbolism, as well as relate them to the accumulated scholarly knowledge of pre-Christian religious beliefs. In this hunt for hidden meaning, it is worthy of note that, if they were once part of ritualised actions, these artefacts would not only be special or potent by virtue of their reference to a symbolic system or to underlying religious beliefs, but also simply by virtue of their being 'ritualised objects'.

As noted above, it seems that the ritualisation of objects and persons render these particularly salient. Furthermore, as argued by Sørensen, ritualisation facilitates representations of such objects as wielders of agency, possessing a special force or potency they would not otherwise possess.[62] Moreover, it is this special quality of the object that enables it to establish a link between the ritual actions it is part of and the purported result of those actions. Thus, ritually infused, such objects tend to maintain their special potency and aura of otherness even outside of the ritual sphere.[63]

The recent theoretical developments and empirical studies that constitute the so-called 'ontological' and 'new materialist' turns argue for a move away from perceiving materials as dead and passive objects, highlighting instead that all materials possess their own forms of agency, and that people outside the modern, Euro-Western world (including people of the past) had similar understandings; as such, they interacted with objects in different ways than is typical of moderners.[64] This notion of object agency does not entail that objects or materials act like humans, but rather that they act in the way of materials, with their own particular forms of agency (→ **Chapter 2**). When we deal with ritualised objects, however, we are dealing with objects that are out of the ordinary and that are used and often designed (and possibly manufactured) in non-ordinary ways. In other words, it is not typically the object's material substance or the ordinary function of such substances that matter in ritual action. The ritual potency of sanctified bread, for example, does not depend on its capacity to satisfy hunger. In this way, ritualised objects are often connected to representations of 'magical agency', i.e. they are understood to possess a special quality which enables them to bring about the wanted result.[65] The staffs of Viking Age graves of possible ritual specialists are a case in point (→ **Chapter 30**). Many of these are designed in a way that resemble distaffs, which are tools used for spinning (→ **Chapter 8**). Yet their various designs suggest that they were not actually suited to (nor intended for) real-life textile production, rendering it much more likely that they were envisioned and, indeed, functioned as ritual tools.[66] Like other ritualised tools, they were likely represented as infused with a special potency, which they would not possess, had they not been part of and designed for ritualised action. This may seem an obvious point, but it is far from trivial. It appears that the accumulation of such magical force in objects and persons during rituals enable the diffusion of that force even outside the ritual sphere. Thus, these objects and individuals would be perceived as powerful and, indeed, 'strange' agents.

Concluding Remarks

Religion, divination, and magic are fuelled by the human occupation with the future. According to the worldviews of people in Scandinavia during the Viking Age, the world was inhabited by a multitude of superhuman agents and controlled by non-mundane forces, such as fate. As a result, people appear to have found it necessary to seek out and manipulate these agents and forces in order to obtain strategic information that would help them cope with uncertainty and navigate through life. To do so, they called on ritual specialists who were able to manipulate the superhuman realm through the use of ritual techniques.

The ritual repertoire of the *vǫlur* and their kind may be investigated in terms of ritualised practices and by means of the analytical concepts of divination and magic. The practices which we may meaningfully explore through these two concepts belong to the same conceptual world, and in empirical studies they are often entangled. Cognitive

research into magic and divination as ritualised actions suggests that they constitute different but intersecting sets of cultural techniques. Both rely on the ritual displacement of agency to the superhuman domain. The veracity of the information obtained through divinatory techniques depends on its stemming from superhuman sources. Magical techniques likewise depend on the understanding that agencies outside the performing agent are activated. Yet, they also facilitate the notion that ritualised persons and objects possess special agentive qualities that they would not otherwise possess. These qualities enable them to create changes to the world that are otherwise beyond the capacities of (ordinary) human or artefactual agents. Thus enhanced by extramundane means, ritualised persons and objects tend to be understood as infused with a special force, which makes them appear as potent wielders of extramundane powers.

By heeding these features of magic and divination as ritualised practices, we may open up new trajectories for investigating the ritual specialists of the Viking Age, the rituals they performed, and the religious beliefs that informed them. Cognitive research lends support to the argument that divinatory and magical techniques – which are underpinned by human cognitive mechanisms and witnessed in empirical studies worldwide (including in modern-day Euro-Western cultures[67]) – were also part of the religious practices performed by real-life people in the Viking Age. Moreover, the inherent ‘strangeness’ of the *vǫlur* and their kind, as this is portrayed in Old Norse textual sources and arguably reflected in archaeological discoveries of ‘atypical’ burials, becomes comprehendible when explored not only on the basis of underlying religious beliefs and symbolism, but also in light of the status they would have been ascribed as powerful ritualised agents, wielding potent ritualised objects.

Notes

1. Price 2002; 2019; Gardeła 2016; 2017; see in particular parts four and five of this book, and references therein. On deviant burials, see Aspöck 2008.
2. For discussions of the source situation and challenges to the scholarly reconstruction of pre-Christian Nordic religion, see e.g. Clunies Ross 1994; Nordberg 2012; Schjødt 2012; 2020c. See also ongoing discussions in the *RMN Newsletter*.
3. e.g. Tolley 2009.
4. See Price 2019: 83 for a comprehensive list of terms.
5. See also Raudvere 2001: 80.
6. *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 4 (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson & Matthias Þórðarson 1985: 206–9), see further below.
7. See Raudvere 2001: 81–2; Tolley 2009: 136; Price 2019: 35–6; Mitchell 2020.
8. Price 2019: 36.
9. Raudvere 2001: 81–2; Price 2019: 35–6. Concerning this plethora of terms, it is also relevant to take factors of chronology and contemporaneity into account.
10. e.g. Brink 2007; Nordberg 2012; Schjødt 2012; 2020c; Murphy 2017.
11. e.g. Blomkvist 2002; Svanberg 2003: 143–4; Nordanskog 2006: 30–1; Fabech 2009. See also Lindberg 2009 and Nordberg 2012; 2018 for discussions of why religion remains a useful concept when studying pre-Christian Scandinavia. The utility of the concept of religion has also been debated in the general study of religion, see Saler 2015, and references therein. See also Jensen 2019: 1–10.
12. Jensen 2019: 7.
13. See also Petersen 2017; Bønding 2020: 9.
14. Importantly, as emphasised by Jeppe Sinding Jensen (2011; 2019: 8–9, 22–3), emic and etic perspectives should not be conflated with insider and outsider perspectives, although this conflation is often encountered in scholarship.
15. For a discussion of different conceptual levels and the problems and challenges related to using insider terms and neologisms, see Sørensen & Petersen 2019: 3–8.
16. See Price 2019: 34–5, who alternates between the terms magic and sorcery. See further Raudvere 2003: 25–88 for terminological considerations.
17. Sørensen & Petersen 2021: 9.
18. Even so, this view is by no means trivial or uncontroversial. Much scholarly discourse remains influenced by the notion that magic is something different from religion.
19. Mitchell 2020; see also Sørensen 2013.
20. Cf. Sørensen 2013; Jensen 2019: 46; Sørensen & Petersen 2021.
21. Sørensen & Petersen 2021: 11.
22. These working definitions draw on a broad range of scholarly literature (Zuesse 2005; Silva 2016; Nissinen 2018; 2019; 2020), but are especially influenced by the works of scholar of religion Jesper Sørensen (2013; 2018; 2021a; 2021b); see also Sørensen & Petersen 2021.
23. Zuesse 2005; Silva 2016; Nissinen 2018; 2019; 2020.
24. Sørensen & Petersen 2021: 10.
25. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson & Matthias Þórðarson 1985: 206–9. The saga is extant in two different versions in the medieval manuscripts *Skálholtsbók* (AM 557 4to) and *Háuksbók* (AM 544 4to).
26. Tolley 2009.
27. Price 2002; 2019; Gardeła 2016.
28. van Gennep 1960; Turner 1969; Schjødt 2020b.
29. That is presumably goat’s milk, i.e. a goat’s milk for her own young.
30. A *hjallr* used in the practice of *seiðr* is mentioned in other sources, e.g. *Hrólfs saga kraka*, ch. 3, where it is called a *seiðhjallr* (Guðni Jónsson 1943, II: 9).
31. The two manuscripts render the word differently. In *Skálholtsbók*, it is *varðlokur*, and in *Hauksbók*, it is *varðlokkur*. For a discussion of possible meanings of this term, see Tolley 2009: 501–7, and references therein.
32. Text after Einar Ólafur Sveinsson & Matthias Þórðarson 1985: 208; author’s translation; see also Kunz 1997: 6–7; Mitchell 2020: 649.
33. For a different interpretation, see Tolley 2009: 498–501, who bases his reading on a proposed emendation of the *Skálholtsbók* version of the text, suggesting that the *náttúrur* should be interpreted as Guðríðr’s innate skills. This interpretation is speculative, however.
34. For further discussion, see Tolley 2009: 487–95; Price 2019: 335; Wilson 2021, and references therein.

35. Maraschi 2018.
36. Jensen 2019: 75.
37. *Vǫluspá* (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I: 291–321); *Baldrs draumar* (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I: 446–8).
38. Sørensen 2007; Sørensen & Nielbo 2019. For intellectualist approaches, see especially Tylor 1871; Frazer 1911; for symbolist approaches, see e.g. Douglas 1966; Turner 1967; Durkheim 1995.
39. See e.g. Schjødt *et al.* 2020, and the various chapters in this volume.
40. e.g. Schjødt 2020b.
41. Sørensen & Nielbo 2019: 229–31. See also Sørensen 2007.
42. Sørensen 2021b: 264; cf. Rappaport 1979; Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994; Boyer & Liénard 2007; Sørensen 2007; Liénard & Boyer 2008.
43. Sørensen 2021b: 265 (original emphasis); cf. Zacks & Tversky 2001; Nielbo & Sørensen 2011.
44. Sørensen 2021b: 265.
45. Sørensen 2007; Sørensen & Nielbo 2019, and references therein.
46. Nissinen 2018; Sørensen 2021a; Sørensen & Petersen 2019.
47. Sørensen & Petersen 2021: 10–13.
48. Schjødt *et al.* 2013; Sørensen & Nielbo 2019: 238.
49. Schjødt 2020b: 636–7.
50. *Hávamál*, st. 87 (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I: 340).
51. *Víga-Glums saga*, ch. 12 (Jónas Kristjánsson 1956: 41).
52. See also Price 2019: 74.
53. Dillmann 2006: 29; Schjødt 2020b: 636. The inscription dates to the period AD 800–1050.
54. Schjødt 2020b: 25; Sundqvist 2020.
55. DuBois 1999: 124; Raudvere 2003; Sundqvist 2020: 774–9.
56. On liminality as a state of being 'betwixt and between', see Turner 1969.
57. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson & Matthias Þórðarson 1985: 206–7.
58. Sauckel 2013.
59. Schjødt 2007: 183–4; 2020a: 789–90.
60. Tolley 2009: 490–95.
61. Price 2002; 2019; Gardeła 2016; see also Pentz *et al.* 2009; Ulriksen 2018.
62. Sørensen 2021b.
63. Liénard & Sørensen 2013; Sørensen 2021b. Studies sometimes refer to such special potency as *mana*, which is in such cases understood as a scholarly, third-order, etic concept.
64. Holbraad & Pedersen 2017; Gamble *et al.* 2019. See also Lund 2017.
65. Sørensen 2007: 288–92. In other words, their substances are perceived as having been transformed by ritual.
66. Gardeła 2016.
67. Sørensen & Petersen 2019, and references therein.

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2

Between the Material and Immaterial: Burial Objects and their Nonhuman Agencies

Sara Ann Knutson

Introduction: Revisiting the 'Social' and Nonhuman Agency

In most twenty-first-century archaeologies, the 'social' no longer implies exclusively the 'human'. Over the past few decades, interdisciplinary researchers and historically-minded scholars have examined social lives and social interactions in ways that include humans, 'more than humans,'[1] nonhumans,[2] and the posthuman.[3] These engagements depart from European Enlightenment-era theories, including philosopher René Descartes' work, which divided humans as *active* subjects and materials as *passive* objects. This division between 'cognitive' and 'non-cognitive' beings left an intellectual legacy, including the notion of an 'anthropogenic Earth in which humans are everywhere, involved in shaping everything'.[4] Instead, many contemporary anthropologists have committed to acknowledging other forms of life, other forms of agency, other ways of being, and other modes of power and influence that do not always operate within the realm of human activity, intentionality, or awareness.[5] This work encourages researchers to move away from the *classificatory*, placing things into categories, and towards the *cartographic*, a focus on distributions, emergent processes, and relations.[6] These re-framings decentre the human and reflect on the more-than-human world and the role of humans *within it*, producing both better accounts of nonhumans as well as more well-informed articulations of human activity and processes.

But scholarly attention to nonhumans is not a recent development. The transdisciplinary field 'new materialism' emerged among feminist scholars in the 1990s and early 2000s and made a core theoretical turn in repositioning humans alongside nonhuman actants along the continuum of matter and *matter-ing*.[7] But contrary to some claims in Euro-Western scholarship,[8] this study of nonhuman actants and nonhuman social life is not 'new' as the 'new materialism' label would suggest.[9] Indigenous peoples developed knowledge and traditions on nonhuman agencies thousands of years before modern philosophers of science.[10] As Rosiek *et al.* clarify, different individuals around the world and over time can certainly develop similar understandings through 'different conceptual paths,'[11] and this may well have been the case for various ancient communities' understandings of nonhuman agency. Rosiek *et al.*, however, rightly identify the kinds of power dynamics in which indigenous knowledges have frequently been dismissed or re-packaged and accredited to Euro-Western academics. Despite this lack of recognition, indigenous scholars have examined well-established indigenous traditions regarding the agency of nonhumans.[12]

Recognising the contributions of indigenous knowledges in addition to new materialism is important and not separate from our exploration of mind and materiality in the Viking Age, for three fundamental reasons. First, academic power imbalances and the erasure of certain knowledge practices have created echo chambers within the discipline of archaeology and isolated illuminating scholarship that could otherwise help us to understand the premodern past on its own terms, not ours. Viking Age Scandinavia was not a Euro-Western world. Indeed, Scandinavia was hardly considered 'European' before Christianisation during the medieval period.[13] Therefore, to include only post-Enlightenment, Euro-Western theories on the past is to distort the reality of ancient Scandinavians. This is not to simplistically argue that we should equate or conflate generations of indigenous perspectives from around the world with ancient Scandinavian ones, much less appropriate their cultures. Rather, it is suggested here that scholars of the Viking Age must devote greater sensitivity and attention to a plurality of global

archaeological research,[14] especially to perspectives that destabilise dominant Euro-Western theories. This approach problematises the ingrained assumption that ancient Scandinavians must have held similar thoughts, understandings, expectations, and relationships to twenty-first-century Euro-Western ones.

Second, creating space for a multiplicity of voices to inform our studies *on* the past enables us to better appreciate the diversity of perspectives that also existed *in* the past. These diverse voices position the many *particularistic* ways that various communities across time and space came to understand nonhuman agency and how it plays out in the world. Indigenous scholarship especially reveals the biases in what Euro-Western scholarship deems as legitimate or 'scientific' research and which knowledge practices are alternatively dismissed. Sarah Hunt has argued that indigenous peoples have their own ways of knowing the world and reproducing knowledge. While Euro-Western scholarship uses mainly representational practices, namely writing, to communicate research, Hunt claims dancing as a highly theorised and scholarly practice that destabilises dominant ways of knowing the world.[15] Similarly, Eva Garroutte and Kathleen Westcott describe stories not as representational narratives but as *living agents*, according to traditions of the Anishinaabeg (present in the Great Lakes region of Canada and the United States) (Fig. 2.1). The contemporary Euro-Western approach to narratives as objects of analysis is considered less respectful and inhibits the stories' own nonhuman agency 'as a relative within an [infinite web] of human and other-than-human relationships'.[16] By studying the Viking Age, we are examining ancient communities whose main forms of knowledge transmission included oral traditions and storytelling as well as material practices – and *not* as commonly through writing practices as many of us are familiar with in the twenty-first century. It is ironic, then, that we often judge certain knowledge practices to be less rigorous or 'scientific' to the study of the Viking Age than other forms of knowledge production.[17]

Thirdly, indigenous perspectives emphatically remind us that nonhuman agency is not new, nor universal, nor a theory created by contemporary Euro-Western philosophers.[18] Instead, nonhuman agency identifies various active engagements of the world that extend far into the ancient past, including among non-Euro-Western communities. Some indigenous engagements of nonhuman agency are gestured here and later in this chapter, not to universalise or flatten the diverse strands of indigenous traditions around the world but rather to remind the reader that these important threads extend into the ancient past and they continue to exist in our contemporary world. These recognitions remind archaeologists of the many ethical implications involved in the archaeological study of the ancient past, including ancient Scandinavia.

This chapter explores how nonhuman agency, informed by diverse understandings of the concept, can illuminate Viking Age mind and materiality. In particular, the author

Figure 2.1 Miskwaabik Animikii (Norval Morrisseau). Anishinaabe. Psychic Space*, 1996. Acrylic on canvas. © Estate of Norval Morrisseau. Image courtesy of National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC (26/4085). Photo: Walter Larrimore.*

examines the implications of nonhuman agency for burial objects – materials that people in the past assembled alongside human remains. If material, nonhuman relations are also social relations, as many archaeologists now accept, then what does it mean when nonhuman materials are placed in the ground? This chapter reflects on that question as a move towards a more nuanced picture of Viking Age Scandinavia and ancient understandings of the 'social' as more than, and beyond, the human.

Theorising Burial Objects

Archaeological interpretations of burials have and continue to implicate how we evaluate the meanings of 'grave accompaniments' (to use Michael Schiffer's term), or burial objects. In the 1970s, archaeologists argued that the material remains associated with buried individuals could be used to extract information about past social systems, such as social organisation, social roles, and religion.[19] This approach, sometimes referred to as the Saxe-Binford research programme, assumes that the social identities of deceased individuals are expressed through material traces, especially grave goods. In this framework, archaeologists tend to interpret, for example, outlier 'rich' graves as princely or chiefly burials or commonly 'well-equipped' graves as indicative of high social status or a warrior aristocracy.[20] In other words, burials, and the objects discovered with them, act like time capsules, containing the necessary clues to reconstruct past social roles and structures.[21] Although some contemporary archaeologists still use this approach, many scholars recognise that the grave 'is not a Pompeii… in which past societies are fossilised,'[22] nor a microcosm of the entire innerworkings of past societies.

In the following decades, archaeologists critiqued the Saxe-Binford approach to mortuary archaeology, reminding that 'the dead do not bury themselves'.[23] Rather, burials reflect ideas about the deceased individual's life according to the minds of those who arranged the burial and participated in the funerary rites.[24] Archaeologists began questioning *why* a particular assemblage of objects in a burial was selected and used, recognising that the answers to this question are historically contingent and dependent on the social context, including factors such as the ideologies and social relationships among the bereaved – namely, the architects of the burial and funerary rites.[25] In this framework, burial objects are understood as constituting, negotiating, and legitimising social relationships, rather than directly or systematically representing social structures in their entirety among living societies in the past.[26] The meanings of burial objects therefore must be understood within the complex context of the grave rather than as a completely separate line of evidence.

Broadly speaking, the consensus among post-processual archaeologists in the 1980s and subsequent generations was that the dead cannot be studied in isolation. Some scholars approached burials and burial objects as reflective of community relations and priorities,[27] the construction of social memory,[28] or as a comment on the continued relations between the dead and the living.[29] Scholarship in the 2000s continued to problematise mortuary archaeologists' over-emphasis on status and prestige. Researchers questioned the assumption that burial objects are *necessarily* personal possessions of deceased individuals during their lifetimes. Burials became reframed as 'the material residue of specific *practices* carried out in the past',[30] that are linked to networks of symbolic structures and the construction of social relations.[31] This work shifted the conversation in mortuary archaeology to include not only interpretations of burial objects as materials involved in the caretaking of the dead, but also to afford the dead their own agency, including as a powerful moral force that guarantees the claims of the living.[32] This agency of the dead informs human action and their relationship to things in mortuary contexts, but can also extend beyond, such as to the creation and proliferation of relics, a special category of object that takes its meaning from an indexical relation with the person in life as well as their deceased body.[33]

Archaeologists in the 2000s and 2010s began problematising the category of the 'body', inspired by Judith Butler's work.[34] Such scholarship destabilised the notion of a single, normative body and questioned the relationship between the body and materials, places, and persons.[35] Mortuary archaeology and burials became one important focal point in these discussions, including for archaeologists who helped advance concepts of 'personhood' as a fluid and culturally contingent mode of being.[36] This scholarship on personhood grappled with archaeology's human-centred bias and has influenced work that blurs the line between the human and nonhuman, including in mortuary contexts. For example, archaeologists now consider instances where burials are incorporated into residential structures,[37] the power structures in which some human skeletal remains have been treated as objectified things rather than persons,[38] or in cremated remains, where the human and nonhuman elements are indistinguishable, and these organic and inorganic elements form a 'posthuman' assemblage.[39]

Today, some scholars have reframed mortuary contexts and materials as nodes of communication that bring the living, dead, and material into 'historicized fields of action' that affirm or transform these social relationships.[40] This line of research importantly applies ethnographic work in archaeology and appreciates the important role that mortuary contexts play in the continued process of history-making. As a result, archaeologists are repositioning burials and burial objects as nodes of continuity over time rather than snapshots of static moments in the past. In studies of post-burial disturbance, for example, archaeologists have reframed the post-burial removal of certain materials as a continuity in human actions, or what Klevnäs *et al.* describe as a 'shared

treatment' of the dead over time.[41] Cemeteries, meanwhile, have been reconfigured as 'lived landscapes' and part of social memory and collective experience.[42]

In sketching this general theoretical overview of mortuary archaeology over the past fifty years, specifically as such developments have informed the archaeological interpretation of burial objects, the purpose here has been to question and inspire curiosity as to where archaeology is taking burials and burial materials into the 2020s and beyond. In 2013, Liv Nilsson Stutz and Sarah Tarlow observed that archaeology still often relies specifically on burials to study complex, sociocultural aspects of the *living* human past.[43] This sometimes over-reliance on burials for reconstructing *lived* experiences in the past, however, paradoxically obscures other important knowledge about the past that burials can inform. Nilsson Stutz and Tarlow therefore reorient scholarly attention towards socio-cultural understandings of death, mortality, and bereavement in the archaeological record. The observation that many archaeologists still tend to slip back into earlier interpretative approaches to burials, however, continues to ring true today. The Saxe-Binford assumption that burials are directly structured by the lifetimes of the buried people and therefore, that burial objects are *representative* of the interred individual's identity, is problematic and yet still appears in contemporary archaeologies.[44]

One way to avoid this pitfall is to decentre the human in studies of burials and to metaphorically open the 'grave' to include human and nonhuman assemblages and agencies, as recent anthropological scholarship on 'personhood' has explored. This decentring approach creates more space for archaeologists to properly explain why certain nonhumans have come to rest in burials and the complex meanings of these mortuary contexts. From the perspective of nonhuman agency, objects in burials might have informed human identities or constructions of personhood *and/or* these materials might have been intended for fields of social action beyond the human or not for the human at all.

To return then to the original question posed earlier: what does it mean when agentive nonhumans are placed into the ground? Traditional archaeological interpretations would have offered that, in this case, materials experience a sort of social 'death'. Related arguments have been made of fragmented objects, materials that were intentionally broken and deposited into the archaeological record. Such objects are commonplace in Scandinavian archaeology[45] (Fig. 2.2) not least as bog deposits, prompting Danish archaeologists to question why past individuals 'destroyed wealth' in such amounts.[46] John Chapman's work problematised such understandings of fragmented objects as defective, broken, rubbish, or as simply incomplete parts of a lost whole.[47] This scholarship instead reframes fragmented materials as not necessarily indicative of a loss of some kind, but rather as materials that were highly meaningful in the construction and maintenance of social relations. This chapter similarly argues that mortuary materials are not socially 'dead' – these nonhuman social relations instead continued to transform and generate meaning long after their assemblage and deposition in mortuary contexts.

Today, more mortuary archaeologies are decentring the human and broadening the focus from human practices, individuals, and societies to a wider ecology of relations, including with nonhuman animals and nonhuman materials[48] and affording these actors their own agency. What these emergent conversations so far often lack, however, is the expansion of the 'social', as defined in the introduction, to properly include the spiritual, the supernatural, the beyond-human-life actors. But the spiritual is an undeniable, particular dimension of social life and nonhuman agency in the work of many indigenous scholars. The avoidance of the spiritual in Euro-Western theories of nonhuman agency, Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues, marks a clear distinction between indigenous and non-indigenous knowledges and values.[49] While some new materialist and posthumanist scholarship have been critiqued for offering only general 'preachments' of nonhuman agency and less attention to how nonhuman agency shows up *in practice*, indigenous scholars take the existence of nonhuman agency for granted; their focus, instead, lies on the formation of nonhuman relations and the particular immediacy of these relationships in a given environment.[50] For many indigenous traditions, the connection of social relations and nonhuman agency to the spiritual applies to burials and burial materials. These ties, however, are considered

Figure 2.2 Broken sword, approximately of Petersen (1919) type L. Uncovered among grave assemblage in Gulli, Vestfold, Norway (C53660). Photo by Ellen C. Holte, Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo. CC BY-SA 4.0.

protected, sacred knowledge, intended only for members of the specific indigenous community. We Euro-Western scholars must respect this boundary, including in light of archaeology's troubled history with disturbing and looting indigenous ancestral burials.

In non-indigenous contexts, we may take note of the under-theorised role of spiritual relations in the past and the role of nonhumans in these relationships. Expanding the social to include humans, nonhumans, and spiritual agents, means that the agency of interred burial objects is not metaphysical, metaphorical, or something that vaguely and broadly 'exists' in the world. Instead, people in the past understood, in very particular, culturally contingent ways, the activeness of materials and their ability to transform social relationships in human life to social relationships in the beyond-human-life. The remainder of this chapter will reflect on how nonhuman agents can offer new insight into the landscape of the Viking mind, particularly as nonhumans relate to social relations, including with cosmological or spiritual agents. It is hoped that this discussion will inspire new archaeological directions for mortuary contexts, including humans and nonhumans in the past.

Figure 2.3 Sons of Ivaldi. *Image details the goddess Sif in the foreground and the dwarves Eitri and Brokkr creating the golden hairpiece while Loki reclines in the front. © Helena Rosová 2010. Used with kind permission.*

Nonhuman Agency in the Viking World

While a large body of scholarship already exists for human and social agencies, applications of *nonhuman* agency, and its roots in new materialism and indigenous scholarship, are beginning to enter archaeologies of the Viking world.[51] People in Viking Age Scandinavia understood objects, object agencies, and materialities differently than we do in our contemporary world.[52] Sara Ann Knutson (2020) has analysed pre-Christian Scandinavian approaches to materiality based on myths and oral traditions, including the myth of the treasures of the gods, as described in the Old Norse text *Skáldskaparmál,* from the *Prose Edda*. In this myth, the dwarves Eitri and Brokkr fashion six treasures for the gods: the spear Gungnir which never stops its thrust, a golden hair headpiece for the goddess Sif which grows directly to her head, the ship Skíðblaðnir which could be folded as a cloth, the ring Draupnir which replicates eight rings of equal weight every ninth night, the boar Gullinbursti who can run through air and water, and the hammer Mjǫllnir which never misses its target and always returns to the hands of Þórr (Fig. 2.3).[53] In this assemblage of treasures, the animal Gullinbursti especially problematises contemporary assumptions about what constitutes an inanimate object, and the other five treasures are also noticeably 'active' nonhumans and they act independently of their divine owners. Such instances in Norse myths and oral culture cannot be dismissed as simply colourful stories.

Textual sources and oral traditions that attest to Viking Age life and practices contain many examples which demonstrate that nonhuman agencies pervaded daily life and worldviews. The Old Norse language, as preserved in skaldic poetry, especially provides insight into the material, nonhuman landscape of the Viking world and the Viking mind. The frequent use of materials to describe elements of the physical, natural landscape, for instance, is unmistakeable in Old Norse kennings, a circumlocutory poetic device used to identify a particular noun. For instance, the 'hair of the earth' (*haddr jarðar*)[54] is a kenning for 'grass'. A rock is sometimes described as the 'land-shoulder' (*landherðr*)[55] or 'bone of the sea' (*sævar beins*).[56] The 'grey-shirt of Máni (moon)' (*gránserkr mána*)[57] and 'the cover of the world' (*skaut heims*)[58] both connote the celestial landscape of the sky. Some skalds identify the seascape as the 'field of ice-floes' (*jǫkla akr*)[59] or the 'kelp's land' (*láð þangs).*[60] In mythological narratives, the sea is a particular nexus of the human and mythical worlds and is similarly often described in association with (mythic) materials. For instance, the giant Utgarðaloki possesses a drinking horn that stretches into the deepest part of the sea. And people who drown at sea were said to be gathered into the net of the goddess Rán.

In the same worldview in which Scandinavians embraced materials as part and parcel of earthly and mythic landscapes, materiality was also relevant to the human body. Ask and Embla, the first man and woman according to the myths, were made from trees. Naglfar, the ship that will aid the *jǫtnar* ('giants') during Ragnarǫk, is being constructed from the toenails and fingernails of the dead. In non-mythological contexts, skaldic poetry quite often describes humans as 'trees of gold' (*bǫrr seims*) or 'trees

of swords'[61] (*lundr hjǫrva*), with the latter specifically connoting warriors. These examples of landscapes and humans and their attributes, emphatically connected to materiality, should not give the false impression that skaldic poetry *always* describes these entities in terms of tangible materials. Nevertheless, these examples highlight some ways that seemingly dissimilar materials were metaphorically connected in language practices and how many Viking Age Scandinavians ascribed meanings to the world around them based on materials.

The Viking Age material record similarly testifies to particular espousals and conceptions of materiality. Scholars have observed, for instance, the presence of artefacts inscribed with personal names.[62] Some suggest that personal names on materials identify a deceased person or their relatives, deities, the human inscriber, or the object's creator. But some Viking Age materials contain inscriptions in which the object reflexively refers to itself. Nanouschka Burström identifies three examples of such inscriptions. A fifth-century brooch from Etelhem, Gotland (SHM 1261) contains the inscription '**mk mrla wrtaa**', 'm(i)k M(e)r(i)la w(o)rta', ('Merila made me').[63] An eleventh-century sword from Korsødegården, Norway (Museum of Cultural History, Oslo N28, C9981a) is inscribed with the phrase '**Aumutær : geþemik : aslikæramik**', 'Auðmundr gerði mik. Ásleikr á mik' ('Auðmundr made me, Ásleikr owns me') (Fig. 2.4).[64] And a Viking Age box brooch (SHM 13208) from Tyrvalds, Gotland, describes that '**auþi risti runaR auir – byþnuyaʀ**', 'Auði risti runar a... Byðnyar' ('Auði carved the runes on Bödny's [brooch]') (Fig. 2.5).[65]

Archaeologists have explained these kinds of inscriptions as indications of object biographies, human-object relations, and perhaps even objects' *dependence* on humans.[66] But the concept of object biographies tends to anthropomorphise objects, understanding them as if they had human-like

Figure 2.4 Eleventh-century sword with runic inscription Auðmundr gerði mik. Ásleikr á mik. *Uncovered in Korsødegården, Tangen Sogn, Norway (C9981). Photo by Kirsten Helgeland, Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo. CC BY-SA 4.0.*

Figure 2.5 Box brooch with runic inscription on bottom-side. Uncovered in Tyrvalds, Gotland (SHM 13208). Photo by Gabriel Hildebrand, Swedish History Museum. CC BY 4.0.

qualities and human-like life histories. Knutson (2020) argues that personifying objects often misses an important point about materials acting in the manner of materials, not according to human life, its range of actions and possibilities, and its own intensities and tempos.[67] While the inscribed formula 'X owns me' on materials may be explained as human-centred ownership, it is suggested here that these inscriptions reveal more complex meanings. Such inscriptions indeed connect the object to the human in a social relationship, but they simultaneously also draw attention to these objects as nonhuman agents. The inscriptions are from the perspective of the object, not the human owner, and this perspective compels the reader to contemplate the social relationship from the vantage of the object itself. The Viking Age worldview was one where materials were afforded their own perspective, based on understandings of nonhuman agency. Old Norse textual sources, including the Icelandic sagas, mention a related phenomenon, in which some materials possess their *own* inscribed name, not a human owner's personal name. Such evidence similarly points to a cultural context in which personal names were not exclusively a 'human' attribute but instead applied to a range of human and nonhuman agents.[68] Thus, the observation that the presence of 'ownership' inscriptions on materials almost gives the impression of Viking Age materials as 'living creatures'[69] must be qualified: the Viking Age Scandinavians do not appear to have related to materials as *living* beings – rather, they considered them as *agents*.

In addition to the material traces that survive archaeologically, this chapter has already gestured to some textual sources and the ways that the written record also importantly informs Scandinavian attitudes towards materiality. Textual sources do more than simply *supplement* the archaeological record, they sometimes provide information about the past that is less readily apparent from material traces alone, and *vice versa*. For this reason, one form of evidence cannot be privileged over another in our research on the Viking Age: they must be placed in transdisciplinary conversation. It would therefore be an exciting area for future research

in literary studies and textual criticism to explore concepts of nonhuman agency and its articulations in texts and inscriptions from the Viking Age. Materials held appreciable influence in Norse mythological narratives.[70] Objects maintain social lives in the myths, and they mediate interactions between the gods and other supernatural beings. This chapter has so far focused on *tangible* materials in the textual and archaeological record, but the role of materiality in Scandinavian cosmology extends much further.

A final example from the Old Norse mythic narratives demonstrates that Viking Age Scandinavians' conceptions of materiality included complex interactions between the material and the immaterial. The text *Gylfaginning*, the first main section of the *Prose Edda*, includes a mythological narrative about the formation of Gleipnir, the chain that the Norse gods use to finally bind the monster Fenrir after two unsuccessful attempts. *Gylfaginning* tells us that Gleipnir was created out of six things:

> Hann var gjǫrr af sex hlutum: af dyn kattarins ok af skeggi konunnar ok af rótum bjargsins ok af sinum bjarnarins ok af anda fisksins ok af fogls hráka (...) Fjǫturrinn varð sléttr ok blautr sem silkirœma.
>
> It was made of six things: the footsteps of a cat, the beard of a woman, the roots of a mountain, the sinews of a bear, the breath of a fish, and the spittle of a bird (…) The fetter was smooth and soft as silk ribbon.[71]

The chain Gleipnir is constructed from the assemblage of intangible materials which are considered inconceivable to humankind. In other words, Gleipnir wields its power and agency to secure Fenrir based on its immaterial materiality. Part of this immaterial assemblage, from which Gleipnir emerges, is framed as impossible materials – including the spittle of a bird, a mountain's roots, and a woman's beard. The other assemblage part contains intangible processes that humans do not consider tangible – namely, a cat's footsteps and the breath of a fish.

In addition to the *Prose Edda*, Old Norse skaldic poetry also similarly contains examples in which a material referent is identified according to intangible processes. Rain is the 'weeping of the clouds' (*grátr skygia*)[72] and a mountain is the 'paths of the giants' (*vegr jǫtna*),[73] emphasising the action of giants walking. Other landscape features in kennings also sometimes assume more active qualities. Rivers, for instance, are sometimes described as 'the chattering wind of the borderland' (*málhvettan byr markar*) or the 'storm-blasted toppling-noise of the mountains' (*hreggi hǫggvinn fellihryn fjalla*).[74]

These mythic and non-mythic examples suggest complex perspectives during the Viking Age regarding materiality that incorporated materials, intangible materials, and agentive processes. This outlook on materiality mapped onto Scandinavians' understandings of Ásgarðr, the realm of the gods, as much as onto Midgarðr, the realm of humankind. Textual and material traces of this worldview can therefore connect us with the imaginations and lived experiences of people in the past. Materiality was deeply embedded in Scandinavian configurations of the human and the beyond-human experience. The role of nonhuman agents in mediating everyday life and interactions was not taken for granted in ways that perhaps later belief-systems did. For instance, the idea of the world's creation *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, permeates much of Christian cosmology. In the context of pre-Christian Viking mentalities, we are reminded that materials contained more complex meanings than simply passive objects – in their material and textual articulations, nonhuman agents offer glimpses into how Scandinavians wove tangible and intangible materials together just as they wove spirituality and belief into their everyday reality.[75]

A Return to Nonhuman Agency in Burials

Thus far, this chapter has explored some examples of Viking Age nonhuman agency based on archaeological and textual traces. These lines of evidence reveal sophisticated ideas of nonhuman agency as it operated in Viking Age daily life as well as spirituality. Nonhuman agency therefore informed spiritual practices, including the construction of burials. Viking Age materiality and agency are therefore highly relevant to the archaeological interpretation of 'religious' objects, materials associated with magic or *seiðr*, and other objects associated with mortuary and depositional contexts. A significant body of archaeological research has explored Viking Age spiritual practices through *seiðr*, shamanism, and magic.[76] After all, spiritual heritage and tradition permeated daily human actions and practices in Scandinavia.[77] Viking Age Scandinavians did not distinguish between the secular and the sacred – this binary would have been entirely foreign to their worldview. In light of this observation, we must exercise caution in labelling certain material phenomena from the Viking Age as 'magical' when we really mean to articulate nonhuman agency. By doing otherwise, we risk overusing the term 'magic' until it carries little analytical weight. Treating magic as an all-encompassing residual category arguably devalues Viking Age practices – that are indeed magic – as unintelligent or illegitimate in comparison to contemporary Euro-Western expectations of spiritual practices. Magic encompassed important, genuine practices and traditions in Viking Age life that sometimes coordinated with ideas about nonhuman agents. That said, magic should not be explained – and consequentially trivialised – as a source of nonhuman agency, especially when the idea of nonhuman agents remains unusual or incomprehensible to Euro-Western scholars without relying on magic as an explanation.

The most contributive scholarship on Viking Age magic and spiritual practice is therefore the one that recognises

materials as agents, independently from humans and human-oriented agency. It is more productive to interpret objects as nonhuman agents, rather than as passive objects imbued with a *magical quality*. Not least, nonhuman agency helps us to examine 'ritual' objects as agents in assemblages.[78] Assemblages, after all, can consist of human or nonhuman agents, or any combination of humans and nonhumans, each of which has its own realm of possibilities for agency while also interacting with other entities in the assemblage. As a brief example, in *Vatnsdœla saga*, the sorceress Þórdís provides her staff and cloak to Þorkell, a non-magic-worker, who then uses the objects to confuse his opponent in a court trial.[79] In this example, the 'magical' assemblage consists of the human, Þorkell, and two nonhuman agents, the staff and cloak. One may interpret that the nonhuman agents supplied Þorkell with new, temporary, and seemingly magical, abilities – agency that he did not otherwise possess. In other cases throughout the Viking Age, humans, especially ritual specialists, seem to have not always required nonhuman agents in order to derive 'magical' or spiritual power. The *vǫlva* was understood as an important social role that individuals inhabited not occupationally or only when in possession of a proper magical 'tool', but rather in which the humans themselves held special access to supernatural forces and beings as well as in association with altered states of cognition.[80] Interpreting materials in spiritual contexts as passive, 'magical' objects in these cases can therefore sometimes obscure and undermine the powerful roles of *vǫlur* and other ritual specialists in Viking Age societies, suggesting that these persons only held spiritual power when they wielded 'magic-infused' objects. Instead, examining humans and nonhumans as 'agents' involved in a shared assemblage enables scholars to better articulate the ways in which objects can do different things when humans become involved, just as humans can do different things when objects become involved.

Sometimes, nonhumans in the Viking Age supplied people with greater abilities than they had previously. Other times, human ritual specialists extended greater abilities to certain nonhuman materials. In both instances, greater or different modes of agency emerge from an assemblage, from relationships between humans and nonhumans. Identifying nonhuman agency in assemblages therefore means that the researcher must not necessarily make a value judgment on *who* or *what* is the source of power or agency in a certain context. Assemblages avoid the tendency to place humans and nonhumans in competition with each other and to determine the directionality of agency; instead, assemblages help explain the distinct agencies of humans and nonhumans as well as how additional agency emerges from relationships between these entities.[81]

Viking Age Scandinavians recognised the active role of nonhumans in mediating social interactions with the supernatural, the more-than-human, and the beyond-human. The implications of nonhuman agency in Viking Age burials are therefore threefold. First, this framework destabilises a tendency in archaeology to over-emphasise the meanings of burial assemblages discovered in 'celebrity', 'luxurious', 'high-status', or otherwise exceptional burials at the expense of 'deviant', 'difficult', or less elaborate or exceptional burials.[82] The interpretation of burial objects, across all mortuary contexts, as nonhuman agents also takes seriously the materials in non-exceptional burials which still have much to inform us about the Viking Age past.

Second, nonhuman agency clarifies with greater specificity the role of nonhumans, including materials and nonhuman animals, in practices of magic and spirituality, not least in burials. Practices of deposition and their relationship to the supernatural constitute an important part of these discussions.[83] In recent years, archaeologists have devoted greater attention to the previously neglected study of objects that people in the past dedicated to supernatural powers, including in depositional contexts, whether they are called votives, dedications, ritual deposits, hoards, offerings, or another term.[84] Some archaeologists interpreted material traces in these contexts as indicative of past individuals' intentions to mark or establish communications with transcendent powers or as part of apotropaic practices in which magic was evoked for protection against undesired forces.[85] But in both cases, deposited materials are not simply the residues of rituals, they are the product of historicised fields of action 'in which humans and nonhumans were mutually active'.[86] Materials in such cases acted as mediators, whether communicative or protective, between humans and supernatural forces; establishing some kind of connection with transcendental actors is not a passive role for nonhumans to play. The scholarship on depositional practices in the 2000s therefore already began identifying themes that today are useful to the study of nonhuman agents in burials, particularly the attention to materials' special roles in forming social relations with the more-than-human or beyond-human world, whether it is to communicate with, protect from, or affiliate with the supernatural.

Thirdly and finally, the application of theories of nonhuman agency to burials critically destabilises the human in the interpretation of burial assemblages. Earlier, this chapter discussed critiques of non-indigenous scholarship that avoid or ignore nonhuman agency in the context of spirituality, a theme that indigenous scholars already accept. This critique is important to non-indigenous mortuary archaeology because we sometimes diminish aspects of burial assemblages which were intended for more than the deceased human or may have not been intended for the human at all. Old Norse skaldic poetry sometimes refers to the 'grave' as 'corpse-fjord' (*náfjǫrðr*).[87] This poetic construction would suggest that burials were not *entirely* about the living, but also about the dead and beyond-human-life actors. This may seem a rather simple point, but the example reminds

us that we cannot focus on burials only as reflections of the living architects of the burial, nor as the direct representation of deceased individuals' identities, at the expense of forgetting that mortuary practices are conducted *by* the living, but they are rarely conducted exclusively *for* the living. Human practices and intentions in the construction of burials are undoubtedly important; however, only examining burial materials from an anthropocentric perspective undermines the meanings that burial assemblages held for beyond-human life, such as intentions to establish social relations of some kind with spiritual nonhuman agents.

A brief but illustrative example of this anthropocentric bias may be found in the context of coin finds, not least Islamic, in the Viking Age archaeological record. When a group of coins (usually five or more) is uncovered alone or in association with other nonhuman materials, archaeologists label this assemblage as a 'hoard'. However, when coins are uncovered in association with human remains, they are considered 'grave goods'. In other words, the relationship of objects to a (deceased) human seems to change the archaeological value or interpretation of the materials themselves. My point is that categorising the same archaeological phenomena differently based on their contextual association to humans, or not, obscures the role of other cross-cutting variables, in much the same way that archaeologists have critiqued the convention of dividing human remains into male and female groups, which presumes that the most significant variation among human remains is that of biological sex.[88] We must therefore question whether we apply a similar kind of categorical bias to the study of nonhuman materials.

Concluding Thoughts

This chapter has emphasised the importance of nonhuman agency to the study of burial objects and to mind and materiality in the Viking Age. The author argues that Viking Age Scandinavians incorporated complex ideas about materiality and that nonhuman agency comprised a very real part of how they understood the world. These traditions and practices not only permeated daily life but also extended to spiritual practices and worldviews, based on material and documentary traces. When we expand the 'social' to properly include humans and nonhumans, including the beyond-human-life actors, social relations do not die when nonhumans are placed into the ground or any other depositional context. Instead, nonhumans continue to transform various kinds of social relations and generate meaning long after their deposition. As we think through things, we must remember that the social relations between the human, nonhuman, and supernatural are complex, and especially so in burials. While it may be tempting to interpret materials in '*vǫlva* graves' as reflective of the deceased individual's identity, it should be clear at least, that in these burials, and their connections to materiality, altered states of cognition, and nonhuman agency, more is happening.[89] Burials contain particularly important traces of mind and materiality in the Viking world. They operate between the material and the immaterial, between human-inhabited spaces and the not-fully-knowable realm of beyond-human-life.

Spiritual practices and ceremonies 'transcend the boundaries of the individual,' as indigenous scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer explains, 'and resonate beyond the human realm. These acts of reverence are powerfully pragmatic. These are ceremonies that magnify life'.[90] Burials, then, are perhaps best understood as 'episodes in unfolding stories'.[91] And these stories are not just about the human, they also pertain to nonhuman agents and the human practices around these agents that indeed magnified human life. Death is also not universally regarded across human societies as a disruption nor can burials be reduced to utilitarian purposes, such as healing a presumed breach in social life. Instead, in many cases, burials may be better articulated as assemblages that reweave and transform a community's social fabric,[92] now linked through the dead and cosmological actors. Such was the case for Viking Age Scandinavians. As Julie Lund states, there were 'many ways and paths to the land of the dead in Old Norse mentalities and world-views'.[93] Nonhumans played important, sometimes understated, roles in many of these paths and in weaving social life, both in human life and beyond human life. To the Viking mind, these social relations that materials mediated continued long after their deposition into Midgarðr and into the immaterial, more-than-human world beyond.

Notes

1. Haraway 1991; Hastrup 2013; Tsing 2013.
2. Grosz *et al.* 2017; Harrison-Buck & Hendon 2018.
3. Barad 2003; Sørensen 2013; Sundberg 2014; Cipolla 2021.
4. Tsing 2013: 28; Latour 2017.
5. Barad 2001; 2007; Bennett 2004; 2010; Connolly 2013; Coole 2013.
6. Salmón 2000; Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2012.
7. For an overview, see Gamble *et al.* 2019.
8. The term 'Euro-Western' refers to the traditions and discourses of Europeans and settler-colonial societies of European descent. 'Euro-Western' is increasingly used in social science research to recognise that these traditions and discourses have been the dominant voices in academic spaces at the expense of knowledge systems of non-white, formerly colonised, and historically marginalised societies, including indigenous peoples. See Todd 2016; Chilisa 2019; Gamble *et al.* 2019.
9. But see van der Tuin 2011; Bessire & Bond 2014; Lettow 2017; Braidotti 2020.
10. Rosiek *et al.* 2020; Walsh *et al.* 2021. Lisa M. Given (2012: 1) defines indigenous research as a 'systematic inquiry that engages Indigenous persons as investigators or partners to

extend knowledge that is significant for Indigenous peoples and communities'. Not least, indigenous research prioritises indigenous knowledges, which are place-specific, involve commitments to relationships (including with the land as a living entity), and which are rooted in the past, present, and future (Given 2012: 3). See also Smith 2012.

11. Rosiek *et al.* 2020: 332.
12. Deloria 1999; Atleo 2007; Weheliye 2014; Todd 2016; Marker 2018.
13. Knutson 2016.
14. For recent examples of this kind of approach, see Price & Ljungkvist 2018; Raffield 2019.
15. Hunt 2013: 4. See also Povinelli 2002; Povinelli *et al.* 2017.
16. Garroutte & Westcott 2013: 75–6.
17. But see, for example, Gardeła 2016b.
18. Sundberg 2014.
19. Saxe 1970; Binford 1971; Brown 1981; Chapman 1981. See Brown 1995 and Holz 1996 for discussion of the Saxe-Binford project.
20. Kristiansen 1987; 1999.
21. Ekengren 2013: 174.
22. Nilsson Stutz & Tarlow 2013: 2, referencing Schiffer 1972. See also Williams 2005.
23. Parker Pearson 1999: 3.
24. Thomas 1991; Mizoguchi 1993; Härke 1994: 32; Tilley 1999. See also Price 2010.
25. Pader 1982; Hodder 1986; Shanks & Tilley 1987.
26. Parker Pearson 1982; 1999; Barrett 1990; Sørensen 2004.
27. Richards 2001.
28. Joyce 2001; Williams 2006.
29. Thomas 2000; Brück 2004.
30. Joyce 1999: 15 (italics added).
31. Thomas & Tilley 1993; Thomas 1996.
32. Joyce 1999: 17; Latour 2000; Gilchrist 2011; Knutson 2016; Brownlee 2020.
33. Crossland 2009: 74.
34. Butler 1990; 1993. See Joyce 2005 for overview.
35. Joyce 1996; Meskell 1996; Borić & Robb 2008.
36. Thomas 2000; Fowler 2001; 2004; Gillespie 2001; Jones 2002.
37. Joyce 2011.
38. Crossland 2009; Joyce 2011: 41.
39. Sørensen 2013: 11.
40. Crossland 2014, quoting Gillespie 2015: 115. See also Williams & Sayer 2009.
41. Thäte 2007; Klevnäs *et al.* 2021.
42. Moen 2020.
43. Nilsson Stutz & Tarlow 2013: 1–2. Cf. Jennbert 2006.
44. But see, for example, Arnold 2016 for a recent critique of this approach.
45. For a discussion of fragmented or broken swords, for example, see Aannestad 2018, and references therein.
46. Klesius 2000: 31.
47. Chapman 2000; Chapman & Gaydarska 2007.
48. Overton & Hamilakis 2013; Fahlander 2014; Nilsson Stutz 2016: 21.
49. Smith 2012: 78. See also Hernandez 2022.
50. Deloria 1999; Rosiek *et al.* 2020: 339.
51. Gardeła 2016a; 2021; Lund 2017; Knutson 2019; 2020; 2021; forthcoming; Eriksen & Kay 2022.
52. Knutson 2020.
53. Faulkes 1998: 41–2.
54. Clunies Ross 2017b: 499.
55. Heslop 2012: 431.
56. Poole 2012a: 199.
57. Heslop 2017: 367.
58. Harris 2017: 520.
59. Poole 2012b: 233.
60. Gade 2009: 361.
61. Louis-Jensen & Wills 2007: 184–5.
62. Brunning 2013; 2019; Lund 2017; Aannestad 2018; Eriksen & Kay 2022.
63. Krause & Jankuhn 1966: 39–40.
64. The corpus of swords with similar Latin inscriptions 'MEFECIT' (made me) are also relevant here, demonstrating that this practice of creating inscriptions on materials whose 'narrator voice' comes from the perspective of the object was present not only in Northern Europe, but also in Western Europe and beyond. See Peirce & Oakeshott 2002.
65. Snædal 1986; Burström 2015: 30.
66. Burström 2015: 30; Lund 2017; Parrott 2020.
67. Knutson 2020: 270. For an alternative model, see the discussion of 'itinerant objects' in Joyce 2015.
68. Knutson 2020: 267.
69. Domeij 1999: 18.
70. See Knutson 2020.
71. Faulkes 2005: 28; author's translation.
72. McTurk 2017: 705.
73. Marold 2012: 301.
74. Marold 2017: 89.
75. Price 2008.
76. Andrén *et al.* 2006; Dillmann 2006; Heide 2006; Tolley 2009; Gardeła 2016a; Price 2019.
77. Price 2008: 146.
78. For an overview of assemblage theory in archaeology, see Knutson 2021, and citations within.
79. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1939: 119–22.
80. Price 2001; 2019, and citations within.
81. This interpretation does not inherently imply that objects are valued at the same level, or more, than certain human beings, a valid and important concern regarding ethics and power dynamics which Eriksen and Kay 2022 have raised in engaging with nonhuman agency.
82. But see Nilsson Stutz 2016: 19; Gardeła 2017.
83. Brown & Walker 2008; Walker 2008.
84. See Osborne 2004.
85. Osborne 2004: 7; Bill 2016.
86. Joyce & Pollard 2010: 11.
87. Clunies Ross 2017a: 519.
88. Cf. Agarwal *et al.* 2015: 87.
89. Gardeła & Odebäck 2018.
90. Kimmerer 2013: 249.
91. Joyce 2001: 13.
92. Joyce 1999: 17.
93. Lund 2013: 53.

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3

Gender in the Viking World

Eirnin Jefford Franks

In the Viking world, gender was fundamental. From rulers to the lowest rungs of the social ladder, gender determined almost every element of an individual's life in the Viking Age, from what they wore, what activities they could take part in, and how they could interact with other individuals. This is true of all societies: gender is one of the core elements of human identity, and in turn one of the primary tools for social categorisation and division.[1]

Gender is a social construct often related to, but not the same as, sex. Both are social constructs:[2] sex refers to the physical body, for example, reproductive and secondary sex characteristics. Sex is understood by many to be a binary with male and female as discrete categories. This is untrue: as with gender, sex is a spectrum.[3]

Similarly, gender is a social construct, but instead refers to an individual's social identity: how they move through the world, what they wear, the language they refer to themselves with and more. Judith Butler argues that gender is performative.[4] This conceptualisation of gender asks us to consider how we create and recreate gender. Gender is a cycle: we cannot create gender performance without *re*creating gender performance. In practice, this means that we understand gender through an existing script. This script tells us that, for example, boys will like blue. When a boy then likes blue, he is recreating a form of gender understood by that culture based on the gender that has already been created. This recreation of gender reaffirms how that gender should be performed, leading others to then repeat that script. Performing gender does not mean that gender is invalid or inauthentic: here, performance refers to unconscious daily actions rather than dramatic performance. Simply wearing clothing, engaging in activities, and how we relate to others form part of our individual performances of gender – something we do daily, often without thinking.

This cycle of gender means that gender is in constant negotiation. The performance of gender can vary and create new gendered performances that are then recreated by others. As such, gender is culturally specific, meaning that every society or cultural group uses different gender markers, gendered expectations, and ways of performing gender. We cannot apply our modern understandings of gender to the past, as our genders are very different to the genders of the Viking Age. Therefore, we must locate these gender performances *within* the Viking Age.

We must consider some important context: first, gender affects most elements of the Viking world, and is of key importance in social settings. Individuals were unconsciously monitoring and being monitored for how they were performing gender and could face repercussions for performing gender poorly or incorrectly. Second, Scandinavian Viking Age society was unquestionably patriarchal. While women may have had some freedoms not standard for their Continental contemporaries, such as the ability to divorce themselves from their husbands, Viking Age women were still structurally oppressed by men.[5] Finally, the Viking Age is defined by diaspora.[6] This disruption impacted gender relations, heightening existing anxieties around gender.[7]

There is much still to learn about gender in the Viking Age. Therefore, this chapter does not claim to describe it in any definitive way, but instead will give the broad strokes of normative and non-normative gender within a binary structure. It will demonstrate how masculinity and femininity were constructed, how men and women behaved in each of those categories, and how gender regulated Viking Age society at a fundamental level.[8]

Normative Gender

Beginning with normative gender allows us to understand what behaviour was expected of individuals in the Viking Age. Concepts of 'manhood', 'womanhood', 'masculinity', and 'femininity' were not singular or static categories; instead, there were many systems of masculinity and femininity existing alongside one another, often in hierarchised structures.[9] In studying normative gender, we can explore this multifaceted system in more detail.

Viking Age society privileged strict, binary gender roles, with a clear distinction between the lives and activities of men and women. This is clearly demonstrated by the division of women and men's lives into the framework of *fyrir innan stokk* and *fyrir útan stokk*, or the world within the threshold of the home and the world beyond, respectively.[10] Within this framework, women's worlds centred around the running of the farm, including activities such as childcare, cooking, textile work including the rearing of sheep, and the production of dairy products. Men's worlds centred around fishing, agriculture, travel, trade, politics, law, and various martial-related activities.[11]

Scholars have debated how to interpret this model within the context of women and power. Women were excluded from direct power by this division, denying them access to public life – they were inherently treated as inferior to men.[12] However, this did not mean that women had no access to power. They could encourage men to act in particular ways, through which they could exercise limited power.[13] Some scholars, such as Anne-Sofie Gräslund, have argued that 'a farm was like a firm, run by husband and wife together, in which the work of both partners was of equal importance although distinct and complementary'.[14] This interpretation of a symbiotic relationship between men and women allows us to consider the position of women in Viking Age society outside of traditional, masculine-focused models of power, and instead consider women as the backbone of society. As Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir has argued, 'the Viking Age wouldn't have been possible at all without the contribution of women – their labour and expertise yielded the sails that set the ships in motion and clothed the Vikings for their expeditions. They ran farms and raised children, keeping entire households prosperous, often without their husbands'.[15]

Men and Masculinity

Until Gareth Lloyd Evans' 2019 *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, there were no comprehensive studies of the lives of Viking Age men as a gendered subject.[16] Evans addresses this, stating that this lack of study 'can be understood as a function of masculinity's status as the "unmarked category", where maleness and masculinity can pass as universal human conditions, while femaleness and femininity are seen as constructed and other'.[17] In taking this starting point, we acknowledge the need to consider men's lives in this critical way.

Viking Age masculinity was not singular, but instead was a system of multiple masculinities. Evans' use of the critical framework of hegemonic masculinity[18] allows us to understand this complex system. Hegemonic masculinity can be seen as 'the crystallization of the masculine ideal'. Below this hegemonic masculinity sits other, subordinate masculinities that are viewed as inferior. Evans highlights two caveats for understanding hegemonic masculinity. Firstly, this should not be conflated with power, as one can, and does, exist without the other. Secondly, he notes that a man can 'embody a masculinity that is subordinate to the idealized form, but is nevertheless regarded as masculine: deviation from the masculine ideal does not invariably imply feminization'.[19]

To better understand these masculinities, we can create a list of requirements based on evidence from the Viking Age.[20] In order to access masculinity, a man must:

- **Be of fine physical appearance**. This can take several forms, but this particularly includes the presence of a well-groomed beard and hair.[21]
- **Act heroically**. This includes physical and martial prowess and requires that men must not act cowardly.
- **Be bold, sincere, and responsible**. Men must act in good faith, not be 'overly domesticated', and not prioritise sexual activity over physical labour.[22]
- **Act honourably at all times**. Men must act amicably with their kinsmen and take revenge where necessary, in line with the Viking Age honour-based society.[23]
- **Not break any taboos**. Men must ensure that societal taboos are not broken. This is particularly focused around taboos that are seen to benefit society, maintaining a certain standard of behaviour.[24]
- **Not take part in irregular sexual practices**. Irregular sexual practices in the Viking Age included same-sex sexual activity, when a man is the receptive partner only; the penetrative partner's masculinity is unaffected by these acts.

Accessing hegemonic masculinity was not possible for all men. Other elements of identity affected the performance of gender, which in turn aids in the creation of multiple masculinities. These elements can include, but are not limited to:

- **Age**. Youth could be a barrier to masculinity due to the requirement of secondary sex characteristics such as a beard, with young men often needing to prove their masculinity.[25] Old age can also reduce a man's masculinity, although Evans notes that this does not appear to be strictly reliant on chronological age, but instead depends on behaviour as one ages.[26]
- **Social status**. High social status gave better access to and more freedom within masculinity. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir highlights that while saga authors consider sex with multiple partners to be

a sign of weakness (and therefore reduced masculinity) for most men, kings and chieftains can take concubines and multiple wives.[27] In contrast, men of lower social status were not expected to perform masculinity to the same standard as higher status men, and when they did so this was commented on as remarkable given their status.[28]

- **Race**. While Viking society was predominantly populated by white Scandinavians, this was not exclusively the case. Non-white masculinities were subordinated to white Viking masculinities, as we can see in the tale of the so-called *blámaðr*, or, literally, 'black man'.[29] This unnamed man from *Kjalnesinga saga*[30] is described as extremely strong and an excellent fighter. Evans highlights that 'if a man of such prowess, who was not black, were in the king's retinue he would without a doubt be thought a champion rather than a troll'.[31]
- **Injury and disability**. Men who sustain injuries in combat see their masculinity negatively affected. It is a sign that they lost in battle and cannot fulfil all the requirements of masculinity due to a lack of military prowess.[32] However, Evans argues that men who are physically impaired are not held to quite the same standard as able-bodied men,[33] implying that disabled men may have access to limited masculinity, but cannot reach the hegemonic ideal.[34]

Masculinity can go too far. The hegemonic ideal demands balance to maintain social order. The character of Grettir in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* shows that '(hyper)masculinity problematizes a character's relation to self, family, society, and the very notion of masculinity itself.'[35] In childhood, Grettir was already so determined to perform hegemonic masculinity that he needed to dominate all those around him, including his father.[36] As Evans notes, 'the extreme assertion of dominance that is characteristic of hypermasculinity runs contrary to the cultural imperative to obey one's father and thus disrupts the usual social hierarchy'.[37] This episode demonstrates that while hegemonic masculinity is the target, this must be done with moderation, and an excess of masculinity can upset the social order.

Masculinity determined the behaviour of kings, traders, warriors, farmers, and enslaved men. Men constantly monitored each other's masculinity and used it to guide behaviour. Evans identifies this use of masculinity 'in even the most seemingly banal of situations',[38] citing an episode in *Flóamanna saga* in which the enslaved man Gíparr encourages Kolr to *drekka karlmannliga* ('drink like a man').[39] The implications of straying from masculinity will be explored further below.

Women and Femininity

There was a rise in scholarship considering women in the Viking Age at the end of the twentieth century, including works such as Judith Jesch's *Women in the Viking Age* in 1991,[40] followed by Jenny Jochens' *Women in Old Norse Society* (1995) and *Old Norse Images of Women* (1996).[41] With this rise, the image of the 'strong Viking woman' has gained iconic status both in popular culture and scholarship. However, most Viking Age women did not fit into this trope and instead their lives were ruled by femininity.

While not being socially maintained in the same way as masculinity, femininity was still a significant and potentially powerful force within the Viking world – one that patriarchal society may have feared. Helga Kress argues that 'those elements outside society which they do not have power over but are seeking to win, are often defined as feminine, and in one way or another, related to the earth.'[42] Femininity was not seen as disempowering or powerless – the anxieties around femininity suggest it was considered just as powerful, if not more so, than masculinity. However, this should not be used to detract from the oppression of women, but instead reminds us of the complicated nature of gender.

Femininity did not seem to have the same strict requirements as masculinity. Instead, it is posited here that there are three key areas that contribute to the construction of femininity within the Viking Age. These are:

- **Wisdom**. This was core to femininity,[43] and we consistently see women providing sage counsel to the men around them. In the *Íslendindasǫgur* this takes the form of the 'whetting woman' trope, according to which women use their wisdom to encourage their husbands to enact revenge[44] or to seek a peaceful resolution.[45] This theme also appears across other Old Norse sources: Brynhildr in *Vǫlsunga saga*, the *vǫlva* of *Vǫluspá*; the eddic poem *Hávamál* states that women are *horskar* ('wise').[46]
- **Sexual chastity**. The word *vergjarn* could be used as an insult towards women who failed to be chaste, literally meaning 'man mad'.[47] Freyja faces this insult in *Þrymskviða*,[48] demonstrating how vital this concept was: even significant goddesses must adhere.
- **Care and maternity**. It was expected that a woman would bear children to her husband, but not sexually engage with other men. Indeed, it is thought that Viking Age women in Norway gave birth roughly every thirty months, and similar figures are expected throughout the rest of the Viking world.[49] Women of child-bearing age would often remarry after divorce or widowhood.[50] The image of the monstrous giantess subverts maternity[51] and demonstrates the anxieties surrounding women failing at this aspect of femininity.

In separating the gendered performance of femininity from the ideological category of womanhood, we can see further elements that helped construct the position of normative womanhood. It is posited here that womanhood is also constructed through:

- **The role of the housewife**. This was an important and occasionally powerful position.[52] We see this in the Hassmyra stone from Västmanland, Sweden which carries the following inscription: 'the good farmer Holmgöt had the stone set up in memory of Odendisa, his wife. There will not come to Hassmyra a better housewife who runs the farm…'[53] It appears that, at least among some Viking Age communities, this position was symbolised by the wearing of keys on the belt.[54]
- **Textile work**. This was not only central to women's lives but also a vital part of the North Atlantic economy: it 'was not simply housework'.[55] Indeed, textiles in the form of *vaðmál* could be used as commodity-money.[56] Textile production appears to be the most gender-specific realm of Viking Age life,[57] and it became a sphere for female expression.[58] Spindle whorls are often found in the graves of women across the social strata, and are almost exclusive to femininity.[59] Even young girls were expected to engage in textile work, and one young girl was buried at the Birka site with a needle case.[60]
- **Ritual roles**. Feasting and gift-giving were culturally significant in the Viking Age. Women may have held an essential role as the servers of drinks: the housewife would serve her husband first and then his followers in a ritual that established their rank.[61] Other rituals took place within the home, for which women were responsible. Neil Price states that 'this was another source of true social power, guarding the lines of communication between the community and the other worlds'.[62] Furthermore, there is the role of the *vǫlva*, who practices *seiðr*. This realm of ritual practice had clear connections to the concept of femininity.[63]

Due to the extravagant nature of the Oseberg ship burial in the Norwegian context, it is argued that one of its two female occupants had some level of power or influence. The items in the grave reflect the feminine realms of textile work, food production, and ritual practices,[64] and therefore the burial may present an archetype of Viking Age womanhood – perhaps even consciously so.[65]

As with masculinity, other elements of identity affected femininity. As women grew older, they likely lost access to femininity, as they lost their ability to sexually reproduce. Social status also had an impact: higher-status women were able to focus on more detailed and artistic textile work such as embroidery and tapestry, as opposed to the more utilitarian-focused weaving and cloth-making.[66]

Ultimately, women's lives were equally controlled by femininity as men's were by masculinity. However, while men monitored each other's masculinity amongst themselves, women's femininity was monitored by the men of patriarchal society, who had power over them, and where women had bleak prospects.[67]

Non-normative Gender

Most people in the Viking Age adhered to these strict gendered roles. However, this was not true of all people, and we know that plenty strayed from the expectations placed on them. There is clear evidence for queer identities in the Viking Age,[68] and scholars have argued for further alternative gender systems during this period of history.[69]

Studying non-normative genders allows us to isolate elements outside of where we 'expect' to see them, bringing them into sharper contrast and deepening our knowledge. It also allows us to understand the repercussions of not performing gender correctly.

Considerations of non-normative gender were first undertaken by Carol Clover. She argues for a one-sex system in the Viking Age, in which individuals were understood to have one of two versions of the same sex (male or inverted male),[70] and could gain access to power if they were *hvatr*, bold, active, or masculine, as opposed to *blauðr*, soft, weak, or feminine.[71] Clover argues that instead of male and female, people were divided into 'able-bodied men (and the exceptional woman)… [and] a kind of rainbow coalition of everyone else (most women, children, slaves, and old, disabled, or otherwise disenfranchised men)'.[72]

Clover's model, while ground-breaking at the time, is no longer recommended by scholars. Evans highlights that masculinity relies, at least in part, on male secondary sex characteristics, such as a beard. Therefore, a masculine man and a masculine woman would have been understood as discrete categories, rather than the same gendered position.[73] Furthermore, this conception of gender relies on power as a determinate of its construction, and this conflation is unhelpful.[74] As earlier stated, hegemonic masculinity and power do not have to co-exist.[75] If this is true of hegemonic masculinity, the most culturally exalted form of gender, then it will certainly be true of other genders too.

Despite these criticisms, Clover's article had a lasting impact on the study of Viking Age gender, and as Evans notes, 'she is clearly right to see character's gender performances as mutable and mobile'.[76] It is these mutable and mobile genders that shall now be considered below.

Women and Masculinity

Some women in the Viking Age were able to take on male tasks, responsibilities, or roles. Scholarship and popular culture alike have always been fascinated with the figure of the strong Viking Age woman.[77] However, often power and masculinity are conflated. Women could take on some male tasks without performing masculinity, and in doing so, her gender is not necessarily changed. While men were prioritised, women could and did inherit money and land. A 'not-insignificant percentage' of women did so, and some became substantial landowners.[78] Furthermore, some women may have gone raiding, and some became skalds. The latter is considered particularly notable by Clover, as poetry was

very specifically a man's realm.[79] However, the extent to which they performed a masculine gender is unclear, and it is possible that it was not a requirement for a woman in a man's realm to *necessarily* perform masculinity at all: some, or indeed many of these women may have acquired these male roles while retaining femininity.

However, some women did perform masculinity. In *Laxdœla saga*, Auðr's husband divorces her for wearing men's trousers *sem karlkonur* ('like masculine women').[80] This small act of gender transgression demonstrates a complex understanding around female masculinity. Here, as Evans notes, 'she is not a man, nor is she unambiguously perceived to be one'.[81] It is made clear that Auðr retains her womanhood despite this transgression, and indeed it is the retention of this womanhood that seems to be so contentious. Evans draws particular attention to the curious word *karlkonur*. This word, in juxtaposing these two gender categories, 'indicates that sex *is* of importance to questions of gender identity and performance'.[82] Combining this with the reason for divorce – wearing men's trousers – we can infer that masculinity, while not being inherent to maleness, was likely constructed through its proximity to the ideological category of manhood.[83]

The most predominant example of female masculinity in the Viking Age is the phenomenon of the shield-maidens, although their existence in reality is unknown and often debated.[84] However, there was no doubt that this figure existed within the cultural imagination. The warrior woman appears in many sagas, primarily of the *fornaldarsǫgur* type, alongside the heroic eddic poems, skaldic poems, and the Prose Edda.[85] Archetypal shield-maidens are young women who take on the male role of a warrior, often changing name, pronouns, and clothes to reflect their gendered position.[86] The most famous example is Hervǫr/Hervarðr of *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*. As a child, she is more interested in masculine activities like fighting than feminine activities like textile work. As she grows older, she chooses to retrieve her inheritance, a magic sword, from her father's grave. To do so, she becomes the leader of a Viking group,[87] takes the masculine name Hervarðr and wears masculine clothes.[88] Scholars have debated interpretations of Hervǫr/Hervarðr. Clover argues that Hervǫr/Hervarðr is functionally a son due to being an only child: it is only her who can claim the inheritance, and as such, she necessarily took on this male role.[89] However, Miriam Mayburd disagrees with this, arguing that we should consider Hervǫr/Hervarðr as 'an invitation to depart from the modern theoretical construction of gender binary'.[90]

Hervǫr/Hervarðr is not our only contentious example of female masculinity. Following its excavation over 100 years ago, the grave Bj. 581 from Birka, Sweden, has been considered an archetypical example of a Viking Age warrior.[91] However, aDNA analysis revealed that this individual was biologically female, within the standards conventionally employed by physical anthropologists,[92] sending shockwaves around the world as the scientific article broke into mainstream media. Scholars have debated the various interpretations of this burial: was this a female warrior, as the research team declared; someone who could now be considered a trans man;[93] or perhaps another gender configuration that we are unfamiliar with?[94] While we may never answer this question, we can use the grave to explore female masculinity: we have a female-sexed body buried with items that appear to be connected to masculine gender performances. While sexing a grave based on grave goods is discouraged,[95] the items construct a masculine gender, and the grave arguably lacks any items that construct a feminine gender.[96]

Female masculinity received mixed reactions in the Viking Age. As we see from Auðr in *Laxdœla saga*, women could find themselves divorced from their husbands – and therefore lacking security – by transgressing gender in this way. However, as Evans highlights, it is possible that Auðr's masculinity in this episode challenges her husband's, to the extent that her masculinity outweighs his: it could be this imbalance that causes the divorce, as Auðr may emasculate her husband. However, Clover notes women being praised for their masculinity in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, in which Hildigunnr is described as *drengr mikill* ('a great man'). Clover goes on to argue that 'this is a world in which "masculinity" always has a plus value, even (or perhaps especially) when it is enacted by a woman'.[97] However, many of the warrior women we meet eventually return to normative womanhood: this could perhaps suggest a societal anxiety around female masculinity, deeming it inappropriate. Indeed, Price states that 'women could not acceptably look like men or try to symbolically be them'.[98] However, ultimately, masculine women were undoubtedly received far better than feminine men.

Men and Femininity

One of the key methods through which male masculinity was maintained in the Viking Age is through the *ergi* complex. This concept relies on the insult of *ergi*, which denoted some form of unmanliness, and possible queerness, particularly in relation to sexual transgressions.[99] These insults often took the form of *níð*.[100] Accusations of this kind exclusively referred to the receptive partner in anal sex, and it has been suggested that other same-sex sexual activity such as mutual masturbation would not have affected masculinity in the same way.[101] This suggests that the taboo was not same-sex activity *per se*, but the undermining of masculinity via penetration: 'anal penetration constructed the man who experienced it as a whore, bride, mare, bitch, and the like – in whatever guise a female creature, and as such subject to pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation'.[102] Calling another man *ergi* was taken very seriously. The law code *Grágás* states that the punishment for falsely accusing someone of

ergi was full outlawry.[103] Evidently, transgressing outside of masculinity was perilous for the men who did so.

Ergi is about emasculation – a lack of masculinity, which does not inherently mean the presence of femininity. However, this does not mean that the lines between the two were not blurred, and often men who performed feminine genders were accused of *ergi* regardless. Similarly, men accused of *ergi* were not inherently performing a feminine gender.

As with masculine women, we see a range of extents to which men engage with femininity in the Viking Age. Notably, we do not often see examples of men taking on the roles of women in the home or in textile production, and to the best of this author's knowledge we have no examples of men taking feminine names and pronouns in a way comparable to warrior women. However, this does not mean we do not have a wealth of information to draw on to explore how men engaged with femininity.

Returning to *Laxdœla saga* once again, we see an episode in which Þuriðr exchanges her baby for her husband's sword. As Kress argues, 'with this she not only castrates him, but also feminizes him, making him into a mother with a baby in his arms'.[104] This small act creates a gender performance – albeit one enforced upon someone else – that is feminine: the husband here is in a maternal position, one which constructs a feminine gender.

As with masculine women, we also have archaeological evidence that implies the existence of men who took on feminine genders. The excavations at Klinta, Öland, and Portway, Andover, England, both have graves with individuals who appear to have been biologically male but buried as feminine people. Price states that 'male-bodied individuals buried in conventional women's dress and/or with normatively feminine accessories have conclusively been found at several sites'.[105] Furthermore, the so-called 'Óðinn from Lejre' figure seems to depict a man, arguably Óðinn, in women's clothing.[106] The *Grágás* law code takes extra care to describe the clothing that is appropriate for each gender,[107] and as such we can infer that a man wearing women's clothing, particularly buried in such a way by their own community, was perhaps not seen to be a man at all, but instead a woman or another feminine gender.

The *vǫlur* of the Viking Age were ostensibly women, and the related practice of *seiðr* is considered shameful for men.[108] Despite this, we see numerous incidents of men practicing *seiðr*, including, but not limited to, Óðinn.[109] Even men of high status experienced negative repercussions for their actions, with Óðinn being accused of *ergi* on numerous occasions.[110] There are two key elements of *seiðr* that directly correlate to the performance of femininity. The first of these is knowledge and wisdom. These are central to the practice of *seiðr*, which often entails the *vǫlva* or another kind of ritual specialist gaining knowledge about the future or the mythical world. For example, the *vǫlva* in *Vǫluspá* tells of the creation of the cosmos and the destruction of the gods;[111] while the *vǫlva* in *Eiríks saga rauða* tells the nervous crowd that their fate will improve in the spring.[112] Alongside this, and admittedly more dubious, is the proposition that *seiðr* involved the idea of spinning (the turning of fibres into thread in textile production), either literally or conceptually (→ **Chapter 8**).[113] If this indeed were the case, that would make this practice explicitly feminine. As such, *seiðr* in and of itself takes part in the performance of femininity. Therefore, the men who perform this ritual magic are also engaging in performances of femininity.

Concluding Remarks

Men had high expectations to live up to with masculinity. Masculinity existed within a hegemonic system, in which there was a superior form of masculinity, with other masculinities subordinated to it. To access masculinity, men had to be of good physical appearance, act heroically, be bold, sincere, and responsible, always act honourably, not break any taboos, and not take part in irregular sexual practices, such as being the receptive partner in anal sex.

The construction of femininity seemed to be less detailed and less closely monitored than masculinity.[114] The construction of femininity relied on wisdom, sexual chastity, and care and maternity. Gender-conforming women were also expected to run the farm, be involved in textile production, and take part in specific ritual roles within the home. As such, we can argue that these elements also contributed to the construction of femininity.

However, masculinity and femininity are not confined to men and women respectively, and we see examples of people transgressing gender throughout the corpus of sources we have for the Viking Age, whether literary or archaeological. These transgressions seem more permissible for women, who were able to take on male roles or perform masculinity with fewer repercussions, although there were clearly social anxieties surrounding this.

It was less acceptable for men to transgress into femininity, as demonstrated by the *ergi* insult complex, but this did not stop some men from performing femininity regardless.

Gender impacted the lives of every individual in the Viking Age. No matter someone's social status, age, or importance, they were expected to live within certain roles deemed appropriate based on their gender. However, this did not stop many people throughout the Viking Age from challenging these gendered expectations and performing genders outside the one they were assigned in childhood.

Notes

1. This chapter will focus on the binary positions of masculinity and femininity, and their connected realms of manhood and womanhood. This focus on the binary is due to space within this chapter, rather than genders outside of the binary being non-existent or unimportant. This chapter only considers specifically Norse conceptions of gender, rather than any other Viking Age societies such as Sámi, Slavic, and Baltic ethnic groups.
2. A social construct is an idea that has been created and accepted by a society, as opposed to essentialism, which argues that categories have intrinsic natures or dispositions. For example, an essentialist view on gender would argue that boys like blue by nature of their biology, whereas social constructivism argues that this is part of a gendered social script.
3. American Psychiatric Association website.
4. Butler 1990.
5. Structural oppression refers to the systems that exist in and are accepted by society that, by design, favour one group over others. An example in this instance is the conceptualisation of marriage as an exchange of a woman between men without her desires, opinions, or even consent taken into consideration (Raffield *et al*. 2017a: 322; Hayeur-Smith 2020: 23).
6. Jesch 2015.
7. Stig Sørensen 2009: 264.
8. This chapter uses ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ to refer to the broader performances of gendered positions; ‘men’ and ‘women’ to refer to the ideological binary categories we understand as the primary genders of society; and ‘male’ and ‘female’ to refer to the category of sex.
9. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2017: 227.
10. Jochens 1995: 117.
11. Clover 1993: 365; Price 2020: 157.
12. Raffield *et al*. 2017b: 187.
13. Gräslund 2001: 89. For example, see the ‘whetting woman’ trope, e.g. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 15–47.
14. Gräslund 2001: 89.
15. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2020: 115.
16. In contrast, the body of scholarship from the centuries before this considered men’s lives as the ungendered lives of the people of the Viking Age.
17. Evans 2019: 9.
18. Evans 2019: 16.
19. Evans 2019: 17.
20. This list of requirements is taken from Evans 2019: 25.
21. Evans 2019: 13; Hayeur-Smith 2020: 24.
22. Hayeur-Smith 2020: 25.
23. Miller 1990.
24. These taboos include things such as incestuous relationships.
25. Evans 2019: 67–8.
26. Evans 2019: 78.
27. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2017: 228. See also Raffield *et al*. 2017a: 315–24 for more discussion of concubinage and polygamy.
28. Evans 2019: 104–5.
29. Evans 2019: 84.
30. Jóhannes Halldórsson 1959.
31. Evans 2019: 85.
32. Evans 2019: 87.
33. Evans 2019: 90.
34. For example, we can consider the man buried in Repton, who was seemingly injured in battle in a way that resulted in his genitalia being presumably mutilated or amputated. He was instead buried with a boar tusk between his legs, possibly referencing that his masculinity was still somewhat intact, but perhaps diminished due to this injury (Jarman 2021: 18–20).
35. Evans 2019: 107.
36. Guðni Jónsson 1936.
37. Evans 2019: 115.
38. Evans 2019: 45.
39. Þórhallur Vilmundarson & Bjarni Vilhjálmsson 1991.
40. Jesch 1991.
41. Jochens 1995; 1996.
42. Kress 2001: 83.
43. Clark & Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2016: 342–4.
44. Jochens 2001: 138; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 15.
45. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 45.
46. Examples cited from Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 25. See also Guðni Jónsson 1943; Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I.
47. Jochens 1996: 60.
48. Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I: 424.
49. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2020: 120.
50. Jochens 1995: 61.
51. Clark & Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2016: 347.
52. Stig Sørensen 2009: 260.
53. Gräslund 2001: 84.
54. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2017: 230.
55. Hayeur-Smith 2020: 4.
56. i.e., textiles could be exchanged in place of money or precious metals such as silver or gold (Andersson Strand 2021: 169).
57. Arwill-Nordbladh 2003: 28.
58. Hayeur-Smith 2020: 7-8.
59. Arwill-Nordbladh 2003: 28.
60. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2020: 31.
61. Enright 1996.
62. Price 2020: 157.
63. Arwill-Nordbladh 2003: 32.
64. Arwill-Nordbladh 2003: 23-27.
65. Arwill-Nordbladh 2003: 35.
66. Gräslund 2001: 97.
67. Jesch 1991: 208. See also Raffield *et al*. 2017a: 322.
68. Price 2020: 168.
69. For example, Clover 1993: 363–87; Solli 2008; Jefford Franks 2019; Tirosh 2020.
70. Clover 1993: 377. This is based on Thomas Laqueur’s one-sex model. See Laqueur 1990.
71. Clover 1993: 364.
72. Clover 1993: 380.
73. Evans 2019: 13.
74. For a further critique of this model, see Jefford Franks 2019: 33–4.
75. Evans 2019: 17.

76. Evans 2019: 15.
77. Clover 1993: 366.
78. Clover 1993: 366.
79. Clover 1993: 367.
80. Literally *karlkonur* means 'man women'. See Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1934: 96.
81. Evans 2020: 66.
82. Evans 2020: 64.
83. It is of course worth remembering here that gender is in constant and ongoing negotiation: the cycle of masculinity constructing manhood and manhood constructing masculinity is difficult to unpick and certainly not something that can be dealt with in this chapter.
84. Hedenstierna-Jonson 2018; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2020: 38; Price 2020: 328; Gardeła 2021: 22–5.
85. Price 2020: 327.
86. Price 2020: 327
87. Viking here used in the proper sense of a group of men in the Viking Age travelling overseas by boat for trading, raiding, or settling activities.
88. Turville-Petre 1956.
89. Turville-Petre 1956: 12–14.
90. Mayburd 2014: 124.
91. Price *et al*. 2019: 182.
92. Hedenstierna-Jonson *et al*. 2017: 1–8.
93. It is not appropriate to apply our modern labels of gender and sexuality onto the past, but we can make comparisons that allow us to communicate these ideas where we lack the language from within the culture itself.
94. Price states that '*they must all be recognised as possible Viking Age identities* while – crucially – not assuming this must be the case.' (Price 2020: 177, emphasis original).
95. The sexing of a grave exclusively based on grave goods relies on circular arguments: i.e. women are buried with x item, so the presence of x item means a grave must belong to a woman.
96. For example, there are no items relating to textile work, care or maternity, or the home. However, the presence of gaming pieces could be open to interpretation. These pieces are understood to reflect strategic capabilities of this individual. This could reflect the masculine requirement of martial prowess, or the female requirement of wisdom – or, indeed, both or something else altogether.
97. Clover 1993: 372.
98. Price 2020: 172.
99. Clover 1993: 374–6; Mayburd 2014: 128–9.
100. Price 2020: 170. *Níð* is the term for the formalised process of declaring an insult or accusation against someone.
101. Evans 2019: 92–6.
102. Clover 1993: 375.
103. Clover 1993: 374.
104. Kress 2001: 91.
105. Price 2020: 169.
106. Mannering 2013: 84.
107. Mayburd 2014: 136.
108. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941: 13.
109. Jefford Franks 2019: 36–43.
110. Jefford Franks 2019: 36–43.
111. Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I: 291–321.
112. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson & Matthias Þórðarson 1935.
113. Heide 2006.
114. It is worth acknowledging that this is based primarily on textual sources that were produced by men. My thanks to Leszek Gardeła for this point.

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4

Folklore and Prophecy

Terry Gunnell

Folklore is essentially 'lore' (unofficial knowledge) that is passed down between people over the course of time, initially in oral form and in the shape of demonstration rather than through writing.[1] The idea that it may preserve ancient knowledge and thus be a valuable source with regard to ancient beliefs, narratives, customs and skills largely goes back to the early nineteenth century, when scholars like Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (following in the footsteps of other scholars like Johann Gottfried Herder) started collecting folkloric material, initiating a cultural tsunami of folkloric collection across Northern Europe.[2] The belief of the Grimms was that in addition to containing the elements of the national *Volksgeist*, the oral stories that they had collected, preserved and passed on by the rural working classes, also contained features of ancient myths.[3] Similar beliefs can be seen in the way in which Jacob Grimm comparatively uncritically draws on later folk material alongside original Old Nordic and German textual sources in his attempts to reconstruct pagan beliefs and rituals in his *Deutsche Mythologie* (1835), an approach that would be echoed some years later in Wilhelm Mannhardt's *Wald-und Feldkulte* (1875–1877), which places a greater emphasis on traditions.

While similar ideas would continue to be reflected in a number of other works from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,[4] fuelled in part by interests in origin and evolution, they have since been tempered somewhat by a greater understanding of how folk tradition (and especially the oral tradition) 'works', and an ever-increasing folkloric focus on questions relating to function and performance.[5] There is certainly evidence that narratives, customs, and beliefs can be passed down for centuries, something that can be seen in the archaeological evidence that points to examples of the same site (such as Thorsbjerg) having being used for sacrificial depositions of weapons for several hundred years (from 100 BC to AD 500).[6] Evidence also exists of folk narratives effectively preserving faint memories of ancient activities that took place in a certain locality, as with those Norwegian legends telling of an armoured knight and his horse that were supposed to be lying beneath a large rock, a rock that was later found to cover the (unburied) bones of a man and horse, and two Viking Age spear heads. Of a similar kind are those legends from Dejbjerg in Denmark, which told of wagons filled with gold that were apparently lying in a local bog, something that was seemingly later backed up by the finding of the Dejbjerg wagons in 1881–1882.[7] With regard to traditions, there is good reason to believe that customs of leaving out newly brewed beer and newly baked bread on local Iron Age gravemounds went on in parts of western Norway until the early twentieth century, and that narratives, superstitions and beliefs relating to such gravemounds have seemingly protected them from destruction for centuries.[8]

All the same, it is always imperative to remember that while folklore can preserve ideas and customs for centuries, beliefs and superstitions, like narratives and traditions, regularly transform over time under the influence of environmental, social, or religious change, or neighbouring cultures. As has regularly been pointed out, the Germanic and Old Nordic religions were not dogmatic 'universal' religions like Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, or Hinduism, which drew on written texts, but rather so called 'ethnic religions',[9] which were passed on by word of mouth and would have varied by time and place. In other words, by nature, they were themselves a form of folklore. This means that one should handle them with both care and caution. Many eddic and skaldic poems were viewed as being pre-Christian by early Christian scholars such as Snorri Sturluson; and are still viewed in this way by many modern scholars who have

few compunctions against suggesting that a skaldic poem recorded in the thirteenth century might have remained intact for over three hundred years. The facts of the matter are that, like most oral narratives,[10] while they may well contain some, or even a great deal of 'authentic' material, the likelihood is that these poems recorded in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries are a blend of ancient and more recent material, much like those accounts of Beowulf and Grendel's mother and the Arthurian Lady of the Lake, which seem to contain faint memories of depositions of weapons in lakes, and beliefs in female goddesses residing in the water.[11] The same applies to the Icelandic *Landnámabók* ('Book of Settlements') and the family sagas, which (as they note themselves) also have roots in oral family memories, and even more recent accounts like the Icelandic legends of the Black Death, and the variant of Óðinn's and Hermóðr's visits to Hel that was potentially recorded in Orkney in the early twentieth century.[12] It may well also apply to Nordic masking traditions, which also appear to have early roots.[13] The central problem is that of deciding what might be ancient and what comes from later times.

All in all, it is logical that folkloric material is something that needs to be used *alongside* other materials (such as archaeological and/or early literary sources), somewhat like comparative material from other cultures, which can provide us with many valuable insights into how religions might have 'worked' and 'performed'. Indeed, this is an approach nowadays regularly taken up by archaeologists who commonly collect information dealing with local memories and traditions relating to particular sites as part of their collection of contextual evidence.[14] The possibility exists that it *might* be old and *might* help explain earlier materials and the way they were understood in the past.

With regard to the question of what folklore might help with understanding (or at least lending support to) the ancient Germanic and Nordic *vǫlur* under discussion in this present book (which range from the figure of Veleda described by Tacitus[15] to those of Gambara mentioned in Paulus Diaconus's *Historia Langobardorum* (→ **Chapter 21**);[16] Þorbjǫrg *lítilvǫlva* in *Eiríks saga rauða*;[17] Heiðr in *Ǫrvar-Odds saga*; and the *vǫlva* who utters *Vǫluspá* (and Heiðr in st. 22 of that poem)),[18] and the staffs that some of these women are said to have carried (which closely reflect those that have been found in the ground (→ **Chapter 30**)), it is logical to begin with the idea of the existence of *ørlǫg* (Old Norse), *wyrd* (Old English) or pre-determined fate, which was clearly deep-rooted among both the Germanic and Nordic peoples. Clearly reflected in the statements in both the Old English *Wanderer* (line 5) and *Beowulf* (line 455), that 'Wyrd bið ful ārǣd' ('Fate is completely wholly inexorable')[19] and 'Gæð a wyrd swa hio scel!' ('Fate will go as it will!');[20] in the words preserved in the eddic poem *Fáfnismál* (st. 11) that 'í vatni þú drukknar, / ef í vindi rœr; / allt er feigs forað' ('you will drown in water if you row in a wind; the doomed man's fate is decided');[21] and in *Grettis saga* that 'verðr hverr þá at fara, er hann er feigr' ('Anyone who is doomed has to make his way'),[22] there is evidently a strong sense that things are predestined and that one cannot question a fate that has been decided.

The idea of fate being 'shaped' by female figures is, of course, depicted in the description of the spinning *nornir* in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* (sts 2–4);[23] and then most directly in *Vǫluspá* (st. 20) in the image of the three female women Urðr, Verðandi, and Skuld who sit at the well of Urðarbrunnr and foot of the world tree Yggdrasill, presumably reading fate from the waters of the well, before speaking it ('þær líf kuru') and recording it on wood ('skáru á skíði').[24] The fact that the Germanic peoples believed that this fate was not just decided but could also be read in various ways is reflected not only in numerous accounts written by the various Classical and Christian historians, but also later Old Icelandic literature. Strabo (c. 63 BC–AD 64), for example, tells of how Cimbri priestesses made prophecies based on readings of blood and entrails (Book 7 ch. 2),[25] an idea reflected in Willibald's *Vita S. Bonifacii* (from the eighth century).[26] In his detailed account of Germanic prophetic activities in *Germania* (c. AD 100), Tacitus also talks of priests making decisions based on the flight of birds or the sounds made by horses.[27]

The most common form of divination nonetheless seems to have been that of lot-casting (Latin: *sortes*; Old Icelandic: *hlutan*; cf. the throwing of *blótspán* or perhaps *teinlautar*[28]), something described in some detail in the same section of *Germania*, and often (possibly mistakenly) interpreted as the casting of runes. The passage reads as follows:

> The use of the lots is simple. A little bough is lopped off a fruit-bearing tree, and cut into small pieces; these are distinguished by certain marks, and thrown carelessly and at random over a white garment. In public questions the priest of the particular state, in private the father of the family, invokes the gods, and, with his eyes toward heaven, takes up each piece three times, and finds in them a meaning according to the mark previously impressed on them. If they prove unfavorable, there is no further consultation that day about the matter; if they sanction it, the confirmation of augury is still required.[29]

Lot casting of this kind (in connection with the Germanic/Old Nordic peoples) is also referred to by Cæsar in his *Gallic Wars* (Book I, ch. 50; where it is described as something carried out mainly by women);[30] and in the eighth and ninth centuries by Paulus Diaconus (725–795) in his *Historia Langobardorum* (ch. 2, in which lots are cast to decide which group should leave a particular area).[31] It is also mentioned by Alcuin in *Vita Willibrordi* (ch. 11) (an account from the late eighth century in which they are used as a means of deciding sacrificial victims in Forsiteland/Heligoland);[32] in the *Annals of Xanten* (describing how Vikings facing disease in Paris in AD 145 threw lots to see whether they could expect assistance from the gods);[33] and

then most particularly in Rimbert's *Vita Anskarii* (c. 880: chs 18, 19, 26–7, 30) in which lots are cast several times to decide a key plan of action (once with regard to whether Christianity can be practised; and once to decide whether an army should attack or retreat).[34] Somewhat later, similar practices are still being described in the thirteenth-century *Hervarar saga ok Heiðriks*, in which lots (*blótspán*) are said to be used to decide an appropriate sacrifice when a harvest fails;[35] in the twelfth-century *Landnámabók* [S 198], in which *blótspán* are used to decide when land should be taken;[36] in *Vǫluspá*, st. 62 (in which the new gods choose *hlautvið* after Ragnarǫk); and then in Einar Skálaglamm's *Vellekla*, st. 30 (possibly from the tenth century, and quoted in *Fagrskinna* [1984:118]), in which lots (*blótspán* in the prose, *teinlautar* in the poem) seem to have been cast in a field.[37] Faint parallels to this practice can perhaps be seen in the numerous accounts of people throwing their high-seat pillars into the sea when approaching land as a means of finding out where the gods wish them to settle in Iceland.[38]

Of particular interest in this context is the way in which, according to the sagas, prophetic *seiðr* activities seem to have originally been in the hands of women, and seem to have most commonly taken place outside at dusk (or night-time) at around the period of the so-called *vetrnætur* (Winter Nights) in late October, a period seen in both the Nordic and Celtic worlds as the start of the new year (*Samhain* in Irish), which was later replaced by the Christian festival of Halloween.[39] This, it might be remembered, was also the time setting for the central pagan festival/sacrifice involving women, which was commonly referred to as the *dísablót* (the sacrifice to the female *dísir*), a festival described in most detail in *Þiðranda þáttr ok Þórhalls*, a work that underlines the idea of sacrificial activities in the Nordic world being closely connected to the attainment of some kind of prophecy (*fréttir*).[40]

Traditions and beliefs of this kind were evidently difficult to stamp out with the arrival of Christianity, not least because the Bible itself talked of prophets, prophetesses and some pre-ordained fate, and because figures like the various sibyls were well known in Classical literature (and also mentioned by Snorri Sturluson in the Prologue to his *Prose Edda*[41]). Interestingly, support for the idea that one could divine the correct site for a settlement with the help of various rituals (such as allowing logs to float down a river, or letting livestock freely drag materials) is reflected in numerous accounts in later centuries from both north-western Sweden and western Norway.[42] As Bengt af Klintberg notes, there is good reason to believe that these narratives have a background in earlier customs.[43]

That customs relating to prophetic ritual activities associated with the beginning of the year (now in most cases transferred to the beginning of the calendar year at Christmas and New Year) continued to take place after the acceptance of Christianity in the Nordic countries (as *Eiríks saga rauða* itself suggests) gains some support from the wide range of later Nordic divinatory traditions that were recorded in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many of these, much like those in the distant past, being attempts to ascertain how the coming year would be. Interestingly, the majority of such traditions appear to have been related to careful observation of the surroundings at a given liminal time of change, which are used to read the future, rather than any ritual activity. They include watching the bubbles in beer that is being brewed (to see if fights are likely to occur over the Christmas period); observing how smoke rises from local chimneys (the highest smoke meaning the longest corn); noting the behaviour of candles (and the direction in which wax flows or how the candle burns as an indicator of who is likely to die during the coming year); and checking whether the straw on the floor under particular seats forms a cross (once again an indication of a forthcoming death).[44] One could also visit the local churchyard door (in the expectation of seeing signs of how many weddings or funerals will pass through over the coming year), or simply note the weather patterns on each of the twelve days of Christmas (each day reflecting the probable weather for the coming twelve months of the year).[45]

Other ways of divining what was likely to occur over the coming year involved slightly more complicated rituals such as dropping molten lead into water to see the shapes it takes (a tradition referred to in Sweden as *nyårstydor* ('New Year Tidings'));[46] walking round the house while everybody is eating and then looking through the main window to see whether anyone appears to lack a head (meaning they are likely to die);[47] and placing a bowl of sea water (marked with fishing grounds) under the main table and then getting the first person to rise on Christmas morning to see where bubbles appear.[48] Particularly complicated were those traditions referred to in the south of Sweden in 1600 as *årsgangen* ('the passage of the year'). Here (at Christmas) you were advised to fast, avoid seeing firelight and making any sound, and then go out and carefully take note of everything you see (which could include open graves waiting for bodies, signs of war, fires burning, men sharpening scythes and large bundles of hay). Similar traditions recorded two hundred years later in the same area added the conditions that if you wanted to receive such prophetic visions it was important to walk round the church backwards while reading the Lord's Prayer in reverse, avoiding looking around yourself or making any jokes.[49]

For logical reasons, a large number of such seasonally related traditions were connected to attempts to divine who you were likely to marry in the future (naturally also a feature of the prophecy Þorbjǫrg *lítilvǫlva* gives to Guðríðr Þorbjarnardóttir in reward for her assistance in *Eiríks saga rauða*). Sometimes such divinatory customs seem to have been relatively simple, involving little more than a visit to a crossroads at a particular time,[50] but in

most cases a variety of more complicated rituals seem to have been necessary. One Swedish custom involved taking a hymnbook outside, and then bowing to the new moon, and asking for information, after which one had to drop the hymnbook on the ground and check which page it fell open at.[51] In another (also from Sweden), you had to carry a porridge pot (or some bread and beer) with your eyes covered around the house three times, before opening your eyes to encounter your future partner.[52] Three of the most common rituals across the Nordic area went by names such as 'site i julestugun' ('sitting in the Christmas room') or 'sitt på julstolen' ('sitting in the Christmas chair'); 'å kle jolestolen'/'kläda julstol' ('dressing the Christmas chair'); and 'å kaste sko' ('throwing shoes'). The former tradition in one Norwegian account involved the person wishing to discover their future partner in fasting and then sitting alone in a dark room while others ate at Christmas, and for that person then to be led out into the darkened main room in which they would find a burning candle and three bowls on the table, containing ale, milk, and water. The querent was then left alone and would hopefully receive a vision of their future partner who would appear and drink from one of the bowls (water being a particularly bad omen of how wealthy the future pair are likely to be).[53] The second tradition involved several similarities to the first. In this case, you were supposed to lay the clothes you were planning to wear over Christmas over a particular chair and then walk three times around the table (which once again had bowls on it) before sitting in the chair. Then, once again, hopefully you would receive a vision of your future partner who would once again drink from one of the bowls.[54] The third ritual, which has connections with certain popular games in Norway, involved the participant lying on their back and kicking a shoe over their head. The direction in which the shoe ended up facing was then interpreted with regard to their marriage prospects (or their hopes for successfully surviving the coming year).[55]

As noted above, in most cases these rituals are associated with the start of the calendar year (and/or Christmas). There are, however, several Nordic traditions that point to similar prophetic customs having also been related at one time to Halloween (as noted above, the old start of the year in pagan belief). On example was a belief in certain parts of Norway that dreams you have on the first day of winter ideally in a room that has never been slept in before (such as the cellar) accompanied by an unused broom that was earlier made on St John's (St Hans') Eve were likely to have particular significance.[56] The mention of the broom here is naturally interesting, being loosely reminiscent not only of the brooms apparently used by Nordic witches to fly to places like Blåkulla mountain in later folklore,[57] but also the earlier-noted *vǫlva*-staffs found in the graves of a number of women from the Viking Age **(→ Part 4)**.

Support for the idea that Halloween (the time at which Þorbjǫrg *lítilvǫlva* carries out her *seiðr*) might have been the original time-setting for many of the seasonal divinatory traditions noted above is supported by the fact that very similar traditions (especially those related to divining a future partner) were more commonly found at Halloween (or Hallowe'en) than at Christmas or New Year in certain areas of North-East Scotland and in the Hebrides islands to the west of Scotland (both once part of the Viking diaspora).[58] In addition to these traditions (involving the raised visionary partner choosing plates or bowls), in his survey of folkloric traditions from North-East Scotland, Walter Gregor also lists a range of other divinatory Halloween rituals that had a similar purpose (many of which have parallels in the Scottish islands). These included (once again) sleeping in a strange bed (which you are supposed to enter backwards) with a ring on one finger after putting one of your shoes under the bed (something which will hopefully lead to you dreaming of a future partner);[59] pulling up cabbage (or greens) to see how much earth remained on the root (its shape somehow reflecting the means or looks of the future partner);[60] sowing lint seeds along the ridge of a field (while chanting a verse) and looking over your left shoulder (to see the image of a future partner who will be crossing the ridge as if pulling up crops); putting one's arms 'round a stack of oats or barley three times, against the sun' (which can lead to you suddenly finding yourself holding the image of your future partner); and throwing one end of a thread into a kiln and asking who seems to be holding it on the other side.[61] Another involves a girl going to a south-running stream and washing the sleeve of her shirt before hanging it out in front of a large fire, and then going to bed (while keeping watch to see whether the image of a future partner will appear to turn the sleeve of the shirt).[62] Another belief was that girls could divine the number of children that they would have by going to a yard where oats were stored, then sitting with their backs to a stack of oats and reaching behind themselves to grasp an oat-stalk. The number of corns on the stalk then apparently represented the number of children the girl would have.[63] Parallels to the Christmas/New Year customs of dropping molten lead into water are meanwhile found in the Halloween traditions of discerning the future by dropping egg white into water to see how it behaved or what shapes it would take.[64]

While these customs are somewhat different to a formal ritual like *seiðr*, they nonetheless provide some support to the beliefs in fate and the choice of particular time settings for recognised divinatory rituals (sometimes involving a particular chair) implied by the saga accounts; the regular involvement of women in such rituals; and the idea that dreams could give access to knowledge about this predestined future.[65]

Further support for the deep-rootedness of such beliefs in the Nordic countries and their continued existence even in our own time has relatively recently been demonstrated by a survey of national folk beliefs that was carried out in Iceland by the Social Science Institute (*Félagsvísindastofnun*) of the University of Iceland and run by the present author, building on a similar survey carried out by the psychologist Erlendur Haraldsson in 1974.[66] One of the most striking conclusions of this survey from 2006 and 2007 involving nearly 1,000 people,[67] which asked about both experience and degrees of belief (ranging from total disbelief to openness to an idea, to total belief), was the degree to which those beliefs that were strongest in modern Iceland largely reflected those that were known in saga times, especially when it came to questions of beliefs in fate and the possibility of reading it in various ways.[68] According to the survey, between 87% (2006) and 83% (2007) of those who filled in the survey were open to the idea that the future could be prophesied, only 4% (2006) and 7% (2007) regarding it as impossible.[69] Similar figures occurred with regard to the idea that dreams can inform you about the future, only 3% (2006) and 5% (2007) of those answering seeing this as something that is impossible, while 24% (2006) and 23% (2007) were totally certain of this possibility.[70] Meanwhile, between 49% (2006) and 47% (2007) of those involved said that they had at some time in their lives paid a visit to someone who might be able to give them some insight into their future.[71] Meanwhile, 55% (2006) and 57% (2007) talked of having personally experienced a premonition of events that later occurred (something that unfortunately did not help Iceland avoid the financial crash of 2008).[72]

Naturally, figures like those given above examined separately do not mean that we are dealing with the same worldview as that which lay behind the beliefs in the abilities of seeresses and seers back in the Iron Age. Along with the evidence of the folklore collected in the Nordic countries and Nordic diaspora in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it nonetheless lends support to the idea that the earlier accounts recorded by outsiders in Classical times and by Icelanders in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries has some background in actuality, and, in the case of the saga accounts, that they reflect genuine oral memories of living beliefs that existed in the past rather than pure imagination or borrowings from foreign literary works.

Notes

1. Note: This chapter builds on three earlier articles by the same author dealing with the use of folklore as a source on Old Nordic beliefs, rituals, and traditions, see Gunnell 2014a; 2020a; forthcoming.
2. See Gunnell 2022.
3. See Grimm 1875: I, 10; and 1882–1883: I, 7. See also Grimm's introduction to the second edition of *Deutsche Mythologie*: Grimm 1844: I, xii–xvi, and xxxii; translated in Grimm 1882–1883, III, xi–xvii.
4. See, for example, Olsen 1909; 1915; Lid 1928; 1933; 1942; Höfler 1952; 1973.
5. See further Gunnell 2020a: 197–8.
6. See Price 2015: 293–301.
7. See Alver 1989: 138. Naturally, one can also cite those ballads that have seemingly been preserved near intact in rural areas such as the Appalachian Mountain for centuries: see Child 1882–1898; Sharp & Karpeles 1932; Buchan 1972. With regard to the gold wagons, see also af Klintberg 1998, which provides a useful reminder that comparable traditions exist with regard to a number of places in southern Sweden (where similar wagons have as yet not been found).
8. See Shetelig 1911; Olrik & Ellekilde 1926–1951: II, 231–2; Birkeli 1938; Gunnell 2014a; Omland 2007; 2010.
9. See Russell 1994: 46; Steinsland 2005: 33, 421–55.
10. See, for example, Lord 1960; Foley 2002; Gísli Sigurðsson 2004.
11. See Gunnell 2020a: I, 200; 2020b.
12. See Gunnell 2001b; Gunnell with Muir 2021.
13. See Gunnell 2001a; the various articles in Gunnell 2007.
14. For more comprehensive analyses of folklore as source material (and further examples), as well as some detailed reviews of the way in which a number of scholars have effectively made use of folkloric materials in recent times, see further Gunnell 2014a; 2020; forthcoming.
15. Mattingly 1948.
16. Foulke 1974.
17. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson & Matthías Þorðarson 1935: 206–9.
18. Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014.
19. Leslie 1966: 61. See also Alexander 2008: 51.
20. Chickering 1977: 74–75.
21. Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014: 305; author's translation.
22. Guðni Jónsson 1935: 62; author's translation.
23. Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014: 247.
24. Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014: 296; author's translation. On these women, see further Bek-Pedersen 2014; Gunnell 2022b.
25. Jones 1917–32: VII, 168–70.
26. See Talbot 1954: 10–11.
27. See Goetz & Welwei 1995: I, 134–5; transl. Mattingly 1948: 108. Similar ideas of people trusting horses to decide where they should live are reflected in two accounts in *Landnámabók* (Jakob Benediktsson 1968: 42–4, 96–7 [S 7–8, 68]).
28. Celander 1931. See further Gunnell 2010: 108–14.
29. Goetz & Welwei 1995: I, 134–5; transl. Mattingly 1948: 108.
30. Edwards 1917: 82–3.
31. Foulke 1974: 4.
32. See Talbot 1954: 10–11.
33. See Wood 1987: 47; see further Wood 1987: 56–7 on the view of such augury by Christians.
34. Odelman 1986: 34, 40, 54–55, 58–60.
35. Guðni Jónsson & Bjarni Vilhjálmsson 1943: 208.
36. Jakob Benediktsson 1968: 234.
37. Bjarni Einarsson 1984: 118.

38. See Jakob Benediktsson 1968: 42–5, 124–5, 163–4, 232, 302–3, 312, 317; Gunnell 2010: 109.
39. See *Eiríks saga rauða*: 'Þat var háttr Þorbjargar um vetrum, at hon fór at veizlum' ('It was Þorbjǫrg's custom at the start of winter to visit banquets/ seasonal gatherings') (ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson & Matthías Þorðarson 1935: 206; transl. present author); *Örvar-Odds saga*: 'Kona er nefnd Heiðr. […] Hún fór á veizlur ok sagði mönnum fyrir um vetrarfar ok forlǫg sín' ('There was a woman named Heiðr. […] She visited banquets/ seasonal gatherings and told people about how the winter would go and their fates') (ed. Guðni Jónsson & Bjarni Vilhjálmsson 1943: 286; transl. present author). On the *vetrnætur* festival, see further Gunnell 2000; and Nordberg 2006: 34–45.
40. See Bragi Halldórsson *et al.* 1987. On the *dísablót* festival and the female spirits associated with it, see further Gunnell 2000. On the idea that this might also have been considered by some to be the start of the 'female' half of the year, see further Gunnell 2021.
41. See Faulkes 2005: 5.
42. See Campbell & Nyman 1976: 1, 12–15; Strömbäck 1976; af Klintberg 2010: 361–2 (legend types U11 (cattle), U12 (horse), U13 (logs)); Christiansen 1958: 200–209 (on Migratory Legend type 7060: The Disputed Site for a Church). Information about Norwegian legends of this kind has also been drawn from an unpublished lecture presented by the late Reimund Kvideland in Tartu, Estonia, in the summer of 2005.
43. Af Klintberg 2010: 359.
44. Bø 1974: 164; 1980: 47–9, 52 (on Norwegian customs); Nilsson 1938: 36 (also on Swedish customs).
45. Nilsson 1938: 37–8. The churchyard traditions come from Denmark. Similar traditions involving closely observing the weather during the twelve days of Christmas are recorded in the north-east of Scotland (an area that had a number of Nordic inhabitants in the Viking period): see Lyle 2000: 18–19.
46. Bringéus 2006: 11 (Sweden).
47. Nilsson 1938: 36 (Sweden). See also af Klintberg 2010: 33 (A42) for Swedish legends relating to this tradition.
48. Bø 1980: 53 (Norway).
49. Nilsson 1938: 37. See also Kuusela 2016; af Klintberg 2010: 32–4 (A40, 41 and 43) for Swedish legends relating to this tradition.
50. Bø 1980: 51 (Norway).
51. Bringéus 2006: 12.
52. Nilsson 1938: 36. A Norwegian variation of this ritual involving the need to walk three times backwards around the stove with a cake in your hand while saying the Lord's Prayer backwards if you wanted to see your likely partner is noted in Bø 1980: 50
53. Bø 1980: 50. See also Nilsson 1938: 36–7 for a variant of this, and af Klintberg 2010: 31–2 (A32–39) for a list of Swedish legends relating to this tradition and also the dangers it could sometimes involve.
54. Nilsson 1938: 36; Bø 1980: 50.
55. Bø 1974: 166.
56. Alver 1981: 95.
57. On beliefs and traditions relating to witches' brooms in Norway, see Alver 1971: 34–5, 209–19; af Klintberg 2010: 275–81 (N1–30); Kvideland & Sehmsdorf 1988: 180–7. There are perhaps logical reasons for connecting these two traditions. See also, however, Gardeła 2008: 61; 2016: 174–6 and more recently Harder Klitgaard 2018: 119, and the suggestion that the staffs of the *vǫlur* might also be meant to be a symbolic reference to the world tree that the Old Norse *nornir* apparently sat beneath according to *Vǫluspá* st. 20.
58. See Gregor 1881: 85–6 (echoed in Bennett 2004: 101), which contains a reference to very similar traditions to those Nordic customs relating to the use of three bowls. Here, however, the diviner (who is blindfolded) has to point at one of the bowls with a stick three times. In this case, the liquids contained in the two of the bowls are clean and dirty water, while the third bowl contains nothing (the implication being that if this is pointed to, the person trying to read his/her future will never marry). For more recent similar traditions from the Outer Hebridean island of Vatersay in which the blindfolded person had to put their hands in one of three dishes containing dirty water, clean water, and earth, see Lyle 2000: 6. See also Lyle 2000: 3, 5 for other slightly more complicated rituals from the Hebrides which now involved six plates, the additional plates containing earth, salt, and meal. Another closely related tradition from the North-East involved a girl slicing an apple in front of a looking glass, and then (while combing her hair and staring at the mirror) holding a piece of apple on the point of a knife over her left shoulder. The idea was that the image of her future partner would then appear in the mirror, reaching out for the apple. On the question of Halloween being a potential precursor to Christmas and New Year for traditions relating to the start of the winter season in the Nordic diaspora, see also Gunnell 2007 (on guising traditions in Shetland).
59. For other traditions relating to the importance of Halloween dreams, see Lyle 2000: 9–10.
60. A parallel from Shetland involves a girl entering a 'kaleyard' blindfold, wrapping her garter around the first kale she encounters, and then counting how many shoots it has to find out how many children the girl will give birth to (Lyle 2000: 2). For a closely related version of this ritual from Islay, see Lyle 2000: 7.
61. For very similar Halloween traditions (now involving throwing a ball of thread into a dark barn or down into a water mill) recorded in more recent times on the island of Harris in the Outer Hebrides and on Shetland, see Lyle 2000: 2, 5.
62. See Gregor 1881: 83–6 (echoed in Bennett 2004: 99–101). For other similar 'Soaking A Sleeve' traditions from Shetland, the Hebrides and Skye, see Lyle 2000: 3, 4, 7
63. See Gregor 1881: 83–6 (echoed in Bennett 2004: 99–101). For very similar Halloween traditions from the island of Harris recorded in more recent times, see Lyle 2000: 5.
64. See Lyle 2000: 2 (Shetland), 4 (the Hebrides) and 6 (Vatersay).
65. See further Heijnen 2013, which contains a detailed anthropological examination of how Icelanders have

interpreted dreams in the past and not least in the present. This work closely echoes the findings of the survey.

66. See Ásdís Aðalbjörg Arnalds, Ragna Benedikta Garðarsdóttir & Unnur Diljá Teitsdóttir 2008; Gunnell 2014b.
67. The survey was carried out in two parts over two years involving two different groups: first c. 660 people chosen at random in 2006, and then c. 320 people chosen in 2007 by students of folkloristics (who aimed for a range of participants of different ages, genders, backgrounds, and domiciles).
68. The main exception here is beliefs in nature spirits (*huldufólk* or *álfar*). While Icelanders are still apparently open to believing in the existence of these beings, there is less strong belief in them than there is in seeing the spirits of dead people or in the potentially divinatory information provided by dreams: see Gunnell 2014b.
69. See Ásdís Aðalbjörg Arnalds *et al.* 2008: 76–7, 183–4. Interestingly, age and education had little effect on these figures, although women were evidently more open to the idea than men, between 1% (2006) and 2% (2007) seeing the reading of the future as something that is impossible.
70. Ásdís Aðalbjörg Arnalds *et al.* 2008: 78–9, 185–6. Here, once again, more women than men were convinced of this idea (29% in 2006 and 28% in 2007; as opposed to 17% of men in both cases). Once again education appeared to make no difference to these opinions.
71. Ásdís Aðalbjörg Arnalds *et al.* 2008: 52–5, 157–60. Over 40% in each case saw this as having been beneficial. Once again, many more women than men (64% compared to 26% in 2006; and 66% compared to 20% in 2007) appear to have taken part in these visits.
72. See Ásdís Aðalbjörg Arnalds *et al.* 2008: 19, 125.

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Part 2

Places and Spaces: Rituals and their Settings

5

Places and Spaces of Pre-Christian Religion: An Introduction to Part 2

Sophie Bønding

Pre-Christian religious practice among Viking Age Scandinavians took place in a variety of settings and social arenas. Woven into the fabric of society and social life,[1] religion was not something that was only enacted in large-scale, collective, and high-intensive rituals. At a smaller scale and lower intensity, actions of a ritual and religious character were connected to and intertwined with everyday activities, including such seemingly mundane activities as textile production (→ **Chapter 8**).[2] The character and scale of religious ritual activities undoubtedly varied greatly, and so did the spaces within which they took place. Some rituals may be carried out in solitude (e.g. a prayer of assistance directed towards a deity), taking place in a space only temporarily marked off from ordinary space, for example through bodily gestures and perhaps ritual objects. Other rituals involve several people, sometimes an entire community, and can include more dramatic elements such as sacrificial acts, processional movement, and feasting, and often require the expertise of ritual specialists. Large-scale rituals are, theoretically at least, more likely than small-scale rituals are to leave behind material traces that can be identified archaeologically, as well as to create 'echoes' in later written sources.[3] Some religious activity in Viking Age Scandinavia undoubtedly took place at a small scale and in such locations that render it impossible to detect this activity today. Yet, it is possible to identify some spaces that seem to have been set aside and marked off – either permanently or periodically – from more mundane spaces and which served as arenas for religious ritual activity.

The archaeological and textual records indicate that religious ritual activity was carried out in a variety of locations, both inside and in connection to buildings, including elite halls, domestic outbuildings, and specialised 'cult houses', and in open-air locations such as wetlands, groves, and burial sites. This introductory chapter begins with some theoretical considerations concerning the location of religion in space, including the much-debated notion of 'sacred space'. This is followed by a brief discussion of the Old Norse term *hof*, illustrating the kinds of challenges scholars face when attempting to connect (and sometimes correlate) archaeological finds and the Old Norse textual record. Finally, some considerations on the creation of pre-Christian sacred space are offered to set the stage for the in-depth studies in the present section of this book.

Religion Taking Place

Religion exists in space – not just in inner, spiritual worlds – but in places and spaces *on Earth*.[4] Configurations of place and space are fundamental features of religion as part of people's lived lives. This has been made increasingly clear since the 1990s with the so-called 'spatial turn', a shift across the various disciplines of cultural studies, which in the study of religion has generated focused attention on space, place, and location as central contextual factors of religion.[5] As part of this 'turn', cultural theorists have challenged previously dominant Cartesian conceptions of and approaches to space, drawing attention to space, not as an essential or *sui generis* phenomenon, but as a dynamic category. In other words, spaces and places are not merely stages for or backdrops of human activity but are themselves dynamic, social products, created by humans' attribution of meaning to them. When considering the location of religion in space and the nature of the spaces within which religion is located, it is important to acknowledge that spaces have mental and social as well as material dimensions.[6] Spaces are conceived, experienced, represented, and lived in various ways – 'thoroughly enmeshed in embodiment and everyday

practice, knowledge and discourse, and in processes of production and reproduction'.[7] Consequently, space is an important factor to consider when analysing religion.

A fundamental concept, when examining religion in its spatial context, is 'sacred space'. The notions of sacred and profane lie at the heart of all religion, even if the concepts themselves have been variously constructed in the history of research. Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) understood them as ascriptive categories – things sacred are 'things set apart and forbidden' and thus separate from other, profane or ordinary things, because they are collectively assigned a special significance.[8] Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), on the other hand, did not understand the sacred as an ascriptive category but rather an ontological category, independent of the eye of the observer.[9] As scholarly categories, sacred and profane constitute a dichotomy, as sacred entities are sacred in virtue of their distinction from profane entities and vice versa. However, alongside this seemingly absolute polarity is a hierarchical graduation of positions: some sacred entities (e.g. objects and spaces) are more sacred than other sacred entities, and a sacred space often becomes increasingly sacred as one moves towards its centre.[10]

Sacred space now constitutes a classical topic in the study of religion. But despite some interest in the location of the sacred in the early twentieth century,[11] it was with Mircea Eliade's seminal work *The Sacred and the Profane* from 1959 that sacred space became a significant subject of critical enquiry and theoretical reflection in terms of its meaning, characteristics, and functions.[12] Eliade's work has provided food for thought for subsequent scholars who have discussed, criticised, developed, and repudiated his ideas in different measure. Eliade posited several axioms of sacred space as separate from ordinary, profane space. Especially his idea of the *axis mundi*, the 'centre' through which communication between different cosmic domains takes place, has proved influential in subsequent scholarship.[13]

The scholar of religion Jonathan Z. Smith (1938–2017) departed from Eliade's assumption of the *sui generis* nature of the sacred and was instead committed to an anthropological approach to material and cosmological places and spaces. Recognising these as the results of human symbolic work, he treated the sacred as a transitive, attributive category, meaning that the sacred is created through peoples' attribution of meaning and value.[14] As he pointed out, the sacred and the profane, are not inherent qualities – 'not substantive categories, but rather situational ones'.[15] This means that humans do not only respond to sacred space, they also bring it into being. The creation (and maintenance) of sacred space is attained by way of religious ritual, which Smith, in turn, understands as a creative process through which people make their world meaningful and inhabitable.[16] In other words, the sacred space is made sacred (sacralised) through ritual transformation of otherwise ordinary or profane space, which sets the space apart, marks it off from the banality of everyday life, and imbues it with special meaning.

The significance and special meaning that a given sacred space carries for a specific group of people is usually based in that group's narrative traditions, according to which the space is intrinsically sacred, not ascriptively sacred.[17] In other words, the distinctiveness of a particular sacred space is expressed in the conviction that its sacredness is not arbitrary. This is one reason why it can be difficult for outside interpreters – whether contemporary or much later (such as present-day scholars examining Viking Age cultures) – to decode the complex of meanings attributed to a specific space by a specific group of people to whom it is sacred.

As the sacred is an attributive quality, sacred space comes in different varieties, including spaces constructed specifically for religious ritual purposes, such as 'temples' or other 'cult houses', but also landscapes that are simply religiously interpreted, such as lakes, grooves, or mountains. Sometimes, the setting apart of a space as sacred is only temporary, as when a Viking Age hall was temporarily transformed into a place of religious ritual feasting, which included the consumption of sacrificed meat and the dedication of toasts to different superhuman entities (see below). Thus, places and spaces in which religious ritual take place are also symbolic places and spaces, and as such they are 'one means by which religious ideas about the divine, the human community, and the ritual process of producing sacred space are given material presence'.[18] It is the attribution of meaning to such spaces that gives them their quality as 'sacred'.

The Spatial Context of Viking Age Religion in Scandinavia

It is possible to access the spatial context of pre-Christian religious practice among Viking Age Scandinavians through our various categories of source material. In different ways they provide information about the locations in which pre-Christian religion was performed. While archaeological finds may be interpreted as the remains of religious ritual practice, the textual record (when treated with caution) can help us situate such practices in their social and cultural contexts. In addition, place names can provide information on the geographic location and distribution of ritual sites, accessible for example through elements such as *vé* ('sanctuary') or *lundr* ('grove'). Each of these source categories is connected to specific problems and challenges regarding its use as a source for religious practice. However, this is not the place for a detailed discussion of these challenges.[19]

Religious ritual activity can be located in a great variety of spaces and places, not only at central places, but also in more remote or peripheral places like wetland areas and burial sites. An overview of different types of ritual sites, including ritual buildings and open-air locations,

is presented and discussed from an archaeological perspective in the next chapter (→ **Chapter 6**); therefore, an overview shall not occupy us here.[20] Instead, the remaining part of this chapter addresses, first, the long-standing terminological debate concerning ritual buildings, focusing on the Old Norse term *hof*. Second, following on from this, the dynamic character of sacred space in pre-Christian Scandinavia is discussed.

The Hof *in Viking Age Scandinavia*

A long-standing debate in Viking Age studies has centred on the question of terminology relating to ritual buildings, as scholars attempt to link archaeological finds to descriptions of cultic structures found in Old Norse sources from the Middle Ages.

The Old Norse textual record contains such words as *hof* and *hǫrgr*, *goðahús* and *blóthús*. While the latter two can be translated to 'gods' house' and 'sacrificial house', respectively, the meanings of the former two are by no means straightforward and remain a topic of scholarly debate. Early on, in 1835, Jacob Grimm argued – based on textual sources – that rituals among the ancient Germanic peoples were mainly performed out of doors, especially in connection with sacred groves. This was soon criticised by scholars who drew attention to Old Norse literary sources containing information on cultic buildings as the arenas of religious ritual.[21] Excavations in 1908 of a large building at Hofstaðir in north-eastern Iceland, which showed potential traces of ritual activity, were used to support this view.[22] In 1966, the archaeologist Olaf Olsen published his seminal, source-critical study *Hørg, hov og kirke* (which can be translated as *'Hǫrgr*, *hof* and church'). He argued that the Old Norse textual descriptions of *hof* buildings – at the time generally translated as 'temples' – had no support in archaeological evidence from the so-called *hof*-settlements in Iceland. He perceived such textual accounts of 'temples' as based, instead, on medieval churches.[23] According to Olsen, the buildings discovered in archaeological excavations and interpreted as 'temples' were not actually temples, but should rather be understood as elite residences that served as arenas for ceremonial, religious feasting but also for activities that could not be regarded as religious in a strict sense. As such, they were multi-functional buildings belonging to the elite.[24]

Olsen's work proved strongly influential. Since then, hall buildings at elite sites, such as Gudme and Lejre in Denmark, Uppsala and Helgö in Sweden, and Borg on Lofoten in Norway – where rich artefacts have been found and interpreted as the remains of ritual activity, e.g. glass shards and gold-foil figures – have generally been understood as examples of multi-functional arenas for the elite.[25] Since Olsen's 1966 study, new excavations have unearthed the remains of what is interpreted as smaller buildings, dedicated more specifically to cultic activities and located separately from, although sometimes close to, large hall buildings (e.g. in Tissø and Uppåkra).[26] Such finds have added new material to the debate about the meaning and the function of ritual buildings, and has reignited the discussion about 'temple' buildings (→ **Chapter 6**).

In the available textual record, the meaning of the Old Norse term *hof* is not straightforward. It sometimes designates a hall building at a ruler's (e.g. a chieftain's) farm, in which ritual feasts are occasionally performed, yet, in other cases, it refers to a building of smaller size, reserved more exclusively for religious ritual activity and located separately from elite halls – sometimes at a distance from a central place. The latter type is also occasionally referred to as a *goðahús* ('gods' house') or a *blóthús* ('sacrificial house').[27]

The Hof *as Hall Buildings*

The use of the term *hof* to designate a multi-functional hall building occurs across a range of Old Norse textual genres. An early occurrence is found in the early Christian skaldic poem *Austrfararvísur* ('Verses about easterly journeys') from c. 1020, where *hof* arguably refers to a building in which a ritual feast takes place. The Christian skald Sigvatr Þórðarson describes a journey he undertook to Svíþjoð (in central Sweden). Sigvatr and his retainers arrive at a farm, seeking lodging for the night, but they are turned away because a pre-Christian sacrificial feast, an *álfablót* ('sacrifice to the *alfar*'),[28] is taking place there. Snorri Sturluson, in whose *Óláfs saga Helga* (c. 1230) the poem is extant, understands the word *hof* to be a place name, referring to the farm in its entirety. However, within the context of the poem itself (which is about 200 years older than the saga in which it is preserved), *hof* seems more plausibly to refer to the building within which the religious feast is taking place. In st. 4, Sigvatr says: 'Réðk til Hofs at hœfa; / hurð vas aptr' ('I resolved to aim for *hof* / the door was barred').[29] The capital H in Hof is an editorial choice and, as suggested by Olof Sundqvist, the information about the door (*hurð*) being shut follows immediately after the statement that Sigvatr aimed for (the) *hof*, thus suggesting that *hurð* is the door of a house, a *hof*.[30] In addition, Sigvartr adds: 'en spurðumk… fyrir útan' ('but I made enquiries from outside'), further supporting the interpretation that he is standing in front of a building that he is not allowed to enter. Moreover, Sigvartr adds that the people there say that something is *heilagr*, 'holy, sacred' there – presumably referring to the space and/or the actions carried out inside the building.[31] Consequently, the most plausible interpretation of this passage is that the term *hof* in this context should not be understood as a place name referring to the entire farm, but rather designates the building within which a religious ritual is taking place. On this occasion, the internal space of the hall is considered sacred – clearly and emphatically marked off from the outside, profane space while the ritual activities are taking place.[32]

In the Old Norse corpus of prose texts (dated to the Middle Ages), the term *hof* is often used to designate a pre-Christian elite hall building, which is described as multi-functional in the sense that it serves as a space for everyday activities, socio-political gatherings, and religious, ritual feasting. Textual sources indicate that ritual feasts (Old Norse *veizla*, sg.), which included ritual toasting and drinking, as well as the consumption of meat from sacrificed animals, were held in such halls. Further, these sources indicate that rulers played a special role in such rituals, perhaps as ritual specialists themselves, and that it was their duty to take part in the festivities and sit in the high-seat – itself a marked-off space within the hall space which, moreover, carried religious connotations.[33]

One of the most commonly referenced saga texts in the scholarly debate about ritual buildings is *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 4, most likely written sometime between 1245 and 1255. Ch. 4 relates the story of Þórólfr mostrarskegg Ǫrnólfsson and his *hof* in western Iceland. According to this text, Þórólfr established a great farm at Þórsness, which he called Hofstaðir (‘the *hof* place’). There he erected a *hof*, which was a large building (‘var þat mikit hús’). Just inside the door, which was located in one of the sidewalls near the gable, were the high-seat pillars, and beyond that point the building was considered a sanctuary (*friðarstaðr*). It is further said that:

> Innar af hofinu var hús í þá líking, sem nú er sǫnghús í kirkjum, ok stóð þar stalli á miðju gólfinu sem altari, ok lá þar á hringr einn mótlauss, tvítøgeyringr, ok skyldi þar at sverja eiða alla; þann hring skyldi hofgoði hafa á hendi sér til allra mannfunda. Á stallanum skyldi ok standa hlautbolli, ok þar í hlautteinn sem stǫkkull væri, ok skyldi þar støkkva með ór bollanum blóði því, er hlaut var kallat; þat var þess konar blóð, er svæfð váru þau kvikendi, er goðunum var fórnat.
>
> Inside the *hof* was a structure (*hús*) built much like the choir in churches nowadays, and in the middle a raised platform (*stalli*) like an altar. On this platform lay a solid ring weighing twenty ounces, upon which people had to swear all their oaths. It was the business of the *hofgoði* to wear this ring on his arm at every public meeting. There was a sacrificial bowl on the platform (*stalli*) too, with a sacrificial twig (*hlautteinn*) shaped like a priest’s aspergillum for the blood of animals killed as offerings to the gods to be sprinkled from the bowl. This blood was called *hlaut*.[34]

The reliability of this account as a source to pre-Christian cult buildings is contested. As with other textual sources, we can never just accept or reject the entire account but must evaluate the authenticity of the individual pieces of information it contains. The role and ritual treatment of sacrificial blood is a case in point.[35] The account was very likely influenced by ch. 14 of Snorri Sturluson’s *Hákonar saga góða* (c. 1230), and this detracts from its value as an independent source to the kind of building and rituals it claims to describe. Snorri’s account includes the description of a sacrificial feast held at Hlaðir (i.e. present-day Lade) in Trøndelag, Norway. The feast takes place inside a *hof*, described as a hall building, and here, too, the sacrificial blood (called *hlaut*) carries ritual importance – in this case, it is sprinkled on the *stallir* (‘platforms’ or ‘alters’) as well as on the walls of the *hof*, inside and outside. The authenticity of the information about the treatment of sacrificial blood in this account has been challenged. From a linguistic perspective, Klaus Düwel has argued that Old Norse *hlaut* did not carry the meaning of ‘sacrificial blood’ in pre-Christian times.[36] Anders Hultgård has argued that the pre-Christian meaning of the term *hlaut* was not ‘sacrificial blood’ but most probably ‘lot’, i.e. an instrument used in divinatory rituals.[37] Consequently, the meaning of the term had changed by the time of Snorri. While it is unclear where Snorri took his inspiration from to use the term as a designation of ‘sacrificial blood’, it is likely that the author of *Eyrbyggja saga* was inspired by Snorri, as has been suggested by Sundqvist.[38] However, this only indicates that writers of thirteenth-century texts applied the terminology of their own time when describing much older events, but it does not necessarily render the acts described inauthentic.[39] Moreover, it has been argued that the sprinkling of blood was not authentic to the tenth century but was, in fact, a ‘borrowing’ from Old Testament descriptions of sacrificial rituals.[40] Against this argument must be noted that the use and specific treatment of blood in religious rituals is a recurrent element in archaic cultures, making the possibility that this element of the account is a manufactured ‘borrowing’ less likely.[41] In addition, recent archaeological findings suggest that sacrificial blood did, indeed, play a role in ritual contexts in Viking Age Scandinavia (→ **Chapter 7**).

It is sound policy to keep an informed, sceptical attitude towards the source value of the thirteenth-century textual corpus concerning pre-Christian religion. The currently dominant perspective in scholarship on cultic buildings is that we have to be careful not to overestimate the cogency of the texts as sources, but that there is reason to put some trust in the textual accounts, at least in the cases where the information contained in them is rendered probable by archaeological excavations and place names.[42] An interesting example is the Viking Age hall building at Hofstaðir, *Mývatnssveit* in north-eastern Iceland.[43] The place name *Hofstaðir*, ‘the *hof* place’, likely indicates that the building was considered a *hof*. Analyses of the animal bone material located in the vicinity of the hall suggest that seasonal sacrificial rituals and ritual feasting took place at the site. A minimum of twenty-three cattle skulls, excavated in two clusters outside the walls of the hall, show evidence of specialised butchering, involving a strike to the forehead followed by decapitation. This very particular, violent, and seemingly intentionally bloody manner of killing would have made quite a spectacle and suggests a ritual, sacrificial context.[44] In addition, the bone material shows indications

of weathering, suggesting that the skulls or cattle heads were displayed for a prolonged period of time on the turf walls or the roof – probably along the entire length of the hall, where they were exposed to the weather. From here, they would have been visible to people approaching the hall building, at least during certain periods of the year, most likely spring and summer (→ **Chapters 6 and 7**).[45]

The most recent excavations (conducted between 1992 and 2002) suggest that the hall building was divided into three rooms. The central room was probably used as living quarters for sleeping, eating, and other everyday activities – perhaps including craftwork, as indicated by the distribution of beads found in the southern end of this room. A centrally placed hearth was presumably used for heating and cooking, opposite which the chieftain's high-seat was probably placed. It was most likely this central room that was used for ritual feasting. The northern room seems to have been used for food processing, since it contained two great cooking pits that had been cleaned out repeatedly, and the southern room probably served as storage for food.[46] Thus, the hall at Hofstaðir was most likely multi-functional in the sense that it served as living quarters and a space for everyday activity, but also – at least periodically – as an arena for socio-political interactions between different members of the society, as well as for seasonal religious feasting.[47] Significantly, these latter two functions were two sides of a coin: socio-political negotiations most likely took place during religious feasts, and as such, there was a mutually reinforcing relationship between the political and religious aspects of communal life.[48]

The **Hof** *as Smaller, Specialised Cultic Buildings*

In other places in Scandinavia, e.g. in Jämtland in Sweden and Uttrøndelag in Norway, place names containing *hov* – a variant of Old Norse *hof* – seem to refer to elite halls that were likely used as arenas of pre-Christian ritual feasting.[49] Meanwhile, as demonstrated by Per Vikstrand, the *hov* place names in the Mälaren region show a different pattern. They are not closely related to central places and therefore cannot designate elite halls. Instead, they are connected to smaller farms established in connection to, but at some distance from, larger and older settlements. Vikstrand suggests that, in this area, the word *hov* in these instances designated a smaller cult building located separately and at some distance from a larger settlement, although clearly related to this. Hov in Vendel in Uppland illustrates this point, as it is located relatively far from the central place on the other side of Vendelsjön.[50]

The interpretation of the term *hof* as a designation of such separate cult buildings is supported by the medieval textual corpus. Here, *hof* sometimes refers to a smaller building, which is reserved for religious ritual practice – a building detached from the main hall building of a larger settlement and placed in a peripherical location. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, chs 87–8 mention a *hof* near a farm belonging to a ruler, Guðbrandr. The *hof*, also referred to as *goðahús*, contains the images of deities. It can be deduced that this building was located at some distance from the main settlement, since it was burned down one night while a ritual feast (*veizla*) was taking place at the farm, but the deed was not discovered until the next morning.[51] Another example is *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, in which Hrafnkell *freysgoði* owns a building, referred to by the terms *hof* and *goðahús*, which is dedicated to cultic activity, and within which images of deities are kept. It is located at a distance from his farm. The text does not mention feasting taking place in this house.[52]

Attempting to untangle the different meanings attributed in various sources to the term *hof* as a designator of cultic buildings, Olof Sundqvist has conducted a semantic investigation of the term, based on Old Norse literature, place-name evidence, and archaeological sites. He concludes that the meaning of the word seems to have varied across different sources and contexts and, therefore, does not refer to a single, static phenomenon. It is more likely that the question of whether or not a specific building was perceived as a *hof* was not determined by its location or its size, but rather the kind of architecture, objects, ritual specialists, or ritual activities taking place within and in connection to it. He rightly stresses that the various and sometimes unclear meaning of Old Norse *hof* 'makes it hard to connect this term to a specific type of building or structure found in archaeological excavations'. The meaning of the term likely varied across Scandinavia and changed over time. All of this must be kept in mind when scholars search the Old Norse language and literature for terms to match archaeological finds.[53]

Creating Sacred Space

In Viking Age Scandinavia, there was a high degree of variation regarding ritual space, as will become evident in the chapters below.[54] In principle, ritual space can have any shape and size. What makes it suitable for ritual actions is that it is marked off from the rest of the world – from mundane, everyday space. This marking off requires sacralising (ritual) activities, and as marked-off spaces, specific rules of conduct apply within them.[55] In Viking Age Scandinavia, some ritual spaces, for example the smaller, specialised cultic buildings mentioned above and locations in the natural landscape such as groves and wetlands, would have been perceived and treated as permanently sacred. Even so, they likely required maintenance through ritual actions in order for their sacredness to be maintained, making sure that they remained suitable spaces for superhuman entities and forces to reside or manifest.

The halls of the elite, which most of the time served as domestic and residential buildings, seem to have been temporarily marked off for religious activities at special

occasions.[56] At such times, they would have been transformed into sacred spaces, suitable for the intended ritual actions – for example, allowing them to serve as arenas for the communication with superhuman entities. Just as ritual actions have the power to transform the status of a person, for example from child to adult, or from an ordinary person into a warrior,[57] specific ritual actions would have been perceived as capable of transforming the hall space, at least for the duration of the ritual events themselves.[58] Such temporary transformation of space is by no means an isolated example in the history of religions. The difference generally lies in the (mythic) narrative and symbolic ascription of special value to the space during such ritual occasions. Although the space is normally used for ordinary, mundane activities, on these occasions it is primarily connected to the ultimate realities of the community. During such events, the space is, therefore, conceptualised, perceived, experienced, and felt in ways different from what they usually are.[59]

One way in which such a transformation can be attained is by activation of a micro-macro correspondence, which is frequently encountered in sacred buildings, where the building as a microcosmos mirrors the macrocosmos.[60] Such a micro-macro correspondence was probably activated during ceremonies in Viking Age hall buildings. As argued by Terry Gunnell, the interior architecture of the hall seems to have been invoked in dramatic ritual performances when it was transformed into visual signs of the cosmos, mirroring the layout of the cosmos.[61] A recurrent element of ritual dramatic performances cross-culturally is a condensation of time and space, meaning that past and present, as well as 'here and there', are perceived as identical or parallel, for example by enacting ritual events and thus doing the same things here and now as superhuman agents once did in the mythic pasts.[62] This phenomenon, where superhuman beings are brought into the centre of the human world during ritual performances, is what Lars Lönnroth has called 'the double scene'.[63] Further, on the basis of the mythical aspects of the architectural characteristics of the hall space, Sundqvist has argued for a likely micro-macrocosmic relationship between Viking Age halls and the halls described in mythical sources, suggesting that the hall as a place of cultic action be regarded as a threshold between the world of humans and the world of the gods, 'a meeting place for humans and divine beings'.[64] As such, the Viking Age halls seem to have served as a mnemonic framework for engendering and manifesting connections to the cosmological past. In this capacity, it formed the frame for communal, ritual activities during which a specific collective identity was established, negotiated, and maintained.[65]

It must be added that several Old Norse written accounts situate the performances by *vǫlur* and other ritual experts versed in magic and divination within the space of the hall.[66] In *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 4, Þorbjǫrg *lítilvǫlva* performs her act of divination inside a building where the entire community is gathered.[67] In the course of the ritual sequence described, different smaller ritual elements lead up to the climatic performance of *seiðr*, for which a special seat or an elevated construction (*hjallr*) has been prepared. It is described how this space is further marked off as a space within the hall by a group of women forming a circle around the *hjallr*, thus preparing the space for communication with superhuman beings (the *náttúrur*).

Spaces of Religious Ritual

Places and spaces are dynamic entities. Rather than being empty arenas for human action, they are themselves social products, created by human ascription of meaning to them. According to Christopher Tilley places are 'centres of bodily activities, human significance and emotional attachment'.[68] This is important when dealing with pre-Christian religion in the Viking Age. Religious practice took place in a vast variety of locations which the people of Viking Age Scandinavia in different ways and for varying reasons perceived as suitable for such practice. Some served as temporary ritual arenas, while others were perceived (and maintained) as more permanently sacred. As sacrality is attributed to a location through collective processes of meaning-making, sacred places and spaces could in principle come in all forms and sizes. The chapters of this section of the book treat different arenas of religious performance, from groves and riversides to elite settlements, halls, and domestic outbuildings, as well as the ritualised movement between locations.

Notes

1. Bønding 2021. See also Jensen 2019: 219.
2. Bender Jørgensen 2013. See also Carlie 2004; Armstrong Oma 2019.
3. On this concept of 'echoes' in the written sources, see e.g. Clunies Ross 1994; Frog 2022.
4. Jensen 2019: 153.
5. Knott 2010. See also Crang & Thrift 2000; Hubbard *et al.* 2004.
6. Lefebvre 1991: 410–11; Knott 2010.
7. Knott 2008: 1111.
8. Durkheim 1995: 33, 44.
9. Eliade 1959.
10. Smith 1987: 56–8. For recent discussions of the notions of sacred and profane in the context of pre-Christian Scandinavia, see García Losquiño *et al.* 2020; concerning sacred space, see Schjødt 2020c.
11. van der Leeuw 1993.
12. Eliade 1959.
13. Lefebvre 1991: 404; Shields 1991: 29. For further references, see Knott 2008.
14. Smith 1978; 1987. See also Knott 2010: 34. Smith's conceptualisation of the sacred and the profane as human constructions is thus in accordance with Durkheim (1995): nothing is inherently sacred or profane.

15. Smith 1987: 104.
16. Smith 1987: 28, 105. See also Peter Berger's (1990) discussion of the processes of sacralisation through which people create an inhabitable world for themselves.
17. Brereton 2005: 7979.
18. Knott 2007: 51.
19. For discussions, see chapters zero through eight in Schjødt *et al.* 2020.
20. See also Zachrisson & Andrén 2020.
21. e.g. Keyser 1847; Olsen 1926; Gehl 1941.
22. Bruun & Jónsson 1909. For the report from the most recent excavations, including discussions of the 1908 digs, see Lucas 2009.
23. See also Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999 for the view that these descriptions tell us more about medieval churches than about pre-Christian cultic buildings.
24. Olsen 1966.
25. Sundqvist 2011; 2016: 95-160, and references therein.
26. For a general overview, see Zachrisson & Andrén 2020. For more in-depth interpretations, see Sundqvist 2016: 95–160. See also Larsson 2007; Jørgensen 2009.
27. Sundqvist 2009; 2016: 104, 155–6.
28. *Álfar* are a kind of superhuman beings connected to fertility. See Gunnell 2020.
29. Text and translation after Fulk 2012: 589. Translation amended by the author.
30. Sundqvist 2009: 69; 2016: 369–70.
31. 'en þau sǫgðu… heilagt' ('but they said [it was] holy'). Text and translation after Fulk 2012: 589.
32. See also Murphy 2018: 57–61 for a discussion of this poem in relation to the topic of sacred space, including further references.
33. Sundqvist 2016. See also Schjødt 2020b; Bønding 2021.
34. Text after Einar Ól. Sveinsson & Matthías Þórðarson 1985: 8–9; translation after Hermann Pálsson & P. Edwards 1989: 29, with emendations by the author. See also Sundqvist 2016: 147–50.
35. For a treatment of the other details of the account along with a comparison between *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 4, *Hákonar saga goða*, ch. 14, *Kjalnesinga saga*, ch. 2, and the Úlfljótslǫg (which presumably is the oldest Icelandic law complex), all of which share significant details, see Schjødt 2020a. Many scholars have perceived the four texts to be mutually dependent, detracting from the source value of the individual narratives. Nevertheless, there are differences between the accounts, and it cannot be ruled out that we are dealing with at least partly different traditions.
36. Duwel 1985: 21–38; Hultgård 1993: 230.
37. Hultgård 1996: 53.
38. Sundqvist 2016: 318.
39. Meulengracht Sørensen 1991: 239.
40. For example, Düwel 1985: 34–5.
41. See also Schjødt 2020a: 810.
42. Brink 1996; Sundqvist 2009; 2016, and references therein.
43. Lucas 2009.
44. Lucas & McGovern 2007.
45. Lucas & McGovern 2007; Sundqvist 2016: 150–5. For a critical discussion of this interpretation, see Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir 2011.
46. Lucas 2009: 62–93, 112–7, 373–97. See also Sundqvist 2016: 150–5.
47. Lucas 2009: 404–7; Sundqvist 2016: 153–4.
48. See Bønding 2020: 60–130; 2021. It likely that, occasionally, ritual dramatic performances based on oral poetry took place in the halls of the elite. See Gunnell 1995; 2006; Nygaard 2018.
49. Sundqvist 2009: 73–4, and references therein.
50. Vikstrand 2001: 267–70. In addition, Vikstrand notes a further problem related to the term *hof*. It is polysemantic and has meanings beyond the strictly ritual and religious one. In some Scandinavian dialects, variants of Old Norse *hof*, e.g. Norwegian *hov,* have a topographical meaning and can be translated as 'elevation' or 'hill'. The relation between the different possible meanings of the term *hof* as a place of ritual and as a topographical designation has been much debated but without reaching a satisfactory explanation. Due to these problems, when dealing with place names containing the element *hof*, it is not self-evident which sense of the word is implied, which is why arguments for a potentially religious meaning of any given place name must be underpinned by further contextual arguments (Vikstrand 2001: 268–9; 2020, and references therein).
51. Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1971: 210, 214–15.
52. Jón Jóhannesson 1950: 99, 124.
53. Sundqvist 2009: 75; 2016: 104–6.
54. For an overview, see also Zachrisson & Andrén 2020.
55. Smith 1987.
56. As outlined below (→ **Chapter 7**), many types of ritual activity were connected to Viking Age halls. What concerns us here is the hall as an example of a temporarily sacralised space.
57. Schjødt 2020d.
58. See also Murphy 2016.
59. Fibiger 2021, and references therein.
60. Fibiger 2021: 184.
61. Gunnell 2001; 2006.
62. Jensen 2019: 104.
63. Lönnroth 1979.
64. Sundqvist 2016: 119.
65. Bønding 2021: 82–90.
66. Even if it is not explicitly mentioned that the performance takes place in a hall, this is implied as the ritual specialists are invited to perform their rituals in connection with ritual feasts (*veizlur*). E.g. *Hrólfs saga kraka*, ch. 3 (Guðni Jónsson 1943, II: 7–11); *Norna-Gests þáttr*, ch. 11 (Guðni Jónsson 1943, I: 186).
67. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson & Matthias Þórðarson 1985: 206–9.
68. Tilley 1994: 15.

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6

Cult Buildings and Ritual Sites: A View from Gamla Uppsala

John Ljungkvist & Ben Raffield

Uppsala's Pagan Temple: The Emergence of a Legend

In the years around 1080, a German scholar and priest in Hamburg wrote a short description of a famous pagan temple in Uppsala, Sweden. It was a sanctuary entirely made of gold where the people worshipped the idols of three gods; Thor, Wodan, and Fricco, who are often presumed to represent the pre-Christian gods Þórr, Óðinn, Freyr. Þórr was the mightiest, sitting on a throne in the middle of a *sal* ('hall or room'), flanked by Óðinn and Freyr.[1] The scholar who penned this account was named Adam of Bremen, and his writings are preserved today in the book *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, which offers an overview of the peoples who inhabited the lands that lay beyond the northern boundary of Christian Europe. From a source-critical perspective, several parts of the text are dubious.[2] Adam states, for example, that the area of modern-day Finland was inhabited by Amazons, whose daughters turned beautiful while their sons were born with dogs' heads on their chests.[3] Adam had heard stories about this himself, but of course he never travelled north to validate them. His description of the temple at Uppsala was similarly obtained from a third party. Despite this, his account of the sanctuary and its divine inhabitants has generated hundreds if not thousands of scholarly works and served as the inspiration for countless popular reconstructions. We find it represented in national romantic paintings, the most famous being Carl Larsson's once-controversial *Midvinterblot*. The site is of course also the centre of key events in the recent History TV series, *Vikings*.

It is not only the pagan temple, however, that was of interest to Adam. If we return to his text then we also find a slightly more detailed description of the wider ritual landscape, which includes an account of how the entire people of the Svear apparently gathered at Uppsala every

Figure 6.1 The temple of Gamla Uppsala as depicted and imagined by Olaus Magnus in 1555. Source: Kungl. Konsthögskolan.

ninth year in order to sacrifice nine male beings of every living species – including humans – who were then hung from the branches of a sacred groove.[4] As a priest who was involved in ongoing efforts to Christianise the Baltic region, Adam had an agenda that affected his account, and his writings have been and will continue to be debated at length. Nevertheless, his notions about the temple and cult in the heartland of the Svear made a lasting impression, finding a place in the clerical literature of the Middle Ages. His account was reproduced and proved to be a source of inspiration for the first historical work on Sweden, compiled by Olaus Magnus in 1555 (Fig. 6.1).[5]

Temple Pioneers

The legend of the great temple at Uppsala has also filtered into antiquarian and archaeological research. The idea of a temple was particularly appealing to the seventeenth-century

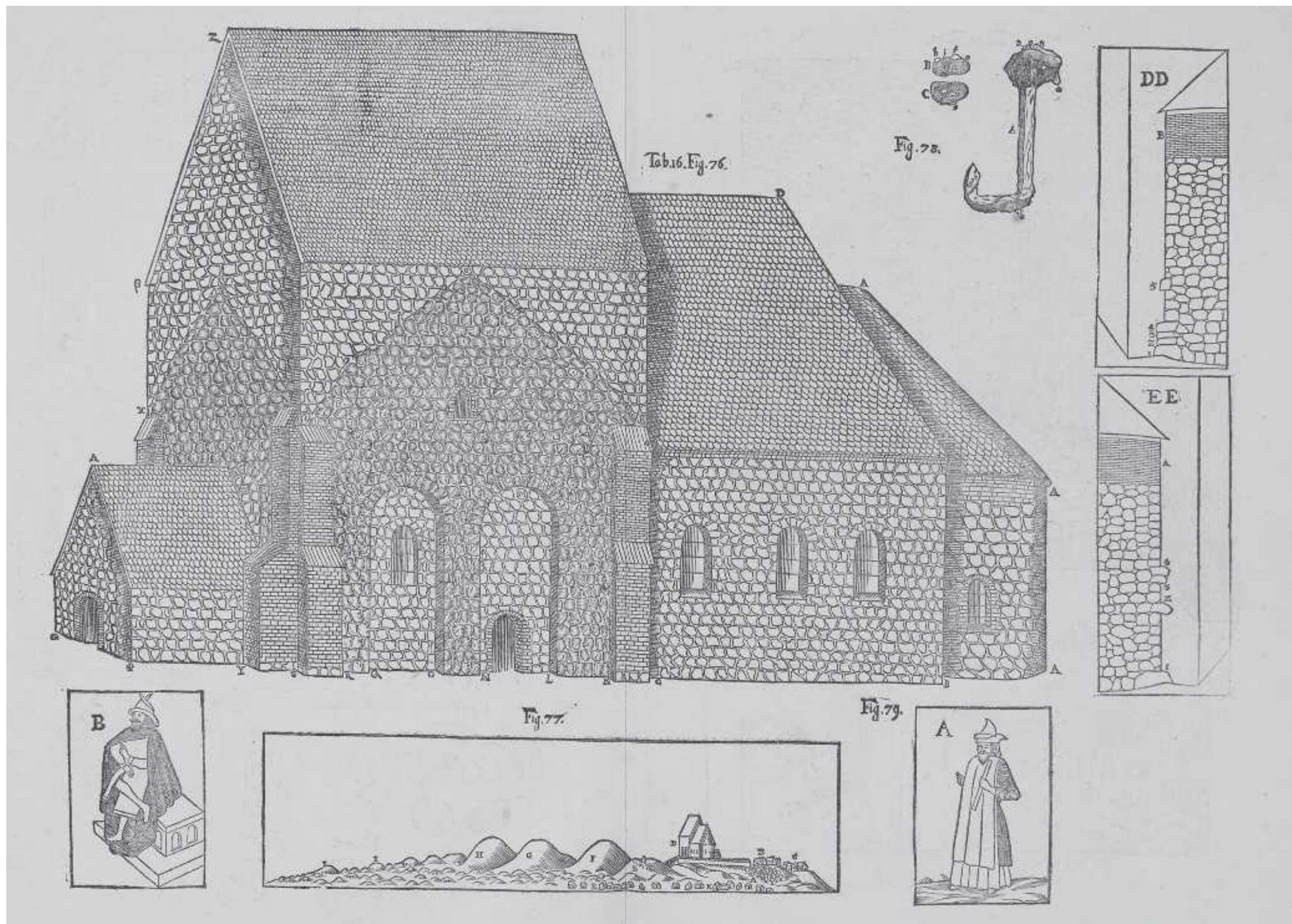

Figure 6.2 The church in Gamla Uppsala as depicted by Olof Rudbeck in 1679. The lower part of the central tower, which shows traces of razed transepts from the cathedral, he assumed to be remains of the pagan temple, incorporated into the church. Courtesy of Uppsala University.

antiquarian Olof Rudbeck, a man who can be considered in some ways to be the first scientific-based archaeologist. In his work *Atlantica*, Rudbeck attempted to show that Sweden, at this time a major European power, was actually the lost civilisation of Atlantis.[6] Naturally, Gamla Uppsala – as it was known by this point – was the focal point of this early civilisation. In his research, Rudbeck conducted excavations on the site of the present church, which itself represents the remains of a twelfth-century cathedral, in order to locate Adam of Bremen's famous temple. His excavations turned up pieces of molten metal and other debris, which he assumed were the remains of the temple that had been incorporated into the medieval church (these materials, however, in fact relate to a fire that occurred at the cathedral in 1202) (Fig. 6.2). Rudbeck was a brilliant forerunner in observing and recording ancient monuments, but his results exemplify what might be regarded today as an over-enthusiastic and amusingly bombastic interpretation of the archaeological record. It was not until 1926–7 that evidence for the temple would again be sought under the church. When conducting excavations underneath the church floor, Sune Lindqvist – then professor of archaeology at Uppsala University – discovered several archaeological layers and postholes dating from the Iron Age, which he believed could represent the remains of the long-lost Uppsala temple. These arguments of course had a major resonance in the scholarly world and Lindqvist's interpretations were quite widely accepted (though suspiciously not published in detail until 1996).[7] By then, Else Nordahl had reviewed the results from the excavation, and from this she concluded that the pattern of the post-holes could in fact be attributed to several phases of buildings dating from the Iron Age to the Middle Ages. While Nordahl's reinterpretation of the evidence essentially consigned Lindqvist's arguments to the bin of discarded ideas, this does not necessarily rule out the possibility that a temple or cult building could have existed at the site.

The Latest Results

In the last few decades, Gamla Uppsala has been the subject of several archaeological projects that are now fundamentally changing the ways in which we view the site. There are,

however, still many gaps in our knowledge, and the question regarding the existence of a temple or cult building remains salient. Another important and challenging question, and one that is intimately related to the possibility of a temple existing at the site during the eleventh century, concerns the lack of a Viking Age royal estate in Gamla Uppsala. We know that there was a 'great hall', which together with at least one other major building on the estate burnt down in around AD 800.[8] These represented the last of several generations of stratigraphically superimposed monumental buildings, all of which were situated on a series of artificial terraces located just to the north of the modern-day church and cemetery. These massive buildings were evidently of great importance, and their elevated position would have meant that they would have been visible from several kilometres away. Unfortunately, however, the burning of the latest buildings marks the beginning of a lacuna in our knowledge of the site, and even today we know frustratingly little about the potential location of the Viking Age estate. Certainly, an estate should have existed given that Gamla Uppsala continued to function as an important centre in this period, but where is the evidence?

Efforts have been made to untangle the history of the site. In 2010–18, excavations taking place on the site of the superimposed halls and terraces uncovered some tentative evidence of Viking Age activity in the area to the north of the present-day church. It was noted, however, that the part of the site immediately bordering the stone wall that demarcates the edge of the churchyard yielded a higher amount of Viking Age finds and features, and this may indicate the presence of a manor that had perhaps shifted south over time, and whose later phases of occupation may now lie covered by the medieval churchyard. As we will see below, this might also indicate that a ritual building actually did exist – at least in theory – in this area.

In early 2018, archaeologists from Uppsala University and Upplandsmuseet working as part of the *Viking Dynasties* project, a collaboration between researchers from Denmark and Sweden, undertook a small-scale excavation beneath the floor of the church. This was an exciting venture as the soil profiles from Lindqvist's 1926–7 excavations are still standing. These profiles reveal several phases of activity on the site, as represented for example by the burnt layers from the 1202 cathedral fire, in addition to medieval graves and evidence for activity dating from the early Roman Iron Age onwards. In between these stages one can observe evidence for stone-paved yards, roads, and, most importantly, artificial clay terraces and the remains of post-holes belonging to large buildings (Fig. 6.3). While the presence of these terraces was already known, the new investigation clarified some details of the rather obscure picture of the site as a whole. At least two important things can now be deduced. First, it appears that the area under the church was the focus for the construction of new terraces that were raised while

Figure 6.3 A profile of layers beneath the church of Gamla Uppsala. The uppermost originate from the construction and destruction of the cathedral in 1202. Beneath these, terrace layers of clay from the Vendel and probably Viking Age. At the very bottom, a thick red, coal rich layer from a burnt down building, together with a concentration of stones from a newly discovered post-hole. Photo by Roberto Fortuna, National Museum of Denmark.

the last 'great hall' to the north was still in use. Second, we now had new evidence for additional large buildings dating from the Viking Age, whose presence had not been properly confirmed previously. This means that we do indeed appear to have evidence for a Viking Age royal manor on the site, but can these post-holes be taken as representing traces of a ritual building, or even a temple? The simple answer to this question is, unfortunately, *no*. There is as yet no evidence for a ritual building or object dating from the Viking Age within the manor area.

Setting Gamla Uppsala in Context: Cult Buildings and Ritual Practices at Other Sites

Given that we still do not have evidence for the mythical temple at Gamla Uppsala, how might we approach the question of special ritual buildings existing at the site during the late Iron Age? From an archaeological perspective, this is a complex topic. Questions remain concerning not only the existence of a special ritual building, but also how the idea of a 'temple' was perceived and defined by medieval writers such as Adam of Bremen. Indeed, the very use of the term 'temple' involves the application not only of a Latin term – *templum* – to a prehistoric Scandinavian context, but it is also loaded with cultural baggage. The societies of the late Iron Age were very different culturally from those of ancient Greece, Rome, and the early medieval Christian world. Architectural styles would have similarly differed, meaning that we cannot simply predict what a Scandinavian 'temple' might have looked like, or apply models based on more familiar classical or Christian designs. We know from place names and Old Norse literature, however, that some

places were defined as specific places for cult practice. In some cases there are natural places like *lundr* (grove) or *akr* (field).[9] Some are man-made; these might include a mound, a *stafgarþr* (a kind of wooden enclosure), or a *hǫrgr*, the latter of which was defined by Olaf Olsen as a small religious building long before any had actually been found by archaeologists.[10] In general, we lack detailed literary descriptions of cult places and it is a challenge to connect archaeological remains for ritual structures and practices with the available evidence. The Old Norse sources that survive today mainly originate from Iceland or western Scandinavia, with dates of composition lying in the twelfth–thirteenth centuries. It is now increasingly clear, furthermore, that the people of the late Iron Age did not adhere to a homogenous pre-Christian 'religion,' but rather to regional variants of a shared belief system.[11] This means that the meaning of specific words, the form and use of ritual structures and iconography, and the nature of ritual acts themselves, varied from place to place.

This brings us back to the question of pagan temples. Given the versatility of pre-Christian ideologies, we should not be surprised to find evidence for ritual practices manifesting in a vast range of archaeological contexts. We shall explore just some of these below.

Temples, Halls, and Farms

The question of temples and ritual buildings in Scandinavia has long been debated among scholars working in disciplines ranging from archaeology, to history, the history of religion, and philology.[12] Looking across the broad expanse of the late Iron Age North, we find evidence for a range of structures that may have served cultic functions – buildings such as the *hǫrgr* mentioned earlier. The basic construction pattern for these buildings appears to have been based on square stone settings – presumably foundations for a structure – which sometimes seem to have featured only three sides. In some cases, small but distinct groups of post-holes indicate a similar or related construction. In others, they are closely associated with or even situated *within* the boundaries of elite sites – often within some form of enclosure appended to a hall. Structures of this kind have been found, for example, at Tissø, Lejre, and Gudme in Denmark, and also at Uppåkra in Sweden (though nothing similar has yet been identified at Gamla Uppsala).[13] These buildings were often small, and must have been relatively cramped spaces. That at Uppåkra, for example, measures only 13 meters in length and yet appears to have been fairly monumental in its construction. Relatively little is known of the rites that might have taken place within these buildings, and some appear to have been kept conspicuously 'clean' or free of objects – Uppåkra is a rare exception to this pattern. It is possible that access to these spaces was restricted, and that in some cases they might represent something akin to a 'private chapel' that was used solely by elites. At the same time, however, later medieval sagas indicate that one function of 'temples' was to house sacred rings upon which oaths were sworn in the presence of the gods.[14] Two examples of these rings, perhaps from the entrance doors, have been recovered from Uppåkra, as well as other finds indicative of ritual activities, including offerings of weapons and possible sacrificial deposits, which were made outside of the structure.[15] Uppåkra is also notable for producing over two hundred *guldgubber* – tiny golden foils depicting humanoid figures in a range of poses, which appear to have been fastened to the walls of the cult house. These last finds are especially interesting in light of Adam of Bremen's description of the temple at Uppsala, which as noted above, was supposedly made of gold.[16]

Another site that has yielded an interesting range of finds is that at Borg in Östergötland, where archaeologists have identified a peculiar building lying within a courtyard. The structure contained a small stone platform but was in itself largely devoid of finds. Ritual practices seem instead to have been concentrated outside of the structure, in this case an area in front of the entrance. When excavating the site, archaeologists uncovered an unusual number of pig bones – possibly detritus relating to offerings and feasting activity – and also, perhaps most interestingly, a large number of so-called amulet rings, some of which were deposited in a small pit.[17] These objects take various forms, ranging from simple rings of iron with an attached staple, almost like a miniature door ring, to rings shaped like fire steels. They can vary greatly in size, from pendants measuring a few centimetres in diameter, which were attached to larger objects, to large rings that themselves were complemented with additional amulets (Fig. 6.4). The latter might include miniature objects such as scythes, small iron rings or fire-steel amulets, and small spears.[18]

Figure 6.4 A large 17.9 cm wide amulet ring of copper alloy with attached smaller rings. Found in Olarve, Hangvar parish on Gotland. Photo by Swedish History Museum.

Figure 6.5 Large amulet ring of silver with attached smaller amulets consisting of rings and folded dirhams. Found at Krapperup, Skåne. Photo by Swedish History Museum.

In some rare cases, even silver coins are wrapped around the rings (Fig. 6.5).[19] While the silver objects were of course very expensive, one gets the impression that the iron attachments were made quickly and in a relatively crude way – analyses of the metal have shown that they are often made of poor-quality iron. Given the number of these objects that have been found, it seems like the most important aspect of the amulet rings generally was the 'message' communicated through their deposition, rather than the intrinsic value ascribed to the object itself.

Another interesting site where we see mass offerings is Estuna, in Uppland (or 'Æsir-Tuna', with the term 'tuna' referring to an aristocratic farmstead). Excavations within the medieval churchyard have revealed thousands of arrowheads, spears, and hastily-made, spear-like objects that had been deposited by a stone construction. These depositions are similar, though in greater volume, to those made at another '-tuna' site – Ultuna (referring to the god Ullr), which dates from the Vendel period, where amulets, weapons, and miniature weapons were found in a culture layer with an extraordinarily large number of pig bones. Other smaller depositions of animal bones at Ultuna have also been found alongside what appears to be a large 'sacrificed' boat within the grave field.[20] While the number and type of ritually deposited items therefore vary across sites, the names of these places, which combine the names of Æsir gods with place-name elements indicating an elite site, emphasise the special role of certain places where aristocratic power, status-goods, and ritual performances became entangled. Some objects have an obvious martial connection, and in particular links to the powerful spear-wielding war-god Óðinn and the bow-carrier Ullr, who could be invoked in order to ensure success in battle or single combat.[21]

The situation of cult buildings within an aristocratic milieu also raises interesting questions concerning the etymology of another Old Norse term – *hof* – which was also used to describe roofed structures that were used for ritual purposes. While this term can be used broadly to refer to some sort of cult house, it is also used in reference to a great hall.[22] This implies that while the smaller cult structures that have been found at sites such as Gudme, Tissø, and Uppåkra may have indeed served as specially designated places for the performance of specific rites, their function can only be fully understood when they are set within the wider context of the hall. In Sweden our knowledge of these structures has only started to really develop in the last thirty years, largely thanks to a surge of excavations at late Iron Age settlement sites. The dualistic functions that the hall served as both a secular and sacred space and – perhaps more importantly – as an arena for public engagement, reflects the identity and ideological influence of the elite themselves. During the late Iron Age, the elite played a key role as religious practitioners who possessed the ability to mediate between the gods and the wider population, something that was further reinforced by their patronage to the powerful war god Óðinn.[23] Thus the hall served as an epicentre for ritual activity within the community – a place where the aristocracy held and presided over feasts and other rites dedicated to the gods.

In some cases, halls were constructed or maintained specifically to function as venues for the hosting of ritual events. The best evidence for this is perhaps seen at Hofstaðir in Iceland, where archaeological excavations have identified a large hall that has been used for the holding of seasonal feasts during the tenth–eleventh centuries. Finds of several dozen cattle skulls, which appear to have been hung around the hall, attest to the ritualised killing of animals by decapitation, and scientific analyses of pig bones recovered at the site indicate that the animals were fed on a diet of trout, resulting in the production of very fatty pork that would have been roasted and consumed during feasts.[24] Butchered cuts of meat were also brought to the site. The ritual connotations of the hall are further strengthened by the fact that the building was dismantled and abandoned at around the turn of the First Millennium – the time when the Icelanders officially accepted Christianity as their religion. The site was then 'sealed' with the burial of the cattle skulls.[25] While it is perhaps going too far to argue that halls themselves served as 'temples,' these structures clearly did serve a range of cultic functions, and furthermore they also stand as testament to the deeply-connected nature of ideology and politics during the pre-Christian period.

Cult structures, however, were not exclusively associated with high-status elite dwellings. On a number of occasions, archaeologists have recorded small and modest buildings or other constructions with peculiar depositions of objects and animal bones while excavating settlements and grave fields, often in spaces that might be considered as liminal zones separating the parts of the landscape inhabited by the living and the dead (Fig. 6.6).[26] It seems like they do not

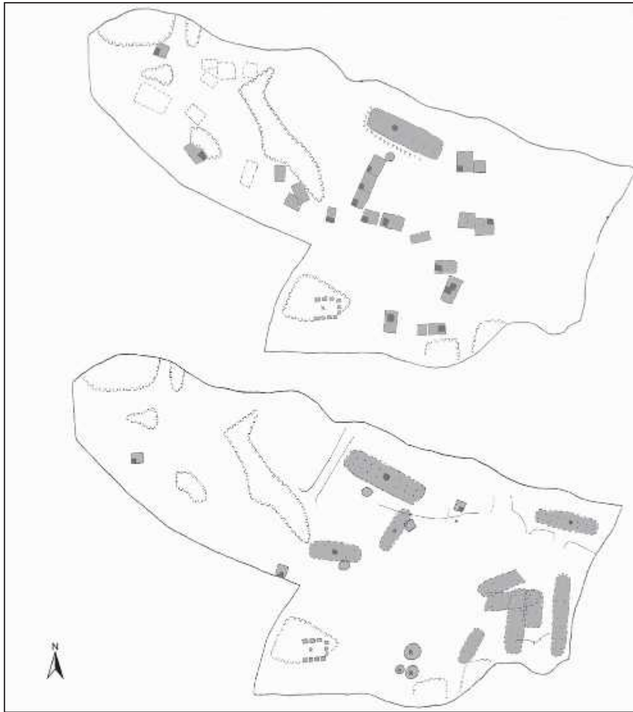

Figure 6.6 The settlement in Sanda during the Migration (and Vendel?) Period (below) and the Viking Age (top). The ritual building is found as a small U-shaped feature in the SW edge of the settlement. After Ljungkvist 2006: fig. 8.

have a fixed position like a Roman-period house shrine or a Christian chapel – rather, they could be situated in many different places. An interesting challenge for the future is to examine when, how, and why specific rituals were performed in certain places.

Some ritual structures appear to have been situated in elevated positions in the landscape on the edges of settlements or burial grounds. The clearest example of this can be seen at Lilla Ullevi in Uppland, Sweden, a place that integrates the Old Norse term *vé* – which is taken to indicate a sanctuary of some kind – with the name Ullr, an enigmatic pre-Christian deity who, as noted above, appears to have been associated with hunting and also skiing.[27] Thus, Lilla Ullevi is 'the little *vé* of Ullr'. Excavations revealed a building shaped almost as a 'half-hall' building, which had been constructed on the top of a hill. Two stone projections extended out from the structure, within which was situated a number of postholes that may have served as the setting for some kind of construction. It was surrounded by an enclosure, hearths, and, most interestingly, many amulet rings of which several have attached staples meaning that they were hammered into posts, either inside the building, on a door, or on posts placed in the courtyard.[28] This Vendel period building is probably the closest thing to a temple that has been found so far in Middle Sweden, and perhaps serves as an indication of what *might* be found in Gamla Uppsala and other high status centres. It is interesting to note that the site seems to have been demarcated by a series of posts, which may have served as some form of boundary. These may have also served to partially obscure or screen the activities taking place within, thereby raising the possibility that access to ritual acts may have been managed.[29]

In the Open Air: The Wider Ritual Landscape

While today we might commonly understand religious activities as being practised within specific, purpose-built structures such as churches or mosques, during the late Iron Age the landscape itself served as an arena for ritual practice. There is evidence to suggest that the calendar of seasonal ritual acts, as seen as taking place for example within the environs of the hall at Hofstaðir, also played out at open-air sites. These seem to have consisted largely of sacrificial or votive acts focusing on specific landscape features such as trees or groves, or lakes, bogs, and other 'watery' places. One interesting site where we gain a glimpse into the wider landscape of ritual practice is that at Lunda in Södermanland, Sweden, where excavations in 2001–2 identified what appears to be evidence for a sacred grove, situated on a prominent hill overlooking a late Iron Age settlement and cemetery.[30] The settlement itself is notable for the finding of three ithyphallic figurines, two of gilded bronze and one of gold, which were recovered during excavations of the hall there, indicating a cultic function for the site and its aristocratic residents (Fig. 6.7). The activities taking place on the hill located at a short distance from the settlement were characterised by the construction of stone settings, the building of fires, and the crushing of large stones or boulders. In addition, very small pieces of fragmented animal bone, burnt clay, and drops of resin were scattered all over the hill, accompanied by a smaller number of finds including arrowheads, knives, and beads. Small quantities of human bone were similarly found scattered over, underneath, and within the stone settings, and also elsewhere across the site.

While it is impossible to ascertain exactly what kinds of acts were carried out at Lunda, it has been suggested that these may have been associated with some kind of fertility ritual, with the nearby community 'sowing' the hill with objects in order to secure favourable prospects for the coming years.[31] The practices taking place on the Lunda hill therefore reflect a pattern in late Iron Age ritual behaviours that placed an emphasis on repeated, small-scale offerings, which might have included single beads, some cremated bones, or hastily made amulet rings. The pattern here therefore mirrors to some extent those rites observed at sites such as Borg and Estuna, noted above.[32] It is possible that the meaning or symbolism of these acts may have varied in line with the environments within which they were undertaken, but we cannot say for sure.

Another dramatic example of pre-Christian ritual practices has been identified underneath the medieval church on Frösö (or 'Freyr's Island') in Jämtland, Sweden. Directly under the altar, archaeologists uncovered the stump of a

Figure 6.7 One of the figurines found in Lunda, made of bronze with a gilded head. Photo by Gabriel Hildebrand, Swedish History Museum.

large birch tree, around which was spread the bones of a large number of animals, including elk, bears, sheep and/or goats, and pigs. The deposits date from the Viking Age, with analyses of the bones indicating that the animals were butchered at specific points within the year, during the early autumn, late spring, and at around the time of the summer solstice.[33] What exactly the rites associated with these bones entailed is uncertain, but one finds it difficult (once again) to ignore the description of the ritual activities noted by Adam of Bremen as taking place at Uppsala, where we read of both animals and human beings being slaughtered and hung in the trees of a sacred grove. The fact that the tree was eventually cut down and then covered by an altar attests not only to its importance as a focal point of pre-Christian ritual activity, but also the efforts of the Church to harness the power of such sites as a means of refocusing and shaping the ideological attention of communities as part of the Christianisation process.

Another aspect of ritual activity that can be explored much further is the practice of water offerings. This is a rite traditionally related to the Bronze Age and Early Iron Age, but in the last few decades it has become clear that this was a practice that continued with varying degrees of intensity into the late Iron Age.[34] Deposits appear to have been made in rivers, streams, and bogs, and while the nature of ritual practices does appear to vary across periods and cultures there are several clear indications of both human and weapon sacrifices taking place in lakes and rivers well into the late Viking Age.[35] This is a practice that has now also been observed as possibly taking place in regions subject to viking raiding and settlement outside of Scandinavia.[36]

Perceptions of Cult Buildings and Ritual in Late Iron Age Scandinavia

Although the limitations of this chapter enable us to briefly consider only a few of the many sites that are known to us, it is clear that the ideological boundaries of the late Iron Age ritual landscape extended far beyond the use of single cult houses or 'temples'. Rather than being considered as *the* focal point of ritual activity, these structures should be taken as representing merely one of many places where rites were performed, thereby acting as individual nodes of ritual practice within a multi-layered ideological landscape.[37] In seeking to reconstruct the ritual landscape, we should focus not just on these individual structures but also on the spaces that existed between them and their associated settlements. It is also necessary to acknowledge the important role that the hall itself played as a site for public performances and festivals, and in doing so to similarly recognise the influence of ritual sites located in what might appear to be more 'marginal' locations, such as those situated on the edges of grave fields for example, or in natural places lying at an even greater distance from human habitation. Evidence for ritual practices within these locales may vary wildly, from significant deposits of weapons or animal bones to tiny fragments of crushed rock or clay.

While certain rituals, such as those taking place at Lilla Ullevi, may have been expressed through the use of socially exclusive and grandiose performances, many (and perhaps most) prehistoric ritual practices likely manifested in 'small' ways. Indeed, it appears that it was the symbolic associations of ritual actions, rather than the scale of the rites or the materials involved in these, which carried the greatest weight for those taking part in votive rites. As such, in many ways the ritual practices of the Viking Age can be hard to grasp – the ritual landscape was one in which ideology was communicated through repeated gestures or performances, which in many cases may have been modest or deeply personal. In some cases these performances were repeated regularly, as represented by a slow accumulation of a few bones, or single beads, taking place over years or perhaps generations. More dramatic acts involving the bloody slaughter of animals and/or people may have been reserved for specific occasions, rather than reflecting the essence of day-to-day ritual practice.

What does all of this mean, however, for our understanding of Gamla Uppsala, and the famous legend of the pagan 'temple'? Certainly we would urge caution to anyone looking to interpret the structures lying beneath the medieval church as a temple or cult house. While the siting of structures underneath a Christian place of worship might be taken to indicate that these were somehow ideologically charged, the evidence currently points to multiple phases of occupation and activity at this specific location, and as such it is impossible to directly ascribe the features with a collective function or even a consistent date. We have yet to identify, furthermore, any evidence for deposits of the type known to have been made in the immediate environment of cult houses such as those at Uppåkra and Borg. When we consider that Adam of Bremen never visited Uppsala himself, we should perhaps be open to the possibility that the 'temple' that he describes may in fact represent a distorted vision of a great hall – a place where relationships with the gods and/or other higher powers were negotiated and mediated through elite performances and feasting. Given Gamla Uppsala's known (and later presumed) status as a manorial site during the Vendel and Viking periods, this interpretation may explain the current lack of evidence for a specially constructed cult building. We would also draw attention to the possibility that the 'temple' might represent a metaphor for wider patterns of ritual practice at the landscape level. Perhaps any rites taking place at the site were conducted in the open air, in the vicinity of a grove – as Adam himself describes – or in association with other liminal natural features.

That said, we certainly cannot rule out the possibility that some sort of sanctuary or even a cult house existed at Gamla Uppsala. Only a small percentage of the site has been excavated, and it is likely that the most interesting parts of the Viking Age manor have been damaged or destroyed by the construction of the medieval church and churchyard. It would only take a single archaeological discovery to overturn our knowledge of the activities taking place there, and it is our hope that, in time, future work will shed further light on these questions. Until then, the enigma and mythos of the pagan temple will undoubtedly endure.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. Tschan 1959: 207.
2. For a recent discussion of texts that may have influenced Adam's work, see Simek 2022. For further discussions see Bartusik *et al*. 2022.
3. Tschan 1959: 206.
4. Tschan 1959: 208.
5. Magnus 1976.
6. Rudbeck 1937–1950.
7. Nordahl 1996.
8. Christensen 2015: 98–100; Ljungkvist & Frölund 2015: 14–20.
9. Vikstrand 2011.
10. Olsen 1966.
11. Hultgård 2008; Price 2020: 31–4.
12. See for example discussions and references in Jesch 2015: 129–39; Sundqvist 2015: 95–104.
13. See e.g. Christensen 1991; 2015; Jørgensen 2003; 2009; Larsson 2006; 2007; 2019.
14. See e.g. *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 4 (Einar Ól. Sveinsson & Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 8; Schach & Hollander 1959: 5); *Víga-Glúms saga*, ch. 25 (Jónas Kristjánsson 1965: 86; Turville-Petre 1960: 44–5).
15. Ödman 2003; Larsson 2019: 21–2.
16. On *guldgubber*, see Pesch & Helmbrecht 2019.
17. Lindeblad & Nielsen 1997.
18. See for example Gardeła & Odebäck 2018; Price 2019: 120–5, 166–8; Gardeła 2022.
19. SHM 92, 1501.
20. Hulth 2020.
21. Artelius 2005; Price 2019: 62. See also *Gylfaginning*, ch. 31 (Faulkes 2005: 26; Byock 2005: 38).
22. Olsen 1966: 282.
23. Price & Mortimer 2014; Sundqvist 2015.
24. Lucas & McGovern 2007; Lucas 2009.
25. Lucas 2009: 165–6.
26. Åqvist 2006.
27. Bäck *et al.* 2008.
28. Bäck *et al.* 2008: 41–59.
29. Price 2014: 180–2.
30. Andersson *et al.* 2004.
31. Andersson 2006: 183–5.
32. Lindeblad & Nielsen 1997; Notelid 2009.
33. Magnell & Iregren 2010; Magnell 2013.
34. Ljungkvist 2006; Fredengren 2015; Jørgensen 2009.
35. Lund 2008: 2010.
36. Androshchuk 2002; Raffield 2014.
37. For further discussion, see Murphy 2016.

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Abbreviations

SHM = Inventory number, Statens Historiska Museum, Stockholm.

7

Of Bodies and Buildings: Rituals in the Halls of the Vikings

Marianne Hem Eriksen

Introduction: Ritual, Affect, and the Body

This chapter will review the elite feasting halls of the vikings as ritual spaces and places. Monumental timbered buildings, often rebuilt on the same spot for generations, the halls were social and political nodal points throughout the first millennium AD, strongly associated in research with the warrior retinue and the early kings. However, this contribution will focus less on the development of kingship and the role hall rituals played in what the contemporary West may categorise as high-level politics, and more on ritual as embodied and affective practices. The chapter argues that these acts bundled bodies, politics, and performance in rich ways that would have produced specific affects, memories, and emotions among onlookers and participants. The discussion will draw on archaeologically excavated hall sites across Scandinavia; narratives and motifs conveyed through later written sources; and reflect on patterned material culture at hall sites.

Exactly what makes a 'ritual' has been discussed across the social sciences for a long time and has not been – nor will it ever be – fully resolved. Ritual is not a universal category nor an essentialised mode of practice across all time and space, and some scholars see the classification of 'ritual' versus 'profane' a product of Western Enlightenment thinking, an effort to purify and simplify the past.[1] Severin Fowles offers us the alternative term 'doings' rather than 'rituals', an English translation of the term used by the Pueblo groups he studies.[2] In an analogous vein, it has been pointed out that the Old Norse language has no word for religion, and that Norse-speakers used the term *siðr* – 'custom' or 'tradition'.[3] The late Iron Age Scandinavians' conceptual understanding of religion was likely a practice-based understanding of specific acts having transformative potential in the world. As a heuristic for this chapter, then, and based on a bricolage of writings on ritual,[4] 'ritual' is understood here as practices or *siðir* that are somewhat set apart from everyday life, that heighten attention or focus, and that are concerned with *relations* among community, bodies, and objects. *Siðr* and 'doing' will be used interchangeably in this sense.

This chapter focuses on the affective and embodied aspects of these ritual 'doings' in hall buildings. Watershed works on emotion and affect in archaeology over the last decade allow new ways to glimpse a fuller picture of people's lives in the past, and the role material culture plays in affect.[5] While emotion and affect are not universally configured, all human beings (and many animals) experience emotion. Emotion was as important a part of life in the past as economy, technology, or production (and of course intersects with all these as well). While we can never know exactly what, for example, an onlooker to a ritual performance of poetry in the eighth-century phase of the Lejre hall would feel, it is still crucial to consider that architectures, material culture, and bodily performance will have *moved* people. This is one way we can breathe more life and blood into the narratives we tell about the past, recasting architecture and material culture from the realm of background or economic-rational 'property' into active participants in world-making.

An important inroad to understanding the affective power of ritual 'doings' is to understand the foundational role of *the body*. All experience is of course embodied. However, ritualised acts have the potential to especially harvest the sensory experience of sounds and smells, spoken words, and gestures, that punctuate experience and make specific situations stand out from routine, everyday life. Crucially, no such thing as a universal body exists.[6] Bodies are moulded by politics, society, epigenetics, and environments

from conception or even before. The embodied experience of feasting, animal sacrifice, magical practice, or poetic performance will therefore have been differentiated by intersectional identities of gender, age, ability, and social status. In discussing embodied and affective experience, it should thus be remembered that the experience of a hall feast from the point of view of an adult male warrior will have been a world apart from that of an enslaved teenage woman. When we speak of embodiment we cannot separate it out from body-politics.

The Halls of the Late Iron and Viking Ages

A long-winding discussion in Iron and Viking Age research is exactly what constitutes a *hall*. Frands Herschend offered five criteria three decades ago: that halls should belong to larger estates; consist of a larger space with minimum roof-supporting posts; have a demarcated position within the settlement; their hearths should not be used for cooking or handicraft; and that the artefact assemblage should differ from assemblages in more ‘regular’ buildings.[7] These criteria have since been expanded and discussed by several scholars;[8] and some of the criteria (such as the use of hearths for cooking or production) seem to be less applicable as the empirical basis has expanded. This brief chapter will not discuss the nuances of the different sets of criteria used in any detail, and would rather argue that in a non-dogmatic, non-centralised society we should expect a high degree of variation in architectural choices, technologies, and ritual practices over vast geographical regions and across centuries. The hall phenomenon is perhaps better understood as variations of a theme rather than any strictly regulated and rule-bound architectural, political, or ritual expression.

Within a more open-ended, less dogmatic understanding, what *was* a hall building in the first millennium? Fundamentally, the hall is a new type of architectural feature growing out of the architectural tradition of three-aisled longhouses, which were introduced in Scandinavia in the early Bronze Age. Through differing architectural solutions including shifting the alignment of roof-supporting posts, a new type of space was created in selected longhouses – a large room centred on the hearth. Its primary function was likely not everyday food production or socialising, but political and religious feasts and celebrations. This innovation was conventionally thought to occur in the Roman Iron Age, however some scholars place the introduction of the hall back into the Pre-Roman Iron Age.[9] Somewhat confusingly, scholarly discourse uses the term ‘hall’ both for the specific room and for the building itself. This discrepancy also exists in the archaeological record: in some instances, entire buildings seem dedicated to collective gatherings of, perhaps, a chieftain or petty king and warrior-bands (e.g. Tissø below) – whereas in others, the hall is a space within a longhouse, used at certain times or in certain contexts for larger gatherings of households or larger communities (e.g. Borg below).

A repertoire of hall buildings can tell us about the archaeological traces of monumental, elite architectures, amended with descriptions and motifs from later written sources. The descriptions are based on the following sites dating to the Late Iron and Viking Ages, i.e. c. AD 550–1050: Gamla Uppsala,[10] Järrestad,[11] Slöinge,[12] and Helgö,[13] Sweden; Lejre[14] and Tissø,[15] Denmark; and Borg in Lofoten,[16] Norway (Table 7.1). While not all of these will fit every ‘check-list’ approach to the archaeological record, in combination I argue they provide a rich foundation on which to draw out some thoughts on ritual performance, embodiment, and affect of the halls.

The Complex Biographies of the Halls

The *siðr* doings of hall buildings started long before their standing life. The planning, building, and rebuilding of hall buildings stand out in the archaeological record as elaborate, intentional, deliberate events to mark the biographies of the buildings.[17] It seems the entire process of building both

Table 7.1 Hall sites drawn on in the article.

	Tissø	*Järrestad*	*Lejre (House III-IVab)*	*Helgö*	*Borg in Lofoten*	*Gamla Uppsala*	*Slöinge*
Approx. dating (generations)	AD 600–1000 (10–12)	AD 550–1050 (15–18)	End of the seventh–tenth century AD (10–12)	AD 700–800? (3?)	AD 400/ 500–1000 (15–18)	AD 560/ 70–800 (6–7)	AD 600–800 (6)
Number of interpreted hall buildings/ sequences	4	3	3	1	2	2	2
Deposition of artefacts	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Gold foil figures		patrix (die)		Y	Y		Y
Post removal	?	Y	Y	?	Y	N (burnt *in situ*)	Y
Fire				Y?		Y	

regular longhouses and feasting halls could be punctuated with ritual 'doings' concerned with the initiation of space, deposition of selected artefacts in constructional elements, and making sure rebuilds and repairs are done in a 'proper' way. In the following, I draw on selected sites to flesh out some of the *siðr* regarding the building process itself, before the following section examines some of the ritual practices that could take place within the standing halls.

The Siðr *of Choosing the Hall Site*

Halls' location was not left to chance. Where to build the monument of the elites – a space that would be used for feasts, celebrations, perhaps rites of passage such as weddings and burials for generations to come – was a significant decision. It is likely that questions of territory, labour, kinship, alliance, communication, and memory all came into play, making the planning and construction of hall buildings significant social and political events.

The majority of halls are placed at elevated points in the landscape – making them more exposed to wind, but also more visible from afar. In some cases, the builders chose to build the halls in connection with material traces of previous ritual 'doings'. At Borg in Lofoten, the hall was built over or into older burials.[18] To eradicate older burials when building a hall could have several, opposing, reasons: it could be to forge material connections to real or ideal ancestors, signalling continuation and protection. However, it could also constitute a demonstration of power: out with the old and in with the new.[19]

Moreover, at both Helgö[20] and Gamla Uppsala,[21] the exact placing of the site was important enough to create artificial plateaus to level the ground before construction. Enormous amounts of labour were exerted in building halls right in *these* spots – signalling that the exact place of construction was a crucial concern. Other choices too seem to have overridden any 'practical' concerns. Borg is also well above the arctic circle, meaning that the monumental timber needed for hall buildings did not grow locally, but had to be transported across long distances. Magnetic mapping at Borg also indicated some activity prior to the construction involving fire.[22] It is impossible to know what event this may have been, but in a world populated by a range of beings, spirits, and animate dead, there may have been diverse precautions and concerns to navigate in order to make a hall site 'proper'.[23]

The Siðr *of Raising the Hall*

Building the hall, which can be conceptualised as an earthly parallel to the gods' dwellings in Ásgarðr,[24] was surely not only about technical competency and architectural know-how (although it certainly was about those things). It has been argued that in the Old English epic poem *Beowulf*, king Hroðgar's construction of the hall Heorot *is* his inauguration as king.[25] The practice of building in itself may have been a ritualised 'doing' on its own – although we can perhaps assume that especially for hall buildings, there may have been specialised guilds of architects and woodworkers who carried out some of the labour.[26] However, the events of raising the hall, digging post-hole by post-hole, planning out where the hallroom and hearth should be, and raising the structure, post by post, may very well have involved all kinds of performances, affects, and sensory experiences – for the hall owners as well as the builders.

The erection of the halls themselves will have involved what Lesley McFadyen has called 'quick architectures'[27] – moments of bodily *making* in which builders, with their sweat, blood, and muscle, collaboratively raised enormous timbers (in this case), probably through elaborate systems of rope and levers. McFadyen calls these 'dependent assemblages', where for a time peoples' bodies were carrying part of the weight of built structures. What kinds of group cooperation does that entail, she asks – and how does politics (of the body and otherwise) play into such moments of 'quick architecture'? There must also have been a keen awareness during these building projects, so intimately connected with leadership, that they were building for the future. The person(s) instigating construction were tying dependencies and performances, obligations and potentials into a material project of wood, stone, and clay for the future – these were truly multi-generational endeavours.

The clearest *material* trace of *siðr* involved in raising the hall, except for the hall monument itself, is the deposition of artefacts in constructional elements. As with many *siðir*, depositing artefacts below floors and within post-holes was drawn from a broader repertoire of practice around longhouses and architecture in general.[28] However, prominent halls sometimes have assemblages of deposited artefacts that stand out quantitatively and qualitatively from those in dwellings without clear hall function. An artefact type intimately connected with hall sites is the gold foil figures (Fig. 7.1). These miniature objects pressed in relief in sheets of gold, depict anthropomorphic or occasionally zoomorphic figures; more than three thousand of these enigmatic artefacts have been found in Scandinavia.[29] Gold foils are hardly ever encountered in burial contexts, but are rather found in connection with central places and hall buildings in particular. Made in glimmering gold, these artefacts were fragile and malleable, extremely tiny, and clustered around roof-supporting posts in hall and *hov*[30] sites. Diverse arguments have been put forward regarding the objects' function(s): e.g. that the figures depict a *hieros gamos* ('sacred wedding') between two deities;[31] that the figures functioned as 'temple money'[32] or tokens granting entry to ritual events;[33] or that they depict portraits of elite individuals and couples, perhaps in relation to marriage rituals.[34]

Elsewhere I argue that while research has been preoccupied with exactly what or whom these figures depict,

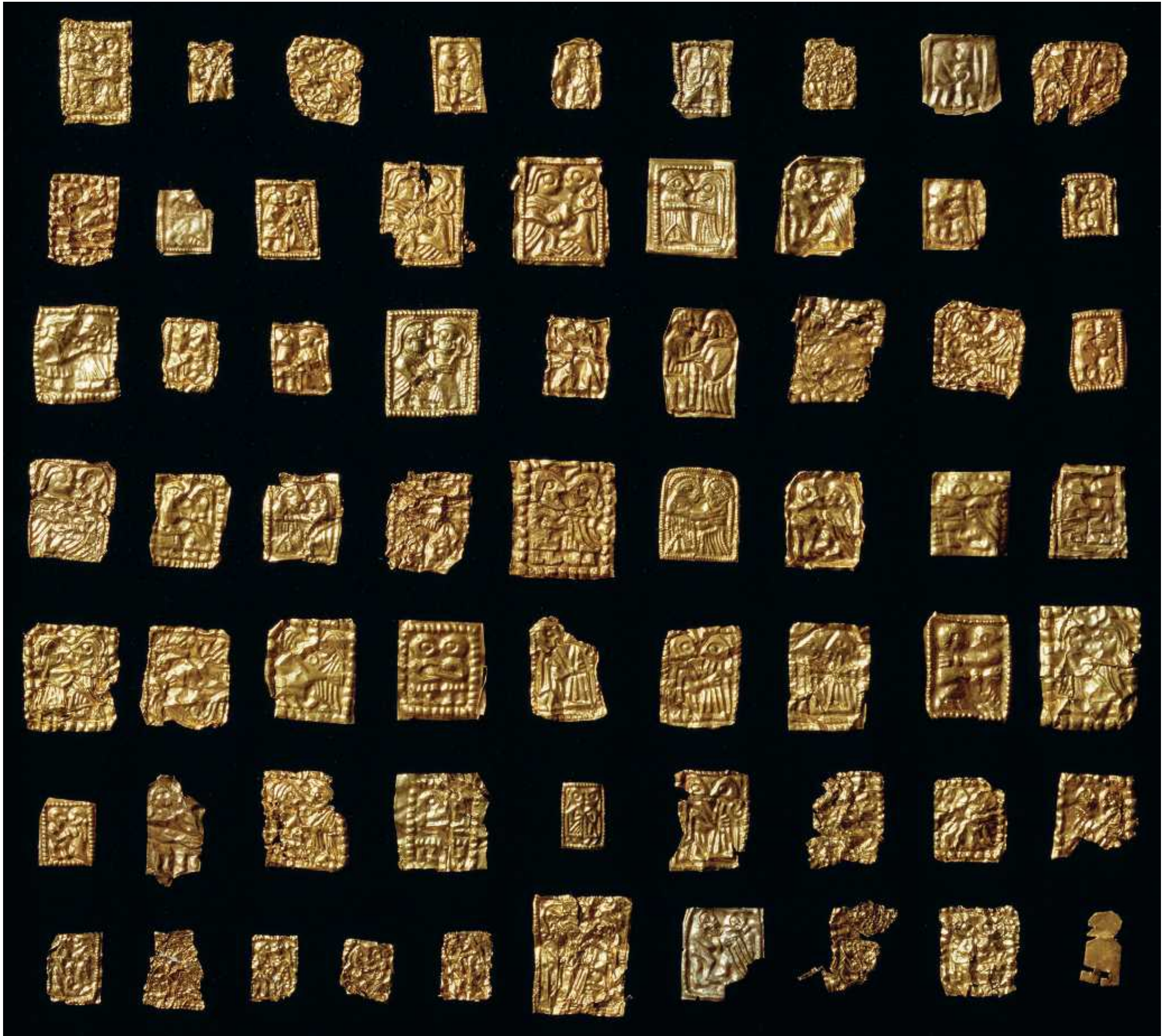

Figure 7.1 A collection of gold foil figures from Denmark. Photo by Lennart Larsen, National Museum of Denmark. CC-BY-SA.

focus could rather be directed towards other aspects of the artefacts.[35] The builders purposefully used minuscule objects of gold – depicting bodies of various kinds – and texturised architectures with them. Some of the foils have been folded, so that their motifs are obscured. Moreover, it is possible that these tiny glimmering artefacts were made *for* the deposition into post-holes – that they did not circulate widely, but were meant to be concealed, powerful artefacts within the building projects. It is worth considering, too, how these enigmatic objects would emanate specific atmospheres for the audience in the hall once it was built: whether the crowds would know under which posts gold foils were placed, whether they would remember their motifs, whether this would charge the atmosphere, and whether this was known only to the few.

The **Siðr** *of Rebuilding the Hall*

One of the consequences of building with wood is its inbuilt temporality. Any building, but especially one built in rapidly deteriorating materials, requires repeated intervention to keep standing, i.e. repair and rebuilding.[36] The hall sites often display signs of very controlled and deliberate rebuilding. The hall building at Borg in Lofoten went through a major rebuild in the early Viking Age, when this absolutely monumental structure was expanded from 65 to 82 m in length. However, meticulous care was taken to extend the building in two directions while leaving the hall room exactly in place, at the very highest point of the ridge.[37] Similarly, the hall sequence at Lejre on Sjælland, Denmark, was rebuilt in several successive phases, across perhaps 300–400 years or 10–12 generations, all the while reusing

the same post-holes (!).[38] All of the hall sites described here were rebuilt in more than one phase but the precise landscape location was kept – indicating that once the site of a hall was selected, it was a concern to keep rebuilding in place as part of a multigenerational project. An exception is Slöinge, where a near-identical hall building was built directly south of the older one, touching the walls of the former hall.

Another striking observation is the fact that during rebuilding, new depositional events would take place. It seems it was a requirement to insert particularly chosen artefacts (gold foil figures, exotica, glass, ceramics, etc.) into constructional elements again once the hall was being rebuilt. Whatever the exact type of *work* these artefacts were expected to do (e.g. apotropaic, 'house offering', or something else entirely) each phase of rebuilding required a new depositional event. The repeated deposition of gold foil figures at Borg in Lofoten demonstrates this well due to the stratigraphic resolution – here new foils were deposited in repeated events in the same post-hole, the oldest deposition captured under packing stones and the later found higher in the fill.[39] It has been tentatively suggested that these repeated rebuilds and depositions were connected with generational changes of hall owners – that the biography of the leaders and the biography of the building were intimately entangled.[40] If this is right, the acts of replacing the massive roof-supporting posts at hall sites, adding successively more powerful objects into the same post-hole, may have been public spectacles as part of the initiation ritual for the new leaders.

The Siðr *of Demolition*

At some point, the hall site was no longer viable, and the perpetual collaboration among bodies, timber, wattle, and clay that held the halls up was ultimately ended. This was the culmination of a multigenerational project, in the case of Lejre or Borg perhaps more than ten generations. Possibly, the end of leadership of a particular kin group or warrior-band meant that the hall was no longer viable.[41] However, it seems to have been of immense importance that the act of ending of the hall was performed in a proper manner. At four sites, there are signs of post removal, while burning down the hall – likely intentional – occurs at one or two hall sites (Table 7.1). At Borg in Lofoten, broken drinking vessels of glass were found concentrated to the northern corner of the hall room. These glasses may have been consciously destroyed, whether in an attack[42] or as part of a *siðr* of abandonment.

The post removal is particularly interesting, as some intriguing saga episodes indicate. Several narratives mention the posts of the high-seat (it is unclear whether these are roof-supporting posts or other kinds of constructional elements) being pulled out of the ground and taken with travellers to Iceland. One example is from *Eyrbyggja saga* ch. 4, where the chieftain Þórolfr brings the high seat posts from his *hov* in Norway on the journey to Iceland. When they see the shores of Iceland, Þórolfr throws the posts, carved with his preferred god Þórr, overboard. At the spot where the posts reach the shore, he builds a new hall and cult building.[43] The materials from the ancestral hall site were thus imbued with some essence or property that made it *do work* for the new ritual space in new lands. Intriguingly, at least in the world of saga literature, this custom of throwing objects from the homelands overboard and letting them lead the way ashore was not only done with timber, but also with dead bodies.[44]

The Siðr *after Demolition*

Finally, the ritual 'doings' of halls could continue even after the structure itself was taken apart, burned, or reused elsewhere. A particularly striking concluding act can be identified at Slöinge. Here, in each of the two adjacent hall buildings with near-identical layout (House II succeeding House III in time), *the same post-hole* is marked out in particular ways. In both instances, the roof-supporting posts have been cut at the base as part of the demolition process. After the community at Slöinge tore down the building and removed the posts, however, they deposited enormous amounts of spectacular artefacts concentrated to just one post-hole. The younger hall phase is particularly striking: 35 (!) gold foils, a further 15 gold foil fragments, 27 garnets, 15 glass shards, and 48 ceramic shards were found in one post-hole in the interpreted hall room. If these deposits were, as suggested by the excavators, accidental remains of a floor,[45] it seems extremely unlikely that the floor sunk into only one post-hole – placed in the exact same position in the north-east corner of the hall room – in each building. This is, rather, clearly a deliberate act involving a striking assemblage of artefacts – including miniature depictions of anthropomorphic bodies, as well as sparkly gemstones and imported drinking equipment, targeting a specific post-hole *after* the post had been cut and removed.

Other concluding acts can also be observed in the material: at both Gamla Uppsala (Fig. 7.2) and Tissø the surfaces of the torn-down houses were meticulously cleaned.[46] At Gamla Uppsala, artefacts, such as door-hinges made from spears (!), were then deposited into the post-holes of the likely intentionally burnt-down house; and bodies of animals were deposited on top of the cleaned and burnt hall plot (→ **Chapter 6**). Finally, a 30 cm thick sealing layer of clay was placed over the hall site.[47]

While we may not be able to fully comprehend what these practices entailed or their precise purpose, it seems clear enough that hall buildings necessitated a proper conclusion even after the structures themselves had been destroyed. Some hall sites' names would provide mnemonic reminders for centuries or even millennia after their demolition: Järrestad ('the jarl's place'), [Gamla] Uppsala ('the high hall'), Borg ('the fortified/elevated settlement'),

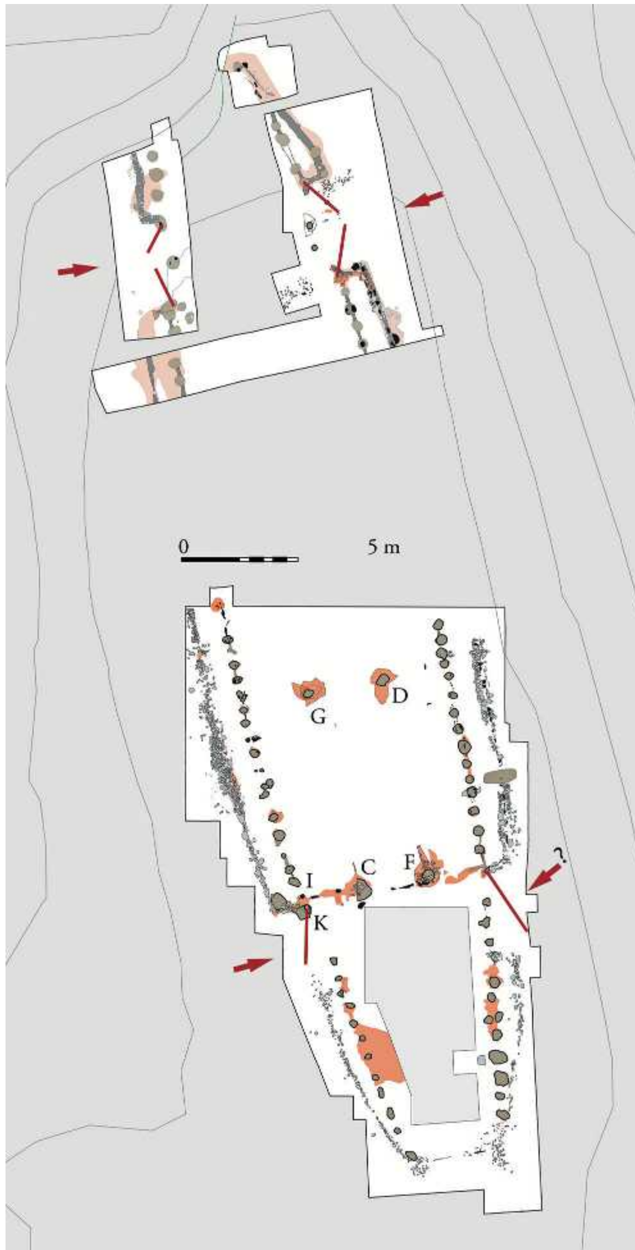

Figure 7.2 The partially excavated hall of Gamla Uppsala, which would see diverse concluding rituals including burning. After Ljungkvist & Frölund 2015.

Helgö ('the sacred island'), Tissø ('Týr's lake'). The memories of the performances, the attachments to the hall sites, could persist for a long time indeed.

Ritual and Embodied Performance in the Hall

The following section will focus on ritual practices and performances that may have taken place in hall buildings during their life as standing buildings. This is not an exhaustive list: several other practices could have been discussed, including metalwork, textile work, etc. that intersect what we would categorise as 'production' and 'ritual', but which in the period at hand may have seamlessly transcended modern dichotomies. Other ritual practices may not have left any trace in neither the archaeological nor written record, or we may not be able to understand them from our inherently fragmentary evidence. I will focus less on how these rituals may have been strategic in high-level political negotiation, and more on the embodied, sensory and affective potential of these *siðr* doings.

Feasting: Devouring Gifts

The first to be discussed is the feasting itself, i.e. eating and intoxication.[48] In written sources the feast is intimately connected to halls in general. Halls are described through poetic phrases such as Old English *medoheal*, *beorsele*, Old Norse *mjǫðrann*, *bjórsalr*; in both languages combining the words for 'mead' or 'beer' with various names for 'hall', thereby intimately connecting the hall with alcoholic consumption.[49] Michael Enright famously suggested based on a range of Germanic sources that the 'queen' or female leader played a crucial role at feasts.[50] She would be responsible for pouring alcohol for the warriors in turn – an act that not only reflected, but established rank within the retinue through public performance. Pouring of alcohol may then have been an embodied ritual that negotiated and manipulated social bonds and power relations. Moreover, it has been pointed out that the entire practice of feasting was associated with gift-exchange, another form of establishing and negotiating social bonds. In *Beowulf*, the high-seat of the king is even called *gif-stol*, i.e. 'gift-chair' – presumably the seat from which the leader(s) would distribute gifts to capture their followers into social debt.[51]

When we discuss Iron and Viking Age Scandinavia as a gift-based political system in the Maussean sense,[52] ring-swords or other precious metal objects are often seen as the ultimate gifts. However, the feast itself – when hosted by a specific kin-group or leader – may have been just as important a gift, with a crucial difference: when the guests at the feasts would ingest food and drink, they would *devour* the gift. Food and drink are material culture too – they are a specific form of material culture that is made to be destroyed through the ingestion process.[53] When the warrior-bands or other guests in the hall ingested food and alcohol provided by their leader, they fundamentally *swallowed* the social debt that followed. The food and alcohol will have altered the bodies of the people feasting in turn.

Blót: Sacrificing Animals

A second ritual performance at hall sites, potentially linked with the first, is the violent sacrifice of animals. In Viking archaeology, there has perhaps been a tendency of viewing osteological evidence in settlement contexts as mundane

food waste,[54] while the transformation of warm, living bodies to ritual foodstuffs may have been peppered with sensory experience – loud and bloody.

Some scholars have placed much emphasis on animal sacrifice and the sacrificial practice known from written sources as *blóta, sóa, senda.*[55] *Hákonar saga góða* famously mentions all manners of animals being slaughtered, however the horse seems to stand out as particularly important (→ **Chapter 17**). An aspect conveyed in the saga as particularly crucial, is the substance of blood. Old Norse *blót* may be connected to the same stem as the verbs 'bloom' (Proto-Germanic **blōmô*) and 'blood' (Old Norse *blóð*), but the etymology is contested.[56] In this saga narrative, the practices of the *blót* are described in some detail in chapter 14. Blood from sacrificed horses and sheep is collected in bowls and subsequently sprinkled on the walls, artefacts, and the participants of the ritual themselves. The flesh from the same animals should then be prepared for the feast in cooking pots hung over a central hearth. The host would carry a drinking cup around the fire, and then lead the gathering in ritualised drinking, performing conventional toasts in honour of the gods, to crops and peace, and to brave deeds. When the protagonist Hákon participates in such a *blót*, it is clearly crucial that Hákon (who is resistant, as he was fostered in England and thus raised a Christian) devours the flesh from the sacrifice, specifically the liver.[57] This and similar textual evidence provide an inkling of the embodied practices associated with halls and feasts: communal drinking, ingesting specific foodstuffs, and incorporating certain, powerful substances, such as animal blood.

While such stories may seem fanciful, direct archaeological evidence of bloody events are well attested at the site of Hofstaðir in Iceland.[58] At the monumental hall, an assemblage of cattle skulls were found with striking pathologies as well as taphonomic evidence. At minimum 23 cattle, almost certainly mature bulls, had been struck on the forehead and then beheaded in what is interpreted as an intentionally bloody and spectacular manner. The arterial cut may have produced fountains of blood. After death, the decapitated heads were exposed to the elements for months or years. These taphonomic traces, combined with the skulls' contextual patterning along the wall lines of the hall sites, indicate that the bull heads were hung fully fleshed from the roof or over doors at the hall site, before slowly decomposing over time. The sensory, atmospheric experience of entering a hall with a decomposing, horned cattle skull hanging from the roof can only be glimpsed; but it does not seem to be a stretch to imagine that this assemblage of wooden architecture, ritualised space, and animal bodies had the capacity to affect its viewers. Certainly, the bloody spectacle of slaughtering the animals may have generated specific atmospheres and affects.

Sacrificing animals and sprinkling their blood is decidedly embodied practices. They entail ending the beating heart of the animal body and using its body substance in a ritual doing; embodied, spectacular, and performative acts for the human body wielding the knife or collecting blood in cups or bowls, as well as for the onlookers. However participants and audience felt about the ritual, it is difficult to imagine that they were *unmoved*.

Tying Bonds and Swearing Oaths

Another *siðr* that may have taken place in or upon entry to hall buildings, is oath-swearing. This is yet another practice concerned with negotiating social bonds, loyalty, and performance. Rings have long been associated with sweating loyalty in European prehistory (we even use wedding rings today). In the Iron and Viking Ages, there are several saga accounts that indicate that one could swear oaths on arm-rings.[59] *Eyrbyggja saga* states that in the *hov* there was a pedestal in the middle of the floor, and on it was a ring on which all men should swear oaths.[60] An increasing assemblage of artefacts may shed further light on the matter.

One category of artefacts is the miniature rings sometimes called 'amulet rings'. They have been found particularly in Sweden, the most striking example being the 67 miniature rings found together with Thor's hammers and other miniatures at a stone setting made to evoke the gable-end of a building at Lilla Ullevi in Sweden.[61] Several of the miniature rings were found to look like miniature door-rings, with small iron cramps, perhaps attached to wooden posts at the site. This leads us to the second cluster of artefacts connected with oath-swearing: the iron door-rings found at hall and *hov* sites from particularly central Scandinavia.[62]

In brief, some hall and *hov* sites have seen large, iron-cast door handles in ring shape – in one case inscribed with runes (Fig. 7.3) – treated in specific ways. Several of these artefacts have been deposited in post-holes or by the gates to these monumental buildings. Possibly, these rings would hang on the doors of special buildings, and upon entering the space, the participants would swear oaths of loyalty or, as indicated on the runic inscription on the Forsa ring, perhaps swear to protect the cult building.[63] The rings may then not only have been visual artefacts associated with oaths but objects that would be sensorily engaged with, touched while crossing the boundary into the hall or *hov*. Once the *hov* or hall building went out of use, or a new one was built, the oath-ring was deposited as a concluding 'doing', somehow interring the object and perhaps also its oaths, the bonds it held between humans, structures, memories, and experiences. This concluding ritual seems to have taken place at the *hov* site of Uppåkra, the hall at Järrestad, and the halls at Gamla Uppsala. *More* than objects intimately associated with ritual spaces, the door-rings thus constituted a vital part of the oath and the social bond. These iron objects entwined material culture, specific spaces, intent of fealty and loyalty, and embodied performance.

Figure 7.3 The Forsa ring. Photo by Marianne Hem Eriksen.

Embodying Gods: Dramatic Performance

A final ritual 'doing' potentially linked with the hall, is the possible ritual performance of medieval epic poems. This idea, proposed by Terry Gunnell,[64] is based on poems of the *Poetic Edda*,[65] such as *Lokasenna* and *Vǫluspá*, which consist almost entirely of dialogue. Were these originally dramatic performances by actors giving voice to the Norse gods, or the *vǫlva* in *Vǫluspá*? If so, where could we expect such dramatic performances to take place? Gunnell suggests that some of the poems would be well-suited for outdoors theatrical performance, while others would be staged within the hall.

Herschend has taken this idea further, actively linking the hall architectures we know from the archaeological record to the poetic stanzas, and what he reads as stage directions, in the eddic poem *Skírnismál*.[66] He suggests, based on the spatial descriptions of the hall in the poem, that this poetic setting would fit very well with a building such as Borg in Lofoten (Fig. 7.4). He also lists the artefacts that would be required for the performance, including a sword, a rod, and a drinking cup. Herschend subsequently draws out the movements of the potential actors of the dramatic performance of *Skírnismál*, demonstrating how the actual, embodied performance could play out within a specific architectural space.

A person taking on the role of a deity, and literally speaking for them, was not merely 'play-acting': this was likely a ritual in itself. Nygaard argues that by performing as a Norse deity, the performer *becomes* the deity.[67] In many ways, we can see the entire hall phenomenon and its clear ritual mirroring as an opportunity for some individuals of the elite to actively forge links between themselves, their 'doings', their architectures, and the deities in their halls in the mythological realm. The leader in the high-seat becomes Óðinn, the warrior retinue becomes the *einherjar*, and the hall becomes Valhǫll.[68] This parallel will likely have

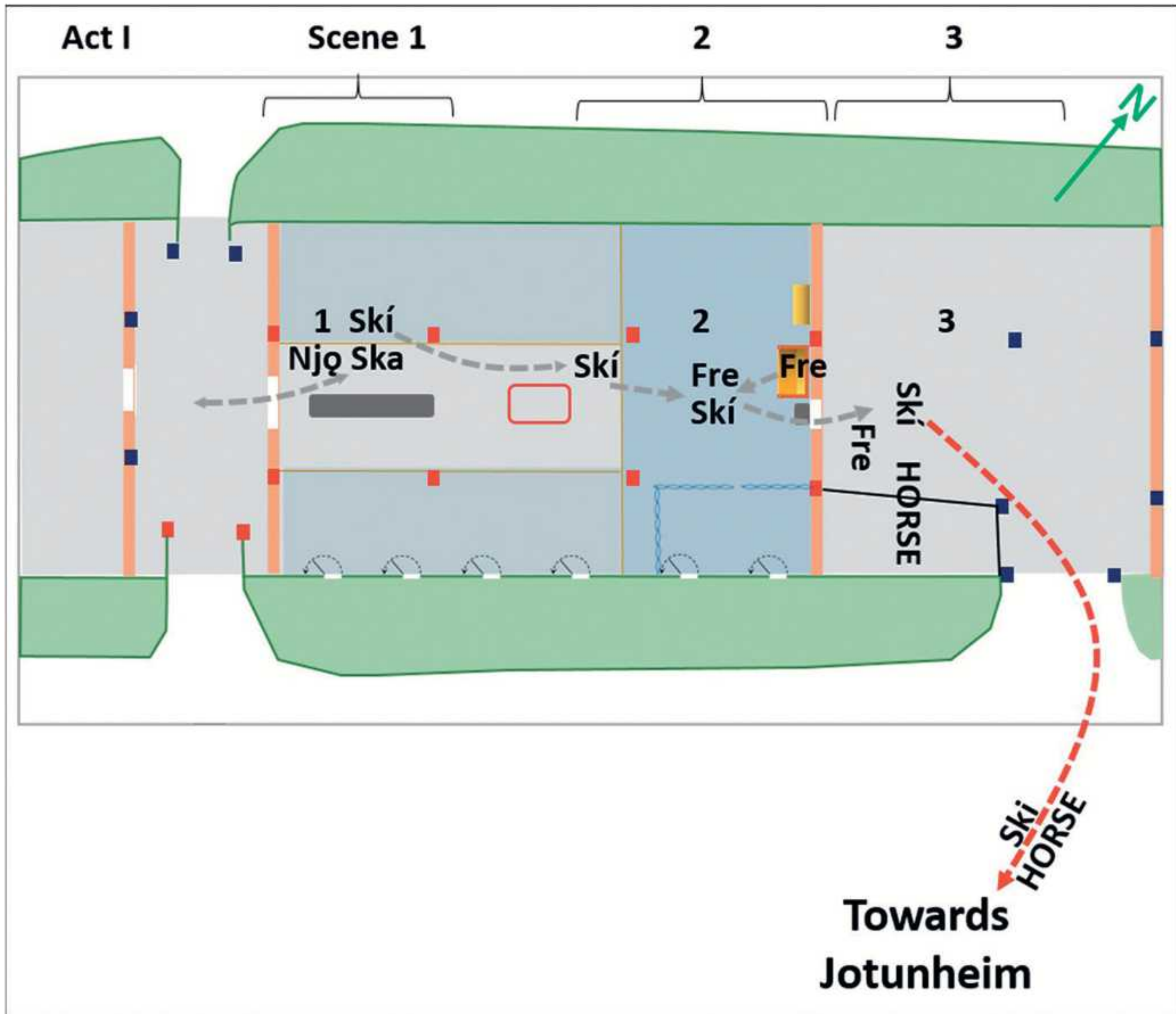

Figure 7.4 Herschend's mapping of Act I of Skírnismál *at Borg in Lofoten. After Herschend 2018: 113. Reproduced with permission.*

contributed to the affective and atmospheric experience of hall rituals, where some bodies are simultaneously both themselves *and* the embodiment of a god.

Of Buildings and Bodies: Discussion and Concluding Remarks

I started this chapter on rituals and the halls of the Viking Age Scandinavians by asking what we really mean by 'ritual'. I wrote that in this context, rituals are understood as 'doings' or *siðir* that are somewhat set apart from everyday life; that heighten attention or focus, and that are concerned with *relations* among community, bodies, and objects.

Kings and warrior elites, I would argue, see disproportionate attention in Viking studies. Even when we are literally on their arena, we need not only focus on ritual practices as high-level politics but acknowledge that these were also experiences full of sounds, blood and intoxication, of non-elite humans and non-humans. Ritual doings were affective and embodied – they *moved* people, and although we cannot quite catch what was experienced, it gives more life to the Viking Age Scandinavians to see them as fleshed-out beings with desires, hopes, anxieties, and aversions. The halls buildings provided spaces for very specific types of encounters among material culture, objects, and human and animal bodies.

The initial building process can be seen as a multigenerational project where bodies engaged with wood, landscapes, and memories to create and recreate a specific space, a specific atmosphere, for the future. Political, social, and perhaps ritual concerns governed the choosing of place and orchestration of materials. Collaborations, whether equal

or unequal, formed quick architectures where halls were raised, post by post, by sweat and muscle. The builders meticulously texturised hall buildings with rare and exotic objects, tying distant lands, materials, and practices into the built structure; especially paying concern to miniature bodies imprinted in gold foils to be concealed within the hall. Moreover, these doings of incorporating carefully selected things into the architecture occurred not only at construction but also during repairs and rebuilding – and even after demolition. What kinds of performances, sensory experiences, or atmospheres were generated and remembered, we can only speculate.

During the buildings' use, they clearly saw diverse ritual practices of which we have only mentioned a few: the *siðr* of killing animals, transforming them from living, breathing beings to sources of blood to objects on display as part of the hall architecture; the ingestion of precisely those animals' flesh and intoxicating drinks as part of a performance and embodiment of social ties among the retinue, quite literally sustaining obligations and relations among people, things, and the hall space. Those same bonds and obligations materialised in specific objects such as oath-rings, on which people would swear loyalty and fealty, tying them and the building together. And finally, the halls saw the performance of gods' acts and words, embodied by the elites within their ritualised spaces.

Not only did the building, rebuilding, feasting, dramatic performance, and abandonment of the hall sites involve human and animal bodies in diverse and often performative ways; the hall building itself may have been conceptualised as a body. There are hints of this in some of the practices discussed: the perpetual demarking of different phases of the biographies of the buildings seems in some ways to mirror how the lifespan of people is marked and punctuated. Bringing animal blood into the building and sprinkling it around creates a literal circulation of blood within the building. Taking wooden posts from a hall structure onto a ship, throwing them into the sea and allowing the timbers to lead the way seems to be a variation of a ritual 'doing' where the wooden post is substituted with the dead body of a kin-member. And the name of the hall in Beowulf is *Heorot* – 'deer' – again showing a link between animal bodies and hall buildings.[69] Additionally, many of the words for different architectural elements relates to the body. This includes words for *gable*, Old Norse *gavl,* related to proto-Germanic **geblan* 'head', 'skull', 'gable'.[70] *Stafr*, Old Norse for *post*, is more obscure, but relates to verbs and nouns such as 'walk forwards', 'footprint'.[71] *Window*, Old Norse *vindauge*, is literally a 'wind-eye'.[72] The many intricate links between bodies and houses compells the suggestion that perhaps longhouses and halls were conceptualised to some extent as bodies: a *house-body*.[73] Whether or not this is correct, and however the Iron and Viking Age populations conceptualised the halls, they clearly did not only function as neutral backdrops or stages. The buildings required planning, interventions, and *care* again and again; they were not 'containers' of action but material parts of the ties among humans, animals, landscapes, and objects.

Finally, while the sets of ritual practices described above may, then, have generated corporeal, sensory, and memorable experiences for people experiencing them – events that could change the trajectories of lives and alter bodies, social bonds, and futures – it remains a fact that such experiences in elite feasting halls were only for the few. Most people in the Viking Age would likely never have had the chance to experience these spaces and practices – or would have experienced them from the point of view of a subordinate, subaltern, or enslaved person – possibly as the ones conducting the labour. Perhaps it is they who in future deserve our fullest attention.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to editors Leszek Gardeła and Sophie Bønding for the invitation to publish this chapter, and their boundless patience with me as the sound of deadlines swooshed past. Thanks also to Kevin Kay for helping make the text stronger. The chapter necessitated a revisit of my unpublished MPhil thesis (2010), which of course is extremely embarrassing, but nonetheless constitutes the basis of some observations herein.

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Notes

1. Brück 1999; Fowles 2013; Swenson 2015. Cf. Latour 1993.
2. Fowles 2013.
3. Steinsland 2005: 13.
4. Turner 1967; Brück 1999; Bradley 2005; Hodder 2010; Fowles 2013; Swenson 2015.
5. Tarlow 2012; Harris & Sørensen 2010; Sørensen 2015.
6. Brück 2005; Robb & Harris 2013.
7. Herschend 1993.
8. e.g. Eriksen 2010; Carstens 2015.
9. Løken 2001.
10. Duczko 1996; Ljungkvist & Frölund 2015.
11. Söderberg 2005.
12. Lundqvist 1996; Lundqvist & Arcini 2003.
13. Herschend 1995.
14. Christensen 2010.
15. Jørgensen 2002.
16. Munch *et al.* 2003.
17. Eriksen 2010; 2016.
18. Holand & Hood 2003.
19. Stenholm 2006.
20. Holmqvist & Granath 1969: 32.
21. Nordahl 1993: 59.

22. Arrhenius & Freij 2003.
23. Eriksen 2018.
24. Hedeager 2002.
25. Herschend 1998: 36.
26. Eriksen in press.
27. McFadyen 2016.
28. Carlie 2004; Eriksen 2019: ch. 6.
29. Watt 2019.
30. The *hov* (Old Norse *hof*) is known from several written sources, described as a separate building for ritual practice, often associated with elite settlements and halls. A handful of these structures have in the last decades been convincingly identified in the archaeological record, e.g. Uppåkra (Larsson 2007), as part of the Tissø complex (Jørgensen 2002), possibly at Järrestad (Söderberg 2006), and unpublished sites from Ørsta and Vingrom.
31. Steinsland 1990.
32. Watt 2004.
33. Baastrup 2015.
34. Pesch & Helmbrecht 2019; Watt 2019.
35. Eriksen 2022; cf. Weismantel & Meskell 2014.
36. Eriksen in press.
37. Herschend & Mikkelsen 2003: 65.
38. Christensen 2010.
39. Munch 2003.
40. Eriksen 2010.
41. Eriksen 2016.
42. Herschend 1997: 36; Herschend & Mikkelsen 2003: 52.
43. Hermann Pálsson & Edwards 1972.
44. *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, ch. 27 (Heggstad 1965).
45. Lundqvist & Arcini 2003.
46. Jørgensen 2002: 238; Nordahl 1993: 62.
47. Ljungkvist & Frölund 2015: 18.
48. Dietler & Hayden 2001.
49. e.g. Lönnroth 1997: 33.
50. Enright 1996.
51. Alexander 1973.
52. Mauss 1954.
53. Dietler 2006.
54. But see Magnell & Iregren 2010.
55. Näsström 2001.
56. e.g. Näsström 2001: 23–4; Steinsland 2005: 276.
57. *Hákonar saga góða*, chs 17-18 (Hansen, Larsen & Vaa 1995).
58. Lucas & McGovern 2007.
59. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* states that when King Alfred and the Great Danish Army made peace at Wareham in AD 876, the vikings swore oaths on the 'sacred ring' or 'the sacred bracelet'. According to *Hávamál* stanza 108, Óðinn has sworn a 'ring-oath'.
60. Hermann Pálsson & Edwards 1972. Next to the ring was a bowl of blood from sacrificed animals.
61. Bäck *et al.* 2008.
62. Ödman 2003; Eriksen 2015.
63. Brink 2010.
64. Gunnell 1995.
65. All poems from the *Poetic Edda*. See Larrington 1996.
66. Herschend 2018. Cf. Gunnell 2006.
67. Nygaard 2018. Cf. Gunnell 2013: 168.
68. Eriksen 2010.
69. Alexander 1973.
70. Bjorvand & Lindeman 2007: 348–9.
71. Bjorvand & Lindeman 2007: 1046–7.
72. Bjorvand & Lindeman, 2007: 1311.
73. See full discussion in Eriksen 2016.

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8

Ritual Activities Involving Domestic Work and Outhouses

Karen Bek-Pedersen

Within Old Norse literary tradition, spinning and weaving appear to sometimes be conceived of as magical acts. From a practical point of view, however, and considering the sheer amount of spinning that has to take place before weaving can even commence – as well as the amount of weaving and sewing that has to take place before any functional clothes materialise, these activities cannot possibly have been regarded as magical at all times. We must therefore tread somewhat carefully when entering the sphere of everyday domestic life with a view to finding traces of ritual, magic, and special beliefs. But, as mentioned, examples do exist that suggest ways and contexts in which magical intent was or became part of spinning and weaving. This chapter sets out to explore some of these cases, from mythical and legendary settings as well as from the socially realistic settings of the sagas of Icelanders.

Ritual, Outhouse, and Tools

Rituals are ways of communicating with the beyond – however that is conceived. Carrying out a ritual act, great or small, is a way of setting a scene, establishing a certain frame of mind or paving the way for communication between the human and the supernatural.[1] As we shall see, such communication may take place in both directions – being directed at supernatural entities or coming from them. Rituals therefore presuppose either the existence of such entities who are able to influence human lives or, at least, an understanding of the world that allows the individual to, in some way, influence how the surroundings are (or are to be interpreted) at a given time. A ritual act can be anything from lighting a candle for a deceased person to putting on a grand and elaborate feast lasting several days to mark the birth of Christ.

In the present chapter, the scene is set at home, on the Viking Age farm, and the rituals in question take place as part of or in imitation of spinning and weaving, both of which are perfectly ordinary everyday tasks. Despite the fact that both are processes concerned with the production of textile, spinning and weaving are quite separate activities. The former requires only a drop spindle, is very portable and can be done pretty much everywhere; the latter requires a large, heavy loom and can therefore only be carried out in the place where the loom is set up – in the Viking Age often a separate outhouse used for textile-related work, in later times usually a sectioned-off part of the house set aside for the same purpose.[2] In Old Norse, such an outhouse or room is commonly called a *dyngja* (pl. *dyngjur*). A number of sagas briefly mention *dyngjur*, mainly as gendered spaces where women would gather to do women's work and where men are rarely seen.[3]

The full spinning kit involves a drop spindle, a distaff, and a container for the raw material (e.g. a wool basket).[4] The spindle is a thin stick with a spindle whorl at the lower end and a notch at the top; the weight of the whorl gives the stick momentum when you turn it (→ **Chapter 25**). The distaff is a longer stick that holds the unspun flax or wool, often in a sort of nest or closed cage near the top. The spinner uses one hand to set the spindle turning, and both hands to draw out and control the unspun material on its way from the distaff to the spindle. The spun thread is wound up onto the spindle. The reason why the nest is at the top of the distaff is that the risk of the unspun raw material getting tangled up in the turning motions of the spindle is much smaller that way. The container also holds unspun material that can be added to the distaff.

The loom that was in use in Viking Age Scandinavia was a warp-weighted loom,[5] made of wood and therefore rarely

Figure 8.1 Iron weaving sword from Sanddal, Sogn og Fjordane, Norway. Photo by Leszek Gardeła.

preserved archaeologically.[6] The loom is about as tall as a person, consists of two uprights, one at either side, and a horizontal top beam onto which woven cloth is wound as the weaving progresses. The warp is attached to the top beam, threaded through loops attached to horizontal heddle rods positioned about halfway down the uprights and is then tied onto stones or other heavy items (also known as loom-weights) at the lower end to keep the warp taut while weaving is ongoing. This tautness is essential to facilitate the weaving. The person doing the weaving stands in front of the loom, and weaving takes place from the top down. One or more heddle rods are lifted to create a shed between one set of warp threads and another, the weft is passed through the shed and another heddle rod (or a set of them) is now lifted to create a new shed. Before the weft is passed through the new shed, a weaving sword is used to beat the weft into place with an upward motion. A pin-beater can be used to push the weft into place between individual warp threads. A weaving sword is shaped pretty much like a sword,[7] and some specimens even have hilts; it can be made of metal, wood, or animal bone (Fig. 8.1). A pin-beater, also made of wood or bone, is a small, thin rod that tapers at either end. Once the warp has been set up and threaded through the heddles, the basics of the pattern on the final cloth have already been laid out and cannot be changed.[8]

The loom was usually set up in the *dyngja*, although other rooms may also have been used, especially in later times. Archaeological finds of pit houses containing stones with holes in or similar items used as weights reveal that many such buildings were used as weaving houses.[9] These buildings usually also feature large fireplaces that would provide the light necessary for the weaver. In order to produce good, even cloth on the loom, the spinner has to produce great lengths of evenly spun thread. This takes a great deal of skill (and patience), just like setting up an evenly tightened warp on the loom requires meticulous attention to a great many details. Both processes are very time-consuming, but they also share certain more symbolic characteristics, as will be discussed below.

Special Spinning

We know that *vadmál* or homespun was a major export article in early Icelandic economy, and thus spinning woollen thread and weaving cloth from it must have been going on endlessly on Viking Age farms in Iceland.[10] But it is so much of an everyday activity that the sagas hardly ever mention

it; only in a few cases where something highly unusual is going on do we see a drop spindle on the scene.

One such example occurs in *Fóstbrœðra saga*, ch. 23, where the woman Gríma is helping Þormóðr, one of the saga's main characters, hide from his enemies.[11] The episode takes place in Greenland and Þormóðr is in dire straits, wounded and unable to run. Gríma and her husband, who live far away from anyone else, allow him to hide in their house, but one night, Gríma dreams that a large group of people are coming to kill Þormóðr. In order to help him, she tells him to sit in the special chair she has, which is carved with an image of the god Þórr and which she now places in the middle of the room, telling Þormóðr that he is not to move no matter what happens. She also tells her husband, Gamli, to start boiling seal meat and create a lot of smoke inside the house. Gríma herself sits down in the doorway to spin yarn and greet the people when they arrive. She sits there on the threshold mumbling something to herself, and the pursuers, when they come and ransack the house, do not find anything. Although they clear the house of smoke, they see only the chair with the image of Þórr and his hammer; Þormóðr remains invisible to them.

Thus, by means of the special chair, the smoke from the boiling seal, the spinning in the doorway, which must be considered a liminal space, and whatever it is she mumbles, Gríma manages to create an illusion – a magical trick. She is able to alter the way reality looks, at least temporarily, but she is not in charge of life and death. Prior to the arrival of the pursuers, she tells Þormóðr that if he is fated to die on this day, then there is nowhere for him to hide and none of this will help him.[12] With this statement, she seems to distinguish between her own abilities and the supernatural powers that determine the fates of human beings. Gríma may thus be seen to emulate or perhaps even manipulate the *nornir* in her attempt to sway Þormóðr's fate at this particular point in time, but she specifies that this is merely an attempt; she will give no guarantees.

A very similar incident occurs in *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 20, where the widow Katla likewise helps her son Oddr hide from his pursuers.[13] Oddr is the only man present on the farm, but Katla sits down on the bench to spin yarn and tells Oddr to sit still next to her; the other women are told to remain in their seats and let Katla do the talking. When the pursuers arrive and ransack the house, they see Katla spinning, using her distaff, but they do not find Oddr anywhere and leave again. But it then seems to them that Katla has played them a trick and that her distaff was really Oddr transformed. They return to Katla's farm but still do not find him; yet on leaving the farm this time, it seems to them that the billygoat whose beard Katla was now trimming was Oddr transformed. They return once more, but only find Katla sitting on the bench spinning; they grab her distaff and break it, apparently associating the tool with her abilities to prevent them from seeing the man they are looking for or transforming him into other shapes. On leaving the farm the third time, they realise that the boar they saw in a heap of ashes must have been the transformed Oddr and they return one last time. It is only when the pursuers put a sealskin bag over Katla's head that they finally find Oddr.

In this case, it seems to be the spinning itself and Katla's special abilities that create magic. She refers to her own workings in this context as illusions, *sjónhverfingar*, which suggests a temporary alteration of reality rather than the laying down of a man's fate. The scene takes place inside a house with lots of women, but there is nothing special about the building or room; it is just a farm house.

What Gríma and Katla engage in on these two occasions are acts of magic that are somehow induced by spinning and by the two women maintaining careful control of what goes on in the houses where the magic is to work – Gríma and Katla are the only ones to speak to the pursuers. The link between spinning and altered reality might be that spinning is, metaphorically speaking, a way of creating 'something' out of 'nothing'. You start out with an unshaped mass of potential and you give it a form; you do not change its fundamental make-up, but you give it a specific shape – in the case of spinning you turn it into a useful product, in the case of magic an altered version of reality. Surely, Gríma's mumbling is linked to the shaping of reality that she wants to attain.

A different sort of spinning takes place in *Laxdœla saga*, ch. 49 where Guðrún Ósvifrsdóttir is at home on the farm while her husband Bolli is away killing Kjartan – the man whom Guðrún actually wanted to marry. It is Guðrún herself who urges her brothers and husband to avenge themselves on Kjartan after he has humiliated them. When Bolli returns to the farm, Guðrún comes out to meet him, asking what time of day it is; he replies that it is near noon, and she then makes a cryptic statement in which she likens her own work at spinning to Bolli's slaying of Kjartan: 'Misjǫfn verða morgunverkin; ek hefi spunnit tólf álna garn, en þú hefir vegit Kjartan' (The deeds of a morning are very unlike; I have spun twelve ells of yarn and you have slain Kjartan).[14]

It is a strange comparison but, although Guðrún says that the two deeds are very unlike each other, she nonetheless makes the comparison. Moreover, the amount of spinning she has done – twelve ells – is either conspicuously small (a piece of yarn twelve ells long) or unbelievably large (enough yarn to weave twelve ells of cloth).[15] It has been noted that exactly twelve ells of cloth was equal to the cost of burying a person,[16] so it is hard to believe that the particular measure Guðrún mentions is random. Indeed, it seems to be very carefully calculated, and the deeds seem to be exactly equal: Guðrún's work can pay for the result of Bolli's work. But, in purely practical terms, it would be an insurmountable amount of spinning to do in a morning – even though she does get up very early that day. Exactly what we are to make of Guðrún's words remains disputed, but I do not

think we should doubt that she was intentionally trying to manipulate reality while spinning. She acts in a deliberate manner in the context and appears to be completely aware of what she is doing. Her question about the time of day suggests that she has been working inside, but we do not know whether she was in the *dyngja* or another room.

Visionary Weaving

These examples of enigmatic spinning linked to the preservation or taking of men's lives feature the actual activity – spinning is taking place and yarn is produced in the houses of Gríma, Katla, and Guðrún. Two instances of weaving mentioned in the sagas differ from the spinning examples in that they occur in dreams or as visions.

One of these takes place in *Jómsvíkinga saga*, ch. 8 where the woman Ingibjǫrg is marrying Pálnir whose brother has been killed by King Haraldr. On their wedding night, Ingibjǫrg dreams and, when she wakes up, she relates the dream to her husband:

> 'Þat dreymði mik,' segir hon, 'at ek þóttumk hér stǫdd á þessum bœ, en ek þóttumk uppi eiga einn vef. Hann var grár at lit. Mér þótti kljáðr vefrinn ok var ek at at slá vefinn. Þá fell af einn kléinn af miðjum vefnum á bak. Þá sá ek at kljárnir þeir váru manna hǫfuð ein. Ok ek tók upp þetta hǫfuð ok kenda ek.' Pálnir spurði hvers hǫfuð væri, en hon kvað vera hǫfuð Haralds konungs Gormssonar.[17]

> 'I dreamed,' she says, 'that I thought I was staying here on this estate, and I thought that the loom was set up, and the cloth was grey of colour. It seemed as though the weights were attached to the cloth, and I was weaving. When one of the loom weights fell down behind from the middle of the cloth, I saw that the weights were men's heads. I picked up this head and I recognised it.' Pálnir asked whose head it was, and she said that it was the head of King Haraldr Gormsson.[18]

There seems to be no intent here; there is no deliberate attempt on Ingibjǫrg's side to sway any powers, make anybody do anything or in other ways control events. The dream comes to her and it is taken to be prophetic – as dreams are in Old Norse literature – predicting Pálnir's killing of King Haraldr. The imagery is striking: the severed heads of men are used as weights on a loom. At the same time, the scene described by Ingibjǫrg appears to be entirely normal; she is not doing anything untoward until she stands there holding a man's head in her hand.

Several details from Ingibjǫrg's dream are echoed in an even gorier episode from *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 157, which involves the eleven-stanza long poem known to scholarship as *Darraðarljóð*.[19] The surrounding prose links the poem to the Battle of Clontarf, fought near Dublin between two armies led by the Norse Sigtryggr silkiskegg and the Irish Brian Boru in the spring of 1014.[20] What is described in *Brennu-Njáls saga* is a vision experienced by a man in Caithness in Scotland on the morning of the battle: He sees twelve persons riding up to a *dyngja* and there they all disappear. He goes up to the *dyngja* and looks in through a window; inside, he sees women setting up a loom, with men's heads as loom weights, men's intestines as warp and weft, a sword as weaving sword and an arrow as pin-beater. Then the women speak the poem, which describes how the battle progresses, after which they tear the weaving down, each retaining a piece in her hand; as they mount their horses and ride off – six to the south and six to the north – the man goes back home. The vision is mentioned as one of several omens heralding the battle and its outcome.

The loom with one or more men's heads as weights and the prediction of one or more men's death are shared with Ingibjǫrg's dream, but what the weaving women say in the stanzas constitutes more than a prophecy; it is, in fact, a description of how they are conducting developments on the battlefield from their loom and through their words. The first three stanzas give a good impression:

> Vítt er orpit
> fyrir valfalli
> rifs reiðiský:
> rignir blóði;
> nú er fyrir geirum
> grár upp kominn
> vefr verþjóðar,
> er þær vinur fylla
> rauðum vepti
> Randvés bana.[21]

> Sjá er orpinn vefr
> ýta þǫrmum
> ok harðkléaðr
> hǫfðum manna;
> eru dreyrrekin
> dǫrr at skǫptum,
> járnvarðr yllir,
> en ǫrum hrælaðr;
> skulum slá sverðum
> sigrvef þenna.

> Gengr Hildr at vefa
> ok Hjǫrþrimul,
> Sanngríðr, Svipul,
> sverðum tognum;
> skapt mun gnesta,
> skjǫldr mun bresta,
> mun hjálmgagarr
> í hlíf koma.

> Far and wide
> with the fall of the dead
> a warp is set up:
> blood rains down.
> Now, with the spears,
> a grey woven fabric
> of warriors is formed,
> which women friends
> of Randvér's killer
> complete with a red weft.

The fabric is warped
with men's intestines
and firmly weighted
with men's heads;
bloodstained spears serve
as heddle rods,
the shed is ironclad
and pegged with arrows.
With our swords we must strike
this fabric of victory.

Hildr goes to weave
and Hjǫrþrimul,
Sanngríðr, Svipul,
with unsheathed swords:
the shaft will break,
the shield will shatter,
the sword will
pierce armour.[22]

The names mentioned in stanza 3 (another two names appear in stanza 5) look like *valkyrja* names and so the women are generally thought of as *valkyrjur* – a category of supernatural female creatures closely linked to battle.[23] This means there is supernatural agency involved; powers beyond humankind are determining the fate of men fighting in the battle, but they are doing so in a strange way: they are weaving the battle while simultaneously telling the story of what goes on. In comparison to Ingibjǫrg's dream, the imagery used in *Darraðarljóð* is so much more explicit and finds no parallels in Norse tradition. Moreover, the notion of fate as something that is woven by a supernatural power appears nowhere else in Norse tradition, either, although it is known in Old English tradition.[24] In *Darraðarljóð*, however, it seems to be not only the weaving of the grisly fabric on the loom and the speaking of the poem, but also the tearing of the cloth at the end that constitutes the determining act. Arguably, in Ingibjǫrg's dream, the falling of the loom weight seals King Haraldr's fate, and this may also be seen as a kind of damage to the fabric on the loom, albeit not a tearing apart of it – or a breaking of the tools, as in the case of Katla's distaff.

A third instance of torn weaving may also be relevant here, namely Brynhildr's reaction in *Vǫlsunga saga*, ch. 31 when she realises that she will never marry her beloved Sigurðr who has been deceived into marrying another woman.[25] Her response to the news is to tear up the tapestry she has been weaving, which depicts Sigurðr's deeds, and then to begin to plot his murder.[26] Destroying the tapestry may be seen as a symbolic precursor to the destruction of the man, although arguably it does not carry quite the same ominous weight of inevitability as the words and actions of *Darraðarljóð*.

These instances of visionary weaving foreshadowing the violent deaths of men – Ingibjǫrg and the valkyries, as well as Brynhildr – are all set by the loom and thus explicitly or implicitly in the *dyngja*, which is the weaving room and the women's room. There may be a sense of this particular space being invested with a gendered energy that reaches beyond the abilities of ordinary human women – and here it seems significant to point out that those Norse supernatural creatures who represent the notions of fate, battle-luck, birth, and death are predominantly female: the *nornir* represent fate, *valkyrjur* battle-luck, and *dísir* birth and death.[27] This, in turn, may mean that these powers can manifest their decisions in female-gendered symbolism, such as through domestic work that is done only by women. It may also mean that women, in doing such work, are able to somehow communicate with or emulate those powers.

Weaving Tools with Messages

In this context, it is interesting that a number of archaeological artefacts connected to various kinds of textile production carry runic inscriptions and other engravings that may have had magical connotations.[28] Especially fascinating is a weaving sword, a *skeið*, found at one of the Norse settlements in Greenland, which has engraved on it images of two sword-wielding characters (Fig. 8.2).[29] The item is dated to 1200–1300, which makes it contemporary with the writing down of the sagas. We cannot know why the tool carries this image, nor whether it was used for anything other than perfectly normal weaving; there could be many reasons, but it seems remarkable that a Norse woman in Greenland had this very decoration on her weaving sword. Perhaps she was aware of the traditions underpinning *Darraðarljóð*. Perhaps there was a specific intention behind the illustration; the handle of the *skeið* carries a runic inscription, which is, sadly, no longer legible.[30]

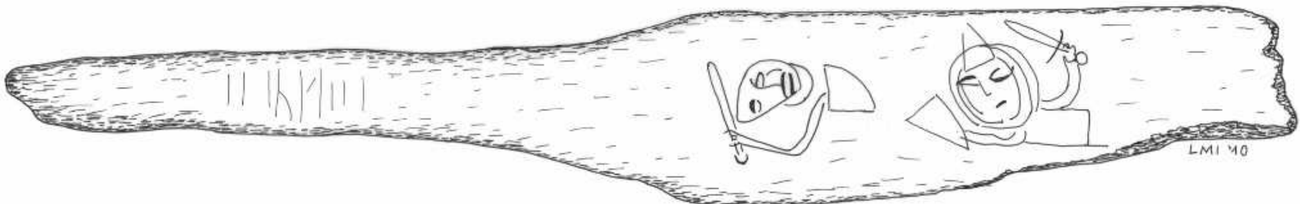

Figure 8.2 Weaving sword from Austmannadal, Greenland. Drawing by Lisbeth Imer and courtesy of National Museum of Denmark.

A much earlier weaving sword made of yew tree and carrying a runic inscription was found at Westeremden in the Netherlands. This is dated to between 550 and 750, and the inscription consists of two names; it reads: *Adugislu meþ Gisuhildu*, 'Adugisl with Gisuhild'.[31] The first appears to be a man's name and the second a woman's.[32] The fact that the names rhyme has inspired the interpretation that this could be a sort of versified love-charm. If this is correct then it may be either a confirmation of a romantic attachment between the two people named or a charm whereby Gisuhild attempts to secure for herself the favour of Adugisl. But we really cannot know what the intended meaning was.[33]

A weaving tool with a runic inscription was also found at Borgund in Norway. The item is dated to between 1100 and 1500, made of wood and clearly knife-shaped, with a slim handle and a broad blade. The inscription occurs on the blade and reads: '**hantria',** *handhrjá*, which possibly means 'affliction of the hand'.[34] Whether this is a complaint, a curse or something completely different is hard to tell.

A more detailed runic inscription is found on a weaving tablet made of bone or horn from Lund in Skåne, now Sweden, dated to between 725 and 1100.[35] This is rather a different sort of tool, which is not used for making cloth, but for tablet weaving – a way of producing straps and bands that can be used for decoration on clothes or as belts. This requires a set of square tablets, all the same size.[36] The warp is set up by threading yarn through the holes in the corners of the tablets – four pieces of yarn for each tablet. This warp can be attached at one end to the weaver's belt or to a strap around her back and at the other end to a doorpost, a tree, or some other solidly anchored item, and tension is created by ensuring that the warp is taut. When the tablets are aligned, a shed appears between the holes in the upper and lower corners, and the weaver can insert the weft on the side facing her. When the tablets are turned, a new shed appears. Patterns are created by using different colours of yarn in the different holes and by turning the tablets variously away from and towards the weaver. It is possible to make very complex patterns, including writing and figures, such as birds, trees, and so on. A weaving knife, which is basically a miniature weaving sword, is used to push the weft into place with each turning of the tablets.

The tablet from Lund measures c. 4.5 × 4.5 cm and has a hole in each corner, though one corner has broken off. The inscription is commonly interpreted as an amatory curse; it reads: **skuaraʀ : iki¶mar : afa ¶ (:) -on : m^n · krat · ¶ aallatti :**, 'Sigvarar Ingimarr hafa [m]un minn grat aallatti', 'Sigvọr's Ingimarr shall have my weeping/misfortune, aallatti'. The final nonsense-word is interpreted as a magic word that seals the curse and is generally taken as evidence that this is, indeed, an intention to cause harm and not just an expression of anger. Ingimarr may be the son of Sigvọr or he may be her lover, and the owner of the tablet clearly has something against him. She is possibly seeking revenge because he prefers another woman above her – but again, we cannot know the exact context.

Finally, a probable weaving tool made of wood, found at Lödöse in Sweden and dated to the twelfth century also carries a runic inscription.[37] The item is shaped kind of like a knife, 20 cm long, 2–3 cm wide and c. 1.5 cm thick, and it was possibly a shed knife used for inkle weaving or with a narrow backstrap loom.[38] It is clearly different from the weaving swords used for making cloth on a large loom since it is much shorter and does not have the tapered edge that renders the swords fit for pushing the weft into place. But it can be used for pushing down one of the two sets of warp threads used with inkle weaving and thus open up the shed between them. The runic inscription reads: **mun : þu · mik : man : þik : un : þu : m(e)r : an : þʀʀ : brmʀ mk**, 'mun þu mik, man þik – un þu mer, an þer – barmi mik', 'Think of me, I think of you – love me, I love you – have mercy on me'.[39] This is generally taken to be a message of love, and the tool is regarded as a love token inscribed by an enamoured rune carver and presented to the woman who is the object of his affection.

As this brief archaeological survey shows, a variety of weaving tools were inscribed with a variety of runic messages: curses, love messages, names, pictures. There do not seem to be any limits for what may be inscribed on a textile-related implement, and we have to assess each instance individually.

Ties that Bind

There is one Norse instance of supernatural powers using threads for the purpose of outlining the fate of a man and this occurs in the heroic poem *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, stanzas 2–4.[40] Here, the *nornir*, a group of female supernatural creatures strongly linked to fate, turn up at the birth of Helgi, who is the hero of this poem, and determine his fate by doing something with threads. Exactly what they do, however, has been the subject of some discussion. The relevant stanzas read as follows:

Nótt varð í bæ,
nornir kvómo
þær er ọðlingi
aldr um skópo:
þann báðo fylki
frægstan verða
ok buðlunga
bestan þikkia.

Snøro þær af afli
ørlọgþátto,
þá er borgir braut
í Brálundi;[41]
þær um greiddo
gullin símo
ok um mána sal
miðian festo.

Þær austr ok vestr
enda fálo:
þar átti lofðungr
land á milli;
brá nipt Nera[42]
á norðrvega
einni festi,
ey bað hon halda.

Night fell on the place,
nornir came,
those who were to shape
fate for the prince;
they said the king
should be most famous
and that he would be thought
the best of leaders.

They twisted very strongly
the strands of fate,
as the fortifications broke
in Brálundr;
they arranged
golden threads
and fastened them in the middle
of the moon's hall.

East and west
they put the ends,
the prince should have
the land between;
the kinswoman of Neri
to the north
threw one fastening;
bade it hold forever.[43]

The image drawn here of what the *nornir* do has been interpreted variously as spinning and weaving. However, neither really works from a practical perspective and, as mentioned, the two activities look nothing like each other when you watch someone doing it. The stanzas suggest there are three threads – too many for spinning and too few for weaving. Instead, some way of joining three threads together seems to be what is taking place. It is possible that we are to imagine three individual *nornir* spinning one thread each before joining them together in some way. The purpose of their actions appears to be the establishment of a glorious future spanning a sizeable geographical area for the new-born hero; it is said that Helgi will be 'most famous' and the 'best of leaders', the threads are golden and they encompass the east, west and north as the area in which those descriptions will apply to Helgi. The image, thus, is very positive and ties Helgi to a given geographical area; nothing is said about cutting or tearing the 'strands of fate', there is no blood and gore, no severed heads or deaths. In short, the impression is completely different from all the other ones discussed so far. Moreover, the action seems to take place on a cosmic scene – reaching from the firmament into three of the cardinal directions. This is not an outhouse or a room of the farmhouse.

So, we do see the Norse powers of fate using threads as determining factors in their work of laying down human fates – but the central actions are binding, sectioning off and tying together. It is interesting to note that a number of words used about the Old Norse gods collectively also have to do with binding, such as *hǫpt* and *bǫnd*, 'fetters' and 'bonds'. The gods, it seems, were in some ways thought of as 'binding powers', perhaps in the sense of controlling things that from a human perspective seem uncontrollable.

The *Dyngja* as Womb

As emerges from the examples discussed above, not all of these interesting cases actually mention the room in which more or less strange textile work takes place – conversely, not all references to the *dyngja* involve activities that are strange. In most cases, this particular outhouse or room is a perfectly normal space where women congregate to do work, chat, and gossip.[44] But it also seems that the feminine connotations of this space and the ordinary activities it houses sometimes tap into symbolic representations and conceptions that are similarly gendered. So, the potential for symbolism is there, in the *dyngja*, but it is only activated in special contexts.

One example seems to draw on the symbolic potential of the *dyngja* in a specific and highly allegorical manner. This is the exchange between Sigurðr jarl of Orkney and his mother Eðna in *Orkneyinga saga*, ch. 11. The context is that Sigurðr is about to take part in the Battle of Clontarf, but before setting off, he consults his mother, seeking a prediction regarding the outcome because he is worried that the odds are against him: 'Sigurðr gekk til fréttar við móður sín; hon var margkunnig' (Sigurðr consulted his mother who was skilled in many arts). The term *margkunningr* is usually reserved for people who have second sight or master the art of magic, and the phrase *ganga til fréttar* refers to seeking a prophetic statement about the future. The latter is commonly used when people ask a *vǫlva* questions. Eðna then gives him a special banner she has woven for him:[45]

> Hon svarar: 'Ek mynda þik hafa lengi upp fætt í ulllaupi mínum, ef ek vissa, at þú myndir einart lifa, ok ræðr auðna lífi, en eigi, hvar maðr er kominn; betra er at deyja með sæmð en lifa með skǫmm. Tak þú her við merki því, sem ek hefi gǫrt þér af allri minni kunnáttu, ok vænti ek, at sigrsælt myni vera þeim, er fyrir er borit, en banvænt þeim, er berr.' Merkit var gǫrt af miklum hannyrðum ok ágætligum hagleik; þat var gǫrt í hrafns mynd, ok þá er vindr blæss í merkit, þá var sem hrafn beindi fluginn. Sigurðr jarl varð reiðr mjǫk við orð móður sinnar.[46]

> She replies: 'I would have nurtured you for a long time in my wool basket, if I knew that you would live forever, but it is fate which rules life, and not where a man happens to be; better to die with dignity than to live with shame. Now take this banner, which I have made for you with all my skill, and it is my conviction that it will bring victory to the man before whom it is carried, but death to the man who carries it.' It was

> a beautifully made banner, which had on it the embroidered image of a raven, and when it fluttered in the wind it looked as if the raven were flying. Sigurðr became very angry at his mother's words.[47]

In effect, Eðna is handing Sigurðr his death in the form of the banner, which he ends up carrying himself.[48] Whether this is her intention is, of course, a different matter, but her utterance certainly suggests that magic is involved and that she is able to sway the powers that determine life and death for human beings. She moreover makes an allegorical statement about keeping her son in her wool basket, and I believe this can potentially be understood as a symbolic reference to the *dyngja*, as well as to the womb. *Dyngja* because this space is appropriate for women and small children, but not for grown men; if Eðna had kept her son in there it would mean not allowing him to grow up to become a man. Womb because the wool basket is the container for the unspun raw material that has not yet attained a given form; in a sense, the stuff is not yet stuff, it has not yet 'been born'.[49] Keeping something in there means not bringing it into existence. Here, there may be an overlap between two different kinds of feminine spaces, a biological one and a domestic one. It is possible that the ritual behaviour we see linked to spinning and weaving arises out of a desire to activate this symbolic overlap.

Conclusions

The uses of spinning showcased by Gríma, Katla, and Guðrún reveal that this rather humdrum everyday task could, in certain situations, in the hands of some women, take on a whole new quality, becoming a way of manipulating reality instead of the mere production of thread from wool or flax. The symbolic link between the ordinary and the extraordinary versions of spinning may be the notion of creating 'something' from 'nothing', of giving shape to that which has no shape or, perhaps, altering the shape of what is already there. At any rate, the ritual version features a deliberate human intention aimed at achieving a specific result in the physical world.

The instances of weaving linked to Ingibjǫrg, the *valkyrjur*, and Brynhildr likewise show that this similarly routine domestic work could, in special circumstances, become symbolic of the fates of men. The link between the violent deaths of men and the peaceful manufacture of cloth is not immediately obvious, but weaving may be regarded as an act of determining in the sense that the warp, once it has been set up, dictates the options left open for the weft to create a pattern. This deterministic aspect may constitute a link to ideas about fate.[50] Weaving, too, is arguably a way of making 'something' out of 'nothing', in that a great many loose threads are put together into one piece of fabric; but also the tearing apart of the whole seems to be an important part of the ritualistic versions discussed above. A number of archaeologically preserved weaving tools carry runic and other inscriptions that potentially have magical connotations.

The 'fateful strings' by which the *nornir* attach Helgi to his life in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* constitute a different image, namely that of binding, even ensuring that the strings will not come undone since the *nornir* bid them hold forever. We are still nominally in the textile industry, although the strings here are said to be made of gold and the scene is a cosmic one, not an outhouse. The two spaces – cosmos and *dyngja* – may be metaphorically linked, but this interpretation is not readily offered by the poem itself. The binding actions of the *nornir* recall the terms *hǫpt* and *bǫnd* that are sometimes used about the gods; quite what the relationship between *nornir* and gods is – who has power over whom – is hard to tell.

The outhouse or room to which weaving was confined, and where spinning undoubtedly also took place, was first and foremost a practical space, and yet it was not only that. The indications are that human and supernatural feminine powers could in some sense merge in this space and that ritual activities involving or emulating textile-related domestic tasks conducted there (or elsewhere) by women could influence the concrete lives of other people in very tangible ways, even to the extent of predicting or causing deaths.

The fact that items resembling spinning tools – in particular distaffs or ceremonial staffs looking like distaffs, but not spindles – are found in Viking Age graves among the equipment used by presumed Norse workers of magic, suggests that this type of domestic work did, indeed, hold a symbolic significance in ritual contexts.[51] Current scholarship links such ceremonial distaffs to *seiðr*, and it is quite possible that this link between spinning and *seiðr* is genuine. I regard this as the most convincing way of accounting for such items found in archaeological contexts, and the fact that the monotonous work of spinning is conducive to a trance-like state of mind supports the interpretation,[52] since *seiðr* rituals, too, likely involved an altered state of consciousness.[53] At the same time, I think it is important to keep in mind that none of the Norse texts discussed here actually use the term *seiðr* to describe what goes on neither at the loom nor with spindle and distaff. Likewise, in the cases of Gríma, Katla, and Guðrún, actual yarn-producing spinning takes place, whereas this does not appear to have been the case during *seiðr* rituals. These discrepancies do not mean the link is false, but the texts alone do not reveal the (symbolic) overlap. Even so, I believe that the texts do, indeed, draw on the symbolism and associations of the *seiðr*-complex.

Notes

1. See Bell 1997: 159–231, for a definition of what a ritual is and a basic categorisation of different types of rituals.
2. Milek 2012: 103-105, 118–23.

3. Bek-Pedersen 2011a: 105–13; 2011b.
4. Wayland Barber 1994: 36–9.
5. For a thorough introduction to this type of loom and the techniques of weaving on it, see Hoffmann 1974.
6. A rare exception is the small loom found in the Oseberg burial; Hoffmann 1974: 330-331. The type of loom commonly used in the North at this time is similar to warp-weighted looms across prehistoric Europe, possible also Egypt; Hoffmann 1974: 297–321; Wayland Barber 1994: 81–93.
7. Stirling & Milek 2016.
8. Bek-Pedersen 2009a: 32–6. It must be noted that this applies to the weaving of cloth; tapestry weaving is different; cf. Hoffmann 1974: 185–7; Horneij 1991: 25–36.
9. Milek 2012: 103–5.
10. Hayeur Smith 2015: 23.
11. *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 23 (Björn K. Þórólfsson & Guðni Jónsson 1943: 245–7).
12. *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 23 (Björn K. Þórólfsson & Guðni Jónsson 1943: 245). Cf. Bek-Pedersen 2011a: 146–7.
13. *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 20 (Einar Ól. Sveinsson & Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 50-54). Cf. Dillmann 1982; Bek-Pedersen 2011a: 146–7.
14. *Laxdœla saga*, ch. 48–9 (Einar Ól Sveinsson 1934: 149–54). The wording of Guðrún's statement varies between different manuscripts; see Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1997: 134–7; Louis-Jensen 1993: 267–71. The number twelve is special in the sense that it seems to have symbolised a unit comprised of a dozen separate parts, quite possibly because there are normally twelve full moons in a year; cf. Nordberg 2009: 282, Bek-Pedersen 2021: 573.
15. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1997: 137–44.
16. This is stipulated in section 2 of the Christian Laws Section of the medieval Icelandic legal codex *Grágás*: 'xii alnum skal kaupa leg undir mann' (Vilhjálmur Finsen 1852: 9); 'Twelve ells is to be paid for the grave of anyone' (Dennis *et al.* 1980: 27).
17. Blake 1962: 10.
18. Author's translation.
19. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 157 (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954: 454–9). The saga attaches no name to the poem.
20. Several details mentioned in the poem fit neither with Clontarf nor with the surrounding prose of *Brennu-Njáls saga*, but seem to match another battle fought almost a century earlier; for a discussion of the discrepancies, see Goedheer 1938: 74–87; Genzmer 1956; Poole 1991: 120–5; Bek-Pedersen 2011a: 143.
21. We do not know who Randvér or his killer is.
22. *Darraðarljóð*. Translation after Poole 1991: 116–19.
23. The prose mentions twelve riders whereas only six names of weavers are mentioned in the stanzas. Holtsmark 1939: 93 interprets the women as *nornir*; I do not agree with her, see Bek-Pedersen 2007: 6–8.
24. It appears in various forms in *Riddle 56* of the *Exeter Book*, in *Beowulf* lines 697 and 1942, the *Riming Poem* 70 and *Guthlac* 1351; see Bek-Pedersen 2011a: 141–3; 2007: 6–7. The British Isles context of *Darraðarljóð* – the vision in Caithness and the battle near Dublin – may suggest that the imagery employed in the poem comes from British tradition, though it is clearly also understood in Norse.
25. These circumstances recall Guðrún and Kjartan's situation in *Laxdœla saga*.
26. In *Vǫlsunga saga*, ch. 25, Brynhildr is making a tapestry depicting Sigurðr's heroic deeds; the only other time we see her at work at her loom is in chapter 31, where she destroys her tapestry, and we can probably assume that it is the same tapestry (Grimstad 2000: 158–9, 182–3).
27. Bek-Pedersen 2011a: 14–56.
28. The items discussed here do not constitute any exhaustive overview.
29. Roussell 1941: 276; Østergård 2004: 57. The object was found at the farm of Austmannadal 5, no. 53d (room XIX) in the Norse Western settlement in Greenland. This room is thought to have been sleeping quarters (Roussell 1941: 184; Nedkvitne 2019: 352–3). It contained a large number of artefacts, among these 240 loom-weights, and this seems to be the rationale for regarding the item as a *skeið*. It has, however, also been suggested that the object is a toy sword (Imer 2017: 78, 159); this interpretation is based on the image etched into it. In my opinion, founded on the images of weaving swords in Hoffmann 1974: 279–83 and Øye 2022: 52, the shape of the object suggests a weaving tool rather than a toy sword, but we have no competent way of determining the use of the item with certainty.
30. Roussell 1941: 276; Imer 2017: 78, 159.
31. MacLeod & Mees 2006: 50.
32. Looijenga 2003: 311–12. The inscription is known as Westeremden A.
33. MacLeod & Mees 2006: 50.
34. N 436, Samnordisk Runtextdatabas. An image is available online at Arild Hauges Runer.
35. DR 311, Samnordisk Runtextdatabas; MacLeod & Mees 2006: 61.
36. Square with four holes is the most common type of tablet, as the two tablets from Dejbjerg, dated to c. 200, and many of the fifty-two from Oseberg, dated to c. 850, although some of the Oseberg tablets have any number of holes in a variety of positions (Crockett 1991: 13; Lewins 2003).
37. Vg 279, Samnordisk Runtextdatabas; Svärdström 1982: 15–21.
38. I am not aware of any evidence that backstrap looms were in use in Scandinavia during the Viking Age; inkle looms are modern, although the technique is ancient (Lewins 2015). Rigid heddles and small band looms that could be used for inkle weaving are known from thirteenth-century Scandinavia (Øye 2022: 52–3). Inkling differs from both the warp-weighted loom and the tablets, but it produces bands akin to tablet woven ones. Inkle weaving is faster than tablet weaving, but the range of patterns is also much more limited. Moreover, inkle bands are generally thinner whereas tablet woven bands are sturdier and thicker. The use of a shed knife with a modern inkle loom is described in Svärdström 1982: 18–21.
39. MacLeod & Mees 2006: 54 also mention other very similar sounding inscriptions.
40. Neckel & Kuhn 1962: 130.
41. Brálundr must be the name of Helgi's birthplace; it is not found in known geography.

42. Neither the identity of Neri nor that of his kinswoman is known; the kinswoman appears to be closely linked to the *nornir*.
43. Author's translation; adjusted from Larrington 1996: 114–15.
44. Cf. Bek-Pedersen 2008; 2011b.
45. The raven banner figures in *Orkneyinga saga*, ch. 11 (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965: 24–25), *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 157 (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954: 451) and *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, ch. 2 (Jón Jóhannesson 1950: 301). Similar banners are mentioned in a number of Old English sources, notably *The Annals of St Neots* and *Encomium Emmae*; these are discussed in more detail in Bek-Pedersen 2009b. On the symbolism of banners, including their archaeological examples in miniature form, see → **Chapter 35**.
46. Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965: 24–5.
47. Author's translation.
48. The other part of the prediction does not come true, however, because Sigurðr ends up on the losing side of the battle.
49. This imagery was used in Christian iconography, but there is no reason to believe it was invented by Christianity; Badalanova Geller 2004; Bek-Pedersen 2011a: 111–13, 155–6.
50. Cf. Bek-Pedersen 2009a.
51. See especially Heide 2006: 235–60; Gardeła 2016; Price 2019: 131–66. On the *vǫlva*'s toolkit, see → **Part 5**.
52. Cf. Ruch 2020: 223–4.
53. Price 2019: 166–8.

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9

Rituals in the Open Landscape

Matthias Egeler

Ritual is a performance,[1] often almost a kind of theatre; and when this theatre is performed out of doors, the landscape becomes its stage. This chapter will explore the convergence between ritual and landscape in the metaphor of the theatre stage. In anthropology, the history of religions, and landscape theory, both ritual and the landscape have been likened to theatrical performances and their stage sets, and the following discussion will present some of the resulting intersections of performative approaches to ritual and theatrical approaches to the landscape.

In the following pages, I will develop these intersections in several steps. First, I will present an analysis of one of the most detailed surviving descriptions of a *vǫlva* in the medieval literature of the North – the account in *Eiríks saga rauða* (the Saga of Eirik the Red) – in order to show just how theatrical such a ritual performance could be. Then I will introduce some theorists who viewed the landscape as a theatre stage, and from there I will move on to the performance of a seeress in *Ljósvetninga saga* (the Saga of the People of Lake Ljósavatn). Discussing this second performance, I will explore how this seeress uses the natural landscape as the stage of her theatrical-dramatic ritual. This will establish the possibility of viewing the connection between ritual and landscape through the metaphor of the theatre stage. I will then further explore this metaphor through examples from *Landnámabók* (the Icelandic Book of Settlements). These further examples will illustrate both how special places in the landscape, like waterfalls or an unusual cave, could be used as a theatre stage for ritual, and how sometimes the landscape was even actively changed through ritual, especially the ritual construction of burial mounds. In a concluding section, I will end with some remarks on the afterlife of pre-Christian ritual performances. Such ritual performances affected the Icelandic imagination of the landscape well beyond the threshold of modernity and thus illustrate the huge impact that rituals in the landscape had on the way in which this landscape was imagined and thought about.

Eiríks Saga Rauða: The Theatricality of the *Vǫlva*'s Ritual

The most detailed description of a *vǫlva* and her performance in the medieval literature of Iceland is the famous chapter 4 of *Eiríks saga rauða*, a text of the thirteenth century.[2] In this episode, which is set in Norse Greenland around AD 1000, a wandering seeress by the name of Þorbjǫrg holds a prophetic consultation. The context of this consultation is that the land is ravaged by famine and disease, as well as ill-luck – not only is the community suffering hunger, but hunters and fishermen who try to procure some food often just vanish. In this situation, the local population wants reassurance that their lot will soon turn to the better, and they call in the wise woman Þorbjǫrg. Þorbjǫrg is described with various words that designate her status as a seeress and ritual specialist: she is called a *spákona* ('seeress'), *lítil-vǫlva* ('little *vǫlva*'), and a *vísendakona* ('woman of knowledge'), and her exalted status is clearly marked. As a guest in the hall of the farmer, she is placed upon a specially prepared high seat covered in feather-filled pillows. Later she is given special food, which she eats using special cutlery made of copper alloy; in this way, the context of famine is mirrored in a ritualised act of eating – and assuming that she consumes her food on the high seat that she has been allocated earlier, this ritualised consumption of food is performed on a kind of raised stage.

During the consultation that she holds the following day, her position is again raised above her surroundings. For the occasion, a platform or scaffold (*hjallr*) is constructed, and while the seeress sits on this platform, a supporting cast of women forms a circle around her and sings a special

chant.[3] Thus, the seeress is both framed by a supporting cast of people who participate in the ritual, and – sitting on a platform – appears to be raised over her audience. The emphatic effect of physically raising her over her audience is further emphasised by the clothing of the seeress. The saga describes her as wearing a blue or black cloak decorated with precious stones, a string of glass beads and shoes with metal knobs, as well as a staff with a copper alloy knob. This assortment of metal, glass and gemstones has one thing in common: it reflects the light. The performance of the seeress thus is given huge visual force by displaying her in a sparkling costume on a raised, stage-like structure, while her supporting chorus is, in a manner of speaking, hidden in the orchestral pit at her feet.

The two tableaux that the saga presents here are strikingly theatrical: first, the seeress eats in a presumably elevated position for all to see, and then she prophecies from a specially constructed 'stage'. Many analyses of ritual highlight the character of ritual as drama and performance, often with strong theatrical elements.[4] For instance, Axel Michaels and William S. Sax have emphasised the ritual form of Indian popular theatre that treats mythological themes,[5] and on the basis of his studies of both African and Western ethnographic material, the anthropologist Victor Turner explored the workings of ritual through the theatrical metaphor of the 'social drama'.[6] In a Nordic context, Terry Gunnell has proposed that the origins of the poetic forms of parts of the extant eddic poems were in fact ritual dramatic performances that in effect constituted ritual theatre.[7] Few Old Norse texts make it as clear as *Eiríks saga rauða* just how close the performance of ritual – at least as it was imagined by the authors of the medieval sagas – could come to a carefully orchestrated theatre performance, with a 'stage', costume, and even supporting music.

This performance mirrors its specific context.[8] Viewed from the analytical, etic perspective (i.e. the scholar's outside perspective), arguably the main purpose of Þorbjǫrg's performance is to reassure the inhabitants of the farm that soon everything will turn to the better and that the famine will end. Þorbjǫrg does what she has come to do and prophecies that the end of the tribulations is near at hand: she helps people cope with their suffering by offering comfort, first by performing a ritualised, dramatised act of eating and then by prophesising the impending return of food. Given the intensity of the suffering that she addresses, it is only fitting that Þorbjǫrg puts up a good show, which lends enough emotional weight to her comforting message to make a difference to people's emotional life at least for a while.

Dramatic Performance and Landscape

The performance aspect of ritual constitutes a point of convergence with perspectives on landscape as they have been developed by theorists like Daniel Cosgrove and anthropologist Keith H. Basso. Cosgrove wrote several influential studies of how landscapes were viewed historically and how their visual representation and appearance were used for ideological purposes. In these, he proposed that sometimes it can be enlightening to look at the landscape as theatre: this metaphor combines the visual aspect of the landscape with the cultural interpretations embedded in the landscape.[9] Basso arrived at a similar metaphor from a very different angle. Through several decades of the later twentieth century, Basso conducted a long-term ethnographic study of landscape and storytelling among a community of Western Apache. In this study, he documented how closely places in the landscape, tales, toponyms, and ideas of right or wrong behaviour were intertwined. The Western Apache landscape that he analysed was densely filled with stories. These stories were connected to specific places, and every time one passed such a story-place this encounter with the place evoked the story, its heroes, and its moral message. Through the force of its associations with such stories and their protagonists, the Western Apache landscape became 'something resembling a theatre, a natural stage upon the land (vacant now but with props still fully intact) where significant moral dramas unfolded in the past'.[10]

Ljósvetninga Saga: The Natural Landscape as a Stage for Ritual

The ritual of the *vǫlva* in *Eiríks saga rauða* illustrates how ritual can be enacted as a dramatic performance of an eminently theatrical character. Another literary account of such a ritual further demonstrates how such performances – at least as they were imagined in later centuries – could use the natural landscape as their stage. This second performance is found in an episode of *Ljósvetninga saga* (ch. 11 [21]),[11] another Icelandic literary text of the thirteenth century whose story is set in c. 1000–1050 Iceland. In the episode in *Eiríks saga rauða*, the overall setting of the scene had not played any apparent role: the description focuses on the stage-like platform (*hjallr*), but we are never told where this stage-like platform was constructed. In *Ljósvetninga saga*, in contrast, the seeress uses the natural landscape as both setting and theatrical prop of her performance.

Seen from the etic perspective of scholarly analysis, the purpose of this performance is, again, to offer comfort to a character from the saga, and again the seeress puts up a good show to drive home her comforting message. Guðmundr *inn ríki* Eyjólfsson, or Guðmundr the Rich, is one of the main characters of *Ljósvetninga saga*, and by the time he consults the seer, he has made enough enemies to be worried about his future safety. He therefore approaches a certain Þórhildr, who is an old friend of his and who adheres to 'old ways' ('var forn í lund'). Guðmundr asks her whether he has to be worried about blood vengeance. Þórhildr tells him to come back to her on another occasion, when nobody

would observe them. One morning, Guðmundr does so and finds her already waiting for him. She is wearing trousers, has a helmet on her head and carries an axe in her hand. Thus cross-dressed as a male warrior,[12] Þórhildr leads Guðmundr down to the fjord. On the way to the water, she mysteriously seems to become more and more stocky, until finally she wades out into the sea and hits the water with her axe.[13] Nothing happens, and she returns to shore and tells Guðmundr that he does not have to worry about blood vengeance. Guðmundr then asks her whether his sons will also escape unharmed. The woman again wades out into the water and strikes it with her axe; now, however, the saga tells that there was a loud noise and the water turned bloody. Þórhildr concludes that one of Guðmundr's sons is in danger, and refuses to answer further questions.

This passage can be viewed in different ways. Scholars like Terry Gunnell and Leszek Gardeła consider it plausible that it contains authentic memories of Viking Age ritual practice.[14] At the same time, it could also be read as a primarily literary text in a literary context. The armed attack on the water that the saga ascribes to the seeress recalls motifs of classical Graeco-Roman literature, where Xerxes has the waters of the Hellespont whipped and Achilles, in Book 21 of the *Iliad*, fights the river Skamandros.[15] Also the supernatural elements of the episode make for a good story, but not for convincing history. While, of course, there is no truly conclusive proof either way, this episode of *Ljósvetninga saga* can be viewed as primarily a high medieval literary text, rather than a factual account of real ritual practice during the Viking Age.

Even so, however, it is interesting to see how the high medieval author of this passage imagined people of the Viking Age as using the natural landscape as part of their ritual performances. Structurally, the ritual described in *Ljósvetninga saga* is quite close to the ritual described in *Eiríks saga rauða*: in both these texts, a female ritual specialist is called upon to comfort her audience that their worst fears will not come true. The ritual specialist dresses in a way which emphasises her status as a representative of the 'other', that is the supernatural world; the one from *Eiríks saga rauða* achieves this effect through the attribute of a staff and unusually rich clothing and cutlery, while the other – in keeping with the topic of the prophecy she is asked to deliver – cross-dresses as a male warrior. Both of them then stage an elaborate dramatic performance: one in the form of a musical performance on an especially constructed 'stage', and the other in the form of a stylised enactment of the violence that her client is afraid of. Both conclude with prophecies that more or less alleviate the fears of their clients.

In both accounts, the strong dramatic elements of these literary rituals serve the same purpose: they put up a show that is meant to impress their main message on their audience, which is that everything will be well, at least more or less. This is what their clients want to hear, and they deliver what they were asked for with a flourish. What is interesting for the way in which the open landscape is used is that in *Ljósvetninga saga*, the natural landscape feature of the fjord plays the role which in *Eiríks saga rauða* is played by the raised platform (*hjallr*): it serves as a stage, and even a stage that includes some of the props used by the performer.

Landnámabók: Rituals in the Open Landscape Beyond the *Íslendingasögur*

There is some evidence suggesting that the landscape was used as a stage-cum-prop also in ritual practice outside of literature. *Landnámabók* is an Icelandic historical text that gives an account of the first settlement of Iceland in the ninth and tenth centuries. The most detailed description of a pre-Christian cult in the oldest extant recension of this text, which probably was composed around 1275–1280, claims that a certain Þorsteinn rauðnefr (Red-Nose) practised a cult at a waterfall (*Landnámabók* S355=H313):[16]

> Þorsteinn rauðnefr var blótmaðr mikill; hann blótaði forsinn, ok skyldi bera leifar allar á forsinn. Hann var ok framsýnn mjǫk. Þorsteinn lét telja sauði sína ór rétt tuttugu hundruð, en þá hljóp alla réttina þaðan af. Því var sauðrinn svá margr, at hann sá á haustum, hverir feigir váru, ok lét þá skera. En et síðasta haust, er hann lifði, þá mælti hann í sauðarétt: 'Skeri þér nú sauði þá, er þér vilið; feigr em ek nú eða allr sauðrinn elligar, nema bæði sé.' En þá nótt, er hann andaðisk, rak sauðinn allan í forsinn.

> Þorsteinn Red-Nose was a great sacrificer. He used to make sacrifices to the waterfall and all the left-overs had to be thrown into it. He could see clearly into the future. Þorsteinn had all his sheep counted and they numbered 2400; after that they all jumped over the wall of the fold. Þorsteinn had so many sheep because each autumn he could see which of the sheep were doomed to die, and he had those slaughtered. That's why he always had so many. The last autumn of his life, he said at the sheep-fold, 'Now you can slaughter any of the sheep you like. Either I'm doomed to die or the sheep are doomed, or all of us are.' The night he died, all the sheep got swept into the waterfall by a gale.

This entry in *Landnámabók* certainly is not 'history' in the modern sense of the word. Its supernatural elements clearly suggest at least a strong admixture of folktale and legend. But the general idea that people sometimes used waterfalls as sites of sacrifice is also attested elsewhere. From medieval Norway the Christian laws of the *Gulaþingslǫg* mention as a pagan idea that land-spirits (*landvættir*) are dwelling 'in groves or mounds or waterfalls' ('í lundum æða haugum æða forsom').[17] This suggests that waterfalls were one of the typical places of the pagan supernatural. In Sweden, at least three place-names seem to be formed as compounds of the names of gods with the element *fors*, 'waterfall'; this suggests that here waterfalls might have served as cult sites.[18] In a number of Icelandic sagas, supernatural entities are

said to inhabit waterfalls,[19] and the poem *Jómsvíkingadrápa* by bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson (c. 1150/60 to 1223) appears to mention sitting under a waterfall as a pagan technique of acquiring knowledge.[20] The latter point – waterfalls as sources of supernatural knowledge – is particularly interesting given how the story in *Landnámabók* connects the idea of sacrificing to a waterfall with the idea of foreknowledge: in both testimonies, waterfalls are sites of supernatural encounters that grant knowledge of the future.

Unfortunately, there is little that we can tell about the specific use of such natural places as sites of rituals.[21] It appears that there was some kind of – maybe more or less systematic – use of natural places like waterfalls as sites of ritual performances. Waterfalls also do not seem to have been the only kind of places that were recurrently used for such purposes. Similar evidence exists for the use of sacred groves and of boulders or rocks.[22] Generally, however, the scant nature of our sources does not allow us to reconstruct in any detail what ritual performances were held there. We can hypothesise that, as in the literary description of a ritual performance in *Ljósvetninga saga*, rituals at such places made very conscious use of the local circumstances. What use this was, however, remains elusive.

A possible exception to this elusiveness of ritual may be the cave of Surtshellir in Western Iceland.[23] Surtshellir is a tunnel-like cave in the Hallmundarhraun lava field (Fig. 9.1). The cave is almost 2 km long, while the lava field stretches over more than 50 km, covering an area of more than 240 km^2. Given the typical flow rates of Icelandic volcanic eruptions of its type, the eruption that created this lava field would have lasted several years and could indeed have lasted for more than half a century. Importantly, this eruption took place only after the beginning of the Norse settlement of Iceland in the early ninth century. The early settlers of Iceland came predominantly from Scandinavia, often arriving in Iceland after extended stays in Britain and Ireland. While the Mediterranean Mount Etna was known as an active volcano, for these northern European settlers the experience of active volcanism would have been entirely new and would have made a corresponding impression.[24] This is the more so since the lava flow that created the Hallmundarhraun lava field directly impacted agricultural land. Much of it covered upland grazing areas and forests as well as lowland areas that would have been prime agricultural assets. For the settlers that had taken land locally, the Hallmundarhraun eruption must have been a cataclysmic event that threatened to devour the very basis of their lives and to burn it in a conflagration of almost unimaginable violence.

Figure 9.1 Inside Surtshellir. Photo by Matthias Egeler.

What makes this event fascinating from the perspective of the history of religions is that there is some documentation of the responses that people had to this experience. The name Surtshellir has a clear meaning, which is: 'Cave of Surtr'. Surtr, whom the cave is named after, is a prominent figure from Old Icelandic mythology. There, he is described as a fire giant whose powers are second only to those of the gods. When the world ends, he will kindle the conflagration that will destroy the whole cosmos. Surtr thus is the central actor of a fiery apocalypse, in which the world ends in flames.

To give the name of the apocalyptic fire giant to a cave in a lava field that swallowed more than 240 km^2 of agricultural land seems supremely fitting. There is even evidence that this cave was treated as the abode of Surtr. A written testimony for this is provided again by *Landnámabók* (S208).[25] There, it is told how a certain Þorvaldr *holbarki* ('Hollow-Throat') moved in with a nearby farmer. At some point arrangements were made that Þorvaldr would marry the farmer's daughter and stay for good. Before he did that, however, Þorvaldr went 'up to Surt's Cave and declaimed a poem there that he'd composed about the giant living in the cave' ('fór hann upp til hellisins Surts ok fœrði þar drápu þá, er hann hafði ort um jǫtuninn í hellinum'). Only then did the wedding take place. This anecdote suggests that for some people at least, the presence of the fire giant in his cave in Hallmundarhraun was very real indeed. And no stage would have been more suitable to enact this presence than the cave that was identified as the giant's dwelling place.

Even more importantly, a new study of the archaeological finds in Surtshellir proposes that the cave could have functioned as a place in which cultic activities were performed over an extended period of time.[26] Surtshellir contains a very rich complex of archaeological finds. At one point, a massive drystone wall was erected across the main tunnel of the cave, and side-tunnels contained large deposits of bones as well as a boat-shaped structure constructed in low drystone walling. These structures have been known for a long time, and most of the deposits of bones have fallen victim to souvenir-hunting travellers, who visited the cave already in the eighteenth century. Other finds from the cave include fragments of fire starters

made from jasper and chalcedony, glass beads, whetstone fragments, opiment (a pigment that in Viking Age contexts otherwise is only known from royal burial sites), and lead weights. A new analysis of the finds by Kevin P. Smith and others argues that these finds are the remains of ritual activity. For instance, an analysis of the bones suggests that the animals were slaughtered during late winter or early spring, rather than during the normal slaughtering time in autumn, and the way in which the animals were butchered does not follow the patterns of normal domestic butchering on Icelandic farms, but is reminiscent of patterns observed at another suspected ritual site.[27] Overall, this new study proposes that the cave was a site of regular ritual activity throughout the pre-Christian period of Iceland, during which bones and small valuables were deposited for about 80 to 120 years, until the ritual use of the cave ended with the Christianisation of Iceland. If this interpretation is correct, Surtshellir was a natural site that was used to stage potentially elaborate rites which in one way or another directly related to the volcanic nature of the cave, connected this volcanic nature with the stories of myth, and performed a ritual response.

Grave Mounds: Creating Stage Props

In examples like that of the sacrifices at waterfalls and the ritual activity in the cave Surtshellir, places in the natural landscape that are somehow special are used to stage ritual performances. In these cases, pre-existing special elements of the natural landscape serve as the stage sets and props of ritual. In other cases, it seems that rituals actively transformed the landscape in order to create such special landscape features. Most commonly, this would have been the case for funerary rituals. Arguably the most frequent way in which pre-Christian ritual practice is mentioned in medieval Icelandic literature is through the construction of burial mounds.[28] Time and again, we read that somebody is buried in a mound. To quote just a few examples from *Landnámabók*:

> Þar gagnvart fyrir norðan Hvítá við sjálfa ána er haugr hans; þar var hann veginn.
>
> His [Grímr's] burial mound stands there, down by Hvit River on the north bank, and that's where he was killed.
>
> Þar dó Miðfjarðar-Skeggi, ok er þar haugr hans fyrir neðan garð.
>
> That's where Midfjord-Skeggi died, and his burial mound stands just below the farm.
>
> Hann [Þórarinn korni] var hamrammr mjǫk ok liggr í Kornahaugi.
>
> [...] Þórarinn Korni was a great sorcerer and lies buried in Kornahaug ["Korni's Burial Mound"].
>
> [...]; hann [Eyvindr] bjó at Helgastǫðum ok er þar heygðr.
>
> He [Eyvindr] made his home at Helgastead, and that's where he was buried, in a grave mound.[29]

The frequency with which such mound burials are mentioned essentially seems to reflect historical reality, as burial mounds are a very common feature of the Icelandic archaeological record.[30] What is important in the context of this discussion is that the interaction with such mounds did not necessarily end when the construction of the mound had been completed. From other parts of the Nordic world, there is tantalising archaeological evidence that suggests a continued ritual interaction with burial mounds (→ **Chapter 14**).[31] Thus, Viking Age burial mounds from Uppland and Södermanland in Sweden sometimes have 'external cists' or 'sacrificial cists' that may have been used to deposit food for the dead also after the ritual of the burial as such had been completed.[32]

Also in Iceland, people kept engaging with mounds, at least through storytelling and their imagination. Thus, various passages of Icelandic literature describe burial mounds as places where the dead could be encountered in visions. One famous example is found in *Brennu-Njáls saga* (ch. 78),[33] a text of the thirteenth century, where the mound of the dead Gunnarr is seen opening to reveal a glimpse of the fallen hero, who then gives a speech in which he exhorts his audience to avenge his death. Maybe more humoristic is an episode in *Landnámabók* (S72).[34] There, a certain Ásmundr has been buried in a ship and with a slave beside him, apparently as a kind of human sacrifice. But when later somebody walks past the mound, the dead Ásmundr is heard speaking a stanza in which he complains about the bad company in which he has been buried; so the mound is opened up again and the slave is removed from the grave.

In addition to such stories of one-time occurrences, some mounds seem to have been imbued with a lasting sense of being very special places. One such mound is described as an evergreen sign of life even in the depth of winter (*Landnámabók* S75):

> Laugarbrekku-Einarr var heygðr skammt frá Sigmundarhaugi, ok er haugr hans ávallt grœnn vetr ok sumar.
>
> Einarr of Laugarbrekka was buried near Sigmund's Mound and his grave mound is always green, summer and winter.[35]

Here, the funerary ritual had performed its task so well that it did not just use the landscape as a backdrop, but it transformed it in a way that perfectly dovetails with Keith H. Basso's observations about the storytelling landscape of the Western Apache: through the ritual construction of a burial mound, the landscape had indeed become a theatre stage from which the actors of the ritual performance may have exited, but in which they left behind their props in such a way that they kept evoking the special relation to the world beyond death that the ritual had set in scene.

Afterlife: The Prolonged Echoes of Ritual

The echoes of such rituals could reverberate for a remarkably long time.[36] These reverberations are of interest not only for the history of the reception of Viking Age religion and of medieval imaginings of Viking Age rituals that we meet in the Icelandic sagas, but also because they seem to tell us something about the impact that such rituals had on the imaginary of Icelandic society.[37] Such rituals, as their later reception suggests, could act as sparks that ignited a blaze of the imagination of such deeply-felt force that its embers still were glowing beyond the threshold of modernity.

What I mean by this is exemplified by the alleged burial mound of Gunnarr from *Brennu-Njáls saga*, which was still shown to travellers in the late nineteenth century. When the British painter William G. Collingwood and the Icelandic scholar Jón Stefánsson visited Gunnarr's presumed former farm in the 1890s, they were shown the mound, and Collingwood made a painting of it (Fig. 9.2).[38] This mound thus shows huge continuity in how people kept thinking about Gunnarr's funeral. Yet at the same time, it also shows a deep break within this continuity: the continuity lies only in the *concept* of the hero's burial mound, but not in the physical mound as such. Collingwood's painting makes clear that the mound that he was shown was not a real funerary monument, but a natural hill that only local folktales turned into a place of burial. After a millennium, the historic ritual had faded from memory and its props had shifted to new locations.

Yet even so, the landscape as a theatre stage continued to exist; and somehow it seems to have become even more theatrical. The hill that Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson were shown as Gunnarr's burial mound was more dramatic by orders of magnitude than any surviving Viking Age burial mound in Iceland. The same held true of many other burial mounds in the Icelandic landscape around 1900: time and again it seems that, as the original Viking Age mounds eroded, these mounds were transformed into places of the imagination that were moved to settings much grander than any original burial site could have been. A particularly spectacular example of this kind of shift is the grave mound of a certain Kolli (Fig. 9.3). In the medieval *Landnámabók*, Kolli is barely mentioned in a single sentence.[39] Yet by the nineteenth century, his tomb had turned into a rock pyramid two dozen metres high that dominates the upland valley of Mókollsdalur against the backdrop of a sheer cliff: there, the old settler was imagined to be buried together with his treasure, and out of earshot of the bells of the local

Figure 9.2 Gunnar's How at Lythend *by William G. Collingwood. After Collingwood & Jón Stefánsson 1899: 29, fig. 25.*

Figure 9.3 From Viking Age grave mound to rock pyramid: Kolli's alleged burial mound Mókollshaugur. Folklore identifies the burial mound with the higher, right-hand landscape formation. Photo by Matthias Egeler.

church.[40] Even a millennium after the original burial ritual was performed, the landscape remained a theatre stage, and while the props created by the original performance did not endure, it seems that somehow they had enough life in them to grow even as they disappeared.

Notes

1. See Michaels & Sax 2016.
2. Einar Ól. Sveinsson & Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 410–13.
3. The exact purpose of these chants is fraught with philological problems: Tolley 2009, vol. 1: 498–507.
4. See Turner 1982: esp. 79–81; Michaels and William 2016; Gunnell 2018a; Luhrmann 2020: x.
5. Michaels and William 2016: 309 with further literature.
6. Turner 1982; Michaels and William 2016: 309–10. For a discussion of the differences between ritual and theatre in the modern sense see Turner 1982: 112–13.
7. Gunnell 1995.
8. Cf. Gunnell 2021: 178.
9. Cosgrove & Daniels 1993; Cosgrove 1998: xxvi.
10. Basso 1996: 120–21 (quote: 121).
11. Björn Sigfússon 1940: 59–60.
12. On her cross-dressing – the trousers had strongly male gendered connotations – cf. Gardeła 2021a: 436; Gunnell 2021: 178 ('the only description in the *Íslendingasǫgur* of a woman wearing male clothes and bearing arms'). In *Laxdœla saga* ch. 35 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934: 96), allegations that a woman regularly wears trousers are used as a reason for justifying a divorce.
13. On coastal water as a liminal setting for rituals in Old Norse textual sources cf. Gunnell 2021: 179–80.
14. Gardeła 2021a: 435–7; 2021b: 32–33; Gunnell 2021.
15. Herodotus VII.35; Homer, *Iliad* XXI.211–384.
16. Ed. Jakob Benediktsson 1968: 358; transl. Hermann Pálsson & Edwards 1972: 134. Here and in following quotations, the forms of the names used in the translation have been adapted for consistency.
17. Ed. Keyser and Munch 1848: 308; Jakob Benediktsson 1968: 359 (note 3).
18. Brink 2007: 113, 129 (nos. 2, 23), 134 (no. 9).
19. Egeler 2016: 281.
20. Stanza 4, ed. Lethbridge 2012. Cf. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999: 30.
21. On the concept of 'natural places', see Bradley 2000.
22. See, for instance, Egeler 2016: 289–301.
23. Smith *et al*. 2021; Guðmundur Ólafsson *et al*. 2010.
24. On volcanoes in Norse mythology, see Nordvig 2021.
25. Jakob Benediktsson 1968: 240; transl. Hermann Pálsson & Edwards 1972: 94.

26. Smith *et al*. 2021. In an earlier study, the authors interpreted the cave as an outlaw shelter: Guðmundur Ólafsson *et al*. 2010.
27. The hall of Hofstaðir in northern Iceland, on which see → **Chapters 5 and 7**.
28. Bennett 2014; 2018.
29. Chapters S39, S40, S76, S247 = Jakob Benediktsson 1968: 76, 77, 110, 276; transl. Hermann Pálsson & Edwards 1972: 31, 31, 41, 105.
30. Kristján Eldjárn 2016.
31. See the survey in Gardeła 2016.
32. Gardeła 2016: 186–188.
33. Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954: 192–4.
34. Jakob Benediktsson 1968: 102–3.
35. Jakob Benediktsson 1968: 108; transl. Hermann Pálsson & Edwards 1972: 41.
36. Cf. Clunies Ross 1994 on the comparable afterlife of myth.
37. On the concept of the imaginary cf. Le Goff 1990.
38. Collingwood & Jón Stefánsson 1899: 29.
39. S164=H133, Jakob Benediktsson 1968: 199.
40. Jón Árnason 1961 (vol. 2): 91.

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10

Pre-Christian Rituals at Elite Sites

Lars Grundvad

Since 2016, several large hoards and isolated pre-Christian religiously charged objects have been discovered in the sacred landscape around Fæsted and Harreby in the hinterland of Ribe in Jylland, Denmark.[1] Furthermore, traces of a presumed *hǫrgr* (a type of structure intended for sacrificial acts known from Old Norse literature) and halls have been noted. The hoard deposits have been excavated in their *in situ* contexts, providing much more information than the isolated plough soil finds discovered with metal detectors. When these different finds are critically compared and contrasted one may arrive at interesting conclusions concerning Viking Age ritual activities.

This chapter reviews and analyses pre-Christian religious practices that were carried out in proximity to Viking Age elite manors. It approaches this topic through the presentation of a case study of a recently discovered manor from Harreby in southern Jylland, Denmark, which dates to c. AD 600–975. Here an interesting pattern emerges as regards the deposits of silver and gold, all of which were apparently 'hidden' near the gates in fences that seem to have separated the sacred areas within the enclosures and the secular activities that were carried out outside of them. An additional goal of this chapter is to shed light on the religious expression of the symbolically-magically charged items in these deposits. Is it possible to find out *who* or *what* the sacrifice was supposed to appease? Were the hoards seen as means of protection from supernatural or non-human beings? Did the people who deposited them seek to strengthen the sacrifice by offering especially potent objects?

Based on this case study, the aim is to shed light on topics that Lars Jørgensen pioneered especially through his work on the Tissø complex, where he explored the pre-Christian cult and the physical environment in which it was conducted. Other Nordic manor sites also testify to the great accumulation of wealth presumably associated with the activities of Viking Age aristocracy, and to the conduct of pre-Christian cult rituals there. As of yet, however, nobody has commenced a detailed analysis of the particulars of these cult activities. Based on results from the Harreby site, it is now possible to approach this challenge.

Presentation of the Pre-Christian Cult Site at Harreby

Today Harreby exists almost only as a place name with a small accumulation of modern farmsteads. The archaeological site discussed in this chapter and the surrounding area is situated relatively high above sea level and is quite visible in the landscape, approximately 12 km east of the Viking Age emporium of Ribe. This prominent location is precisely where several significant mainland routes intersected and where rows of burial mounds acted as ancient markers of these routes.[2] The particular location of Harreby was one of the primary reasons why it became such an important site in Jylland, as much of the inland traffic was naturally forced to pass by in its vicinity. East of Harreby the extensive and dense Farrisskov ('the Farris Forest') stretched all the way from the area around Kolding to Sønder Hygum, and to the west traffic was hampered because of large wetlands (Fig. 10.1).[3]

In 2016, a nearly 1.5 kg large gold hoard including objects fashioned in the Jellinge style was discovered with metal detector near Harreby. Today, the hoard is commonly known as Fæstedskatten ('the Fæsted hoard'). The hoard seems to have been deposited not much later than AD 970.[4] The discovery could be linked to a gold necklace that was found in the same field in 1911, which was also made in the Jellinge style.[5] The 2016 discovery led to a

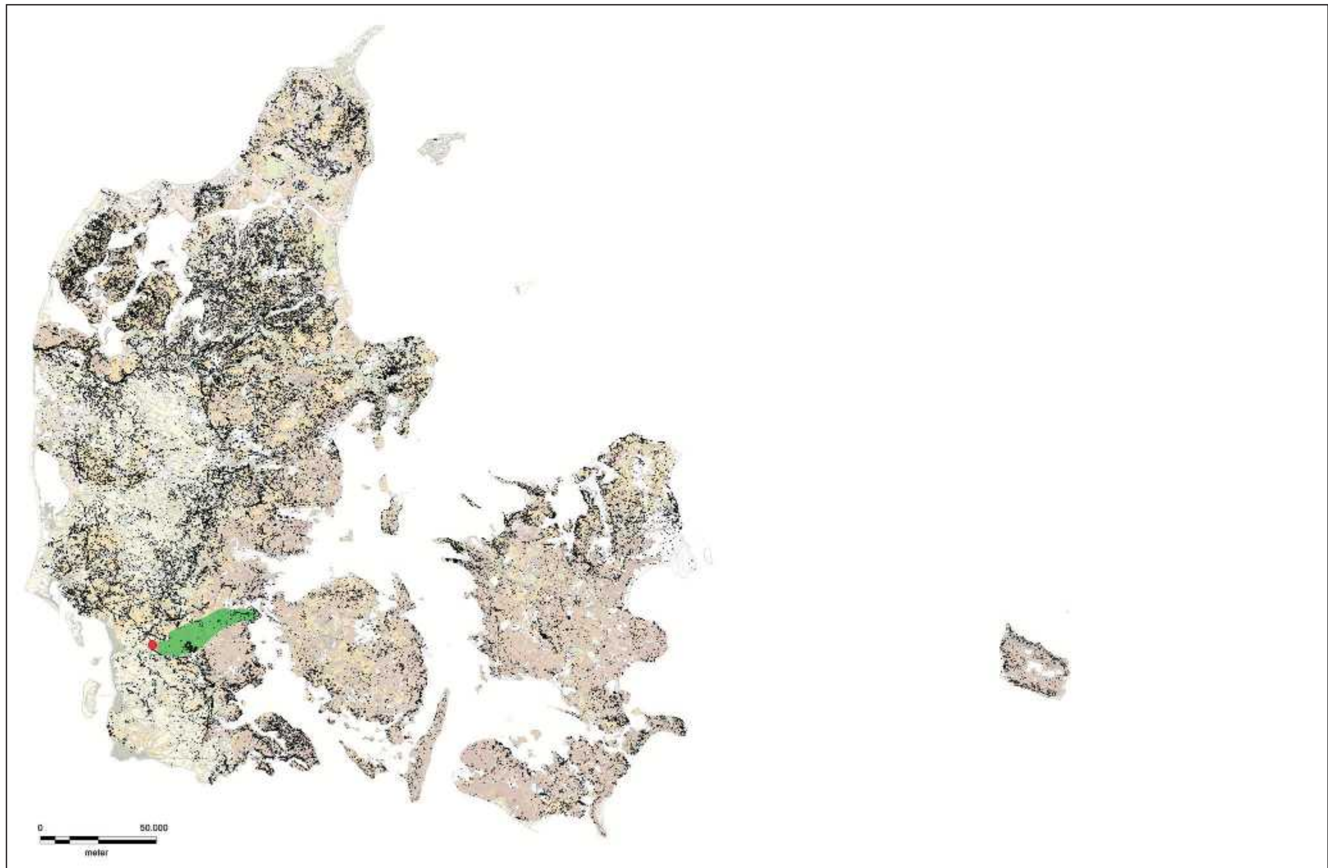

Figure 10.1 Overview of all registered burial mounds in Denmark. Note the rows coming from the south up towards Farrisskoven, which are shown in green, and which then extend through Harreby, marked with a red spot. The map is based on the Danish soil classification prepared by the Department of Agroecology, Aarhus University. Final map created by Silja Arnfridardottir Christensen, Sønderskov Museum.

minor archaeological excavation later the same year, which revealed the deposition pit. Two cloth hooks found inside and near the pit showed that the hoard probably had been wrapped in a piece of cloth. In addition to the previously known necklace from 1911, it became apparent that the hoard contained a very elaborate gold disc fibula, also ornamented in the Jellinge style, eight gold arm-rings, one of which was ornamented in the same animal style, pendants with gems, gold beads etc. In addition, it was observed that the hoard was buried near an entrance within a fence that had been used over a prolonged period of time. Subsequent excavations clearly show that the site is characterised by extraordinary, almost monumental constructions. For instance, the farmstead is bounded by an approximately 575 m long east–west oriented earth rampart to the north, while the western courtyard boundary is seen in the form of a more than 155 m long multi-phased, curved fence with several entrances, where the gold hoard was discovered near the north-westernmost gate. Interestingly, by the gate located immediately south of the one with the gold hoard, a relatively rich deposit was recently excavated, primarily consisting of hacksilver and jewellery.[6] The Harreby site undoubtedly contained a manor house with white halls and a presumed *hǫrgr* dating to the Vendel Period and the Viking Age, which had a royal connection, judging by the extraordinarily rich artefacts.[7]

Outside the fences, several pit houses were registered, while only one has yet been discovered inside the gates. These houses probably served as temporary workshop spaces. Therefore, there seems to be an evident difference between the inside and the outside of the fences; a difference which, in the case of the East Danish manor sites, appears to suggest that people gathered around these atypical, very large and wealthy manors for special events, and that these sites also served the role of assembly sites. At these different gatherings, the guests supposedly lived in the pit houses and produced goods that could be sold and exchanged.[8] The pit houses outside the fences are well documented on other assembly sites of the time. The characteristics of these sites clearly indicate that they served as places where people gathered. But they do not bear much witness to the practice of pre-Christian rituals similar to those that were presumably performed inside the fences at Harreby.

Inside the fences of the Harreby site, an approximately 27 × 27 m large heap of burnt stones was discovered. In Scandinavian archaeology, structures of this kind are often

associated with religiously charged mound-like constructions known in Old Norse literature as *hǫrgr*, which were apparently central to pre-Christian religion, although their particulars and functions have not been fully explained.[9] Often it is precisely such stone mounds that are central to the study of the pre-Christian places of worship,[10] but in this chapter, the focus is shifted away from such constructions, since no real traces of deposits or other religiously charged actions have yet been identified at the Harreby *hǫrgr*.

In addition to the stone layer at least two very characteristic hall buildings were registered at Harreby, both of which were undoubtedly contemporary with the *hǫrgr*. One hall was quite impressive and measured approximately 37 × 10.5 m. The other smaller hall shows signs of having been painted white and adorned with forged iron ornaments in the form of spirals reminiscent of the well-known neck spirals from the Ladby ship's dragon.[11] Interestingly, similar spirals are a phenomenon known from the early Christian churches, and some of them are still preserved on the doors of a few English churches. But it is equally interesting to note that spirals of the same kind are also known from the Viking Age aristocratic hall at Gamla Uppsala, which is also considered a pre-Christian cult centre (→ **Chapter 6**).[12] Perhaps this testifies to a continuity in the use of spiral motifs, which survived the transition from pre-Christian religion to Christianity. Likewise, the white halls are also a phenomenon that is recognised in the eastern Danish elite manors where excavations have successfully revealed traces of slaked lime production, which was used locally.[13] Research into pre-Christian Nordic religion has put forward the suggestion that Viking Age halls represented a micro cosmos and served as places where important religious acts would be performed by the social elite.[14] However, we still need to understand the deposition practices in connection with the pre-Christian cult. Everything found at the Harreby manor can be dated to the Vendel Period or the Viking Age (here specifically AD 600–975), which means that some of the buildings existed at the time when both the gold and silver hoards were buried. In the western extension of the largest of the two identified halls, the immediate traces of an inner yard have been documented. Such internal areas are considered characteristic of elite farms with religious functions.[15]

Overall, the many archaeological discoveries at Harreby are thus reminiscent of the results shown in particular in the eastern Danish areas; including especially the royal manors at Tissø[16] and Lejre,[17] both of which are well known for extraordinary discoveries dating to the same time-frame as the Harreby site. In the context of the present chapter it is remarkable that both of these complexes have been central focal points in studies and analyses of pre-Christian cult in Scandinavia. Also, further east in Sweden similar manors have been shown to be associated with the absolute elite of society (perhaps they were royal seats) and with the practice of pre-Christian religion.[18] This shows that precisely the farms of the elite can hold a key to understanding at least some aspects of the pre-Christian depositional practice.

The Two Primary Deposits

Two deposits – namely, the well-known gold hoard, Fæstedskatten, and the lesser-known silver hoard, which was discovered only 17 m south of the gold hoard – constitute a major part of the archaeological data in the analysis commenced in this chapter (Fig. 10.2). The gold hoard contains a mixed content in the form of gemmed gold pendants and various types of jewellery, the youngest of which are made in the Jellinge style while the oldest parts appear in the form of a converted Solidus struck under Honorius (AD 395–423).[19] Despite the fact that the hoard is most often called 'the gold hoard', the excavation of the deposition pit (A70) showed that it also contained fragmented dirhams and jewellery of silver, including a bracelet and a thick braided chain. Overall, the presence of the Jellinge style and the coins indicates that the time of deposition was not significantly later than AD 970.[20] The same is a fact for the silver hoard, which – based on its coin-content – can be dated after the 960s (*terminus post quem*). Thus, the time of deposition, in archaeological terms, seems to be almost simultaneous.

Both hoards could be related to their respective deposit pits. The gold deposit pit was poorly preserved, so that not much could be deduced about the actual execution of the deposition. However, the pit was oval and relatively flat-bottomed, as well as characterised by a larger amount of returned subsoil material. The deposition pit was located at the southern part of a wide entrance in the multi-phase fence. The silver hoard and its context reveal more details, however. It was discovered during an actual excavation of pit A961, which in the course of the initial registration at the surface level resembled the natural remnants of a fallen tree. After the discovery of silver pieces in the fill, the pit was first excavated horizontally stratigraphically, whereby the feature became almost bathtub-shaped, and thereby resembled a burial. The orientation was approximately north to south, and the pit did not contain any actual burial goods, just as no traces of a deceased person could be detected. Therefore, it is not interpreted as a burial. The fill was relatively homogeneous; in fact, it was backfilled with subsoil, which also resembles the rapid covering of a burial pit. The silver finds consisted of 104 pieces, the vast majority of which were small coin fragments. Among the coins, however, were two almost intact and particularly interesting specimens: a previously unknown type of coin minted in Dublin in approximately AD 939–942 and a larger fragment of a dirham dated to around AD 960. Therefore, the deposit cannot stem from a period earlier than that. The pieces were not placed together in one concentration. On the contrary, they were registered scattered in the fill

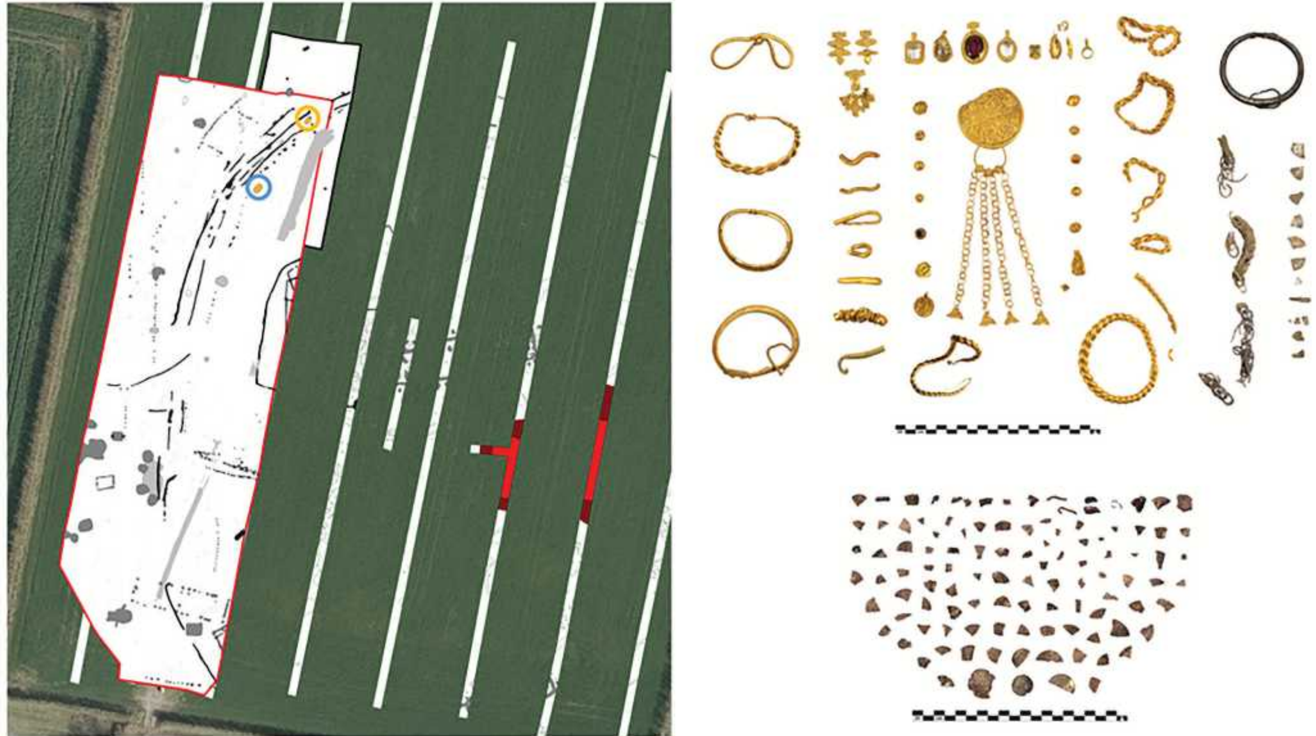

Figure 10.2 The interpreted excavation plan from the sacred manor site at Harreby as well as the two hoards. The gold hoard's find spot is shown furthest north, marked with a yellow circle, and the silver deposition with a blue circle. To the east, the hǫrgr *is marked in red, and the two halls are seen respectively north and south thereof. Illustration by Lars Grundvad, Sønderskov Museum.*

both vertically and horizontally. Interestingly, the deposit context of the silver hoard was, as mentioned above, only 17 m south of the gold deposit, and equally interesting is the fact that the deposit was again made near an entrance in the multi-phased fence. According to the prevailing interpretation, each of the depositions is related to specific gates, but – of course – they cannot be fully simultaneous, as they are related to two different phases. The gates seem to play a very important role in this.

Reason for Deposition

When studying hoards, it is normal to analyse *why* they were buried. Previous studies have shown that a large proportion of Danish hoards can be connected to historical events, where war seems to be a primary reason for deposition.[21] Pragmatic reasons for burying precious metals may also be that they are scrap metal deposits intended for remelting or reshaping – this reason is also frequently suggested when it comes to buried iron objects. However, it is also possible to consider some deposits as having been conducted with ritual intent, for instance as pre-Christian sacrifices. Sometimes the cause may even be a combination of the mentioned reasons. Below, an attempt is made to present three plausible interpretations of the gold and silver hoards at Fæsted.

The Pragmatic Cause: War and Unrest

In his dissertation about Danish Viking Age and early medieval hoards from 1942, Roar Skovmand suggested war and unrest as frequent reasons for deposition. He was able to identify a trend that may also be relevant in connection with the Harreby finds. As mentioned above, they must be dated to the time after AD 960 but not significantly later than AD 970, a dating based especially on the coins, but also on stylistic grounds due to the presence of Jellinge style objects. The year AD 970 is interesting when related to historical sources: as the politically biased chronicler Thietmar of Merseburg states, in AD 974 Emperor Otto II's armies broke through Dannevirke and occupied the trading town of Hedeby.[22] The distance between Hedeby and Harreby is only approximately 120 km, and since Thietmar also reports that Otto built a stronghold to fortify certain regions in present-day southern Jylland, it is possible that the owners of the manor house at Harreby felt under so much threat that they hid all their valuables in easily recoverable places; namely, at the north-west gates of the courtyard, which are the gates that would be furthest away from an imperial army coming from the south. In light of current interpretations of the rows of burial mounds and the related ancient routes through the landscape, it is believed that Jylland's inland traffic from north to south had to pass through a landscape-defined sluice and a traffic junction at Fæsted/Harreby,[23] which is why the

threat was potentially very real, if Thietmar's accounts are accepted. However, doubts have been raised as to whether Otto II actually occupied Hedeby and southern Jylland. Numismatic studies have shown that the power of the emperor was never implemented in Hedeby, which is why it is doubtful that Otto II ever ruled in the town.[24] That the threat of unrest there should be the cause of two individual deposits with such a diverse content also seems unlikely. To bury all the valuables together in one pit would have made more logical sense.

Entrance Fee

Studies on the well-known cult site Sorte Muld on Bornholm have produced interesting analyses of an extremely extensive body of artefactual material known as *guldgubber*, essentially small gold foils with rich iconographic content. One theory explaining the meaning of the many thousands of *guldgubber* discovered at Sorte Muld can potentially be applied to understand the aforementioned depositions conducted at Harreby, but it should be borne in mind that the *guldgubber* date to the period just before the Viking Age, and thus represent an older find group than the two hoards discussed in this chapter. According to this theory, *guldgubber* were used almost as a kind of 'entrance tickets' to participate in the rituals and ceremonies that took place within the fences at Sorte Muld.[25] According to Maria Panum Baastrup, the entrance payment tradition can be traced back into prehistory in the eastern Mediterranean region, and she suggests that participation in the cult required a relatively uniform payment in the Vendel Period. If this interpretation is valid, the question is whether the hoards from Harreby should be reckoned as a later, further developed, or regional variation of this ancient tradition. If so, it would make sense that the valuables are deposited at entrances, and it is equally meaningful that the components of the silver deposit in particular take the form of fragmented coins and jewellery as well as a single bar. A review of the hoard-parts shows that the vast majority have relatively uniform units of weight and that almost all objects (97 out of 104) weigh less than 1 g (Fig. 10.3). This uniformity may be an argument for a payment system that may even reflect the payer's social status and financial capacity, as illustrated by the presence of almost intact coins and larger jewellery fragments, which may represent a different social *stratum* than those who could 'only' pay with a modest silver clip. Thus, some silver payers may have been able to pay more silver than others. Perhaps the gates were even reserved for specific *strata* of society, which may explain why the approximately 1.5 kg gold deposit was discovered near the gate to the north. This gate may have been reserved for the members of the highest echelons of society; perhaps even representatives of King Gorm the Old and the Jelling dynasty.[26]

As can be expected, there are also arguments against this interpretation. Precisely the great versatility of object types is also an argument against the theory of entrance payments, since no other similar deposits at entrances are known from contemporary sites.

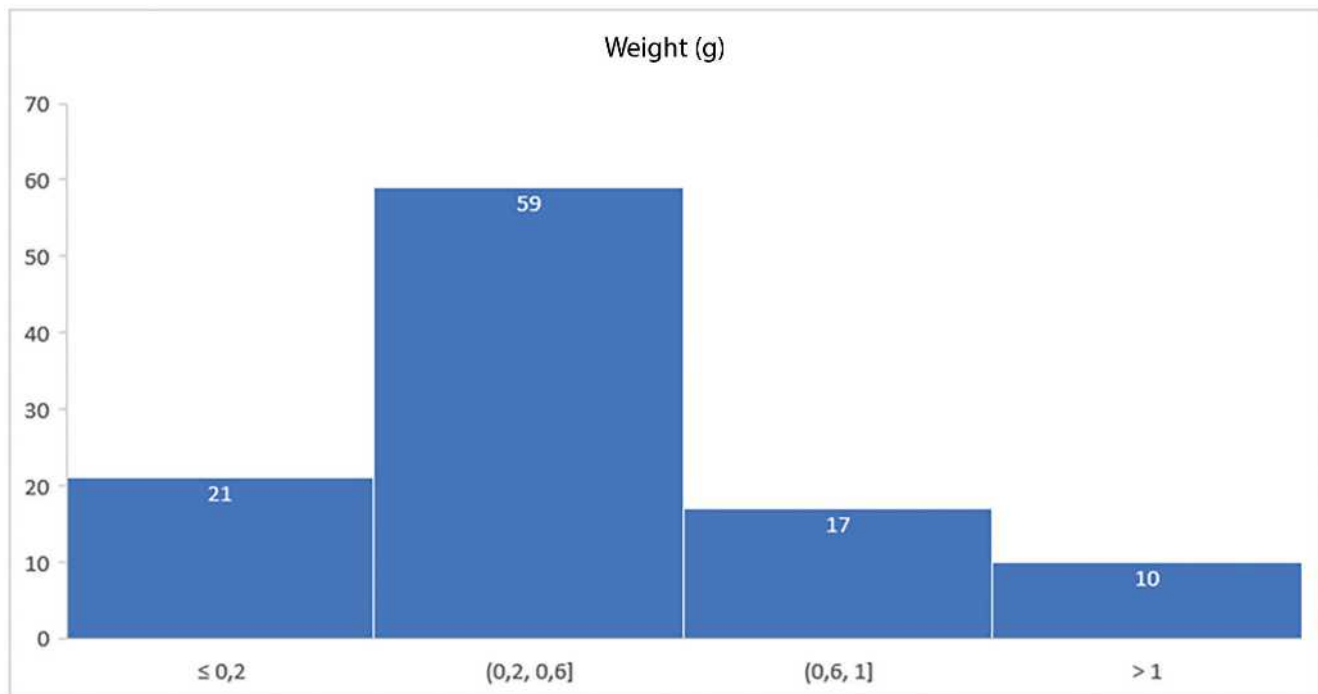

Figure 10.3 Graph showing the different silver weight intervals from the findings in the Fæsted silver hoard. By Silja Arnfridardottir Christensen, Sønderskov Museum.

A Protective Offering

In the case of the gold hoard, it has previously been suggested that it was placed near an entrance as a protective sacrifice. This type of deposition is known from all of pre-Christian antiquity, and the diversity of the sacrificial material is virtually unlimited. From the Danish Roman Iron Age, for example, the tradition of burying pottery at entrance post-holes in houses is well attested. The custom of securing entrances against evil spirits, beings, and powers, however, is not only known from pre-Christian times. Across Europe the tradition to bury snakes in pots under steppingstones and the custom of placing thunder stones (fossilised sea urchins) over the entrances are known all the way into the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[27] Guarding the entrances was thus so ingrained in pre-Christian culture(s) that the tradition survived the conversion. It is therefore possible that the two deposits from Harreby are to be regarded as unusually rich protective sacrifices located at the visual boundaries of the farmstead. Swedish studies of hoards and rune stones in the landscape have made it plausible to suggest that protective sacrifices were conducted at the boundaries of the farms; *per analogiam*, rune stones were raised in the same locations with the same intent – to protect properties from external 'evil'.[28] Furthermore, it should be noted that the deposition may have been associated with the belief that doorways had special religious significance; for example that on special occasions doorways could provide a view into other worlds such as the realm of the dead.[29] Importantly, acts of deposition may represent a mix of causes. For instance, it is not inconceivable that a protective sacrifice has been made against a physical threat such as future acts of war.

Other Revealing Artefacts

The criteria for when finds are perceived to represent a central place or a central region are dynamic. In particular, the Danish legislation for the use of metal detectors in amateur archaeology has greatly improved the archaeological knowledge. Sites that used to be considered as elite sites are now often seen as more ordinary, and thus rich and extraordinary finds must be made before places are elevated to the strictly aristocratic level. It has in fact been suggested that it is not possible at all to consider manor sites to have been established due to centralised power, but that their emergence should be understood on the basis of an anarchist perspective on social organisation rather than on the basis of a hierarchical model of society.[30] It has already been established that Harreby contains finds that are related to society's high elite and probably even to Gorm the Old's early Jelling dynasty,[31] and therefore it is relevant to draw attention to the objects from the plough-soil context that also testify to pre-Christian religious conditions.

Thus, two Thor's hammer pendants, which are considered an expression of the cult of Þórr, have been found in the plough-soil at the Harreby site (Fig. 10.4).[32] One of the finds does not reveal much in terms of dating, while the other is considered to represent chronologically later types. Likewise, one figurine representing an armed standing figure is known from the site (Fig. 10.4). Similar specimens are often labelled 'valkyrie fibulas' or 'valkyrie pendants' and have been interpreted as representations of the mythical *valkyrjur* and/or as objects showing 'real' women's associations with the sphere of war.[33] Considered in isolation, these finds do not bear much witness to the cult practised at the site, but they do tell of a versatile and probably rather individually defined religion.

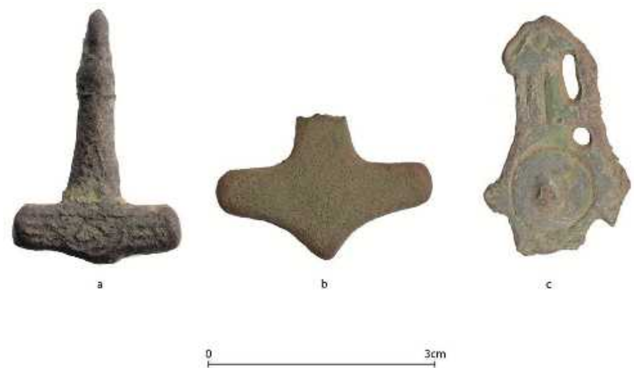

Figure 10.4 Two hammer-shaped pendants (a, b) and a so-called 'valkyrie' figurine (c). To the left (a), an intact piece that is suspected to be a patrice or a mould. Photos by Lars Grundvad, Sønderskov Museum.

Who Were they Sacrificing to?

As demonstrated, the presumably ritually deposited artefacts are very versatile, which, like the above-mentioned plough-soil finds, may imply that pre-Christian religion was variously understood and expressed by its practitioners. Gender might have played a role in the selection of gods or other beings whom people addressed in acts of worship. Perhaps the religion and the practice of it were regional, just as it could also be related to each given season or to specific rituals. For the finds from Harreby, the Thor's-hammer pendants indicate that Þórr might have played a role in the cult there. However, it may be possible to tease out more information about other gods who were potentially more important than Þórr at this place.

It is suggested here, based on the items that the gold hoard consists of in 2022, that Óðinn was one of the three most important gods at Harreby. Óðinn was considered one of the major deities in the Old Norse system of belief. He ruled over life and death, just as he ruled over the outcome of battles. People's specific relationship to Óðinn is generally difficult to identify in the artefactual material, but it has been suggested that several types of jewellery such as, for example, mask pendants can be seen as his symbols (→ **Chapter 27**).[34] Óðinn and his cult can perhaps be traced

in more indirect ways – hidden in stories and symbols. It is thus thought-provoking that the gold hoard contains one gold necklace and eight gold arm rings. The numbers evoke memories of the stories in Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning* (ch. 49), about Óðinn's ring Draupnir, which dripped eight new rings every ninth night. Therefore, parts of the Fæsted hoard can be interpreted as visual symbols of or references to Óðinn, which were used in ritual contexts (Fig. 10.5). A review of contemporary Nordic hoards shows that this pattern is not unknown. One noteworthy example is the Vulu hoard from Sør-Trøndelag in Norway, which has the same number of specimens.

Figure 10.5 Eight gold arm rings and the golden braided necklace from the Fæsted hoard, which in combination can symbolise Óðinn's ring Draupnir. Photos of bracelets: Nick Shaadt, Sønderskov Museum. Photo of necklace: Nationalmuseet. Digitally assembled by Silja Arnfridardottir Christensen, Sønderskov Museum.

Several rich and magnificent objects dated to the Vendel Period have previously been associated with the Óðinn cult and viewed as being directly related to the highest social elite *stratum*, to which the large amounts of gold in the Fæsted hoard must certainly also be linked. The best examples of this are the almost identical contemporary helmet finds from Vendel and Valsgärde in eastern Sweden as well as from Sutton Hoo, England. The helmet from Sutton Hoo was found in an extremely richly equipped boat grave dating to the seventh century, which is believed to have held the body of a member of Anglo-Saxon royalty. The helmet was among the hundreds of grave goods and is very distinctive, with a face mask and neck protection. It is adorned with *Pressblech* plates showing martial-related scenes. In the context of this chapter, however, the bird of prey motif placed on the transition between the face mask and the helmet dome, as well as the presence of inlaid red semi-precious stones on the stylised eyebrows formed by the bird's widespread wings, are particularly interesting. Because predatory birds are associated with the social elite and the cult of Óðinn, the stone-clad eyebrows hide a surprise that recently was interpreted as an Óðinnic symbol: studies of the inlaid gems have revealed that they are placed on different backgrounds. One of the eyebrows has so-called 'waffle gold' positioned underneath the stones – this feature creates a special visual effect and reflects light. No gold foil has been used under the other eyebrow, however. Based on these peculiar features of the helmet, it has been suggested that it was used in pre-Christian rituals. The helmet was designed in such a way as to create the illusion that the user had one dark eye socket while the other eye was 'illuminated' by the red stones. In this way, the wearer would represent the absolute elite, but he would also constitute a visual representation of the one-eyed god Óðinn.[35] This can be interpreted as signalling twofold power: worldly and supernatural.

The aforementioned gold rings may have been used in a similar way. They may have been a clear sign that the bearer represented or re-enacted Óðinn in the cult. That the rings were furthermore linked to the elite, for whom Óðinn was the primary deity, is of course partly visible in the amount of gold, but it can also be read in the written sources. In the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*[36] and in the skaldic poem *Haraldskvæði*[37] from the ninth century, the act of ring-giving manifested status and testified to alliances between the lord and the retinue. The fact that the gold hoard has been found at a site that is known to have a presumed *hǫrgr* as well as white-painted halls decorated with iron spirals elevates the significance of the discovery even more, and shows that the deposit of the Fæsted hoard may have been of a sacred nature, which is even further emphasised if it is accepted that the deposits were intended as sacrificial offerings – a greater gift to the gods could hardly be given.

If it is accepted that the rings and the necklace are visual representations of Óðinnic symbolism, it is also possible that the stone-set pendants as well as the other adornments were part of a physical and visual manifestation of a mythical necklace known as Brísingamen (Fig. 10.6). According to Þrymskviða, the necklace belonged to Freyja.[38] Precisely the versatility of the shape and type of the pendants has previously been suggested to be a feature of the possible representations of the Brínsingamen in particular.[39] In the poem *Beowulf* (v. 1198–201), it is reported that precious stones were part of *Brosinga men* and – according to some translations – that the necklace had filigree decorations:

syþðan Hama ætwæg
to þære byrhtan byrig
Brosinga mene,
sigle ond sinc-fæt –
searo-niðas fleah
Eormenrices,
geceas ecne ræd.[40]

since Hama bore off
the shining city
the Brosings' necklace,
gem-figured filigree.
He gained the hatred
of Eormanric the Goth;
chose eternal reward.[41]

Figure 10.6 Suggested setup of selected pendants from the gold hoard. Photos: Nick Schaadt, Sønderskov Museum. Digitally compiled by Silja Arnfridardottir Christensen, Sønderskov Museum.

Thus, this set of objects would also constitute a particularly significant sacrifice. If these objects are accepted as symbolic representations of Draupnir and Brísingamen, it is perhaps not without significance that Óðinn and Freyja, according to some researchers, ought to be considered as lovers.[42] In ritual practices and re-enactments of mythical events these deities may have been represented by the upper echelons of society, perhaps even by royalty, which was evidently involved in the development of the Jellinge style, a style that characterises the hoard.

The idea that the cult at Harreby could be related to the worship of the fertility god Freyr, instead of Óðinn or Freyja, is a third possibility that must be highlighted. This is strongly suggested by the place names that testify to the importance of the site. Harreby is situated in Frøs Herred ('Shire of Freyr'), which is why it is probable that Freyr played a significant role in the cult here.[43] Indications of a fertility cult as early as in the Roman Iron Age have already been documented at the Stavsager Høj site near Fæsted, only approximately 1.8 km north of Harreby. Excavations there have shown traces of a destroyed ceremonial wagon of the Dejbjerg type.[44] As highlighted by Tacitus in AD 98, ritual use of special carriages in the fertility cult was associated with Nerthus (ch. 40).[45] Another indication that the site witnessed Iron Age pre-Christian religious activity is the numerous sacrifices of weapons and gold conducted in the period from approximately the third century to no later than AD 550. It is also noteworthy that the word *Stav* in Stavsager Høj can allude to a pre-Christian sanctuary.[46] Collectively, all this shows a continuity in the religious use of the landscape, as well as testifies to the existence of a fertility cult through time and space.

Concluding Discussion

The find material from Harreby is as significant as the material from other comparable manor sites dated between the seventh century to the end of the tenth century. The finds from the plough-soil, however, pose many interpretational challenges. The Harreby artefacts appear to testify to the worship of Þórr and perhaps to the belief in female supernatural beings such as the *valkyrjur*. But we do not know much about the role of these objects in cultic practice, and it is probable that different individuals used them in different and unorthodox ways.

More specific knowledge can perhaps be deduced from artefact 'constellations' in the gold hoard in particular. It is suggested here that the gold hoard includes objects with symbolic meaning that can be linked to the written sources on pre-Christian religion – stories that must be used in a source-critical manner since they were written after the introduction of Christianity. In the case of the gold hoard, however, certain features can be recognised that bring both Freyja's Brísingamen and Óðinn's ring Draupnir to mind. It is possible that the person(s) using these objects perhaps represented and re-enacted these deities in the course of special ceremonies and other ritual acts.

There may have been several different reasons for burying these valuables, but if it is accepted that the deposition practice was a religiously charged act, then it is worth considering why it took place near the gates. Gates and entrances probably had symbolic significance, and they seem to have represented liminal points between the human world and the world beyond.[47] The process of burying valuables in the ground may have been understood as an act of returning the sacred, magically charged artefacts to the otherworld, for example to the dwarves who lived in earthen caves and mounds. In this way, when parts of the deposition were returned to their creators, a cyclic action was initiated, for it was the dwarves who forged the gods' most valuable objects. This cyclic action represents more than just the material and the artefacts; it can also be seen as an expression of the lived life and the end of life itself represented by the burial of the hoards. However, it could also be seen as an act conducted according to the 'law of Óðinn', which is mentioned in *Ynglinga saga.*[48] This 'law' concerns the deposition of items in the ground: those who do so, can count on regaining their belongings in the afterlife.

Notes

1. Grundvad 2020.
2. Matthiessen 1930.
3. Grundvad & Albris 2020.
4. Grundvad & Poulsen 2020.
5. Skovmand 1942: 86-87; Jørgensen & Petersen 1998: 288–9.
6. Grundvad *et al.* 2021: 25.
7. Grundvad & Knudsen 2017.
8. Jørgensen *et al.* 2011.
9. Christensen 2015.
10. Christensen 2015; Grundvad & Albris 2020.
11. Thorvildsen 1957.
12. Ljungkvist & Frölund 2018.
13. Henriksen & Holst 2014.
14. Nygaard 2018, and references therein.
15. e.g. Jørgensen 2014.
16. Jørgensen 2010.
17. Christensen 2015.
18. Rundkvist 2011.
19. Horsnæs 2020: 195
20. Grundvad & Poulsen 2020.
21. Skovmand 1942.
22. Warner 2001.
23. Matthiessen 1930.
24. Moesgård 2012.
25. Baastrup 2015.
26. Grundvad & Knudsen 2017.
27. Søvsø *et al*. 2019: 67.
28. Zachrisson 1998: 226–7.
29. Price 2002: 168.
30. Borake 2020.
31. Grundvad & Knudsen 2017.

32. e.g. Pentz 2018: 21-22.
33. Petersen 2005; Gardeła 2013: 301; 2021; Deckers *et al.* 2021: 37.
34. Pentz 2018: 22.
35. Price & Mortimer 2014.
36. Fulk *et al.* 2010.
37. Fulk 2012.
38. Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014: 422–7. Cf. Pentz 2018: 19.
39. Arrhenius 2009.
40. *Beowulf*, v. 1198–201; text after Fulk 2010: 164.
41. *Beowulf*, v. 1198–201; translation after Chickering 1977.
42. e.g. Clunies Ross 1994: 98.
43. Grundvad & Albris 2020.
44. Grundvad 2021.
45. Bruun & Lund 1974.
46. Grundvad & Albris 2020.
47. Eriksen 2013; 2019.
48. Hollander 1964.

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11

Processions and Ritual Movement in Viking Age Scandinavia

Luke John Murphy & Simon Nygaard

Introduction

In this chapter we survey and analyse evidence for processions and their possible functions in Viking Age Scandinavia. We propose two forms of processional movement, and examine forms of ritual transport and their likely venues. Although older studies of 'procession' as part of human ritual activity defined it as purely linear – that is, a ritual movement from Point A to Point B (and occasionally back again)[1] – we also incorporate evidence for circulatory movements around a particular place, which seems to have played a significant role in pre-Christian Nordic culture. Indeed, what we term *circulatory processions* are arguably more numerous in our written source material than their *linear* counterparts, although the ever-growing archaeological record may nuance this picture in years to come. Linear processions are mostly found in funerary contexts, and consist of ritual movement from one place to another, potentially also including a non-ritual return to the starting point via the same route. Circulatory processions, on the other hand, seem to have typically begun and ended at a particularly sacred place (such as a sacral building, grove, or lake), and to have been conducted by one or more representations of a deity and their ritual specialist(s), who progressed around local or regional landscapes. In at least some cases there is evidence to suggest that ritual activities were conducted at stops along the way, and it is possible that linear processions formed subsidiary parts of a larger circulatory procession at the latter's stopping points.

In order to analyse which features these processions may have had, we employ Bernhard Lang's typology of processions.[2] Lang describes four main types of processions:

- *Functional* processions are probably the most common in human society generally, and consist of the ritualisation of a movement that would happen regardless, such as the transportation of a coffin from the church to the grave.
- *Hierophoric* processions are those where an icon or other symbol of the sacred is transported from one place to another, as in archaic Near Eastern processions.[3]
- *Mimetic* processions are re-enactments of sacred, mythical, or historical events, such as the performance of mythic narratives by human actors in so-called 'mythological drama',[4] for instance, medieval European passion plays.
- *Demonstrative* processions are displays of the ritual's participants themselves, as when groups with a particular identity (be that political, religious, ethnic, or some combination thereof) express their association through public displays of affiliation, such as the Orange Order marches in Northern Ireland.

These types can also be combined, producing hybrid forms.

Processions in pre-Christian Nordic religions have received very little scholarly attention, particularly when compared to other ritual categories like 'sacrifice' or 'initiation'. Some of this neglect is due to the way processions have often only been examined as parts of wider ritual performances, compounded by difficulties in identifying processions in our source material. Studies like ours must therefore rely on interpretation, looking for evidence of processions implicit in the terse wording of medieval texts and the ambiguous remains of material corpora. Anders Hultgård's study of 'cultic circumnavigations' offered the first systematic overview of some textual accounts describing religious processions.[5] However, this work contains no discussion of funerary processions, pays very little attention to archaeological material (and none to iconographic evidence), and examines only travel via vehicle, omitting any

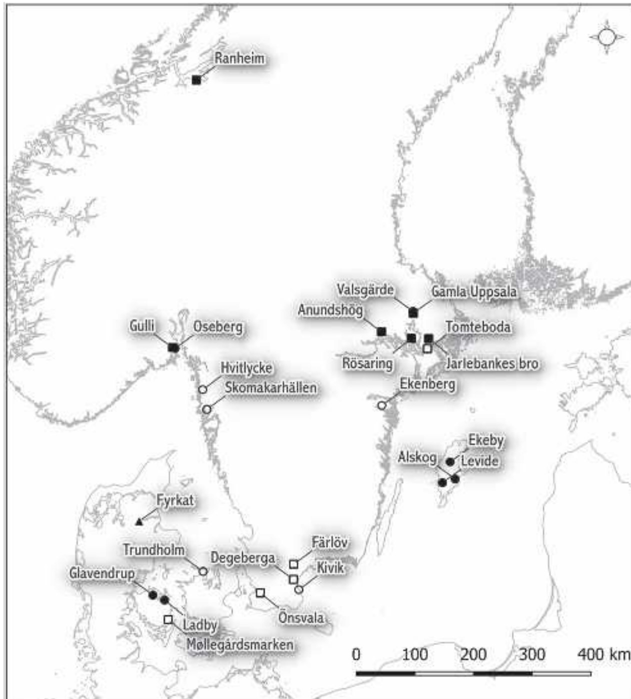

Figure 11.1 Map of sites mentioned in this subchapter. Key: ○ Pre-Viking Age sites mentioned in 'Forms of Ritual Transport'. □ Pre-Viking Age sites mentioned in 'Linear Monuments…'. ● Viking Age sites mentioned in 'Forms of Ritual Transport. ■ Viking Age sites mentioned in 'Linear Monuments…'. ▲ Viking Age sites mentioned in both sections.

ambulatory journeys that may have constituted processions. The next dedicated examination of pre-Christian processions came in 2017, when the present authors published a lengthy Danish-language article, the results of which we expand upon and refine here, *inter alia* through paying greater attention to archaeological evidence (Fig. 11.1).[6] Our work was the first to consider the functions that processions may have played in pre-Christian Nordic cult, which has since been taken up in scholarship more widely.[7]

Circulatory Processions

The category of circulatory processions contains a number of relatively clear examples, most of which can be related to either prosperity cults or so-called ritual drama. Here we examine the Nerthus cult in Chapter 40 of Tacitus' *Germania*, *Gunnars þáttr helmings*, and Book 5 of Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, before turning to ritual performances of eddic poetry.

Prosperity Cults

In AD 98 the Roman historian Cornelius Publius Tacitus wrote a more-or-less ethnographic account of the Germanic peoples and their customs titled *Germania*. While a useful font of information on early Iron Age Germanic culture and religion, readers of Tacitus' work must carefully consider its value as a source. There are good reasons for scepticism, particularly Tacitus' lack of first-hand knowledge, but *Germania* does include useful information that can be supported and supplemented by archaeological findings from the period and further illuminated by episodes in later medieval textual sources.[8] One such example is Chapter 40, which contains a description of the goddess Nerthus, whose cult Tacitus places among the Germanic tribes likely based somewhere in the western Baltic region – probably present-day Denmark or Northern Germany. He writes:

> (…) in commune Nerthum, id est Terram matrem, colunt eamque intervenire rebus hominum, invehi populis arbitrantur. est in insula oceani castum nemus, dicatumque in eo vehiculum, veste contectum; attingere uni sacerdoti concessum. is adesse penetrali deam intellegit vectamque bubus feminis multa cum veneratione prosequitur. laeti tunc dies, festa loca, quaecumque adventu hospitioque dignatur. non bella ineunt, non arma sumunt; clausum omne ferrum; pax et quies tunc tantum nota, tunc tantum amata, donec idem sacerdos satiatam conversatione mortalium deam temple reddat.

> (...) they worship in common Nerthus, or Mother Earth, and conceive her as intervening in human affairs, and riding in procession through the cities of men. In an island of the ocean is a holy grove, and in it a consecrated chariot, covered with robes: a single priest is permitted to touch it: he feels the presence of the goddess in her shrine, and follows with deep reverence as she rides away drawn by cows: then come days of rejoicing, and all places keep holiday, as many as she thinks worthy to receive and entertain her. They make no war, take no arms: every weapon is put away; peace and quiet are then, and then alone, known and loved, until the same priest returns the goddess to her sacred precinct, when she has had her fill of the society of mortals.[9]

This is the clearest example of a circulatory procession in our source material. Tacitus's description is, of course, an attempt by a cultural outsider to describe events in Roman cultural terms, employing a form of *Interpretatio Romana* for which the Roman Magna Mater-cult likely served as an exemplar.[10]

Additionally, the ritual movements of the Nerthus cult are also clearly a hierophoric procession,[11] where the deity is transported through the landscape on a wagon by a ritual specialist of the opposite gender. Sadly, we are not informed about the rituals that we may assume took place during the festivities mentioned in general terms when the procession made stops along its route – or whether these may have involved linear processions to local sacral sites. Nonetheless, the function and overall purpose of the procession remains relatively clear. Nerthus can essentially be regarded as a prosperity goddess, and her oft-posited connection – both functionally and linguistically – to the Vanir gods of medieval Old Norse sources supports this supposition.[12] The common Proto-Germanic root of both

Nerthus and the Vanir god Njǫrðr can be reconstructed as *nerþuz* (‘power’),[13] which has given rise to the interpretation of Nerthus and Njǫrðr as divine twins, as is often seen with fertility deities (such as the Nâsatyas recorded in *Rigveda* from c. 1900 BC).[14] The Vanir prosperity gods Freyr and Freyja also have a common Old Norse root – their names are generally thought to mean ‘lord’ and ‘lady’[15] – and the siblings have been interpreted as a younger variant of Njǫrðr and Nerthus.[16] In summation, Nerthus can be seen as a prosperity goddess, and the function of the procession described in *Germania* 40 seems to have been to bring fertility, primarily in the form of peace and prosperity, to the areas visited by the procession. We are therefore dealing with a hierophoric fertility procession.

Another source of great relevance is *Gunnars þáttr helmings*, an Icelandic *þáttr* – a short narrative that forms part of a longer text – written around 1375 and preserved in the collection *Flateyjarbok*.[17] As with most saga literature, the story is somewhere between fictional history and historical fiction: this conversion *þáttr* is a clearly polemical narrative set in conversion-era Sweden, where the pagan Swedes are portrayed as naive for worshipping something that the Christian author identifies as *fjandinn* (‘the devil’).[18]

Gunnars þáttr is often used to reinforce the connection between Nerthus and Vanir gods, because the narrative structure in the two texts is largely the same. The Norwegian Gunnarr *helmingr* (lit. halved, two-coloured) has been wrongly accused of murder in Norway and has to flee to Uppland in Sweden. There he becomes involved in a Freyr cult, where the god, in the form of a wooden idol, resides at a temple with a female ritual specialist. Freyr and the ritual specialist’s sexual relationship is deemed necessary by the Swedes. The narrative continuously plays with the – often sexual – tension between Gunnarr, the ritual specialist, and Freyr. The climax of the conflict comes during the annual autumnal procession around the local landscape, where the Freyr idol, his ritual specialist ‘wife’, and their following are received with *veizlur* (‘ritual feasts’) in order for Freyr to provide the people with *árbót* (‘a prosperous year’).[19] During a storm in a mountain pass, the wagon with Freyr and the ritual specialist and Gunnarr are separated from the rest of the procession, and Gunnarr and Freyr end up in a wrestling match when Gunnarr, exhausted from leading the wagon, dares to sit in the holy vehicle. Gunnarr ultimately wins, dons the remains of the wooden idol, and convinces the ritual specialist to act as if he is Freyr during the procession and its many feasts, where he eats and drinks as normal men. This delights the pagan Swedes – and even more so when the female ritual specialist becomes pregnant, apparently by Gunnarr. The Swedes go on to attribute the exceedingly mild weather and prosperous crops of the following year to Freyr’s apparent virility.

Between the lines of this clearly polemic, Christian text may be remnants of older oral traditions concerning Freyr’s role in a prosperity cult[20] – strongly reminiscent of the Nerthus cult of *Germania*. Nonetheless, in *Gunnars þáttr helmings* we encounter a circulatory procession going from a primary sacral place (the start- and presumed endpoint) making stops around the landscape in order to promote the prosperity of the region. Additionally, there is the motif of a holy wedding (*hieros gamos*) between the god and ritual specialist, which is traditionally thought to further secure the fertility of the land.[21] The ritual feast described at the stop the procession makes after the struggle in the mountains probably served a similar function, presumably consisting of a communal meal of sacrificed animals – as we see, for instance, in *Hákonar saga goða*, a thirteenth-century *konungasaga* set in early tenth-century Norway or *Kjalnesinga saga*, a fourteenth-century íslendingasaga set in ninth-to-eleventh century Iceland and Norway.[22] The procession is hierophoric, centering on prosperity through the fertility of the land (and its people), and features a deity drawn in procession from feast to feast aboard a wagon accompanied by a ritual specialist of the opposite gender.

An additional example of circulatory processions in Viking Age Scandinavia, albeit one less explicitly linked to pagan religious praxis, is found in *Gesta Danorum* (book 5, 16.3) written around 1200 by the Danish chronicler Saxo Grammaticus.[23] This narrative of King Frotho seems to draw on both the Freyr tradition of *Gunnars þáttr* and on the euhemerised myth of the deity’s death in Snorri Sturluson’s *Ynglinga saga* from the 1230s, which lacks any explicit processional movement. After Frotho’s death, Saxo writes that the chieftains want to keep his demise a secret from the king’s subjects in order to maintain the tax regime and geographic integrity of Frotho’s large kingdom. They keep the secret for three years by preserving the king’s body and transporting his corpse in his royal wagon as if he were an old frail man. Such processions seem to have been a common royal activity in both Viking Age Sweden (notably via the Eriksgatan route) and elsewhere in early medieval Europe, so the ruse would likely have been believable.[24] No ritual specialist is mentioned, and the motivation behind the procession seems to be primarily economic and political. We still argue that the procession’s function is fundamentally hierophoric, since the king in this context may be seen as a sacral figure.[25]

Ritual Drama

A somewhat different form of circulatory procession may be detected in so-called ‘ritual drama’ during the Viking Age.[26] The performance of eddic poetry – an anonymous genre of Old Norse poetry concerned with pre-Christian gods and heroes – created what Lars Lönnröth called a ‘double scene’ as human actors temporarily ‘became’ deities.[27] Some such performances, for instance *Lokasenna*, which is set within a single hall, would have required no particular movements, and thus no procession.[28] Other poems, however, have been argued to have been staged at various locations that would have required both performers and audiences to move

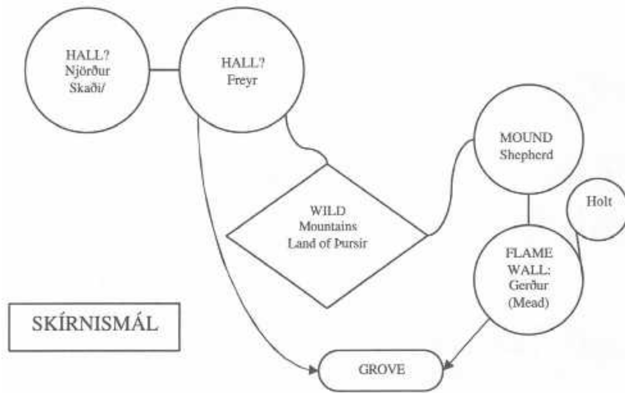

Figure 11.2 Diagram of Skírnir's movements during a performance of Skírnismál. *After Gunnell 2006: 240. Reproduced with permission.*

between locales. *Skírnismál*, for example, describes the travels of Freyr's servant Skírnir to Jǫtunheimr in order to fulfil his master's sexual desire for the *jǫtunn*-woman called Gerðr, and is a clear example of this: Terry Gunnell has proposed it would have been performed outdoors at several (improvised) stages on a typical Viking Age farmstead (Fig. 11.2).[29] The movement of performers and audience between such locations during a performance of the poem would have constituted a ritual, mimetic procession as the 'gods' re-enacted a mythic journey. However, the need for the audience (and actors) to also be at each location requires any such movements to also have been functional processions. That *Skírnismál* should be seen as a circulatory ritual procession is clear, as both the initial and final strophes of the poem are set in the same location, the home of the gods from where Freyr first glimpsed Gerðr and from where Skírnir set out on his journey.

Conclusions on Circulatory Processions

In sum, the circulatory processions we have examined thus far have all been linked with prosperity and power – especially if we view rulers as being in some way sacral figures (*Skírnismál* may be something of an exception to this, although the poem's text is, at its core, about sexual dominance and thus power). Many of the examples were seemingly part of a Vanir-centred cult, something that has been suggested to have played an integral role in Viking Age rulership.[30] The dominant form of circulatory processions in Viking Age Scandinavia is clearly one in which hierophoric representations of sacral powers were transported around a region (typically in a wagon and accompanied by a ritual specialist of the opposite gender), although *Skírnismál* demonstrates a hybrid mimetic-functional function.

Linear Processions

In the pre-Christian Nordic region we mostly find linear processions in connection with funerary rituals. In addition to descriptions of linear burial processions in written sources, there are also a number of archaeological and iconographic finds that can be interpreted as evidence of linear processions – some with clear funerary connotations, some without.

Funerary Processions

Three medieval texts preserve clear accounts of processions occurring as part of funerary rituals in pre-Christian Scandinavian contexts. Unfortunately, two of these describe a mythological event – the funeral of the deity Baldr – and the third outlines a funeral that took place on the banks of the Volga in modern Russia, likely conducted by people whose culture hybridised practices from a wider region, and is thus not straightforwardly Nordic.[31]

To begin with the latter, the *Risāla* ('Account, Description') was written by the Arabic-speaking traveller Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān during the tenth century, but is preserved only piecemeal in other manuscripts, the oldest of which dates to the thirteenth century. Ibn Faḍlān witnessed the funeral of a Rus' chieftain (indeed, he seems to have gone out of his way to be in attendance),[32] and describes how the chieftain was first buried in a temporary grave for ten days before being moved to a ship that had been pulled ashore to serve as the focus of the funeral itself. This translation of the corpse is only one of a series of movements to the beached ship, focused on provisioning the pyre in appropriate style. Such movements were undoubtedly linear, in the sense that the corpse and other supplies moved only in one direction, but the terse style of Ibn Faḍlān's account makes it difficult to say how ritualised they may have been. He does note that some ritual movements occurred before the chieftain's exhumation, saying that the mourners 'advanced, going to and fro [around the boat] uttering words which I did not understand'.[33] Whether this may have amounted to a group performing a circulatory procession around the boat, or whether it reflects a ring of people around the boat moving back and forth, is ambiguous.

That the *Risāla* might reflect more widespread Nordic funerary practices is supported by two descriptions of Baldr's funeral.[34] Chapter 49 of Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning*,[35] part of his *Edda* (a handbook of poetics composed by the Christian magnate in the 1220s) is at least partially based on *Húsdrápa* ('House Poem'). Originally composed by Úlfr Uggason in c. 983–5, this skaldic verse is one of only three ekphratic poems in Old Norse,[36] and describes mythological scenes carved into the wooden panels of an Icelandic house. Stanzas 7–10 of *Húsdrápa* outline the arrival of various mythological figures at Baldr's pyre: Freyr rides his boar, Heimdallr comes on horseback, as does Óðinn, who arrives with *valkyrjur* and ravens in train.[37] Snorri's account adds a number of mythological figures to this cortège, noting that many of them travel by their characteristic divine modes: Freyr's boar and Heimdallr's horse are named, and it is clarified that Freyja arrived 'kǫttum sínum' ('[by means of]

her cats'[38]). Such is the attention paid to the scene that it may well have been intended to be understood as a (linear) hierophoric procession, part of the funerary ritual aiming to ensure Baldr's safe delivery to his afterlife.

A similar intention may lie behind the other clearly linear movements in Snorri's account: first the gods move Baldr's body to the coast, where he is to be burned on his ship Hringhorni.[39] Only once the mourners are in attendance and the ship has been ignited and pushed out to sea are the bodies of Baldr, his wife Nanna, and his horse carried from their temporary resting places to the pyre:

> Þá var borit út á skipit lík Baldrs, ok er þat sá kona hans Nanna Nepsdóttir þá sprakk hon af harmi ok dó. Var hon borin á bálit ok slegit í eldi (...) hestr Baldrs var leiddr á bálit með ǫllu reiði.

> Then Baldr's corpse was carried out onto the ship, and when his wife Nanna Nepsdóttir saw that she died of grief. She was carried onto the pyre (…) Baldr's horse, with its harness and gear, was led onto the fire.[40]

While the movement to the general location of the funeral should probably not be understood as ritual movement, the carrying of the bodies to the pyre itself is clearly part of the funerary proceedings. Given this movement relocates the bodies of deities, the corpses naturally held sacral value – all the more so given the special import accorded to Baldr's invulnerable body immediately prior to his death[41] – which makes the procession not merely functional, but also hierophoric in nature.

A key site for Scandinavian archaeology of funerary rituals is the ninth-century burial at Oseberg, Norway, containing the bodies of two women and a large amount of high-status grave goods: a 21 m ship, a wagon, a sled, several beheaded horses, and a number of tapestry fragments.[42] The most elaborate of these tapestries is poorly preserved, but seems to depict a crowd of humans, animals, and vehicles moving in the same direction (Fig. 11.3), although there is no consensus on what the tapestry fragments portray more generally.[43] The presence of feline iconography in the various grave goods has been used to suggest that one of the buried women was a cult specialist dedicated to the deity Freyja, and that the tapestries thus depict a Freyja-focused ritual.[44] We believe a far simpler and more likely explanation is that the tapestry fragments portray a funerary procession, conducted for the benefit of a high-status member of the Viking Age elite. Such high-status funerary rituals seem to have sometimes included the death of retainers (Nanna, and the enslaved girl in the *Risāla*),[45] which could potentially explain the second body in the Oseberg grave and the hanged bodies depicted on the Oseberg tapestry. While any ritual movement conducted as part of the Oseberg funeral would have been functional according to Lang's typology, the highly elite nature of the burial makes it likely that the bodies inhumed were invested with some form of sacral value, suggesting any potential procession would likely have been a functional-hierophoric hybrid.

One corpus of evidence that might suggest processions formed part of pre-Christian funerary traditions are the Gotlandic picture stones.[46] These memorial stones were erected in several stylistic phases between c. 400–1100, and stones from the third and final pre-Christian phase (c. 800–1000) also depict anthropomorphic figures engaged in a range of activities. Some of these, like the Oseberg tapestry fragments,

Figure 11.3 Reconstruction of detail from one of the Oseberg tapestry fragments 1–2. Stig Saxegaard, Storm Studios. All colours are illustrative. After Vedeler 2019. Reproduced with permission.

include groups seemingly moving in the same direction, and might thus represent ritual movement. The Lärbo Tängelgårda I stone (Fig. 11.4),[47] for example, has three panels showing human figures: the uppermost appears to show a battle, while the lower two seem to show warriors walking in procession, leading a dead body on a horse, and following a mounted figure. The warriors hold their swords upside-down and brandish rings (possibly so-called Scandinavian 'temple rings' known from both textual and archaeological sources),[48] which would suggest a ritual, not merely practical, purpose to their procession. The mounted figure is apparently being greeted by a female being, and is surrounded by so-called **valknútar*,[49] which might have been intended to depict a dead warrior's accession to Valhǫll. The Lärbo Tängelgårda I stone would thus seem to portray a hybrid functional-hierophoric procession that not only featured the practical relocation of a corpse, but also sacrally charged symbols (inverted swords, rings, **valknútar*, and possibly even a *valkyrja*).

Figure 11.4 Reconstruction of the upper panels of the Lärbro Tängelgårda I stone. Photo by JC Merriman. CC BY-2.0, Wikimedia Commons.

The Sanda I stone (Fig. 11.5), however, has a far less clearly funerary context. This stone has three figures apparently walking from right to left, the first holding a spear, the second a club (or hammer?), and the third a sickle. The usual interpretation of these figures is that they are intended to represent the deities Óðinn, Þórr, and Freyr (or possibly Óðinn, Hœnir, and Lóðurr, or Óðinn, Vili, and Vé), although the runic inscription on the stone seems to memorialise three (human?) names, '**: roþuisl : aug : farborn : auk : kunborn :**' ('Hróðvísl ok Farbjǫrn ok Gunnbjǫrn').[50] If these names refer to historical humans, the lines between the depiction of a purely mythological journey or procession (of the type known from other Gotlandic picture stones)[51] and a human performance of the same narrative becomes blurred, perhaps suggesting the procession on Sanda I – if procession it is – was mimetic in function. Whether or not the scene depicted on Sanda I has anything to do with the stone's presumed memorial purpose is similarly unclear.

More generally, archaeological evidence for funerary rituals in the pre-Christian Nordic region is an area of lively debate.[52] Tantalisingly, the linear processional movement of a dead body expressed in texts like *Gylfaginning* might be witnessed archaeologically in some linear monuments found at grave fields. However, the makeup of sites with these features is complex, and it is possible at least some of these formalised routes were used outside of funerary contexts or as part of larger ritual movements beyond the immediate site. Similarly, evidence for various forms of transport in and from funerary contexts – not least the wagon from Oseberg – is at least partially paralleled by the textual accounts of wagon-usage in circulatory processions considered above. We will therefore consider both topics separately below.

Linear Processions in Non-Funerary Contexts

In addition to the clear evidence for linear processions in funerary contexts, there is a small body of evidence that suggests linear processions might also have appeared in

Figure 11.5 The Sanda I stone. Photo by Swedish History Museum. CC BY-4.0.

other ritual contexts during the late Iron Age. In *Hákonar saga goða*, Snorri recounts that it was common pre-Christian practice that 'þá er blót skyldi vera (…) allir bændr skyldu þar koma, sem hof var, ok flytja þannug fǫng sín, þau er þeir skyld hafa, meða veizlan stóð' ('when a sacrifice was to be held (…) all farmers should come to where the cult house stood, and bring [with them] all the provisions that they would need, while the sacrificial feast was conducted').[53] Many of the participants in such a *blót* would have undertaken such travel, which necessarily included a return home, in an entirely practical manner, with ritual activity restricted to the main event itself. Yet it is possible that some stages of the journey, such as the final approach to the *hof* when many parties would have coalesced, were conducted in a sacrally charged manner. These journeys may have been what Lang terms 'demonstrative', with a ritual congregation displaying their religious unity as a group. This seems particularly likely in the case of the Norwegian *blót* Snorri describes, as Norway was undergoing a series of politicised (and sometimes violent) attempts to establish Christianity during the Viking Age. If the farmers were also expected to provide their own offerings to be sacrificed, any such animal would have been imbued with hierophoric value, something marked out for the gods, which would add a more explicitly religious element to their arrival at the ritual site. That such animals were sometimes paraded before their sacrifice is indicated in some redactions of *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, when a holy boar marked out for Freyr is presented before the king,[54] although details of exactly how animal sacrifice was conducted in the Viking Age are extremely sparse due to the Christian milieux in which medieval texts were produced.[55]

Another case of a linear procession divorced from funerary contexts can be found in *Hauks þáttr hárbrókar*, preserved in *Flateyjarbók*. Like *Gunnars þáttr* examined above, this text purports to depict Swedish paganism to a West-Nordic Christian audience, casting some doubt on the authenticity of events it describes. In the *þáttr*, a king holds a *veizla* to secure otherworldly knowledge from a deity called Lýtir, potentially a byname of Freyr.[56] The procedure involves the driving of two wagons to a location where the king customarily sacrificed to Lýtir, although whether this should be understood as a nearby building or distant 'natural' feature such as a lake or grove is unclear.[57] There, the wagons are left overnight until sufficient sacrifices have been made to convince the deity to board one – highly reminiscent of Freyr in *Gunnars þáttr*. Once the god is aboard, the wagon is pulled into the king's hall by draft animals, at which point the ruler is able to 'ganga til frétta' ('go get [the] news', i.e. conduct a divinatory ritual).[58] The movements here are partially functional (the wagons must be in place before Lýtir can be coaxed aboard), partially hierophoric (Lýtir is said to be physically present in the wagon), and partially demonstrative (the king very publicly requests Lýtir's knowledge in front of an audience, as opposed to in the relative privacy implied at the place where he sacrificed to the deity). Whether any procession here is circulatory or linear is similarly complex: Lýtir is entreated to accompany two men on a journey north before returning 'home', a circular journey that was likely ritualised to some extent due to the perceived presence of the god. However, given the distances involved (to say nothing of the possibility that the deity would refuse the king's request), it seems unlikely the whole journey should be viewed as a procession. Rather, given the ritual nature of the divination and the lack of any intermediate stops between the king's hall and Lýtir's dwelling, it seems more likely that only Lýtir's travel to the hall – and possibly only his entrance to the royal building itself – was ritualised to the point of procession,[59] which would suggest a linear format and a hybrid functional-hierophoric-demonstrative function.

Conclusions on Linear Processions

Linear processions in Viking Age Scandinavia appear to have primarily been performed in funerary contexts, particularly in the transport of the body to the site of the funeral, be that a burial pit, mound, ship, or pyre. Such ritual movement would therefore have constituted at least functional processions, with high-status burials such as those of the martial elite (as witnessed by the Oseberg grave and described in the *Risāla*) also featuring hierophoic elements – not only the corpse itself, but also potentially rings, inverted swords, or mythologically significant implements. The Sanda I stone upon which such implements are depicted may portray a mimetic procession (of dubious connection to funerary rituals) assuming it does in fact depict a dramatic re-enactment of mythological figures, and not those figures themselves. While funerary rituals for non-elite members of society seem less likely to have featured some of the extravagant hierophoric elements preserved in our elite-focused textual and archaeological corpora, that does not mean they were fundamentally functional, or even purely practical, non-ritualised affairs (although some of them doubtless were).[60] On the basis of the evidence available to us, however, we can say that linear processions in the Viking Age were most common in elite funerary processions, where they functioned as hybrid functional-hierophoric ritual movements. In other contexts, both *Hákonar saga* and *Hauks þáttr* suggest that linear processions sometimes formed part of larger ritual complexes, where they could fulfil complicated hybrid functional-hierophoric-demonstrative roles.

Other Evidence for Processions in Viking Age Scandinavia

While the evidence considered thus far generally falls more-or-less straightforwardly into the two categories of procession proposed in our earlier work,[61] some archaeological

data is less easy to categorise. Rather than making insecure claims and overstating the usefulness of the proposed categorisation, such evidence is examined separately here in the hope of providing an appropriately nuanced discussion.

Forms of Ritual Transport

The prominence of wagons in the majority of sources for circulatory processions examined above is remarkable, particularly when it comes to prosperity cults. However, there are numerous instances of the use of wagons that are not tied to circulatory procession at all, but which are also not clearly connected with linear processions. The presence of a wagon (among other means of transportation) in the Oseberg grave (Fig. 11.6), as well as the depiction of several wheeled vehicles in the Oseberg tapestry fragments, is noteworthy in this regard. Not only is procession in a funerary context fundamentally a linear ritual that culminates at the burial site, the Oseberg wagon itself was clearly designed for ritual, not practical, purposes: it was both collapsible and unsteerable – the front wheels could not be turned to either side, and thus the wagon could only travel in a straight line. While light and unsteerable wagons like that excavated at Oseberg or the much older Trundholm 'sun chariot' – a 54 cm long bronze artefact from c. 1400 BC excavated in western Denmark[62] – could potentially have been transported along longer, circulatory routes, their ritual use was clearly restricted to short, linear processions, perhaps along so-called 'ritual roads', as discussed below.

We might also consider the possibility that the wagon in general was intended to serve as transport to an afterlife. Some Gotlandic picture stones depict wheeled vehicles, as on the Ekeby and Alskog stones,[63] although none of these can be clearly linked to processions. While the Gotlandic stones were clearly intended to serve a memorial purpose and some were erected in connection with graves, not all of them were *funerary* monuments: like many mainland Scandinavian runestones, some Gotlandic picture stones were erected along key transport routes entirely separate from any known inhumation or cremation sites, quite possibly some time later, accompanied by ritual procedures of their own.[64] The closest association between funerary ritual and a wagon is found on the Levide stone, where the damaged runic inscription appears to invoke the Christian God to protect the souls of a deceased couple (Fig. 11.7).[65] That this wagon was intended to serve the dead as a vehicle to their afterlife is certainly possible, but far from clear.

There are some possible iconographic forerunners to the Viking Age Gotlandic picture stones. The so-called 'King's Grave' at Kivik in Skåne, Sweden is a very high-status burial monument from c. 1300 BC, and is decorated with carved stone panels. One of these shows eight identically clad figures following a dancer or acrobat, a number of other human and animal figures, and a chariot (Fig. 11.8).

Figure 11.6 The Oseberg wagon. Photo by Eirik Irgens Johnsen, Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo. CC BY-SA 4.0.

Figure 11.7 The Levide stone. Photo by Riksantikvarieämbetet. Public domain.

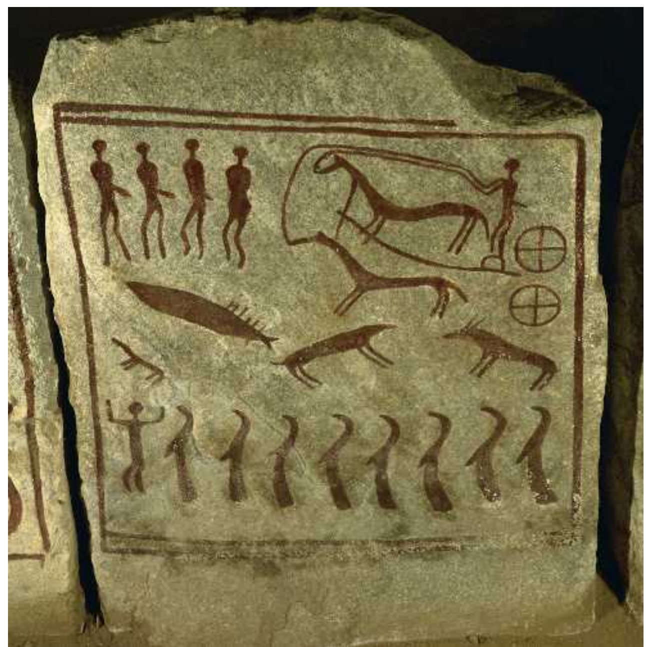

Figure 11.8 Stone 7 of the Kivik grave. Photo by Lennart Larsen, National Museum of Denmark. CC BY-SA 2.5.

Despite the clearly funerary context of the stone panel, it is far from clear that the procession depicted was connected to a burial ritual. Indeed, both processions and wheeled vehicles are known from Bronze Age (c. 1750–500 BC) petroglyphs carved into cliffs and rock formations with no funerary contexts (e.g. Fig. 11.9). Our limited knowledge of Bronze Age cosmology and religion in fact suggests that processions were more likely related to the worship of the sun, forming hybrid hierophoric-mimetic processions echoing celestial movements in the sky.[66]

There are also written sources from the early Middle Ages that indicate the afterlife could be reached on foot[67] or on horseback,[68] and ships, shoes, horses, horseshoes, carriages, sledges, and skates have all been found in Iron Age burials.[69] What's more, boat and ship burials like the Oseberg grave and numerous others known from the entire Nordic region (such as the Ladby grave in Denmark or Valsgärde grave field in Sweden), not to mention the long-standing tradition of ship-shaped stone settings known from Southern Scandinavia (for instance, at Glavendrup, Denmark) are generally thought to represent the need to travel to the afterlife by ship.[70] Perhaps comparably, a small number of inhumations using parts of or entire wagons as makeshift 'coffins' are also known from the Viking Age, such as grave 4, the so-called '*vǫlva* grave' at Fyrkat, Denmark,[71] which might have represented similar ideas (→ **Chapters 23–25**).[72] Granted, the strong variation in Nordic burial cultures during the Iron Age further complicates any attempts to make blanket claims regarding transport to afterlives on the basis of grave goods, which might, after all, 'merely' be the personal possessions of the deceased or ritual deposits made by mourners on either personal or symbolic grounds.[73] Of course, it is entirely possible that vehicles served more than one of these roles, perhaps being used during the deceased's lifetime, serving a ritual role during their funeral, and finally buried or burnt in order to secure the deceased's transport to an afterlife.

Figure 11.9 A potential procession between two boats on the Bronze Age stone carving at Ekenberg in Norrköping, Sweden. Photo by Planx. CC BY-3.0, Wikimedia Commons.

The use of many modes of transportation connected with processions surveyed here is noteworthy, especially considering Lang's proposition that participants in processions often took part on foot.[74] Indeed, it is remarkable that in Old Norse sources for processions, the verb *at ganga* ('to walk') seemingly does not feature when it concerns the sacral participants (a deity or their representation, ritual specialists, and so on) and only occasionally concerning more profane participants. Instead, neutral verbs which can describe movement both on foot and by other means are used, for instance *fara* ('travel'), *fylgja* ('follow'), *koma* ('come'), and *leiða* ('lead').[75] The words that can be tied to specific forms of transportation also suggest that walking was not frequent:[76] *áka* ('drive') is used to describe both Freyr's wagon at Baldr's funeral in *Gylfaginning* and the wagons of Lýtir's divination; *riða* ('ride') is used to describe transportation on various animals in both *Gylfaginning* and *Húsdrápa*, and so on.

This, however, does not mean that riding in a wagon or on a horse should necessarily be taken as evidence of processions or ritual movement more generally in Viking Age Scandinavia, just as the presence of vehicles in a grave does not constitute evidence of transport to the afterlife. Good, practical reasons for using such modes of transportation are ample – from weather to travel distance (Fig. 11.10) – especially for members of the societal elite, for whom horses (and likely wagons) also functioned as status symbols. Such modes of transport could also have been used in specific processions to physically elevate sacral symbols or figures, either to set them apart from, or to make them more visible to, the remaining participants, or both (the sensory aspects of Viking Age rituals are a badly overlooked field of inquiry).[77] In fact, it is not clear which forms of transport – if any – participants of lower social status used in such processions. In *Gunnars þáttr*, it is indicated that the ritual specialist and the idol of Freyr are to ride in the wagon while Gunnarr and the retainers are to *ganga fyrir* ('walk in front'; to our knowledge the only instance of the verb *ganga* in sources for procession), while the neutral terms noted above are used for less singular mythological figures, like the *jǫtnar* and *valkyrjur*, in Baldr's funeral. If these groups should be seen as mythological representatives of human participants in processions set in this world, perhaps they did walk, as *Gunnars þáttr* suggests. The use of wagons and other forms of transportation could thus correlate with ascribed sacrality and social status in the Old Norse written, material, and iconographic sources, something that seems to be corroborated by the inclusion of a wagon among the high-status Oseberg grave goods, the depiction of a chariot in a processional context in the 'King's grave' at Kivik, and the use of wheeled vehicles in circulatory contexts related to prosperity cults and linear funerary contexts.

Figure 11.10 Reconstruction of Viking Age transport equipment by the 'Vikinger på rejse' project, Vikingemarked Fyrkat, 04.07.2018. Photo by Maria Nørgaard and Stig L. Petersen. Reproduced with permission.

Linear Monuments and Ritual Roads

New information on Viking Age ritual architecture comes constantly to light as new archaeological investigations are undertaken and old data are interpreted in the light of new finds and ideas. Some of this information, particularly concerning so-called 'linear monuments' and 'ritual roads', may help shed light on processions and ritual movement in Viking Age Scandinavia. Such structures are often poorly preserved and (by necessity) outside the main areas of activity of the sites to which they are connected, and their functions are not well understood. To further complicate matters, there seem to have been two main forms of comparable architecture: rows of freestanding posts with no evidence they formed part of other structures (such as buildings, tents, or even temporary structures), and notable roads. Both tend to run in straight lines, and some sites may feature combinations of them, with 'linear monuments' of freestanding posts marking out particular routes. Many sites featuring one or both forms of this architecture seem to have been used for ritual purposes, and we understand both linear monuments and comparable roads as means by which movement to or around sacral space was controlled.[78]

Perhaps the most straightforward connection between these structures and the evidence for ritual processions we have considered thus far are the presence of noteworthy roads connected to some grave fields. Roads within or leading to grave fields need not necessarily imply ritual movement. Such sites are often on the edge of settlement areas, and roads can provide practical transport links for corpses, mourners, and workers and material for the preparation of graves, pyres, or memorials. As we noted above, neither the funerals of the Rus' chieftain or Baldr make it explicit that travel to the site of their funerary rites were ritualised, although at least some movement around the site certainly seems to have been. The network of roads connecting the large grave field at Møllegårdsmarken to the rest of the wider Gudme settlement area in eastern Fyn in Denmark, for example, may have been used for such practical purposes: in use c. 100 BC–AD 425, the roads run to the edge of the grave field, sometimes ending close to one of four small fourth-century buildings.[79] These constructions, none with dimensions exceeding 5.5 m, have been interpreted as 'mortuary houses', used as temporary storage and preparation spaces for corpses while more permanent graves and ritual activities were readied.[80] The roads' unusually fine gravel surfaces have clearly preserved the imprints of wheel ruts c. 1.2 m in width, suggesting that wheeled vehicles were regularly used to transport material – likely both corpses and building supplies – to the grave field.

At other sites, however, there is no practical explanation for the road remains excavated. At Rösaring near Sigtuna in Uppland, Sweden, for example, a ninth-century road runs c. 540 m almost exactly north–south atop a prominent 60 m-tall ridge.[81] This road runs from a small building (also interpreted as a mortuary house)[82] in the north, to the site's largest mound, flat-topped and 21 m in diameter, which is surrounded by other burials, cairns, and a Bronze Age labyrinth.[83] It is edged on one side by a low dyke and on the other by a row of around a hundred pits (likely post-holes), each c. 1 m in diameter and set 4–5 m apart.[84] The area

seems to have been a chieftain's seat from around the sixth century, and the burial complex includes four large burial mounds from just before the Viking Age. As the mounds were built from local resources, it seems unlikely that the road was constructed to transport building material, which would have needed to be moved up the ridge, not along its crest. The best explanation of the road's function thus seems to have been to ensure easy movement of the corpse from the 'mortuary house' to the grave field at the site's southern edge, perhaps by wheeled vehicle, and likely accompanied by ritual specialists, mourners, and workers responsible for the closing of the grave (assuming the mourners themselves did not fulfil this role). Such ritual movement is easily seen as a linear procession, with hybrid functional-demonstrative functions, and possibly additional hierophoric functions if sacrally charged symbols – such as a corpse or the rings and weapons depicted on the Gotlandic picture stones – were involved.

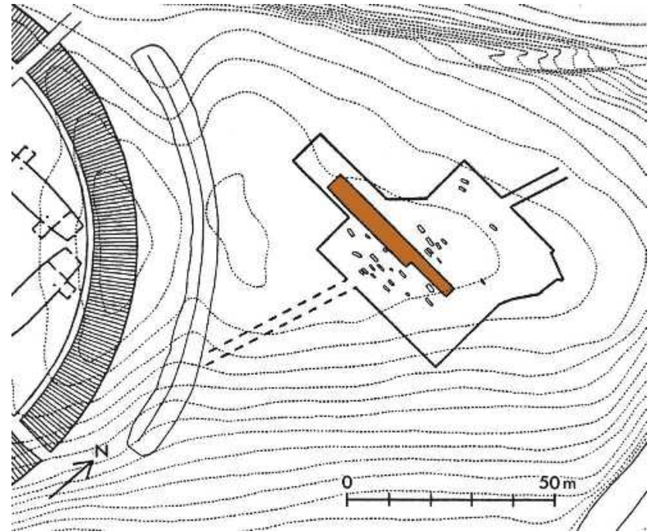

Figure 11.11 Plan of the north-eastern corner of the ring fort at Fyrkat in Jylland, Denmark, showing the excavation of the grave field on the nearby ridge. The section marked in brown (colour added by present authors) is the area where post-holes seem to represent a wooden roadway that likely stemmed from the fort's northern gate. Original drawing after Roesdahl 1977: fig. II.80. Reproduced with permission.

Smaller-scale but fundamentally comparable arrangements have also been excavated at both Gulli in Vestfold, Norway and Fyrkat in Jylland, Denmark. The latter is one of the ring forts constructed across the then-Danish kingdom at the end of the tenth century, likely part of a long-standing tradition of royally sponsored monumental building projects.[85] Situated at the head of Mariager Fjord, the fortress would also have controlled the main land-route between Aarhus and Aalborg on the Jutlandic peninsula. While the fortress only saw brief usage, there is a small grave field to its north-east, atop a low ridge. The grave field contains only 29 burials (famously including the so-called '*vǫlva*' of grave 4, who was buried in a wagon-body) but is neatly split by a series of small post-holes that likely once contained supports for an elevated wooden platform (Fig. 11.11).[86] This sort of platform is known to have been built as elevated walkways at other Nordic settlements (for instance, between the houses on muddy ground at Viking Dublin),[87] and the Fyrkat example seems likely to have served as the culmination of a road leading into the grave field from the fortress: c. 38 m long by at most 5 m wide, no graves were found under the presumed surface, and it sits at the very highest point of the ridge, and is exactly aligned with the east–west internal structures of the ring fortress. The high-status milieu of the fortress is confirmed by the relatively rich furnishings of the graves, which implies an elevated degree of ritualisation during any funerary proceedings – and that this short 'ritual road' was likely regarded as sacrally charged space, the site of functional-hierophoric processions.

Gulli, a site under cultivation since the Mesolithic up until the present, features a Viking Age grave field in use c. AD 700–1050.[88] This grave field was partially destroyed by ploughing, allowing only the 20 surviving inhumation graves to be examined archaeologically: there are a number of ring-ditches suggesting many of the graves were once marked by mounds, three extant burials contained chamber graves, at least four included (partial) horse remains, and as many as eight graves saw boats used as coffins.[89] As can be seen from a plan of the site (Fig. 11.12), the graves were organised into two rows running roughly east–west, with preserved skeletal remains oriented at 90° to the gap between the graves with their heads to the north. This gap appears to have been a road that predated the Viking Age graves (but not three earlier cooking pits dated to c. AD 100–540), which seem to have been arranged around it.[90] A small structure (9.4 m × 4.5 m internally) towards the eastern end of the road is witnessed by four post-holes and the remains of ditches around three of its sides, perhaps suggesting its western gable was open to the grave field,[91] and it has been dated to the late eighth century or before on the basis of deposited material recovered from its post-holes.

As with the comparable small buildings at Møllegårdsmarken or Rösaring, this structure could be understood as a straightforward mortuary house, the sort of building used for temporary storage of cadavers, and likely the point at which practical movement stopped and ritual processions began. However, while the excavation team at Gulli acknowledge this possibility, they also suggest the structure could have served other, or even multiple, purposes: grave fields could also be the sites of rituals directed to ancestral figures for all manner of ends, including prosperity,[92] and small buildings (like roads) could serve many functions. Acknowledging Jens Peter Schjødt's critique of our earlier study, we therefore accept that the roads at Rösaring, Fyrkat, and Gulli need not have been used only for funerary processions.[93] Nonetheless, the dead-straight nature of these roads, the

Figure 11.12 Overview of the excavations at Gulli in Vestfold, Norway. Plan after Gjerpe 2005, created by Mange Samdal. Ring-ditches are marked in orange, graves in red, and the small structure in green. Reproduced with permission.

clearly demarcated endings of the examples at Rösaring and Fyrkat, and their obvious connection to burial grounds strongly suggests these monuments were primarily used for small-scale linear procession in the Viking Age.

That said, some sites feature linear structures better linked to processional arrival at a site than to ritual movement within it. The site at Ranheim in Sør-Trøndelag, Norway, for instance, seems to have been used for ritual purposes over several centuries.[94] It lies close to the southern coast of Trondheim Fjord, and includes a small 'cult house' (dated after c. 895–990) comparable to the well-known finds at Uppåkra in Skåne, Sweden and Tissø on Fyn, Denmark, as well as a flat-topped stone platform, c. 15 m across and c. 1 m tall, atop which significant traces of burnt bone were excavated, suggesting it was used for significant outdoor feasting, dated to the fifth century (Fig. 11.13).[95] What is more, the site also features two parallel rows of large stones (in place by c. AD 390–440, according to the dating of a charcoal deposit beneath one of the stones) which seem to point from the site to the nearby waterline. It is possible that these stones – which serve no discernible practical purpose – were a form of linear monument intended to mark a route from an undocumented landing place on the fjord up to the ritual site (this may also have been the case at Rösaring, where the northern end of the road approaches the likely Viking Age waterline). Given the restricted size of the excavated area, however, it is uncertain how far west any stone rows might have extended, and it is also possible they formed so-called 'soft' boundaries of the type known to have been enforced by comparable stone platforms, wetland, and roped stakes – so-called *vébǫnd* – at other *vé* sites in the late Iron Age.[96]

Perhaps more securely, Anundshög in Västmanland, Sweden was in use from at least the early Iron Age until the Middle Ages, and features a series of monuments and rich burials from the Migration and Viking Ages: there are two large ship settings and a runestone,[97] and was the location of a *þing* ('assembly') during at least the Viking Age,[98] which made use of the site's pre-existing mounds to organise ritualised socio-political gatherings. The monuments were situated between an area of wetland to the west, and a small river to the north and south (Figs 11.14 and 11.15). This river was crossed by two fords (one each to the north and east), which may have formed part of the 'Eriksgata',

a route between several regional assembly sites known from medieval textual sources, and which was followed by newly appointed kings during the early Middle Ages.[99] These fords, and the roads leading across them, would thus have been vital links between Anundshög and other ritual sites. While they may have been purely functional routes, the Eirksgata was a large-scale ritual movement – a demonstrative political procession, likely with hierophoric overtones due to the sacral nature of rulers in both pagan and Christian Sweden[100] – and even local assemblies could feature ritual activities, particularly the communal consumption of special meals, likely connected to community-building.[101] What is more, the line of the eastern road is extended south of the monuments by a line of post-holes every c. 5 m, tentatively dated to the Vendel or Viking Ages, the purpose of which is unclear: there is no evidence they were connected to one another or any other structures. Their location to the south of the site's other monuments, however, has lead Alexandra Sanmark to suggest they were a form of *vébǫnd* that enclosed Anundshög, turning the site into a 'symbolic island'.[102] Rather than serving as a platform for ritual movement like the 'ritual roads' of Rösaring, Fyrkat, and Gulli (and potentially Ranheim and Anundshög itself), this linear monument seems therefore to limit movement at the ritual site, exercising a demonstrative control over where people could *not* move, rather than where they could.

Comparable linear monuments of wooden posts have also been excavated at Gamla Uppsala in Uppland, Sweden, around 75 km to the north-east of Anundshög. This site, also partially bounded by wetland, famously features a series of large mounds, significant grave fields, and was a major assembly site from the Vendel Age on – as well as serving a major religious site, if the eleventh-century chronicler Adam of Bremen is to be believed (→ **Chapter 6**).[103] The two lines of post-holes run at nearly 90° to one another, and are both dated to the late Vendel period, with no evidence they existed in multiple phases.[104] The post-holes themselves are very large (c. 1.5 m in diameter) with significant stone footings, which would seem to suggest the posts were tall

Figure 11.13 Aerial photographs of the excavations at Ranheim in Sør-Trøndelag, Norway: a) shows the excavations at the site, with the excavation area to the bottom containing the parallel rows of stows running E–W in the bottom left, the stone platform in the bottom centre, and the 'cult house' in the centre; b) shows the site's local context, including the location of the current E–W coastline and river, to a landing site on which the parallel rows of stones may have led during the Iron Age when sea levels were higher. Photos by Erling Skjervold. Reproduced with permission.

constructions.[105] It is unclear if they were border markers, or if they were used to display the remains of sacrificial offerings as Sanmark has suggested,[106] and which is witnessed on a smaller scale by Ibrāhīm ibn Ya‘qūb al-Isrā’īlī al-Turṭushi’s description of Hedeby (a port-of-trade in Viking Age Denmark) in the early 960s.[107] Unlike Anundshög, however, at least the northern row of post-holes at Gamla Uppsala may have been directly collocated with a known prehistoric road route, which led north from the site to a ford across the River Samnan (Fig. 11.16).[108] Thus the monuments’ potential relation to ritual movement and procession at Gamla Uppsala is complex: it seems unlikely that the individual posts were used as ‘ritual axes mundi’,[109] and we regard it as more probable that the southern row of posts was – like its counterpart at Anundshög – intended to serve as a highly visible boundary marker, delimiting the southern edge of the site’s ritual space. The northern row, however, seems to have monumentalised the Samnan road, a major route to the site, increasing its long-distance visibility, perhaps comparable with the ridge-top ritual roads of Rösaring and Fyrkat. It could therefore tentatively be suggested that this route was used for processional arrivals to (and possibly departures from) Gamla Uppsala, with such ritual movements potentially demonstrating the full range of hybrid functions according to Lang’s typology depending on the intended activity at the site itself, which seems to have spanned religious, political, social, and economic purposes.[110]

Figure 11.14 Map of Anundshög, showing the wetland, roads, and wooden monument imposed on a map from 1689. After Sanmark 2015: fig. 1. Reproduced with permission.

While both Gamla Uppsala and Anundshög can be regarded as belonging to the very highest levels of Svea society – indeed, it has been suggested that the two sites competed with each other, driving their increasing monumentality throughout the Vendel and Viking Ages[111] – four other Swedish sites demonstrate that similar ideas were explored at more local levels. Indeed, Degeberga (Skåne), Önsvala (Skåne), Färlöv (Skåne), and Tomteboda (Stockholm) have already been productively compared to Gamla Uppsala and Anundshög: all four sites had some regional importance, featured burials from as early as the Roman Iron Age (Degeberga, Önsvala, and Färlöv) or the Vendel Age (Tomteboda), and expressed some level of

Figure 11.15 Aerial photograph of Anundshög seen from the south-east. Photo by Daniel Löwenborg. Reproduced with permission.

Figure 11.16 The linear monuments at Gamla Uppsala region overlaid on a 1952 map of the region. Adapted from Wikborg 2017: fig. 1. Reproduced with permission.

monumentality, up to two large ship settings and a runestone at Färlöv.[112] All four also had some form of linear monument, road, or both connected to the site: Degeberga featured a line of regularly paced Migration Period pit hearths, later replaced by a parallel row of post-holes, both parallel to the remains of a lane leading to a river valley and a presumed ford.[113] Önsvala, around 5 km from the major cult site at Uppåkra, also featured a row of pit hearths C-14 dated to the early fourth century, a trench of unknown purpose c. 25 m east of the hearths and parallel to them, as well as a partially filled depression interpreted as the remains of a road c. 15 m east of the trench and parallel to both it and the hearths.[114] Färlöv is a large grave field abutting several hundred metres of prehistoric road (perhaps reminiscent of Gulli, if the road there did not terminate at the grave field) running directly north–south atop a ridge (reminiscent of Rösaring and Fyrkat), and was clearly high status, with two large ship settings from the Vendel or early Viking Age and a ninth-century runestone.[115] The linear monument on the site – a row of post-holes – ran parallel to the road, just inside the grave field, and would have greatly increased the site's visibility in the local landscape. The site at Tomteboda is a grave field on a south-facing slope overlooking Lake Ulvsundasjön, an upper branch of Lake Mälaren, with a range of grave markers and monuments dated to c. 400–800. The linear monument here runs 53 m downhill to the west–southwest, possibly marking a now-lost route to the nearby high water level,[116] perhaps connecting the site to an undocumented landing place as may also have been the case at Ranheim.

Synthesising their findings at Degeberga with results from the other sites, Tony Björk and Ylva Wickberg suggest that a general paradigm of changing monumentality can be abstracted: earlier lines of pit hearths, stemming mostly from the Migration Period, were replaced in the early-to-mid Vendel Period with a parallel row of post-holes, representing 'evidence for a radical transformation of the ritual landscape during the mid-1st millennium AD', perhaps in parallel to the erection of peripheral hill forts in Norway.[117] We would observe that this seems in line with observations regarding the increased portability of religious praxis as it became increasingly decoupled from specific landscape features during the Migration Period,[118] and that the short windows during which each of these linear monuments seem to have been constructed might suggest they represented monumental expressions of so-called 'crisis rituals',[119] perhaps – as Schjødt has suggested[120] – conducted in connection with the large-scale violence that demarcated the Migration Period from the preceding Roman Iron Age.

Adding the evidence from Rösaring, Fyrkat, Gulli, and Ranheim to Björk and Wickberg's examination of the Swedish sites, no single pattern emerges (Table 11.1), nor does there seem to have been obvious geographic distribution beyond the southern Swedish model identified by Björk and Wickberg (indeed, the majority of our archaeological evidence remains markedly southern Scandinavian; Fig. 11.1). That said, it does seem that all of these locations employed comparable monumental architecture to express a small range of similar ideas during the Migration (c. AD 400–550), Vendel (c. AD 550–800), and Viking Ages (c. AD 800–1100): linear monuments constructed of rows of wooden posts (and potentially stones at Ranheim, as well as hearths earlier in the Iron Age) were used to enclose ritual spaces (Anundshög, the southern row at Gamla Uppsala), or to demarcate routes to (the northern row at Gamla Uppsala, Degeberga, Färlöv, Tomteboda) or within them (Fyrkat, Gulli). These routes were not necessarily solely ritual in purpose: some appear to have been pre-existing parts of larger regional transport networks (the northern row at Gamla Uppsala, Färlöv), which likely fulfilled everyday practical ends more often than they did ritual processions. Other routes seem more restricted to ritual spaces, such as the wooden platform that culminated the short route from the Fyrkat fortress to the ridgetop grave field. It is perhaps notable that where these roads fully entered a ritual space – not merely running to the site (Møllegårdsmarken) or alongside it (Färlöv) – they generally appear to be 'dead ends', with only one entrance

Table 11.1 Comparison of features at the sites discussed in this subchapter. Sites with linear monuments and/or ritual roads that likely saw use during the Viking Age are marked in green.

	Location	*Notable Geographic Features*	*Related Graves*	*Road*	*Linear Monuments*	*Other Features*
Møllemarken	Fyn (DK)	*none*	Large grave field, many elite graves, 100 BC–AD 425	External, various routes to other parts of the Gudme settlement area (a central place complex c. AD 200–600)	*none*	Four 'mortuary houses' around the perimeter
Rösaring	Uppland (SW)	Ridgetop, coastal slope	Small grave field containing at least four Bronze-Age cairns and two mounds thought to be Iron Age	Internal (north–south), from 'mortuary house' to grave field (c. 580 m); potential external link to lost landing site	1) at least 540 m of post holes, c. 3.75 m apart from the 'mortuary house' to the grave field (dating unclear, thought to be Iron Age)	'Mortuary house' at the northern end of the road
Fyrkat	Jylland (DK)	Ridgetop, slope to waterline, nearby wetland,	Small grave field, 29 graves, some elite, c. AD 980–1000	Internal (east–west), probably from the fortress' northern gate to the centre of the grave field	1) post holes suggesting a wooden walkway, c. 38 m long by 5 m wide in the centre of the grave field, aligned with the fortress' geometry (c. AD 980–1000)	Large fortress, c. AD 980–1000
Gulli	Vestfold (NR)	*none*	Mid-sized grave field, 60 graves, c. AD 700–1050	Internal (east–west), between two rows of graves, ends of the route uncertain	*none*	*none*
Ranheim	Sør-Trøndelag (NR)	Slope to waterline	Three graves, c. 760–415 BC	Internal (east–west); potential external link to lost landing site	1–2) two sequential and parallel lines of large stones, covering at least 60 m, constructed c. AD 390–440	Viking-Age 'cult house'; fifth-century stone platform
Anundshög	Västmanland (SW)	Nearby wetland	Large grave field, many elite graves, many monuments, c. AD 400–1100	External, two routes to other centres in the Uppland region (both via fords)	1) at least 156 m of post-holes, c. 2 m apart, constructed after c. AD 400	Assembly site (at least Iron and Middle Ages); 12 burial mounds (Anundshög itself c. AD 210–540); five ship settings (Iron Age); runestone (c. AD 1050–1100)
Gamla Uppsala	Uppland (SW)	Nearby wetland	Large grave field, many elite graves, c. AD 1–1100	External, various routes to other centres in the Uppland region (in one case via a ford)	1) a row of post holes (roughly north–south), c. 6 m apart, 862 m long alongside a road; 2) a line of wooden posts (roughly east–west), c. 6 m apart, at least 725 m across a flat area	Assembly site (at least Iron and Middle Ages); many burial mounds (Iron Age); several hall buildings (Iron Age)

(Continued)

Table 11.1 (Continued)

	Location	*Notable Geographic Features*	*Related Graves*	*Road*	*Linear Monuments*	*Other Features*
Degeberga	Skåne (SW)	Ridgetop, nearby wetland	Small grave field partially surveyed, c. AD 1–400	Internal (north–south), parallel to the linear monuments; external, the site is a natural crossroads in the local landscape	1) a curved row of hearths (roughly north–south), c. 120 m long, c. AD 200–400; 2) a rows of pit hearths (roughly north–south), c. 150 m long, c. AD 400–650; 3) a row of post-holes (roughly north–south) at least 190 m long, c. AD 400–650	Nearby late Bronze and early Iron Age settlement; nearby high-status grave fields (Iron Age)
Önsvala	Skåne (SW)	*none*	Mid-sized grave field, some elite graves, c. AD 200–1000	Potential road remains in a partially filled depression, c. 60 m long and 7 m wide	1) a row of pit hearths, c. 4.2 m apart, c. AD 370–480; 2) a parallel trench; 3) a parallel depression interpreted as remains of a road, containing seven hearths	Nearby Iron Age settlement
Färlöv	Skåne (SW)	Ridgetop, nearby wetland	Large grave field, some elite, some monumental	External (north–south), at least 20 m long	1) a row of post-holes at least 20 m long, c. 3 m apart, c. AD 530–670	Two Vendel or Viking Age ship settings; ninth-century runestone
Tomteboda	Stockholm (SW)	Slope to waterline	Mid-sized grave field, 24 graves, some monumental, some elite, c. AD 400–800	*none*	1) a row of post holes at least 53 m long, c. 4.6 m apart, c. AD 400–550; later covered by Vendel Era graves	Fragments of Migration Age picture stone bearing runes
Jarlebankes bro	Stockholm (SW)	Nearby wetland	*none*	External (north–south), c. 110 m long, 6 m wide, crossing an area of wetland on the edge of Jarlebanke's land, c. AD 1025–1075	1) the road is flanked on each side by rows of standing stones, some bearing runic inscriptions, with various spacings, c. AD 1025–1075	*none*

and exit (the twin fords allowing access to and from the 'symbolic island' of the Anundshög assembly site are a clear exception to this). While such routes would necessarily be traversed in both directions, we would argue ritual activity was likely primarily restricted to the entrance to the site and some form of action at the route's culmination – likely a funerary, assembly, or ancestor-focused ritual. This would imply that any ritual entrances would most likely have been functional-hierophoric hybrids, potentially adding a further demonstrative element in socio-political rituals conducted at assembly sites. Movements away from ritual sites seem less likely to have included hierophoric elements, with corpses and offerings to ancestors or deities left behind in the sacral space, and were thus primarily functional processions, or even non-ritual practical movement. Overall, therefore, we believe the evidence of most linear monuments and ritual roads are best connected with linear processions on level of the local site, with the clear exception of circulatory processions between ritual sites, as seems to have been the case at Anundshög.

Notably, many of these sites examined here preserve structures that predate the Viking Age, hinting at long-standing traditions regarding access to sacral spaces in the Nordic region. Similar ideas can even be detected in Christian societies during the Viking Age: in Sweden, local magnates undertook monumentalisation projects that included not only church building, but also the construction of new routes and the rededication of old ones that would enable larger populations to access the sacral spaces of the new religion. The Viking Age elevated road known as Jarlebanke's Bro in Täby in Stockholm, Sweden is perhaps the most famous example. Over 110 m long and 6 m wide, it is flanked by a linear monument of its own: two parallel rows of standing stones, several bearing Christian iconography and runic inscriptions explaining that the local magnate constructed the road 'for his soul' during his own lifetime (Fig. 11.17), probably in the mid-eleventh century.[121]

Figure 11.17 Jarlebanke's Bro, Täby (Stockholm, Sweden). Photo CC-BY-SA-3.0-migrated, Wikimedia Commons.

Conclusion

This investigation suggests that two kinds of procession were dominant in the pre-Christian Nordic region. Circulatory processions, which seem to have moved from place to place, were apparently linked to material prosperity, generally through the mediation of sacral rulers or ritual specialists. These processions are often found in the context of Vanir-worship, and in Lang's processional typology seem to have served a hierophoric function. Linear processions, on the other hand, seem to have been less homogeneous. Many of them appear to have taken place as part of funerary rituals in which the body was transported to a grave or pyre. These can be easily understood as functional processions. However, the display of sacred symbols, the possibility of mimetic elements, and the potential sacral value of the body itself all suggest that such linear processions could also have had a hierophoric function. Hierophoric-functional hybrid processions can also be found outside funerary contexts in, for example, *Flateyjarbók*'s account of the Swedish Lýtir cult. Of course, many processions, and ritual movements in general, also have practical ends, but it is clear that in Viking Age Scandinavia such functional processions often also exhibited hybridised hierophoric functions. Such hybridisation does not occur to the same degree in, for example, the few examples of possible mimetic processions we have examined. Our distinction between circulatory and linear processions is, of course, arbitrary, as the individual stops on a larger circulating journey could easily have included linear motion, as can be seen in accounts of the circulation of dead kings like King Frotho in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*. It seems overwhelmingly likely that the archaeological finds of linear monuments and ritual roads (as well as high-status wagons) played a role in such journeys. While this distinction is subjective, we nevertheless believe that it is a useful distinction, and that the sources support our interpretation that processions in Viking Age Scandinavia largely took one of two forms: a group of circulatory, predominantly hierophoric processions associated with material prosperity on the one hand; and another group of linear, predominantly hiero-functional processions often associated with burial rituals on the other.[122]

Notes

1. For instance, Grimes 1987: 7416.
2. Lang 2011.
3. Cf. Lundager Jensen 2017 who suggests the term *hierophoric* (of or related to the appearance of supranatural power) rather than Lang's original *theophoric* (of or related to the appearance of deities) in order to include the transportation of sacred objects as well as divine figures.

4. Gunnell 1995.
5. Hultgård 2001.
6. Nygaard & Murphy 2017.
7. For example, Sundqvist 2018; Lindow 2020b: 1314–15; Schjødt 2020.
8. Bruun & Lund 1974: 20–3.
9. Text and translation after Hutton & Peterson 1970: 197.
10. Cf. Janson 2018
11. Throughout this text we generally refer to 'ritual movement' or 'ritual activity', but we acknowledge that 'ritual' is not an either/or binary category: some actions can be 'more ritual' than others, which has led scholars of religion to develop complex systems for analysing 'ritualisation'. See, for instance, Bell 1997; Grimes 2011; Steward & Strathern 2014.
12. For the Vanir-debate, see Simek 2010; Lindow 2020a: 1047–9; Frog 2021.
13. Lindow 2020c: 1332.
14. Arya & Joshi 2001.
15. Cf. Elmevik 2003.
16. Näsström 1995: 54.
17. Nordal 1944–1945: I.375–376
18. Ármann Jakobsson 2013.
19. Hultgård 2003.
20. Sundqvist 2020: 1228–9.
21. Steinsland 1997.
22. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941: 167; Jóhannes Halldórson 1959: 7.
23. Friis-Jensen & Fisher 2015: 354–5.
24. Nygaard & Murphy 2017: 48–9.
25. On sacral kings, see Sundqvist 2002.
26. Gunnell 2006.
27. Lönnroth 1978. Although they are only preserved in a handful of medieval manuscripts, these poems are thought to stem in part from a prehistoric, Scandinavian oral tradition.
28. Gunnell 2016; Nygaard 2018.
29. Gunnell 2006.
30. Sundqvist 2002.
31. Montgomery 2000: 1–5.
32. Montgomery 2000: 13.
33. Montgomery 2000: 15.
34. The likely connection of the *Risāla* to Nordic culture might also be supported by the scarcity of boat and ship burials in most of the Slavic world and many of the nomadic peoples that lived along the Volga (Kajkowski 2016). There is, however, notable evidence that East-Slavic peoples employed sleighs in their funerary practices during the Middle Ages (Vasil'ev 2007; Kollinger 2016; 2020).
35. Faulkes 2005: 46–7.
36. Shortt Butler 2015.
37. Marold *et al.* 2017: 402.
38. Faulkes 2005: 47.
39. Faulkes 2005: 46.
40. Text after Faulkes 2005: 46–7; translation by the authors.
41. Faulkes 2005: 45–6.
42. Christensen *et al*. 1992.
43. Vedeler 2019; Price 2022.
44. Ingstad 1993: 254.
45. Cf. Shetelig 1910.
46. Lindqvist 1941–1942; Andrén 1993; Oehrl 2019.
47. Lindqvist 1941–1942: II.92–93.
48. Mattsson McGinnis 2016; Nygaard & Murphy 2017: 61.
49. Hellers 2012.
50. Runic Inscription G 181.
51. Lindqvist 1941–1942: I.95–101, II.22–25.
52. Price 2014.
53. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941: 167.
54. Rafn 1829: I.531–532.
55. Cf. Stolle 2020.
56. Elmevik 1990; Sundqvist 2002: 233–5; Lindow & Schjødt 2020: 1431–3.
57. Cf. Murphy 2016.
58. Nordal 1944–1945: II.67.
59. Whether or not there was even a non-ritualised, practical return journey is unclear: the wagons are implied to have been kept at the king's home, and if there was no physical manifestation of Lýtir comparable to the Freyr idol in *Gunnars þáttr*, the deity might have been understood to return home without the need of human transport.
60. Svanberg 2003.
61. Nygaard & Murphy 2017: 41–2.
62. Schovsbo 1987; 2009; cf. Kaul 2004; Wold 2005.
63. Lindqvist 1941–1942: II.13, II.43.
64. Oehrl 2020: 71; Nygaard forthcoming.
65. Runic Inscription G 77.
66. Randsborg 1993; Bengtsson 2004; Kaul 2004: 173–80.
67. e.g. *Gísla saga*, ch. 14 (Björn K. Þórólfsson & Guðni Jónsson 1943: 45); Strömbäck 1961.
68. Faulkes 2005: 49; Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, II: 349.
69. Müller-Wille 1969; Price 2008; Bagge & Pedersen 2021.
70. Andrén 1993; Aannestad & Glørstad 2017.
71. Roesdahl 1977: 83–104; Pentz *et al.* 2009; Gardeła 2016a; Price 2019.
72. Mitchell 2020: 667.
73. Svanberg 2003; Williams 2007; Härke 2014; Murphy 2017.
74. Lang 2011.
75. Nygaard & Murphy 2017: 49.
76. Cf. Hultgård 2001: 438.
77. Murphy forthcoming.
78. Björk & Wickberg 2015. Cf. Murphy 2016.
79. Madsen & Thrane 1995.
80. Madsen & Thrane 1995.
81. Damell 1985; Bratt & Andersson 2000.
82. Damell 1985: 184. Cf. Gardeła 2016b: 188–90.
83. On labyrinths, see Kraft 2022.
84. Damell 1985: 171.
85. Sindbæk 2020; Christensen *et al*. 2021.
86. Roesdahl 1977: 129.
87. Wallace 2000: 72.
88. Gjerpe 2005: 11.
89. Gjerpe 2005.
90. Gjerpe 2005: 17–18.
91. Gjerpe 2005: 147–51.
92. Gardeła 2016b; Laidoner 2020.
93. Schjødt 2019.
94. Rønne 2011.
95. The excavators have linked this structure to medieval textual accounts of *hǫrgar* ('stone shrines'), suggesting the site was

a whole served as a *vé* ('holy site'). Given the difficulties connecting textual accounts of pre-Christian religious praxis and archaeological evidence, the former conclusion is somewhat tenuous, although the latter seems more sensible. See Kaliff 2001; Price 2006; Murphy 2018a.

96. Murphy 2018a.
97. Runic Inscription Vs 13.
98. Sanmark & Semple 2011.
99. Sundqvist 2022.
100. Sundqvist 2002; 2016; Bønding 2021.
101. Sanmark 2015: 106–9; Murphy 2018a. Whether Viking Age assemblies were ever opened with processions, as Sanmark (2015: 102–3) has suggested, is unclear. There are medieval Old Norse terms that denote movement to attend an assembly (such as *þingferð*, *þingfǫr*, and *þingganga*, all meaning something like 'assembly journey'), although these likely represent terms for practical, rather than ritual, journeys. The *Konungsbók* redaction of the medieval Icelandic law code *Grágás* (GKS 1157 fol, produced c. 1260) lays out that participants at the Alþing are to proceed to Lögberg in a particular order – the lawspeaker followed by each chieftain and his appointed judges – and that a bell is used to signal the start of business (Finsen 1852: 45–6, K 24; Dennis *et al.* 1980: 59), which certainly suggests an element of ritual to proceedings. It is likely that these rituals are based on long-standing traditions, potentially stemming from the Viking Age, but the Christian influence denoted by the use of a bell complicates matters.
102. Sanmark 2015: 99–103. Cf. Sanmark & Semple 2011.
103. Alkarp & Price 2005; Sundqvist *et al.* 2013; Ljungkvist & Frölund 2015.
104. Wikborg 2017.
105. Beronius Jörpeland *et al.* 2013.
106. Sanmark 2015: 98; Beronius Jörpeland *et al*. 2018.
107. Murphy 2018b: 63.
108. Beronius Jörpeland *et al*. 2018.
109. Sundqvist 2018.
110. Sundqvist *et al.* 2013.
111. Sanmark 2015: 96.
112. Björk & Wickberg 2015.
113. Björk & Wickberg 2015.
114. Larsson 1982; 2013.
115. Runic Inscription DR NOR1998;21; Vestergaard 2007: 149–50.
116. Björk & Wickberg 2015: 248–51.
117. Björk & Wickberg 2015: 242.
118. Fabech 1994; Gunnell 2017.
119. Björk & Wickberg 2015: 245.
120. Schjødt 2019: 110–11.
121. Runic Inscription U 164; U 165.
122. Authorship statement: we, the authors, share overall responsibility for the 'Introduction' and 'Conclusion', as well as the final state of the text. Simon Nygaard claims primary responsibility for the subchapters 'Circulatory Processions' and 'Forms of Ritual Transport', Luke John Murphy claims primary responsibility for the subchapters 'Linear Processions' and 'Linear Monuments and Ritual Roads'.

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12

Ritualised Executions and Human Sacrifices in the Viking World

Matthias Simon Toplak

In his famous *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, written between 1070–1085, the cleric and chronicler Adam of Bremen reports that a large sacrificial celebration was held every nine years at a large pagan temple in Gamla Uppsala in Sweden as late as in the eleventh century. During this feast, nine males of every living creature were offered up for sacrifice to the gods and hung into the trees of a sacred grove.[1] Almost identical sacrificial acts, which are said to have taken place at the Danish royal seat in Lejre in the early eleventh century, are described by the Ottonian bishop Thietmar of Merseburg in his chronicle.[2] These accounts have had a massive influence on the perception of pre-Christian cult practices since the beginning of academic research on the Viking Age. Thus, the ritual sacrifice of humans has been a recurring and both fascinating and stereotypical motif in the popular perception of Viking Age ritual and religion. The historical reality of human sacrifice, however, is far less obvious and is caught between unclear, often significantly older archaeological findings (such as bog bodies[3]), overinterpreted grave finds and uncritical readings of written sources, sometimes pertaining to a far older period, such as Tacitus' *Germania* from around AD 100. Through a critical (re)evaluation of old and new archaeological findings and research results and through new scientific methods of analysis, it is archaeology that can provide new perspectives on this complex topic and put the written sources in a historical context.[4]

The Written Sources

In older research, the ritual killing of humans among Germanic tribes in the period of the Roman Empire has often been associated with a 'sacral penal law' (German *Sakralstrafrecht*) based on antique sources.[5] Contemporary sources, in contrast, describe the cultic-religious sacrifice of humans in Viking Age Scandinavia as votive offerings to the gods or other supernatural entities, which means offerings for which a certain return was expected, for example to obtain or secure peace, fertility, or the goodwill of the gods, e.g. for a battle.[6] The already mentioned Christian chronicler Adam of Bremen, for example, describes specifically which god was sacrificed to on which occasion – Þórr in times of disease or famine, Óðinn in times of war, and Freyr in connection to weddings.[7]

Even though Latin writings such as Adam's *Gesta* or Thietmar's *Chronicon* have often been regarded as unreliable sources for religion and ritual in the Scandinavian Viking Age due to a whole series of obviously literary or church-political motivated exaggerations or clearly false assertions[8] (the existence of a pagan temple at Gamla Uppsala, for example, is still disputed[9]), Old Norse sources present a similar picture. Human sacrifices are occasionally thematised in some contemporary skaldic poems, mostly as war-related offerings to the Old Norse war god Óðinn and often paraphrased in *kenningar*, complex circumlocutions with metaphorical meanings that are characteristic of Old Norse poetry.[10] Furthermore, human sacrifices are also mentioned frequently in the Old Norse saga literature. Despite the fact that the sagas were written generations after the Viking Age in a Christian society,[11] it can be assumed that they reflect authentic memories of pagan ritual practices.

While *Guta saga*, the legendary history of Gotland, which was written in the thirteenth or fourteenth century,[12] only mentions in general that humans were also sacrificed in pre-Christian times,[13] other sagas report quite specifically about human sacrifices and the underlying intentions.[14] Thus, the sacrifice of enemies in honour of Óðinn, as *do ut des* offerings before a battle or as offerings after a victorious

battle is a recurring motif, for example in the traditions concerning Hákon jarl Sigurðarson in Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar and Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*.[15] Hákon jarl is said to have sacrificed his own son Erlingr to Óðinn before fighting the Jómsvíkingar in the battle of Hjǫrungavágr at the end of the tenth century.[16] Both the contemporary Latin texts written by Christian clergy and the Old Norse text from medieval times, which likely reflect older traditions, suggest that the ritual killing of humans as votive offerings to the gods in times of need and before or even in fulfilment of a vow after a battle were part of the ritual life in the Viking Age.

One of the most famous written sources concerning the question of human sacrifice in the Viking Age, however, describes a further function of human sacrifice apart from its religious importance as a votive offering to the gods. It seems highly probable that no other source has had such a lasting impact on the perception of Viking Age rituals and the conception of human sacrifices in the Viking Age as the famous description of the funeral of a Rus chieftain handed down in the travelogue of the Arab diplomat Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān (→ **Chapter 13**).[17] Sent to the king of the Volga Bulgars by the Arab Caliph of Baghdad in 921, he was eyewitness of an elaborate and long-lasting funeral ceremony carried out by a group of people known as the Rus at the banks of the Volga (Fig. 12.1). In his account, ibn Faḍlān describes in detail the elaborate seven-day funeral ceremony that ended with the cremation of the deceased on a ship drawn ashore. The central part of the ceremony was the ritual killing of several animals and finally of a slave girl who, according to the text, had agreed to follow her master into the afterlife. After having sexual intercourse with the followers of the deceased chieftain, the slave girl was drugged, sexually abused once more, and finally ritually killed by strangling and stabbing. These sexual acts and the killing of the slave girl have often been interpreted as symbolising a 'posthumous marriage' between the deceased and the girl as a 'dead man's bride', in which the followers acted as representatives of the deceased in consummating the marriage.[18] Ibn Faḍlān mentions that male slaves as well as female slaves were asked to voluntarily follow their master into death[19] (thus undermining the interpretation of the rite

Figure 12.1 Interpretative reconstruction of the funeral ceremony of a Rus chieftain according to ibn Faḍlān's description. Illustration by Leonard Ermel. Copyright by Matthias Toplak.

as a posthumous marriage[20]), but similar instances of the killing of females (slave girls, wives, or concubines) during the funeral ceremony among various Viking Age societies are mentioned by other Arab writers, such as ibn Rusta, al-Masudi and ibn Miskawayh.[21] Therefore, the main motivation for this form of human sacrifice during the funeral ceremony seems to have been the provision of a (female) companion for the deceased in the afterlife.

The Archaeological Evidence

While most actions left behind only fragmentary traces in the archaeological record even in ideal circumstances – the majority of ritual actions during a funeral ceremony, such as prayers or blessings will probably leave no material traces at all[22] – our understanding of the motivations and abstract ideas underlying these actions remain pure speculation, dependent only on uncertain written traditions.[23] Therefore, both the identification and the interpretation of the remains of human sacrifices is a challenging task for archaeology.[24] A number of archaeological features can with more or less probability be interpreted as the remains of human sacrifices, whereas most of the cultic practices from the Viking Age remain archaeologically invisible.

Depictions of Human Sacrifice

While the archaeological remains of sacrificial acts are difficult to interpret, some contemporary pictorial depictions of ritual killings of humans support the reality of human sacrifices and even back up some of the later written sources. A unique and extremely valuable sources illuminating the mentality and mythology of late Iron Age and Viking Age Scandinavia are the famous Gotlandic picture stones.[25] These monuments, mostly made of erected limestone slabs in different sizes and shapes and dating to the fifth to eleventh century, are almost exclusively limited to the Baltic island of Gotland. The complex motives and iconographic programmes that were carved and painted on these stones provide a unique and direct access to the pictorial world and especially to the mythology and cosmology of a mostly preliterate era.[26] On the famous large picture stone Stora Hammars I, Lärbro parish,[27] now exhibited in the open-air museum at Bunge, a scene which is probably a human sacrifice is depicted (Fig. 12.2).[28] On the right side of the image, four men with raised weapons are shown, the man in front holding a bird. In the centre of the scene a human figure appears to be forced down on an altar by a man with a spear.[29] It is not clear from the depiction whether we should infer that the potential victim is being sacrificed with the spear,[30] but the large *valknut* symbol directly above the scene, which is likely associated with the god of war and death, Óðinn,[31] makes such an interpretation possible. A tree is depicted to the left of this scene, and a man is hanging from the branches, armed (or at least equipped) with a round shield.

Figure 12.2 Upper part of the picture stone Stora Hammars I with the sacrificial scene. Photo by Matthias Toplak.

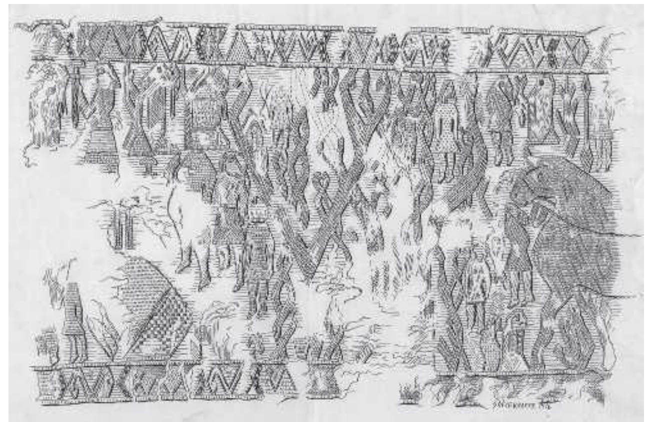

Figure 12.3 Detail of the tapestry from the Oseberg grave, showing several hanged human individuals in a large tree-like structure. Illustration by Sofie Krafft 1916, University Oslo, CC BY-SA 4.0.

On another Viking Age picture stone, namely the stone from Garda Bote, a row of seven, possibly also hanged, female figures can be identified.[32] Whether this is a depiction of human sacrifices, however, remains uncertain.[33] Human figures apparently hung in the branches of a large tree are also portrayed on the tapestry from the famous ship grave at Oseberg (Fig. 12.3).[34] The pictorial content of the entire tapestry makes it probable that this scene is to be understood in the context of ritual actions, possibly a funeral ceremony or a sacrificial feast.[35]

Sacrificial Sites

Human bones, which can be interpreted as the remains of human sacrifices, are also known from some isolated Viking Age localities.[36] A number of sacrificial sites such as Uppåkra near Lund in Skåne, Sweden, and Skedemosse on Öland[37] were in continuous or recurrent use from the pre-Roman Iron Age to the Viking Age. In some cases,

the finds of human bones can be specifically dated to the Viking Age, but it is often difficult to assign the bone material to a specific period without precise scientific analyses. As already mentioned, it is impossible to deduce with absolute certainty the original intention behind a deposition from the often highly fragmented bones. However, against the background of the written traditions, in most cases, sacrifice seems to be the most likely explanation.

An interesting case that sheds new light on the written sources such as Adam's *Gesta* is the former lake Bokaren in Uppland, Sweden.[38] As early as the mid-twentieth century, dredging activities uncovered human and horse bones, including the skulls of a woman and a man, who had been laid on a wooden platform in the lake.[39] Following the excavations, the findings were dated to the Bronze Age based on pollen analyses, but new research with radiocarbon dating has shown that the bones were of significantly younger age and date to the late Vendel Age (sixth–eighth centuries) and the end of the Viking Age.[40] Both horses and humans have been subjected to exceptional violence to the head. The horses and possibly also the woman were each killed with a hard blow to the forehead while at least the man was decapitated. Only certain parts of the horses such as the heads and hooves have been deposited, which indicates that the meat was consumed, while only the skin with the head and the attached hooves was displayed or deposited.

The indications of collective ritual killing of humans and horses that were found at the Viking Age site of lake Bokaren, together with the depiction of hanged men on the tapestry from the grave at Oseberg and the Gotlandic picture stones shed light on the reliability of the accounts of sacrifices given by Adam of Bremen and Thietmar of Merseburg.

The Viking Age sacrifice site at Götavi in Närke, Sweden,[41] also deserves attention, as it supports statements known from later written sources, even if no reliable evidence of human sacrifice has yet been identified. At this site, which was enclosed by a fence, a foundation of nine parallel stone packs had been laid. Not only the name of the site – 'Götavi' which means, 'sanctuary (*ví*) of the gods' – but also the number nine, which plays a significant role in Old Norse mythology, point to the cultic significance of the site.[42] Chemical analyses of the stone packs have proven that large amounts of blood were spilled there, a clear indication of animal and possibly even human sacrifice. This finding confirms the importance of blood in pre-Christian cult mentioned in several Old Norse sources, for example in *Hákonar saga góða* in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*.[43] A large number of hearths were found around the enclosed area, which probably served as cooking fires for ritual meals. This aspect is described in later literature. In *Guta saga*, it is reported that in pagan times the inhabitants of Gotland held regional sacrificial festivals where they cooked the meat of sacrificial animals together. This form of ritual meal was of such importance that those involved in it were called *suþnautar*, 'cooking companions'.[44] On some other Viking Age sites, discoveries of human skeletal remains from non-funerary contexts might be regarded as potential indications of human sacrifice: Examples are Lillmyr in Barlingbo parish on Gotland, where a human skull was found together with a horse skeleton, several shield buckles, and intentionally bent swords,[45] and Fyrisån, Hederviken and Knivsta in Uppland, Sweden,[46] where depositions of disarticulated human bones were found.

Human Sacrifices in Burials

The report by ibn Faḍlān impressively indicates that human sacrifices could also occur during funeral ceremonies. In these cases, several levels of meaning of the ritual killing of a human being could overlap. In addition to the 'conventional' intentions as a votive sacrifice to the gods, as a sacred punishment, or as the bloody killing of a living being as an act of social catharsis for the local society,[47] a further intention could be added, namely to provide the deceased with a companion for the afterlife. However, the fact that the ritual killing and burial of humans during a funeral ceremony was mentioned in some sources, should not be overemphasised. Even though double – or even multiple – burials occur regularly in many Viking Age cemeteries, it must be assumed that they in most cases reflect family members or spouses, kinsmen or comrades in arms[48] that died contemporaneously. Another possible cause for double or multiple burials might be that spouses, relatives, or other socially connected individuals that died during the winter months, when proper burials were not possible due to the ground being frozen,[49] were perhaps buried together in spring time. Furthermore, such burials might even be the results of secondary burials.[50] Yet, the possibility of human sacrifices buried in double or multiple graves cannot be dismissed completely. Ibn Faḍlān describes a certain way of ritual killing that would leave no or only few traces in the archaeological material – namely strangling and stabbing – and some graves actually exist which provide striking parallels to his account.

In some chamber graves from the area of Old Rus, adult men were buried together with substantially smaller individuals,[51] perhaps young girls.[52] The arrangement of both individuals, either holding hands or with the second individual lying in the man's embrace, might signal affection or even the man's control or ownership over the second individual (Figs 12.4 and 12.5).[53] These burials might reflect the custom of the killing of wives or slave girls, as mentioned by ibn Faḍlān and some other Arab writers. Decapitated humans in some double graves from the Scandinavian Viking Age can be interpreted e.g. as slaves,[54] prisoners of war or convicts that were sacrificed as votive offerings, ritual 'scapegoats' that were killed during bloody ceremonies,[55] or servants for the afterlife. For example, in grave

Figure 12.4 Burial of an adult male and a young individual, probably a young girl, in chamber grave 36 from Shestovytsya, Chernigov, Chernihiv Oblast, Ukraine. After Androshchuk & Zocenko 2012: 185, fig. 129; reworked by Matthias Toplak.

A29 from Bollstanäs, Uppland, in Sweden, two decapitated men were buried in a prone position in the cremation layer of the presumed regular burial,[56] and in the famous grave of the 'Älgmannen' (A129) in Birka, Uppland in Sweden, a male individual was buried in a supine position, accompanied by weapons and elk antler, while a second, decapitated individual was buried in a flexed and partially prone position across the first man (Fig. 12.6).[57] In grave 55 from Lejre on Sjælland, in Denmark, two male individuals were buried superimposed; the upper one was decapitated and in a prone position, the lower one in a supine position,[58] and in grave FII from the Danish cemetery at Stengade, Langeland, two men were buried side by side in a chamber grave, one of them was also decapitated and perhaps even bound (Fig. 12.7).[59] Some graves in a small burial ground in Flakstad in Norway held a 'second' individual who seems to have been decapitated.[60]

Another famous and often discussed double burial of a male and a female, however, demands further explanatory approaches that focus on ideas of cult and sorcery in the Viking Age.

'Deviant Burials' in Viking Age Scandinavia

In 1981, a double grave of a woman and a man was discovered in Gerdrup on Sjælland, Denmark, about 10 km north of Roskilde (→ **Chapter 28**).[61] The grave, more than 1 m deep, probably dates from the ninth century and was located together with a temporary cremation burial between some other isolated older burials in a dune by a fjord. Already during the excavation, the body position of the two well-preserved skeletons attracted a lot of attention (Fig. 12.8). The man, buried on the left (western) side of the grave, lay in a strangely twisted position with his knees spread apart but his ankles close together. Osteological examinations revealed that he was probably 35–40 years old at the time of death and the twisted cervical vertebrae suggested that he may have died of hanging.[62] The position of his legs could indicate that he was perhaps buried bound by the feet. Two large stones had been placed directly on the body of the woman lying on the right side of the grave, who was of middle age but who had been partially toothless for several years before she died. Next to her legs lay a c. 40 cm long spearhead, and between the two dead bodies the remains of an unburnt sheep skull were found. How to interpret this grave has been discussed for decades.[63] It has generally been assumed that the man was a slave who was ritually killed to follow the woman into the afterlife.[64] Ancient DNA analyses, however, have revealed that the two dead were mother and son.[65] Nevertheless, this exciting result raises more questions than it provides answers. Why was the mother buried next to her hanged and possibly even bound son? What did the spear next to the woman mean, and above all why were these heavy stones placed on top of the woman's body?

Similar findings of graves in which the dead were covered with heavy stones, which cannot be interpreted as part of the regular grave structure, are sporadically known from other burial grounds of the Scandinavian Viking Age. A good example is the cemetery by Bogøvej on the Danish island of Langeland, where several burials with larger stones directly placed on the dead were excavated. Particularly striking is grave P, the burial of a man in prone position with several large stones placed on the body (Fig. 12.9).[66] The phenomenon of prone burials is known across space and time from various cultural groups, including from the Scandinavian Iron and Viking Ages.[67] Various explanations have been offered for the custom of Viking Age prone burials, most of them suggesting that they communicated something negative about the deceased and implying that they were literally 'biting the dust'.[68] While the prone position could perhaps have been understood as an act of humiliation – either as a pejorative post-mortem humiliation and exclusion of the dead – it could have also been seen in more positive light and as a Christian gesture of humility towards God. Alternatively, prone burial could also be viewed as an apotropaic rite to avert supernatural threats, such as the 'evil eye'.[69]

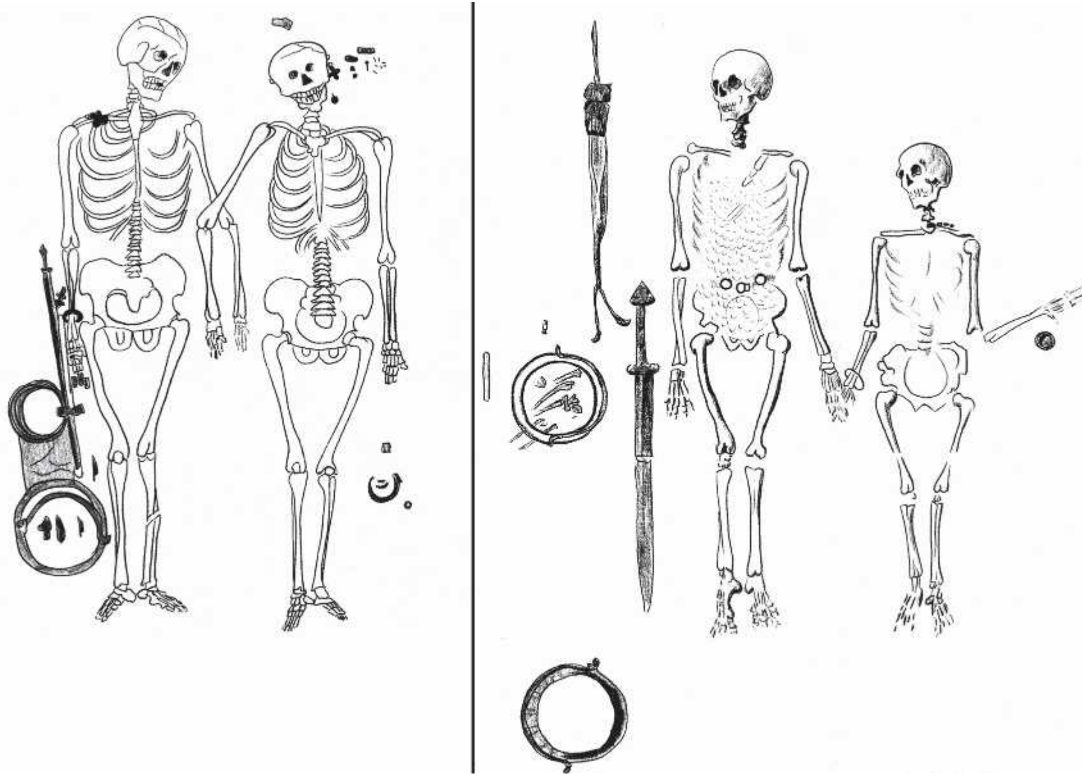

Figure 12.5 Double burials of male and female individuals from Pìdgìrcì, Lviv Oblast, Ukraine. After Liwoch & Müller-Wille 2012: 423, fig. 3, 426, fig. 7; reworked by Matthias Toplak.

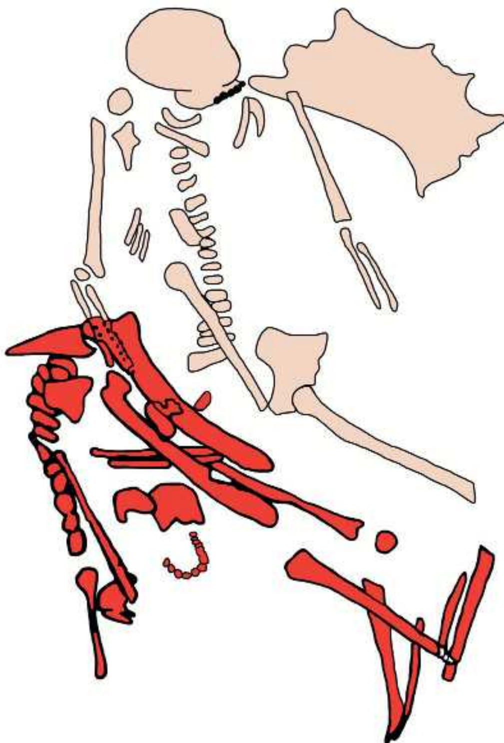

Figure 12.6 Burial of the 'Älgmannen' (A129) in Birka, Uppland, Sweden together with a decapitated male individual (marked in red). Redrawn by Leszek Gardeła after Holmquist Olausson 1990: 176, fig. 2.

A prone position of the deceased is often regarded as an indication of a so-called 'deviant burial', a burial that deviates from the expected norm by one or several aspects (therefore better termed 'atypical burial' or *Sonderbestattung* in German), especially the treatment of the corpse, such as decapitation, stoning, binding, or a twisted or even prone position.[70] Of course, not every aspect of a burial that initially appears somehow different in the archaeological record can be uncritically overinterpreted as an indicator of a 'deviant burial'. Prone positions, for instance, can also occur under certain circumstances as a result of taphonomic processes. Also, a dislocated skull does not need to signal a decapitation but could also result from later disturbances. But the large number of prone burials, decapitations, and signs of binding of the deceased on so-called 'execution cemeteries' in Anglo-Saxon England[71] as well as some graves from Viking Age Scandinavia that exhibit multiple forms of deviant treatment of the corpse, indicate that the concept of 'deviant burials' *was* clearly present in early medieval mentality. While decapitations, the binding of the corpse, or careless and hasty burials that might result in a prone position of the deceased in these 'execution cemeteries' are likely consequences of juridical actions, some burials from Viking Age Scandinavia, such as the double grave from Gerdrup or grave P from Bogøvej, could be explained by reference to ideas (and fears) of supernatural spirits as expressed in later sources.[72]

Figure 12.7 Double burial from Stengade, Langeland, Denmark (grave FII) of two male individuals, one of them decapitated and presumably also bound. Left: redrawn by Leszek Gardeła after Skaarup 1976: 57. Right: illustration by Mirosław Kuźma. Copyright by Leszek Gardeła and Mirosław Kuźma.

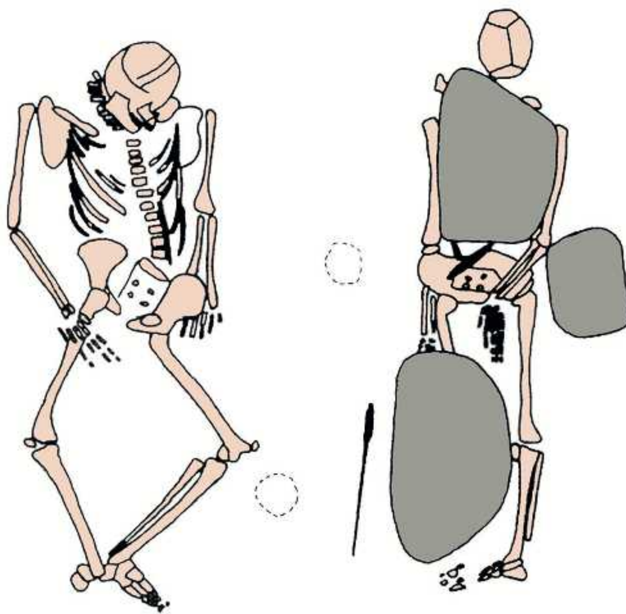

Figure 12.8 Double burial from Gerdrup, Sjælland, Denmark of a stoned female and her hanged son. Left: redrawn by Leszek Gardeła after Christensen 1982. Right: illustration by Mirosław Kuźma. Copyright by Leszek Gardeła and Mirosław Kuźma.

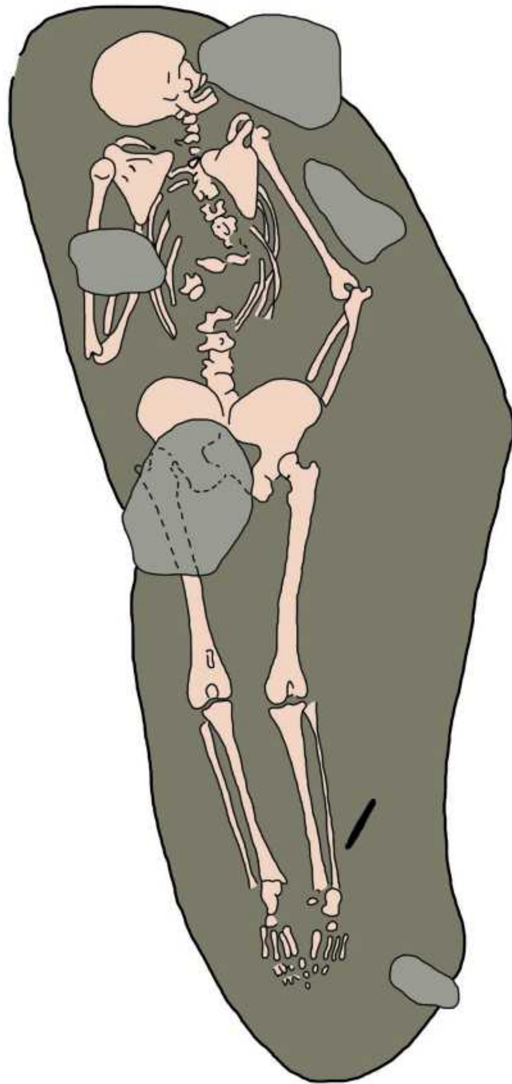

Figure 12.9 Prone burial from Bogøvej, Langeland, Denmark (grave P). Left: redrawn by Leszek Gardeła after Grøn et al. *1994: 14, fig. 7. Right: illustration by Mirosław Kuźma. Copyright by Leszek Gardeła and Mirosław Kuźma.*

Ritual Executions and Apotropaic Burials in Old Norse Sources

Striking parallels to these special acts and atypical burials can be found in the Old Norse saga literature, which however is several hundred years younger than the Viking Age burials mentioned above. Several sagas describe apotropaic actions – executions and/or burials – that were considered necessary to neutralise people to whom special supernatural powers were attributed, such as sorcerers/sorceresses or other forms of so-called 'ritual specialists',[73] or in order to prevent particular 'dangerous dead' such as *berserkir* or other particularly cruel people from haunting the living as revenants. That this fear of the physical return of the dead as so-called *draugar* was more than a literary motif of the saga literature and mockery of pagan superstition, but rather reflected ideas authentic to the Viking Age is indicated by a small copper plate from Ulvsunda near present-day Stockholm in Sweden, which can be dated to the time around AD 800 and which exhibits a spell against revenants carved in runes: **Vesat-tu urvakr uti, misfylgiR!** ('Don't be to awake outside [of the grave], revenant!') (Fig. 12.10).[74]

While prone burials are missing from the sagas, often-recurring motifs are death by stoning and burials under large stones that hold the dead in their graves.[75] Stoning or burial under stones are mentioned in different contexts but they seem to have been considered as particularly effective apotropaic actions against 'dangerous dead' such as potential

Figure 12.10 Copper plate from Ulvsunda, Stockholm, Sweden, with a spell against revenants in runic inscriptions. Photo by Gabriel Hildebrand, Swedish History Museum. CC BY 2.5 SE, reworked by Leszek Gardeła.

revenants or 'ritual specialists', along with drowning and burning.[76] Stoning as a death penalty for malevolent magic is also mentioned in several Old Norse law texts from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.[77] Beheading does not seem to have been considered an effective measure against 'ritual specialists' – at least there is only one reference in the wider corpus of Old Norse saga literature[78] – but other 'dangerous dead' such as revenants are banished by beheading in several sagas.[79] Furthermore, these 'dangerous dead' were often buried on the margin of society, away from regular cemeteries, settlements, and frequented roads.[80] A short but impressive example of this custom is given in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, one of the most famous and tragic Old Norse sagas, presumably written in the mid-thirteenth century.[81] Here, the two siblings Auðbjörg and Þórgrimr were accused of magic (Old Norse *seiðr*), they were taken to a distant headland, stoned to death, and buried under a pile of stones.[82] Remarkably, the saga mentions that the skin of an animal was put over the head of one of these two siblings. This action might have been intended as an apotropaic countermeasure against the 'evil eye'. Other passages in the Old Norse saga literature describe similar procedures to avoid a dead (or even a dying?) man's stare.[83] Prone burials may have been deemed equally suitable, even if they are not explicitly mentioned in the sagas.

The Old Norse saga literature was written centuries after the events that led to the 'atypical burials' of the Scandinavian Viking Age, and as elements of a literary tradition from a decidedly Christian context they must be regarded with extreme caution whenever one attempts to use them as a source for Viking Age mentalities and ideas about the afterlife and the supernatural other-world. Nevertheless, literature and archaeology sometimes reveal astonishing parallels that seem to justify the consideration of the sagas as starting points for new perspectives on 'deviant burials'. Particularly surprising are the concordances between the double grave of Gerdrup after the new aDNA analyses and the passage in another famous Old Norse saga, the *Eyrbyggja saga*.

Eyrbyggja saga, probably dating to the middle of the thirteenth century and taking place mostly on the Icelandic peninsula of Snæfellsnes during the time of Christianisation, is one of the most fascinating Old Norse literary creations as it is characterised by the distinct interest of its anonymous author in pagan traditions and superstitions, rituals concerning death and burial, and supernatural elements such as revenants and sorcery.[84] In a subplot of the storyline, the sorceress Katla and her son Oddr appear.[85] When Oddr is accused of cutting off a woman's arm, his mother Katla uses magic to hide him from his captors three times. It is another sorceress named Geirríðr that succeeds in dispelling Katla's illusion by putting a sack made of sealskin over her head.[86] Thereupon, Katla's son Oddr gets caught and is hanged on a distant cape. Katla, on the other hand, is stoned to death.[87] The saga does not report on the burial of the two, but it would be fitting in the literary context of the saga and against the background of the sources discussed here if they were buried together at the remote site of their execution.[88]

It is unlikely that a real incident that happened sometime in the ninth century in Denmark, namely the presumed ritual killing and burial of a mother and her son, probably for superstitious reasons, became the model for an episode in the Old Norse saga literature, committed to writing in Iceland some four hundred years later. However, even though there is no description of the grave of Katla and Oddr in the saga, the entire scenery shows a striking resemblance to the grave of Gerdrup:[89] while the son is hanged, his mother is stoned to death or at least buried under heavy stones. Is it appropriate to interpret the heavy stones on the female from Gerdrup as apotropaic measures that should keep her in her grave and prevent her from returning to the world of the living? Was the spear used as a ritual tool for some sort of malevolent magic by the female?[90] Iron rods that could with some caution be interpreted as staffs of sorcery or 'magic staffs' are known from an array of female burials from Viking Age Scandinavia,[91] and the spear from Gerdrup might have served a similar function as a ritual tool. Was it possible that both mother and son were accused of sorcery, ritually killed, and buried in a grave in the dunes? Modern scientific analyses might provide new perspectives on those two individuals buried at Gerdrup, but we will probably never know what exactly happened on the shore of the fjord more than 1000 years ago. Yet the saga literature offers some interesting references for speculations.

Beliefs, Superstitions, and Ritual Killing in Old Norse Mentality – A Conclusion

The comparison of archaeological features from the Viking Age, contemporary written records, and later literary sources reveals striking similarities that present a congruent picture despite all the necessary caution when dealing with written sources. The archaeological finds support the general picture of contemporary Latin and Arabic reports on ritual human sacrifice in the Scandinavian Viking Age. It is possible that specific descriptions have been exaggerated for religious or political reasons or have degenerated into literary motifs, but on surprisingly many parameters written sources and archaeological results *do* overlap. The same applies to the Old Norse saga literature. Despite the chronological discrepancy of several hundred years between the Viking Age and the composition of the sagas and despite the discrepancy in the social spheres of the Scandinavian Viking Age and the Icelandic Christian High Middle Ages, in many important religious and socio-political aspects the sagas still seem to reflect concepts and beliefs rooted in a pre-Christian mentality.[92] Therefore, it seems reasonable to cautiously use the depictions in the sagas as points of departure for studying and illuminating atypical burials of the Viking Age.

Thus, a fascinating picture emerges from the critical comparison of these three kinds of sources, that adds interesting nuances to our knowledge of death and burial in the ninth to eleventh centuries AD and provides new perspectives on the pre-Christian beliefs of the people in the North. The ritual killing of humans was in certain circumstances apparently considered either advantageous or necessary for apotropaic reasons. Women – slaves, and perhaps also wives – could be ritually killed during funeral ceremonies to follow the deceased into the afterlife, and human sacrifices as votive offerings to the gods or other supernatural entities, as described by Adam and Thietmar, are at least conceivable considering the archaeological findings. The interpretation of the atypical burials based on the Old Norse saga literature indicates the existence of beliefs concerning sorcery and revenants in the Viking mind as well as a genuine fear of the 'dangerous dead'. Ritual executions by stoning or decapitation and certain forms of burials were apparently regarded as appropriate apotropaic practices to avoid harm to society and to prevent the dead from returning to the world of the living. The threat of these 'dangerous dead' seems to have been deeply rooted in the pre-Christian Scandinavian mentality, and the fear of revenants and evil spirits was just as concrete and real for the people of the Viking Age as *seiðr* and other forms of 'magic'.

Notes

1. 'Sacrificium itaque tale est: ex omni animante, quod masculinum est, novem capita offeruntur, quorum sanguine deos [tales] placari mos est. Corpora autem suspenduntur in lucum, qui proximus est templo.' ('The sacrifice is of this nature: of every living creature that is male, they offer nine heads, with the blood of which it is customary to placate gods of this sort. The bodies they hang in the sacred grove that is close to the temple.') (*Gesta Hammaburgensis*, book IV, 27 (MGH SS rer. 2), Schmeidler 1917: 259–60; author's translation).
2. *Chronicon*, Book I, 17 (9) (MGH SS rer. Germ. N. S. 9), see Holtzmann 1935: 24.
3. See e.g. Fredengren & Löfqvist 2019: 227–8.
4. For further literature on the question of human sacrifices, see especially Beck 1970; Hultgård 1993; 2001; Green 1998; Aldhouse-Green 2001; Maier *et al.* 2003; Simek 2006: 273–4; Jensen 2016; af Edholm 2016; 2020; Toplak in press.
5. Scheuer 1913; von Amira 1922; Ström 1942. See also Mogk 1909: 643; Schmidt 1995: 26; af Edholm 2020: 73–101 for a critical discussion on the question of the sacral penal law (*Sakralstrafrecht*).
6. For an intensive discussion of the highly problematic term 'sacrifice' and its inherent religious implications, see e.g. Berggren 2006; 2010: 44–103; af Edholm 2016; 2020: 36–51; Toplak in press.
7. 'Omnibus itaque diis suis attributos habent sacerdotes, qui sacrificia populi offerant. Si pestis et fames imminent, Thor ydolo lybatur, si bellum, Wodani, si nuptiae celebrandae sunt, Fricconi' ('They have assigned priests to all their gods, who offer the people's sacrifices. When plague and hunger threaten, sacrifices are made to the idol Þórr, when war threatens, to Wodan, when a wedding is to be celebrated, to Frikko') (*Gesta Hammaburgensis*, Book IV, 27 (MGH SS rer. 2), Schmeidler 1917: 259; author's translation).
8. See especially Janson 1998; Scior 2002; Fraesdorff 2005; Kalhjundi 2005; Schulmeyer-Ahl 2009.
9. Alkarp & Price 2005.
10. af Edholm 2020: 120–2, 189–210.
11. See e.g. Clunies Ross 2003; 2010; Clover & Lindow 2005; McTurk 2005.
12. Peel 1999: vii.
13. 'Blotaþu þair synum ok dytrum sinum ok fileþi miþ mati ok mungati.' ('They sacrificed their sons and daughters and cattle, together with food and ale.') (*Guta saga*, ch. 1, quotation and translation after Peel 1999: 4–5). See also Brink 2013: 40–1.
14. See especially af Edholm 2016; 2020: 118–24.
15. af Edholm 2020: 171–181, 222–223.
16. 'Þat er sǫgn manna, at Hákon jarl hafi í þessi orrostu blótit til sigrs sér Erlingi, syni sínum, ok síðan gerði élit, ok þá snøri mannfallinu á hendr Jómsvíkingum' ('It was rumoured that in this battle Jarl Hákon had made a sacrifice of his son Erlingr for victory, and after that the storm blew up, and then the casualties turned against the Jómsvikings') (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ch. 42, quotation from Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941: 286, translation from Finlay & Faulkes 2016: 178). See also Sundqvist 2002: 253–8.
17. For discussions of ibn Faḍlān's description, see Warmind 1995; Montgomery 2000; Taylor 2002: 107–12; Schjødt 2007; Price 2010: 131–7; Lunde & Stone 2012: xviii–xxvi, 50–3; Staecker *et al.* 2018: 66–8.

18. See e.g. Warmind 1995; Taylor 2002: 96–112; Price 2010: 136; Gardeła & Kajkowski 2014: 112–13 for a discussion of this question.
19. Lunde & Stone 2012: 50.
20. Taylor 2002: 109.
21. Lunde & Stone 2012: 127, 151; See also Price 2002: 46; 2008: 267; 2010: 136–7; Gardeła in press.
22. See e.g. Toplak 2017b: 129; 2021: 57.
23. See also the discussion in af Edholm 2020: 132–3.
24. See Maier *et al.* 2003: 113–14.
25. See Lindqvist 1941; 1942; Nylén & Lamm 1978; Karnell 2012; Oehrl 2019.
26. It has even been suggested that the picture stones themselves could have been associated with human sacrifices, as a kind of altar or sacrificial place. See Thunmark-Nylén 2006: 507; *contra* Oehrl 2019: 35.
27. Lindqvist 1941: 104–5, fig. 81; 1942: 83–7; Nylén & Lamm 1978: 62–3.
28. Lindqvist 1968: 20–2; Capelle 1980: 97; Trotzig 1983: 370–1; Maier *et al.* 2003: 124; Pesch 2005: 124; Simek 2006: 274; Sundqvist 2009: 655; Oehrl 2019: 61, 75–6.
29. The prevailing reading as a depiction of a human sacrifice, however, is based on a revised interpretation by Sune Lindqvist. In the first publication of the image stone Stora Hammars I in his work *Gotlands Bildsteine*, Lindqvist 1942: 86–7 already describes an ‘altar’, but he does not yet identify a human figure lying on it. This new reading, rightly termed as *opinio communis* by Oehrl 2019: 61, 66, was first published in Lindqvist 1968: 20–2.
30. According to Old Nose mythological poems such as the *Rúnatals þáttr* in *Hávamál*, stanza 138 (see Neckel & Kuhn 1983: 40), the spear is considered Óðinn’s weapon, as Óðinn marked himself with a spear to gain the runes; see e.g. Nordberg 2002: 20–1; 2004: 77, 95; Price 2002: 94–5; Gardeła 2021: 53, 94–100.
31. Hellers 2012.
32. Lindqvist 1941: fig. 141; 1942: 46–7.
33. Oehrl 2019: 62.
34. Vedeler 2019: 103–10.
35. Vedeler 2019: 47–63.
36. af Edholm 2016: 136–40; 2020: 125–33; Fredengren & Löfqvist 2019.
37. af Edholm 2020: 125–8.
38. Eklund 2014; Eklund & Hennius 2014; Zachrisson 2014a; 2014b; Fredengren 2015; Fredengren & Löfqvist 2019; af Edholm 2020: 131–2, 297–8.
39. Further human bones were discovered during follow-up investigations in 2015, see Fredengren & Löfqvist 2019: 234.
40. Eklund & Hennius 2014; Fredengren 2015: 167.
41. Svensson 2010; Vikstrand 2010; Lagerlöf *et al.* 2012; Price 2014: 182–3.
42. Price 2014: 184.
43. ‘Þar var ok drepinn allskonar smali ok svá hross; en blóð þat alt, er þar kom af, þá var kallat hlaut, ok hlautbollar þat, er blóð þat stóð í, ok hlautteinar, þat var svá gert sem stöklar; með því skyldi rjóða stallana öllu saman, ok svá veggi hofsins utan ok innan, ok svá stökkva á mennina; en slátr skyldi sjóða til mannfagnaðar’ (‘All kinds of domestic animals were slaughtered there, including horses, and all the blood that came from them was then called *hlaut* (‘lot’), and what the blood was contained in, *hlaut*-bowls, and *hlaut*-twigs, these were fashioned like holy water sprinklers; with these the altars were to be reddened all over, and also the walls of the temple outside and inside and the people also were sprinkled.) (*Hákonar saga góða*, ch. 14; quotation after Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941: 167–8, translation after Finlay & Faulkes 2016: 98). See also Sundqvist 2002: 184–8; Simek 2006: 329.
44. ‘En smeri þing hafþu mindri blotan miþ fileþi, mati ok mungati, sum haita suþnautar, þy et þair suþu allir saman’ (‘But smaller assemblies held a lesser sacrifice with cattle, food, and drink. Those involved were called “boiling-companions”, because they all cooked their sacrificial meals together’) (*Guta saga*, ch. 1, quotation and translation from Peel 1999: 4–5).
45. Thunmark-Nylén 2000: 55–6.
46. af Edholm 2020: 298, 233–4.
47. See Lucas & McGovern 2007; Price 2008; 2010; 2012; Jensen 2016; Toplak in press.
48. See e.g. the late Viking Age cemetery of Kopparsvik on Gotland with several double burials of males that might be interpreted as trading partners who died during their stay at the trading place, see Toplak 2016: 90.
49. Gräslund 1980: 75–6.
50. Jensen 2016: 5.
51. Osteological investigations or aDNA analyses of these individuals are lacking, so the age and sex of these secondary individuals remain uncertain.
52. See Arne 1931: 286; Duczko 2004: 244; Androshchuk & Zocenko 2012: 169–73; Liwoch & Müller-Wille 2012.
53. Raffield *et al.* 2017: 169–72.
54. Raffield *et al.* 2021: 43–52.
55. See Toplak in press.
56. Hemmendorff 1984.
57. Holmquist Olausson 1990.
58. Andersen 1993.
59. Skaarup 1976: 56–8; 1989: 56–9; Sellevold *et al.* 1984: 116; Gardeła 2013a: 111; 2013b: 108–10; 2014: 72–3; 2017: 148–51.
60. Naumann *et al.* 2014.
61. Christensen 1982; 1997; Gardeła 2009: 288–90; 2011: 339, 352–3; 2012: 142–9; 2013a: 117–18; Kastholm 2015.
62. Christensen 1982: 21.
63. See especially Gardeła 2012: 145–9.
64. Christensen 1997: 34.
65. Kastholm & Margaryan 2021: 8–9.
66. Grøn *et al.* 1994: 14–15; Gardeła 2011: 348–9; 2012: 158–9, 161; 2013a: 115–17; 2013b: 131; 2014: 67–8; 2017: 107–8.
67. Arcini 2009a; 2009b; Gardeła 2015a; 2017: 106–109; 2020; Toplak 2015; 2017a; 2018.
68. Gardeła 2013a: 114.
69. Toplak 2015; 2016: 307–324; 2017a; 2017b; 2018; Gardeła 2017: 100–15.

70. Meyer-Orlac 1982; 1997; Thäte 2007: 266–72; Aspöck 2008; 2009; Cherryson 2008; Murphy 2008; Taylor 2008; Beilke-Voigt & Biermann 2009; Biermann 2009; Jungklaus 2009; Pollex 2009; Reynolds 2009; Štefan 2009; Gardeła 2012; 2011; 2013a; 2013b; 2015b; 2014; 2020; 2017; Augstein 2013; Gardeła & Kajkowski 2013; Gramsch 2013; Müller-Scheeßel 2013a; 2013b; Veit 2013; Toplak 2016; 2017a; 2018; Betsinger *et al.* 2020; Gabelmann & Owens 2020; Ishikawa 2020; Mickleburgh *et al.* 2020; Müller-Scheeßel *et al.* 2020; Scott *et al.* 2020.
71. Harman *et al.* 1981; Buckberry 2008; Reynolds 2009.
72. For a critical perspective see Kastholm & Margaryan 2021.
73. See Gardeła 2012: 36, 89–120 for a discussion of this term.
74. Birkmann 1995: 256; for a divergent interpretation, see Pereswetoff-Morath 2017: 134–9; 2019: 171–5.
75. Ström 1942: 102–15; Gardeła 2009; 2011; 2012: 124–37; 2013a.
76. Ström 1942: 171–98; Gardeła 2012: 123; Jakobsson 2013.
77. Ström 1942: 103. The same laws are also found in the Old Testament, see Pálsson 1974: 66–7.
78. Simpson 1973: 168.
79. Gardeła 2013b: 96–101.
80. Gardeła 2014.
81. Simek 2007: 114–15.
82. ‘En er Börkr frétti þessi fákynstr, þá ferr hann upp á Annmarkastaði ok lætr taka Auðbjörgu ok ferr með hana út á Saltnes ok berr hana grjóti í hel. Ok er þetta er liðit, ferr Gísli heiman ok kemr á Nefsstaði ok tekr Þórgrím nef höndum ok foerir á Saltnes, ok er dreginn belgr á höfuð honum, ok er barðr grjóti til bana ok er kasaðr hjá systur sinni, á hryggnum milli Haukadals ok Meðaldals’ (‘And when Börkr received news of this occurrence, he goes up to Annmarkastaðir and has Auðbjörg seized and goes with her out to Saltnes and stones her to death. And when this has happened, Gísli leaves his home and comes to Nefsstaðir and catches Þórgrimr nef and takes him to Saltnes and an animal’s skin is put over his head and he is stoned to death and buried under a heap of stones beside his sister, on the ridge between Haukadal and Meðaldal’) (*Gísla saga Súrssonar*, ch. 19, quotation after Þórólfsson & Jónsson 1943: 60; author’s translation). See also Gardeła 2012: 127–8; 2013a: 106.
83. Ellis Davidsson 1973; Gardeła 2012: 128; 2013a: 101–4, 106–7.
84. See especially Böldl 2005; Simek 2007: 85–6.
85. Gardeła 2012: 130–1.
86. ‘Geirríðr varp af sér skikkjunni ol gekk at Kǫtlu ok tók selbelg, er hon hafði haft með sér, ok fœrði hann á hǫfuð Kǫtlu’ (‘Geirríðr threw off her coat and walked up to Katla and took a sack of sealskin that she had with her and put it over Katla’s head’) (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 20, quotation after Sveinsson & Þórðarson 1935: 53; author’s translation).
87. ‘Eptir þat bǫrðu þeir Kǫtlu grjóti í hel þar undir hǫfðanum’ (‘After that they stoned Katla to death at the foot of the promotory’) (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 20, quotation after Sveinsson & Þórðarson 1935: 54; author’s translation).
88. Ström 1942: 105–6.
89. Gardeła 2009: 289–290; 2012: 149.
90. Gardeła 2009: 289; 2016: 186.
91. Gardeła 2016.
92. Toplak 2016: 250–5.

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13

Women and Sacrifice: Roles and Connections

Marianne Moen

Introducing Ritual Life in the Viking Age

A basic premise for understanding (ritual) behaviour in the Viking Age is that ritual and daily life were entangled in profound ways, suggesting quite a different way of ordering spheres of action from modern divisions into sacred and secular.[1] This is not to say that the Viking Age knew no boundaries in terms of ritual performance from other acts of societal importance, nor that it had no sacred spaces or cult buildings, as indeed it had both.[2] Rather, it means that although sacred groves,[3] cult buildings,[4] and potent ritually charged landscapes[5] were certainly in existence, these are better understood as an integral part of a cognitive landscape of daily praxis and life. Though there were rituals enacted on a grander scale, such as the seasonal *blót* or publicly staged passage rituals such as funerals,[6] to a great extent ritual enactment in the Viking Age was placed in the hands of individuals and communities, and not centralised and controlled as subsequently became the norm in the Northern European medieval period.[7]

More than this, pre-Christian religion in Scandinavia is perhaps better understood not as something one necessarily *believed* in, but more as something one *did*.[8] This is reflected in the language used around the conversion to Christianity (approximately AD 1000), which referred to the bygone faith as *forn siðr* (meaning 'old customs'),[9] hinting at a way of life defined as much by practices as by beliefs. Quite different from many historically known ways of enacting religion in other words, where belief defines practice. Within this framework, it is perhaps not surprising that current scholarly interpretations envisage ritual responsibility as combined with other social functions in many cases.[10]

Further to the entanglement of daily life and ritual practice, the centrality of concepts of sacrifice are relevant here. The Old Norse verb *blóta* means to offer/sacrifice,[11] and indeed sacrifices run through the ritual language of the Viking Age in profound and inalienable ways. The emphasis on sacrifice in this paper, therefore, does not intend to lift it up as something out of the ordinary, but instead seeks to contextualise the involvement of women and sacrifice into a broader setting of ritual enactment. These are very broad brushstrokes indeed, but serve to introduce a society wherein ritual performance was integral to the fabric of life, and thereby a vital component of how to live in the world and navigate it correctly.

'Religious Women' in Research History

When approaching the research history of the Viking Age from a gendered perspective, it is striking that the prospect of religiously prominent women has habitually been treated rather more favourably than that of socially prominent women in non-religious functions. This is arguably symptomatic of a deeper ongoing research trend where ritual significance is used to explain prominent female figures so as to avoid according them political prominence.[12] Within this, lies the idiosyncrasy that the ritual responsibilities of high-status men are habitually treated as one part of their social function combined with worldly leadership roles, whilst women's ritual responsibilities are highlighted as their main defining trait, divorced from mundane power.[13] Male ritual responsibilities are thereby envisaged as part of a complex leadership role, whilst women's become their sole purpose.

Viking Age research has seen a renewed focus on questions of gender and the roles of women over the last decade.[14] Nevertheless, recent research has also shown embedded gendered biases that persist in the ways in which Viking Age

society is portrayed,[15] meaning in effect that interpretations still lean towards according assumed male actions, roles, and spheres more academic focus and space.[16] An inadvertent effect of this, is to create an (academic) image of 'society' where women exist on the margins of a male dominated social sphere.[17] The interpretative result of placing half of the adult population on the supposed margins, unintended as it may be, does raise the question of who we believe constitute a society, if not people of different genders, ages, and social groups. The relegation of women into contained and separate ritual roles may be argued to represent a culturally specific and historically grounded need to contain and limit female agency. Seen in this light, the relative prominence of women in religious roles in the research history of the Viking Age becomes as much about recent historical and social ideals as it is about the material at hand.

Women and Sacrifice in the Viking Age

As this chapter is specifically concerned with the envisaged role of women in acts of a sacrificial nature, a brief definition of the nature of sacrifice is required, though it is a topic far too large to be explored in detail here.[18] Ultimately, sacrifice, as we know it from the Old Norse sources can be understood as an exchange, wherein something is dedicated to the gods (or other non-human beings) in the hope of achieving a greater gain in return.[19] The following pages will consider some of the entanglements between women and sacrifice from two different angles. First from the question of research focus, especially the way in which Eurocentric views have tended to naturalise women in the role of victims.[20] Second from the starting point of women as active agents: in the role of performers and instigators of sacrifice,[21] and in the role of recipients of sacrifice, in the form of female deities to whom sacrifices were dedicated.

Women as Victims of Sacrifice

Casting women in the role of victims of sacrifice makes cultural sense according to Eurocentric value structures and entrenched views of gender structures.[22] These knowledge structures, and hence the knowledge produced within them, tend to posit women as a *passive* foil to men's *active* roles.[23] This harks back to Darwinist views of evolutionary determinism and remains integral to archaeological models, notwithstanding ongoing critique.[24]

As pertains to the Viking Age, the view of women as preferred sacrificial victims is often grounded in one particular source: the Arab traveller ibn Faḍlān's account from around AD 920, known as the *Risāla*.[25] The source is unique in being the only known eye-witness account of a funeral of a chieftain of the Rus, commonly interpreted as people of Scandinavian origin.[26] Ibn Faḍlān encountered the group he describes near the Volga river, and whilst the source contains a great deal of detail on these people and their customs, it is especially the account of the funeral that has caught and kindled the imagination of generations of Viking Age scholars.[27] Before proceeding, a few brief notes on the source itself are timely. Ibn Faḍlān's *Risāla* is accessible through several translations, all with minor variations between them.[28] It is, moreover, a unique source in terms of its cultural context: ibn Faḍlān wrote for an audience, and this audience was not us, the modern readers. As ibn Faḍlān did not speak the language of the Rus and relied on an interpreter, this means in effect that we rely on an interpreted account of an already interpreted set of events. Add to this the cultural lenses that inevitably colour how we perceive the story today, and it is clear that we approach it at several cultural removes. These reservations notwithstanding, it remains a source that can yield unique insights into the funerary – and sacrificial – rituals of the Viking Age, and my approach through a feminist reading can hopefully offer a new dimension.[29]

Ibn Faḍlān recounts how the funeral preparations started with the dead man's relations asking his slaves for a volunteer to die with him.[30] A young girl comes forward, and ibn Faḍlān offers the comment that it is often so, though the option is open to both girls and boys.[31] The preparatory rituals proceed from there, with the readying of lavish grave goods and alcoholic drink, and the sacrifice of several animals. Throughout the proceedings, the slave girl who had volunteered enjoys an elevated social position, and is given fine clothes to wear and good food and drink as well as servants of her own.[32] The inevitable end to her life comes at the apex of the death rites, when she has intercourse with several of the chieftain's men, before being strangled and stabbed.[33] Finally, the ship is set on fire, and a mound raised over the ashes.[34]

It will be obvious to people familiar with Viking Age burial practices that there are conspicuous overlaps between ibn Faḍlān's account and several of the more famous Viking Age burials. Mounds built over ships, animal sacrifices, and lavish grave goods are well-known aspects of the varied mortuary rituals observed from the period,[35] and so, arguably, is attendant sacrifices.[36] However, this is where the waters become rather muddied. Arguably, the death of the slave girl in ibn Faḍlān's account has influenced how archaeologists tend to interpret multiple burials, with a favoured interpretation being that they represent evidence of *suttee*, or the sacrifice of a wife upon their husband's death.[37] Ibn Faḍlān's slave girl has added fuel to this narrative, providing an enticing source from which to argue that women were more often chosen as victims of sacrifice than were men.[38] However, this narrative of women as the victims of choice in Scandinavian funerary practices is not uniformly reflected in the comparative material. A first challenge is that even in cases of multiple burial, it is often an interpretative leap to assume one body was killed to accompany another, and further it is often unclear who should be interpreted as the

victim. Examples here may include the famous Oseberg mound, and numerous other multiple burials such as at e.g. the urban centre at Kaupang in Vestfold, Norway.[39] Conversely, several known cases might instead justify an interpretation of male victims, such as at the male and female burial at Gerdrup in Sjælland, Denmark, where a female is accompanied by a male who appears to have had bound feet and have died by hanging (→ **Chapter 28**).[40] The 'Elk Man' at Birka in Uppland, Sweden is another, where an older male is accompanied by a younger male body thrown somewhat haphazardly into the grave.[41]

A second challenge to the trope of sacrificed slave *girls*, is that ibn Faḍlān's account makes it clear that the chosen slave could be a boy. Indeed, an account by another Arab traveller also records how when one of the Rus died, he could choose to be buried with his possessions, his wife, and his slave if he happened to be fond of him.[42] An episode in *Gautreks saga* echoes this, where a male slave was allowed to die with his master, a possibility that opened up an afterlife in the realm of Óðinn, something he would otherwise not have had access to.[43] It appears clear that women were not the only suitable victims of attendant sacrifice. Indeed, the pertinent aspect of the slave girl's social person may in this case be less the *girl* and more the *slave* component.[44]

There is a third interpretative challenge here as well, and that lies in the habitual reluctance to grant agency to perceived victims, such as the slave girl. In many interpretations, her death is represented as an imposition upon a gullible young girl led into an appalling death,[45] as is indeed a viable reading. However, it is also worth fielding the notion that perhaps it was instead an active choice, a decision to take the chance at improving a life of inescapable servitude and slavery. Considering her status in life, the choice of death with the promise of an elevated social position in the afterlife can be seen as rational.[46] The death of the slave girl in ibn Faḍlān's *Risāla*, in other words, cannot be used to argue for a predilection for sacrificing girls in general. It ought also strike a note of caution in how we represent the agency of those who may have died in sacrificial rituals.

Women as the Performers of Sacrifice

Continuing with ibn Faḍlān's *Risāla*, this unique source also contains another female figure of note, but who has gotten substantially less academic focus.[47] This is the *Malak al-Maut* or 'Angel of Death', so termed by ibn Faḍlān, who describes her as an old, corpulent crone of somewhat frightening appearance.[48] Aside from these aspects of her physique, there are tantalising hints at her role as the orchestrator of the rituals. She is described as being responsible for cutting the cloth for the dead man's funeral clothes, a role we can surmise as being of some importance, as a whole third of his wealth was set aside for this.[49] Furthermore, she coordinates the rituals throughout, and even herself carries out the final killing of the slave girl (Fig. 13.1).[50] Notwithstanding these hints at an established and integral ritual role, her exact position remains enigmatic, and it is fair to say that her role is underexplored in many of the scholarly interpretations of ibn Faḍlān's account, which often place the slave girl in focus instead. Arguably, the Angel of Death is a figure who can tell us much more about the ritual realities of the Viking Age, though she is perhaps a less likely object of fascination. Neil Price has drawn attention to the term ibn Faḍlān uses: *Malak al-Maut*, which in Islamic tradition is the angel who separates the soul from the body at death, not unlike the role of the *valkyrjur* in Old Norse tradition, the chooser of the slain, in their similar roles of taking or collecting the dead.[51] That her role was particularly connected with facilitating the transition into the realm of the dead appears clear, and as Montgomery has commented, she has parallels in a variety of sources with women who sacrifice.[52]

The slave girl herself also enacts a sacrifice in the course of the rituals, when she decapitates a hen, which is subsequently thrown onto the ship.[53] It is also interesting to note how the animal sacrifices are described as *thrown* onto the ship, as opposed to objects such as weapons and food, which are *placed* there. One could speculate if there is an underlying symbolism of violence considered integral to how the separate parts of the ritual enactment is handled.

A rather different story is found in the tale known as *Vǫlsa þáttr* recorded in the fourteenth-century *Flateyjarbók*.[54] This is not a tale of burials or attendant sacrifices, but does centre on women, sacrifice, and rituals. It describes how during his ongoing campaign to Christianise Norway, king Óláfr (later to be known as St Óláfr) happened to stop at a wealthy farm, where he encountered a pagan ritual led by the lady of the house. Every evening, she would bring out a carefully preserved horse phallus (the *Vǫlsi* of the title), and the household members would sing and chant verses to it and pass it between them (Fig. 13.2). Each verse would end with the prayer 'Þiggi mǫrnir þetta blæti' ('Accept, Mǫrnir, this sacrifice').[55] The exact identity of Mornir remains elusive,[56] though different interpretations include both the god Freyr and a more conceptually envisaged giantess.[57] Either way, associations between fertility, women, and sacrifice do seem clear,[58] with the verses veering towards the decidedly raunchy.[59] The source is late by any defining standard, but interestingly there are echoes in earlier material that hint at ritual continuity. For instance, the source includes a ritual enacted by the lady of the house where she is lifted above the lintel to see into the future, which echoes once again ibn Faḍlān's *Risāla*, where the slave girl is lifted above something resembling a door frame to see her master in the afterlife.[60] Moreover, the phallus is preserved in 'linen and onion', a phrase also found on a considerably older object, a small bone scraper found in Norway.[61] The nature of the sacrifices enacted during this ritual may have been lost in translation, but the echoes of women as instigators of sacrificial rites remain.

Figure 13.1 The Angel of Death *portrayed as she is arranging the funeral chamber for the dead chieftain, before the final acts of the ritual. Illustration by Eric Carlson.*

Returning from the lighter touch of *Vǫlsa þáttr*, however, we can glimpse an older association of women as performers of sacrifice in a variety of Germanic sources. Strabo's *Geographica* ('Geography') from around 64 BC–AD 21 records how priestesses among the Cimbri (potentially from Jylland in Denmark), cut the throats of prisoners of war and prophesied using their blood and entrails.[62] Other Germanic sources also detail human sacrifice, though usually we are not told the gender of those who performed such rituals.[63] There are also potential connections between women and the cyclical *blót* sacrifices, as for instance in *Óláfs saga helga*. A passage here details how the skald Sigvatr and his companions struggled to find shelter one night: at one farm they were turned away by the lady of the house with the reason given that they were carrying out an *álfablót* and Sigvatr and his companions were Christians and therefore could not be welcome at such a time.[64] The exact role of the lady of the house in this *álfablót* remains unspecified, but as she was the one who turned away guests at such a time, we can perhaps surmise a role of direct involvement in the proceedings (Fig. 13.3).

Finally, female deities could also be the recipients of sacrifice in written sources, anchoring women to sacrifice in yet another way. Óðinn is often acknowledged as intimately connected with rites of sacrifice, with his self-sacrifice for wisdom by hanging in the world tree for nine nights echoed across references to hanging in varied sources.[65] Yet he was not the only deity worthy of receiving sacrifices. Þorgerðr Holgabrúðr appears in various sources under differing guises, sometimes described as a goddess, sometimes as an ancestor figure.[66] Both *Flateyjarbók* and *Jómsvíkinga saga* records her as commanding the allegiance of Hákon jarl, to the degree where he carries out sacrifices to her: including that of his youngest son to ensure victory in a battle around the year AD 980–990.[67] Significantly, this sacrifice was effective and secured the help of Þorgerðr Holgabrúðr in achieving victory.

Figure 13.2 The ritual described in Vǫlsa þáttr *in progress. Here the members of the household pass the phallus to each other, until it reaches the (Christian) king, who promptly throws the object to the dog to be devoured. Illustration by Eric Carlson.*

Figure 13.3 Artist's reimagining of Sigvatr being turned away by the mistress of the house. Illustration by Eric Carlson.

Concluding Words

Women appear in many ways to be closely connected to sacrificial rituals, but it is important to bear in mind that at no time are they pictured as the sole owners of any such role, be that victim, instigator, performer, or beneficiary. I suggest that in determining the enactment of many such roles, social status was of higher importance than gender. Furthermore, when we revisit the proposition at the start, that the research history favours women as passive victims in promoted interpretations, we can see that this does not measure particularly well when compared with the material. It may be fair to say therefore, that when gendered lines are drawn and imposed upon narratives of sacrifice, these may hail more from academic traditions than the material upon which they are placed. By focusing overtly on the slave girl in ibn Faḍlān's story, we may forget that the same source tells us that the choice to die was offered to slave boys as well.[68] Moreover, in giving her centre stage, we tend to forget the enigmatic Angel of Death. Similarly, if we consider that religious responsibilities are habitually cited as the powerful (male) chieftain's prerogative and part of his social function,[69] it appears that women performing religious duties are often placed outside of this same sphere of power, with little exploration of how religious duties combined with their other social functions.

The analysis presented here suggests that these interpretative biases are perpetuated by entrenched gendered preconceptions that persist within Eurocentric knowledge structures and that insist that women and men be treated as fundamentally different even when inhabiting comparable social roles. Arguably, it does not reflect the source material, it rather reflects how we *read* it. Thus, if we seek to untangle the ramifications of who were sacrificed, who carried out the deeds, and on whose orders, we would do well to attempt to detangle culturally situated biases that may influence how we read the different actors in light of engrained gendered expectations to behaviour. The material cannot speak for itself, but when we speak for it, we need to acknowledge how our own voices become part of the narratives we create.

Notes

1. Solli 2004; Hultgård 2008; Andrén 2014; Schjødt 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; Zachrisson & Andrén 2020.
2. Schjødt 2003; 2020a; 2020b; Zachrisson & Andrén 2020.
3. Andrén 2014.
4. Zachrisson & Andrén 2020.
5. Lund 2009; 2020.
6. Price 2010; Schjødt 2020c.
7. Brink 2007; Schjødt 2020b.
8. Schjødt 2020d: 590.
9. Steinsland 2005: 268.
10. Sundqvist 2007; 2020.
11. Steinsland 2005: 277.
12. Gansum 1995; discussed in Arnold 2002; Deckers *et al.* 2021.
13. As discussed in e.g. Pedersen 2008; Moen 2019a.
14. Croix 2012; Gardeła 2018; 2021; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2020; Kershaw 2020; Moen 2021.
15. Pedersen 2008; 2014; Aannestad & Glørstad 2017; Moen 2019b; Price *et al.* 2019.
16. As the table of contents and index will reveal in e.g. Christiansen 2002; Skre 2007; Barrett & Gibbon 2015; Pedersen & Sindbæk 2020.
17. Though there are notable exceptions to this tendency, see e.g. Gardeła 2021.
18. Berggren 2006; Oras 2013; af Edholm 2016; Stevens 2016; Schwartz 2017.
19. Näsström 2001; Steinsland 2005; Raudvere 2008.
20. As discussed in Moen & Walsh 2021.
21. Raudvere 2003; Moen & Walsh 2021.
22. Moen & Walsh 2021.
23. Conkey & Spector 1984; Wylie 2007; Tomášková 2011; Ghisleni *et al.* 2016; Frieman *et al.* 2019.
24. Connell 1987; Gilchrist 1999; Tomášková 2011.
25. McKeithen 1979; Montgomery 2000; Lunde & Stone 2012.
26. Though the origin of the Rus remains a topic of some debate, cf. Franklin & Shepard 1996; Montgomery 2000; Hillerdal 2009; Hraundal 2013; Raffield 2018.
27. Bersu & Wilson 1966; Ellis 1968; Price 2010; Upham 2019.
28. Perhaps the most commonly used are Montgomery 2000; Lunde & Stone 2012. I have referred mostly to Lunde & Stone 2012 throughout, though Montgomery 2000 is used as a control source. The two translations do differ in some details, but correspond in the pertinent details used here.
29. Moen & Walsh 2021.
30. Lunde & Stone 2012.
31. Lunde & Stone 2012; Moen & Walsh 2021.
32. Montgomery 2000; Lunde & Stone 2012.
33. Lunde & Stone 2012.
34. Lunde & Stone 2012.
35. Price 2008; 2010.
36. Shetelig 1908; Bersu & Wilson 1966; Wilson 2008.
37. As espoused in Shetelig 1908; Wilson 2008; and as problematised in Ratican 2020.
38. As discussed in e.g. Upham 2019; Moen & Walsh 2021.
39. Stylegar 2007; Pedersen 2008; Bill & Daly 2012; Ratican 2020.
40. Bennike 1985; Wilson 2008; Kastholm 2016.
41. Olausson 1990.
42. Lunde & Stone 2012: 151.
43. Ellis 1968: 73–4 (from *Gautreks saga*, ch. 1).
44. Moen & Walsh 2021.
45. Montgomery 2000; Price 2010; Jensen 2016.
46. Moen & Walsh 2021.
47. Upham 2019.
48. Montgomery 2000, Lunde & Stone 2012.
49. Lunde & Stone 2012: 50–3.
50. Lunde & Stone 2012: 49.
51. Price 2010: 133.
52. Montgomery 2000: 15.
53. Montgomery 2000: 17.
54. As discussed in Schjødt 2020b.

55. Raudvere 2003: 135; Hedeager 2011: 107.
56. Schjødt 2020b: 801.
57. Steinsland 2005: 350–2.
58. Hedeager 2011; Schjødt 2020b.
59. Raudvere 2003: 135; Steinsland 2005: 350–2; see also Gardeła 2016: 188–90 for a discussion of phallic objects in Western Slavic contexts.
60. Lunde & Stone 2012.
61. Steinsland 2005: 351.
62. Schjødt 2020d; Sundqvist 2020: 610.
63. Schjødt 2020d.
64. Schjødt 2020b: 799.
65. Tschan 2002. See also Näsström 2001; Vedeler 2019; Zachrisson & Andrén 2020.
66. See Gardeła 2021: 38–9 for a discussion of this.
67. Hedeager 2011: 101; Gardeła 2021: 38–9.
68. The source is explicit in that girls most often volunteered for the role, but there are other accounts which detail the death of slave boys with their masters. See Moen & Walsh 2021.
69. Sundqvist 2007; Schjødt 2020b.

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14

Surely Every Live Man Fades Among the Dead: Fear and Desire in the Afterlife of Viking Age Graves

Alison Klevnäs

Encountering Oseberg

When the excavation of the Oseberg ship mound in Vestfold, Norway began in 1903, it could immediately be seen that the grave had been broken into early in its history.[1] The outstanding preservation conditions in the clay tumulus made the burial famous for its intact wooden artefacts and textiles (Fig. 14.1), but also gave unrivalled evidence of an episode of destructive plunder, making this the touchstone site for discussions of Viking Age mound-breaking ever since.[2] The initial opinion of the excavators was that the monumental grave had been re-entered by grave-robbers, perhaps even professionals. A substantial trench, more than 20 m long, up to 6 m deep and several metres wide had been dug into the side of the mound from the south. This gave access to the main burial chamber, which was a tent-like structure of rough planks and logs built just behind the mast of the funerary ship. When the break-in trench was excavated, it was found to contain layered debris including wooden spades and stretchers, some of which have recently been dated to the reopening event itself.[3]

Near the start of the trench, the intruders encountered the ornamented stem of the ship, part of which they eventually hacked off, carrying some pieces into the trench and along to the burial chamber, and apparently taking a 2 m-long section away with them. At the far end of the trench, they cut their way through the wooden roof of the chamber and climbed inside (Fig. 14.2). They dragged out and destroyed the furnishings once surrounding the bodies of the dead, including two carved beds and a chair. Among the wreckage in the trench were strewn the mixed remains of down and feathers from bedding, pieces of tapestries, wooden chests, a basket, a wooden saddle, and parts of the ship's frame (Fig. 14.3).[4]

Also found among the debris were remains of the skeletons of two women. The more complete lay mainly at the bottom of the intrusive passage; the excavation director described the remains as 'thrown' out of the burial chamber.[5] Several bones including most of the face were missing. The second individual, a younger female, was represented by only a few skeletal parts spread between the chamber and the trench. Notably, fragments of the cranium were distributed in both areas; it had been crushed, apparently deliberately, within the chamber.[6]

At this stage the excavators suggested that the skeletons might have been disturbed because they were mixed up with the dress ornaments and jewellery that the robbers wanted, pointing out that the more complete skeleton lacked hand and arm areas where jewellery could have been worn. They noted that the re-entry had occurred before the weight of the mound had deformed the ship and chamber, but after the decomposition of the two corpses, since the skeletons were fully disarticulated.[7] They considered that the scale of the operation, representing at least several days of work, put secrecy out of the question, leading them to believe that it could not have been permitted during pagan times. On this basis they proposed that it had occurred as part of a wave of mound-breaking in the early Christian period.[8]

Revisiting Oseberg

In 1945 Norwegian archaeologist Anton Wilhelm Brøgger revisited Oseberg in a wide-ranging essay which foreshadowed much subsequent discussion of mound-breaking as seen in both the archaeological record and early written sources.[9] Brøgger reassessed the plans from the original excavation, arguing that the initial interpretation had underplayed evidence of less straightforward motives than plain

Figure 14.1 The Oseberg ship under excavation in 1904. Photo by Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo. CC BY-SA 4.0.

Figure 14.2 The tent-like burial chamber onboard the Oseberg ship showing damage from the re-entry. Photograph from the Oseberg excavation 11 August 1904. Photo by Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo. CC BY-SA 4.0.

Figure 14.3 Snake's head detail from a single part of the Oseberg find illustrating the quality of the workmanship and the preservation. Photo by Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo. CC BY-SA 4.0.

robbery. In particular, he drew attention to the emphasis on the bodies of the dead in the actions of the mound-breakers, arguing that a major aim was to take away the remains of the older woman, whom he considered the more significant figure, a queen. He underlined that the destructive actions directed against both the cadavers and their grave furnishings, as well as the ship itself, went far beyond a re-entry to remove valuables, suggesting instead that the desire was 'to obliterate the dead and to make the grave impossible as a dwelling place' (Norw. 'å tilintetgjøre den døde og umuliggjøre graven som bolig').[10]

In support of this argument, Brøgger presented and weighed up the evidence for and against ancient raids on other significant burial mounds and ship graves in Norway then known from the archaeological record. The best documented was that on the ship mound some 20 km away at Gokstad, which had been excavated more than twenty years before the Oseberg find, though detailed information about the disturbance had only recently become available.[11] Brøgger pointed out key similarities between the reopening events at the two sites, including that the re-entry at Gokstad was carried out at a similar interval after burial. He considered the Gokstad diggers more skilled and experienced, noting that they dug more directly to the chamber, although the routes through both mounds were longer than necessary since they each began from angles removed from the burial chambers at which they aimed.

The similarity on which Brøgger placed greatest weight was the 'striking destruction' (Norw. 'påfallende ødeleggelser') seen at Gokstad as well.[12] As at Oseberg, part of the boat had been damaged and all the objects found around the body were damaged and fragmentary. The skeleton, this time male, had again been largely removed from its resting place. The bed on which it had been lying was carried out from the burial chamber and destroyed, and the skull in particular appeared to have been deliberately damaged.

Surveying the information from other Norwegian sites, Brøgger observed that cenotaph mounds – those without burials – appear to have been left intact, along with those dating back to the Bronze Age. This he took to underline his point that the corpse was key to the re-visitations. He showed that by no means all Viking Age burial mounds were disturbed, but that apparently similar re-entry events had been documented or were suspected in a number. These include the mound cemetery at Borre in Vestfold and the grave known as Grønhaug on Karmøy, where again the partial remains of a heavily disturbed male skeleton with the skull missing had been recorded.[13]

That the Oseberg reopening was far from a one-off event was thus seen as central to its interpretation from early on. However, Brøgger's archaeological frame did not extend beyond Norway and its 'royal' – or at least high elite – grave mounds. He was concerned to identify the excavated individuals in the disturbed tombs with named historical figures and to understand the treatment of their burials in the context of political trajectories after their deaths; the circumstances of the time gave an imperative to writing Norway's independent history.

To delve further into motivations for the treatment of the bodies and their burial places, Brøgger then presented a broad assortment of written sources relating to ancient graves in Norway, with the intention of using these to investigate relations with the dead as portrayed in folklore from pagan times onwards. With due discussion of their relevance, he brought in early law codes, literature and poetry, later folk traditions, and a selection of runic inscriptions. Above all he turned to the medieval Old Norse sagas, specifically some of the *Íslendingasǫgur, konungasǫgur,* and *fornaldarsǫgur* which are considered to relate most closely to life in Norway.

Several of these sagas feature dramatic and memorable episodes of entries into grave mounds and physical struggles with the dead who dwell in them. Brøgger recounts a number, identifying two main narrative threads that recur through the variety of wild tales and forceful characters. The first portrays mound-breaking as tied up with the idea of *reimleikr*: the trouble caused to the living by unruly revenants who become dangerous and may leave their barrows and spread trouble and fear. These nuisances could only be ended by entering the tomb and overcoming the often supernaturally strong dead body in order to 're-kill' the mound-dweller. A classic example which Brøgger cites is that of Kárr inn gamli (Kar the Old) in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, the former owner of an Icelandic farmstead who is now haunting the neighbourhood so savagely that all other inhabitants are driven away.[14] The hero, Grettir,

breaks into the mound in order to deal with the troublesome revenant. It takes him the best part of a day to reach the wooden burial chamber, into which he lowers himself on a rope. The story continues:

> Gekk Grettir þá í hauginn; var þar myrkt og þeygi þefgott. Leitask hann nú fyrir, hversu háttat var. Hann fann hestbein, ok síðan drap hann sér við stólbrúðir ok fann, at þar sat maðr á stóli. Þar var fé mikit í gulli ok silfri borit saman ok einn kistill settr undir foetr honum, fullr af silfri. Grettir tók þetta fé allt ok bar til festar; ok er hann gekk útar eptir hauginum, var gripit til hans fast. Lét hann þá laust féit, en rézk í mót þeim, ok tókusk þeir þá til heldr óþyrmiliga. Gekk nú upp allt þat, er fyrir varð; sótti haugbúinn með kappi. Grettir fór undan lengi, ok þar kemr, at hann sér, ateigi mun duga at hlífask við. Sparir nú hvárrgi annan; foerask þeir þangat, er hestbeinin váru; kippðusk þeir þar um lengi, ok fóru ýmsir á kné, en svá lauk, at haugbúinn féll á bak aptr, ok varð af því dykr mikill. Þá hljóp Auðunn frá festarhaldinu, ok ætlaði, at Grettir myndi dauðr. Grettir brá nú sverðinu Jǫkulsnaut ok hjó á hálsinn haugbúanum, svá at af tók hǫfuðit; setti hann þat við þjó honum.

> Then Grettir went into the mound. Inside it was dark, and the air not very sweet. He groped about to find out how things were arranged. He came upon some horse bones, then he knocked against the carved backpost of a chair, and he could feel someone sitting in it. A great treasure of gold and silver was gathered together there, and under the man's feet was a chest full of silver. Grettir took all the treasure and carried it towards the rope, but as he was making his way through the barrow he was seized fast by someone. He let go of the treasure and turned to attack, and they set on each other mercilessly, so that everything in their way was thrown out of place. The mound-dweller attacked vigorously, and for a while Grettir had to give way, but finally he realized this was not a good time to spare himself. Then they both fought desperately, and moved towards the horse bones, where they had a fierce struggle for a long time. Now the one and now the other was forced to his knees, but in the end the mound-dweller fell backwards, and there was a great crash. Then Audun ran away from the rope, thinking that Grettir must be dead. Grettir drew his sword – Jokul's Gift – and struck with it at the mound-dweller's neck so that it cut off his head. He placed the head against Kar's buttocks.[15]

The description of the grave is strongly reminiscent of Viking Age mounds and their contents as seen in the archaeological record. However, as Brøgger points out, there is not actually much gold or silver in such burials.[16] Rather, he draws attention to a second recurring strand in the saga tales: the removal not of generic treasure but specifically of certain categories of valuable heirlooms which might be recovered to play a part at a crucial moment for the lineage of a kin group. Here he cites the story in which the long-dead king Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr appears in a dream and asks for his own mound to be reopened and the objects lying on its floor removed. The belt is to be taken to queen Asta in childbed, enabling her to give birth to a son who later becomes the famous Norwegian king St Óláfr. The sword and ring are to be passed onto this child. Yet here again, violence is required, as the dream ghost orders the sword first to be used to cut off the head of the mound-dweller.[17] Such hereditary artefacts are much more in line with those deposited in Viking Age burials; Brøgger goes as far as to suggest that a motive along these lines might have been part of the background to the Gokstad reopening, although he is cautious about drawing direct lines of interpretation from highly embroidered yarns.

Rather he stresses that the destruction of the dead, usually in the narrative form that the mound-breaker must fight and overcome the mound-dweller, is a constant theme in the saga tales of mound-breaking, even the main shared motif.[18] Taking the collection of sources as a whole, Brøgger argues that the impetus to the violent acts seen in archaeological mound-breaking must lie in the intensity and strength of the relationship between the living and the dead, the duality of the care owed to the dead and the fear of their power, which led to unrest between them.[19] This intense relationship is seen also, as he shows, in medieval mentions of magical communication with the dead in their graves; he makes a suggestion that the ancient dead became more feared as Christianity took hold, altering both practices and narratives.[20]

From Mound-Breaking to Mortuary Materialities

In the more than twelve decades since the Oseberg discoveries, burial disturbance has been recognised in a much wider range of Scandinavian graves but also more broadly as a recurrent phenomenon across many past societies. It is increasingly understood as part of a whole spectrum of physical interactions with dead bodies, objects associated with them, and their monuments.[21] Several strands in recent archaeological thinking have come together to make this a far more prominent topic than it has ever been.

One aspect of the broad background is the study of the uses of the past in the past, especially the life histories of monuments and their roles in social memory, which gained traction in archaeology from the late 1990s.[22] Here the secondary use of older mortuary monuments gave a special focus, since it is a marked feature of many archaeological contexts, not least in first millennium Europe, when both prehistoric and Roman sites were widely re-used.[23] But attention to intergenerationality has come to extend to the wider landscape as well and to include not only relations with the ancient past, but also increasing examination of ways in which community is created with the more recent dead, for example through spatial and other mnemonic relations as burials accrue into cemeteries.[24] With traditions no longer – or at least decreasingly – understood as passive expressions of origin or allegiance, interest has increased in their active management and maintenance. In mortuary contexts, we see this in the ways through which people use the monumental and artefactual world

around them to establish and cite time-depth in the lives of their communities. Then at the much smaller scale of portable objects, the construction of heritage and passing on of value and meaning have featured strongly in recent work on heirlooms and how possessions entangle with life events, acquire aspects of personhood, and maintain social relationships across temporal distance.[25] All this means that where later re-entries into graves were once felt to be out of time – intrusions of later periods into what should be bounded contexts – that out-of-time-ness is itself now seen as a potential topic for study.

Another major influence is the attention that is being paid more generally in mortuary archaeology to traces of activities which took place before, after and alongside the deposition of bodies and burial assemblages.[26] This is a shift from a relatively static approach to the excavated remains of burials, largely noting the presence and absence of deposited objects and what they might represent in terms of wealth or symbolic value, towards a more experiential account of mortuary events. For example, over the last couple of decades influential papers on rich later first millennium burials in Northern Europe, not least the seventh-century ship grave at Sutton Hoo in eastern England, have set out the dramatic quality of the rituals that created them, with not only artefactual props but probably also sounds, visual effects, and mythological citations creating affective impact.[27] Funerary rites are thus increasingly reconstructed as multi-stage, multi-sensory events, and for more modest burials as well, recent work advocates excavation and recording methods that collect and preserve the observations needed to make visible the full sequences of gestures and activities involved in the treatment of the dead.[28]

One direction in which this has led is towards not only exploring how funerary rites are experienced in sensory terms, but also attempting to access their affective impact on participants and viewers: how the ritual, social, and emotional trajectories of the processes intertwine and reinforce each other. This move can be seen as part of wider archaeological ambitions to theorise and find methodologies for accessing the emotion and affect that are an elemental part of human relations with the built and artefactual world (→ **Chapter 13**); mortuary studies have proved a natural starting point for such exploration.[29] For first millennium graves, this has resulted, for example, in studies that trace powerful emotive aesthetics in the ways artefacts and bodies were placed together.[30] Yet although relations of care and honour in funerary occasions are readily relatable, they are by no means all that is seen in the Viking Age; their study has come together with appreciation of how strongly killing and destruction also feature in how the mortuary customs of the time treated and defined persons and things.[31]

A further and crucial effect of the shift towards a participatory perspective has been increased awareness that acts of deposition may form only minor foci in mortuary processes, even if the depositing of bodies and any associated artefacts is the key moment for their entry into the archaeological record. A more ethnographically informed approach to mortuary archaeology now investigates the wide – even wild – variety of ways in which human remains may be treated before, during, and after processes of soft tissue decomposition. These can include prolonged handling and curation of cadavers and skeletal remains before eventual deposition; arresting recent papers have, for instance, demonstrated practices of deliberate mummification in hitherto unsuspected prehistoric European contexts.[32] In a similar vein, extended mortuary rites have been argued – and credibly refuted – for Viking Age burials, not least the Oseberg mound itself, although here the suggestion was for a prolonged process of monument construction and access to the main burial before final closure, rather than protracted treatment of the body.[33]

In many contexts the creation of a stable final resting place is of course not even a goal of mortuary ritual. Many of the dead throughout prehistory were disposed of – or kept close – in ways we can only surmise, since unless buried or otherwise physically protected, their remains and their treatment are almost always archaeologically invisible.[34] Then even when bodies or their parts are deposited in ways which bring them into the archaeological record, maintaining their coherence may not be the purpose of their deposition. Human remains are known to be subject to often multiple episodes of re-visitation and manipulation across a whole variety of archaeological and ethnographic settings. Megalithic tombs from the European Neolithic provide well-known examples, where the architecture of the monuments facilitates access for the prolonged, multiple stage interactions that have long been recognised and discussed by excavators.[35] Thus although constructions in which deliberately deposited human remains are found are usually labelled as graves, with the implication that they were endpoints in mortuary processes, some may be better regarded as places of mortuary storage, with re-access part of their intended use. Contexts with multiple consecutive burials and manipulation of body parts can be very challenging to excavate and reconstruct, but over recent decades such sites and practices have come to be regarded as much less anomalous than was previously the case. A variety of methodologies for dealing with complex multiple phases of deposition and secondary manipulation of whole and partial bodies are being developed by specialists in the periods where they are commonly seen.[36]

That mortuary sites may be revisited, and that prolonged or repeated physical interactions with human remains are by no means unusual, is thus well-established. However, here a distinction is often implicitly made between expected interventions in burial contexts – ones which might be considered extended engagements with the dead – and interventions that might be called secondary, or not directly anticipated

in the earlier stages of the mortuary process and not part of the apparent ritual trajectory. This distinction is subjective and more of a continuum than discrete categories, but is often baked into how excavated evidence from different periods and grave forms is dealt with. Interventions that can be seen as extended death rituals, part of the temporal and social context of the burial feature, are typically accepted as part of its intentional creation and are subjects of interest, as we have seen in Neolithic Europe. The second kind, interventions that seem secondary to mortuary activity and often run counter to its apparent aim of creating a lasting burial site, tend to be received as more problematic, often as damage or disturbance, and frequently receive labels such as 'robbery' or 'looting', as was initially the case at Oseberg. Thus although the process of disposing of the dead is recognised as a complex social and emotional activity, interventions considered secondary to the mortuary trajectory have tended to receive common-sense explanations, often relying on supposedly universal impulses of need or greed. The timeframe is relatively unimportant; many interventions that have been labelled as secondary occur soon after burial, but if they do not fit with archaeological expectations of how an interment should be treated, they are often considered in separate terms.[37]

This is where the investigation of 'disturbed' graves has accelerated most in recent years. Rapidly growing numbers of case studies have been published from a wide variety of geographic and temporal contexts demonstrating that practices of secondary intervention are at least always worth another look.[38] Investigation of the exact actions carried out when graves were re-entered frequently indicates more complex motives, ones not separate from mortuary practice, but embedded within and even elucidating contemporaneous understandings of death and the dead. In other cases, it may not be possible to isolate a motive, but the frequency of re-interventions may lead to the conclusion that they are an intentional treatment of interments. To give a single but influential example, recurrent disturbance of older inhumations at the Stone Age cemetery of Zvejnieki in northern Latvia was long assumed to be accidental. However, archaeothanatological analysis of the disarticulated remains and the sequences of their movement showed that although the re-entries initially appeared simply disruptive, they are better seen as an integral and meaningful part of the mortuary practices, part of how the graves linked individuals and place.[39]

Methodological development has burgeoned alongside this recognition of interpretative complexity. New techniques, including digital ones, are being pioneered for the recording and reconstruction of disturbance events both at initial excavation and in retrospective examination of excavation records and especially photographs, as in the Zvejnieki case.[40] Meanwhile there is a return to a willingness to combine perspectives from disparate forms of evidence – archaeological, archaeothanatological, bioarchaeological, poetical, literary, philological – which has been less common in the decades since Brøgger's work.[41] On the other hand, it is also fair to say that many early excavations, such as those at Oseberg, were actually highly effective at observing and recording evidence of secondary intrusions. There is an extent to which recent interest represents a return to their spirit of curiosity and a rejection of some of the assumptions that led to the side-lining of disturbance episodes in the intervening years.[42]

The broadening shifts described here have to some extent removed the imperative to specific emic explanations of particular reopening events, such as was felt by the Oseberg excavators. On the other hand, far more comparative material is now available through which to understand secondary practices in Viking Age graves as seen in their archaeological footprints. And there is a richness of other sources that – critically viewed – offer perspectives on re-engagement with Viking Age graves that can make the period a case study to open possibilities elsewhere.

New Knowledge about Re-Entries into Viking Age Graves

More than twenty years before work started at Oseberg, considerable evidence of early emptying of Vendel Period and Viking Age graves had already been excavated in Sweden, by Hjalmar Stolpe at the high-status boat-grave cemetery in Vendel, Uppland.[43] Here, as at Oseberg, the excavator paid attention to the re-entries in his observations and recording, even if neither the preservation nor the documentation were equally rich. A piece of material from the building of the nearby church in the disturbed fill of one grave inclined Stolpe to believe that the graves had been re-discovered during its thirteenth-century construction. He also noted that whoever carried out the robbing appeared to have learnt about the typical grave layout as they worked across the cemetery, aiming with growing efficiency at the main burial deposit of skeleton and associated belongings, almost all of which they dug out of all the graves they accessed.[44] However, unlike Brøgger, Stolpe did not attempt further exploration of possible motivations for the disturbance, and with his own and subsequent attention understandably taken up by the remarkable finds from the few untouched burials, the potential parallel was overlooked.

The focus on human remains and their immediate context emphasised by Brøgger had thus already been observed at Vendel as well, and the patterns he observed have since grown stronger in the expanding archaeological evidence. Reopening of Viking Age graves is not ubiquitous in the material record; rather it seems targeted to specific sites and tombs. At Vendel, for example, although the elite boat-grave cemetery was largely emptied of its occupants at some point after its use ended, the interference was limited to this site

and no other ancient burials in the large parish were affected.[45] However, it is very common for signs of re-entry to be noted, especially in high-status inhumation graves, and not least in ones containing ships or boats, whose structures add complexity to burial contexts and often make disturbance plainer to recognise.[46] It was possible to see, for example, that the early tenth-century ship grave at Ladby on Fyn in Denmark had been broken into when the wooden cover over the central part of the ship had not yet collapsed. Here again objects were destroyed: the intrusive cut contained over 500 fragments of damaged grave goods that had been extracted from the burial and fragmented on purpose before being replaced with the backfill. Further items were missing: although there was a buckle from a sword belt, only two possible hilt fragments have been found, and neither axe nor spear remained.[47] Just a few fragments of bone and some teeth were left. Targeting of human remains has been consistently noted wherever evidence is available, including at further sites in Norway, such as Storem in Overhalla.[48]

Descendant generations did not confine their attention to the highest status interments. In particular, substantial evidence has been documented in recent years in Iceland, the setting for almost all the many saga mound-breaking scenes. A comprehensive survey and detailed analysis are still missing, but disturbance of Icelandic Viking Age burials now appears to be pervasive.[49] Meanwhile two relatively recently excavated sites in Norway have shown the detail of evidence that can be recovered, including from less spectacular graves. At Langeid in Setesdal Valley in south-central Norway, for example, although human bone was not preserved, it could be seen that several of the last burials made in the ancestral pre-Christian cemetery had been disturbed. Here, as elsewhere, possessions closely associated with the dead had been targeted: swords had been broken and their fragments spread out in the re-entered graves.[50] Similarly at Gulli in Vestfold, a number of inhumations, some in boats, were opened in a mixed-rite cemetery. As at Vendel, the reopening cuts were aimed at the areas of the monuments where the bodies lay, and at Gulli the skulls appear to have been a particular target. Some grave goods were missing, for example one of a pair of oval brooches. Others remained, but showed signs of deliberate damage. A sword and a shield boss, for example, had been broken and left in an intrusive cut. As the Gulli excavators argued, the probably poor condition of the grave goods at the time, plus the decision to destroy rather than remove some key objects, suggest that an acquisitive motive is unlikely.[51]

Alongside clearer characterisation of reopening activities, recent decades have brought more information about their chronology. A key breakthrough for understanding of the Oseberg ship-grave and its disturbance was made through the dating precision provided by dendrochronological analysis of the several types of preserved wood in the mound. The Oseberg burial was dated by its artefacts to the ninth century; we now know more precisely that the burial chamber was constructed in AD 834.[52] In 2012, Jan Bill and Aoife Daly used dendrochronology to date spades and stretchers left in the mound after its reopening (Fig. 14.4). At Gokstad this

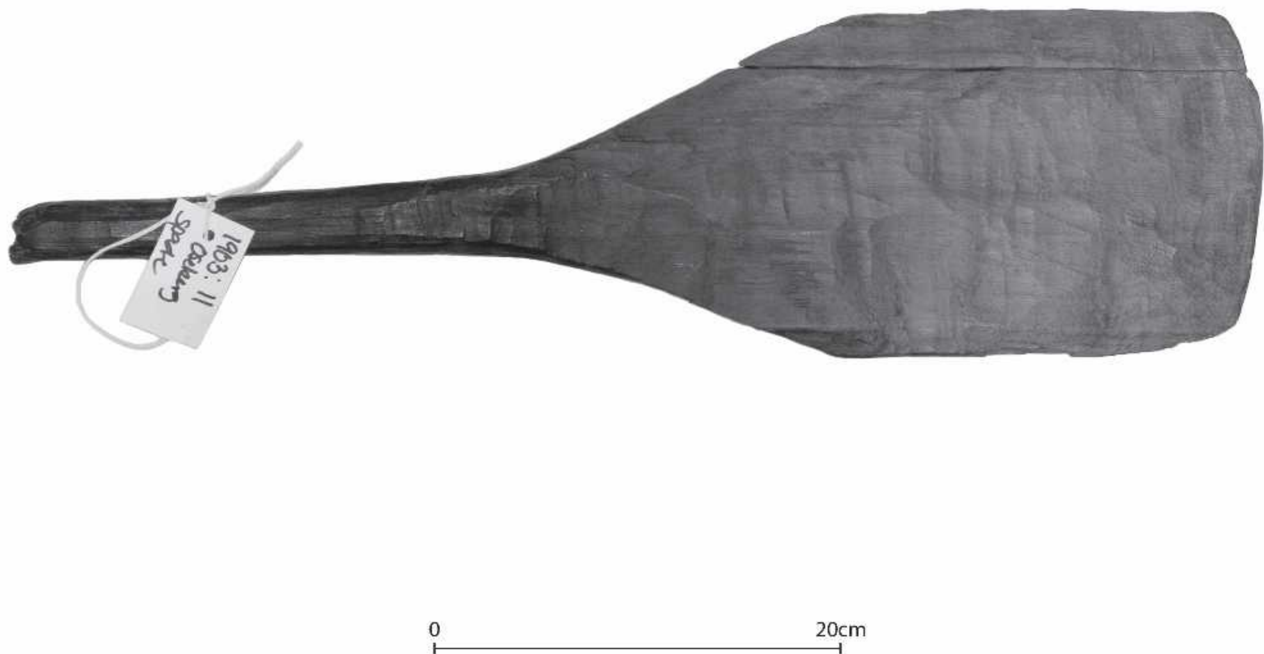

Figure 14.4 One of several wooden spades found in the Oseberg mound. This broken example is of oak and was discovered in the reopening trench above the burial chamber. Photo by Elin Christine Storbekk, Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo. CC BY-SA 4.0.

included a spade made from re-used wood cannibalised from broken-up parts of the ship itself. Bill and Daly conclude that both the Oseberg and Gokstad ship graves were most likely broken into during the second half of the tenth century, Oseberg probably more specifically between AD 953 and 975. They follow Brøgger's inclination that the break-ins may have occurred at around the same time, possibly as part of one operation, due to their proximity and similarities.[53] Bill and Daly see the intervention in terms of subduing local monuments, pointing out that the old mounds retained such power in the landscape that it was worth desecrating them and disinterring their occupants more than a century after their burial.[54]

More widely, however, we see that Viking Age graves were not reopened in a single phase. Despite the recurrent patterns in the activities, this was a way of treating burials that was repeated at different times and presumably in a variety of circumstances. Nevertheless, it is increasingly evident that grave disturbance was predominantly a phenomenon of the later Viking Age and the Middle Ages. Later Viking Age burials could be ransacked soon after completion, or even during the process of monument-building, as in the case of an early tenth-century burial in the small boat-grave cemetery behind the great mounds at Gamla Uppsala.[55] Yet this kind of early intervention is unusual in the Viking Age archaeological record as it stands. More typical is the other reopened boat-grave in the same cemetery, which was dug into much later, at a point when the corpse and wooden boat planks had all rotted. Bones from multiple animal species were added to the new backfill of this burial, while a nearby stone-covered horse grave from the fourteenth century is another sign of late activity in the cemetery. Meanwhile at Langeid the disturbed burials were among the latest pagan graves in the area, with dates into the eleventh century.[56] And again at Gulli the graves had been disturbed quite late, after substantial metal corrosion had set in, but probably before the fourteenth-century activity at the site.[57] Then at Vendel, Stolpe had good grounds for his suspicion that the graves were reopened in connection with church-building, since this was an occasion with men and spades available on-site. But even if this is not the precise dating, it is a likely timeframe, since the boats had completely rotted, and yet objects still retained enough material or social interest to make it worth digging through almost all the graves. By contrast, by the time the burial ground was rediscovered in the nineteenth century, the remains were fragmentary and in a friable condition, so that they had no evident value to anyone but a dedicated antiquarian, and many were destroyed by the workmen who found them.[58]

Intergenerational Memory-Making at the End of the Viking Age

In the 1990s Jan Brendalsmo and Gunnhild Røthe developed Brøgger's preliminary reading of diverse written sources into a firmer suggestion that a set of pagan customs associated with prophecy, perhaps involving actual recovery of material from burials as a way to access ancestral wisdom, might lie behind the grave reopening seen in the archaeological record.[59] They linked literary evidence for divination practices at grave sites with prohibitions in a number of early law codes, including the thirteenth-century Gulating and Borgarting laws from Norway, which forbid attempts to 'wake up' mound-dwellers.[60] Meanwhile a range of sources feature necromantic acts involving curated human body parts, especially heads.[61] Magic involving waking the dead to obtain their knowledge is strongly associated with Óðinn, but is also linked to the *vǫlur*, giving direct relevance to ongoing scholarly speculation that one or both of the Oseberg women may have taken a leading role in sorcery or cultic activity.[62]

Now, however, the late dating of most archaeologically known reopening activity places it within the period of the conversion of Scandinavia and the gradual Christianisation of most aspects of ritual life, rather than as an older pagan activity. Here, as elsewhere in Northern Europe, the last phases of non-churchyard burial have tended to be seen as representing only the fading of ancient custom and have typically received less interest than those regarded as fully pagan. Yet it is increasingly recognised that a whole range of commemorative activities flourished at this time, including the establishment of new monument forms and rural cemeteries,[63] and not least considerable fascination with the re-adoption or mimicking of ancient grave forms. As discussed above, re-use of older monuments through the insertion or superimposition of new burials is common all over Scandinavia in the Viking Age, and it is particularly pronounced in the later part of the period. Yet it is far from a uniform practice: when specific sites are assessed close-up, such as in Fredrik Fahlander's examination of the tenth- and eleventh-century activities at Broby Bro in Uppland, Sweden, it can be seen that the treatment of graves was creative and singular, down to individual funerary events.[64] Using that site as just one example, ancient cremated remains were removed, stone monuments were remodelled, and cremations and inhumations inserted, all in ways which seem sometimes to preserve and reference and sometimes to eliminate the previous burials.

Such activities continued far beyond the start of churchyard burial. Some regions, notably Gotland and Uppland, seem to have lacked the centralised authority to galvanise a coordinated shift to Christian practice and instead experienced a protracted phase of many decades and even centuries of overlapping mortuary traditions in multiple places in the landscape.[65] In Uppland, where the Gamla Uppsala and Vendel boat-graves were reopened towards the end of or soon after the Viking Age, neither cremation nor furnished burial stopped entirely until the beginning of the twelfth century.[66] Ancestral burial grounds continued in use throughout

the eleventh century and sometimes well into the twelfth century,[67] and it has been noted in recent pre-development excavations that graves were occasionally added as late as the mid-thirteenth century.[68] Re-engagements such as that at Oseberg, which do not involve the addition of new bodies, have been treated separately from this late mortuary activity, but should now be seen against this backdrop, which extended into the Middle Ages, of the creation of intergenerational meaning through the late use and reworking of pre-Christian sites.

The extended chronology of such activity also places it much closer in date to the written sources in which grave reopening provides so much food for imagination: ancient burial grounds were by no means bygone irrelevancies when the first sagas were written. Here it is pertinent that several literary sources include examples which they place in their present rather than the semi-legendary past. These may differ from the classic *draugar* tales situated in the late Iron Age, but they nonetheless contain supernatural elements which make it clear that ancient burials were still felt to bear – or could function in literature as bearing – considerable power. Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus, for example, writing around the year 1200, relates that men 'in our own time' tried one night to raid the famous mound of an ancient hero, but were repelled by a magical flood, which caused them to flee in panic. Saxo tells that there 'is no doubt this flood was (…) conjured up by some magical agency'; specifying 'diis loci illius', the guardian spirits of the place.[69]

Emotion in the Reopening of Viking Age Graves

The prolonged afterlife of many monuments during the Viking Age and into the Middle Ages suggests that material practices drew the past into the present in senses which find a mirror in some of the ways in which the saga narrators derived value and meaning from recounting tales of the past. As Brøgger was careful to emphasise, there is no sense in which the medieval sources directly retell actual reopening events. Yet the linking elements he discerned – destructive actions and interactions with human remains – have persisted as distinct themes through both the diversity of the subsequently uncovered archaeological material and more recent scholarly enquiry. As we have seen, Brøgger's observation that the cadaver is a central object still holds true for many events characterised as reopening. Meanwhile in wider late Viking Age re-use of past burials, recent work such as that of Fahlander highlights that older human remains and not only their containing grave monuments were crucial materialities.[70]

Brøgger's interpretation of mound-breaking as aimed at destroying both the deceased and also their dwelling-place builds on material observations but also on a particular understanding of grave space as seen in the medieval written sources relating stories of the Viking Age. That is the capacity of graves to maintain the presence of the dead in the landscape of the living: it has long been recognised that before the advent of churchyard burial, the dead were highly present in the landscape, dwelling in their graves in an animate state.[71] Mound graves, with their shapes echoing the hills or mountains in which the dead are also sometimes poetically described as residing,[72] feature strongly in these stories. And the internal forms and contents of several prominent monument types, especially chamber and boat graves, were arranged as accommodation for an ongoing existence.[73] Using both written and material sources, Leszek Gardeła has highlighted that this continued presence was not only figurative but conceived as fully corporeal: in the archaeological record he identifies a range of practices enabling and directing particular forms of visual and haptic contact with dead bodies in prolonged mortuary rituals, together with grave structures designed to allow offerings to be given to the dead, perhaps even added to burial contexts.[74] The examples presented by Gardeła make it clear that bodily remains endured as the location of personhood for lengthy periods after death and disposal, and as we have seen, the importance of the deceased resident is apparent throughout the archaeological evidence for reopening in the recurrent focus on their remains and not least their heads, axiomatically the bodily site at which individuality is most concentrated.[75]

That artefacts along with human remains were removed as well as damaged in reopening events received less attention in Brøgger's account and has been downplayed in subsequent discussions. For example, while acknowledging that some common categories of artefacts were removed at the break-ins, notably dress accessories from the Oseberg burial and weapons from the Gokstad grave, Bill and Daly consider that this was not the primary objective, instead foregrounding the considerable and varied evidence of violence directed at several elements of the burial assemblages.[76] Elsewhere the present author has argued that the taking of grave treasures is a significant theme across archaeological evidence and different genres of written sources: desire for belongings, though expressed and explained in a variety of terms, almost always features in the stories, and objects are no less a focus than skeletal parts in the material traces. Further, this author has suggested that the two are linked: the written sources give us a way of understanding *how* and *why* the violence was a necessary part of the transferal of the objects to new owners.[77] This is in part a revisiting of the capacities of Viking Age possessions to embody and transmit aspects of personhood that have long been discussed, if in evolving ways, by scholars with an eye to both material and written records.[78]

Connecting all these themes, but rarely if ever directly addressed, a key aspect that links both the literary and archaeological evidence is the degree of emotion, the expressions of desire and above all fear and peril,

which are related in the tales and can be seen to run through the material practices. The destructive element in the archaeological re-entries has been emphasised above, but it also has a public, performative aspect: as Bill and Daly point out, not only do the scales of the undertakings at Oseberg and Gokstad rule out secrecy, but the sizes of the trenches suggest that exposure was wanted and that the break-ins should be understood as dramatic, staged events where it was important to have eyewitnesses.[79] Similarly at Ladby, the scale of the activity is far beyond the personal: an area of turf up to 5 m long was removed to enable entry.[80]

In the written sources, graves frequently appear as fearful places even when the dead are not known by name and do not themselves feature in the narrative. An account in *Orkneyinga saga*, for instance, of how Haraldr jarl and his men sought shelter in an ancient mound against an Orcadian winter storm includes the laconic remark that some of them succumbed to madness:

> Þeir gengu þaðan inn þrettánda dag jóla í Fjörð. Þeir váru í Orkahaugi, meðan él dró á; ok oerðusk þar tveir men fyrir þeim, ok var þeim þat farartálmi mikill.

> And on the thirteenth day of Christmas they travelled on foot over to Firth. During a snowstorm they took shelter in Maeshowe and there two of them went insane, which slowed them down badly.[81]

The prominent mound then known as the Orkney howe is now identified as the famous Maeshowe Neolithic passage grave. It contains many Viking Age runic inscriptions, some of which brag of mound-breaking in terms that underline its status as a risky masculine pursuit.[82]

As discussed above, archaeological discourse increasingly recognises the importance of emotion in mediating human experience and reactions, and especially its centrality to mortuary activity. In post-depositional re-engagements with burial places, we see that they remain sites of powerful feeling – even of potential madness – long after initial funerary rites are completed. Violent re-engagements may well have reacted to and harnessed beliefs and fears such as those that echo through the written sources, but in the archaeological evidence they can more readily be interpreted in general terms as enacting and reinforcing the concentration of emotion at old grave sites, just as mortuary re-use is accepted as doing.

Many Viking Age graves, especially those built for inhumations, seem to have been created to form a preserving space, one that maintains the integrity and positioning of the assemblage of bodies and artefacts. They are not only monuments to what has been, but constructions intended to sustain the dead in 'one world where the past, the present and the future went hand in hand'.[83] Re-entries such as those seen as Oseberg may appear only destructive and certainly leave evidence which takes additional time to record – at Oseberg the need to document the secondary activity added a month and a half to the excavation.[84] However, that extra time taken for the initial excavation over a century ago has enabled archaeologists gradually to piece together multiple emotionally charged ways in which the reopening actions seem designed to disrupt the ritual trajectory of the creation and maintenance of the burial assemblage, and thereby direct us to what was most important in it.

This is an elaboration of the insight presented long ago by Brøgger: although the re-entries into the Oseberg and Gokstad mounds appear entirely opposed to the ways they worked as mortuary sites, and were thus initially thought to have been performed by people working in pursuit of entirely different, profit-seeking values, the acts were deeply rooted in Viking Age understandings of death itself. In Brøgger's as well as more recent work, material and written evidence combine to highlight the extent of ontological divergence between our own time and a milieu, which, being described by medieval authors, easily acquires a misleading familiarity.

Notes

1. Brøgger 1917a: 3; Bill & Daly 2012.
2. Brøgger *et al.* 1917; Brøgger 1945; Christensen *et al.* 1992; Myhre 1994; Gansum & Risan 1999; Arwill-Nordbladh 2002; Holck 2006; 2009; Bill & Daly 2012; Klevnäs 2016; 2019.
3. Bill & Daly 2012.
4. Brøgger 1917a; 1945: 1–3; Bill & Daly 2012.
5. *Aftenposten*, 13 September 1904.
6. Brøgger 1917a: 25–7; Holck 2006; 2009; Bill & Daly 2012: 815.
7. Brøgger 1917b: 152–8.
8. Brøgger 1917a: 26; 1917b: 163.
9. Brøgger 1945.
10. Brøgger 1945: 9.
11. Nicolaysen 1882: 5; Grieg 1928.
12. Nicolaysen 1882: 46, 53–4; Brøgger 1945: 7; Holck 2009: 24–31; Bill & Daly 2012: 815–16; Klevnäs 2016: 465–6.
13. Brøgger 1945: 13; Myhre & Gansum 2003; Bonde & Stylegar 2009.
14. Brøgger 1945: 32–4. For further examples and analysis, see Hofmann 2015.
15. Text after Guðni Jónsson 1936: 57–8; translation after Fox & Hermann Pálsson 1974: 37.
16. Brøgger 1945: 16.
17. Brøgger 1945: 36–8; Røthe 1997; Hofmann 2015: 298; Klevnäs 2016.
18. Brøgger 1945: 26.
19. Brøgger 1945: 24, 31.
20. Brøgger 1945: 24–30.
21. e.g. Gardeła & Kajkowski 2015; Aspöck *et al.* 2020; Weiss-Krejci *et al*. 2022.
22. e.g. Holtorf 1998; Semple 1998; 2013; Effros 2001; Williams 2003; 2006; Lund & Arwill-Nordbladh 2016; Murer 2019; Lund 2022.

23. e.g. Zadora-Rio 2003; O'Sullivan *et al.* 2014: 294–300; Jagu *et al.* 1996; Hållans Stenholm 2012; Artelius 2013; Pazienza 2017.
24. e.g. Semple & Williams 2015; Mees 2019; Sayer 2020.
25. e.g. Gilchrist 2013; Klevnäs & Hedenstierna-Jonsson 2015; Klevnäs 2016; Lund 2017; Knutson 2020.
26. e.g. Bartelheim & Heyd 2001; Nilsson Stutz 2003; Harrington *et al.* 2021.
27. e.g. Carver 2000; Halsall 2003; Price 2008; 2014; Price & Mortimer 2014.
28. e.g. Harrington *et al*. 2021.
29. e.g. Tarlow 2012; DeMarrais 2013; Nilsson Stutz 2016.
30. e.g. Mui 2018; Sayer *et al.* 2019.
31. e.g. Aanestad 2018; Ratican 2019.
32. Booth *et al.* 2015; Peyroteo Stjerna *et al.* 2022.
33. Gansum & Risan 1999; Nordeide 2011.
34. Weiss-Krejci 2013.
35. e.g. Beckett & Robb 2006.
36. e.g. Neves 2014; Lorentz 2016.
37. Aspöck *et al.* 2020b; Noterman & Klevnäs 2022.
38. e.g. Case studies in Gardeła & Kajkowski 2015; Aspöck *et al.* 2020a; Weiss-Krejci *et al.* 2022.
39. Nilsson Stutz & Larsson 2016.
40. See e.g. Aspöck *et al.* 2022 for an overview and references.
41. e.g. Weiss-Krejci *et al.* 2022.
42. Further discussion in Noterman & Klevnäs 2022.
43. Stolpe 1894; Stolpe & Arne 1912; Klevnäs 2015.
44. Stolpe 1894: 98.
45. Klevnäs 2015.
46. Klevnäs 2007.
47. Sørensen 2001: 65–6, 111–18.
48. Farbregd 1972.
49. Friðriksson 2013.
50. Wenn *et al*. 2016.
51. Gjerpe 2005.
52. Bonde & Christensen 1993.
53. Bill & Daly 2012.
54. Bill & Daly 2012: 808.
55. Klevnäs 2007.
56. Wenn *et al.* 2016.
57. Gjerpe 2005: 142–8.
58. Klevnäs 2015.
59. Brendalsmo & Røthe 1992.
60. Brøgger 1945: 27–30; Brendalsmo & Røthe 1992: 96–8.
61. Ellis 1943: 151–69; Gardeła 2013b; Mitchell 2017; Williams & Klevnäs 2019; Eriksen 2020.
62. Ingstad 1992; Price 2002.
63. Widerström 2019 gives an illustrative recently excavated example.
64. Fahlander 2018.
65. Ljung 2020.
66. Ljungkvist 2015.
67. Gräslund 2010.
68. e.g. Runer 2020.
69. 'Hunc quidam nostri temporis viri, quorum praecipuus Haraldus erat, vigente veteris sepulturae fama, spe reperiendae pecuniae noctu adorti repentino coeptum horrore liquerunt. Ex ipso namque perrupti montis cacumine subita torrentis vis magno aquarum strepitu prorumpere videbatur, cuius rapidior moles incitatissimo lapsu subiectis infusa campis, quicquid offendebat, involveret. Ad cuius impetum deturbati fossores abiectis ligonibus variam carpsere fugam, irruentis aquae verticibus implicandos se rati, si coeptum diutius exsequi niterentur. Ita a diis loci illius praesidibus incussus subito metus iuvenum animos avaritia abstractos ad salutis curam convertit neglectoque cupiditatis proposito vitae studiosos esse docuit.' (Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, Book III. Text and translation after Friis-Jensen & Fisher 2015: 161–3; see also Pedersen 2006).
70. Fahlander 2018.
71. Kelchner 1935; Ellis 1943; Gardeła 2013a; 2016: Sundqvist 2015; Klevnäs 2019; see also Thompson 2003: 93 for hints in the Anglo-Saxon sources that such beliefs may have extended beyond Scandinavia.
72. Ellis 1943: 87–9.
73. Full discussion and references in Gardeła 2013a.
74. Gardeła 2016; see also Gräslund 2001; Eriksen 2013.
75. See Gardeła & Kajkowski 2013, for a fuller discussion of this point.
76. Bill & Daly 2012: 815.
77. Klevnäs 2016.
78. Ellis Davidson 1960; Williams & Klevnäs 2019.
79. Bill & Daly 2012: 818.
80. Sørensen 2001: 65–6, 111–18.
81. Text after Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965; translation after Hermann Pálsson & Edwards 1981: 188; see also Hofmann 2015.
82. Barnes 1994.
83. Gurevič 1969: 51
84. Brøgger 1945: 1.

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Part 3

Animals in Ritual Practices

15

Animals in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion: An Introduction to Part 3

Sophie Bønding

In Viking Age Scandinavia, human and animal worlds were tightly intertwined. Judging from archaeological and textual sources, pre-Christian Scandinavians understood and represented their relationship to animals in ways that differ significantly from dominant modern, Euro-Western articulations of the human–animal binary. Animals were seen not only as important resources for the production of food and other commodities, but also as significant community members – social actors, who possessed their own personhood and agency.[1] The emergence, in recent decades, of 'animal studies' as a cross-disciplinary research field has demonstrated the importance of studying animals both as subjects in their own right and as part of the imagination of the human.[2] Both of these perspectives are relevant when investigating animals in pre-Christian Scandinavian society and religion. Accordingly, a growing subfield within Viking Studies has in recent years focused on the myriad ways in which animals 'mattered' in pre-Christian Northern Europe.[3] It is clear that the animal other constituted a significant part of the conceptual universes that existed here. Iconographic representations of animals adorn material objects from the Viking Age, such as jewellery, weapons, and picture stones. In textual sources extant in medieval manuscripts, mythological animals appear alongside and interacting with gods and other superhuman agents.[4] In addition, real-life animals formed parts of religious ritual practices, as is evident from faunal remains unearthed in the course of archaeological excavations. This introductory chapter offers some reflections on the roles of animals in the conceptual universe of pre-Christian Scandinavians – their religious worldviews and practices – setting the stage for the in-depth studies in part three of this book.

Decentering the Human

The rise of 'animal studies' as an interdisciplinary research field is informed by a series of intellectual developments across scientific disciplines, often conceptualised as a multitude of so-called 'turns'. Along with the 'animal turn' proclaimed by 'animal studies', these include, for example, the 'ontological turn', the 'posthumanist turn', the 'species turn', and the 'new materialist turn'.[5] Pursuing different yet related trajectories of critial thought, these 'turns' challenge the anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism which dominate modern, Euro-Western thought. Instead, many scholars are committed to reassessing what it means to be human, as well as how humans coexist with, relate to, and engage in social interactions with other species of agents – faunal, floral, artefactual, technological, etc. Such agents are conceptualised in different terms, for example as 'non-humans', 'more-than-humans', and 'other-than-humans' (depending on the specific scholarly discourse), thus inviting us humans to self-consciously welcome other perspectives, voices, ideals, values, and modes of experiencing the world.[6] As such, the world in which human lives unfold is perceived as the result of a co-production with other species of beings, including animal others.

This reorientation is based on a fundamental questioning of the nature-culture divide, which dominates modern, Euro-Western perceptions of reality.[7] Thus, new lines of enquiry break with the anthropocentric perceptions of the human–animal relationship, according to which animals are subordiante to humans. Although appearing in different variants (and relatively widespead) in Classical Antiquity,[8] it was in the Christian Middle Ages that this human-centric view was consolidated and became fundamentally ingrained in Euro-Western thought.[9] It reached its zenith in the course

of the Enlightenment, most famously with René Descartes (1596–1650) whose version of the division between nature and culture became especially influential. His differentiation between *res extensa* (the realm of physical, material matter) and *res cogitans* (the mental, immaterial realm constituted by human consciousness) is often considered to be the fundamental tenent of the modern, naturalist worldview.[10] According to Descartes, an animal was an *automaton*, a self-moving machine without a consciousness, lacking both speech and thought, while humans were thinking, rational beings.[11] In the twentieth century, influential philosophers began to question this human exceptionalism, and today it has become clear that the anthropocentric and naturalistic view embedded in Euro-Western societies is a cultural construction and far from the only way in which people across time and space have understood the relationship between humans and nonhumans, including animal others.[12]

Animal studies thus critically challenge modern, anthropocentric perceptions of animals as subordinate beings in relation to humans. Scholars have demonstrated that ‘animality’ (like gender and race) is a useful lens through which to critically study cultures and societies.[13] As such, there is a growing acknowledgement that societies outside the modern Euro-Western cultural sphere – including societies of the past, such as Viking Age Scandinavia – conceptualise human–animal relationships without the modern human-centric binaries.[14] It is often highlighted that prehistoric societies had far more complex and nuanced perceptions of animals than we do today, and that animals should be perceived as agents and co-creators of reality, as members of inter-species communities, who played key roles in the worldviews and religious lives of past societies.[15]

Animals in Pre-Christian Religious Thought and Practice

An important insight produced by animal studies is that animals play significant roles in human self-conception, meaning that they are deeply enmeshed in notions of what it is to be human. Thus, historian of religion Aaron Gross notes that: ‘in tangled and circular ways (…) human communities everywhere imagine themselves – their subjectivity, their ethics, their ancestry – with and through animals’.[16]

When exploring the roles of animals in the context of pre-Christian Scandinavian religion, historian of religion Lars Albinus’ observation about animal otherness is useful. Albinus suggests that in many cultures humans have had (and continue to have) ‘a tendency to regard animals as a mediating link between life in this world and a transcendent form of being’.[17] This means that humans tend to use animals as a resource of meaning-making to shed light not only on humans themselves but also on their relation with deities and other superhuman entities. Thus, even though animals are understood in many societies as partners and community members, they simultaneously confront humans with an inscrutable alterity. Although humans can see themselves in the characteristics and properties of animals (e.g. the strength of a bear, the ferocity of a wolf, or the cunning of a fox), animals cannot take part in human verbal communication, and ultimately we are unable to know what they are thinking. It is this ‘double nature’ of animals being like humans, yet pointing towards something fundamentally other than human, which according to Albinus establishes animals as a mediating link between humans and their (perceived) other (e.g. superhuman or non-mundane agents and forces).[18]

Old Norse literature and Viking Age iconography are ripe with narrative, linguistic, and visual representations of human–animal relationships and interactions. Leaping to mind is the eddic poem *Fáfnismál*, committed to writing in the twelfth century but no doubt reaching back to older oral traditions. Having slain the dragon Fáfnir, the hero Sigurðr (fáfnisbani) roasts the dragon’s heart in order that his fosterfather and mentor Reginn can eat it. However, touching the heart to check if it is properly cooked, Sigurðr burns his finger. When he puts his finger into his mouth to soothe it, he ingests a bit of the dragon’s blood, which enables him to understand the speech of a group of small birds (*igður*, ‘tits’) in a nearby tree. The birds speak amongst themselves, saying that Reginn intends to kill Sigurðr to acquire Fáfnir’s treasure and that Sigurðr had better kill Reginn and take the treasure for himself.[19] This story (or parts of it) is known from several pictorial representations from the Viking Age, most detailed on the Ramsund rock (Sö 101) in Södermanland, Sweden. Dating to the early eleventh century, this depiction includes, among other details, a figure generally interpreted as Sigurðr, finger in mouth, portrayed alongside two birds in a tree (→ **Chapter 16**). This scene of Sigurðr and the birds, whether in poetic narrative or iconographic depiction, reflects not only the idea that birds communicate amongst themselves in a language inaccessible to humans, but that birds possess knowledge beyond that of humans. Furthermore, under certain conditions (e.g. after the consumption of certain substances), humans become able to transcend this barrier and understand bird speech – allowing birds to serve as mediators of ‘numinous knowledge’ (i.e. knowledge otherwise hidden from and inaccessible to (regular) humans).[20]

Probably the most famous birds of the pre-Christian Norse story-world are Óðinn’s two ravens, Huginn and Muninn, who serve as the god’s companions and his mediators of news about events in other worlds.[21] They are, of course, not the only animal companions of Óðinn, whose eight-legged horse Sleipnir is able to move between cosmic realms.[22] In addition, Óðinn has two wolves, Geri and Freki, who, along with Huginn and Muninn, semantically connect Óðinn to the battlefield where ravens and wolves would appear as carnivore-scavengers.[23] Several other figures of

the mythology are accompanied by animals; for instance, the boar Gullinbursti, fashioned by two dwarves and gifted to the god Freyr.[24]

Real-life animals were part of religious rituals, as evident from faunal remains unearthed in archaeological contexts. Due to the combination of advanced scientific methodologies for the analysis of such faunal remains and new theoretical perspectives on human–animal relations, scholars are today able to pursue new lines of enquiry which are not only oriented towards the utalitarian roles that animals undoubtedly played as resources for consumption and the manufacture of commodities, as sacrificial objects, etc. – although such questions remain important. New questions include, but are not limited to: What were the roles of animals in sacrificial rituals, how were they treated, and how did they behave? What kinds of affective responses would such rituals evoke in the human and nonhuman participants? How did the roles of animals vary in rituals across space and time? And how can all of this help us gain new insights into the religious worldviews and conceptual universes of people in Viking Age Scandinavia?[25]

Concluding Remarks

In Viking Age Scandinavia, animals served different roles in the context of religion, not only as objects, symbols, and metaphors, but also as subjects and active agents in complex interspecies relations with humans and other nonhumans. In different ways, the chapters in this part of the book engage with pictorial, textual, material, and other sources in order to explore the many ways in which animals mattered.

Notes

1. Loumand 2006; Jennbert 2011; Jensen 2013; Evans Tang 2022.
2. Gross 2012: 1, 4. See also Gross & Vallely 2012.
3. Jennbert 2011; Evans Tang 2022; Gardeła & Kajkowski 2023.
4. The term ‘superhuman’ is used here to refer to entities that in research literature are also sometimes denoted with such nonidentical but similar concepts as ‘supernatural’, ‘nonmundane’, ‘suprahuman’, ‘otherworldly’, etc. Each of these concepts has advantages and disadvantages in terms of conceptualising the intended referents. It is, however, outside the scope of the present chapter to discuss this terminology in detail. For uses of the term ‘superhuman’, see e.g. Levy 2018; Jensen 2019; Sørensen 2021.
5. Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2012; Gross 2012; Hill 2013; Holbraad & Pedersen 2017; Gamble *et al.* 2019. See also → **Chapter 2**.
6. Haraway 1991; 2008; Tsing 2013; Fenske & Norkunas 2017; Harrison-Buck & Hendon 2018; Cipolla 2021.
7. This view dominates but not without opposition – not only by scholarly discourses questioning this divide, but also by religious movements (religious conservatives as well as varieties of New Age practitioners) who in various ways challenge the mainframe of modern, Western naturalistic worldviews (cf. Taylor 2007: 505).
8. Albinus 2021: 24–5. The *Book of Genesis* is often highlighted as the starting point of Western perceptions of supremacy over animals (e.g. Boyd 2017). However, as noted by Lars Albinus (2021: 24), this perception was not uncommon in Classical Antiquity, unconnected to Christian thought, although there was no uniformity in how the hierarchical difference between humans and animals were more precisely understood. Arguably, it is in the works of Thomas Aquinas (1225–75) that humans’ supreme right over animals was most clearly expressed in Christian theology. See also Toft 2021.
9. See Boyd 2017.
10. Descola 2013: 172–200.
11. Descartes 2006.
12. Descola 2013; Lundager Jensen 2021.
13. Gross & Vallely 2012.
14. Dobres & Robb 2000; Fowler 2004; Haraway 2008; Descola 2013; Hill 2013.
15. Lindstrøm 2012; Hill 2013: 117–18; Gardeła & Kajkowski 2023.
16. Gross 2012: 1.
17. Albinus 2021: 7.
18. Albinus 2021.
19. Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, II: 309–10.
20. On numinous knowledge, see Schjødt 2008.
21. e.g. *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 7 (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941: 18–19); see Mitchell 2022.
22. e.g. *Gylfaginning*, ch. 49 (Faulkes 2005: 46); *Baldrs draumar*, st. 2 (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I: 446).
23. *Grímnismál*, st. 19 (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I: 371); *Gylfaginning*, ch. 38 (Faulkes 2005: 32).
24. *Skáldskaparmál*, ch. 7 (Faulkes 1998: 18).
25. e.g. Jennbert 2004; Dubois 2012; Pluskowski 2012; Lindholm & Ljungkvist 2015; Karpińska 2018; Gräslund 2020.

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16

Human–Avian and God–Avian Relations in Viking Age Religion and Mythology – as Mirrored by Contemporary Pictorial Art

Sigmund Oehrl

In the archaeological material, in addition to bird bones in settlements, sacrificial sites, and graves (as in the case of the '*vǫlva* graves' discussed in this volume), it is above all pictorial representations that provide information about the significance of birds and the relationship between humans and birds in the spiritual world of the vikings. These are authentic and unadulterated, autochthonous testimonies, unlike most of the written sources that were recorded in Iceland in the Middle Ages mainly due to antiquarian interest. Birds are among the main motifs in Viking Age animal art and thus have been present on almost every kind of object, both high-status and every-day items, such as jewellery, weapons, and military equipment, vessels, textiles, vehicles, architecture, stone monuments, and more. In this paper, without any claim for completeness, those motifs and depictions are presented that document a special relationship and a certain interaction between humans/gods and birds in religious and mythological contexts, as these are particularly suitable for outlining the possible meanings and functions of birds that played a role in the ritual practice of the magic workers dealt with in the present volume.

Human–Avian and God–Avian Communication

Significantly, none other than the head of the Old Norse pantheon, Óðinn, has a particularly close relation to birds. Icelandic literary tradition frequently tells of the god's two feathered companions and scouts, the ravens Huginn and Muninn.[1] In early skaldic poetry, as early as the ninth century, due to this companionship the god is called 'Raven-God' (*Hrafnáss*).[2] Around 1220, the Icelandic scholar Snorri Sturluson, in his *Prose Edda*, reports in detail on the scouting function of the two birds and explains the background of this ancient belief:

> Hrafnar tveir sitja á ǫxlum honom ok segja í eyru honum ǫll tíðindi þau er þeir siá eða heyra. Þeir heita svá: Huginn ok Muninn. Þá sendir hann í dagan at fljúgja um allan heim ok koma þeir aptr at dǫgurðarmáli. Þar af verðr hann margra tíðinda víss. Því kalla menn hann hrafna guð.[3]

> Two ravens sit on his shoulders and speak into his ear all the news they see or hear about. Their names are Huginn and Muninn. He sends them out at daybreak to fly all over the world and at breakfast time they return. From this much news becomes known to him. That is why Óðinn is also called the raven-god.[4]

An early pictorial representation of the god with one of his ravens sitting on his shoulder can be seen on the fragment of the tenth-century Thorvald's Cross stone from Kirk Andreas on the Isle of Man (MM 128).[5] The stone depicts the devouring of Óðinn by the wolf Fenrir at Ragnarǫk,[6] which was obviously connected here with a Christian message, as the back of the monument, which is dominated by a large cross, shows Christ triumphing over demons (Fig. 16.1).

Another iconographic correspondence to Snorri's account, focusing on the communication between the god and his ravens, can probably be seen on the runestone from Altuna kyrka in Uppland, Sweden, from the second half of the eleventh century (U 1161). On one of the stele's narrow sides there are figural representations (Fig. 16.2). The lower half undoubtedly preserves a representation of the god Þórr sitting in a boat with his hammer in his hand and fishing for the Miðgarðsormr.[7] Above this depiction, a rider is portrayed. Above the horseman, in the upper half of the surface, is a ladder-like scaffolding with three rungs. An apparently male human figure stands on the lowest rung and spreads his arms. The figure's head peeks out above the top rung and can be seen *en face*. Above the head, the wing and remains of the body of a large flying bird are visible.

Figure 16.1 Stone cross, so-called Thorvald Cross from Kirk Andreas, Isle of Man, c. AD 950–1000. After Reitzenstein 1924: figs 8–9.

On the top rung, to the left of the human figure, another bird sits and touches the man's head with its beak.

This image has been interpreted as the god Óðinn, who is standing on a scaffold-like seat or lookout tower, receiving messages from his feathered scouts.[8] One of the ravens is whispering into the god's ear, just as described by Snorri. But what kind of ladder is the supreme god standing on? Actually, Snorri[9] as well as the thirteenth-century prose introductions to the eddic poems *Grímnismál*[10] and *Skírnismál*[11] tell of a special place or structure called *hliðskjálf*, from which Óðinn can look into other worlds. This place seems to represent a kind of high seat. Is this high seat or the ladder of this high seat depicted on the runestone? Óðinn's *hliðskjálf* is associated with the so-called *seiðhjallr*, an artificial elevation of some kind that seems to have been imagined sometimes as a hill, sometimes as a seat or a tower, from which, according to Old Norse saga literature, a sorcerer or a sorceress (*seiðmaðr* or *seiðkona*) could look into the future and magically influence the course of events.[12]

A tiny (1.7 cm high), once gilded, silver figurine (a pendant potentially with an amuletic function) from the first half of the tenth century found in the area of the ancient royal seat of Lejre has been regarded as a representation of Óðinn with his ravens (Fig. 16.3).[13] The figure wears a cap, a long robe and a cloak, sits on a throne with animal heads on the backrest and is flanked by two birds sitting on the armrests. The two birds raise their heads and direct their attention to the head of the person on the throne. Do they talk into their master's ears and tell him news? Whether two bulges in the mouth area of the human figure are supposed to represent a moustache or a kind of neck ring remains unclear. The clothing of the person on the throne is also puzzling. On the one hand it suggests a female costume, on the other hand it is reminiscent of the liturgical vestments of Christian priests. It is therefore debatable whether this is actually a male figure or a woman – or Óðinn in women's clothing, performing magic (*seiðr*)?

The literary tradition of the Middle Ages also tells of humans who had the ability to communicate with birds,

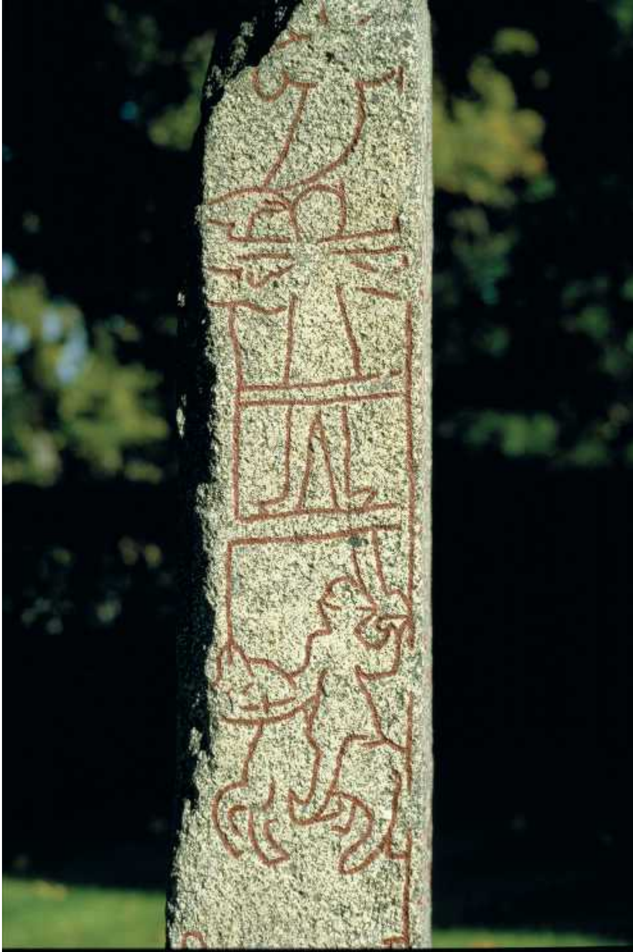

Figure 16.2 Runestone from Altuna church in Uppland, Sweden (U 1161). Courtesy of RAÄ Stockholm.

Figure 16.3 Silver pendant in the form of an enthroned anthropomorphic figure from Lejre on Sjælland, Denmark. Courtesy of O. Malling, Museum Organisation ROMU, Roskilde.

or who acquired this ability by magical means. The most prominent example is the hero Sigurðr, whose youthful deeds, the slaying of the dragon and the acquisition of the dragon's hoard, are recorded in Snorri's *Prose Edda*, the thirteenth-century *Vǫlsunga saga*, and in the heroic poems of the *Codex regius*, in particular *Reginsmál* and *Fáfnismál*, written down in the late thirteenth century but supposedly composed some centuries earlier.[14] After the hero has killed the dragon, he roasts its heart in order to prepare a special meal. Because he wants to check whether the roast is already cooked, he touches it with his finger and burns himself. To cool his finger, he puts it into his mouth and in this way tastes the dragon's blood. As a result, the blood gives him the ability to understand the voices of the small birds (*igður*, 'tits') sitting next to him in a tree. The birds tell him that his mentor Reginn intends to kill him in order to acquire the dragon's gold. The hero then kills Reginn and takes the hoard for himself.

During the late Viking Age, this motif, the killing of the dragon and the acquisition of the treasure, was frequently depicted on stone crosses of the Isle of Man, stone monuments from Northern England, and Swedish runestones.[15] The most detailed depiction is to be found on the famous rock Ramsundsberget in Södermanland, Sweden (Sö 101), carved in the beginning of the eleventh century (Fig. 16.4).[16] The cooking test, i.e. the finger in the hero's mouth and the birds next to him, belong to the fixed motif stock of the Sigurðr iconography. The depiction on the fragment of a stone cross from Kirk Andreas on the Isle of Man (MM 121) from the middle of the tenth century is particularly impressive. It shows the hero bending over the spit with the dragon heart slices and bringing his hand to his mouth, while a bird's head with open beak turns towards him from behind (Fig. 16.5).[17]

Human–Avian and God–Avian Metamorphosis

Humans or gods who can take on bird-like features and fly like birds or even change into birds are occasionally mentioned in Old Norse literature. In order to flee from the giant Suttungr, Óðinn transforms himself into an eagle, as is most fully described in Snorri's thirteenth-century *Prose Edda*.[18] The kenning (a poetic circumlocution) *arnar kjapta órð*, 'seed of the eagle's beak', which appears in the tenth-century poem *Berudrápa* by Egill Skallagrímsson,[19] denotes the mead of poetry and refers to Óðinn's eagle metamorphosis. The eagle shape of the god also seems to be referred to in his epithets (so-called *heiti*) *Arnhǫfði*, 'the eagle-headed one' and Ǫrn, 'eagle'.[20] Snorri says: 'Þá brásk hann í arnarham ok flaug sem ákafast' ('Then he [i.e. Óðinn] changed into an eagle shell/shape and flew as fast as he could'). Óðinn's adversary in this story, the owner of the mead of poetry, a giant named Suttung, is able to shapeshift too: 'En er Suttungr sá flug arnarins, tók hann sér arnarham ok flaug eptir honum' ('But when Suttung saw the eagle's flight,

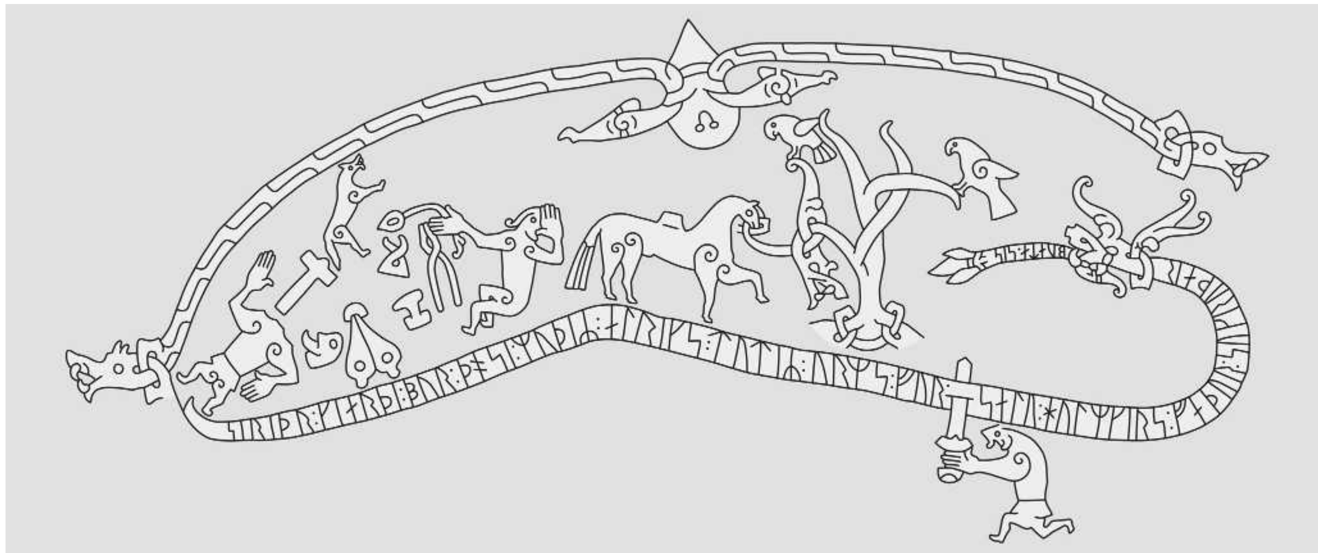

Figure 16.4 Runic rock carvings in Ramsund, Södermanland, Sweden. Courtesy of J.L. Markussen.

Figure 16.5 Stone cross from Kirk Andreas, Isle of Man (MM 121). Courtesy of D.H. Steinforth.

he took eagle shape/form himself and flew after him'). It can be suggested that the transformation or the flight is only made possible by a special device, which should probably be imagined as a kind of outfit. Freyja, the goddess of love and fertility, possesses such a cover or garment, a *valshamr*, 'falcon shell/shape', which is usually translated as 'falcon shirt' (imagined as a feathered cloak).[21] In the myth of the abduction of the goddess Iðunn, detailed again in Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál*, Freyja lends her hawk shirt to Loki, who is to free Iðunn from the power of a giant.[22]

Mention must be made of the legendary blacksmith Wayland (Old Norse *Vǫlundr*). He takes revenge on King Níðuðr – who had crippled him and kept him captive as a forced labourer – by killing the king's sons and raping his daughter whom he had made docile with an intoxicating drink. He then flies away, apparently in the guise of a bird.[23] Wayland's flight is recorded in both main sources of the myth. *Þiðreks saga*, written down in Norway in the thirteenth century, tells of an artificial flying device, a kind of feathered suit. In the eddic poem *Vǫlundarkviða*, which probably dates back to the tenth century,[24] in fact, a flying machine or outfit is not mentioned; the smith takes to the air without any explanation. But even in the saga it is not entirely clear whether Wayland, like Icarus, is able to fly by means of a mechanical apparatus, or whether his feathered suit actually turns him into a bird, so to speak. The latter seems to be indicated by Wayland's answer to the king's question whether he was a bird now: 'nv em ec fvgl oc nv em ec maðr' ('now I am bird, and now I am man').[25]

Viking Age pictorial representations attest to the considerable age of such ideas.[26] As in literary tradition, it usually remains unclear in iconography whether the persons depicted are wearing a kind of bird shell or bird suit, or whether they are undergoing a metamorphosis (or both). An image of Wayland in bird shape can be seen on the prominent

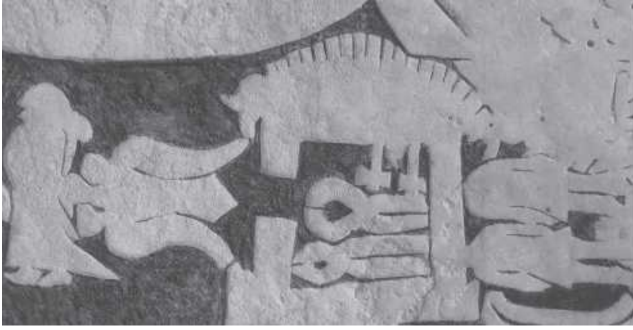

Figure 16.6 Picture stone no. VIII from Ardre church on Gotland, Sweden. Courtesy of ATA Stockholm.

Gotlandic picture stone Ardre church VIII dating to the ninth/tenth century (Fig. 16.6).[27] To the right of the depicted smithy lie two headless male figures, the king's sons killed by Wayland. To the smithy's left, a large bird and a woman, the king's daughter, can be seen. The bird has two approximately circular appendages at its shoulders, to the left and right of the head, that appear like two additional heads.[28] As the large bird shows no clear anthropomorphic features, it could indicate Wayland's complete metamorphosis.

Another huge bird figure is depicted on the Gotlandic picture stone Lärbro St. Hammars III, next to a woman with a drinking horn and an armed man (Fig. 16.7).[29] The bird seems to have some human features, in particular legs and possibly a man's head.[30] Previous research interpreted this scene as Óðinn stealing the mead of poetry.[31] The 'bird man' was supposed to represent the god escaping in the shape of an eagle, the armed man was interpreted as the giant Suttungr, the guardian of the mead of poetry, and the woman as Gunnlǫð, the giant's daughter with whom the god spent the night in order get the mead, a drinking horn in her hand. However, the image could well be regarded as a depiction of Wayland in bird shape, next to the king and his daughter holding the intoxicating drink.[32]

The depiction is comparable to an image of Wayland on the tenth-century stone cross in Leeds in West Yorkshire (Leeds 1)[33]: an anthropomorphic figure, of which only parts of the limbs have survived, is surrounded by a ribbon-shaped frame that on the left and right merges in a bird's wings (Fig. 16.8a–b). The arms are attached to the frame by ring-shaped bands. Near the figure's feet there are (among other things) two smith's tongs. With its outstretched hands, the peculiar figure reaches for a woman and grabs hold of her braid and of her gown's train. Above the woman's body, the remains of a bird's beak are preserved; this belonged to the missing head of a bird which probably snapped at the woman.[34] The figure on the Leeds cross is interpreted as Wayland in his flying machine.[35] The woman with the drinking horn represents the king's daughter with the intoxicating drink. The rough grasp at her dress and hair as well as the beak's attack against the hip refers to the mistreatment of the princess.

Figure 16.7 Picture stone no. III from Stora Hammars in Lärbro, Gotland, Sweden. Courtesy of ATA Stockholm.

Comparable is also the image on a bronze chape from a tenth-century hoard in Birka (Fig. 16.9).[36] It features a human figure in a 'bird shell' with tail feathers, wings, and a bird's head. The latter's long beak is placed above a small human head and is flanked by two circular bulges that the human with outstretched arms seems to reach for. Very probably they are the same objects that the 'Wayland bird-man' of Leeds reaches for, and a similar arrangement might be shown on Ardre church VIII. Whether this is also Wayland or, for example, Óðinn or Loki in a bird shell cannot be decided.

In this context, the important discovery of a similar 'bird man' in the South Swedish central place of Uppåkra must also be mentioned. It represents a gilded bronze mount[37] in the shape of a bearded man with wings or wearing either a kind of 'bird coat' or a flying machine (Fig. 16.10).[38]

Figure 16.8.a Stone cross from Leeds in Western Yorkshire, England, fragments Leeds 1g, 1h and 1j, side C. Courtesy of K. Jukes & D. Craig, CASSS.

Figure 16.8.b Stone cross from Leeds in Western Yorkshire, England, fragments Leeds 1g, 1h and 1j, side C, reconstructive drawing. After Bailey 1980: fig. 16.

Small droplets depicted on the left wing (below the human hand) allow a connection with the *Þiðreks saga*'s version of Wayland's escape: according to the Norwegian saga author (whose narrative is supposedly based on north German sources), the smith carries a blood-filled bag under his wing, which then bursts after a well-aimed shot of an arrow and thus feigns Wayland's death.[39]

Another, but quite differently realised human-bird hybrid creature can be seen on the tapestry fragments from the ninth century boat grave of Oseberg.[40] It looks like a human being in a long robe, probably a woman, wearing some kind of bird cap or mask (Fig. 16.11). A further 'bird-woman' is depicted on a silver cup from Lejre (Fig. 16.12).[41] It is to be regarded as the main cup of a drinking service that was used in the course of ritual feasts or other rites. Several deposits of such drinking services are known from the North.[42] The main cups mostly represent *pyxides*, magnificent host containers from the Carolingian Empire. The cup from Lejre, on the other hand, is a Scandinavian product, which was, however, modelled on the host boxes. The shoulder area of the cup depicts a female figure *en face* with Pippi Longstocking-like pigtails, whose body merges into a bird's tail at the bottom and whose arms merge into wings.

Birds as Guides of the Dead

In the late literary tradition there are indications that the *valkyrjur*, who select the dead on the battlefield and lead them to Óðinn's Valhǫll, have a special affinity with birds and that they can even turn into swans. In *Vǫlundarkviða*,

Figure 16.9 Bronze sword scabbard chape from Birka, Uppland, Sweden. Courtesy of B. Ambrosiani.

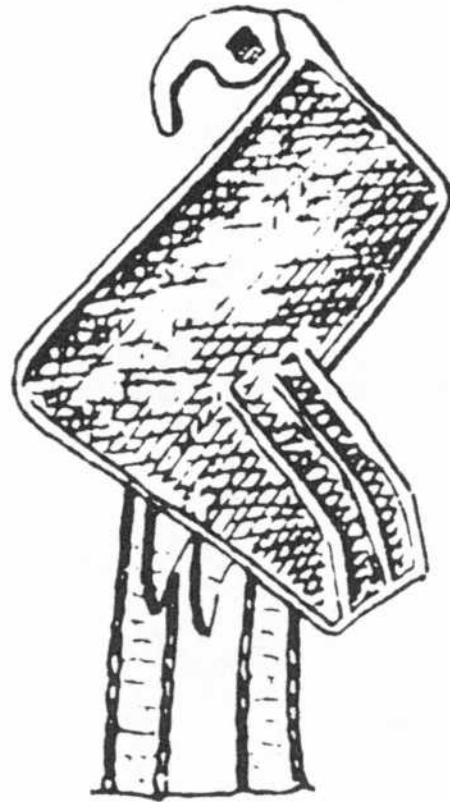

Figure 16.11 Figure on fragment 7B of the tapestries from Oseberg, Vestfold, Norway. Courtesy of S. Krafft.

Figure 16.10 Bronze fitting representing a human-avian hybrid from Uppåkra in Skåne, Sweden. Courtesy of M. Helmbrecht.

Figure 16.12 Silver cup from Lejre on Sjælland, Denmark. After Brand & Wamers 2005: 181 cat. no. 44.

there are three mythical females (*alvitr*) – the wives of Vǫlundr and his two brothers – who have the power to 'determine the fate' of humans (*ørlǫg drýgia*); one of them has the epithet *svanhvít* ('swan white') and wears 'swan feathers' (*svanfiaðrar*).[43] The compiler of the *Codex Regius* (the main manuscript of the *Poetic Edda*), in his prose addition, refers to these beings in *Vǫlundarkviða* as 'valkyries' ('Þat vóro valkyrior') wearing 'swan shirts' (*álptarhamir*).[44] Another, but younger eddic poem conveys the idea of a *valkyrja* in bird shape: in stanza 6 of *Helreið Brynhildar*, the *valkyrja* Brynhildr mentions the theft of her *hamr*, her 'shell/shape', which should be imagined as a shirt or another kind of dress.[45] Other examples are the *Gríplur* (written around 1400) and, drawing on this, *Hrómundar saga Grípssonar* (from the seventeenth century), both of which are based on a lost **Hrómundar saga*. *Hrómundar saga Grípssonar* tells of the hero Helgi's wife that she appears on the battlefield 'in the shape of a swan' in order to support her husband with magic songs.[46] While in the eddic poem *Helgakviða Hundingsbana ǫnnor* Helgi's wife is called a *valkyrja*,[47] the saga refers to her as 'sorceress' ('ein fjölkýngiskona var þar komin í álftar ham' ('a sorceress had come there in the shape of a swan')). Personal names like *Svanhildr* ('fight swan') and *Foglhildr* ('fight bird'), which are documented in early sources, seem to indicate the idea of women operating on the battlefield in the guise of a swan as well.[48]

That the *valkyrja* in the shape of a waterbird is indeed an old idea is attested by Viking Age picture stones. There is a group of aquatic bird depictions to be observed on Viking Age picture stones from Gotland, which appear to be involved in the arrival of the deceased in the realm of death.[49] The most common motif on Gotland's Viking Age picture stones is the sailing ship, commonly regarded as a ship of the dead.[50] Another common motif is the horseman being welcomed by a woman with a drinking horn, interpreted by most scholars as representing a *valkyrja* who greets a fallen warrior at the gates of Valhǫll and serves him a welcome drink, as described in the skaldic poem *Eiríksmál*, a praise of the Norwegian King Eiríkr blóðøx, composed shortly after 954.[51]

On a picture stone fragment from the field at Grötlingbo Barshaldershed, the *valkyrja* with the drinking horn does not receive a horseman, but rather a dead person in a wagon (Fig. 16.13).[52] Close behind the woman with the welcome drink, a long-necked bird resembling a swan or goose is shown, apparently accompanying the drink-giver in her greeting and following her. A Viking Age hogback gravestone from Sockburn in Durham (England) also features a waterfowl following a woman who holds a no longer recognisable object, probably a drinking vessel, in her outstretched hand (Fig. 16.14).[53]

A stone from the grave field of the Viking Age trading place of Fröjel (Fröjel Bottarve) also depicts the woman

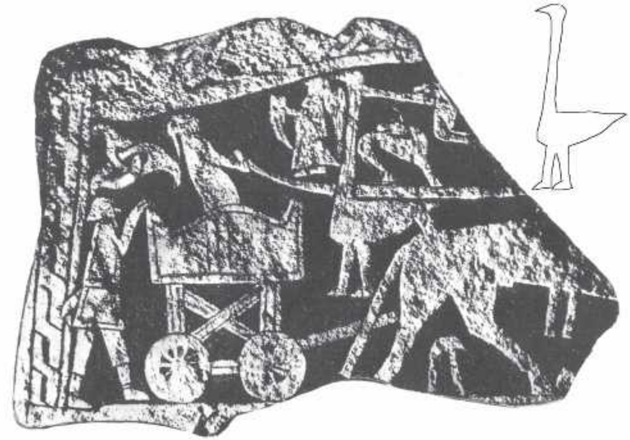

Figure 16.13 Picture stone from the burial ground of Barshaldershed in Grötlingbo, Norrkvie 6/63, Gotland, Sweden. After Lamm & Nylen 2003: 103.

Figure 16.14 Fragment of a grave stone, a so-called hogback, from Sockburn (no. 15), County Durham, England. Courtesy of T. Middlemass, CASSS.

with the drinking horn; here, she welcomes a man on foot, while a horseman is shown in the panel above the scene (Fig. 16.15).[54] Behind the arriving man, there is a bird with a long neck that touches the man with its beak. This creates the impression that this bird accompanies the dead man and nudges him forward, in the direction of the *valkyrja* with the drinking horn already expecting him. The bird, which on the fragment of Grötlingbo Barshaldershed seems to be following the woman with the horn like a servant, appears here as an active helper. Probably, the birds discussed here represent *valkyrjur* in swan shape that operate jointly with their anthropomorphic 'colleagues', welcoming or leading the deceased to the world of death.

The swan recurs on the eleventh-century picture stone Sanda kyrka I (Fig. 16.16). A man is shown standing in a building between two figures – a woman and a man – each

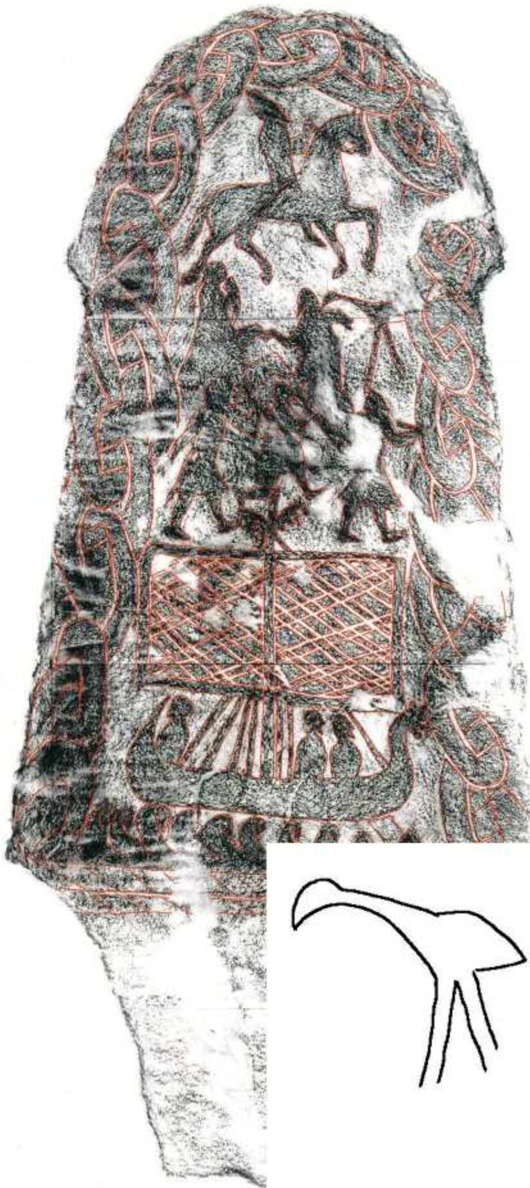

Figure 16.15 Picture stone from Bottarve in Fröjel, Gotland, Sweden, drawing on frottage. Courtesy of A. Andreeff.

Figure 16.16 Picture stone no. I from Sanda church on Gotland, Sweden. After Lindqvist 1941–1942 II: fig. 480.

Figure 16.17 Bird figure from the horse collar from Skællebæk. Photo by National Museum of Denmark.

sitting on a throne. The standing man faces the seated man, and both grasp the shaft of a lance standing between them. From outside, the long-necked bird sticks its head into the building and touches the upright man with its beak, as if guiding and prodding him forward in front of the throne.

It has been assumed that the two men with the spear are performing an initiation ritual by means of a ceremonial 'awarding of the weapon'. Whatever might be the accurate interpretation of the ritual event in the 'throne room' – the bird sticking its long-necked head in the room and touching the upright lance bearer with its beak shows that it can hardly be a real occurrence, but rather must be a mythical handover of arms. Escorting the warrior and directing or nudging him towards the enthroned man, the bird of Sanda kyrka I is equivalent to the bird of Fröjel Bottarve that accompanies the slain man to the *valkyrja* with the drinking horn. Consequently, it is quite possible that the scene of the stone from Sanda has to be interpreted as the arrival of a fallen warrior in Valhǫll, who swears fealty to his new lord, Óðinn, father of the fallen.[55] A swan-shaped *valkyrja* has guided the hero to his final destination.

Against the background discussed here, it is conceivable that other representations of swans in late Iron Age and Viking Age art are also connected with the *valkyrjur* and refer to eschatological ideas. Certain types of bird brooches and in particular animal figures on horse collars like those from Møllemosegård (Fyn), Elstrup (Sønderjylland), and Skællebæk (Sjælland) in Denmark come to mind here (Fig. 16.17).[56] There are also throne-shaped amulets like the one from Hedeby in Northern Germany with birds sitting on

the armrests, which are less reminiscent of ravens, as in the case of the Lejre figurine discussed above, but look more like long-necked swans – bird-shaped *valkyrjur*, servants of the god of the fallen, sitting on their master's throne? (→ **Chapter 32**).[57]

The well-known runestone from Sparlösa in Västergötland (Vg 119) from around AD 800 should also be mentioned. The image programme of this stone includes a horseman, a sailing ship and a large hall building (Fig. 16.18a). Based on the common interpretation of the Gotlandic picture stones, this has been regarded as the image of a fallen warrior riding to Valhǫll, along with an image of the ship of the dead.[58] Remarkably, the ship of the dead is accompanied here by two long-necked birds, probably swans.

Furthermore, another bird plays a role on the Sparlösa stele. On one of the four sides there are three interwoven Oseberg style animals, which may be seen as a snake, a stylised long-necked water bird (swan), and an owl (Fig. 16.18b).[59] Owls appear only sporadically in the art of the Viking Age,[60] and they play hardly any role in Old Norse literature. An indication that they nevertheless had a certain significance in Viking Age culture can be found in the thirteenth-century eddic poem *Sigrdrífumál*. In the stanzas, which represent instructions on the magical use of runes, it is said that these signs should be carved on various objects and materials, including wolf claws, bear claws and the beaks of eagles ('á arna nefi') and owls ('á nefi uglo').[61] In medieval traditions and later folk beliefs, the owl, as a nocturnal bird, has a negative meaning, especially as a herald of impending doom and death.[62]

Bird Sacrifice

The fact that birds, especially chickens, also played a role in sacrificial practices of the Viking Age is evident both from historical records and from archaeological findings.[63]

Figure 16.18 Rune stone from Sparlösa in Västergötland, Sweden (Vg 119). R. Broberg, Wikimedia Commons.

An example often cited is the report of the Arab ambassador Ahmad Ibn Faḍlān on the burial of a Rus chieftain on the Volga in AD 922, where he observed how a cock and hens were sacrificed during the funeral orchestrated by an old priestess called the Angel of Death.[64] Furthermore, the sacrifice of cocks among the Rus is documented in contemporary Byzantine sources.[65] The Ottonian historian and bishop Thietmar of Merseburg (976–1018) notes about the great sacrificial feast in Lejre that cocks were sacrificed there, along with other species of animals (and even humans).[66] Saxo Grammaticus tells in Book I of his *Gesta Danorum*,[67] how the companion of the legendary King Haddingus beheads a cock in the underworld and throws it over the border wall of the realm of the dead, whereupon the cock rises on the other side of the wall and sings. Last but not least, the finds of chicken bones in the exceptional women's graves, which form a central element of the present volume, point to the special cultic significance of these animals in the Viking Age context.

What does the Old Norse literary tradition say about the meaning of chickens in mythology? According to the rather late eddic poem *Fjǫlsvinnsmál* (stanzas 24–25), the cock Víðópnir is sitting on top of the world tree and appears to be its guardian.[68] In the eddic poem *Vǫluspá*, which may have been composed around AD 1000, three cocks appear whose waking call accompanies the end of the world and apparently fulfills important functions in its course.[69] The red cock Fjalarr sits with the giant Eggþér, guardian of the giantess who gives birth to Fenrir's race. Eggþér sits on a mound and strikes his harp while Fjalarr begins to crow to herald the onset of Ragnarǫk. The rooster Gullinkambi wakes the dead warriors in Valhǫll and another cock crows underground in the halls of Hel. Thus, in eddic poetry the cock is associated with death and downfall but also, as in the episode in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, based on its typical call at the dawn of each new day, with return and resurrection.

Indeed, pictorial representations of cocks and other galliforms (possibly even doves) are not uncommon in the art of the Viking Age. They appear on coins, in the form of brooches or on other pieces of jewellery (Fig. 16.19), but especially on stone monuments.[70] Remarkably, however, a Christian context can be seen in the majority of these images. Most notable are the cocks placed on the top or arms of a central sign of the cross on late Viking Age Middle Swedish runestones (Sö 212; Sö 213; Sö 270)[71] and stone crosses on the Isle of Man (MM 98; MM 124; MM 131; MM 132) (Figs 16.20 and 16.21).[72] The specific meaning of these Christian bird depictions remains unclear. In Christian iconography, the cock is a widespread motif especially because of its role in the Passion narrative, where it crows at Peter's denial of Jesus (Mk 14:72; Mt 26:74; Lk 22:60; Jn 18:27).[73] Despite the Christian context, it is of course conceivable, if not probable, that Scandinavian pagan traditions have influenced this motif and that a Christian reinterpretation of pagan

Figure 16.19 Bronze bird brooch from Syre on Karmøy, Rogaland, Norway (S13803). Detector find by Bjørn Tjelta, Rygene Detektorklubb. Courtesy of Arkeologisk Museum Stavanger.

Figure 16.20 Runestone from Tyresta in Österhaninge, Södermanland, Sweden (Sö 270). Courtesy of RAÄ Stockholm.

Figure 16.21 Stone cross from Kirk Andreas, Isle of Man (MM 131), face A. Courtesy of D.H. Steinforth.

Figure 16.22 Runestone from Hagby church in Uppland, Sweden (U 874). Courtesy of M. Källström, RAÄ.

traditions has taken place in Scandinavian Viking Age art. In any case, the placement of the symbol on monuments commemorating the dead makes it clear that the cock must have caried an eschatological meaning here as well.

In some cases, Viking Age representations of galliforms have been addressed as peacocks. This is especially true of the birds depicted on the rune stones from Harg in Odensala (U 448) and Hagby church (U 874), as well as a group of Urnes style bird brooches, as they are featuring both magnificent fanned tail feathers, a typical fan-shaped crest, and a long neck (Fig. 16.22).[74] The peacock can be interpreted as a Christian motif, which was frequently depicted as a symbol of immortality on late Roman and early medieval Christian funerary monuments.[75] In most cases, however, it must remain open whether galliforms on Swedish runestones (U 31; U 171; U 257; U 633; U 746; U 1071; U 1112) also represent peacocks or rather domestic cocks or even native wood grouse or black grouse.[76]

An impressive testimony to Viking Age bird sacrifice is provided by pictorial art. On the Gotlandic picture stone Lärbro Stora Hammars I[77] there is a sacrificial scene depicted that includes two birds of prey (Fig. 16.23). On the left side of the image panel, a warrior with a round shield is hanging in a tree. In front of him, a human figure is lying prone on a kind of scaffold-like table or altar.[78] Two male figures are turning their attention to the prone figure, one of them holding a spear. This scene is regarded as a depiction of a human sacrifice – one man executed on the gallows and a second one killed on the altar.[79] A descending bird of prey is approaching the scene from above. It could be interpreted as an eagle or a raven that has been attracted by the blood of the dying, or as the god Óðinn in the shape of an eagle, accepting or supervising the sacrifice. From the right, a

Figure 16.23 Picture stone no. I from Stora Hammars in Lärbro, Gotland, Sweden. Courtesy of RAÄ Stockholm.

group of warriors is turning to the scene, presenting or handing over a bird of prey, obviously an animal sacrifice.

Furthermore, there is good reason to believe that this depiction is related to the execution ritual referred to as 'to cut a blood eagle' ('at rista blóð ǫrn') in Old Norse literature.[80] In the 'blood eagle' execution ritual, the victim is placed prone and an image of an eagle is cut into his back. Then, according to the written sources, the victim's ribs are broken off the spine and finally his lungs are pulled out, looking like an eagle's wings. Old Norse philologists have discussed these records in great detail and questioned whether this bloody ritual did actually exist and, if so, what it really looked like. The image on the Stora Hammars picture stone might depict the initial moment, when the sign of the eagle is cut into the skin on the victim's back, while the eagle, perhaps Óðinn himself in animal form, to whom the human/bird sacrifice is dedicated, descends from the sky. The same sacrificial scene appears to have been depicted on at least two more Viking Age Gotlandic picture stones.[81]

Another depiction could be of interest here, the small picture stone fragment Buttle Änge no. 8,[82] which shows a processional group of human figures – a woman with a drinking horn and three male warriors with shields, one of which is holding a small duck-like bird on a kind of stick or pole (Fig. 16.24). Above the woman, in the upper left corner of the preserved image, a raptor with folded wings can be seen, presumably also fixed on a stick or pole. In this case, a ritual, perhaps a sacrificial context could be at hand as well.

Falconry and Beyond

A particularly close partnership between humans and birds exists in falconry. According to the Barbarian Law Codes, the *leges barbarorum*, hunting with raptors was well established among the Continental tribes from the fifth or sixth century onwards.[83] Bones of birds of prey in richly furnished graves of the sixth to tenth centuries appear to prove that falconry was also already practised in East Middle Sweden from an early age.[84] The earliest Old Norse texts attesting certain knowledge of falconry in Scandinavia date to the tenth or eleventh century.[85] In addition, pictorial depictions are to be considered as an important source material, indicating a certain knowledge of this form of hunting among the early Scandinavians.[86]

A prominent Viking Age pictorial representation of falconry is portrayed on the runestone from Alstad in Oppland, Norway, from between AD 1000 and 1030 (N 61–62)[87]. A horseman with a bird of prey on his fist, together with two hounds, and a second big raptor on the top of the stone can be seen (Fig. 16.25). A strange, long object in the hand of a second horseman at the bottom, which is club-like and broadens towards its top, could be regarded as a perch for the raptor. A T-shaped perch is depicted on a bronze weathervane from Grimsta near Stockholm, Sweden, from the eleventh century (Fig. 16.26).[88] In this case, the horseman holds his bird on his left fist and the perch in his right hand. There is also a group of eleventh-century Swedish runestones that are worth mentioning. The stone from Vidbo

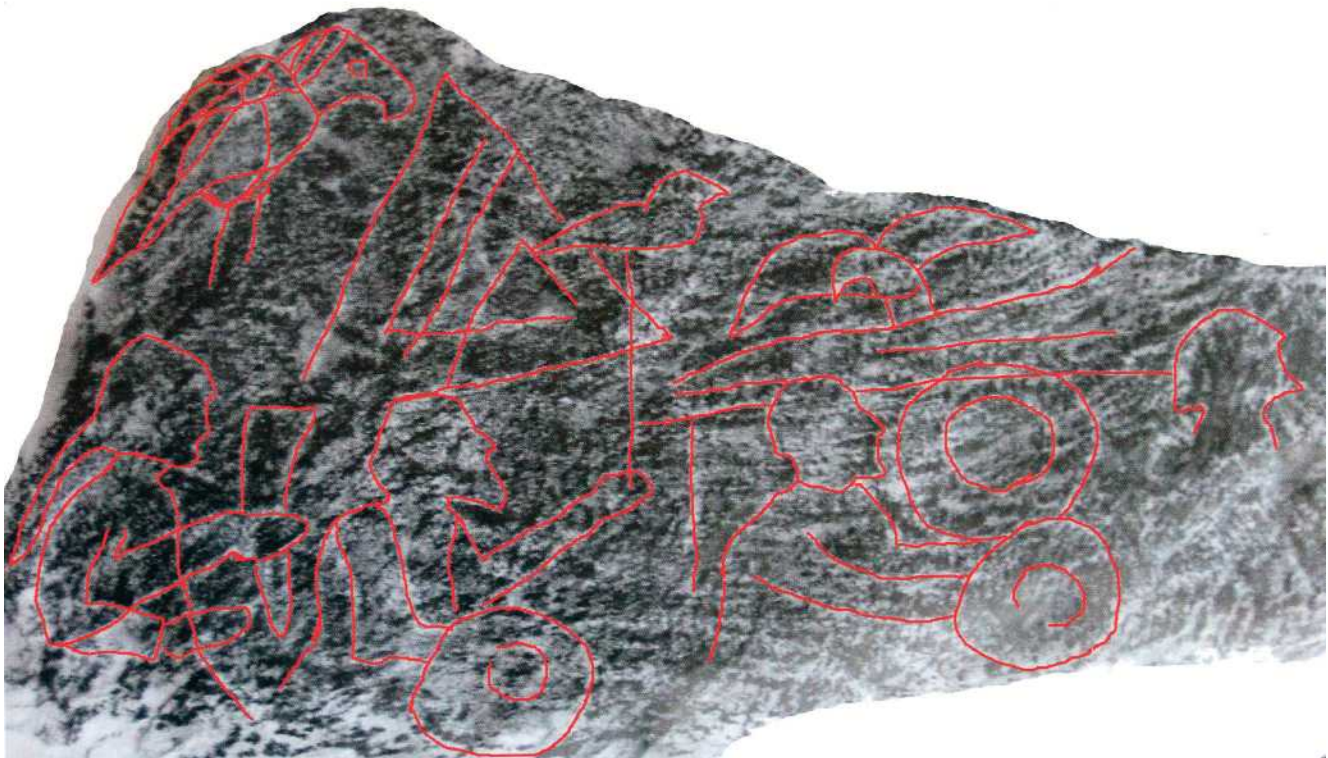

Figure 16.24 Picture stone fragment no. 8 from Buttle Änge on Gotland, Sweden. After Andreeff 2012: 139.

Figure 16.25 Runestone from Alstad in Oppland, Norway (N 61–62). Courtesy of J.L. Markussen.

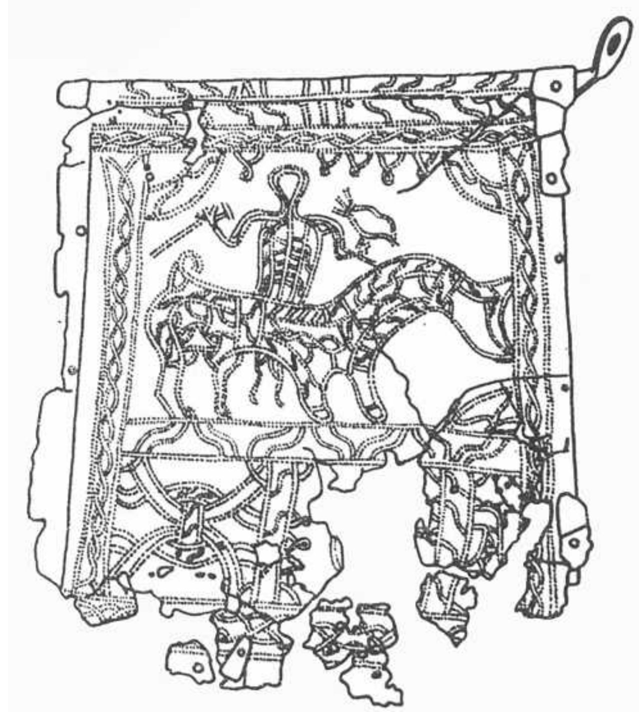

Figure 16.26 Weathervane from Grimsta near Stockholm, Sweden, eleventh century. After Åkerström-Hougen 1981: fig. 10.

Figure 16.27 Picture stone from Klintebys (originally Hunninge?) in Klinte, Gotland, Sweden. Courtesy of ATA Stockholm.

kyrka, Uppland (U 375), for instance, portrays a horseman above whom a stylised bird seems to be flying. On the runestone from Hanunda, Uppland (U 599), a horseman lifts up his hand and above him a big raptor is situated on the runic border. Possibly, this rider is a falconer who is calling his bird back to his fist. A matter of particular interest is the runestone from Böksta/Balingsta, Uppland (U 855). It depicts a mounted hunter with a spear, pursuing a red deer stag with his hounds. A raptor is standing on the stag's antlers attacking its head with its beak. This depiction appears to represent a special kind of falconry, i.e. hunting big game animals with raptors, which was widespread in the Arab world, but almost unknown in medieval Europe. It has been considered, on the basis of this runestone, that viking falconers have been influenced by Eastern hunting traditions.[89]

It goes without saying that depictions of falconers are not mere representations of everyday hunting events, but convey a deep symbolism that aims above all at staging aristocratic power and lifestyle. However, the suspicion is also justified that there are even more far-reaching messages inherent in these pictures. The boundary between the depiction of hunting and mythical human-bird relation is often difficult to define.

For instance, the Gotlandic picture stone Klinte Hunninge IV (Klintebys)[90] depicts a horseman who is welcomed by a woman with a drinking horn (Fig. 16.27). As we have seen, this belongs to the most frequent motifs in the

iconography of the Viking Age Gotlandic picture stones and can be interpreted as the arrival of a fallen warrior in Valhǫll, who is welcomed by a *valkyrja*. Uniquely, however, the horseman on the Klintebys stone has a raptor sitting on his fist. Obviously, we are dealing with a falconer, arriving at the gates of Valhǫll. From the viking settlements in the West the Anglo-Scandinavian stone cross from Sockburn in Durham, dating to the first half of the tenth century can be mentioned, depicting a horseman with a raptor on his fist as well (Sockburn 3A) (Fig. 16.28)[91]. Above the 'falconer', a huge knotted snake is depicted. Below the horseman, two human figures are handing over a drinking horn. Is this a normal hunt or rather a mythological scene?[92] There are some further Anglo-Scandinavian stone crosses of the tenth century, showing human figures with different kinds of birds sitting on their hands or standing on their shoulders, which have been considered in the context of hunting (Kirklevington 2A;[93] Sherburn 1A;[94] Leeds 1A;[95] Billingham 1A[96]) (Fig. 16.29). However, it remains uncertain whether these figures have anything to do with

Figure 16.28 Stone cross fragment from Sockburn (Sockburn 3A) in Durham, England. Courtesy of T. Middlemass, CASSS.

Figure 16.29 Stone cross fragment from Kirklevington (Kirklevington 2A) in Northern Yorkshire, England. Courtesy of T. Middlemass, CASSS.

falconry or whether they represent mythological motifs – Óðinn with his ravens on his shoulder or even a Christian saint or an evangelist?[97]

Birds and War

In numerous accounts of battles in Old Norse (as well as Anglo-Saxon) poetry, the wolf, the raven, and the eagle are mentioned – they feast on the slain, eating the corpses on the battlefield and drinking the blood of fallen warriors in the aftermath of battle.[98] Very common *kennings* for fighting and killing enemies in battle are phrases like 'to feed the eagle' or 'to invite eagle and raven to dinner'. War and battle are called 'banquet meal' or 'feast of wolf and eagle'. Warriors and heroes are called 'friend/feeder of eagles, wolves, and ravens'. Obviously, the 'beasts of battle' motif can also be observed in Viking Age iconography.[99] On the Gotlandic picture stone Lärbro Tängelgårda I,[100] a battle scene is shown, including three birds of prey (Fig. 16.30). One of them is standing on a fallen warrior, tearing off flesh from

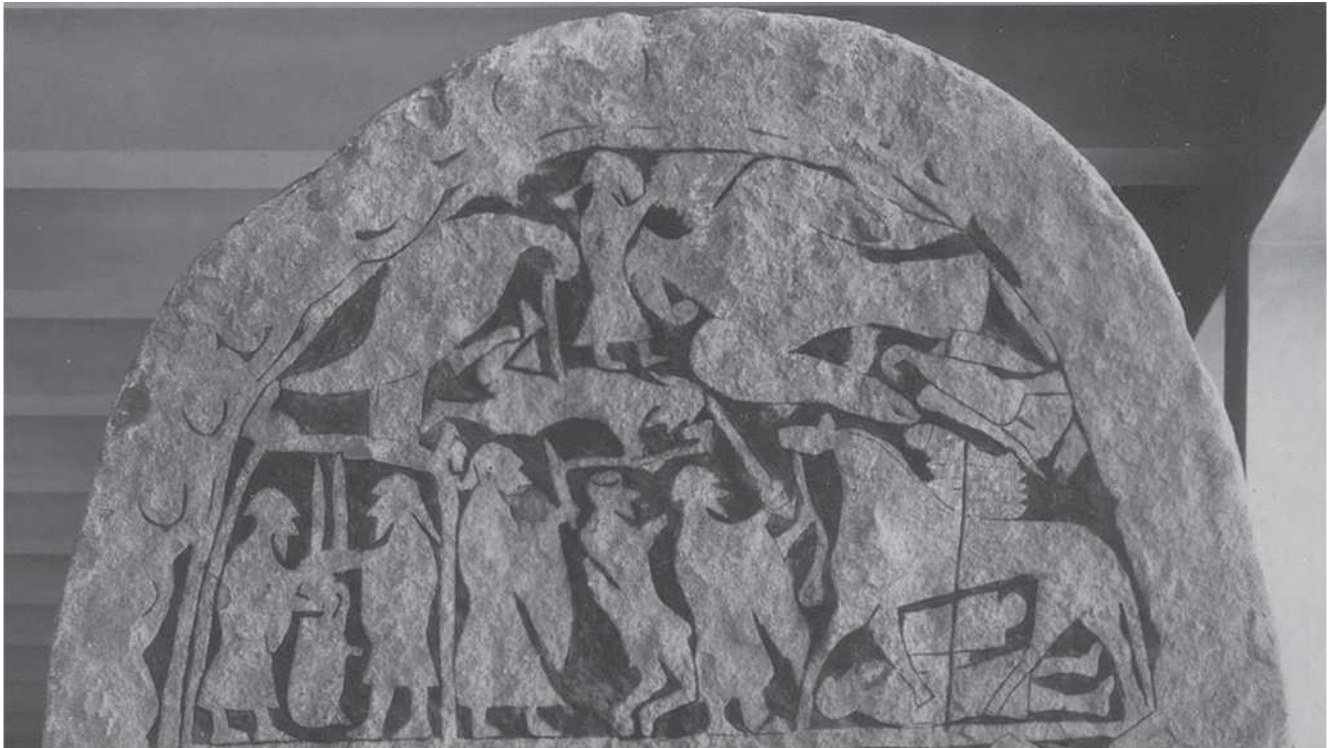

Figure 16.30 Picture stone no. I from Tängelgårda in Lärbro, Gotland, Sweden. Courtesy of ATA Stockholm.

its victim's body with its beak. A similar scene, a raptor (or a raven?), standing on a fallen man's head and picking at his face, is depicted on a Viking Age stone cross from Kirk Michael on the Isle of Man (MM 129) (Fig. 16.31).[101] Apart from that, the Tängelgårda monument as well as the picture stone Lärbro Stora Hammars I (see Fig. 16.23) depict an obviously badly hurt warrior who has fallen off his horse, lying on the ground. A carrion-eating bird is standing on the horse's back, already looking forward to having a meal.

The birds of the battlefield also appear as companions of heroes, seeking proximity to and following the greatest warriors in anticipation of regular feeding. According to the eddic poem *Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrri*, stanzas 1–6 (probably dating back to the eleventh or twelfth century), at the birth of the hero, Helgi, two hungry ravens are talking to each other, saying about the newborn that 'he is a friend of wolves, we shall be joyous' ('sá er varga vinr, / við scolom teitir').[102] In the skaldic praise poem *Haraldskvæði,* stanza 4, dating to around AD 900, a raven tells about the fallen king: 'Haraldi vér fylgðum […] siðan ór eggi kómum' ('We have followed Harold […] ever since we came out of the egg').[103]

Against this background, it is worth considering whether other Viking Age depictions of warriors and horsemen with birds, usually associated with falconry or Óðinn and his ravens (see above), do not also refer to the 'beasts of battle' topos and depict a hero accompanied by carrion-eating birds, thus glorify him in this way. In fact, the relationship between warriors and the beasts of the battlefield is so close in Old Norse heroic poetry that the heroes themselves can be staged as corpse-eating birds. According to the eddic poem *Hamðismál*, stanza 30, presumably composed during the ninth or tenth century, the brothers Hamðir and Sǫrli are fighting bravely against a superiority of Gothic warriors

Figure 16.31 Stone cross from Kirk Michael, Isle of Man (MM 129). After Kermode 1994: pl. LI.

but finally have to face their own deaths. The dying hero, Hamðir, says: 'Vel hǫfom við vegit, / stǫndom á val Gotna, / ofan eggmóðom, / sem ernir á qvisti' ('Well have we fought, on fallen Goths we stand, on those tired by the sword, like eagles on branches').[104]

Conclusion

As this concise and partial overview has shown, in the Scandinavian pre-Christian tradition of the Viking Age diverse and close relationships between humans or gods and various bird species can be observed. Not only the generally later Icelandic literary tradition, but also the contemporary pictorial sources bear witness to this. In this world of ideas, the boundaries between humans and animals can become blurred, and birds can be more than just economically useful. These ideas, even if they can only be understood in fragments and with all kinds of doubts, must be taken into account when assessing archaeological bird finds, not least those in the graves of ritual specialists that are the focus of this volume.

Abbreviations

Gs + no. = Jansson 1981
MM + no. = Manx Museum inventory number
N + no. = Olsen 1941–1960
Sö + no. = Brate/Wessén 1924–1936
U + no. = Jansson/Wessén 1940–1958
V + no. = Jungner/Svärdström 1940–1970

Notes

1. Höfig 2007: 78–85; Mitchell 2018.
2. *Haustlǫng*, st. 4 by Thjóðólfr ór Hvíni, Finnur Jónsson 1912–1915 A I: 17; B I: 15; Clunies Ross 2017.
3. *Gylfaginning*, ch. 38, Faulkes 2005: 32. Cf. *Grímnismál*, st. 20, Neckel & Kuhn 1983: 61.
4. All translations into English are by the author.
5. Kermode 1994: pl. LII:102B; Steinforth 2021.
6. See for example: Shetelig 1933: 226; Gschwantler 1990: 521; Dillmann 1994: 371; Heizmann 1999a: 235–8. The suggestion that it could be the god Víðarr who kills the wolf (Olrik 1902: 163), or even Christ who opens the mouth of hell (Reitzenstein 1924: 178), is not convincing. See, however, the reflections by Steinforth 2021.
7. von Friesen 1924a: 343; 1924b; Brøndsted 1955: 95; Jansson & Wessén 1940–1958 IV: 615–17; Heizmann 1999b: 420–1; Oehrl 2006: 124–33.
8. Weber 1972: 325–31.
9. Faulkes 2005: 20.
10. Neckel & Kuhn 1983: 56.
11. Neckel & Kuhn 1983: 69.
12. Kiil 1960; McGillivray 2020.
13. Helmbrecht 2011: cat. no. 59, 147, fig. 32a; first publication: Christensen 2009; last dealt with by e.g. Osborn 2015; Pesch 2018.
14. For summary and introduction regarding the sources, see recently Ney 2017.
15. Blindheim 1973a–b; Margeson 1980; Düwel 1986; 2005; Oehrl 2013a; Gjedssø Bertelsen 2015; Ney 2017.
16. Düwel 2003.
17. Margeson 1983: 100; Düwel 1986: 240; Kermode 1994: 177.
18. Faulkes 1998: 3–5. The myth is also mentioned in the eddic poem *Hávamál*, sts 13, 14, 104–110, Neckel & Kuhn 1983: 19, 33–4.
19. *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ch. 79, st. 56, Sigurður Nordal 1933: 276.
20. Falk 1924: 41.
21. Heizmann 2001.
22. Faulkes 1998: 2.
23. For the most relevant research literature on the Wayland legend and its sources, see Nedoma 1988; 2005; von See *et al.* 2000: 82–117; Oehrl 2012a; Vierck 2022.
24. Nedoma 1988: 116.
25. Bertelsen 1905–1911, I: 129.
26. In Vierck's (2022) recently published, detailed study, the motif of Wayland's flight and bird shape is traced back to Finno-Ugric shamanistic traditions.
27. Nedoma 1988: 27–31; Oehrl 2012a: 284–7.
28. Oehrl 2019a: pls. 193c, 249a; Vierck (2022: pl. 13–14) also finds models for this three-headedness in the Finno-Ugric tradition.
29. Lindqvist 1941–1942, I: figs 84–5; II: 87, fig. 441.
30. Lindqvist 1948: 21–4; Oehrl 2017: 103–5; 2019a: 217–21.
31. e.g. Lindqvist 1941–1942, I: 95; 1948: 24–5; Hauck 1957: 370–1; Lindqvist 1970: 22; Lamm & Nylén 2003: 50–2. Regarding documentation and interpretation in detail: Oehrl 2019a: 214–23.
32. Oehrl 2012a: 298–9.
33. Coatsworth 2008: 198–200.
34. Lang 1991: 202–3, fig. 768. Further possible parallels: Lang 2001: 61–2; Coatsworth 2008: 202–3.
35. e.g. Collingwood 1914: 298, 312–14; Lang 1974: 17–22; 1976: 90–3; Kopár 2012: 10–22; Oehrl 2012a: 288–91.
36. Ambrosiani 2001: 12, figs 1.2–3; Oehrl 2012a; 2019a: pl. 249.
37. Perhaps the nasal of a helmet, Gustafsson 2015.
38. Helmbrecht 2012; 2013; Zachrisson 2017.
39. Bertelsen 1905–1911, I: 129–30; Helmbrecht 2012: 176–7, fig. 10; 2013: 6–7.
40. Christensen & Nockert 2006; Vedeler 2019.
41. Brandt & Wamers 2005: 181, cat. no. 44.
42. Wamers 1991: 138–52, fig. 33.
43. *Vǫlundarkviða*, sts 1–3, Neckel & Kuhn 1983: 117.
44. Neckel & Kuhn 1983: 116.
45. Neckel & Kuhn 1983: 220.
46. *Hrómundar saga Grípssonar*, ch. 6, Guðni Jónsson 1950: 416–17.
47. *Helgakviða Hundingsbana ǫnnor*, Neckel & Kuhn 1983: 161.
48. von See *et al.* 2009: 445–6.
49. All examples given in the following are discussed in these publications elaborately: Oehrl 2010; 2012a: 304–5; 2012b: 93–6; 2015: 221–4; 2019a: 50–5; 2020a: 138–51; in press. All relevant arguments, sources, and research literature is given there.

50. The journey of the dead in the iconography of the picture stones is discussed in detail by Oehrl 2020a.
51. Oehrl 2020a. Particularly important are the studies by Ellmers 1973; 1980; 1986; 1995.
52. Ellmers 1973; 1986: 352–3, 362; Weber 1973.
53. Cramp 1984: 141, ll. 741 [Sockburn 15]; Lang 1972: 241, figs 1–2; Bailey 1980: 136, pl. 39.
54. Oehrl 2010: fig. 1; 2020a: fig. 28.
55. The woman opposite the enthroned god would then be Frigg, Óðinn's wife. According to the prose introduction of *Grímnismál*, she is sitting with her husband in his great hall (Neckel & Kuhn 1983: 56).
56. Petersen 2005: 64–5, figs 27–8; Franceschi *et al.* 2005: no. 206; Dobat 2006: figs 2–3.
57. Petersen 2005: 65–6, fig. 29.
58. Hauck 1982: 284–6; in detail on the images of Sparlösa, but with different conclusions: Nordgren 2009.
59. Düwel & Oehrl 2017: 99.
60. A late Iron Age brooch in shape of an owl has been found at the central place of Tissø, Sjælland, Denmark (Petersen 2005: 64, fig. 26).
61. *Sigrdrífumál*, Sts 16–17, Neckel & Kuhn 1983: 193.
62. Taylor 1930.
63. Kovalev 2012: 499–503.
64. Frye 2006: 68.
65. Frye 2006: 500.
66. Warner 2001: 80.
67. Friis-Jensen & Fisher 2015.
68. A bird sitting on the top of a tree, presumably a cock, is depicted on the eleventh century Ockelbo rune stone (Gs 19) and the Överhogdal tapestry (Horneij 1991; the fragment date between AD 1040 and 1170, see Possnert 2010).
69. *Vǫluspá*, sts 42–3, Neckel & Kuhn 1983: 10. In passing mention should be made of the armed bugler on the stone cross at Jurby on the Isle of Man (MM 127), accompanied by a flying bird. The bugler has been interpreted as the god Heimdallr who blows into his instrument at the beginning of Ragnarǫk (*Vǫluspá*, st. 50, Neckel & Kuhn 1983: 11), and consequently, the bird has been interpreted as a cock, which also announces the end of the world. However, it looks more like a bird of prey. The image has also been associated with the trumpet angels in the *Revelation of John* (8:13). Both in *Vǫluspá* and in the *Revelation*, a calling eagle plays a role. See Oehrl 2011: 170–1 and Steinforth in press.
70. Ambrosiani 2001; Pedersen 2001; Oehrl 2004: 63–5; Petersen 2010; Kovalev 2012; Gräslund 2021.
71. Oehrl 2004: figs 212–14.
72. The latter have recently been collected and discussed in detail by Steinforth in press.
73. Gerlach 1970: col. 206–10.
74. Gräslund 2021.
75. Gräslund 2021.
76. Oehrl 2004: 63–5, figs 215–21; Gräslund 2021: 184–7.
77. Lindqvist 1941–1942 I: figs 81–2; II: 86–7: figs 434, 436–40.
78. Lindqvist 1968: 20–2. Regarding the uncertainties of documentation, see Oehrl 2019a: 61–2, 66.
79. Many researchers regarded this image as a human sacrifice to Óðinn or Óðinn's self-sacrifice respectively. Most recently this motif has been studied by Klas Wikström af Edholm (2020: 344–8).
80. Ebenbauer 1978; Frank 1984; af Edholm 2018; 2020: 247–62; Murphy *et al*. 2022: esp. 24–7.
81. Oehrl 2008; 2020b.
82. Andreeff 2012: 139–40; Oehrl 2019a: 180, pl. 187c
83. Lindner 1973; Grimm & Oehrl 2017; Dusil 2018.
84. Vretemark 2018; Grimm in press.
85. Hofmann 1957–1958; Carstens 2018.
86. The following monuments and some more have been discussed by the author in several previous publications, in particular Oehrl 2013b; 2014; 2018; 2020c; Grimm & Oehrl 2017. See also Åkerström-Hougen 1981.
87. Christiansen 1997.
88. Biörnstad 1958.
89. Oehrl 2013b; 2014.
90. Lindqvist 1941–1942, I: fig. 134; II: 81–2.
91. Cramp 1984: 136, ill. 710.
92. Kopár 2012: 116–17.
93. Lang 2001: 142–3, ill. 400.
94. Lang 1991: 201, Ill. 762.
95. Coatsworth 2008: 200–2, ill. 16.
96. Cramp 1984: 48, ill. 69.
97. Kopár 2012: 111–12.
98. Beck 1970: 55–67; Honegger 1998; 2017; Jesch 2002; Albert 2014: 129–95.
99. Oehrl 2020c: 455–7.
100. Lindqvist 1941–1942, I: figs 86–8; II: 92–3, figs 448, 450.
101. Kermode 1994: 191.
102. *Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrri*, Neckel & Kuhn 1983: 131–2.
103. *Haraldskvæði*, Finnur Jónsson 1912–1915 A I: 25; B I: 22.
104. *Hamðismál*, Neckel & Kuhn 1983: 273–4.

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17

The Roles of Horses in Viking Age Ritual Action

Harriet J. Evans Tang & Keith Ruiter

The horse was ubiquitous in the Viking Age. Horses were physically present as a means of transportation, draught animals, high-value commodities, and/or non-human companions. They also loomed large in the mindscapes of the Viking Age as symbols of fertility and prestige, key characters in the stories people told, and the subjects of artistic endeavours ranging from poetry to tapestry to inscription. This chapter explores the ways that horses played a role in magic practices and wider rituals at the intersection of these physical and conceptual spheres. Taking an interspecies approach to these rituals, it will pay particular attention to questions of personhood, participation, and agency, and comment on some gendered aspects of these acts. This chapter adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on Viking Age poetry, iconography, and archaeological remains to explore the horse as both ritual object and subject, and asks whether the lines between horse as companion, and horse as ritual actor can be drawn so distinctly.

Given the prominence of horses as participants in Viking Age societies, it should come as no surprise that the picture is complex. Horses, it would seem, were not actors or objects in just one type of ritual, but many. Ship burials, such as Oseberg in Vestfold, Norway, include the bodies of horses which appear to have been ritually killed and deposited, but some of those same horses were interred with traction equipment, suggesting that selected animals had a role to play in the procession to and enactment of the funeral itself. However, the ritual killing and deposition of horses is not limited to funerary contexts as there is evidence of horses having been sacrificed in wetlands and other waterscapes. Viking Age horses could also be partitioned in ritually significant ways. Medieval Icelandic sagas suggest that horse skins, horse heads, and even horse phalluses could be used to channel curses or shame or as objects of worship, and some Old Norse poetry – which may have its roots in Viking Age oral traditions – points to equine teeth, ears, and hooves as body-parts where magically protective runes should be carved.[1] Even horse hair appears to have been significant, with some parts of funerary clothes woven from horse hair. Live horses too were included in Viking Age ritual activity in a range of ways, including being key actors in the movement of itinerant kings in the landscape of Scandinavia (→ **Chapter 11**), such as the royal procession on the Eriksgata, or being the objects on which some oaths were sworn,[2] or even having a role in the healing of traumatised persons. To explore this variety and complexity, this chapter focuses on three primary types of ritual activity: the ritualised killing and deposition of horses, the ritualistic importance of partitioned horses, and the significance of live horses as partners and participants in ritual or magic acts.

Horses in Rituals of Death

Perhaps the most commonly known and discussed ritual activity in which horses were included in the Viking Age is the dramatic, dynamic, and varied rituals surrounding death and burial. Burials with (and of) horses occurred across Viking Age Scandinavia and its associated diasporas throughout this period and were practised with a number of regional and local variations. In certain parts of tenth-century Denmark, the so-called 'equestrian burials'[3] are a prominent feature of elite mortuary culture while burial with horses seems to have been more common in central Sweden in the earlier Vendel period (*c*. AD 540–790) than in the Viking Age.[4] The inclusion of horses in ritual activity related to death and burial is not therefore unique to the Viking Age but a tradition that remained meaningful, and open to transformations of form and meaning over time. Notably it was not exclusively reserved for 'high status' individuals.[5]

In contrast to the varied traditions on the mainland, in Viking Age Iceland, burials with and of horses dominate the pre-Christian cemeteries, with a large proportion of the pre-Christian inhumation burials seeming to include at least one horse.[6] Assumed 'Norse graves' in the Scottish Isles and areas of mainland Scotland, Ireland, and England also show evidence of burial with horses, indicating that whatever their role and relationship to the deceased or the death ritual, horses were often key to the ritualised practices or performances surrounding burial in these areas of the Norse diaspora.[7]

By far the most common interpretations of the inclusion of horses in burial are either as a grave good to serve the deceased in their afterlife, or as a psychopomp, helping transport the dead to that afterlife. This interpretation owes much of its weight to the mythological horse Sleipnir, an eight-legged creature depicted in poetry as being able to traverse all terrains and move between realms. More broadly, however, textual sources, written or compiled in the high medieval period (in the case of eddic poetry with presumed roots in Viking Age oral traditions), seem to suggest that horses were understood as being capable of carrying people and things across borders and through all terrain. Mythological horses were perceived as creatures who drew the sun and moon about the world, or who were capable of travelling across the dangerous spaces between realms, and especially to the place of the dead.[8] Snorri Sturluson in his mythographic writings includes further references to horses as beings able to move between worlds, for example Sleipnir, or traverse all terrain, such as Hófvarfnir who can move over sea and sky.[9] The role of the horse in transporting the dead to Valhǫll has been suggested as a possible meaning behind the iconographic depictions on some Gotlandic picture stones (see Figs 17.1 and 17.2) and has been proposed as one of the meanings behind the so-called 'equestrian burials' mentioned above.[10]

On both stones, a rider is depicted, perhaps a warrior, riding an eight-legged horse towards a group of people (in Fig. 17.1 a drinking horn is also seemingly offered by a figure greeting the rider). In the lower half of each stone is a manned ship, and the inclusion of both horse, rider, and ship on these stones may hint at the parallel between horse and ship discussed below, in which horses and ships are seen as the characteristic travellers of their respective terrains, being associated both with transition and transportation. The association of the horse with death is found also in kennings for gallows, such as 'hábrjóstr Sleipnir hǫrva', 'high-chested Sleipnir of flax cords' and in the name of the world tree Yggdrasill 'horse of Yggr' (another name for Óðinn) on which Óðinn was depicted as hanging himself.[11] The association between horses in general, and Sleipnir in particular as seen in these kennings also fits with the beliefs of horses moving passengers between realms.

The apparent liminality of the horse in pre-Christian traditions, and the depiction of more-than-four-legged

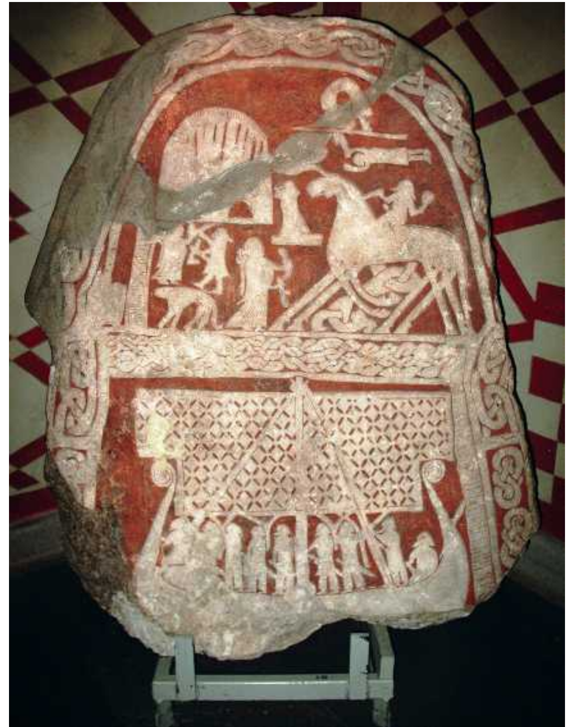

Figure 17.1 Tjängvide stone: showing a rider on an eight-legged horse being greeted by a figure with a drinking horn, with a heavily manned ship in the lower half. Photo by Swedish History Museum.

Figure 17.2 Ardre Kyrke stone: showing a rider on an eight-legged horse riding towards a group of people, with a heavily manned ship in the middle of the stone. Photo by Swedish History Museum.

horses, has been associated with shamanistic practices.[12] Alongside the Gotlandic picture stones, Neil Price considers the Överhogdal woven hangings (800–1000), which include multiple eight-legged horses, as representing a tradition in which more-than-four legged creatures were the 'shaman's' companion, and both horses and elk appear in these representations (see Fig. 17.3).[13] Drawing on ethnographic evidence from across Siberia, including the Buryat and Khanty, Price suggests the hangings show Sámi (elk) and Norse (horse) shaman-companions together; the drumbeats of shamans' drums were sometimes considered to be the hoofbeats of such creatures.[14]

The poem *Sólarljóð* (c. 1200) seems likewise to show a horse as a feature of a ritual to attain a vision of another world. Stanza 51 describes how:

> Á norna stóli
> sat ek níu daga,
> þaðan var ek á hest hafinn;
> gýgjar sólir
> skinu grimmliga
> ór skýdrúpnis skýjum.
>
> On the chair of the norns
> I sat for nine days,
> From there I was raised on a horse;
> The suns of the giantesses
> Shone grimly
> From the cloud-dripper's clouds.[15]

This depiction, even in a Christian visionary poem, seems to fit with an apparent Viking Age understanding of horses (real or metaphysical) as uniquely facilitating the movement of the minds of magic practitioners, not just the bodies of the dead.

In several cases, direct links between horses and presumed magic practitioners or ritual specialists are spatially alluded to in the construction of Viking Age graves. A complex burial from Kaupang (Ka 294–297) serves as a particularly illustrative example.[16] The burial includes five individuals, interred at two distinct occasions – the first, the burial of a man in the mid- to late ninth century, and the second, a multiple burial, likely in the first decades of the tenth century – with a wide variety of material included, suggesting a very complicated set of practices and meanings interwoven into the fabric of the grave.[17] For the purposes of this chapter, the second phase of burial is the most important: the grave of four individuals laid in an 8.5 m long boat directly over the first man.

Toward the prow of the boat, a woman – aged 45–50 years at the time of her death – a man – whose age has not been determined – and an infant had been laid out in close proximity to each other with a range of items including stones, jewellery, dress accessories, weapons, weaving equipment, cooking vessels, at least one key, an assortment of beads, and a dog chain. Toward the back of the boat was the body of a horse and seated in the stern, a second woman with a variety of further items. This woman was well dressed, including a piece of clothing made out of leather [18] and another wide array of items was placed around her including shields, a weaving sword, and a rune-inscribed bronze bowl containing, among other things, the head of a dog which was placed in her lap. The woman's feet were in close proximity, or direct contact with both the body of the dog and the body of the horse mentioned above, both of whom appear to

Figure 17.3 Detail of one of the Överhogdal tapestries, showcasing an eight-legged horse to the bottom left of the frame next to a tree-like shape.

have been dismembered before being placed in the boat in roughly anatomical alignment. At the woman's feet were found a whetstone and a bridle bit, and to her right was placed an iron staff which was weighed down by a large stone. A range of features, including the staff, the leather costume, and the woman's position in the boat, possibly with her hand on the steering oar, have led scholars like Frans Arne Stylegar and Neil Price to posit that this woman was perhaps a *vǫlva*, a female ritual specialist.[19]

Grave A505 from the burial ground at Trekroner-Grydehøj on Sjælland, Denmark (→ **Chapter 28**) also contains the body of a woman often interpreted as a *vǫlva* who, in the ninth century at the age of 25–30, was buried in a comparatively deep pit with a range of furnishings including an iron-tipped copper alloy object interpreted as a staff or similar ritual tool for the practice of *seiðr* magic.[20] The body of a horse partially overlaid the left side of the woman, and a bisected dog had been placed at her feet (Fig. 17.4). The associations between these burials of possible ritual specialists, horses, and ritual tools in complex graves raise interesting questions about the place of horses in rituals and their relationships with ritual specialists, especially those gendered female and therefore in stark contrast to the male-dominated rider motifs and earlier equestrian burials.

Horse use, killing, and deposition in funerary rites may have positioned horses as participants – unwilling as they may have been – in magical practice, rather than solely as symbols of prestige or identity. Clare Rainsford has recently suggested that the inclusion of favoured animals, especially horses, in Anglo-Saxon burials may have been designed to keep the deceased 'safely dead' and prevent their return as a revenant. An isolated reference in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* (st. 36) describes the state of Sigrún after Helgi's death, and how she envisions the dead Helgi's return only through his riding his horse Vígblær, as if the horse were the only thing that could bring him back to her.[21]

The relationship between horses and the dead is important, but so too is their relationship to the preparation and the performance of the funeral. Inclusion of traction harnesses within human-horse burials may encourage a view of burial depositions that moves away from solely symbols of prestige or a specific identity, and the possibilities of horses contributing to pre-burial funerary events should be seen as a vital part of their inclusion in these contexts.[22] The ship burials at Valsgärde, Vendel, and Oseberg are particularly notable for their inclusion of horses with traction equipment: and the harnesses in the Valsgärde burials were found most often *on* the horses, suggesting they were worn at the time they were killed.[23] While such animals may have performed a practical function within the funerary rituals (e.g. drawing the body or various grave furnishings to the burial site), the way such a performance was enacted may have held significant meaning for those involved. The addition of metal rattles to the harnesses on these animals may have contributed to the spectacle, and possible magical elements of such funerals by contributing to the performance of apotropaic magic.[24] A tenth-century inhumation grave at Løve, Norway, shows that such rattles or *rangle* (as they are known in Norwegian) need not be included solely in burials including traction equipment, but might be associated with a single horse.[25] The horse in this burial was laid alongside the dead woman, with an iron *rangle* laid on its chest. The woman in the grave has been interpreted as a ritual specialist, which makes the inclusion and placement of the horse and the *rangle* especially intriguing – might here be seen a ritual specialist with her equine partner, who was likewise buried with the tool of their trade (the *rangle*)? Two other burials with which the Løve burial can be compared (the Gausel burial and Grave A505 from Trekroner-Grydehøj discussed above) seem to likewise show an association of female ritual specialists associated with horses or horse equipment.[26] On the Oseberg tapestry fragments, the multi-faceted nature of horses seems to be highlighted: both riding horses and horses pulling wagons are depicted (and indeed, depicted extraordinarily large compared to the wagons they pull, even accounting for perspective).[27] Horses may have been both functional helpers, and ritual actors in such performances.

While some rituals involving the killing of horses may have been conducted by individuals or in small groups, textual accounts, from both during, and after the Viking Age, suggest associations between the public racing of horses, specifically to exhaustion, and funerary rituals in Eastern Europe. For example, ibn Faḍlān's account of a Rūsiyyah (Rus') funeral on the Volga describes the racing of horses to exhaustion before cutting them into pieces and throwing the disarticulated bodies onto the ship that was to be burned.[28] It seems likely that such horse-racing was a practice seen in Scandinavia also.[29] It has been suggested that racing the horses to exhaustion would have made the horses easier to kill, and evidence from the Baltic region suggests bloodletting via stabbing with an iron spike may have been part of these ritualistic killings of horses at the graveside.[30] However, the sensory experience of such killing (and in some cases subsequent eating) of these animals is important to bear in mind: racing a horse will raise its heart-rate and blood pressure, causing the animal to bleed out faster, and perhaps creating a dramatic spray of blood depending on how the animal is killed, adding to the ritualistic spectacle of the funeral or communal ritual. If the animal is then ritually consumed, although not always the case in such events, stress hormones (for example cortisol and epinephrine), which can detrimentally affect the taste and texture of meat, are lower after bouts of extended exercise.[31] Such communal activities, at proposed cult sites and special places in the landscape, seem to have often entailed the ritual killing, dismemberment or flaying, and sacrifice of certain parts of the animal.[32]

Figure 17.4 Artistic reconstruction of grave A505 from Trekroner-Grydehøj, Sjælland, Denmark. Illustration by Mirosław Kuźma. Copyright Leszek Gardeła and Mirosław Kuźma.

The Partitioned Equine Body and Ritual Activities

Aside from their inclusion in burials, horses were killed and deposited in various places, including wetland landscapes, wells, and beneath houses.[33] The exact nature or purpose of these apparent sacrifices are unclear, although in the medieval period horses are associated with fertility cults. Adam of Bremen, in the *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (eleventh century) described a set of sacrificial rituals at the cult site at Uppsala in Sweden, which included the hanging of bodies of dogs, horses, and men in trees.[34]

Throughout the Viking Age, the partitioning of horse bodies and preservation or deposition of horse body parts seems to have been an important feature of the ritual landscape of Scandinavia, as well as actions involving the social space of the household, and the ornamentation of the human body. In such examples it may be that the part stood for the whole, and represented a horse and its conceptual associations in situations where it was not suitable for a whole horse body to be used, or the partitioned horse may have taken on additional or alternate meanings. The deposition of horse parts in wetlands was a longstanding practice in the North, with Roman Iron Age and Migration Period depositions at sites such as Skedemosse, Valmose, and Nydam, and such ritual depositions continued into the Viking Age in places such as Trelleborg and Starene.[35] While evidence for horse butchery is often rare on farm sites, cut marks on bones are more common at wetland sites, and presumed cult sites or places of ritual feasting.[36] The consumption of horse meat is depicted in medieval conversion narratives as an apparent feature of pre-Christian rituals and in so-called postclassical sagas as a non-Christian identifier.[37] *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* describes a wedding feast hosted by a troll at which horse and human flesh are served together to the non-human guests, while food fit for human consumption is served to the human groom. The eating of horse flesh is therefore used as a stock signifier for a non-Christian, bestial identity (the trollish men are described as eating the meat like hunting dogs and eagles).[38] What is clear from both textual and archaeological evidence is that the consumption of horse meat as part of a wider set of rituals seems to have only been appropriate in specific settings.

Whether eaten or not, the deposition of horses seems particularly focused on waterscapes, with horse bones relatively prominent at such sites, and relatively insignificant at other sites with apparent sacrificial depositions.[39] Folklore often preserves stories of paranormal horses associated with water, which seem to be cited in the medieval texts from Iceland.[40] It may be that wells were particularly suited to the deposition of horses in this symbolic landscape, as contemporary sites of ritual action at Tissø, Denmark, and Järrestad, Skåne, Sweden, show higher frequencies of horse bones in the well structures on each site, when compared to other depositional places on the sites.[41]

The associations of horses with waterscapes are strong.[42] Later traditions clearly understood the horse as a liminal creature, and as conceptually entwined with its marine counterpart, the ship.[43] As such, the shore of any wetland or waterscape was a meeting point, a border, and a productive location for the practising of magic with horses. Perhaps the most famous use of a disarticulated horse body, and one placed on a border between land and sea, is that of the *níðstǫng*:

> Búask þeir til at sigla, ok er þeir váru seglbúnir gekk Egill upp í eyna. Hann tók í hǫnd sér heslistǫng ok gekk á bergsnǫs nǫkkura þá er vissi til lands inn; þá tók hann hrosshǫfuð ok setti upp á stǫngina. Síðan veitti hann formála ok mælti svá: ‘Hér set ek upp níðstǫng ok sný ek þessu níði á hönd Eiríki konungi ok Gunnhildi dróttningu’—hann sneri hrosshǫfðinu inn á land— ‘sný ek þessu níði á landvættir þær er land þetta byggja svá at allar fari þær villar vega, engi hendi né hitti sitt inni fyrr en þær reka Eirík konung ok Gunnhildi ór landi.’ Síðan skýtr hann stǫnginni niðr í bjargrifu ok lét þar standa. Hann sneri ok hǫfðinu inn á land, en hann reist rúnar á stǫnginni ok segja þær formála þenna allan.

> They prepared everything for sailing, and when they were ready to sail, Egill went up to the island. He took in his hand a hazel-pole and went to a rocky outcrop that looked towards the inland. Then he took up a horse’s head and set it up on the pole. Then he made a curse, and said: ’Here I set up a *níð*-pole and I turn this *níð* by hand to King Eiríkr and Queen Gunnhildr’ – he turned the horse’s head to face land – ‘I turn this *níð* onto the land-spirits, those which dwell in this land, so that they all go their confused way, never to find peace until they have driven King Eiríkr and Gunnhildr out of this land.’ Then he pushed the pole down into a rift in the rock and let it stand there. He turned the head to face inland, and he carved runes on the pole and said there the curse in its entirety. [44]

While ethnographic analogies may be drawn with the practice of certain Siberian peoples skinning horses and raising the heads and skins up on a pole (while the meat of the animal is eaten), such a context is much different to the cursing context of the *níðstǫng* in *Egils saga.* Different still are the sites at Jyllandsvej (Viking Age) and the island of Bredholm (late Iron Age), in present-day Denmark.[45] These sites seem to show evidence of horse skins having been suspended on poles in some way, at sites either surrounded by water or overlooking the water. It also seems that horse skins might also have been an additional focus at some earlier deposition sites.[46] At Finnestorp bog site (fourth–sixth centuries), the horse bones showed signs of cut marks indicating they had been flayed before deposition in the wetland.[47] However, the detail and significance of these rituals is difficult to assess. Closer to the episode from *Egils saga* is a depiction of setting the head of a sacrificed horse on a pole as found in Saxo Grammaticus’ *Gesta Danorum* (Book V), on the shore of a river, and the horse’s head is likewise turned to face the enemy.[48] A further example can be found in *Vatnsdæla saga* (ch. 34), though here the pole is

set up at the wall of a sheep-shed (or wall of the farmyard), and the whole body of the horse seems to be impaled at the breast on the pole, rather than a decapitated head. In the *Vatnsdæla saga* episode there is nonetheless a description of carving a curse on the pole, and the turning of the mare's head to look upon the recipient of the curse.[49]

Other horse parts that may have been involved in the practice of magic and the carving of runes are referenced in the eddic poem *Sigrdrífumál* (st. 16): ears, hooves, and teeth. This stanza outlines the material items onto which runes should be written. It is unfortunately disassociated from the preceding stanzas, which specify which sorts of runes (e.g. healing runes) should be written where. Instead, stanza 16 seems the beginning of a separate rune-chant:

> á skildi kvað ristnar
> þeim er stendr fyr
> skínanda goði,
> á eyra Árvakrs
> ok á Alsvinns hófi,
> á því hvéli er snýsk
> under reið Rungnis,
> á Sleipnis tǫnnum
> ok á sleða fjǫtrum
>
> On a shield they should be carved
> By that one who stands before
> The shining god,
> On the ears of Árvakr
> And on the hoof of Alsvinn,
> On that wheel which turns itself
> Under the vehicle of Hrungnir,
> On Sleipnir's teeth
> And on the straps of the sledge[50]

In this stanza, the ear, the hoof, and the teeth are singled out – and indeed, the ear and teeth might give a deeper meaning to the depositions of horse heads seen in the archaeological record (it is easy to think of these as skulls, which restricts thinking of the other, fleshy parts of the head that would have been present). In addition, teeth may reflect a link to the fighting of horses, something that is heavily attested in later literature and laws and may have had an earlier ritual significance (Fig. 17.5).[51] Horse-fighting itself may have left marks on the teeth of fighting horses. At the royal manor site of Åker it has been suggested that horse-fighting took place based on wear marks around a canine from a stallion that could have resulted from a string around the tooth, a feature in a horse fight – such a marking possibly resulting from ritual participation in events is itself a form of carving on the tooth of the horse.[52]

The importance of hooves can be linked to running, racing, and movement in general or specifically to the idea of moving between worlds discussed above – the hooves and legs seem to be singled out for special attention at certain sites. For example, at Borg in Östergötland horses had their hind legs struck with an axe before being killed, and horse legs (alongside heads) feature often in the house sacrifices of the Middle Ages, while at Trelleborg (Denmark), meatless parts of the horse such as the hooves were present in the sacrificial wells, as well as more fleshy parts of the animal.[53]

Figure 17.5 A horse-fight on the Haggeby Stone from Uppland, Sweden. Photo by Bengt A. Lundberg, Riksantikvarieämbetet.

A further part of the horse that may have played a role in ritual or the practice of magic is horsehair. An emphasis on the mane of the horse is apparent in medieval texts, as '-faxi' or 'mane' is a feature of multiple horse names (such as Gullfaxi, Freyfaxi, Svartfaxi, and Hrímfaxi), and trimming the mane of the horse appears to have been an activity undertaken by men.[54] There is some evidence of horsehair being used for clothing items in pre-Viking Age graves, especially in apparently elite burials possibly associated with a warrior cult. The inhumation burials in both Högom (early sixth century) and Evebø (late fifth century), include woven bands of horsehair that seem to have been included in the dress of the buried men who were laid on a bearskin.[55] These bands were valuable items and would have taken many hours to prepare: the horsehair elements on the Högom robe could have taken up to 1740 hours to weave.[56]

Horsehair has also been used in making ship-ropes in historical times in Sweden, and the possibility of this tradition extending back to the Viking Age (or before) is intriguing.[57] There were certainly associations between ships, horses, and their 'equipment' in the Viking Age and medieval poetic imagination, and a close relationship might be proposed between horses and ships that made these animals particularly suitable for deposition in boat burials. Aside from the famous associations of horses and ships in kennings such as 'skær sunda' ('horse of the sounds'), the corpus includes kennings for horses such as 'lung váfaðar Gungnis' ('longship of the swinger of Gungnir [longship of Óðinn]') and 'knǫrr rastar' ('ship of the league').[58] Descriptions of horses can equate the bit and the rudder as methods of control in adjectives such as *stjórnbitlaðr* ('steered by the bit'), and kennings such as 'dýr fiskifœra' ('animal of fishing gear') equate the reins of the horse with the fishing gear of the ship.[59] Such language suggests a blending of bodies and associated trappings between horses and ships, not only a blurring of practical function as transportation. At the burial

from Kaupang (Ka 294–297) discussed above, the possible ritual specialist was connected with both the horse and the boat, and furthermore with the bridle and potentially the steering oar: the equipment that sits at the intersection of rider and horse, and sailor and ship.

A later text shows quite a different view of a female instigator of ritual speech and action involved with a part of a horse. *Vǫlsa þáttr*, a short episode included in the fourteenth-century *Flateyjarbók*, tells the story of a domestic ritual involving a preserved horse penis, with the apparent purpose of increasing the fecundity of those on the farm.[60] While evidently a fourteenth-century compilation and designed to cast a humorous light on the bizarre actions of non-Christian folk that can be corrected by St Óláfr, the *þáttr* has been seen as containing some roots of traditional customs.[61] In the course of the tale, St Óláfr visits a farm in disguise, and after dinner the woman of the house, seemingly a ritual practitioner of sorts, prepares a horse penis that had been preserved some months before when the farmer's horse had died. This penis, seemingly named Vǫlsi, is the focus of a ritual passing around and seeming sacralisation, with each member of the household speaking a verse, ending in 'Þiggi Maurnir þetta blæti' ('May Maurnir receive this offering').[62] Interpretations of Maurnir include a fertility goddess, or a giantess, thus simulating a sacred sex act/marriage between the god (the preserved penis) and the giantess. Luke John Murphy suggests the preservation of the penis itself might not necessarily be ritually charged, as animal penises were preserved for use as herding switches until the nineteenth century.[63] Such objects, while presumed to have been adopted in Iceland due to a lack of wood, may have gathered a magical association as both an object used to herd animals and an object imbued with some of the fecundity of the animal to which it belonged, possibly transferring this fecundity to the animals with whom it was used.

Horses as Partners and Participants

Before the use of horse bodies and body-parts, living, breathing horses would have participated in ritual practices. Living horses appear to have carried significance for consolidating social bonds, had particular associations with the god Freyr, served as mediators between gods and humans, and possibly were even associated with the promotion of healing.[64]

As discussed above, sacrifices of horses have been shown as vital elements of Viking Age communal rituals, but the horse before the sacrifice is sometimes little considered.[65] Deckers and others suggest that a trained stallion would have been accepted as a prestigious gift for the gods and may have been considered the ideal sacrificial figure (and therefore depicted on the so-called 'riderless steed' brooches from Ribe).[66] Such a suggestion highlights the importance of the horse while still alive, and its relationship with a human trainer, emphasising the capacity of the horse for consolidating relationships between the human, animal, and divine realms.[67] Similarly, horse racing appears to have played a role in gathering regional assemblies and may not have always been associated with subsequent sacrifice, but certainly had an impact on interpersonal relationships.[68]

Evidence for the importance of the living horse in the cult of Freyr mostly comes from medieval descriptions, with the example of Freyfaxi in *Hrafnkels saga* and a description of the desecration of a sacred herd of horses in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, both thirteenth-century narratives.[69] Such herds of horses have often been viewed in light of Tacitus' writings from the first century, in which he describes the white horses of Germanic tribes, kept aside from work and in a restricted space, looked after by specific persons and used for auguries.[70] While horses used for divination purposes were kept in special places within Western Slavic temples, there is little sense of a similar practice in Viking Age Scandinavia, nor in the medieval texts reflecting on the Viking Age past.[71] While the horse Freyfaxi in *Hrafnkels saga* is described by the medieval compiler as dedicated to Freyr, he performs no specific ritual function and participates in no magical practice. In contrast, he seems closely entwined with the home of Hrafnkell – a chieftain and purported temple priest – and domestic social relations.[72] The description of Freyfaxi seems very much like all other breeding stallions in these medieval sagas. The story however, while a later narrative and much divorced from a supposed divine context, provides a notable description of possible agency exercised by horses within their relationships with ritual specialists, and other persons.

A notable episode from the *Íslendingasǫgur* suggests a possible therapeutic angle to horse-human interactions that may have involved processes considered 'magical' by those involved. There is a brief episode at the end of *Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa*, in which the killer of Bjǫrn tells his wife (Bjǫrn's former love interest) that Bjǫrn is dead, and she goes into a period of illness or depression. This malady is eased through sitting on a horse:

> Henni þótti sér þat helzt ró, at hon sæti á hestbaki, en Þórðr leiddi undir henni aptr ok fram, ok gerði hann þat, at honum þótti stór mein á vera, en vildi við leita at hugga hana.
>
> The most relief was offered to her by sitting on horseback, as Þórðr led her horse back and forth, and he did so, even though it was a great pain to him, as he wanted to try to comfort her.[73]

While only one reference in a large number of texts, this moment of horse-assisted healing is remarkable, and may suggest alternate interpretations of other, seemingly unique references in these sources. For example, in *Gull-Þóris saga*, an ageing Þórir is seen continuing his tradition of riding his horse Kinnskærr ('Bright-cheeked one') across the bay – an act that might simply indicate a longstanding enjoyment of riding but could also include a therapeutic function. Indeed, the description of Kinnskærr's ability to traverse the fjord

'hvert er var flóð eða fjara' ('whether it was high tide or low tide') also depicts this horse as a creature able to traverse boundaries and especially the fluid border between sea and land, perhaps echoing an older tradition of riding shorelines for less mundane reasons than personal enjoyment.[74]

It could also be seen that certain interactions with humans may have been considered magical. For example, recent research has shown that the sympathetic nervous system is activated in children through the act of horse-riding.[75] It is possible that the importance of children caring for and riding horses was related to a perception of children that did so becoming more capable of managing stress and self-control, and therefore better suited to rule.[76] In some Indigenous societies horses have historically been considered as ontologically similar to children and old people (both being protected groups), they have held and continue to hold important roles in traditional medicine, and are valuable for both external *and internal* transportation.[77]

Conclusions

Horses, their bodies and behaviours, have been used for diverse ritual purposes, and in dynamic magic practice, throughout the early medieval period in Scandinavia and Iceland. Similarly, the magic practitioners making use of horses – as props, partners, or even persons – in this period are also diverse, but the strongest physical and conceptual links seem to be manifested in the possible burials of *vǫlur* and their kind, such as in grave Ka 294–297 from Kaupang. The deposition of horses in burials involved rituals focused around the horse: that is, a central horse-subject, whose relationships with humans and landscapes in life influenced their fate and treatment in death. The disarticulation of horse bodies on the other hand, transforms these body parts into ritual objects, imbued with power beyond, and yet inextricably bound with their horse-ness – their perceived ability to do more, and to go more places than their human companions.

The use and participation of living horses in Viking Age magic is more complicated; it is always easier to see glimpses of those rituals that almost immediately end in the death of the horse, with rituals in which the horse may have remained a living ritual actor and participant in their own right much more intangible in the available record. Nonetheless, this chapter hopes to have shown, through using analogy, medieval sagas, later ethnographic accounts, and modern scientific studies, how horses might have been participating in processes seen as magical, that positively impacted on the lives of people living in the Viking Age.

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Notes

1. It should be noted that, while Viking Age runic inscriptions do attest the use of curses and other magical formulae, such as on the famous Glavendrup runestone (DR 209), the runic alphabet – like any alphabet – was used for a wide variety of purposes, both mundane and otherwise. Not all runic inscriptions are magical and not all magic was linked with runes.
2. For a full treatment of the horse and horse effigies as compurgatory objects, see Riisøy 2016: especially 146.
3. Equestrian burials are understood here as burials of persons (often, but not exclusively sexed male) with either horses and horse equipment, or just horse equipment. Recent re-evaluation of the Fregerslev II burial (Sulas *et al.* 2022) has shown that burials formerly thought to only contain equestrian equipment may in fact have held multiple human and animal bodies that have left little to no trace beyond chemical elements due to complex decomposition processes. Reviewing the corpus of equestrian burials in mainland Scandinavia with the latest methods may reveal a far higher proportion of burials with horses than originally considered and would bring the frequency closer to that presented by the contemporary evidence from Iceland, discussed below.
4. Pedersen 2014: 207; Hedenstierna-Jonson & Ljungkvist 2021. A set of wagon burials, seemingly reserved for women, are often interpreted as the counterpart to the Danish 'equestrian burials', although in almost all cases these wagon burials contained neither horses nor horse equipment (Eisenschmidt 2021). It has also been suggested that these burials in Denmark may not have been simply the female equivalent of the male equestrian graves, or even at all, but could have been indicators of special female figures in society, such as widows, or magic practitioners (Staecker 2002).
5. Later texts, such as *Grettis saga* also recollect these traditions, with the young Grettir encountering horse bones alongside a seated corpse while exploring a Viking Age burial mound in Norway (Guðni Jónsson 1936: 58).
6. Kristján Eldjárn & Adolf Friðriksson 2000; Þóra Pétursdóttir 2007; Rúnar Leifsson 2012; 2018.
7. Sikora 2003; Cooke 2016; Mazza 2020.
8. Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I: 358, 375, 381–2; 446; Loumand 2006.
9. Faulkes 1982: 30, 46; 1998: 20.
10. Ellmers 1980; Roesdahl 1980: 191–3; 1983; 2021. For the most recent and thorough treatment of this difficult corpus, see Oehrl 2019; 2020.
11. Marold 2012: 28; Price 2019: 61.
12. Price 2019: 264.
13. Price 2019: 266–7.
14. Price 2019: 267.
15. Larrington & Robinson 2007: 331–2.
16. Blindheim & Heyerdahl-Larsen 1995: 22–6, 92–5, 99, 103, 115–20, 128–9; Stylegar 2007: 95–100; Price 2010.

17. For a full treatment of this burial and the interpretive possibilities, see Price 2010.
18. Price (2010: 130) notes only one further example of a woman in similar leather costume.
19. Price 2010 with further discussion and references.
20. Ulriksen 2011: 175, 178, 193, 217; 2018: 231–3; Gardeła 2016: 84–88; 2017: 183–4.
21. Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, II: 279; Rainsford 2022.
22. For the consideration of traction and other horse equipment as rather (or also) symbolising close human-horse relationships see Armstrong Oma 2018: 140–1.
23. Bill 2016; Hedenstierna-Jonson & Ljungkvist 2021: 233.
24. Bill 2016: 149.
25. Gardeła 2021: 152–4.
26. Gardeła 2021: 154.
27. Anne Stine Ingstad (1992; 1995) sees the horses in the Oseberg burial as linked with a fertility cult and argues for the presence of a comb in a box with other possible cult items as being a horse-comb. It may be then that the tapestry fragments depict processions associated with such cult activity.
28. Montgomery 2000: 16; Zinoviev 2011.
29. Horse-races have been predominantly linked to assemblies at cult sites in pre-Christian Northern Europe: see Solheim 1956; Atkin 1977–1978; Hoek-Springer 2000: 27. In mythological poetry (*Guðrúnarkviða* II, st. 4; Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, II: 353), we find references to the horse Grani being raced, or perhaps racing to the assembly being both raced and sweating after the death of Sigurðr. See also Evans Tang & Ruiter in press for discussion of horses, personhood, and the reporting of crimes.
30. Zinoviev 2011: 79–80. In some examples outside of Scandinavia, Zinoviev suggests horses may have been buried alive, in narrow pits into which the exhausted horses could be led but from which they could not escape.
31. Micera *et al.* 2010; Nemec Svete *et al.* 2012.
32. A recent study of the Finnish material by Bläuer *et al.* (2022) has demonstrated a dynamic set of rituals involving horses, especially at burial sites and other special places, which span from the late Iron Age to the medieval period. Like the Scandinavian evidence, these rituals seem to have included the ritual killing and often consumption of horses.
33. Møhl 1961; Müller-Wille 1970–1971; Petersen 1995; Monikander 2006; 2010; Stensköld 2006: 212; Gotfredsen *et al.* 2014; Bukkemoen & Skare 2018. Icelandic medieval texts also seem to record practices involving the fall of animals, especially horses, from cliffs as a method of ritual killing (Jón Jóhannesson 1950: 123–4) and place names such as *rysseberg* ('horse cliff') in Norway have been interpreted as indicating a tradition of killing horses by driving them off cliffs or mountain ledges; a practice evidenced in early modern Norway that may have had its roots in earlier rituals (Lid 1924) and has similarities in historic Sámi practice (see Heide 2022). *Landnámabók* ('The Book of Settlements'), a collection of stories about the settlement of Iceland surviving in thirteenth-century manuscripts, also includes multiple references to horses that either originate, return to, or die in waterscapes; for example, the mare Skálm who dies in a bog (later called Skálmakelda), and the mysterious grey horse who comes from and returns to Hjarðarvatn (Jakob Benediktsson 1968: 96, 120). Place names both in Iceland and Norway then associated horses with landscape features, for example, bogs, lakes, and cliffs, and traditional stories include these names as the result of the deaths of horses, which seems at least encouraged by the earlier practice of sacrificing horses and horse bodies in wetlands. However, such depositions often involve the breaking or partitioning of horse bodies, rather than deposition of the whole horse.
34. Tschan 1959: 208. The archaeological investigations at Frösö seem to show evidence of such a sacrificial tree (a tree stump surrounded by animal remains that seem to have been left to rot where they fell), but only a horse mandible tooth was found at the site, the main animals considered to have been exposed to the elements being bear and other wild taxa. See Magnell & Iregren 2010.
35. Møhl 1961; Petersen 1995; Monikander 2006; 2010; Stensköld 2006; Jennbert 2011: 11–17. For Trelleborg and Starene, see Gotfredsen *et al.* 2014; Bukkemoen & Skare 2018.
36. See, for example, Perdikaris 1990; 1996.
37. See *Hákonar saga góða* (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–1951, I: 171–2).
38. Anderson 1997: 257.
39. Nilsson 2003; 2009; Magnell & Iregren 2010; Magnell 2012; Gotfredsen *et al*. 2014.
40. In a medieval Icelandic example from *Landnámabók*, a mysterious horse arrives from the water, seems to want to contribute something to the farm of a human figure (through breeding), but returns to the water after the farmer attempts to harness its power for himself (by making it pull a plough and work the fields – see Egeler 2014 for links to the Irish water-horse tales). It may be seen here that a particular ritual action (lost in the story) was supposed to bring paranormal assistance to a farmer establishing his herds, manifested through the figure of the horse – although it should be mentioned that such arrangements seem not restricted to horses in *Landnámabók*, but to goats and sheep also, with *Eyrbyggja saga* showing a bull attempt to enter into such an arrangement. See Evans Tang 2022: 43–5, 196, 205–6.
41. Nilsson 2003; Gotfredsen *et al.* forthcoming.
42. Quite a different sort of ritual site has been excavated in Iceland: the lava cave Surtshellir. Nearly 300m within this cave, beyond the reach of sunlight, were found evidence of a stone structure, a hearth, and a collection of bones from domestic animals, including horse bones. The treatment of the horse bones is consistent with butchery, and it has been proposed that eating horse flesh was part of the rituals at the site (Smith *et al.* 2021). However, it might be seen that waterscapes and caves were a similar category of 'between places'. Another possibility has been discussed by Bläuer *et al.* (2022: 87–8) who, in considering the Finnish evidence, have highlighted the horse as being associated with the mythical place Hiisi and, in shaman-like ritual practice, having a fiery character. It is argued that this association required special rituals of placation to water spirits when horses needed to cross waterscapes. While Scandinavian and Finno-Ugrian speaking peoples maintained distinct cultures and beliefs, people, goods, and ideas were constantly moving

between these spheres, and the consistent association of horse remains and watery places in both regions is significant. In Western Slavic pre-Christian eschatology also the realm of the dead was considered reachable by crossing water, and by riding a horse (see Gardeła *et al*. 2019; Kajkowski 2020, and references therein).

43. Westerdahl 2010: 283.
44. *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ch. 59. Text after Bjarni Einarson 2003: 98; translation by the authors.
45. Henrikson 2015.
46. Loumand 2006: 133. It can be suggested that the use of the horse was not necessary for a *níðstöng*, but that the horse's head was chosen to better improve the effectiveness of Egill's request (to call on the *landvættir* to drive Eiríkr and Gunnhildr from the land) given the special mobility and liminality of the horse discussed above. *Svarfdæla saga* (ch. 16) includes an odd episode where some men kill and flay a horse, then use the horse skin to wrap a man in to pretend that he has died – this is in order to trick a man into betrothing his daughter to the 'fallen' man and seemingly has no magical purpose – however, when the man, Klaufi, is killed a few chapters later, he does not stay dead, and returns to whet and fight alongside his friends. See Þorgeir Guðmundsson & Þorsteinn Helgason 1830: 154.
47. Vretemark 2013: 54
48. Ellis Davidson 1996: 128.
49. Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1939: 91.
50. *Sigrdrífumál*, st. 16. Text after Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, II: 316–317; translation by the authors.
51. See Gogosz 2013, and references therein.
52. Perdikaris 1996: 424; Bukkemoen & Skare 2018.
53. Falk 2006; Nielsen 2006: 245; Gotfredsen *et al.* 2014.
54. For example, in *Bjarnar saga*, ch. 32 (Sigurður Nordal & Guðni Jónsson 1938), *Gull-Þóris saga*, ch. 14 (Þórhallur Vilmundarson & Bjarni Vilhjálmsson 1991), and *Finnboga saga*, chs 23 and 24 (Jóhannes Halldórsson 1959).
55. Bønder-Jørgensen 2001.
56. Bønder-Jørgensen 2001: 5.
57. Westerdahl 2010: 275.
58. Clunies Ross 2017; Whaley 2017.
59. See Jesch 2017. It may be that these links extended to such items of clothing as the horsehair woven bands, which may have been understood as controlling features of the persons' identities, just as the ropes of the ship or bridle of the horse control these agents, as well as symbolising the relationship between persons.
60. *Vǫlsa þáttr* (Guðbrandur Vigfússon & Unger 1862: 331–6).
61. Clive Tolley (2009) is one of the strongest advocates for its fictional quality, though the dominant scholarly view considers various aspects of the tale to hold significance for pre-Christian traditions. See Heizmann 2012 and Price 2019: 178–80 for overviews of arguments for its plausible early roots.
62. Hedeager 2011: 107; Heizmann 2012: 1089; Murphy 2018: 66–68; Price 2019: 178–80.
63. Murphy 2018: 67.
64. The use of horses in divination practice seems to have been practised much earlier, and particularly associated with the peoples in Central and Eastern Europe and there seems to be no clear evidence that such practices survived in Viking Age Scandinavia. See McKinnell 2020: 76–77; Słupecki 2020; Sikora in press.
65. See Deckers *et al.* 2021.
66. Deckers *et al.* 2021; see also Kaliff & Oestigaard 2020: 216–18.
67. See Armstrong Oma 2018: 138, 142 for a discussion of the transformative nature of training horses and humans into a riding unit, and the attribution of the horse specifically as a '*companion species* with the ability to perform magic' (authors' emphasis).
68. Solheim 1956; Loftsgarden *et al.* 2017: 235.
69. Guðbrandur Vigfússon & Unger 1860: 401.
70. Rives 1999: ch. 10.
71. For Western Slavic examples, see Sikora in press, and references therein, including Saxo Grammaticus (Book XIV 39.9–10; Friis-Jensen & Fischer 2015). See also Słupecki 2006: 225–6.
72. Evans Tang 2022; Evans Tang & Ruiter in press.
73. *Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa*, ch. 33. Text after Sigurður Nordal & Guðni Jónsson 1938: 205; translation by the authors.
74. See Þórhallur Vilmundarson & Bjarni Vilhjálmsson 1991, chs 9 and 17. It is also possible that copper-alloy horse amulets, such as those from Gotland, may have had a healing or protective function – requesting intervention from the powers beyond to assist with certain ailments – although Jensen (2013) connects them to local elite cultures: as it is primarily on Gotland that these amulets were made, and therefore may have indicated a local cultural identity. For further discussion and references, see Jensen 2013.
75. Ohtani *et al.* 2017.
76. For example, in *Atlakviða* and *Rigsþula* (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I: 455–7; 2014, II: 380–1). A parody perhaps of this can be seen in the late *Svarfdæala saga* (ch. 23; Jónas Kristjánsson 1946: 192–194), in which Karl 'ómáli' ('speechless'), a boy considered by the community to have learning or developmental difficulties, seems to gather his senses once he has tamed and ridden a previously unbroken colt: the man and the horse become functional adult members of the community together.
77. Collin 2017: 127.

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18

Conjuring Canids: Wolves and Dogs in Viking Age Sorcery

Aleks Pluskowski

Introduction

As key attributes of the master sorcerer and god of battle, Óðinn, wolves played an important role in the practice and understanding of magic in Viking Age Scandinavia. In Old Norse literature and in runic inscriptions, wolves commonly feature as metaphors for death, whether as the result of martial violence or illness. To die in battle was to feed Óðinn's wolves, and the god in turn was fated to be devoured by the father of all wolves, Fenrir, during the final battle between the Æsir and their *jǫtnar* opponents alongside the forces of Hel.[1] Some eddic narratives also specify a dog as one of Hel's denizens; three of which mention him by name as Garmr.[2] Snorri Sturluson, who distinguished between different supernatural canids in his rendition of Old Norse mythology, has Garmr confront Týr in the final battle; the god who had previously lost his hand binding the monstrous Fenrir. Snorri also names the wolf which will swallow the heavenly bodies at Ragnarǫk as Mánagarmr ('the Moon's Garmr'). In this respect, Fenrir and Garmr appear to be variants of the same cosmic adversary,[3] one which probably developed in the early centuries of the first millennium AD.[4] Garmr, in particular, may be a rendering of an archetypal chthonic hound which served the role of psychopomp or guide through the realm of the dead, as well as its guardian. The growing inclusion of dogs within burials from the seventh century in parts of southern Scandinavia suggests that such a role may have crystallised by then.[5]

This interchangeability between wolves and dogs, although contrasting dramatically with the lived experience of these animals, is also evident in Scandinavian animalised identities. The earliest example of this is the name Widuhundar or 'wood hound', almost certainly a kenning for 'wolf', which features in a runic inscription from Himlingøje, Denmark dating to the early third century.[6] In later sources, the epithet *hundr* could refer to either wolves or dogs, and the lupine *úlfheðnar* ('wolf coats') found their parallel in warriors referred to as hounds;[7] Óðinn's fighters were described as mad as *hundar eða vargar* ('dogs or wolves').[8] Whilst the wolf continued to dominate as a shape changer, black dogs appear in later Scandinavian folklore not only as popular forms of the Christian devil, but also as companions of Óðinn who continued to feature in folk charms.[9] Magic practitioners, in emulating aspects of the god of sorcery, had close associations with wolves and dogs. This was visible in the summoning of wolfish spirits, inflicting injuries, shape changing, and magical acts intended to secure the journey of the dead to the Otherworld.

Summoning Wolfish Spirits

Animal spirits summoned by *vǫlur* and their kind called *gandir* often took the form of wolves, and were sent out to cause harm or obtain information; the perceived threat of invisible lupines is most vividly represented in charms dating to the eleventh and twelfth centuries, intended to protect against sickness.[10] The term *gandr* also became associated with the wolf steeds of sorceresses, which included giantesses, troll-women and those subsequently accused of witchcraft (Fig. 18.1).[11] Later accounts of Sámi sorceresses emphasise control over and stewardship of wild animals, including wolves, and the use of helper spirits in the form of dogs.[12] This familiarity with wolfish spirits may have been deliberately referenced in some of the principal tools identified with *vǫlur* and their kind.

A small number of objects interpreted as magic staffs, particularly when associated with so-called *vǫlva* graves, include possible representations of canids (→ **Chapter 30**). Whether these are stylised wolves or dogs is difficult to

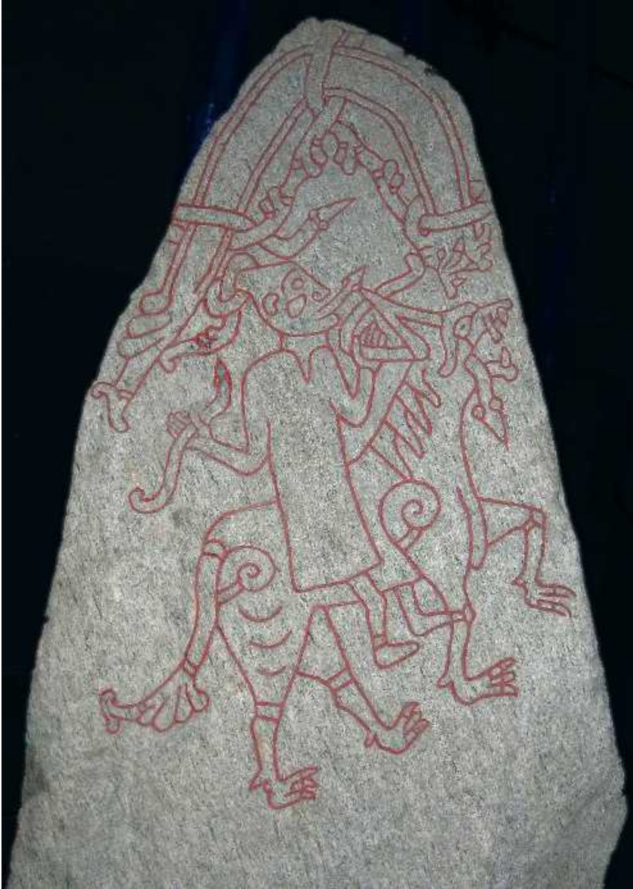

Figure 18.1 A figure riding a wolf on stone 3 from Hunnestad, Skåne, Sweden. Wikimedia Commons.

determine, and even bears, snakes, and birds have been suggested.[13] In two examples of iron staffs recovered from late Viking Age graves in Sweden, animal heads which may be canids have been included as an integral part of the object's structure.[14] One example of a staff from Birka (Bj. 760), appears to be decorated with a single canid head from which its shaft emerges, although this could also represent a serpent (Fig. 18.2). More elaborate is the staff found in Klinta on Öland (see below), where the rungs of its 'basket' feature emerge from four canid (or ursine) heads (Fig. 18.3). A very different object was found with the cremated remains of a richly furnished elderly female (no. 85) in Valsgärde, dating to the first half of the tenth century (Fig. 18.4). Her grave goods included an animal head carved from bone and with carnelians set in its eyes, which has been compared to the wooden animal-headed sculptures found inside the ship burial at Oseberg (see below), and clearly represents a carnivore with its pointed canines.[15] A rare example of a wooden object found in a bog at Hemdrup in Denmark and dating to the tenth century, which may have played a role in performative magic, was decorated with engravings which include the representation of a human figure and four, somewhat abstract rhomboid quadrupeds – perhaps *gandir* (Fig. 18.5).[16]

It is worth noting that the majority of objects identified as staffs are not decorated with zoomorphic designs. Of those with possible canid heads or canid-related motifs, similar designs have been found applied to a range of weapons, armour, and jewellery. Many of these can plausibly, if not definitively, be interpreted as wolves. In the context of the staffs, these more ambiguous animal forms may depict *gandir*, perhaps as a means of reinforcing the power of the staff. Indeed, such objects may have been used to summon them, and perhaps even incorporated their physical remains during the forging process, essentially binding them to the staffs.[17] Where shafts emerge from animal mouths, it is possible to see these are extensions of their bodies – as tongues or breath, connected with spiritual aggression.[18] Such objects visibly reinforced their users' fearful reputation, for wolves and dogs in such a context would have served as reminders of violent death and the otherworld, and of invisible spirits that could inflict harm. A further suggestive link with Óðinn is evident in miniaturised representations of chairs associated with *vǫlur* and their kind (→ **Chapter 32**). Two Danish examples, from Hedeby and Lejre, feature a pairing of canids and birds, leading to interpretations of these as representing archetypal Óðinnic *gandir* – wolves and ravens.[19]

Lupine Identities

One of Óðinn's recurring features is his ability to change shape, and the adoption of animalised identities is also attributed to a broad range of magical practitioners. Sorcerers are described as transforming into various animal shapes in Old Norse literature, but lupine identities (and less commonly dogs) are consistently associated with the aggressive form of magic utilised in battle by specific groups of warriors.[20] There is a recurring association between Óðinn and these animalised warriors, which is visible from the earliest evidence for a culture of masking and ritual animal disguise (→ **Chapter 36**).[21] This appears on Öland in the sixth–seventh centuries. The representations appearing here of masked figures carrying spears have been often interpreted as *úlfheðnar*, which are first mentioned by name as a distinct military unit in the early tenth century.[22] Representations of animal disguise in the seventh century feature on martial equipment, but in later centuries they diversify. The most elaborate example showing numerous disguised figures is found in the processional and ritual scenes on the Oseberg tapestries dating to the early ninth century, whilst the youngest is represented on a substantial runestone at Källby (Vg 56), dated to c. 1080–1130, where a dancing figure in canid disguise may represent the sponsor's father, in whose memory the stone was erected (Fig. 18.6).[23]

It is not clear how this culture of animal disguise relates to descriptions in Old Norse literature of *úlfhamr* – actual transformation into wolves. There was often a poetic interplay between canid identities, disguise, and behaviour,[24] whilst the merger of Nordic and Continental European

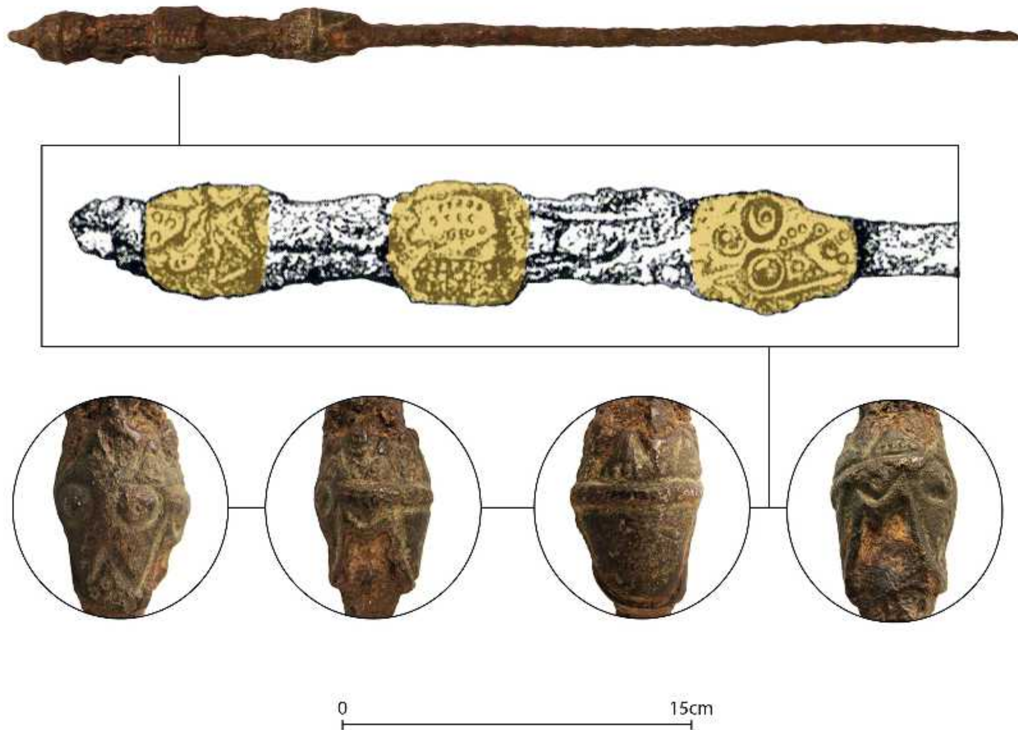

Figure 18.2 The staff from Birka decorated with a possible canid head. Photos by Leszek Gardeła. Drawing after Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 73, reworked by Leszek Gardeła.

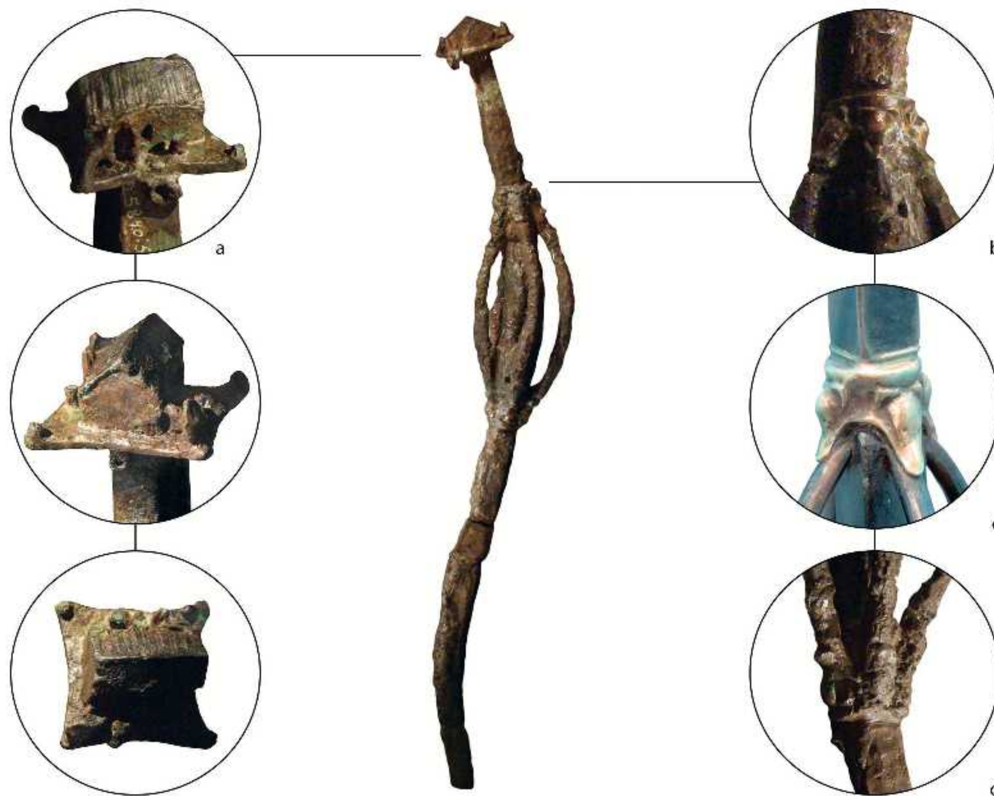

Figure 18.3 The staff decorated with animal heads from Klinta on Öland: a) three-dimensional house (possibly flanked by animal figures); b–d) details of the staff's handle with representations of animal heads; c) modern replica of the animal heads on the staff's handle. Photos by Leszek Gardeła.

Figure 18.4 The carved animal head from Valsgärde Grave 85. Photo by Dan McFadden. Wikimedia Commons.

werewolf motifs, such as in the thirteenth-century *Vǫlsunga saga*, where the episodes of transformation into wolves are associated with ancestry, personal abilities and curses, also makes it difficult to draw a direct line between Viking Age artistic representations with later textual sources.[25] One of the most striking descriptions is found in the fourteenth-century dream text *Stjǫrnu-Odda draumr*, where in the midst of battle, the sorcerous warrior Hléguðr's head was transformed into that of a trollish she-wolf, 'with which she was biting the heads off the king's men'.[26] Her character has been interpreted as a symbolic embodiment of battle, yet even if her wolfish form is a purely literary device, it evokes the earlier relationship between warriors, wolves, wolf skins, and assumed lupine identities.[27] The notion of shape/identity changing was clearly well established in Viking Age Scandinavia. This was an integral part of battlefield *seiðr* which encompassed a range of sorcerous means for inflicting injury or fear on the enemy.[28]

Funerary Magic

Dogs feature widely as ritual deposits in Scandinavian societies in the first millennium, but particularly during the Viking Age and especially in Swedish Uppland.[29] The skeletal remains of dogs, although far less commonly encountered than those of livestock, have been found at cult sites, at the bottom of wells, and on farms, reflecting a variety of rituals, from the seasonal *blót* through to household and incidental

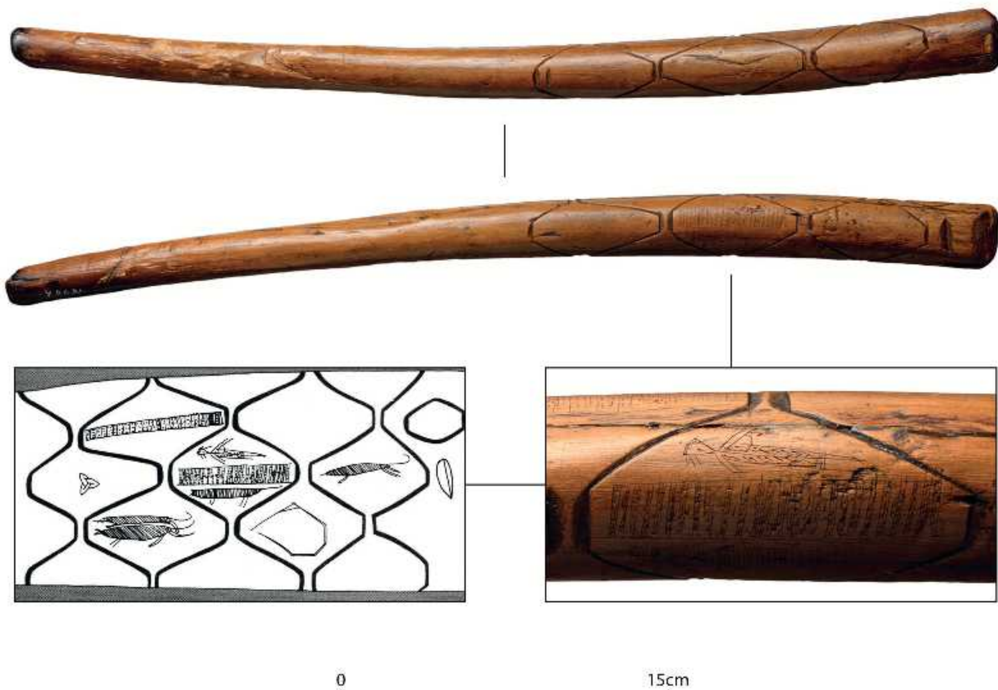

Figure 18.5 Presumed wooden staff from Hemdrup in Jylland, Denmark. The drawing shows all incisions on the surface of the object, including a triquetra knot, an anthropomorphic figure, four zoomorphic figures and runic inscriptions. Photos courtesy of Moesgaard Museum. Drawing after Price 2002: 201. Image design by Leszek Gardeła.

Figure 18.6 The runestone Källby, Västergötland, showing a figure in animal disguise. Photo by Aleks Pluskowski.

sacrifices of a more personal nature.[30] However, dogs are more commonly found as deposits within graves, particularly from the seventh–mid-eleventh century, where they are placed with both the cremated and inhumed remains of men and women from diverse social backgrounds.[31] The animals themselves range from single individuals of varying size, deposited in graves of individuals with few grave goods, through to larger numbers included within the most richly furnished, high-status burials. Often whole animals were deliberately positioned within graves, but in some cases only parts of their bodies, particularly cranial fragments and teeth, have been found. Where dogs were incorporated into inhumation burials, they were often laid at the feet of the deceased; in rare instances they were placed parallel to the body (e.g. grave CA from Kaagården, Denmark).[32] In boat burials, they were typically laid on their side on the portside, facing the bow, but there were variations: a ninth-century boat grave found at Old Uppsala, Sweden had the dog placed outside the stern in the space between the boat and the edge of the pit, whilst at Gokstad, Norway at least six dogs were laid outside the ship.[33] Dog collars and chains have also been encountered in the archaeological record; some of the best-preserved examples derive from the cemetery at Valsgärde, Sweden, where all but three of the thirty-one cremation graves identified as female also contained dogs. These objects appear as equivalents of equestrian equipment deposited in graves.

The inclusion of dogs in graves has been variously interpreted: as signifiers of the social rank, lifestyle, and affluence of the people they accompanied, especially when paired with horses and raptors, enabling elite hunting activities to continue in the otherworld; as companions; and as psychopomps facilitating entry into the realm of the dead.[34] As archaeologists have increasingly paid attention to their specific placement, as part of a sequence of actions that made up the funerary rite, it has become evident that animals were not simply used to showcase status, but must have played important roles in managing the fate of the dead. The role of psychopomp for the two most commonly deposited species – horses and dogs – synergises with the other modes of transport to the otherworld visible in burials, which clearly did also reflect social status. The wealthiest could afford ships, wagons, and horses, whilst the poorest were obliged to walk on foot, although sometimes crampons were also provided. The ritual killing of dogs (and horses) in the performance of funerary rituals may be understood as magical acts to aid the dead in their transition to the otherworld.

Dogs have only been found in a few so-called *vǫlva* graves, and with individuals from significantly different backgrounds.[35] At the upper end of the social spectrum is the burial of two women in the ship at Oseberg (Norway), dated to the early ninth century, one of whom has been tentatively identified not only as a politically important individual, but also a magic practitioner. No expense was spared in easing her transition to the otherworld, along with her female companion. This included a range of vehicles – the ship (although tethered to a rock), a wagon, and four sledges – and a series of deposited animals. Three dogs were killed and placed on the foredeck, along with at least ten decapitated horses and further along, in the afterdeck, a whole bull was found resting on its side. Three further horses and an ox were beheaded and placed by the prow on the port side, and one horse by the starboard side. The head of the ox was found placed on the bed inside the grave chamber. Chain leads were found inside the ship, next to the body of another beheaded dog in the ship's stem.[36] The inclusion of five wooden animal head sculptures paired with five objects interpreted as rattles, placed within and outside the burial chamber, have been interpreted as fulfilling apotropaic functions to protect the deceased (Fig. 18.7). Three of the carved animal heads, with gaping jaws, appear to represent dogs or wolves. Carnivore heads with visible jaws also feature as decorations on three sledges placed in the ship.[37]

Equally high ranking was the burial of a woman at Klinta on the island of Öland, also interpreted as a powerful individual. She had been cremated together with a man and

Figure 18.7 The carved animal heads from the Oseberg ship burial. Photos by Kirsten Helgeland / Kulturhistorisk Museum.

a number of animals, with horse and dog represented, in a boat in the first half of the tenth century, then they had been separated and buried under different mounds. The cremated remains of animals had also been carefully selected, and only horse and dog bones were found in the man's grave. The presence of a staff placed with the woman's remains, alongside a suite of other artefacts, led to suggestions that the couple may have been magic practitioners.[38] However, the most elaborate example has been found in Bikjholberget cemetery at Kaupang (Norway), amidst the largest concentration of boat burials in Scandinavia. Here, a boat placed in the early tenth century directly over the grave of a man, buried a few decades earlier, contained the bodies of two women, a man, and an infant, along with several animals and various objects, including an iron dog chain placed by the man. One of the women, dressed in an unusual outfit which included some type of leather garment, was positioned sitting up on the boat with the steering oar presumably in her hands. An iron staff was placed under a large stone beside her. Various items were arranged in her lap, including the head of a dog. The dog's body, missing a pair of legs, lay across or by the woman's feet. Cut marks on the bones indicate the dog's body had first been butchered, before its skeleton was repositioned on the boat. Butchered dogs are very rare in Scandinavian burials, and only one other grave at Kaupang was known to have contained dogs.[39] A small dog was also included with the remains of a woman cremated in a boat and buried under mound 4 at Myklebostad in Norway in the tenth century, whose grave goods included a staff.[40]

Comparatively lower down the social scale was a woman inhumed at Trekroner-Grydehøj near Roskilde in Denmark (→ **Chapter 28**), and although atypical of the other twenty-six graves found at the Viking Age cemetery, it was in relative terms abundantly furnished. A dog that had been split in half lay at her feet, most likely as a result of being pressed down over a stone placed in the grave. An old stallion had subsequently been killed and laid alongside and partly on top of the woman, and a further burial of another woman and the partial remains of a man were added. Large boulders and stones were then rolled or thrown into the grave which crushed the body of the horse and the face of the first woman, leading to suggestions that she was a practitioner of magic and someone who had been feared by those burying her.[41]

Summarising these examples, it is evident that only a few of the burials tentatively identified as those of *vǫlur* or other ritual specialists included dogs, nor were dogs exclusive to the funerary rites of magic practitioners, but rather existed within a broader and varied framework of magical acts intended to aid the dead. Parallels have been drawn with similar treatment of dogs in other ritualistic contexts, such as the deliberate placement of dog heads in the pit house at Gamla Uppsala and the nearby north mound.[42]

Conclusion: Canids, Death, and Sorcery

Wolves and dogs shared important roles in Viking Age Scandinavian religion, even though they occupied different spheres in everyday life. The wolf, above all, embodied death and the destructive force that could be channelled in battle, and which would ultimately bring about the end of the world. The adoption of lupine personas by warriors developed in the Migration Period, where military prowess was combined with transformative, animalised states. Warriors, their weapons, and even the act of killing took on a predatory, wolfish character as they fed the beasts of Óðinn, the god of battle, with the fallen. As this ideology became more coherently organised, dogs may have become readily adopted as pragmatic substitutes for wolves in magical acts that sought to ease the transition of the dead to the otherworld. This, in turn, shaped the image of the otherworld as home not only to monstrous wolves, but also chthonic hounds. The interchangeability of wolves and dogs may have stemmed from this shared association with death. Just as warriors drew on Óðinn's canids to enhance their abilities on the battlefield, so did sorcerers in performing magical acts that demanded mediation with the invisible world of spirits, and the realm of the dead.

Notes

1. Pluskowski 2006: 155–7.
2. *Vǫluspá*, st. 44 (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I: 302; Larrington 2014: 9)*; Grímnismál*, st. 44 (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I: 376-377; Larrington 2014: 54); *Gylfaginning*, ch. 34, 51 (Faulkes 1995: 28, 54; 2005: 27–9, 49–53); a nameless dog is mentioned in *Baldrs draumar*, st. 2 (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I: 446; Larrington 2014: 235).
3. af Edholm 2016: 71.
4. Andrén 2014: 155–6, 189.
5. Gräslund 2004; 2006: 124.
6. Andrén 2014: 101. There are various later equivalents, e.g. German *hohkund*, Old High German *walthunt*, Swedish *skogshund* (Müller 1970: 69–71).
7. McCone 1987; Breen 1999a, 1999b; Pluskowski 2006: 87.
8. *Ynglinga saga*, ch 6 (Finlay & Faulkes 2011: 10).
9. Odstedt 1943; Woods 1959; Mitchell 2009: 279.
10. Heide 2006; Macleod & Mees 2006: 25–7.
11. Tolley 1995: 67–8; Heide 2006; Price 2019: 184–6.
12. Price 2019: 215.
13. Gardeła 2012a: 290, 306; 2016.
14. For interpretations, see Gardeła 2012a; 2016; Price 2019: 136–66.
15. Gräslund 2008, especially 77–80.
16. Gardeła 2008; Price 2019: 136–66.
17. Gardeła 2012a: 284–5, 290; Price 2019: 186.
18. Gardeła 2012a: 307–8.
19. Price 2019: 122–3.
20. Davidson 1978.

21. Gunnell 1995: 72–6.
22. Schjødt 2020.
23. Pluskowski 2015: 87–92.
24. Breen 1999b.
25. Guðmundsdóttir 2007.
26. *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, ch. 8–9 (Þórhallur Vilmundarson & Bjarni Vilhjálmsson 1991; Taylor 1997: 455, 459)
27. Hui 2017.
28. Price 2019: 301.
29. It is worth noting that dog deposits are not exclusive to early medieval Scandinavia, but are also found in other pre-Christian societies in Northern Europe (e.g. Morris 2011; Kajkowski 2015; Kivikero 2015).
30. Magnell 2019.
31. Gräslund 2004; 2006.
32. Grøn *et al.* 1994: 74–5.
33. Öhman 1983; Gräslund 2002: 167.
34. For summaries of interpretations, see Gräslund 2004; 2014; Gardeła 2012b.
35. For detailed analyses of each burial, see Gardeła 2012a; Price 2014; 2019.
36. For details of the animal deposits, see Brøgger *et al.* 1917, for the animal carvings see Brøgger *et al.* 1920; Brøgger & Schetelig 1928; Christensen *et al.* 1994.
37. Bill 2016.
38. Price 2019.
39. Blindheim & Heyerdahl-Larsen 1995; Stylegar 2007: 96. A butchered dog humerus was identified at Valsgärde 8, but may be intrusive (Nichols 2018: 40–1); cut marks on dog pelvis bones have also been reported (Gräslund 2014: 42).
40. Schetelig 1905; Oestigaard 2015.
41. Gardeła 2013; Ulriksen 2018.
42. Carlie 2006; Frölund & Ljungkvist, forthcoming.

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19

The Oseberg Wagon: Reopening the Case

Luciano Pezzoli

The wood-carvings that adorn the wagon found at the Oseberg ship burial have always stood out from its enormous ceremonial collection and have defied classification since their discovery. Archaeologist Haakon Shetelig, who attended the excavation and wrote in detail about its artistic contents, described the carvings on the wagon as follows:

> the entire decoration is strangely foreign as compared with all that we otherwise know of the art of the Viking Age. The decoration is just as enigmatical as the wagon itself.[1]

The purpose of this chapter is to reopen the 'Oseberg wagon case' to analyse its ornamental structure from a designer's point of view and propose an alternative interpretation of its stylistic anomalies. It is suggested that the anomalies indicate that the wagon is a culturally hybrid artefact, carved by foreign master craftspeople, who depicted Scandinavian mythological themes through their own narrative system. This blended artefact ultimately grants us a privileged access to the symbolic world of the Oseberg women, their cultural connections, and influence.

Over the last five years this author has specialised in the collection and analysis of huge amounts of late Iron Age Scandinavian motifs from archaeological finds, with the purpose of understanding and decoding animal art styles through their development. This work has been conducted with a designer's background and deep understanding of art, and it has developed into a multidisciplinary project in collaboration with Lars Grundvad, archaeologist and curator at Museet Sønderskov, Denmark.

From this ever-growing collection of motifs, hundreds of first-hand reconstructions have supplied the author with deep insights on the mechanics and underlying canons of Scandinavian Iron Age animal art. This has allowed for further experimental research by actively using those 'ornamental languages' and creating new motifs based on the construction rules of the originals, facing the same challenges and thus achieving a deeper level of understanding of their solutions.

Methodology: Understanding Scandinavian Animal Art Narrative System

The method used in this chapter to analyse the ornaments on the wagon is part of a larger context of research aimed at rethinking the traditional approach to decoding and understanding Scandinavian and Germanic Iron Age animal art.

Animal art is here regarded as a proper linguistic system that needs to be approached as an organic, living means of communication, beyond its traditional ornamental understanding. The conventional stylistic classification of animal art must therefore be broken down to reveal a more fluid network of interconnected creative hubs, workshops, and individual craftspeople. Deciphering such ornamental languages invariably begins from retracing the steps taken by the individual maker(s) in the construction of specific motifs. Each design is redrawn and analysed from within its own contextual logic, its specific ornamental features and themes, before being carefully inserted into the broader perspective of its tradition and geographical context.

The designer's perspective and analysis, as applied in the present study, allows access to a level of communication that does not rely on the direct interpretation of the symbols found in the narrative of motifs. This is because the symbolic layer is a slippery speculative ground, most likely rooted in the same cultural mindset that conceived the skaldic imagery of poetic metaphors (*kennings* and *heiti*): an 'insider language', mutable through time and context, not designed to let the uninitiated into the narrative. By contrast, the compositional structure is a more communicative layer, especially in complex and articulated motifs, which was

originally aimed at leading the viewer along its narrative logic. This is the level of communication pursued in this chapter, which may open new options to access the meaning of the narrative.

What Was in the Oseberg Assemblage?

The Oseberg ship was discovered in a large burial mound on a farm near Tønsberg (Vestfold, Norway) in 1903, and is – to this day – the most spectacular Viking Age grave ever found. The archaeologists that excavated the site, led by Gabriel Gustafson, quickly realised that the wealth of ornamental artefacts (extracted from the airtight clay that preserved them) went beyond evidence of just high lineage.

Who Were the Oseberg Ladies?

The remains of two women were found in the grave mound, an older woman in her 70s–80s and a younger one in her 40s–50s.[2] Since their discovery there has been extensive speculation on the ranking and relationship between the two women, but material and iconographic evidence seems to indicate that we are dealing with individuals belonging to the highest nobility as well as high ranking seeresses, the *vǫlur* or their kind.[3]

The influential reach of these individuals must have been vast, as testified by the massive collection of densely carved wooden artefacts (about 12–15 m^2 in total), rendered in a unique palette of stylistic variety.

What Was the Function of the Ornamental Artefacts?

These ornate artefacts include the ship itself, sleds, a wagon, five animal head posts, bed and tent posts, all showing signs of extensive usage prior to the burial. According to Anne Stine Ingstad's analysis of the Oseberg tapestries found in the burial chamber,[4] the processional scenes depicted in its fragments evoke symbols and practices associated with the cults of Óðinn and Freyja, paired with depictions of ceremonial paraphernalia in contextual use,[5] such as the ornamental wagons, one of which was actually found on the ship. It seems thus conceivable that the carved ornamental motifs on both the wagon and the other engraved artefacts may have been complementary to the ceremonial nature of the collection.

Three of the four sleds were richly decorated, and were probably assembled for the burial from the richest parts (top/baskets and undercarriage/runners) of different sleds. This is suggested by the imprecise fit of their various constructional elements, but also by the clear differences in style and themes in the carvings. Thus the entire collection may have counted as few as six different engraved sleds.

The five portable animal head posts, four of which were found connected by rope running through their jaws, were joined to rattles between each post: an arrangement that seems to suggest an elaborate apotropaic, confined area.[6]

Some of the carved artefacts are sparsely strewn, others deliberately covered by tiny silver studs,[7] even on broad silver plates to highlight eyes and fangs of beasts. This may suggest they were employed in dramatic night-time ritual performances where the silver would make the shapes of the carvings shimmer in the firelight.[8]

The Plan of the Vǫlva/Vǫlur

Arne Emil Christensen suggests that the amount of first class craftsmanship found on the ship would indicate that the women had a relationship with art that went beyond the luxury of their status, and that they may actually have been involved in the planning of the artefacts.[9] Modern wood carvers that made copies of the artefacts have estimated it would have taken years to carve all that was found in the grave.[10]

Each motif on the artefacts appears carefully planned with specific beasts recurring from piece to piece, commissioned to elite craftspeople. Shetelig suggests that all craftspeople that manufactured the artefacts originated from one common Vestfold school. However, the re-analysis of the stylistic peculiarities of the wagon, conducted as an integral part of the present study, seems to sustain a hypothesis of a foreign non-Scandinavian origin.

Why Does the Wagon Stand Out From the Collection?

> The carvings on the wagon have throughout a homogeneous character which differs from all that we otherwise know regarding style forms of the Viking Age.[11]

Shetelig is quite right in his assessment of the profound differences in the style and compositional structure of the wagon from anything else in the Scandinavian animal art tradition. According to his analysis:

> The wagon stands isolated in the entire Oseberg Collection. It is at the same time something more and something less than the other carvings, more because it has deeper contents, and less because it does not maintain the standard of the best decorative art of the age.[12]

He defines the merits of the wagon based on the 'apparent' accessibility of its imagery: the naturalistic animal and humanoid figures illustrate discernible scenes, belonging to a somewhat coherent narrative. A large scale composition mostly featuring recognisable, naturalistic animals is indeed unprecedented and seems out of place in pre-Christian Scandinavian animal art, where beasts with ambiguous, stylised features, of mostly unrecognisable species, are the norm.

Regarding the ornamental canons and standards of the wagon, Shetelig rightly spots distinct discrepancies with the finer, traditional work on the other artefacts in the collection. Though he ascribes the lesser quality of the wagon's decoration to it being a direct or indirect copy of an archaic

Figure 19.1 Disc-on-bow brooch, refurbished with silver plates in a Mammen period adaptation of the original Style III. Nygårds, Gotland (SHM 453320). Photo by Swedish History Museum. CC BY.

religious artefact of which contemporary craftspeople could not possibly have mastered the bygone style.[13]

This does not seem to hold to some examples of styles and themes being mimicked by craftspeople living up to three hundred years after such styles were developed and used. This is particularly apparent in Gotlandic brooches, which were originally designed and crafted in animal art Style III (late Vendel), but must have been worn down due to usage and have subsequently been replaced by substitutive plates (Fig. 19.1 and Fig. 19.2). These additions were designed to mimic the original style of which the specific characteristics had long been forgotten. The resulting efforts, by craftsmen of the Borre, Mammen, and Ringerike traditions, do not show any sign of lesser workmanship. They simply mimic what they understand to be the style from their own perspective, keeping true to the main canons of their tradition: their framing, scaling, and interweave are spotless.

In Scandinavian animal art such ornamental standards were part of an unbroken tradition, and though each stylistic expression had its own characteristic features, these structural canons were never completely forgotten or thoroughly misunderstood, as seems to have been the case on the anomaly of the wagon.

The first of these canons was the framework into which motifs were inscribed, the space in which the ornamental work existed, so to speak. Even when beasts themselves constituted the majority of the internal framework, they always created a harmonious negative space balance between each other and the surrounding framework (Fig. 19.3).

The wagon on the other hand seems – especially at the front and back – like a bag filled with a jumble of narrative frames. At the front, where the sequence or frames matters to the narrative, partitions are very subtle, made up of irregular adjoining frames, which – from the point of view of traditional animal art – throw off the eye and make these difficult to distinguish and read (Fig. 19.4).

Figure 19.2 Detail of a reinterpreted beast on the same brooch (SHM 453320). Photo by Swedish History Museum. CC BY.

Figure 19.3 Ornamental carvings of a runner on sled nr. 4 from the Oseberg ship burial (C55000-208). Photo by Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.

Secondly, throughout the Scandinavian animal art tradition, the scale of detail was very strictly regimented: small scale depictions corresponded to more schematic and stylised features, while larger scale imagery allowed for more defined details, all the way up to the grandest scale (Fig. 19.5), reserved for the naturalistic rendition of beast heads (such as animal head posts or corner heads on sleds). Such naturalistic heads were often subdivided in smaller scale, more stylised decorations and patterns. But each scale of detail was homogeneously scaled and circumscribed by its own borders. On the carvings around the wagon though, the finest facial features are represented on a rather minute scale, right beside roughly stylised features and decorative hatching patterns. Instead of a uniform scale, there are finer focus areas next to rougher subordinate details (Fig. 19.6).

Thirdly, on the wagon figures are depicted from different points of view: from the side and from the top at the front composition, from the side and *en face* at the back, while

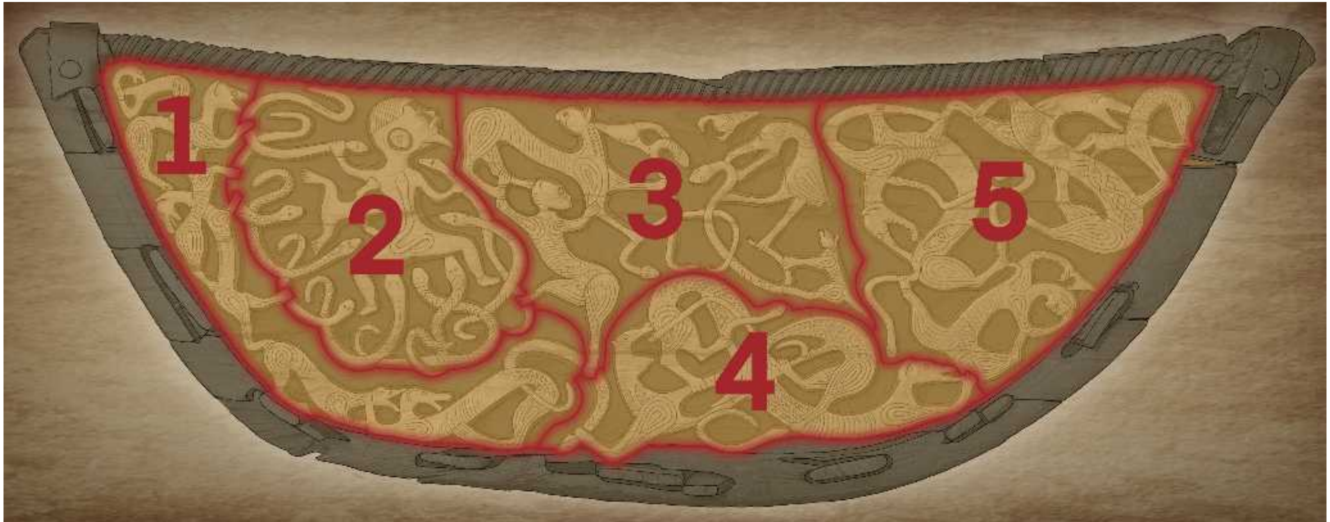

Figure 19.4 Frame structure on the front panel of the wagon. Reconstruction by the author.

Figure 19.5 Scale of detail on similar Oseberg beasts. Photo by Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.

Figure 19.6 Detail of the right flank of the wagon. Photo by Kirsten Helgeland, Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.

consistently from the side on the flanks. In the Scandinavian tradition and in the rest of the Oseberg collection, the orientation of the figures is again homogeneously defined by the frame and style depicted. On the ship, for instance, all creatures on its flanks are seen from the side, while the ones in the *tingl* (the triangular piece of decorated wood on the ship's inner prow, encased where the gunwales come together), which the passenger will face when standing on the ship, are all invariably *en face*. Shetelig remarks that all the heads [of the humanoid figures] have the same remarkable position, with faces bent slightly upwards and in direct profile, whilst the body is seen *en face*.[14] As we will see in the interpretation of the narrative below, the flexibility of orientation on the wagon seems to be functional to different factors

in different frames: a distinction amongst the creatures in the front panel, the movement of the wagon itself on the flanks, and lastly the dramatic effect of the scene unfolding on the back. That is a whole lot of flexibility in adjoining scenes, very unlikely and unprecedented in Viking art.

Figure 19.7 Interlace on the left flank of the wagon. Photo by Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.

Figure 19.8 Interlace detail of the Oseberg ship carvings. Photo by Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.

Figure 19.9 Interlace detail on the right wagon pole. Photo by Kirsten Helgeland, Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.

And last, but probably most important of all, the makers of the wagon were not at all familiar with traditional interweave, which seems peculiar, since (as suggested by Ingstad) knotwork carried a deeper significance in animal art motifs than mere ornamentation.[15] This notion is also supported by the meticulous canons and strict rules that characterised knotwork in each successive stylistic development. The large majority of the knotwork on the wagon, however, amounts to plain braided patterns. The seemingly interwoven beast patterns on the flanks of the wagon are linked by crossing hoops, never linked to a third ribbon to tie the links into actual knots (Fig. 19.7). It seems like the makers were mimicking the general look of interweave without understanding its canons (Fig. 19.8).

This becomes exceedingly obvious in the engraved knotwork patterns at the back of the wagon poles, where the craftspeople try to replicate the more complex ones mastered by their colleagues (of ship, sleds, animal posts, tent, and bed frames) and *fail*, showing they do not possess the knowledge and experience to tackle such challenge (Fig. 19.9). At first, inexperienced glance, the interweave looks the part, but on closer inspection the ribbons change direction halfway through their curve at illogical angles, without maintaining a consistent or smoothly tapered thickness. Tendrils split abruptly and often end nowhere. Limbs and torsos of beasts are dismembered and awkwardly reassembled into an unreadable jumble, very far from the strong cohesive interweave of other carved artefacts at Oseberg, which confers character and poise to the most stylised forms (Fig. 19.10). The craftspeople of the wagon had definitely seen proper Scandinavian knotwork since they were able to mimic its general outlook, but did not have the necessary experience to understand its inner workings.

Figure 19.10 Academist's animal head post, detail. Photo by Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.

Towards a New Interpretation of the Origin of the Wagon

In Search of the Craftspeople of the Oseberg Wagon

Why, then, would such powerful ladies choose such alien, 'lesser' craftsmanship for one of the most important artefacts in their collection? It does not seem plausible that Scandinavian craftspeople 'trained in a severe style, should thus break away from [their] traditional chains'.[16] These artists seem to have been bound to mimic the aesthetic standards of their Scandinavian patron(s).[17] Though their own ornamental and narrative style was not overshadowed by those constrictions, so much so that major differences can intuitively be spotted by untrained eyes over a millennium later. Could it then be that the craftspeople appointed to create its decoration were indeed from an entirely different culture? If so, where are we to search for the animal style and cultural tradition expressed in the Oseberg wagon decoration?

Shetelig suggests that the wagon shows parallels with the northern Carolingian style and the later Vendel tradition, basing his conclusions on minor stylistic details.[18] As we have seen through our analysis, however, the differences seem more profound, both structurally and thematically. The carved scenes on the wagon speak to the viewer with crude immediacy, unfettered by the formal constraints of the Germanic, Carolingian, or Byzantine ornamental traditions. The irregularly clustered beasts seem to describe cosmological myths rooted in a consolidated animal art tradition. Thus, the appointed carvers may have carried something more valuable (or differently valuable) than strict traditional aesthetics to the ornamental wagon. Sámi and Baltic peoples, for instance, were known for their shamanic symbolic imagery, though they never developed such complex – naturalistic or stylised – animal art style.

The research I conducted on animal art from the area of present-day Finland and its pictorial heritage up to the Viking Age did not yield a sufficiently large scale or unique production that would match the complexity of style I was looking for. However, there is a related Finno-Ugric branch of peoples though that *did* develop a vast and complex animal art style, strongly connected with animistic and shamanic spirituality: namely, the Permians.

The Permians

Permians, or Bjarmas, as they were called by contemporary Scandinavians, were a wide group of Finno-Ugric peoples whose civilisation was centred between the Kama river and the western foothills of the northern and central part of the Ural Mountains.[19]

Perm Finns had been specialised fur hunters[20] since the first millennium BC[21] and developed a successful high-quality metalworking production which ranged from iron-making to bronze casting.[22]

Permian towns reached a high degree of prosperity between the fifth–ninth centuries AD through a consolidated trading tradition and the extensive commercial network that came with it, resulting in large scale production centres and stratified societies.[23] Their economy initially flourished through trade with Central and South-East Asia, along the northern branch of the Silk Road, which resulted in massive import of high quality and prestige goods.[24] Silver vessels, decorations, and coins flooded in from Central Asia, Byzantium, and Iran to be accumulated by the elite. Surplus and specialised production, along with extensive commercial experience paved the way for trade with the Fennoscandian region.[25] Perm Finns, closely related in culture and language to Baltic Finns, inhabited the western coast of the Gulf of Finland and traded furs with Baltic and Scandinavian peoples.[26] Old Norse literature mentions them repeatedly[27] as wealthy sedentary peoples, speaking a tongue similar to that of the Sámi, based in the Kola Peninsula and the modern Russian Arkhangelsk region. Several of their metalwork products have been found in the area,[28] as well as in Finland and Estonia,[29] though Scandinavian goods do not appear in the Kama region before the ninth–tenth centuries.

Permian Animal Art (Ural-Siberian Animal Style)

Ancient Permian peoples present similar problems to their Scandinavian counterparts, in that they did not leave written records of their lives. To learn about them we need to rely on material culture, their animal art iconography, and on glimpses of their worldview from the echoes of narrated myths that have reached our time.

Permian animal art is expressed in myriads of bronze plaques, amulets, and figurines presumably depicting a pantheon of spirits, gods, and totemic beasts, often clustered in what seem like cosmological compositions illustrating their place within and amongst dimensions. These mythological creatures strongly reflect the deep relationship between Permians and the natural world that surrounded and sustained them. Animals are ranked within each of the layered dimensions, every creature with its place.[30] Presumed mother goddesses, gods, and heroes appear central in many of these cosmological amulets and plates though their specific identities and their vast, articulated 'shamanic' world are still largely shrouded in mystery.

What shall be addressed here are the structural and narrative similarities that connect this world to the Oseberg wagon and the integrated narrative that may have ensued from the meeting of the Scandinavian and the Permian worlds.

There are several analogies between the Permian animal art and the Oseberg wagon. First among them is the compositional structure of the bronze amulets and plaques that enclose imagery of a cosmologically framed order.

These pictorial representations were usually divided in three vertical layers: at the bottom an underworld, dominated by large lizard-like figures or beavers; at the centre various humanoid or hybrid figures, partly human, partly animal; and

Figure 19.11 Cosmogram amulet with en face *deity, copper alloy. Yazva region; VII–X centuries. Photo courtesy of p-zs.ru.*

Figure 19.13 Cosmogram amulet with female deity, copper alloy (with en face *humanoid). Village of Ust-Kaib Cherdyn district; VII–VIII centuries. Photo courtesy of p-zs.ru.*

Figure 19.12 Cosmogram amulet with en face *group of deities, in copper alloy. Village of Saltanovo, Cherdynsky district; VIII–X centuries. Photo courtesy of p-zs.ru.*

Figure 19.14 Cosmogram amulet with hybrid deities and beasts, copper alloy (side view). Ukhta region; VI–IX centuries. Photo courtesy of p-zs.ru.

in the upper, higher dimension usually animal or animal-hybrid figures enclose the firmament (Figs 19.11–16). In these 'cosmograms', as they have been named,[31] the humanoid figures are either depicted *en face* (Figs 19.11, 19.12, 19.13) – where they strongly resemble the 'cats' at the back of the wagon – or from the side, and looking slightly upwards, similarly to the humanoid figures in the carvings (Figs 19.14, 19.15, 19.16). The compositions are often enclosed within ropelike borders,[32] which often definitely resemble serpents or moose-headed serpentine bodies, connecting the three layers.[33]

Figure 19.15 Cosmogram amulet with winged hybrid deity with moose headdress, copper alloy (side view). Troitsko-Pechora region; VII–IX centuries. Photo courtesy of p-zs.ru.

Figure 19.16 Cosmogram amulet with side view hero/deity and beasts, copper alloy. Surgut Sovetsky district; X century. Photo courtesy of p-zs.ru.

Animals, parts of animals, humanoids morphing into animal spirits, thickly clustered together, often with beasts inside beasts, similarly to the snakes inside the beasts on the wagon (Fig. 19.17). They all appear to describe a cosmic order, more like an illustrated mythological narrative than actual ornamentation (Figs 19.17 and 19.18). And lastly, in these compositions there is no sign of interlace, a feature that was absent from the Ural-Siberian animal style.

Figure 19.17 Beasts inside beast. Cosmogram amulet, copper alloy. Village of Nyrgynda, Sarapuslky district of Udmurtia; VI–VIII centuries. Photo courtesy of p-zs.ru.

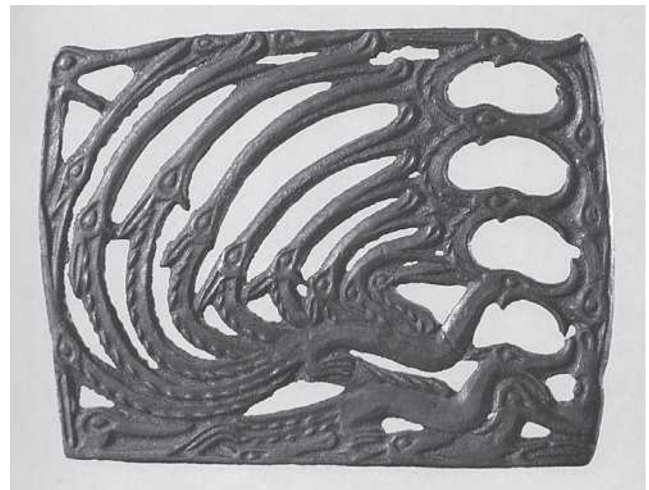

Figure 19.18 Stylised hybrid beasts. Cosmogram amulet, copper alloy. Ukhta river Komi Republic, VII–IX century. Photo courtesy of p-zs.ru.

Interpretation of the Narrative

Thematically the wagon is consistent with other artefacts in the Oseberg corpus, in that specific figures recur on key parts of other artefacts. From the figurehead snake on the prow of the ship, to the canine predator and catlike heads on the animal posts and at the corners of the sleds. These figures seem to cover a pivotal role both in the narrative on the wagon and in the other artefacts of the collection, where they depict the most prominent, recognisable species amongst stylised blended mythological figures.

The Wagon's Front

Although at first glance the composition seems chaotic and irrational, on closer inspection a number of compositional devices become apparent and supply keys to read its narrative structure. The creatures seem to be arranged within five ideal frames, clustered around serpents, which seem to supply a red thread to the narrative (Fig. 19.19). The snakes

and the 'frog' are seen from above, which sets them further apart from other creatures, pictured from the side. All creatures grab onto each other within their frames, but only key figures grab onto creatures in adjacent frames (marked in yellow in Fig. 19.20), thus defining their sequential order and the development of the narrative.

The narrative begins on the left side of the composition with two adjoining, contemporary scenes. The main scene depicts ten snakes and what looks like a frog converging to attack a humanoid figure, floating in space.[34] It is unlikely this may be meant to (primarily) depict Gunnarr's death in the snakepit, as Shetelig suggests,[35] since such a scene would be completely isolated within the flow of the narrative. In this context it seems more plausible that it may illustrate a cosmogonic scene, where the snakes may be interpreted as the driving force that reshapes reality from the body of a proto-giant (Fig. 19.21). The creature interpreted here as a 'frog' closely resembles that of Permian amulets, which in local folklore is linked to fertility and facilitating childbirth. As Ehrenburg writes, 'the frog amulet was nailed to the pillars of maternity hospitals' (Fig. 19.22).[36]

Meanwhile, from the top left corner, small aggressive canines descend along the border around the main scene, as a parallel storyline. They seem to gradually 'evolve', from small beasts into large wolflike predators (Fig. 19.23). At first, they are connected to the snakes gathering around the humanoid in the main scene, but along their progression they take a separate path.

The main storyline proceeds from the devoured humanoid to a new frame (centre-top), a scene of abundance: perhaps

Figure 19.19 Front panel of the wagon. Reconstruction by Luciano Pezzoli.

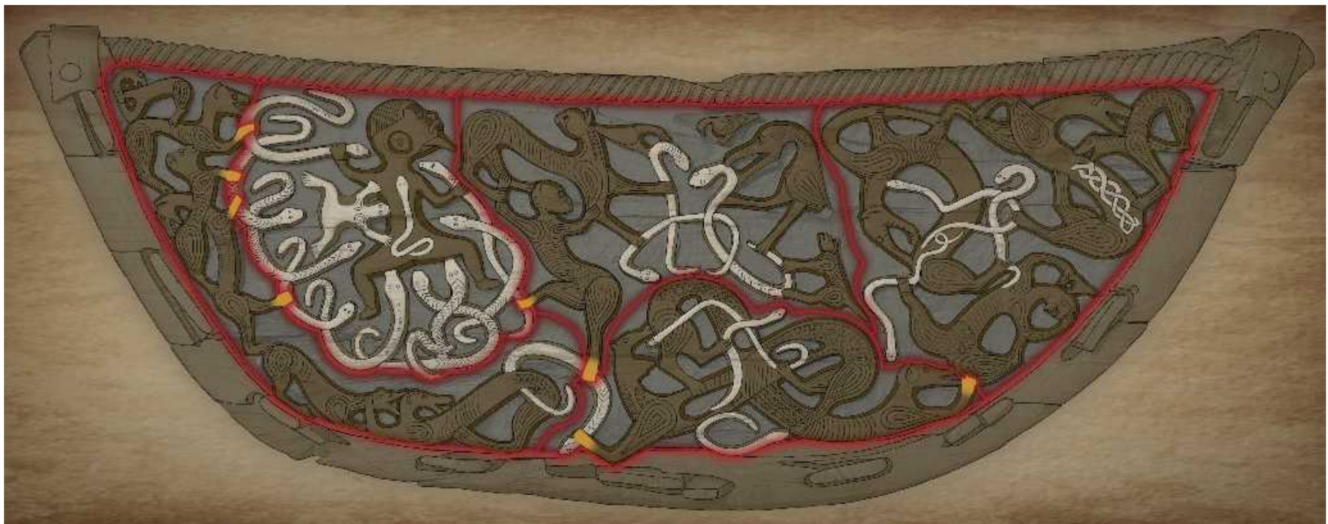

Figure 19.20 Frame connection structure of the front panel motif. Reconstruction by Luciano Pezzoli.

Figure 19.21 Proto-giant torn apart by ten serpents and a froglike creature. Reconstruction by Luciano Pezzoli.

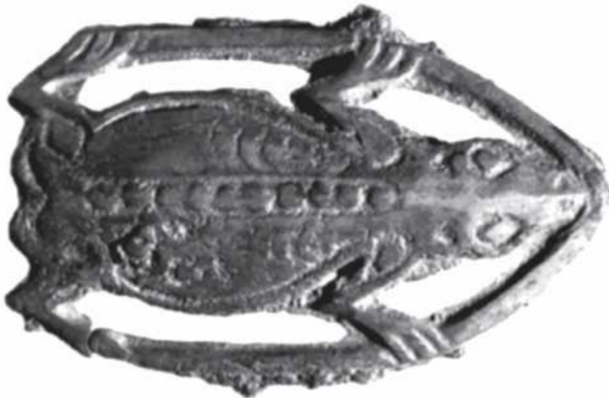

Figure 19.22 Frog amulet in copper alloy (top view). Visim settlement, Dobryansky district, Perm region.

a lush new world, displaying the largest variety of animals on the wagon, gravitating around three snakes (Fig. 19.24). A catlike figure seems to hold a pivotal role here: it is the sole connection between the ten snakes of the cosmogonic scene on the left, and the animal scene on its right. But it also 'hands down' the only single serpent in the composition to the wolflike creatures below.

The gift of the serpent is taken up by the two largest wolf-predators, whose innards are shown as hollow receptacles,[37] while the three catalysing snakes at the centre of the frame move into them: entering through their gaping jaws and lining their entrails (Fig. 19.25).

The last scene in the composition (top right) depicts the ensuing havoc caused by the possessed wolf predators. This frame is linked to the previous only through one of the 'infected/corrupted' predators grasping onto a second

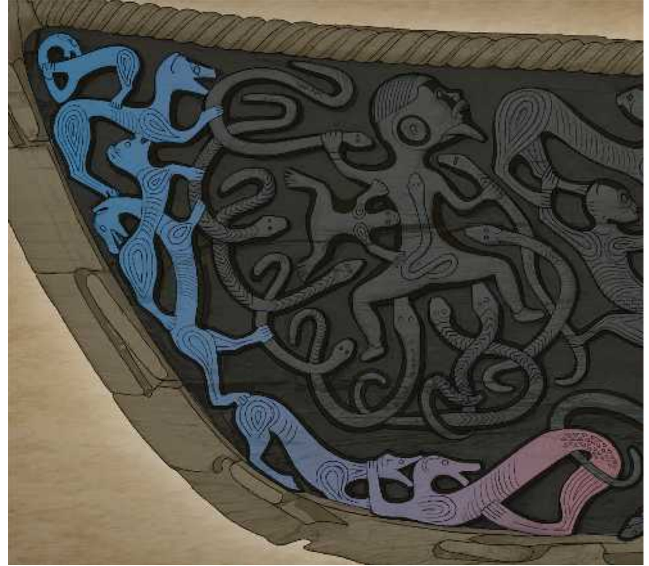

Figure 19.23 Growing predators; front panel of the wagon. Reconstruction by Luciano Pezzoli.

Figure 19.24 Balance after creation and the gift; front panel of the wagon. Reconstruction by Luciano Pezzoli.

Figure 19.25 Infection; front panel of the wagon. Reconstruction by Luciano Pezzoli.

catlike figure, who appears to be trying to amend the mistake by pulling the snake out of a gigantic wolf-predator's anus. But the 'damage' is done, the scene is severed from the top central scene, the lush new world, and the snakes are securely nestled inside the predators' guts, depicted as a braid (Fig. 19.26).

The Wagon's Back

The narrative continues exactly where it left off at the end of the front panel of the wagon, reaching its dramatic climax and completion. Here the composition is more uniform in structure, unfolding from left to the right, in one large panoramic view (Fig. 19.27).

The snake-infested predators flood into the scene from the left, sinking their rabid fangs into friend and foe. Nearly all creatures on the left side are infected by the corrupting serpents. In the upper left corner, a smaller 'cat' hopelessly tries to purge a larger 'cat' of the plague, but it is beyond saving.

Figure 19.26 Regret; front panel of the wagon. Reconstruction by Luciano Pezzoli.

At the centre though, is where the scene reaches its climax: nine 'cats'[38] are surrounded by predators on all sides, awaiting their grim fate. Some hang onto each other for comfort, but most look outside the composition, straight at the viewer, as if seeking for a way out.

It is a clever narrative device: the stance of the figures looking outside of the scene, clutching their faces in terror, enhances the drama that heralds the end. A snake has entered the guts of one of the terrified 'cats' in the centre, and soon all will fall. Is this the end of all things?

Right (Starboard) and Left Flank (Port)

The carvings on the flanks of the wagon take up a completely different form of storytelling, abandoning the sequential narrative employed at the front and back. The motifs here run along the sides in an ongoing flow of entangled creatures, as if depicting the stream of time (Figs 19.28 and 19.29).

The composition is structured in horizontal registers that strongly resemble the layered worlds of Permian cosmological amulets. As noted above, the amulets depict a universe divided into three worlds: the Upper, Middle, and Lower, each governed by different spirits.

The spirits that inhabited the Lower world were often lizards,[39] which also dominate the lower layer on the sides of the wagon, though they are native to neither Western Urals nor Scandinavia (Figs 19.30, 19.31, 19.32).

On top of the Lower world is the Middle world, where on the wagon most beasts are common animals or animal spirits. Amongst them, right in the centre of the right flank of the wagon, are three human figures. Here a specific scene is taking place: a still frame, frozen along the flow of time. As Shetelig writes:

Figure 19.27 Rear panel of the wagon. Reconstruction by Luciano Pezzoli.

Figure 19.28 Ornamental carvings on the left flank of the wagon. Reconstruction by Luciano Pezzoli.

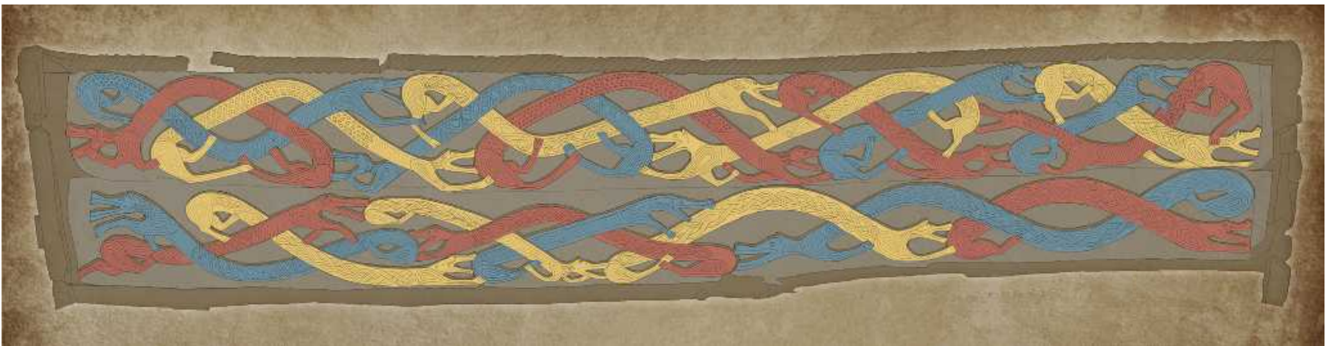

Figure 19.29 Ornamental carvings on the right flank of the wagon. Reconstruction by Luciano Pezzoli.

Figure 19.30 Great lizard amulet, copper alloy. Yazva district Perm region. Photo courtesy of p-zs.ru.

Figure 19.31 Great lizard amulet, copper alloy. Berezniki Perm region. Photo courtesy of p-zs.ru.

> A man on horse-back approaches from the right, and is met by another man who seizes the horse's bridle with his left hand, whilst in his right hand he holds aloft a weapon, presumably a sword. A woman behind the second man has seized him by the right wrist as if to check the blow.[40]

Shetelig sees clear analogies in their clothes and ornamental gear to those from Scandinavian grave finds. While Ingstad describes the iconographic prominence of the single white

Figure 19.32 Beaver and great lizard cosmogram, copper alloy. Konda district KhMAO-Yugra. Photo courtesy of p-zs.ru.

rider on the Oseberg tapestries, which she connects to the male saddle found at the burial as symbolic manifestations of a king's presence. Could this single rider also be part of the same iconography?

Now that we have discussed the concepts of the Lower and Middle layer and their possible analogues in the decoration of the Oseberg wagon, let us investigate the Upper layer. Perhaps, what was held inside the wagon *was* what the Upper layer represented. As Ingstad points out, the tops of the wagons depicted on the Oseberg tapestries, are covered with patterned tapestries hiding what is 'too sacred for human eyes to behold, not improbably images of a deity'. And she proceeds illustrating that: 'In Tacitus' Germania (…) the image of the goddess Nerthus was driven over the fields in a covered wagon drawn by oxen'.[41]

Wagon Poles

At the front of the wagon, the carvings – once again – take up a different character from the previous motifs, although they still elaborate on the leading theme. In both the openwork and the pole shaft motifs, serpents maintain their central role, serving as thematic hinges around which all scenes revolve. Also, here is where most animals lose their identifiable shapes and become proper beasts, closer to the Scandinavian tradition.

Openwork Carvings

The openwork carvings mounted on the wagon poles show very peculiar creatures which, besides the dragon-like interlace beasts at the base of the poles, are the only clearly imaginary beasts in the motifs on the wagon (Fig. 19.33).

These motifs depict epic battles taking place in two parallel compositions that resemble crushing waves. Greater beasts curl back onto smaller beasts tangled in the fray. On the left (port side), a humanoid figure – with a tail – is fighting for its life.[42] A snake bites dramatically into his eyes, as he is poised in the direction the wagon moves. Could this allude to the archetypal Óðinnic sacrifice of bargaining physical vision for deeper mystical insight? (Fig. 19.34).

Shafts

The base of each of the poles is decorated with double braided patterns (right) that converge to form more complex interlace patterns on each shaft: two mirrored great beasts, tangled in battle with snakes (Figs 19.35 and 19.36). This is where the craftspeople took up a greater challenge than they could handle, thus revealing their unfamiliarity with more complex knotwork and its rules (see description of the interweave above).

Below the great beasts' knotwork, two masks, one on each shaft, share their features with those of wolflike predators, but these are only visible on the inner side of the poles, as if to underline their position on the inside of the humanoid figures (Fig. 19.37).

The beasts sink their fangs into the poles, which are regularly segmented into serpentine patterns, tapering into what seem to resemble snake heads (Fig. 19.38). Could their shape be related to that of the wooden 'staff' found in the untouched chest from the burial chamber (Fig. 19.39)?[43]

A 'Rosetta Stone' of Viking Animal Art: Conclusions and Perspectives

The hybrid nature of ornamental work on the wagon may be the key to a system of communication that is very distant from our own. Whereas Scandinavian Viking Age art is a cryptic language of metaphors,[44] here we may have found privileged access to its sacrum. The radical differences between two aesthetic and narrative systems may give us a glimpse of the symbolic red thread that runs through the artefacts at Oseberg and open the way to decoding the ornamental language of other artefacts in the collection.

The leading theme of the wagon, as inferred from the compositional structure of its iconographic narrative, seems to revolve around the symbolism of serpents. Within this context, they first appear to embody the energetic drive that brings about creation, then the cohesive force that keeps creation in balance, and eventually the corrupting power that leads to a bitter end. Could they share the same symbolic content with the imposing serpentine figurehead towering atop the bow of the ship and the wooden staff from the chest in the burial chamber?

On the wagon there are two main groups of players in its key scenes: the wolflike predators and the catlike beings. Perhaps Ingstad is right in reading symbolisms of Óðinn and Freyja cults from the Oseberg tapestries, but what if

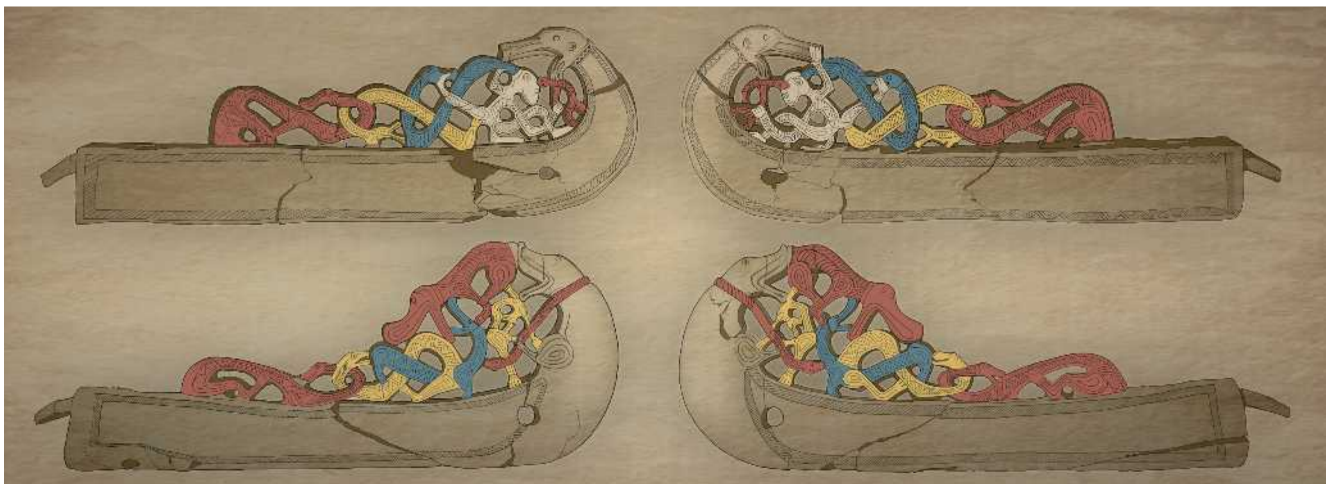

Figure 19.33 Openwork carvings at the front of the wagon. Reconstruction by Luciano Pezzoli.

Figure 19.34 Humanoid bitten in the eyes; openwork carvings at the front of the wagon. Reconstruction by Luciano Pezzoli.

Figure 19.35 Ornamental carvings on the top and inner side of the wagon poles. Reconstruction by Luciano Pezzoli.

the 'cats' on the wagon were meant to depict not just icons of the cult of Freyja, but representations of her kin, the Vanir? What if Óðinn's kin, the Æsir, were incarnated in the wolflike predators? This could perhaps explain why beasts with discernible catlike and wolflike features are carved as key motifs in artefacts by different craftspeople in the Oseberg corpus, from animal posts to sled corner figures. The sequence of imagery on the front and rear panels of the wagon seems to suggest some sort of moral judgement on the use of a magical power represented by the serpents. At first, these catlike creatures seem to share a balance with the creatures grouped around the snakes. But when a serpent is gifted to the avid wolf predators, they ingest it, turning the snakes into a corruptive and destructive force. What the nature and boundaries of the powerful gift represented by the serpent may entail remains unknown. Could this gift refer to

the art of *seiðr*, which according to *Ynglinga saga* (ch. 4), the Æsir were taught by Freyja?[45] The cohesive narratives and recurring themes in the Oseberg collection strengthen the notion that the women may have had a definite plan, which deserves further examination.

Figure 19.36 Dragons and serpents; wagon poles detail. Reconstruction by Luciano Pezzoli.

Figure 19.37 Humanoid masks sharing their features with wolflike heads biting onto the wagon poles. Reconstruction by Luciano Pezzoli.

The Permian Puzzle

Though a Permian origin would explain the exotic carvings on the wagon, it also raises complex questions on how such foreign craftspeople would have found their way to Oseberg. Were they brought to the women's court for the 'shamanic' value of their narrative? And if so, were they repositories of that sacred knowledge or were they labourers for spiritual leaders? Could one of the two women have been a spiritual representative of the Permian elite, accompanied by her own craftspeople?

The mitochondrial DNA analysis run in 2006 at the University of Copenhagen by Dr Tom Gilbert (whom I personally interviewed), indicated that the younger woman from Oseberg may have had DNA from the haplo-group U7. Though the evidence was not conclusive, it was deduced that she may have originated from a place outside Europe, presumably present-day Iran, being one of the closest areas to Scandinavia and Europe where a high density of this type of DNA was found.[46] There is another high intensity area of haplogroup U7, namely in the Permian area at the foot of the Ural Mountains, which may explain the imported craftsmanship. Since 2006, ancient DNA investigation technology has made giant strides, and it would be very interesting to see what a new strontium isotope analysis on the younger woman's tooth enamel would tell about her origin.

Decoding of ornamental languages of late Iron Age Scandinavia holds enormous promise within the context of multidisciplinary research. This is especially the case at Oseberg, where the groundwork done by Shetelig has not been followed by more recent in-depth analysis and structural comparison among the different workshops that created the artefacts. Red threads can be followed throughout the collection on different levels, thematically and stylistically, some of which connect to other craftsmanship hubs in Scandinavia. The employment of such organically 'linguistic' methodology may offer unprecedented insights into other periods and contexts as well, potentially revealing crucial links to the political use of animal art on status related artefacts, or the integration and selection of aesthetic values from paganism to Christianity.

Figure 19.38 Wagon poles, possibly resembling snakes. Reconstruction by Luciano Pezzoli.

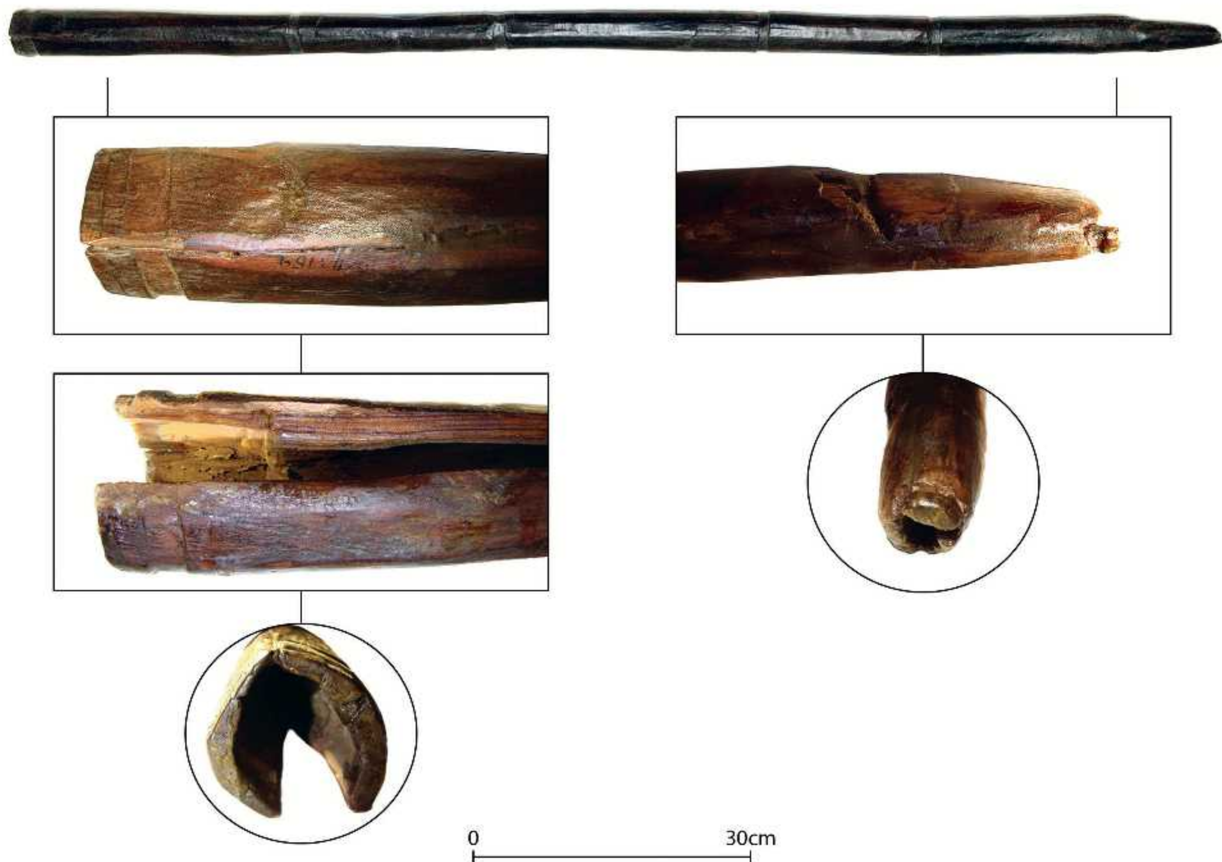

Figure 19.39 Wooden 'staff' from Oseberg, Vestfold, Norway. Photos by Leszek Gardeła.

Notes

1. Shetelig 1920: 348.
2. Holck 2006: 200–3.
3. Ingstad 1992: 252–4. See also → **Chapter 14**.
4. Ingstad 1995: 140–4.
5. Price 2019: 115.
6. Ingstad 1992: 144; Bill 2016: 145–51.
7. Christensen 1992: 164–6.
8. Perhaps lit by lamps such as those depicted on the tapestry, and those in the untouched chest in the burial chamber.
9. Christensen 1992: 155.
10. Christensen 1992: 155.
11. Shetelig 1920: 353.
12. Shetelig 1920: 353.
13. Shetelig 1920: 353–4.
14. Shetelig 1920: 349.
15. Ingstad 1995: 141.
16. Wilson & Jensen 1966: 53.
17. This would indicate that the manufacture and execution of the ornamentation of the wagon were probably carried out *in situ* (Vestfold, Norway), where they would have had access to artefacts of the local tradition – unfortunately the quality of the wood does not allow a dendrological assessment of its origin (pers. comm. Jan Bill 2022).
18. Shetelig 1920: 350.
19. Goldina & Goldina 2018: 163.
20. They hunted beaver, bear, hare, fox, mustelids, otter, squirrel, lynx, and wolverine.
21. Goldina & Goldina 2018: 166.
22. Goldina & Goldina 2018: 172.
23. Goldina & Goldina 2018: 173.
24. 170 shell discs were found on 20 burial grounds of the Mid Kama region. They belonged to *Turbinella pyrum* gastropods that are native to the Indian Ocean.
25. Goldina & Goldina 2018: 173.
26. Goldina & Goldina 2018: 171.
27. Ohthere of Hálogaland's voyage to Bjarmaland (c. AD 890; Bately & Englert 2007); The *Rus' Primary Chronicle* (twelfth century; Hazzard Cross & Sherbowitz-Wetzor 2012); Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (eleventh century; Tschan 2002); Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla* (thirteenth century; Hollander 2002).
28. Goldina & Goldina 2018: 172.
29. Autio 2001: 166.
30. Ehrenburg 2014: 26.
31. Ehrenburg 2014: 7.
32. Similar to the top border of the wagon basket.
33. Ehrenburg 2014: 18.
34. His feet seem to be deliberately left dangling, disconnected from the surrounding figures, unlike all other creatures on the wagon.
35. Shetelig 1920: 349.

36. Ehrenburg 2014: 61. This custom existed since the early Middle Ages among the ancestors of the Khanty and Mansi peoples, and possibly the Selkups. It survived in traditional culture until ethnographic time and was recorded by ethnographers in the twentieth century.
37. A unique feature on the whole wagon.
38. The number nine, its fractions (as in the three clusters of three snakes on the front panel of the wagon) and multiples have been proven to have symbolic significance in iconography. Here the trapped catlike creatures are about to be 'sacrificed' as if in Óðinnic ritual. For further references, see Gardeła 2022.
39. In both cases represented with ribbed body patterns, as on other beasts on the wagon.
40. Shetelig 1920: 349.
41. Ingstad 1995: 142.
42. It would seem it is a male, from the facial hair under the figure's nose.
43. A wooden 'staff' was found in an oak wood chest in the Oseberg ship burial chamber. It is composed of two hollow parts with notches, dividing the 'staff' in five sections (Ingstad 1992: 240–1; Gardela 2012: 257; 2016: 66–73, 94, 207, 212, 308–9; Price 2019: 161).
44. Neiß 2013: 81.
45. Hollander 2002.
46. Holck 2006: 185.

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Part 4

Ritual Specialists

20

Ritual Specialists in the Viking World: An Introduction to Part 4

Leszek Gardeła

Archaeology has always had a very special relationship with death.[1] This largely results from the fact that studies of the past are predominantly concerned with people who are long gone. Tangible remains of individuals who walked the Earth long before us can be encountered within virtually all kinds of archaeological sites, but it is usually cemeteries and graves that are the richest sources of information about them.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – a time when archaeology was not yet regarded as a serious and respectable academic discipline – prehistoric and medieval graves would either be 'dug up' accidentally by amateurs (for instance as a result of agricultural activities or construction work) or purposefully by wealthy estate owners, artists, and various collectors of antiquities. Lack of expertise in implementing careful and rigorous methods of excavation and recording often caused irreversible damage to the original burial context. Even though some of the recovered finds were eventually donated to museums, in the absence of *in situ* drawings and photographs (something that is seen as part of standard archaeological practice today), important information about the artefacts' original placement within graves was lost forever. All this hampers today's attempts to reveal and understand the specifics of certain past burial practices, and to reconstruct aspects of symbolically charged acts that formed part of the funerary drama. An additional challenge we are faced with is the fact that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, amateurs, antiquarians, and semi-professional archaeologists were mainly preoccupied with the acquisition of precious objects and paid little or no regard to osteological remains: human and animal bones would often be discarded and abandoned on the site of their discovery and eventually destroyed by animals, agricultural work, etc. As a result, the biological sex, age, provenance, and diet of numerous individuals from the past can no longer be determined.

In dealing with Viking Age archaeology, and in particular with the complex sub-field that can be labelled as 'the archaeology of sorcery and sorcerers',[2] one has to be critically aware of these and other fallacies of past research methodologies. First and foremost, however, one should never forget that the vast majority of objects that have been interpreted by contemporary archaeologists as having associations with the practice of *seiðr* stem from graves 'excavated' by amateurs. This does not mean that unprofessionally acquired artefactual material holds little scientific value, but it necessitates approaching it in a much more critical and careful manner than we normally approach finds stemming from recent excavations.

Identifying '*Vǫlva* Graves' Using Texts and Archaeology

Researchers who on a professional basis deal with aspects of Viking Age magic usually combine several different strands of evidence to substantiate their interpretations of burials of presumed ritual specialists. Old Norse textual sources, especially eddic poetry and sagas, play a significant role in such endeavours, since they illuminate otherwise inaccessible aspects of past people's mentalities and their behaviour. In dealing with these texts, however, it is vital to keep in mind that the details they convey have to be taken with a pinch of salt – the Norse sagas were written many years after the events they claim to describe and thus not everything they say can be taken at face value. 'Historical distortions' or 'inaccuracies' in these texts may result from various circumstances, including the fact that they were put to parchment by people who, at least nominally, were Christian, and thus may have misunderstood the traditions of their forebearers or even deliberately manipulated them so that stories about them would serve a particular purpose

in the narrative. As recent research has shown, however, extant saga accounts are remarkably precise when it comes to descriptions of Viking Age mortuary practices, suggesting that the memory of the particulars of burial acts from distant times lived on fairly undistorted for generations.[3]

One vivid example of this can be encountered in *Laxdœla saga*, one of the best-known Sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasǫgur*).[4] This important text was put to parchment in the thirteenth century, but it speaks of much earlier events that allegedly took place in tenth-century Iceland. One of its chapters recounts the re-opening of an unusual Viking Age grave, which is found under the floorboards of a Christian church, exactly in the place where the saga protagonist, Guðrún, tends to prey. The saga describes the exhumation process in these words:

> Um morgininn eptir lét Guðrún taka upp fjalar ǫr kirkjugólfinu, þar sem hon var vǫn at falla á knébeð; hon lét grafa þar niðr í jǫrð. Þar fundusk undir bein; þau váru blá ok illilig; þar fannsk ok kinga ok seiðstafr mikill. Þóttusk menn þá vita, at þar mundi verit hafa vǫluleiði nǫkkut. Váru þau bein foerð langt í brott, þar sem sízt var manna vegr.
>
> In the morning Guðrún had the boards removed from the church floor where she was accustomed to fall down on her knees to pray; she had the earth dug up there. Bones were found underneath; they were dark and evil-looking; a brooch and a huge *seiðr*-staff were also found. People thought they knew then that there had been a *vǫlva*'s grave there. The bones were removed far off to a place where later there was a highway.[5]

The *Laxdœla saga* account does not provide any further information concerning the form and appearance of the brooch buried with the woman. As regards the staff, only its large size is noted, but it is strongly emphasised that it was associated with magic practices – it is literally called *seiðstafr*, a *seiðr* staff.

Although it is impossible to know for certain whether or not the exhumation vividly portrayed in *Laxdœla saga* was a real-life historical event, scholars like Neil Price[6] and Leszek Gardeła[7] have used this remarkable account (in combination with other textual sources) to suggest that staffs were among the most distinctive accoutrements of Viking Age ritual specialists; as the saga clearly shows, the staff was so important that it was buried together with its owner, and its presence in the grave later helped identify the deceased occupant as a *vǫlva*.

Yet another Old Norse text known as *Þorsteins þáttr bæjarmagns*[8] lends further support for the assumption that staffs served as 'material markers' of identity.[9] Here, a young boy approaches the mound of his mother who – after the boy's pleading – throws her own 'crooked staff' (Old Norse *krókstafr*) out of the grave, so that the boy can use it to travel to the otherworld.

Although the description of the *vǫlva* grave from *Laxdœla saga* closely corresponds with archaeologically identified graves with staffs which shall be investigated more closely in the chapters that follow, we must be wary of considering all objects buried with the dead as direct and undistorted reflections of the roles or 'professions' they had in life. As Heinrich Härke has convincingly argued,[10] grave goods have the capacity to hold a plethora of meanings (Fig. 20.1). While in some cases they can indeed represent the 'inalienable property of the deceased', they might as well serve as: symbolically charged indicators of status, rank, and identity (of the dead and/or those who buried them); equipment for the hereafter; remains of or allusions to the funeral feast;

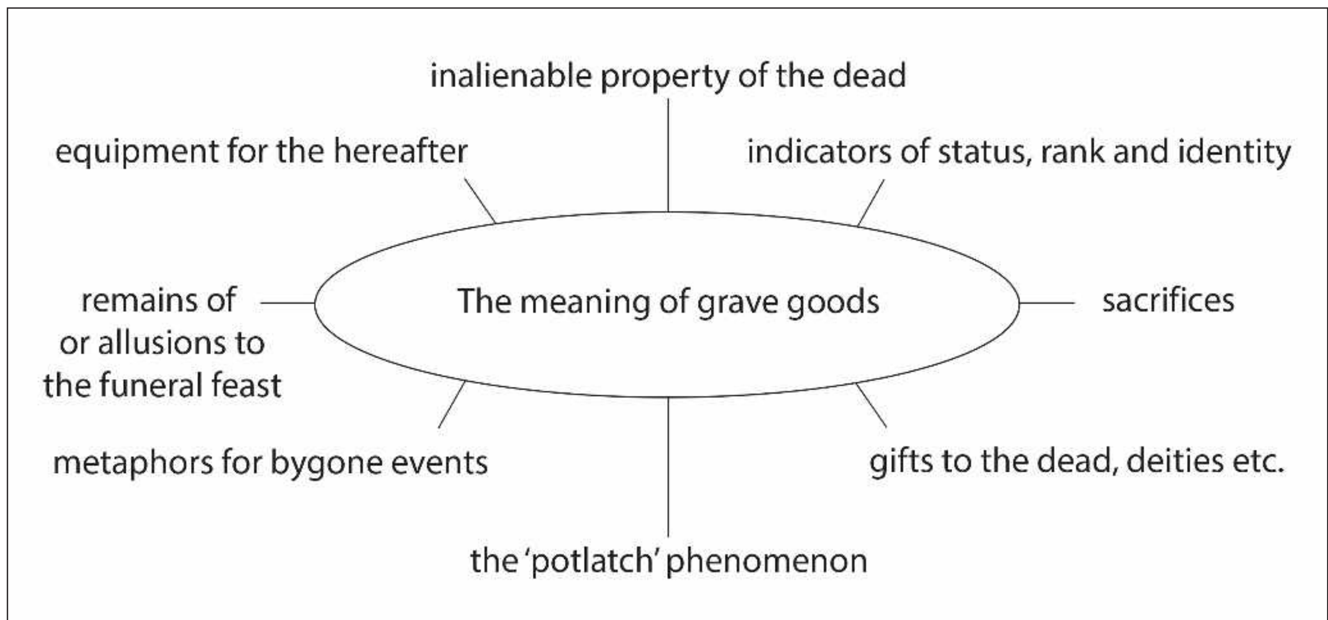

Figure 20.1 The meaning of grave goods according to Heinrich Härke. Illustration by Leszek Gardeła.

metaphors of bygone events; sacrifices; gifts to the dead, deities etc.; or refer to the 'potlatch phenomenon'.

The challenges of 'reading' past identities from grave goods also pertain to so-called 'weapon graves', i.e. graves containing swords, axes, spears, shields, and other martial-related equipment. After many years of uncritically labelling virtually all such graves as belonging to (predominantly male) 'warriors', scholars are now aware of the fact that weapons in funerary contexts need not have belonged to and been actively used by the dead.[11] This is explicitly seen in the case of graves of infants and young children interred with full sets of high-status martial equipment which, for obvious reasons, they would have been unable to wield in combat.[12] Thus, it is evident that in certain mortuary contexts weapons served metaphorical roles (for instance, as material expressions of the mourners' hopes and aspirations for the unfulfilled futures of their loved ones who died an untimely death) rather than mirroring *who* the deceased actually were and *what* they did in life.

Another example of the same interpretational challenge is the presence of weapons in female graves: are they to be understood as markers of the women's active role as warriors or should they rather be seen as symbolic representations of and allusions to certain events from their lives (or the lives of those around them) and some special activities they took part in?[13] As Leszek Gardeła has recently argued, there are good reasons to believe that – in some instances – weapons in female graves should not be interpreted in the literal sense as tools of war and indicators of a warrior identity of the deceased, but instead seen as material metaphors and ritual accoutrements that may have been used in the performance of magic, for instance divination or healing.[14] The ambivalence of militaria in female hands is best exemplified by an intriguing account preserved in *Ljósvetninga saga*, which speaks of a cross-dressing sorceress who uses an axe in a prophetic ritual. This text is still relatively unknown in the scholarly milieu[15] as well as among history afficionados which is why it feels appropriate to cite it here in full:

> Kona hét Þórhildr ok kǫlluð Vaðlækkja ok bjó at Naustum. Hon var forn í lund ok vinr Guðmundar mikill. Guðmundr fór á fund hennar ok mælti: 'Forvitni er mér á því mikil, hvárt nǫkkur mannhefnd mun fram koma fyrir Þorkell hák.' Hon svarar: 'Kom þú í ǫðru sinni at hitta mik, eina saman.' Siðan liðu stundir. Ok einn morgin reið Guðmundr Heiman snimma einn saman til Vaðla. Ok var Þórhildr úti ok gyrð í brœkr ok hafði hjálm á hǫfði ok øx í hendi. Síðan mælti hon: 'Far þú nú með mér, Guðmundr.' Hon fór ofan til fjarðarins ok gerðisk heldr þrýstilig. Hon óð út á vaðlana, ok hjó hon fram oxinni á sjóinn, ok þótti Guðmundi þat enga skipan taka. Síðan kom hon aptr ok mælti: 'Eigi ætla ek, at menn verði til at slá í mannhefndir við þik, ok muntu sitja mega í sœmð þinni.' Guðmundr mælti: 'Nú vilda ek, at þú vissir, hvárt synir mínir munu undan komask.' Hon segir: 'Nú gerir þú mér meira fyrir.' Síðan óð hon út á vaðlana, ok hjó hon í sjó inn, ok varð af brestr mikill ok blóðigr allr sjórinn. Síðan mælti hon: 'Þat ætla ek, Guðmundr, at nær stýrt verði einhverjum syni þínum. Ok mun ek þó nú eigi optar þraut til gera, því at engan veg kostar mik þat lítit: ok munu hvártki tjóa við ógnir né blíðmæli.' Guðmundr mælti: 'Eigi mun ek þessa þraut optar fyrir þik leggja.' Síðan fór Guðmundr heim ok sat í virðingu sinni.
>
> There was a woman named Þórhildr, called the Widow of Vodlar [Vaðlækkja], and she lived at Naust. She was still a heathen in spirit and was a great friend of Guðmundr.
>
> Guðmundr went to meet with her and said, 'I am very curious to know whether there will be any vengeance for Þorkell hák.'
>
> 'Come to see me another time when I am alone,' she answered.
>
> Some time passed, and early one morning Guðmundr rode off alone to Vodlar. Þorhildr was outside dressed in breeches and with a helmet on her head and an axe in her hand.
>
> She said to him, 'Come with me now, Guðmundr.'
>
> She headed down to the fjord and seemed to grow in stature. She waded out into the shallows and struck her axe into the water, and Guðmundr could observe no change.
>
> Then she came back and said, 'I don't think there will be men to take up vengeance against you. You will be able to keep your honour.'
>
> 'Now I would like to know if my sons will escape reprisal,' said Guðmundr.
>
> 'That's a more onerous task,' she said.
>
> She then waded out into the shallows and struck a blow in the water. There was a loud crash and the water turned all bloody.
>
> Then she said, 'I think, Guðmundr, that the blow will fall close to one of your sons. I will not exert myself again because I do so at no little cost for myself; neither threats nor coaxing will avail.'
>
> 'I will not impose this strain on you ever again,' he said.
>
> Guðmundr returned home and kept his respect.[16]

In light of the account cited above, the presence of axes or axe heads in several presumably female graves[17] from Norway – especially from Løve in Vestfold[18] and Mårem in Telemark[19] – may be taken to suggest that they are indeed identifiers of ritual specialists' burials (Fig. 20.2 and Fig. 20.3).[20] This interpretation is additionally substantiated by the fact that these graves contained curated and/or exotic items, amuletic objects, as well as expensive jewellery. All these characteristics, together with the presence of animal remains,[21] make the Mårem and Løve graves stand out, implying that there was indeed something 'special' about the deceased.

Returning to graves with iron staffs, it is clear that they should always be approached with adequate caution and with a critical awareness that 'the dead do not bury themselves'. What distinguishes them from broadly understood 'weapon graves', however, is that they are incomparably rare and – as far as we can tell by the surviving osteological and artefactual material – the staffs they contain all seem to accompany adult individuals. Furthermore, unlike weapons, iron staffs were never mass produced, and even though they all appear to be formally and conceptually linked to a certain archetypical idea, each specimen is actually different.

Figure 20.2 Artistic reconstruction of a Viking Age grave from Mårem, Telemark, Norway. Note the axe by the deceased person's side and the numerous beads that adorn the body. Illustration by Mirosław Kuźma. Copyright by Leszek Gardeła and Mirosław Kuźma.

Figure 20.3 Artistic reconstruction of a Viking Age grave from Løve, Vestfold, Norway. Note the axe by the deceased person's side and the horse carcass. The animal may have been decapitated, since no skull bones have been discovered in the grave. Illustration by Mirosław Kuźma. Copyright by Leszek Gardeła and Mirosław Kuźma.

All this permits speculation that, at least in some instances, the contents of the 'staff graves' *did* indeed belong to the dead. *How* exactly these individuals used their staffs and other accoutrements and *what* these items meant to them and those responsible for the burial acts is very difficult to discern, however. Some glimpses into the mentalities of these people may be gained if one critically interweaves the available archaeological and textual evidence and if one situates this material in the context of theories of personhood and entanglement – these and other themes will be elaborated further in → **Chapter 30**.

In discussing the possibilities of identifying burials of ritual specialists in the archaeological record, it is necessary to also draw attention to a group of graves that international researchers tend to label 'deviant burials' or 'atypical burials'. Edeltraud Aspöck defines them as:

> (…) burials different from the normative burial ritual of the respective period, region and/or cemetery. These differences may occur in body position or treatment, location or construction of the grave or types of grave goods.[22]

Scandinavian Viking Age funerary practices were remarkably diverse, which means it is challenging to draw a line between what is 'normal' and what is 'atypical'.[23] Nevertheless, there is undeniably a number of features in the mortuary record that make certain graves stand out – these include, for instance, the occurrence of large stones or boulders placed directly on the cadavers,[24] prone burial,[25] and evidence of pre- or post-mortem decapitation.[26] Over the last decade or so, scholars have dedicated substantial attention to investigations of tangible evidence of such practices in Viking Age Scandinavia. Their interdisciplinary research has led them to the conclusion that some people buried in 'atypical graves' may have lived their lives as ritual specialists or sorcerers. The most convincing examples are those where the dead are covered with large stones, for instance the graves from Gerdrup[27] and Trekroner-Grydehøj[28] in Sjælland, Denmark, which will be discussed in detail in → **Chapter 28**. What lends credence to their interpretation as the graves of ritual specialists is the fact that in the Old Norse literary corpus stoning is usually conducted as an act of punishment for the performance of malevolent magic.[29] As the texts lead us to believe, stones had the capacity to 'break through' spells and magical protection, and placing stones directly on the cadavers ensured the dead would never rise from their graves to sow terror among the living. Similar apotropaic acts – also directed against magic-working individuals – are well-known from other cultural milieus, for instance among the Western Slavs.[30]

In summation, it is permissible to argue that the Scandinavian Viking Age archaeological record provides tangible evidence for at least three types of ritual specialists' burials that are characterised by the presence of staffs and/or weapons (in female graves) and/or unusual treatment of the cadaver (especially stoning). As we shall see in the later chapters of this book, graves devoid of staffs and weapons (as well as those without any traces of atypical mortuary acts, but containing specific types of miniature objects) may also have belonged to people who dealt with magic. It is not unlikely that future interdisciplinary research will help identify other categories of ritual specialists' burials. Constant advancements in the field of archaeological sciences also hold great potential to refine our understanding of different aspects of Viking Age magic and its agents.

***

Part four of this volume seeks to address some of the methodological problems highlighted above by concentrating on selected graves of presumed ritual specialists from Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. In order to set the stage and situate the discussion within a broad chronological and methodological framework, however, we begin with an investigation of aspects of gender, divination and magic in the times preceding the Viking Age as well as with an onomastic-archaeological investigation of the idea of female sacral leadership. Afterwards, we shall look with new eyes at the iconic discoveries from Birka in Sweden as well as Fyrkat, Gerdrup, and Trekroner-Grydehøj in Denmark. Substantial attention will also be devoted to an intriguing grave from Gutdalen in western Norway, the contents of which shed new light on aspects of magic and its practitioners in the Viking Age.

Notes

1. On the archaeology of death, broadly understood, see Arnold & Wicker 2001; Parker Pearson 2003; Williams 2003; Sayer & Williams 2009; Nilsson Stutz & Tarlow 2013; Cerezo-Román *et al.* 2017; Williams *et al.* 2019.
2. A term first introduced by Neil Price (2002; 2019).
3. For discussions on the correlations between sagas and archaeology, see, for example Price 2002; 2019; Victor 2009; Gardeła 2013a; 2016a; 2017; 2021b.
4. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1943.
5. *Laxdœla saga*, ch. 76. Text and translation after Tolley 2009: 157–8.
6. Price 2002; 2019.
7. Gardeła 2016a: 148.
8. *Þorsteins þáttr bæjarmagns*, ch. 2 (Guðni Jónsson 1976: 322; Hermann Pálsson & Edwards 1985: 259).
9. On the idea of material markers in Viking Age archaeology, see Raffield *et al.* 2016.
10. Härke 2014.
11. On the challenges of interpreting so-called 'warrior graves', see Härke 1990; 1992; 1997; Williams 2006; Sayer & Williams 2009; Sikora 2014; Gardeła 2016b; 2021b.
12. On Viking Age children's graves with weapons, see Kurasiński 2004; Callow 2006; Gardeła 2012; Raffield 2019.
13. On Viking Age women's associations with weapons, see, for example, Clover 1986; 1993; Hedenstierna-Jonson *et al.* 2017; Price *et al.* 2019; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2020; Gardeła 2021b.

14. Gardeła 2021a; 2021b.
15. For more detailed discussions on the *Ljósvetninga saga* axe-ritual, see Gardeła 2021a; 2021b; Gunnell 2021.
16. Text after Björn Sigfússon 1940: 59–60. Translation after Andersson & Miller 1997: 230–1 with minor amendments.
17. The graves are considered as belonging to women due to the fact that they contain jewellery that is conventionally regarded as part of female attire (beads, brooches).
18. For more information on the Løve grave, see Resi 2013; Gardeła 2021b.
19. For more information on the Mårem grave, see Engh 2009 (full site report); Gardeła 2021b.
20. Interestingly, the placing of axes on top of the body may also have served an apotropaic role and prevented the dead from rising. This reading is suggested by a brief mention in *Eiríks saga rauða* (ch. 6) where an axe is placed on the chest of a female revenant. See Einar Ólafur Sveinsson & Matthias Þórðarson 1935: 214–17.
21. The Løve grave held a horse (perhaps decapitated), whereas the Mårem grave contained a single animal vertebrae.
22. Aspöck 2008: 17.
23. For overviews of mortuary practices in Viking Age Scandinavia, see Rygh 1885; Schetelig 1912; Arbman 1943; Gräslund 1980; Svanberg 2003; Nordeide 2011. See also Price 2008.
24. On stoned burials in Viking Age Scandinavia, see Gardeła 2013b; 2017.
25. On prone burials in Viking Age Scandinavia, see Toplak 2015; 2016; 2018; Gardeła 2017.
26. On decapitation in Viking Age Scandinavia, see Gardeła 2013c.
27. Christensen 1982; Kastholm 2015; 2016; Kastholm & Margaryan 2021.
28. Ulriksen 2011; 2018.
29. Ström 1942.
30. Gardeła 2017; Kozak 2021.

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21

Gender, Prophecies, and Magic: Cult Specialists in Denmark before the Viking Age

Jeanette Varberg

Introduction

In recent decades it has become widely accepted in scholarship that women were part of the religious complex of beliefs and ritual practices related to magic in the Viking Age.[1] This chapter strives to look even further back in time through analyses of unusual archaeological material from the Bronze Age and Iron Age. By examining four burials from Denmark with grave goods of what can be interpreted as having a magical character, it investigates whether there is archaeological evidence for cult specialists predating the presumed *vǫlva* graves from the Viking Age.

The four burials discussed in this chapter have in previous works, including the first mentions of the finds in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, been described as magical in the archaeological literature[2] – mainly because of the remains discovered in the graves and the character of the objects. The four graves have been chosen because of the extraordinary items among the grave goods. But it is nonetheless important to bear in mind that the objects require careful assessment in terms of their so-called magical functionality.

The four graves cover a large time span of some 1600 years, from c. 1300 BC to c. AD 300, and it makes it difficult to compare them. But there are some common traits that may point to a general need for discussing the presence of magical practices and cult specialists before the Viking Age in Scandinavia, as well as how these traits may influence the perception of the *vǫlva* as a female cult specialist.

There are two remarkable Bronze Age burials to consider, namely the Maglehøj and the Hvidegaard graves. Both contain small bags or boxes with highly interesting amulets and charms. Concerning the Roman Iron Age, focus is on two graves: the Blidegn grave and the Årslev grave from Fyn. Blidegn represents a burial with features that render it similar to the aforementioned Bronze Age graves, containing a collection of what appear to be very significant magical objects made from natural materials. The Årslev grave is somewhat different. It is an exceptionally rich grave from the late fourth century AD with jewellery from the Black Sea region and an amulet with a gnostic inscription and an anchor, which makes it the oldest known object in Scandinavia that carries what could be a Christian symbol.[3] It is possible that the woman buried in the grave was a Christian or even a 'proto-*vǫlva*', and this grave opens an interesting discussion of how the Early Christian groups evolved, spread, and affected different belief systems, for example those in Scandinavia.

In the first two centuries AD, prophetic rituals carried out by female prophetesses were common in the Mediterranean world[4] and this may have affected the concept of female ritual performers in late Iron Age and Viking Age Scandinavia. In Old Norse scholarship, it is often argued that Norse magic, especially *seiðr*, was rooted in shamanism and should therefore be understood in this light. However, this chapter argues that the prophetic role of prehistoric women, right from Bronze Age and into Viking Age Denmark and wider Scandinavia, may – in some aspects – also have been affected by Mediterranean traditions of magic and female prophetesses who were part of polytheistic religions, as well as of Early Christianity in the Mediterranean area.

The Concepts of Magic and *Seiðr*

Before we enter the realm of archaeological hypotheses based on prehistoric objects that may have been perceived as magical and the meanings they were ascribed, it is necessary to briefly look at how the word 'magic' was used in Antiquity and later traditions, and to explore the extent to which *seiðr* can be described as a distinctive Norse version of magic.[5]

The word 'magic' has been used in countless ways, but to cut to the core: at the most basic level it was simply a term for people's rituals. The term 'magic' derives from Persian *maguŝ* which means 'priest', and it was adopted into Greek as *mageía*.[6] The ancient Greek historian and geographer Herodotus (c. 484–c. 430–420 BC) vividly described the hereditary priesthood from what is now Western Iran, known in Antiquity as officiators of fire sacrifices. The Greek term *mageía* (in Latin *magia*) in most texts bore negative connotations and later became a general term for all suspect uses of supernatural abilities. It was used to denote the exotic and the dangerous. Subsequently, the adherents of the monotheistic religions, e.g. Christians and Jews, tried to dissociate themselves from magic by calling their own rituals *theurgy* (from Greek), 'divine work', and from this emerged the discussion of white versus black magic. According to this logic, rabbis and bishops did not engage in magic since their rituals were led by religious authorities and therefore considered legitimate 'divine work'. But they could – and still can – bless, curse, heal, exorcise, predict the future, and put angels to work.[7] The purpose of rituals was the same regardless of the colour of the magic, but the terms used to designate such ritual actions were different.

Seiðr has been defined as one of the several Norse words associated with magic,[8] but it has also been associated with the term shamanism. The root of the word possibly means 'to bind' although other possibilities exist as well,[9] and *seiðr* comprises for instance divination (e.g. foretelling the future), healing, shapeshifting, controlling the weather, and securing good luck – but also the opposite of good luck.[10] *Seiðr* is associated with the god Óðinn, but the medieval saga literature portrays mainly women as practitioners of *seiðr*. The concept of *seiðr* could have been affected by Sámi shamanism in the northern parts of what is now Norway and Sweden. In historical times, the shamanic traditions from these parts of Scandinavia created a Norse view of the Sámi and Finnish peoples as skilled in sorcery.[11] But the performance of *seiðr* may also have been influenced by the magical traditions of the South European religions of Late Antiquity (roughly fourth-sixth centuries in Europe and adjacent areas bordering the Mediterranean), as will be argued later in this chapter.

Magic can be broadly defined as the use of means (such as charms and spells) believed to have supernatural power over natural forces.[12] Magic is linked to rituals and objects that give the magician power.

Ritual Specialists in Bronze Age Burials

During the Danish Bronze Age, several burials from the Middle Bronze Age period III (1300–1100 BC) stand out because they have been described as graves of 'sorcerers' or 'seers'.[13] The burials are from a time when inhumation graves were beginning to be replaced by urn graves. Most of them were excavated in the 1800s by skilled excavators from the National Museum of Denmark. The burials contained the remains of both men and women and they all hold items conventionally interpreted as magic objects. Two of these burials are exceptional and will be described in the following.

The Hvidegaard Burial

In the summer of 1845, museum assistants Christian Herbst and Adolph Strunk, under the leadership of Etatsraad ('Counsellor of State') Christian Jürgensen Thomsen from the Museet for Nordiske Oldsager (later to become the National Museum of Denmark), excavated a burial mound only a short distance north of Copenhagen. They also had the company of regiment surgeon Ibsen. The burial mound was 6 m in diameter and 2 m high. In the centre they found a stone cist that was about 2.5 m long and 0.5 m wide. Inside the stone cist the skin of an oxen had been laid out and on top of it rested the burnt remains of an adult man mixed up with bones from a teenager and a child. All three were probably burnt in the same cremation fire but separated into two different burials in two different burial mounds next to each other, called Hvidegaard I and Hvidegaard II.[14] In the bone bundle, the excavators also found a small piece of a spiral arm ring, as well as a bronze tube from a corded skirt – both usually interpreted as elements of female dress.[15]

The adult man had thus been cremated together with at least two other individuals before he was buried in the body-sized stone cist in the Hvidegaard I mound (Figs 21.1a–c). The remains of the burnt bones were placed in the middle of the stone cist and wrapped in woollen textiles interpreted as a cloak and what may have been a kaftan.[16] The burial represents a hybrid between inhumation graves and urn graves. The latter was to become the dominant burial custom in the Late Bronze Age. In one end of the cist was a small container of birchbark, which could not be preserved post-excavation. A sword of bronze was placed by what would have been the man's right hip, and attached to the sword-belt was a belt-purse. This was made of leather and closed with a 15 cm bronze pin in a 'proto slide fastener'.

The belt-purse is about 14 cm long and 5 cm wide. It was ornamented and contained numerous objects that soon attracted the excavators' attention. They were likely personal objects, but some had a peculiar origin and no great material value. Among these puzzling objects were a flint dagger used as a strike-a-light, a bronze knife in a leather sheath, a bronze razor with a handle sculpted as a horse's head, bronze tweezers, a fragmented amber bead, a piece of unworked amber, a red stone, a small piece of flint, a small cone shell known only from the Mediterranean (*Conus ventricosus*) which has been perforated and probably worn as pendant or amulet, kindling for the strike-a-light, multiple plant roots of various kind, a square piece of wood, bark, and the talon of a bird of prey initially determined

Figure 21.1 Objects from the Hvidegaard burial. Photo by Lennart Larsen, National Museum of Denmark.

as a falcon by Herbst, but later proven by bird specialist Winge to be from a northern goshawk.[17] Furthermore, the grave held a 5 cm-long tail of a young snake, probably a smooth snake (*Coronella austriaca*), a non-venomous snake of the family *Colubridae*. The snake tale showed signs of use, perhaps from being applied multiple times in rituals.[18] Finally, the belt-purse contained a tiny sheath made from bladder or intestines sown around small pebbles and part of the mandible of a young squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*).[19]

The sword and the set of personal belongings, including the razor, strike-a-light, and tweezer, all resemble the belongings of a well-equipped male warrior, which is soundly attested in the archaeological record.[20] A reassessment of the bones in the grave done by Caroline Arcini in cooperation with Joakim Goldhahn in 2008 indicates that cremated bones from at least three individuals were wrapped up together and deposited in the cist: an adult male of twenty to forty years of age, a teenager of seventeen to nineteen and probably male, and a child of three to five years of age at the time of death. At least one of them was killed with a blow to the skull using the blunt side of a sword or an axe.[21]

Without question this in one of the most intriguing and fascinating burials from the North European Bronze Age. The circumstances of the burial are enigmatic. How many people were actually burnt in the cremation fire? Why were both male and female objects associated with the male bones and who was the person for whom the burial was intended?

The Seiðmaðr

The very first mention of the grave was in *Antiquarisk Tidsskrift* ('Antiquarian Journal') in 1843–45 where in a short notice Herbst remarked that the burial probably belonged to a 'seidman' (*seiðmaðr*).[22] He elaborated on this statement in detail in his article from 1848, concluding that the Hvidegaard man must have been a sorcerer and comparing the small objects in the belt-purse to the description of Þorbjǫrg *lítil-vǫlva* and her magical instruments in *Eiríks saga rauða* (in *Antiquarisk Tidsskrift* called *Thorfin Karlsefne's Saga*).[23]

Herbst's interpretations are still valid, and various scholars have added their specialised knowledge since. In 1904, Herluf Winge reassessed the animal parts in the belt-purse and concluded convincingly that the pebbles and mandible from a small squirrel are, in fact, from the entrails of a bird of prey. Such pebbles are known as 'gizzard stones'. Lacking teeth, most bird species ingest stones to aid their digestion. The squirrel mandible and pebble stone may, according to Winge, come from the goshawk.[24] This opens an interesting perspective as the Hvidegaard man might have taken part in rituals of extispicy, that is, the study of and divination by use of animal entrails (usually the victims of sacrifice). The practice is widely known in the Mediterranean world where it was likely introduced from Mesopotamia and Etruria. To take omens or directions from birds is an old practice. Divination is the art of knowing the will of the gods and other

non-human entities, and birds were often seen as messengers in touch with the Otherworld. Thus, taking omens from birds was widely used in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and among the Hittites. Later, the practice spread to Greek and Roman cultures and was an important part of ritual life.[25]

During the Classical Period (fifth to third century BC) in Ancient Greece, the *manteis* was a ritual specialist who was able to foretell the future and knew the ways of the gods. This 'seer' often came from a strong family line of powerful ritual specialists. Others who were similarly touched by the gods often had some kind of disability. Two famous seers Teiresias and Euenius allegedly chose to be blinded in order to see the unseen – as in fact did Óðinn in Norse mythology, when he gave up one eye.[26]

The small amulet made from a Mediterranean cone shell also confirms that there were established exchange routes between Denmark and the Mediterranean in the Middle Bronze Age,[27] suggesting a spread of ideas and belief along the trade routes or perhaps more precisely a resonance in ritual practices in these two far-apart areas of Europe. Extispicy is one such element that might reveal structural resemblances between large parts of the Bronze Age world, as argued by Goldhahn.[28]

Could the Hvidegaard man in fact be a 'seer' or '*seiðr*-man', as Herbst suggested in 1843? We will never know the exact ideas behind this remarkable burial. But it is possible to conclude that he was burnt in a cremation fire together with at least two other individuals and one of them had received a blow from a weapon, as can be detected on the skull fragments. He was buried with a sword, but also had small pieces of female jewellery with him, as well as a belt-purse with strange and magical objects. He probably was a ritual specialist and may have had a capacity to foretell the future and obtain insight into the will of the gods.

Purses with Magical Objects in the Danish Middle Bronze Age

The Hvidegaard burial is without question the most famous of the burials that contain a belt-purse. But others, too, may be briefly described here. In 1886, a large burial mound called Løfthøj or Garderhøj in Jægersborg just north of Copenhagen was excavated. The stone cist in the middle of the burial mound was covered in a thick layer of seaweed (*Zostera marina*). It contained a rich male burial from period III. A sword rested on the chest of the deceased. He wore a massive gold arm ring on his left wrist, and covering his heart region was a belt-purse. The purse was poorly preserved, but the closing mechanism with a large bronze pin was similar to the one on the belt-purse in the Hvidegaard grave, also in size. The excavators found a small bronze knife, a razor, tweezers, a stick of wood wrapped in leather strips, two leather sheaths wrapped in leather strips, and a strike-a-light of flint in a leather sheath. The stick of wood and the leather sheaths may have had magical significance.

There are about 40 graves with belt-purses from the Middle Bronze Age, primarily in Denmark and North Europe. The purses are found in male burials and are often associated with swords. One third of the currently known exemplars contain gold artefacts, a trait which made Lomborg suggest that these magicians belonged to the elite of the society.[29]

In a grave in Alslev parish in southwest Jylland, a man was buried with a small leather bag containing a razor, tweezers, an awl, a small fragment of gold, a piece of an insect, and two objects wrapped in a piece of leather and leather strips. An X-ray showed that some small 'packages' contained a leather strip and a piece of charcoal. The meaning must have been magical, as suggested for the Garderhøj grave, since the wrapped items represented no value at all.[30]

In Egtved in Jylland, a belt-purse was found in a male grave with twenty-three small objects that also held no or little material value. The man had a razor and tweezers with him together with a small leather bag containing fragments of amber and bronze, a sickle of bronze, fragments of a comb, a small awl, a needle in a bundle of yarn, a piece of a nutshell, a piece of charcoal, a strip of leather wrapped in leather strings, two small twigs of bone and wood, some dissolved bone fragments wrapped in leather, a piece of bark, and two pieces of selenium.[31] Again, we see small twigs and a leather strip wrapped in leather strings as part of the possibly magical contents of the purse.

The largest purse was found not in a grave, but in a bog. In 1944, in Vesterris in northern Jylland, a purse was found that had a closing mechanism similar to the belt-purses from the Hvidegaard and Garderhøj graves. It contained worked horn from cattle and goat, two wooden twigs with a hole in one end, two wooden pegs, and a piece of horn with four depressions resembling cup-marks known from rock carvings.[32] The bag may very well have been placed in the bog as part of a ritual, since watery locations often served as ritual and sacred spaces in the Bronze Age.[33]

The Peculiar and the Magical

Most of the objects from the bags can be associated with what is odd, different, magical, and consequently with powerful rituals. The objects include amber, quartz, roots, twigs of wood and bone, horn, selenium, shells, parts of snakes, wool, insects, mandible from a squirrel, horn from cattle and goat, leather strips wrapped in leather strings, and talons from a goshawk.[34] The belt-purses come in most cases from male burials, but they have a counterpart in female burials in the form of a belt-box made of bronze.

The Maglehøj Burial

In the summer of 1888, Vilhelm Boye excavated a grave mound in Frederikssund in northern Sjælland. Today, the mound is but a shadow of its original size and surrounded by suburban villas, but in the Bronze Age period III, it

almost overlooked the shorelines of Roskilde Fjord from a ridgetop. At the time of excavation, locals claimed that it once had a large stone sitting on top. In 1888, the local farmers wanted the mound gone and while removing the soil from the mound, a small stone cist appeared, and so the National Museum became involved.[35]

The stone cist was carefully covered with beach stones, sand, and seaweed (probably seawrack or eelgrass). Inside the stone cist, Boye found the cremated bones of a woman wrapped in woollen cloth, and on top of them were four carefully placed artefacts: a double button, a fibula, a small, single-edged knife, and a belt-box (Fig. 21.2). The belt-box itself is ornamented and on its top a star or sun surrounded by rays of light is seen – an image typical of Bronze Age iconography.[36]

The bronze lid on the belt-box was still in place and inside the belt-box were several interesting objects: a polished fragmentary tooth from the maxilla of a horse; a fragmentary tooth crown from an old horse; parts of the mandible, scapula, and feet of a weasel; a claw from a lynx, also polished; bones from a lamb or a roe deer; vertebrae from the neck, middle, and tail of a large snake; a piece of burnt bone from a human; a 5.5 cm long twig of rowan; a small piece of charcoal of aspen; a small piece of burnt clay; two small pieces of pyrite; a bronze wire; a small fragment of a knife; two small quartz pebbles; and the lower *larynx* (commonly called the 'voice box') of a raven (*Corvus corax*).[37]

The Voice of a Raven

The magical objects in the belt-box from the Maglehøj burial consisted of several bones and teeth from animals, and in 1904 the highly skilled bird specialist and zoologist Herluf Winge revisited these. His conclusions are rather surprising and highly interesting, but due to a gap between zoological and archaeological research practices, his work with the animal bones in the belt-box did not come to the archaeologists' attention before 2015, when his work was rediscovered.[38] Winge's groundbreaking article had escaped the attention of Bronze Age archaeologists for more than a hundred years. This explains why his careful work with the magical objects in the Hvidegaard grave and especially Maglehøj grave has not been mentioned in archaeological works from the twentieth century.[39]

Winge's careful interpretations give new insights into the objects from the belt-box, which were possibly considered magical. He additionally discovered the left and right feet of a hedgehog among the small animal bones and concluded that the bird throat belonged to a raven and was, quite precisely, the lower larynx. In other words, the woman had the voice of a raven in her belt-box.[40]

Winge furthermore showed that the small bones from the hedgehog and weasel were etched, and he suggested that the bones, as well as the pebbles, came from the stomach of a larger bird of prey, probably a raven, but they could also come from the stomach of an eagle or an owl.[41]

Figure 21.2 Objects from the Maglehøj burial. Photo by Moesgaard Museum.

He did not find it a coincidence that a magician and cult specialist possessed part of a raven in her magical tool kit. The raven, he states, is a bird sacred to both Apollo and Óðinn.[42] Ravens are well-known birds in world mythology, from Japan to Scandinavia, possibly due to their intelligence and ability to plan ahead and to imitate human voices. Tame ravens are also known to steal shiny things. Needless to say, ravens and crows play special roles in Norse mythology.

The Snake

In 2008, zoologist Hans Viborg Kristensen analysed the 15 vertebrae from a snake contained in the belt-box from the Maglehøj grave and concluded that they belonged to the rare smooth snake (*Zamenis longissimus*) also called the Aesculapian snake. The bones belonged to an adult specimen, 1.2 m long. This snake is rare in Danish prehistory and only two specimens are known from excavations of Stone Age settlements. Three others conserved in ethanol are from 1810, 1851, and 1863, collected in the forests of south Sjælland.

The ancient DNA from the three specimens from southern Sjælland have been analysed and the results suggest that the now extinct Danish population was probably a true relict population from the mid-Holocene warming period. This suggests that the *Zamenis longissimus* existed in Denmark from at least 7500 BC up to the early 1900s. As the specimen from the Maglehøj grave was not part of the study,[43] we do not know whether the snake in the Maglehøj grave was local or imported from the Balkans or the Mediterranean, but a local origin must be considered most plausible.

The Aesculapian snake has its name from the Greek god of healing, truth, and prophecy (Greek Asclepius and later Roman Aesculapius), and the serpent was widely used in the god's temples in the Mediterranean World. The snake as a symbol of healing has a long history of use. One of the oldest known associations of the serpent with healing and magic is a depiction of the ancient Sumerian fertility god Ningishzida (c. 2100 BC). The Minoan Snake Goddess is of a later date (c. 1600 BC), probably associated with the Cretan myth about Glaukos and the snake that knows the herb of rebirth and resurrection.[44]

Magician, Shapeshifter, and Fortune Teller

The Maglehøj woman was very likely a cult specialist who engaged in magical practices. In her belt-box she carried small objects of bone and teeth that display conceptual links with all the animals known from the Bronze Age belief system. Flemming Kaul has convincingly argued on the basis of Bronze Age iconography that animals helped the sun on its journey through night and day. Horse, bird, snake, and fish accompanied the sun on different stages of its journey: morning, mid-day, afternoon, and night.[45] Almost all the animals who help the sun on its journey are represented in the Maglehøj woman's belt-box, and both the horse tooth and the claw of a lynx showed signs of having been polished by a finger, probably as part of a ritual.

Maybe she could let her spirit fly with the animals. Shapeshifting is a well-known phenomenon in shamanistic practices, and also in Nordic mythology where for example Loki and Óðinn take the shape of different animals, including birds, horses, fish, and even a flea. In Greek/Roman mythology, the gods Proteus and Zeus have such abilities as well.[46] The polishing or rubbing of the lynx claw and horse tooth could perhaps indicate that a trance-like ritual was performed in order for the woman to let her spirit travel as a lynx or horse. The fact that she had the larynx of a raven in her belt-box could also imply a kind of ritual performance where she was able to speak with the voice of a raven.

The practice of shapeshifting is perhaps also the explanation behind a small bronze figurine showing a woman with bird arms found in the mud in Kolindsund on Djursland, Jylland, in 1900 and dated to the Late Bronze Age (1000–600 BC).[47] Women with birdlike arms, birdmen, and other human–animal hybrids can be seen on rock carvings and as iconography on metal objects from the Bronze Age.[48]

Another interesting motif occurs on the so-called 'dancing ring' from Roga, Lkr. Mecklenburg-Strelitz in northern Germany. It belonged to a rich deposition of female ornaments dated to the Late Bronze Age Period V (900–700 BC). The iconography on this bronze headband depicts on one side nine women holding hands and dancing, hence the nickname of the find. On the other side of the headband, five animals are depicted transforming from birds into horses, and between two of the transforming animals a woman hovers.[49] Could the headband have belonged to a female cult specialist who controlled shapeshifting as part of the ritualised transformation of the sun and its token animals on its cyclic journey through night and day? The idea of shapeshifting as part of a ritual complex in the Middle and Late Nordic Bronze Age cannot, in my opinion, be ruled out.[50]

Cult Specialists in the Late Bronze Age?

The burials with magical accoutrements dated to the middle part of the Bronze Age are intriguing. Especially the Hvidegaard grave and the Maglehøj grave stand out with their large numbers of artefacts that were clearly ritual objects. We do not know exactly what kind of supernatural powers they called upon during the ritual, but the function of the rituals may have been to bless, curse, heal, let spirits fly, shape shift, predict the future, and/or to gain knowledge about the will of the sun or the gods.

By 1400 BC long distance exchange systems had evolved, connecting the shores of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers in Mesopotamia and the Nile in Egypt with the beaches of the Baltic and North Seas, as well as key sites in between, such as Mycenae. Nordic amber and Egyptian and Mesopotamian glass linked the widest expanse of this world in the Middle Bronze Age, and likely beliefs and

ideas (such as the ideas of the magical qualities of snakes and birds) were exchanged along the routes as well.[51]

In the Late Bronze Age (1100–500 BC) and the Pre-Roman Iron Age (500–1 BC), burial practices changed from inhumation graves to urn graves. Only few grave goods were buried with the cremated bones, and they seldom have characteristics that allow their convincing categorisation as magical objects. One exception may be an urn grave from Aalestrup Hede near Hobro, Jylland. Here, a young adult was cremated together with wings from at least eight birds. The human bones and bird bones were buried together in an urn, and the wings belonged to western jackdaw (*Corvus monedula*) and hooded crow (*Corvus cornix*) or rook (*Corvus frugilegus*).[52] The person buried with the birdwings could possibly have been a cult specialist, but aside from the bones the urn was empty and this leaves us with few indications of who was buried here.

Roman Iron Age Graves of Ritual Specialists

In the Roman Iron Age (AD 1–400), inhumation burials reappear in the archaeological record. Among them there are two exceptional female graves that contain magical objects. Both are from the Danish island of Fyn.

The Blidegn Burial

In 1935, a young man named Blidegn was ploughing his mother's land in Brænde Lyndinge in southern Fyn. He came across large stones marking a grave. The grave was placed on a ridge in the landscape overlooking the hilly fields of southern Fyn. Pharmacist and skilled amateur archaeologist Poul Helweg Mikkelsen excavated the burial together with Svend Larsen from Fyens Stiftsmuseum. They found some glass beads and a silver needle that may have been from a brooch in the centre of the grave, indicating that the burial belonged to a woman. In the east end of the burial, a layer of wood covered several artefacts; this was sealed and transported to the National Museum in Copenhagen to be excavated by a conservator.

Under the wooden layer, which turned out to be the remains of a coffin made of alder (*Alnus*), a wooden box was uncovered. It was made of linden wood (*Tilia*). A remarkable collection of unusual artefacts was found inside it (Fig. 21.3). Three bronze vessels were placed inside each

Figure 21.3 Objects from the Blidegn burial. Photo by Museum Odense.

other and two of them were made by LANSIEPAPHROD (L(usius) Ansi(us) Ephaphrod(itus). His work has been found in many parts of Europe, including Pompeii and Herculanum, which indicates a date for the burial around AD 150.[53]

Sea Urchins, a Neolithic Axe, and a Flint Spear

Small stones were carefully placed around the wooden box, all of which were cautiously selected for the burial: sea urchins, smooth beach stones, and the neck end of a Late Neolithic battle axe. There are European examples of Neolithic stone axes that have been reused as amulets. One such axe from the private collection of Christian August von Waldeck supposedly found in the ruins of Herculaneum in Italy had a Greek inscription carved into its surface. The inscription has been interpreted as a spell calling upon Jahve, lord of the heavens, including magical words such as *abla-nathanalba* and AEIHOYΩ, often used on Roman, Greek, and early Christian/Coptic amulets, and in spells of the first centuries AD[54] (see the Årslev burial discussed below).

It is also not uncommon to find fossils in prehistoric graves in Denmark or elsewhere in Europe.[55] Two examples of sea urchins wrapped in bronze wire and worn as amulets were found in Brejninge in Lolland and in an urn grave from Broholm, Fyn.[56] Folklore gathered in Denmark and Southern England in the early nineteenth and twentieth century revealed that both sea urchins and Neolithic stone axes were called thunderstones and believed to protect the house from being struck by lightning. The unusual collection of stones may consequently have been magical stones or amulets meant to protect the objects inside the wooden box placed within the woman's burial.[57]

Besides the three vessels, a small, empty ceramic cup was found together with a small piece of mother of pearl from a shell. The fragments of a woven textile belt complete with a rich buckle and a 7.3 cm end piece made of bronze were also placed among the artefacts. From the belt had hung a large bronze knife. Just beside the knife a large spindle whorl of amber and one of yellow-green glass were placed together. They may have been attached to the belt.

Close to the knife a flint blade from a Late Neolithic spear or small dagger was placed. The meaning of the antique artefact is uncertain; it may have been used as a strike-a-light, or the flint spear might have functioned as some kind of amulet or charm. Several textiles were also placed in the box, but it is not possible to determine what they were used for. It can only be concluded that they were produced by someone highly skilled.[58]

A Collection of Seeds

A small bronze knife with a bent handle was found beside a small basket made of reeds. Inside the basket was a small, fossilised sea urchin, a cone shell from a pine (*Pinius pinea L.)*, and seeds from bladdernut (*Staphylea pinnata L.*). Pine was not native to North Europe and must have been traded into Denmark from the Mediterranean in the Roman Iron Age. Both plants may have been considered during the Iron Age to possess special powers.[59]

From the same period, a woman's burial at Ønlev in south Jylland may be the oldest known grave in Scandinavia belonging to a medical specialist. She was buried with a very special knife, a so-called double instrument, with a small blade at either end used for trepanation. This could indicate that she was a surgeon.[60] Considering the seeds in the small basket inside the box from the Blidegn woman's burial, one could suggest that she may have been a healer.

Casting Lots

In the middle of the wooden box, a bundle of wooden twigs of willow (*Salix*) was found. Each twig was bound with a woollen thread, and the pointy ends of the twigs were stuck through a small piece of cloth; they were originally placed in a sheath made of bark. The twigs bear resemblance to those found in the Garderhøj grave and several of the twigs in other belt-purses from the Bronze Age. The question is: What were they used for? In the weapon sacrifice at Illerup Ådal from the Roman Iron Age, c. AD 200, a small object was found among thousands of pieces of military equipment sacrificed in the shallow water of a lake just west of Skanderborg in Jylland. The object was a small container made of two cylinders of gilded silver (Fig. 21.4). The two cylinders had a lid and held two small and rounded sticks of wood; one had a carved, round mark on it.[61]

In the weapon sacrifice from Nydam in south Jylland, also dated to the Roman Iron Age, a very similar double cylinder was found. It only had one wooden stick in one of the cylinders. It was originally thought that the double cylinder belonged to a warrior's set of personal toiletries, and Engelhardt thought it could be a perfume bottle.[62]

In light of recent research, however, it seems more likely that the double cylinders with wooden sticks were used for casting lots. Since they were beautifully ornamented and clearly costly, they must have belonged to elite warriors. When waging war, difficult decisions must be made, and some decisions might have been left to the will of the gods by cleromancy. The casting of lots was a frequent method of obtaining knowledge of future events across many cultures. The Roman lots were usually little slivers or tablets made of wood. The Roman historian and geographer Tacitus described the casting of lots as performed by Germanic tribes in chapter 10 of his *Germania* (AD 98):

> Auspicia sortesque ut qui maxime observant: sortium consuetudo simplex. Virgam frugiferae arbori decisam in surculos amputant eosque notis quibusdam discretos super candidam vestem temere ac fortuito spargunt. Mox, si publice consultetur, sacerdos civitatis, sin privatim, ipse pater familiae, precatus deos caelumque suspiciens ter singulos tollit, sublatos secundum impressam ante notam interpretatur.

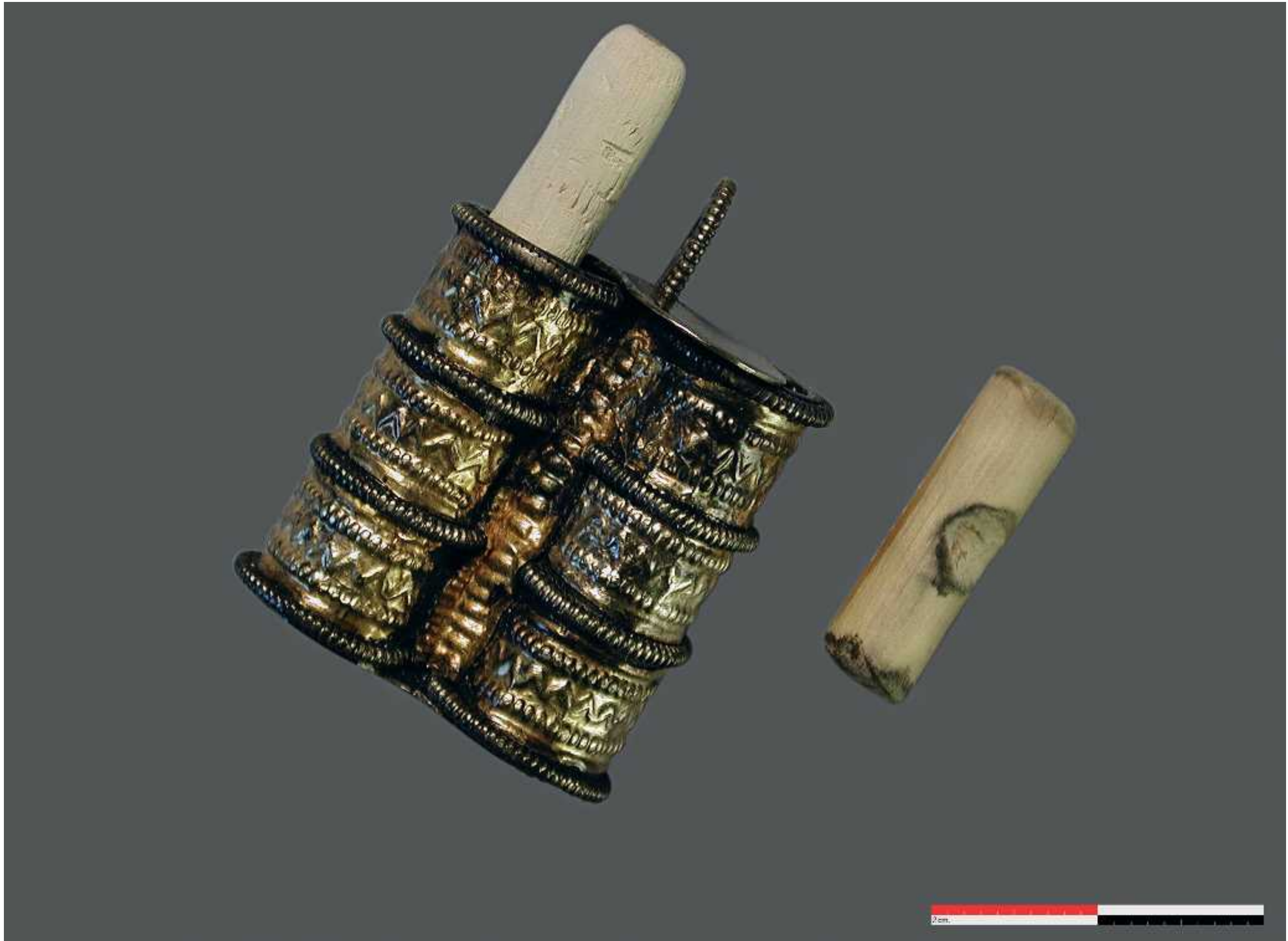

Figure 21.4 Double cylinder with two wooden sticks from the Illerup Ådal find. Photo by Moesgaard Museum.

> To divination and casting of lots, they pay attention beyond any other people. Their method of casting lots is a simple one: they cut a branch from a fruit-bearing tree and divide it into small pieces which they mark with certain distinctive signs and scatter at random onto a white cloth. Then, the priest of the community if the lots are consulted publicly, or the father of the family if it is done privately, after invoking the gods and with eyes raised to heaven, picks up three pieces, one at time, and interprets them according to the signs previously marked upon them.[63]

The small twigs and leather strips wrapped in leather or woollen thread found in several graves, from both the Bronze Age and Iron Age – including the small container with sticks from Illerup Ådal – could perhaps have been used for casting lots in order to communicate with the Otherworld.

The Prophetess Veleda

The woman in the Blidegn burial may have been a cult specialist, perhaps more specifically a healer. In Old Norse, she might have been termed a *lifkona* 'herb-woman' or 'healer'.[64] All objects in the grave are of a type which indicates that they could have been used in rituals of healing, for protection against magic, or to obtain knowledge of future events.

In the Roman written sources pertaining to the Germanic territories, it is not uncommon to come across powerful women and cult specialists who were highly esteemed by their people. In books four and five of *Historiae*, Tacitus mentions a remarkable woman named Veleda. She is described as a member of the Bructeri tribe and as having enormous authority due to her prophetic power. As a prophetess she was worshipped by the Germanic tribes. She was a mediator between gods and humans, and her people gave her gifts after two important victories in which she had foretold the defeat of the Romans.[65]

The descriptions of Veleda and other powerful Germanic women in the Roman sources show parallels to the descriptions of *vǫlur* in Old Norse sources.[66] They fulfilled a role as mediators between gods and humans, and the prophetesses seem to have been highly regarded members of society. It is quite possible that they had forbears in the Bronze Age, as suggested in this chapter. Both men and women could be cult specialists in the Bronze Age, it seems, but concerning

the Iron Age, only graves of female cult specialists have hitherto been identified. But in the two weapon sacrifices at Nydam and Illerup Ådal, small containers for casting lots may indicate a magical practice among elite warriors as well.

The last grave to be mentioned here is somewhat different. There are no magical objects from animals or plants in the burial, but instead, a woman was buried with the oldest known amulet with a powerful magical word found in Northern Europe.

The Årslev Burial

In the summer of 1820, the tenant farmer Claus Sørensen came across a burial when he was digging for gravel in a hill in Årslev, a small village in central Fyn only 20 km north of the location of the Blidegn burial. The local minister, Riber, conducted the excavation of an inhumation grave in correspondence with Den kongelige Commission for Oldsagers Opbevaring i København (later to become the National Museum of Denmark). His report was exemplary, something you could not always expect at a time when archaeological excavations were rare and a scientist was still called a 'natural philosopher'. Riber found two bodies buried 1.2 m apart. They were both placed with the head pointing south and the feet north. This made him conclude that the bodies were buried in the same grave and that the grave was prehistoric. One of the buried bodies was richly equipped while the other was buried with no goods at all. He interprets the former as a female.[67] Between the two bodies was found what were believed to be three metal vessels. One of them was, in Riber's own words, filled with 'smaae menneskeben, som af et lidet barn' ('small human bones, as from a small child').[68] The child's bones were contained in the same vessel in which a Roman silver spoon was found. Later, Mogens Mackeprang interpreted the bones rather as bones of sheep or lamb, and his opinion was that they should be understood as food for the afterlife.[69]

The Skeletons

The skeletal remains of the deceased person with the rich jewellery were examined by doctor Helweg in Odense. He concluded that the deceased was a woman, an interpretation supported by the accompanying jewellery, thus supporting Riber's interpretation. The second skeleton without any grave goods was not found important enough to be examined, but in *Antiquarisk Tidsskrift* from 1843–45 it was noted that this skeleton was believed to be male.[70] Concerning the bones in the vessel, it is quite plausible that Riber was correct in interpreting them as the remains of a child, just as he rightly interpreted the skeleton with the jewellery as a woman. In the 1800s, it was normal to find human bones from old graves in the cemeteries around churches when digging a new grave. Such body parts were reburied in bone pits. A minister is likely to have seen a great many human bones as part of his office and would therefore be a reliable authority regarding the telling of human bones from animal bones. Thus, he could probably also tell the difference between human baby bones and sheep bones.

If Riber was right, the burial consisted of three individuals: a woman, a small child, and perhaps a man. The woman's dress was once richly decorated with golden ornaments, and it is believed that she was the most important person in the grave.[71]

The presumed child was small as it was placed in a fragmented bronze bowl measuring c. 35 cm in diameter.[72] If it was, in fact, a child, as Riber claims, it could only have been a newborn baby, perhaps wrapped in cloth and carefully placed in the middle of the grave, put to sleep in a container. The small silver spoon could then have been the last gift for the child. Burying the baby with a silver spoon in its mouth could perhaps reflect a wish for its prosperity and affluence in death. Unfortunately, the archaeological evidence is too fragmented and uncertain to give a clear answer. But perhaps, if we rely on Riber, mother and child died during childbirth – a common cause of death in prehistory – but that does not explain the cause of death of the presumed man. It has been suggested that he was a slave accompanying the woman in the afterlife.[73] Regrettably, it is not possible to re-examine the human bones from the grave, as they are now lost. Human bones were not regarded as worth collecting in the nineteenth century and often thrown away. Thus, we will never know exactly how many skeletons were in the grave, nor will we know their sex.

The Grave Goods

The grave goods were placed on or in the vicinity of the woman. A closer look at the bronze fragments showed that they stemmed, in fact, from several vessels: a large bronze dish, probably from the western Roman provinces; a bronze bucket of the Hemmoore type produced in the area west of Köln, most likely dated to third century AD; a bronze dish of unknown provenance; a bronze vessel of the Østlands type, dated to the second or third century AD; and bronze and silver fittings from a wooden bucket.[74]

The local workers excavated the burial under the supervision of Riber. His detailed and well-written field report from October 1820 relates that when the workers came across gold jewellery atop the woman's skeletal remains, they got excited and therefore it is not possible to say exactly where the jewellery was found. But the workers later pointed out the findspots as being the head and upper chest region and the hip-area. The jewellery was extraordinary; seven almost identical gold ornaments with inlayed semiprecious stones such as garnet and carneol and attached golden lion-masks (Fig. 21.5).[75] They may have been sewn onto a dress or head garment. The masks resemble jewellery found in the southeast European area, more precisely the Simleul Silvaniei treasure from present-day Romania, consisting of two depositions that are believed to belong together.

Figure 21.5 Seven golden lion-masks from the Årslev burial. Photo by National Museum of Denmark.

The treasure is now displayed in Vienna and Budapest. The general dating of the Årslev find, based on the jewellery and bronze vessels, is late fourth century, i.e. a century earlier than the Simleul Silvaniei treasure which was buried during the second quarter of the fifth century.[76]

Another interesting burial also merits a mention here. Lion-masks resembling the one found in Årslev were encountered in a woman's burial in Kobyakovo, east of Rostov-on-Don in south Russia, just east of the Azov Sea. She had received a rich burial with objects of gold and garments which were imported from as far away as Kazakhstan, northern Pakistan, and even China. The skeleton was perhaps that of a priestess. The buried woman had a richly decorated dress with two gold medallions with lion-heads that clearly resemble the Årslev lions. The burial is difficult to date, but based on a decorated perfume bottle it may be from the first century AD.[77]

Next to the golden masks, a gold fibula with inlays of garnets was found; it may come from Hungary or Central/Northern Europe.[78] A silver fibula and a golden finger ring set with garments as well as a small gold-ring were also among the jewellery of the woman, as was a false gold dinar made into a pendant. On the obverse was an image perhaps of the goddess Victoria and on the reverse an emperor in profile with the letters IINON. But the most intriguing object was a small rock crystal orb with Greek letters together with some other sign.

The Rock Crystal Orb

The small orb made of rock crystal probably served as an amulet (Fig. 21.6). It measures 2.9 cm in diameter and bears the Greek letters ΑΒΛΑΘΑΝΑΛΒΑ (*ablathanalba*) written on the widest point of the orb, where the rock crystal will naturally show the world upside down to anyone who looks through it. This optical phenomenon was used in Late Antiquity and the medieval period to make orbs appear more spectacular and to support their magical qualities. Underneath the inscription, an arrow or an anchor points downwards. The word is an attempted palindrome – it should read the same forwards and backwards – but it was misspelled. The word it was supposed to spell was ΑΒΛΑΝΑΘΑΝΑΛΒΑ (*ablanathanalba*). In *Antiquarisk Tidsskrift* 1843–45, an emendation was suggested, amending the inscription to *Ab-lanu-Atha*, meaning 'Father you are to us' – a well-known word of Hebrew origin used as a magical word more or less in the same manner as Abracadabra. The misspelling could be explained as a mistake made by one of the many illiterate workers that produced amulets in the Roman world without knowing how to spell or read.[79]

Orbs as part of a jewellery set are also known from the Simleul Silvaniei treasure where a large golden necklace with many charms had a central piece in the shape of an orb made from a smoky topaz. In the grave of Childerik (d. AD 481) in France, a similar rock crystal orb was found, but without any magic word. Rock crystal was often used

Figure 21.6 Crystal orb from the Årslev grave. Photo by Jim Lyngvild.

for amulets in the Roman Empire and in Medieval Europe. Only one other crystal orb has Greek words on it and it was found in Hungary. The orb is damaged on one side and the Greek letters are not as easily interpreted as those on the Årslev orb.[80]

Engraved Gems in Late Antiquity

In the first centuries AD, amulets and engraved gems and charms were very common. Christianity was at a nascent stage, and its small congregations were often persecuted by changing Roman emperors. Amulets were used in numerous settings, and they were believed to materially represent divine forces. Hundreds of amulets are preserved from the first centuries, now located in museums and private collections. Many more have no doubt perished due to their small size and the fragility of the materials they were made of, commonly precious metal, stone, animal parts, vegetable, or mineral matter, or just about anything that could fit into a small sack. They were tied to arms or hung around the neck. They were part of everyday dress and could contain biblical verses, angels' names, strings of letters, drawings, and/or magical words.[81]

During the Roman Imperial era, the production of gems became a mass industry, and consequently the motifs and styles became standard. Therefore, a dating of amulets and gems is difficult as the design also depends on the users and their taste. When worn, engraved amulets made of semi-precious stones were believed, according to Pliny the Elder, to ward off evil forces or specific demons, to counter poison, as well as to promote any good cause. It was believed that a demon dwelt in each gem, and that a secret relationship existed between the semi-precious stones and the stars because of their similar sparkle.[82] Therefore, it was thought that the gem contained extraordinary magical power of protective and astrological character. Pliny provides a long list of precious and semi-precious stones that were believed to possess the power to cure disease. Rock crystal (*Crystallum*) was believed to come from ice, and it was expensive.[83] The gems ceased to be prevalent around the beginning of the fourth century AD. The reason for the decline of the art of gem engraving is not clear.[84]

Ablanathanalba

The word *ablanathanalba* was commonly used in both Greek/Roman and Early Christian magic. It is often associated with the god Abrasax (in Latin), Abraxas (in Greek). His name appears in magical papyri and on so many amulets that the name itself has become synonymous with amulets.[85] He was a composite divinity, his name is associated with the year's 365 days, and his name has seven letters like the number of days in a week; the number seven was perceived as a divine number in old Babylonic, Jewish, and Christian beliefs, referring to the seven heavenly bodies: five known planets, the sun, and the moon. This mysterious god, believed to fight against evil, emerged just before the dawn of Christianity. Abrasax unofficially became part of the Early Christian belief systems.[86]

Magic was thus an important part of Early Christian belief in a time when many different forms of Christianity were practised. This was before the time when Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire; the New Testament was only canonised in the fourth century.[87]

In the first centuries AD, especially Christian Gnostics[88] used magic as part of their worship, including in divinatory practices. They combined Christianity, philosophy, astrology, and magic in their mystical search for the correct way to return their soul or spark to the divine being in heaven. Gnosticism was condemned as heretic by the Catholic Church in the fourth century, and many gnostic writings were then forbidden and consequently burned.

However, in Egypt many Gnostic texts and spells survived hidden in the desert sand. On Coptic magical papyri from Egypt, the word *ablanathanalba* often appears. It can be written in the shape of a wing or a triangle, as:

ΑΒΛΑΝΑΘΑΝΑΛΒΑ
ΑΒΛΑΝΑΘΑΝΑΛΒ
ΑΒΛΑΝΑΘΑΝΑΛ
ΑΒΛΑΝΑΘΑΝΑ
ΑΒΛΑΝΑΘΑΝ
ΑΒΛΑΝΑΘΑ
ΑΒΛΑΝΑΘ
ΑΒΛΑΝΑ
ΑΒΛΑΝ
ΑΒΛΑ
ΑΒΛ
ΑΒ
Α

In one Coptic spell, the word was used to drive evil forces from a pregnant woman in an exorcism calling upon angels to protect the mother and child.[89] In the case of the Årslev burial, the amulet inscribed with (a version of) the word proved useless, if the grave is interpreted as that of a mother who died in childbirth and was buried with her child. But the word was used commonly in many kinds of magical spells, and the Årslev woman may not even have understood the word, but only known that it was precious, mysterious, magical, and therefore rendered the amulet powerful.

The fact that the amulet was not set in a piece of jewellery may suggest that it was used in rituals. Most amulets in the Roman world were worn in small sacks, and this was likely also how the crystal gem in the Årslev burial was carried by its owner.

Female Prophetesses in Early Christianity

On the crystal gem from the Årslev grave, a small arrow pointing downwards has been convincingly interpreted as

an Early Christian anchor.[90] This would make the small gem the northernmost amulet found with a Christian symbol on it. This raises the question of whether the woman in the Århslev burial was a Christian? Probably she was not. But it is possible that she used the crystal orb as a magical instrument for obtaining ritual power and for divination, as did several Christian groups during the Årslev woman's lifetime. It was not uncommon for both Gnostic and Christian women in the Roman world to engage in speaking prophesies and foretelling the future.

In the first four centuries of Christianity – which remained multiform and experimental during that time span – women's leadership in rituals was not unusual. From the second century, a wide variety of Christian groups included women in prominent positions. These groups were often designated 'gnostic' or 'heretical' exactly because women played central roles in them.[91] There are several examples of female Christian leaders in this era. A versified inscription from a now lost fragmented marble stone in the Basilican Cemetery of St Paul's in Rome testifies to this. The damage to the marble makes the text of the first line uncertain. The second line reads: 'uenerabilis fem[ina] episcopa Q' ('here lies the venerable woman, bishop Q').

This is a clear indication that a female religious leader designated as bishop existed in Rome in the fourth century, or earlier as the dating of the stone fragment is uncertain.[92]

Another example of women leaders in Early Christianity is Montanism, known to its adherents as 'New Prophecy', a Christian movement which relied on the prophecies of both men and women and which chose prophets as their Church leaders instead of relying on ordained priests. It was founded by Montanius together with two famous prophetesses, Maximilla and Priscilla. They are described by Epiphanus in *Panarion* 49.2.5:

> And among them women are bishops and women are presbyters and the like; as if no difference, they say, 'for in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female'.[93]

The New Prophecy movement included women leaders from the second century until the third quarter of the fourth century AD. They were located in Phrygia (today's central Turkey) but also in Constantinople, North Africa, and Rome. They expanded the roles of prophetesses to include public teaching, exhortation, leading penitential rites, and exercising other diaconal, presbyterial, and episcopal functions. Eventually, the Montanists came to be persecuted as heretics, and the last congregation was supposedly burnt inside their church in 722 by Emperor Leo III. [94]

If we accept the hypothesis that what the Årslev woman had in her grave was a gnostic amulet, bearing a Christian anchor,[95] the question remains whether she used it in rituals. Knowing or un-knowing of the potential of the inscribed word and sign on the crystal gem, she could perhaps have been a woman from the outskirts of the eastern part of the Roman Empire where prophetic women were part of Early Christian groups and congregations. The elaborate jewellery from the grave may point in the direction of such a conclusion.[96]

Still, the skeleton remains from the grave are now lost and it is not possible to extract any DNA or strontium isotopic samples from the remains. It is thus not possible to determine the origin of the woman in the grave. She could also have been a local dressed in exotic jewellery with golden lion-masks and a mysterious amulet that she did not know the original meaning of. But this does not rule out the possibility that she used it in rituals. On the contrary, the odd and different is often a strong ingredient in magic endeavours, and the crystal orb may have been perceived as such in the local magical tradition.

If we accept, for the sake of argument, the East Roman provenance of the buried woman, then it is a possibility that she was part of a cross-European elite, connected and supported by exogamous marriages, and perhaps this connection introduced to Southern Scandinavia new magical practices and beliefs that had developed in the Early Christian context.[97]

If, on the other hand, she was local, it is likely that the amulet was used in a local magical tradition. Either way, the Årslev woman could perhaps be regarded as a proto-*vǫlva*.

The Proto-*Vǫlur*: Cult Leaders in Prehistory

As we have seen, some burial material ranging from the Middle Bronze Age (1300–1100 BC) until the Late Roman Iron Age (AD 300–400) may be interpreted as the remains of ritual specialists and their tools. It seems that, during this period, both men and women acted as cult leaders, diviners, and healers in South Scandinavia – maybe with a component of shape shifting.

The four graves examined here contained objects likely understood by their owners as magic accoutrements which came from or were influenced by the Mediterranean world. From the Bronze Age, burials containing such artefacts include a cone shell and an Aesculapian snake, while the Blidegn burial and the Årslev grave, both from the Roman Iron Age, contained seeds from pine and an amulet, respectively. In the case of divination, casting lots, being shape-shifters, and foretelling the future, there are also strong links with what we know as *seiðr* from Old Norse literature.[98]

Currently, Old Norse magic, and especially the concept of *seiðr,* is thought to have its roots in the old ritual ways of shamanism inspired by the Sámi cultures in northern Scandinavia.[99] However, the presumed prophetic role of certain female ritual specialists from the Bronze Age to the Viking Age, in Denmark and across Scandinavia, may – in some aspects – have been affected by a Mediterranean tradition of magic and female prophetesses from polytheistic religions, as well as Early Christianity. Therefore, we cannot rule out

that the *vǫlva* and the phenomenon of *seiðr* may, at least in some ways, have been inspired by Classic Greek and Roman religions and by Early Christian groups alongside Sámi shamanism.

Overall, we can conclude that rituals that included divination (e.g. telling the future from the entrails of birds or casting lots to discover the will of the gods) and/or shapeshifting seem to be pervasive traits of ritual practices through more than a thousand years in South Scandinavia. In other words, the core ritual functions of the *vǫlur* and their kind, as described in the Old Norse sagas, seem to have a long history reaching back in time, recognisable in the archaeological record spanning from the Middle Bronze Age until the Iron Age and featuring both men and women as ritual specialists.

Notes

1. Price 2019; Mitchell 2020; Sundqvist 2020.
2. *Antiquarisk Tidsskrift* 1843–45; Herbst 1848; Boye 1889; Mikkelsen 1938.
3. Pentz 2007.
4. Jensen 2003.
5. Stefánsson 2005: 202–5.
6. Janowitz 2001: 1–9.
7. Meyer & Smith 1994: 2; Janowitz 2002: 99.
8. Price 2019: 63–5.
9. Mitchell 2020: 655.
10. Price 2019: 64.
11. Stefánsson 2005: 202–5; Price 2019: 235–41.
12. Merriam Webster Dictionary.
13. Herbst 1848; Boye 1889; Winge 1904.
14. Goldhahn 2009: 78–87.
15. Jensen 2002: 301.
16. Herbst 1848.
17. Herbst 1848; Winge 1904.
18. Kristensen 2009.
19. Herbst 1848; Winge 1904; Jensen 2002: 301–3.
20. Randsborg 1993; Kaul 1998; Bergerbrant 2007.
21. Goldhahn 2009: 78–87.
22. *Antiquarisk Tidsskrift* 1843–45: 207.
23. Herbst 1848: 349–50.
24. Winge 1904: 317.
25. Goldhahn 2019: 53–5, 91.
26. Flower 2008; Goldhahn 2019: 57.
27. Varberg *et al.* 2015.
28. Goldhahn 2019.
29. Lomborg 1966; Glob 1970; Goldhahn 2019: 86.
30. Lomborg 1966.
31. Lomborg 1966; Glob 1970: 93.
32. Nielsen 1944; Jensen 2002: 302–4.
33. Kaul 2003.
34. Goldhahn 2019: 86.
35. Boye 1889.
36. Hundt 1997.
37. Boye 1889.
38. The work by Herluf Winge from 1904 was kindly brought to my attention by the Zoological Museum in Copenhagen in 2013, when I was working with the Maglehøj grave material. For the first mention, see Varberg 2015.
39. See Lomborg 1966; Glob 1970; Randsborg 1993; Jensen 2002.
40. Winge 1904.
41. Winge 1904: 316.
42. Winge 1904: 317.
43. Kristensen 2009; Allentoft *et al.* 2018.
44. Wiggermann 1997; Ananiades 2010.
45. Kaul 1998.
46. Stefánsson 2005: 146–51.
47. Varberg 2009; 2013: 153.
48. Varberg 2013; Goldhahn 2019: 216–27.
49. Sprockhoff 1956.
50. For a more elaborate discussion, see Varberg 2013.
51. Kaul 2004: 190–204; Varberg *et al.* 2015; Goldhahn 2019.
52. Winge 1904.
53. Mackeprang 1936.
54. Meyer & Smith 1999; Quast 2011.
55. McNamara 2010.
56. Mikkelsen 1938.
57. Mikkelsen 1938: 37–8; McNamara 2010.
58. Mikkelsen 1938.
59. Mikkelsen 1938: 29.
60. Riis & Frölich 2020.
61. Ilkjær 1993: 97–9.
62. Engelhardt 1970: 18.
63. Rivers 1999.
64. Mitchell 2020: 658.
65. Levene & Fyfe 1997.
66. Levene & Fyfe 1997. See also Dobat 2009.
67. Mackeprang 1940; Storgaard 1990.
68. Passage from a letter dated to 18 October 1820 from minister Riber to the kgl. Commission for Oldsagers Opbevaring; author's translation; after Storgaard 1990: 23.
69. Mackeprang 1940.
70. *Antiquarisk Tidsskrift* 1843–45: 209–11.
71. Storgaard 1990; Pentz 2007.
72. Storgaard 1990: 27.
73. Pentz 2007.
74. Storgaard 1990.
75. Storgaard 1990: 23–4.
76. Storgaard 1990; Kunst Historisches Museum Wien (n.d.).
77. Treister 1997.
78. Mackeprang 1940; Storgaard 1990.
79. Pentz 2007.
80. Mackeprang 1940; Kornbluth 2019; 2020.
81. Janowitz 2001: 56.
82. Sagiv 2018: 10–11.
83. *Naturalis historia*, book 37, ch. 10 (Eichholz 1962: 183–5).
84. Sagiv 2018: 2–26.
85. Lecouteux 2015: 48–50.
86. Pentz 2007; Lecouteux 2015: 48–50.
87. MacCulloch 2009: 215–22.
88. The word Gnosticism is derived from the Greek word *gnósis* which translates to knowledge. Gnosticism is a term for a philosophical and religious movement in the Early Christian era, particularly the second century. Traditionally, it is explained as a syncretism of Christianity and Greek/Roman philosophy and religion (Skovmand 2017: 26–7).

89. Meyer & Smith 1999: 120–4.
90. Pentz 2007.
91. Lewis 2021.
92. Madigan 2021.
93. Williams 2013: 23; Tabbernee 2021.
94. Jensen 2003: 352–62; Tabbernee 2021.
95. Pentz 2007.
96. Storgaard 1991; Pentz 2007.
97. Storgaard 1991.
98. Mikkelsen 1938; Dobat 2009; Price 2019: 364–6.
99. Price 2019: 328.

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22

Women of Another World: Some Reflections on Religious Aspects of Pre-Christian Scandinavian Female Names

Sofie Laurine Albris

Introduction

Sacral personal names have played a part in discussions between philologists and historians of religion, concerning cult leaders and ritual specialists in Iron and Viking Age Scandinavia.[1] Such discussions, however, have usually focused on male names, although many written sources describe female religious specialists, such as the *vǫlva*, as well as cultic leadership performed by housewives and queens.[2] Both literary and iconographic evidence point towards close connections between female political power, female ritual leadership, and female divination.[3]

Sacral elements are found in names of both men and women and are a prominent feature in Viking Age female names.[4] This chapter argues that the use of sacral elements in women's names was part of the articulation of ideal social identities. It further proposes that giving, writing, and depositing names could play a role in rites of passage in the individual's life. When given, a name tied the individual into a web of ancestors and kin, while expressing wishes for the person's character and the roles they would fulfil in life. Thus, a name was not only a label, but a social identity encompassing the past, the present, and the future.

This chapter will examine the occurrence and representation of name elements with sacral meaning in female personal names in Scandinavian Iron and Viking Age runic inscriptions. Readings and interpretations of inscriptions often differ from one runologist to another, and therefore I mainly follow Lena Peterson's two lexicons of runic names.[5] Semantic content is often considered to have been irrelevant in name choice, and it is clear that we have to be careful with interpretations. However, as I have argued elsewhere, name semantics could have worked on an associative level corresponding with other communication forms such as iconography and poetry.[6] To begin with, I will introduce the naming system and the topic of sacral names.

Naming Traditions and Sacral Names in Pre-Christian Scandinavia

The naming system of pre-Christian Scandinavia followed a Germanic tradition with deep Indo-European roots where names were formed of words from the general vocabulary.[7] Some names originate in functional designations, and it can be difficult to distinguish names from other types of words.[8] Inherited from Indo-European systems are the *dithematic names* that combine two word-elements from the general language.[9] Dithematic names were a key component in *variation naming*, where name elements from family members were reused in new names to express kinship relations.[10] This formed long varieties of arbitrary word constellations that were generally not meaningful as constructions.[11] It is a matter of discussion whether meaning would still have been at work for the individual elements in such cases. The correspondence between themes in name semantics, poetry, art, and ritual points towards the individual name elements being essentially meaningful.[12] For example, words for animals in personal names have parallels in the species depicted in animal art, where both names and visual expressions focus on animals related to battlefields and warrior ideology.[13] This means that name semantics can be seen as operating within the general discourse and rhetoric of pre-Christian society and would have played a part in the way social identities were articulated.

The selection of words used in Germanic personal names circled around three main themes: hero worship/warrior ideology, kinship, and religion.[14] The religious aspect is represented in so-called sacral names, and these can be defined as names constructed with words that refer to religious phenomena, in this context of a non-Christian kind.[15] In his 2009 survey of pre-Christian sacral names from Scandinavia, Per Vikstrand divides the names into three groups. The first consists of dithematic names that

incorporate designations for and names of gods and divine beings (such as **ansuz*, 'god', **albiz*, 'elf', or deity names *Þórr* and *Freyr*). The second comprises names that incorporate adjectives with the meaning 'holy' (**hailaga* and **wīhaz*). Third, a range of male names are thought to derive from meaningful compounds that could designate cult functionaries. The idea is that these came into the general naming vocabulary via their use as bynames.[16] Some scholars have argued that such names indicate the existence of specialised ritual leaders, while others believe that cult leadership was a function taken on as part of general leadership roles.[17]

With some exceptions, first elements in dithematic names are used freely between male and female names, whereas second elements are more restricted in terms of gender. In Indo-European and Germanic tradition, many female names were created by *Movierung* which is a term for gender transformation of names, mostly feminisation of masculine names or second elements.[18] This could for example serve to name a girl after her male relatives.

Name Giving, Personhood, and Social Identity

We do not know much about the rituals related to name giving in pre-Christian Scandinavia. After birth, naming was part of a series of special practices that served to incorporate the child into its kin and society. These seem to have included pouring water on the child and name giving (often by the father), and also the first feeding of the child at the breast.[19] The pouring of water and naming are known from other Germanic sources and are thus not practices confined to Scandinavia. These ritualised actions accepted the child into the family, but simultaneously gave it personhood and acknowledged its legal rights. Before these rituals were performed, the child could be left outside to die if the family were unwilling or unable to care for it.[20] Marianne Hem Eriksen has argued that new-borns were not acknowledged as full social beings, but rather seen as animate objects before the incorporating rituals had taken place.[21] Being named was thus part of acquiring personhood. Indeed, named objects could also be perceived as persons.[22]

Although semantics played a part, the most important purpose of name choice was to mark genealogical relationships, either by alliteration or shared elements between names of family members.[23] The child could also be given the full name of a deceased relative, and there are signs that the character of this ancestor was then believed to reappear in the child, which indicates that an essential part of a person's being was tied to their name.[24] Names or name elements could thus work as heirlooms that connected the new individual with the past. The literary sources attest that, upon naming, both of infants and when adults changed their names or gained a byname, a gift was given to 'fasten' the name (ONP *nafnfestr*). It is worth considering whether some objects inscribed with names should be seen in such a context.

Naming did not merely put a label on a new individual, it was also part of a process of obtaining a personhood, becoming accepted and embedded into the social system and connecting with the past, present, and future of the family. The choice of name elements can be seen as expressing the family's expectations regarding the roles the new child would fulfil in life and their hopes for its personal qualities. These qualities may have been gained through semantic meaning, through transference from a relative via the name, or both.[25]

There does not have to be a direct relation between the meaning of a name and the life that was lived by the individual carrying the name. I argue that names, rather, express ideals pertaining to social identities, functions, and roles in a way that may be analogous to, or even directly linked to, burial assemblages. Siv Kristoffersen sees the combinations of objects in elite female burials as 'consequences of a norm that represents associations linked to understandings of identities and ideals (…) not, then, necessarily a direct expression of that identity, but in one way or another they are related to ideas associated with the identity or role represented in the burial'.[26] Name choice can be regarded in a similar way: name elements express an ideal vocabulary of roles and norms, not necessarily reflecting the actual activities or functions the person came to fulfil. While the burial ritual, through its use of role defining objects, can be perceived as the last demonstration of these ideals at the end of life, name giving can be viewed as a ritual that defined them at life's beginning.

Names in Runes

The importance of names is reflected in their prominent position in runic inscriptions – the primary writing form from the second century AD to the end of the Viking Age. Personal names are often central or the only subjects of inscriptions on both objects and monuments. Runic literacy was transferred in narrow elite groups, especially in the Iron Age.[27] Within these small circles, readers probably knew (of) named individuals and understood references to their connections and qualities. Communicating the social identity encoded in a name may have been an important reason for writing names, and the use of runes in the pre-Christian period can be characterised as social communication centred around individuals and their social identities.

The runic material is dominated by male names. For the Iron Age, the number of inscriptions is limited and there are often disagreements regarding interpretations. Peterson's 2004 registry lists around 80 names with a few later finds. We have the unfortunate problem that a range of Iron Age names ending in *-ō* cannot be determined linguistically as either West Germanic male or local female forms.[28] We do not know whether a name such as *Harisō*, on a brooch from Himlingøje, in Sjælland, Denmark is male or a feminised

diminutive of a word meaning 'warrior'. This leaves us with a weak and uncertain material. For the Viking Age, we are better off, with c. 1500 individual name articles in Peterson's Viking Age lexicon and a ratio of about one to three between female and male names.[29]

For both periods, we must expect that runes only reflect the most resourceful strata of society. There is probably a wider social range of males than females, as male names appear in more varied contexts. With some exceptions, pre-Christian women's names appear mostly in funerary contexts, either on objects from burials or on monuments. The uneven distribution makes it difficult to draw conclusions about differences over time or between genders.

Sacrality in Iron Age Female Names

Although religious themes are a common feature of contemporary names in various Germanic areas, relatively few sacral names are found in Scandinavian Elder Futhark inscriptions (c. AD 50–700). We find a couple of male names with the first element **ansuz*, 'pagan god': *Ansugastiz* (god+guest) and *Ansugislaz*, (god+arrowshaft),[30] however, the material is dominated by themes relating to battle and war. The issues that surround identification of female names render the Elder Futhark evidence scarce. I have selected three examples of potentially female names with potentially sacral content, all occuring as parts of grave assemblages. All three are, moreover, problematic in terms of gender and linguistic interpretation. It must be noted that a buried name did not necessarily refer to the buried person, but the presence of a (sacral) name is nonetheless an important feature of the assemblage.

On the catch plate of a rosette fibula from a third-century AD grave from Værløse, Sjælland, we find the runes **alugod** (Fig. 22.1).[31] This is interpreted as a likely personal name, composed of the first element *alu* and a second element *god*.[32] The name is unusual and lacks a grammatical ending, meaning that the full name could have been *Alugodaz* (male) or *Alugodu* (female). The word *alu* especially occurs as a formulaic term in a ritual language on the fifth-century bracteates. Although the word has been linked to 'ale', its exact meaning is elusive, but is generally thought to be something like 'protection'.[33] The second element *god* is otherwise unknown as a name element. Peterson carefully suggests the adjective **gōda*, 'good'.[34] *Alugod*, whether male or female, may have referred to the ritual sphere, or the word *alu* may have had apotropaic intentions.

The fibula was buried with a young woman, probably only 15–16 years of age.[35] The grave contained a Roman ladle and sieve set, other brooches and pins, and ceramic vessels. The fibula is one in seven from Late Roman Iron Age South Scandinavia that carry inscriptions, of which four seem to have been made in the same workshop.[36] Three present male names, while Værløse (*Alugod*), Skovgårde (*Lamō*, 'the lame one'), and Himlingøje 1 (*Harisō*, 'little warrior') have names with uncertain gender. Lisbeth Imer argues that the names refer to the makers of the brooches rather than the owners, and she therefore rejects the possibility that they are female.[37] The Værløse catch plate is decorated in tremolo technique with lines around the edge and a swastika. As Christiane Zimmermann has remarked, the inscription is carved with a different tool in simpler lines

Figure 22.1 The foot of the Værløse rosette fibula with decoration and the inscription ***alugod****. Photo by Roberto Fortuna and Kira Ursem, National Museum of Denmark. CC-BY-SA.*

that cut the decoration, and it is thus secondary to the making of the object.[38] Zimmerman sees the fibula inscriptions as personal communicative acts referring to male runecarvers, connecting them with the female owner of the brooch. Both these interpretations assume that the purpose behind all Late Roman fibula inscriptions must have been the same. Therefore, they also focus on explaining the names as male. However, the possibility that *Alugod* and other names were female cannot be ruled out.[39]

We also find inscriptions on a small selection of Migration Period brooches from Norway.[40] A brooch from a grave in Eikeland, Rogaland, has the inscription: **ek wiz wiwio writu i runoz asni**, normally interpreted as: 'I Wiz, for Wiwjō, write runes in asni.' Here, it is clearly a male runecarver who is dedicating the inscription to a woman. The word *asni* is uninterpreted. The two names *Wiz* and *Wiwjō*, belong to a group of complicated and much discussed names beginning with *Wī*-, that also include the inscription **wiwaz** on the Tune stone and **wiwila** on the Veblungsnes rock.[41] Basically, the *Wī*-names may have different root etymologies of which the two most relevant possibilities are 'battle, fight' or 'holy'. While the other examples are male names, *Wīwjō* is a female derivation of the male *Wiwaz.*[42] *Wiz* is thought to be a contracted **Wīhaz* or *Wīwaz*.

A relation between *Wiz* and *Wīwjō* is marked by alliteration. Ottar Grønvik in his study of the inscription suggested they were husband and wife.[43] However, the alliteration implies that it was more likely a kinship relation such as sister and brother or parent and child.[44] As a feminisation, the semantic content in *Wīwjō* could be considered secondary. Yet, it does not follow that the sacral meaning went unnoticed.

The rather small relief brooch was found in a female grave from the latest part of the Migration Period.[45] Although relief brooches belong to the absolute elite, the Eikeland grave was not ostentatiously rich, but still well equipped with copper alloy brooches, pins, and ceramic vessels.[46] It did not contain keys or tools for textile work, which are usually thought to underline the role of the housewife in this type of female grave.[47] The most noticeable feature was the brooch, which was placed in an unusual position, flanked by two equal-armed brooches.[48] The runes were carved on the back of the head plate, hidden from view when the brooch was worn. Marks of wear show that it had been used after the inscription was made.

Large ornamental brooches that required specialised craftmanship were part of a traditional costume among Scandinavian aristocratic women from c. AD 200 into the Viking Age. These ornaments were emblematic of an ideal female role, and some specimens were passed down through generations, up to 100 years before deposition.[49] This elaborate brooch, itself acting as an agent in communicating an ideal female identity, was given an additional reference in runes to two individuals with sacral names, amplifying its significance and social meaning.[50]

We might consider whether the writing of names in runes on special objects could have something to do with the name gifts, *nafnfestr*, mentioned above. These objects, or the act of inscribing the runes on them may have activated conceptual and ritual relations between social roles and ideals in connection with rites of passage.

Another Migration Period inscription from a funerary context is found on the Stenstad stone, with the runes **igijonhalaR**, '*Igjō's* or *Ing(w)ijō's* stone'. Again, we have an ambiguous name. It can be male or female and is either a derivation of **ig*-, 'snake' or of **Ingwia*- derived from **Ingwaz*.[51] The latter is assumed to originate from the name of a Germanic god and is maybe also a part of the tribal name known in Latin as *Ingvaeones*/*Ingaevones*, mentioned by Pliny the Elder and Tacitus.[52] The names in *Ing*-, common in Germanic languages and Viking Age Scandinavia, may therefore be considered indirectly sacral.[53]

The stone was found in 1781, c. 60 cm below the surface of a mound in Telemark, Norway. Approximately 130 cm further below the stone was a female grave in a small stone cist.[54] The grave contained ceramic vessels, one of which had a glass shard embedded in the bottom. There was also a large cruciform brooch, a wooden bucket, and a silver clasp in Nydam Style. Kristoffersen dates the grave to D1 of the Migration Period.[55] The stone and the objects were sent to Denmark and later transferred to the collections that became the National Museum of Denmark. A gold ring of more than 200 g and a long iron object, which may have been a weaving sword, were later lost.

The inscription indicates that the stone itself was important, although it was, as far as we know, hidden from view since it was apparently placed inside the gravemound. The stone is peculiar, of white quartz and almost egg-shaped (Fig. 22.2), bringing to mind the Swedish *gravklot*-stones that have been suggested to imitate bread, and the Norwegian phallic stones, called 'holy white stones.'[56] Egg, bread, and phallus all display associations to fertility. White stones had a special meaning in Iron Age ritual contexts, both in burials and wetland deposits.[57] It is tempting to see this stone as a fertility symbol referring to a special individual.

In various Roman and Greek sources, we find references to Germanic seeresses that were contemporary with Alugod, Wīwjō, and Ing(w)ijō, some with names that scholars have related to their divinatory functions.[58] Most famous is *Veleda*, described by Tacitus, who lived secluded in a tower and was venerated with gifts.[59] Her name is thought to be derived from a Celtic term for a seeress.[60] Cassius Dio relates that Veleda's successor, *Ganna*, visited the Emperor Domitian together with the king of the Germanic tribe the Semnones.[61] Her name has been connected with Old Norse *gandr*, a term designating a type of magic or a kind of magic staff.[62] Another example is *Waluburg*, who is mentioned in a list of military personnel written on an ostracon (an inscribed ceramic shard) from Roman Egypt found on Elefantine Island. Waluburg is listed here as 'sibyl

Figure 22.2 The Stenstad stone, today part of a monument in Jægerspris, Denmark. Photo by Laurine Albris.

of the Semnones'. *Walu*- may be associated with Germanic **walus*, Old Norse *vǫlr*, 'staff'.[63] Michael Enright has argued that the evidence for these seeresses is too diverse for them merely to reflect a literary topos.[64] Further, they all seem to be linked to Germanic warlords, prophecies of war, and battle outcomes. We cannot exclude the possibility that such women also existed in Scandinavia.

If, however, we consider the three examples above as elite female burial assemblages, they only differ from the standard attire of their periods by the presence of the inscriptions and the potentially sacral names. The graves are not deviant/atypical or indicative of ritual specialists, rather, they follow the general norms. The names would therefore indicate that a religious aspect could be an integrated part of the established elite female role. The egg-shaped stone with fertility associations is, however, completely unique and may indicate that Ing(w)ijō had a special status in the community, although apparently not particularly connected with war.

Sacral Names in Viking Age Runic Inscriptions

After most Germanic groups converted, at least nominally, to Christianity in the third to sixth centuries AD, Viking Age Scandinavian naming practices developed on their own. We see a range of innovations, especially relating to sacral names that seem to affect female names more than male names.[65] The innovations reveal that the naming system and its elements were still an active and meaningful form of communication. It may be that Viking Age non-Christian names became part of a pagan construction of identity.

A remarkable new feature is the use of the deity names *Freyr* and *Þórr* as first elements.[66] Both deity names may be derived from appellatives meaning respectively 'lord' and 'thunder', which could have played a role in their entry into the personal naming system. Especially names in *Þórr-* quickly became popular, for example making up one fourth of the names in *Landnámabók.*[67] In Viking Age runic inscriptions, we can establish around 28 different male name constructions with *Þórr-*, such as *Þórrfastr* and *Þórrgrimʀ*, but only 13 different female constructions. Of these, the short form *Þóra* is the most common female name with 26 attested individuals.[68] The first element *Freyr-* is only attested in four male and four female individuals (*Frøydīs*, *Frøygunnr*, *Frøygærðr* and *Frøylaug*).

Next to the deity names, we find terms for divine beings, *alfr*, m., *áss* m., *dís*, f., and *goð*, n. To these may be added the word *ragn*, originally 'advice, decision', but in the Viking Age meaning 'divine powers'.[69] The words *áss* and *goð*, both meaning 'god, deity', are common as the first elements *Ās-/Ǣs-* and *Guð-* in both male and female names, with a majority of male names as is to be expected. The masculine word *alfr* was hitherto only used as first element in Germanic names, but now became a second element, mainly in the feminised form *-ælfʀ* (e.g. *Āsælfʀ*, *Auðælfʀ*, *Dīsælfʀ*, *Ragnælfʀ*, *Vīælfʀ)*. Although *-ælfʀ* is created through *Movierung* of the male element, we know of only one male named with *-alfʀ*, namely *Gæiralfʀ* on a stone from Gotland (G 57).

A completely new element in naming is *Dīs*/*-dīs*, which is exclusively found in female names as both first and second elements.[70] The word *dís* refers to a (minor) female deity.[71] Interesting in this connection is the eleventh-century Hassmyra stone, Västmanland, Sweden, commemorating a highly skilled housewife named *Oden-Dísa*. *Dísa* is a nickname-form to names in *-dís*. The deity name *Oden* has been added as a prefix, revealing that Dísa had some relation to Óðinn and maybe was associated with her practise of pagan beliefs.[72]

The second elements *-ælfʀ* and *-dīs* break with a convention wherein divine beings were never used as second elements in personal names-, a break that mainly occurs in female names. Philip Shaw argues that the predominance of innovations in female sacral names must be ascribed to a willingness to use unconventional names for children of lesser consequence, while more conservative choices were made for important children, such as male heirs.[73] What should also be considered here is that the names in *-ælfʀ* and *-dīs* mainly belong to the eastern Swedish material, where the majority of stones are from the eleventh century and thus from the period of conversion to Christianity.

Table 22.1 lists the female names from Early Viking Age pre-conversion inscriptions, based on the chronological division in Åkerström's study from 2019. This list reflects how most runestones from this period are found in the former Danish area (present-day Denmark and Southern Sweden).[74] Some women are named in more than one inscription. We find the second elements *-friðr*, *-hildr*, *-borg*, *-gunnr*, *-vī*, and the short forms *Ása*, *Tófa*, and *Þóra* (the latter only on portable objects). The first elements are *Ás-*, *Ragn-*, *Þiúð-*, *Þōr-*, *Orm-*, *Vī-*, *Guð-*, and *Sik-*. The elements *-ælfʀ* and *-dīs* are not represented and may then be later eastern Swedish inventions. Semantically, the Early Viking Age name elements represent only three domains: religion, battle, and aspects of representation and hospitality (loved, saver/helper, people). These words form a small catalogue of 'virtues of Viking Age elite ladies.' The religious theme is dominant, being represented in at least 14 of an estimated 18 individuals (depending on whether the *Þōrvī*-names represent separate persons).

The women in these inscriptions, especially those on the runestones, are among those with most resources and power in society.[75] Indeed, we find two queens, Þōrvī (Thyra) and Ásfriðr, as well as the wealthy Ragnhild who erected

Table 22.1 Female names from early Viking Age runic inscriptions (AD 700 – 950/970).

Name, status	*Signum*	*Object*	*Interpretation*
Ásfriðr (raiser, mother, and wife of king)	DR 2 Haddeby 2	Runestone	God + loved
Ásfriðr (raiser, mother, and wife of king)	DR 4 Haddeby 4	Runestone	God + loved
Ragnhild (raiser, sister, wife)	DR 230 Tryggevælde	Runestone	Divine powers + battle
Ragnhild (raiser, wife)	DR 209 Glavendrup	Runestone	Divine powers + battle
Þiúðborg (commemorated)	DR 188 † Ørbæk	Runestone	People + saver/helper
Þórgunnr (commemorated, helper/mate of the *bryti*)	DR 40 Randbøl (uncertain date)	Runestone	Þōrr + battle
Þōrvī (Thyra) (received a mound)	DR 29 Bække 1	Runestone	Þōrr + vī
Þōrvī (Thyra) (commemorated, lady, *drotning*)	DR 26 Læborg	Runestone	Þōrr + vī
Þōrvī (Thyra) (commemorated, wife of king, *Danmarkaʀ bot*).	DR 41 Jelling 1	Runestone	Þōrr + vī
Þiúðvī (raiser, wife)	DR 239 Gørlev 1	Runestone	People + vī
Tófa (commemorated together with husband, a *þegn*)	DR 143 Gunderup 1	Runestone	Short form to names in Þōrr-
Vīborg (commemorated, mother)	DR 30 Bække 2	Runestone	Vī + saver/helper
Ása (mother of commemorated)	DR 333 Örja	Runestone	Short form to names in Ás- 'god'
Guðfríðr (raiser, may be male, Guðfreðr)	DR 188 † Ørbæk	Runestone	God + loved
Ormhild (?, said something)	DR MLUHM1983–84; 131 Lilla Köpinge	Comb, bone	Snake + battle
Ása (? uncertain inscription)	DR EM85;350 Hemdrup	Wooden stick	Short form to names in Ás- 'god'
Ása (rewarded with wealth?)	DR 263 Skabersjö	Brooch, copper alloy	Short form to names in Ás- 'god'
Þóra (is scorned, according to inscription)	U ANF1937;172 Björkö	Dresspin, bone	Short form to names in Þōrr-
Þóra (?)	N A211 Slemmedal	Mount, silver	Short form to names in Þōrr-
Þórfríðr (receiver of knife handle)	DR EM85;348 Lindholm Høje	Knife handle, horn	Þōrr + loved
Þórfríðr (?, may be male, Þórfreðr)	N A210 Slemmedal	Mount, silver	Þōrr + loved
Sikridr (owner of bucket buried in double female grave)	N 138 Oseberg II	Bucket, wood	Victory + loved

impressive monuments for two deceased husbands. Many of the stone inscriptions contain various sacral references in addition to sacral names. The Glavendrup inscription from Fyn, states that Ragnhild's husband was *goða véa*, 'godi of the shrine', and features a Þórr hallow-formula and a curse for those who might want to destroy the monument.[76] Her other stone, Tryggevælde, from Stevns in Sjælland, which is thought to be earlier and is located in a rich Iron/Viking Age environment, includes a similar curse.[77] Þiúðvī who raised the Gørlev 1 stone also included various formulas, including the *þistil*-*mistil*-*kistil*-formula.[78] This stone probably stood in the vicinity of the magnate's farm at Tissø and can thus be seen in relation to the cult place and wealth centre found here. The Læborg stone, erected to a Þōrvī, who Lisbeth Imer argues could be identical with queen Þōrvī of Jelling 1, features no less than two Thor's hammer ornaments (Fig. 22.3).[79]

Formations with **wīha*-, 'holy', mentioned above, appear in the Viking Age as a first element *Vī*- in a long range of combinations in both male and female names, with a greater variety in male compositions.[80] As a second element, masculine -*vēʀ* (<**wīhaz*), feminine -*vī* (< **wīhō*), the number of female combinations is double that of the male number (8 male, 16 female). The male second element -*vēʀ* has been considered to originate in a designation for a cult specialist.[81] May female -*vī* at an early point have represented a feminine aspect of this kind of function, rather than merely a feminised reflection of the male element?

It is likely that the names in Table 22.1 first of all reflect the association of (elite) women with the religious sphere and express wishes to connect female offspring with sacral concepts. This could be seen as a reaction to the spread of Christianity, but it could also be related to the fact that females born into the elite were expected to take on sacral roles.

Final Remarks

Olof Sundqvist has recently discussed how research has established a binary model for pre-Christian cultic leadership, where female ritual leadership was viewed as belonging to the private sphere, the household, or within simple and peripheral fertility sanctuaries of lesser social importance, whereas male leaders performed larger public rituals related to war, to the *Æsir* gods, and in circumstances of great social significance.[82] This binary model also presupposes a religious system wherein there is a spatial and social division between private and public spheres, and where female religious authority was limited to the former. As Sundqvist points out, there are several problems with this

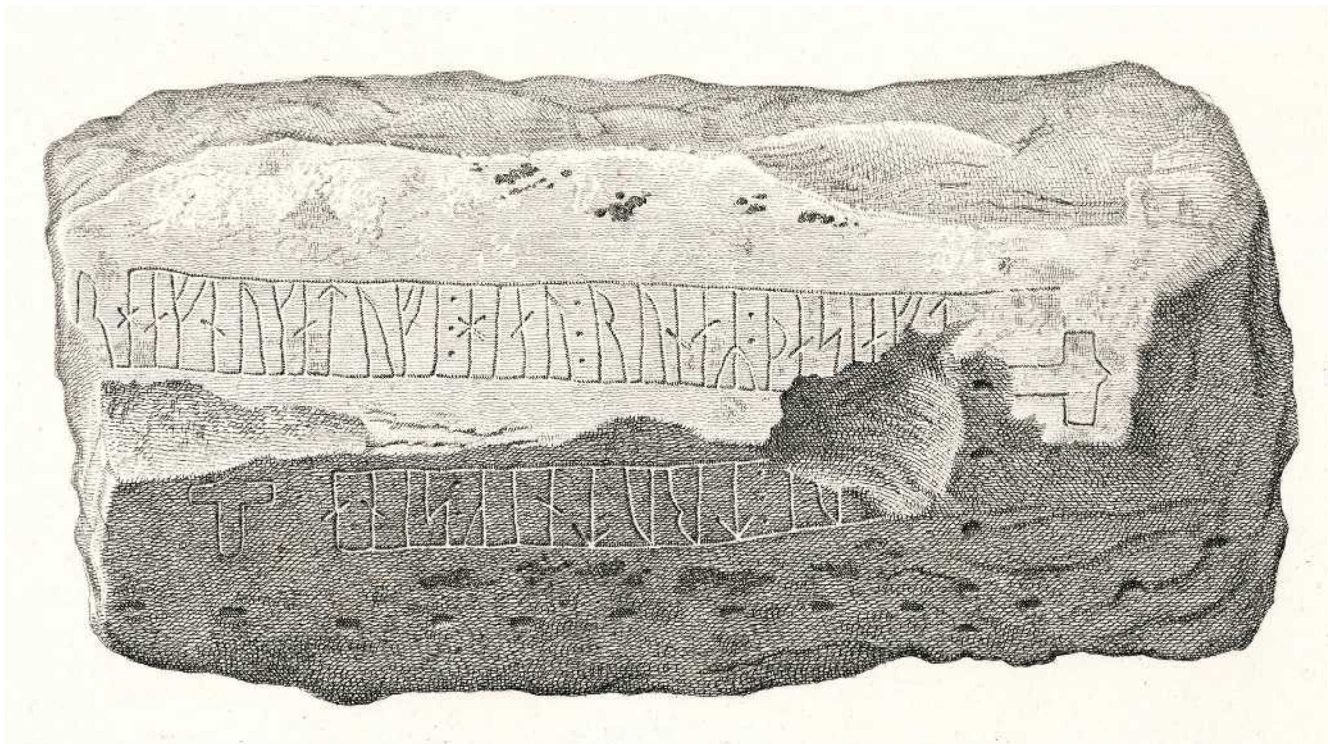

Figure 22.3 The Læborg runestone with the inscription flanked by two Thor's hammers, perhaps serving as protection of the monument. The missing piece was later discovered and has today been remounted on the stone, thus restoring the name Þurui. Drawing by Zeuten, etched by I. Kornerup for the 1875 publication Kongehøjene i Jelling og deres Undersøgelse efter Kong Frederik VII's Befaling i 1861*, Det Kongelige Nordiske Oldskriftselskab.*

model. Firstly, the division between private and public may not be meaningful in a pre-Christian context. It may, in fact, be a projection of Medieval Christian religious organisation onto descriptions of earlier periods made by the Christian authors of the Icelandic sagas. Secondly, there is evidence to show that female cult leadership was not limited to a private, secluded sphere, nor to minor fertility rituals and magic practices.[83] Women also performed ritual functions in relation to war, death, and rulership. Sundqvist stresses that we need to view both ritual space and gender roles in a different way if we are to understand the complexity of pre-Christian religion.

In this chapter, evidence from personal names has been employed to show how sacral associations were an integrated part of the norms and ideals surrounding women of the elite. The personal name material thus also contradicts the binary model. Scandinavian and common Germanic female personal names inform us about conceptual relations between women and religious concepts that were deeply embedded in Germanic societies. The innovations within sacral female naming traditions that occur in the Viking Age show us that such relations were still vivid at this time. As a testimony to perceptions of female ideals, names of women contribute to our understanding of the archaeological evidence related to the roles, functions, and identities of women. As sources, the names do not directly reflect the activities of each individual named woman; rather, they illustrate symbolic relations between women and religious concepts that had their roots in pre-Viking Age societies. Still, it is clear that women *did* take part in and had leading roles in ritual life, and maybe the sacral elements in names of high-status females do express expectations from the name givers that the child would grow up to take on such functions as part of her role as a leading female.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. Sundqvist 2003; Vikstrand 2009: 23–4; Vasshus 2022.
2. Sundqvist 2020: 146.
3. See also Ljungkvist 2011; Simek 2015.
4. Shaw 2011.
5. Peterson 2004; 2007.
6. Albris 2020.
7. Cf. Peterson 1988; 1994; Andersson 1998.
8. Peterson 1988: 121−2.
9. Shaw 2011: 151.
10. Shaw 2011: 157−9.
11. Peterson 1988: 123−5; Andersson 1998: 28; Vikstrand 2009: 7−9.
12. See discussion in Schulte 2019: 86; Albris 2020: 6–9.
13. Müller 1968; Høilund Nielsen 2002; Hedeager 2004; Albris 2020.
14. Andersson 1998.
15. See also Vikstrand 2009: 5–6.
16. e.g. Kousgård Sørensen 1989.
17. Sundqvist 2003.
18. Shaw 2011.
19. Steinsland 2007: 364–5; Mejsholm 2009: 103–6.
20. Mundal 1987.
21. Eriksen 2017.
22. Cf. Torfing 2016; Røstad 2018.
23. Nedoma 2018: 1586.
24. Mejsholm 2009:105–6, and references therein.
25. A famous example is Gregory of Tours' account that Clothar II was named from his grandfather Clothar I in the wish that he would fulfil the meaning of the name ('fame' + 'army'), and possess the power of his grandfather (see quote in Nedoma 2018: 1586).
26. Kristoffersen 2015a: 399.
27. Imer 2015: 67−90, 131−2.
28. Cf. summary and discussion in Antonsen 2002: 261–73.
29. Peterson 2007: 11.
30. Vikstrand 2009: 8–9.
31. Imer 2015: 331
32. Peterson 2004: 6.
33. Høst Heyerdahl 2006: 171–83; Vikstrand 2009: 12–14; Wicker 2021: 131–2.
34. Peterson 2004: 6.
35. Lund Hansen 1998: 198.
36. Imer 2011: 15.
37. Imer 2011: 17–23.
38. Zimmermann 2010: 94, 98.
39. Nor is it impossible that women could make jewellery or cut runes, cf. Wicker 2012.
40. Kristoffersen 2015a.
41. See Peterson 2004: 18–19; Vikstrand 2009: 10–12; Vasshus 2022.
42. Peterson 1994: 147–9; 2004: 18–19. An alternative interpretation of **wiwio** is that it is a genitive plural of **wīwijōz* 'descendants of *Wīwaz*'; Syrett 1994: 213, note 166; Knirk 2015: 421.
43. Grønvik 1987: 58.
44. Meißner 2012: 187–91.
45. Kristoffersen 2015b.
46. Kristoffersen 2015b: 236.
47. Kristoffersen 2015a: 398–9. For a discussion of the roles of keys and locking in relation to social status in first millennium Scandinavia, see Berg 2021: 420–35.
48. Kristoffersen 2015b: 435.
49. Røstad 2018: 76, 83–8.
50. Røstad 2018: 88.
51. Peterson 2004: 12.
52. Pliny, *Natural History* 4,28 (Mayhoff 1906), Tacitus *de Origine et situ Germanorum,* 2,3 (Furneaux 1900).
53. Peterson 2007: 135–6; Vikstrand 2009: note 7.
54. Undset 1878: 16–20; Straume 2002.

55. Kristoffersen 2000: 263.
56. Christiansson 1948; Stylegar 2009.
57. Monikander 2010: 35–6.
58. For overviews on these women, see Enright 2011; Simek 2015. On the Greek/Roman sources, see Okamura 1994.
59. Tacitus' *Historiae* 4.61 (Levene & Fyfe 1997: 213–16).
60. Enright 2011: 146.
61. Okamura 1994: 290; Enright 2011: 147.
62. See Simek 1995: 99, 370 and Enright 2011: 150 for a discussion of these name etymologies.
63. Okamura 1994: note 26.
64. Enright 2011: 147–50.
65. Shaw 2011: 159–61.
66. Vikstrand 2009: 19–20; Shaw 2011: 152–3, 156.
67. Vikstrand 2009: 19–20.
68. Peterson 2007: 274.
69. Peterson 2007: 178–9.
70. Peterson 2007: 55.
71. Shaw 2011: 153–6.
72. Vikstrand 2009: 21.
73. Vikstrand 2009: 163–5. See also Meldgaard 2004.
74. Imer 2014: 167–9.
75. Jesch 1992: 42–72.
76. Lerche Nielsen 1998.
77. Lerche Nielsen 2006.
78. This formula is found in various stylised versions in runic inscriptions, for example the Gørlev 1 and Ledberg stones, as well as in the legendary saga *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*. The words þistil-*mistil-kistil*, 'thistle, mistletoe, little casket', may have worked as a fertility charm or have apotropaic protective purposes. See Schulte 2021 for an updated discussion.
79. Imer 2014: 168.
80. Vikstrand 2009: 17, 22.
81. Vikstrand 2009: 11, 23.
82. Sundqvist 2020: 145–6.
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23

The Fyrkat *Vǫlva* Revisited

Else Roesdahl

The grave of the Fyrkat *vǫlva* is perhaps the most interesting female grave from Denmark's Viking Age. It was excavated in 1954–1955 and published in 1977. It was one of c. 30 burials at king Harald Bluetooth's fortress of Fyrkat in East Jylland (one of the so-called Trelleborg fortresses), and the *vǫlva*'s context is, then, partly known, as is the date of the burial (c. 980). New research after the publication of the grave in 1977 has added greatly to our understanding of her and her context, and more is still to come.

Excavation and Publication History

The Fyrkat cemetery was excavated in 1954–1960 as part of the fortress investigations. Most graves, including the *vǫlva* grave (grave no. 4), were investigated by Svend Søndergaard, a brilliant excavator and recorder with much experience but no academic training, and when working on the grave he was all alone. It is thanks to his careful work that so much is known about it. Grave 4 was excavated from October 1954 until November 1955, with a break during summer where Søndergaard worked at the fortress itself. His observations were recorded in many measured drawings, in some photographs, and in detailed letters with descriptions sent to the head of excavations, C.G. Schultz of the National Museum of Denmark, who was busy elsewhere and particularly interested in architecture. Søndergaard was fully aware that the grave was exceptional and spent much time on it; he also had certain parts of the grave taken up in plaster casts and sent to the National Museum for indoor excavation at the Department of Conservation. Indeed, much of the grave was excavated and recorded there. Søndergaard was fascinated by the grave and felt great responsibility in his work – in the margin of a measured drawing he even composed a small poem.[1]

In 1958, C.G. Schultz died unexpectedly. The Fyrkat artefacts were stored at the National Museum and the records went into archive. During the 1960s, however, the young curator Olaf Olsen, who had 'inherited' the responsibilities for Fyrkat, started to plan the publication, and in 1966 I was attached to the project and began to locate, unpack, identify, and record the artefacts and provide them with a museum inventory number. I also suggested which objects needed conservation, something that was much discussed with and then carried out by Jørgen Nordqvist at the Conservation Department. It was then that my relationship with the *vǫlva* started. Subsequently, I was asked to publish the Fyrkat artefacts and the cemetery.[2]

It was particularly interesting to collect and to study the varied and unusual evidence from grave 4 and to view it in relation to theories on the function of the fortress. Johannes Brøndsted's 1936 catalogue of Danish Viking Age inhumation graves provided a basis for comparative studies of the graves (although Brøndsted was reluctant to identify specific burial customs within his corpus).[3] There was clearly no good parallel to Fyrkat's grave 4, although parallels to some grave goods and to features of the burial custom could be found there.

In 1977, the Fyrkat excavations were published in two volumes, one on the fortress and the buildings, and one on the artefacts and the cemetery including grave 4.[4] The cemetery clearly belonged to the fortress, and c. 30 graves were identified (Fig. 23.1). No skeletons were preserved, but based on grave goods and the length of graves, there were at least three women, one man, and nine children buried there. Most graves were close to a c. 38 m long and 3–5 m wide timbered road or platform, which was and is unparalleled; presumably it was intended for ceremonial purposes. At the time, the chronology of the fortress with its cemetery was

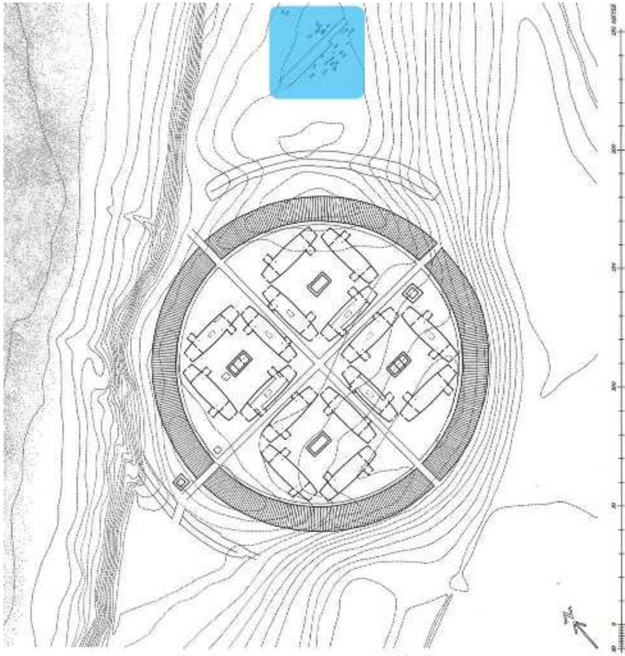

Figure 23.1 The Fyrkat fortress and the cemetery (in blue) to the north-east. Drawing by Holger Schmidt, after Roesdahl 1977.

fairly broad within the second half of the tenth century, and it was therefore uncertain whether it belonged to the pagan or Christian period – the official conversion of Denmark took place in c. 965.[5]

Grave 4 was located just north of the platform (Fig. 23.2) and, like a woman in another grave (no. 20), the deceased was buried in the body of a wagon (instead of a normal coffin). It was at Fyrkat that this burial custom was identified – first by Søndergaard, who wrote about it in one of his letters to C.G. Schultz; he had seen pictures and a description of the Oseberg wagon in a book given to him by Schultz and recognised the parallel to the grave 4 'coffin'. This was, however, forgotten until the idea reappeared during my work on the Fyrkat publication, and a number of parallels were found. Now it is a recognised burial custom for aristocratic women, particularly in Jylland, and many examples are known.[6]

The body of the woman was just 'shadows in the soil' (Fig. 23.3). But she clearly lay on her back with the head to the west, and her height was estimated at *c.* 170 cm. The plaster casts and the finds from them were located, except for one (D in Fig. 24.3), which covered the lower part of the face and upper part of the chest. It was lost until

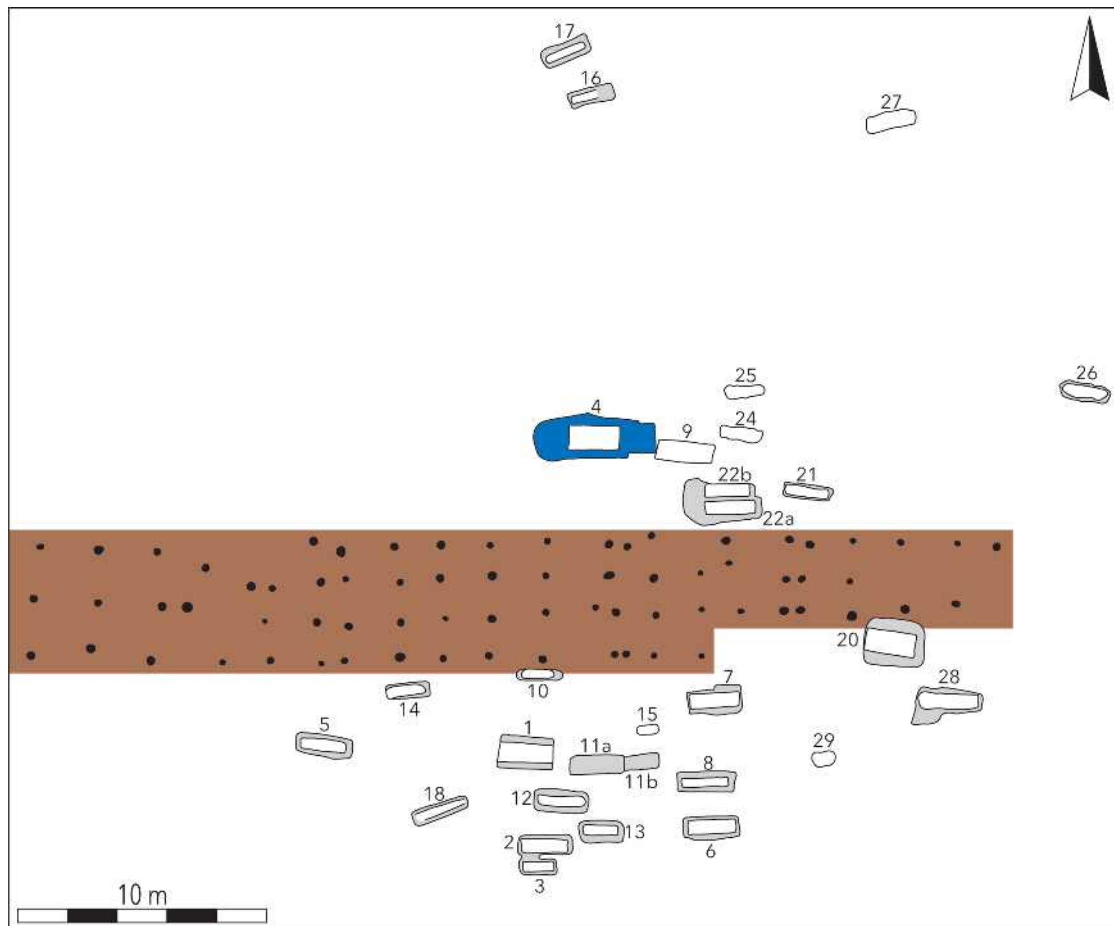

Figure 23.2 Plan of the Fyrkat cemetery showing the platform and the graves (grave 4 is marked in blue). Drawing by Holger Schmidt, after Roesdahl 1977.

Figure 23.3 The western end of the Fyrkat 4 grave during excavation in 1955. Faint traces of the upper part of the body are seen, as well as iron fittings from the wagon body used as a coffin and, to the right, the 'beaker' and the end of the roasting spit. Photo by Svend Søndergaard.

1993 and again brought to light in 2021.[7] This part of the grave and its contents consequently do not feature in the 1977 publication.

The grave goods are otherwise catalogued (nos. 1–52), illustrated and discussed in the publication, and their respective positions in the grave are mostly known (for a full inventory with updated discussion, see → **Chapter 24**). The overall picture was that of a rich and very unusual female burial which, apart from what were normal types of female artefacts (such as a small whetstone, textile tools, and a casket), held a roasting spit, a pair of drinking horns without mounts (nos. 3–4), various trinkets, and remains of fine textiles (nos. 38–48) including some gold and silver thread ornaments (Fig. 23.4; see also → **Chapter 25**). There were also unique artefacts, although these were presumably manufactured in Scandinavia, such as a delicate, composite iron 'pin' or 'staff' with fine copper-alloy mounts (no. 23), and imported ones of unknown or apparently eastern origin, for instance a copper alloy bowl without its handle and a beaker-shaped object made of copper and possibly gilt (nos. 5–6). Besides, some grave goods had apparently been used in strange ways, for example a pair of presumed toe-rings (no. 25), or were partly broken, like the bowl just mentioned and a once top-quality but now ruined Gotlandic box brooch (no. 7). Finally, a small group had seemingly religious or magic meaning, such as a chair-shaped silver amulet pendant and a small heap of henbane seeds; such seeds have narcotic properties (nos. 29 and 52).

She would have been an aristocratic woman, but an unusual one, and she puzzled me and still does. In 1977, my interpretation ended in careful statements that she (or someone she knew) might have brought the eastern artefacts back as travellers' souvenirs, and that the religious/magic belongings probably served to put her in touch with supernatural powers. At the time, the academic attitude in Denmark did not welcome 'magic and mind' interpretations; the main issues were description, dating, parallels, severe source criticism, and to express oneself briefly. But it is pleasing that the quality of my publication was sufficient for others to pursue more imaginative roads.[8]

Figure 23.4 Selection of objects from the Fyrkat 4 grave: copper alloy bowl, beaker-shaped copper object (possibly end mount of a staff), long whetstone, key, gold thread ornaments, Gotlandic box brooch from which several mounts were missing (centre), possible strap end of copper with gold foil, two glass beads, chair-shaped silver amulet pendant, small silver ring, two toe-rings, whetstone, small spindle whorl, 'bird's feet' pendant. Photo by Preben Dehlholm.

The *Vǫlva* Grave After 1977

The interpretation of the Fyrkat 4 grave saw a breakthrough in 2002. Hayo Vierck published a reconstruction drawing showing how many of the trinkets, including the chair-shaped pendant, may have been carried in a purse hanging from the woman's belt, or together with it (see Fig. 24.10); he explained them briefly, but without reservation, as connected with pre-Christian Norse magic.[9]

Neil Price's ground-breaking book *The Viking Way* appeared that same year. The general attitude towards interpretations had changed, and his book deals with pre-Christian Norse magic in broad archaeological, textual, and anthropological contexts. A wide range of aspects of 'sorcery' were discussed, and a number of women's graves from the Viking Age, including grave 4 at Fyrkat, were convincingly identified as graves of *vǫlur* and their kind. One of the diagnostic artefacts was the fine iron 'staff' with mounts (no. 23), while others were the chair-shaped pendant and the henbane seeds. He also pointed to the role of magic in martial contexts: war-spells might be cast at battlefields, which makes the presence of a *vǫlva* at the Fyrkat fortress very appropriate. Consequently, some of her unusual grave goods now changed from being exotic souvenirs to serious religious accessories, and she transformed into a powerful ritual specialist, cult leader, and sorceress with important functions in society and in relation to war.[10]

Two years later, in 2004, I updated the context of the cemetery and graves. Dendrochronology had now provided dates for the Trelleborg-type fortresses: they were built in around 975–980, and according to other evidence they lasted for a very short time, perhaps only 10–15 years. They would have been built by Harald Bluetooth (king c. 958–987), who in c. 965 'made' Christianity the official religion of Denmark. The Fyrkat cemetery therefore belongs to the time when Christianity was new, and the children's graves are probably a sign of the new religion. But the *vǫlva* grave and several others held grave goods in the pagan tradition, and she was certainly a pagan – here, at the king's own fortress. The cemetery and in particular the *vǫlva* grave therefore demonstrate (as do the Jelling monuments) a religious tolerance at the highest social level at the time of very early Christianity in Denmark. One of the reasons for the *vǫlva*'s presence might be that, in serious matters like war, it was safest to rely on trusted people and tradition (Fig. 23.5).[11]

In 2009, Peter Pentz and others published an article on the *vǫlva* grave. This was also inspired by Price's interpretation, and new analyses of various artefacts had been carried out demonstrating the potential of using further natural sciences in order to get a better understanding of the

Figure 23.5 Kirk Michael stone 123, Isle of Man, with a depiction of a female figure holding a staff. Possibly a vǫlva*. Photo by Leszek Gardeła.*

grave. Colour identified from textile fragments showed that her dress was blue with some red details. From the inside of the Gotlandic brooch, white lead was identified, possibly a white ointment with medical/magic properties; accordingly, the brooch had been used as a container. Convincing parallels to the copper alloy bowl were presented; these came from Iran. The identification of a small lump as 'owl pellets' was dismissed, and other artefacts were discussed afresh.[12]

The glass sherds from the grave (no. 37) are now identified as a mirror,[13] and chair-shaped pendants (like no. 29) have been extensively discussed and with growing confidence associated with Óðinn (→ **Chapter 32**).[14] And, in 2021, a small silver-plated fragment with niello ornament was published. It was one of the few artefacts found by excavations at Borgring, a recently identified fortress of the Trelleborg type, and it turned out to be the top of a side mount from a Gotlandic brooch of the exact same type as that from the Fyrkat *vǫlva*'s grave – from which three of four side mounts were missing. Detailed studies show that it may well be the top of one of these. If so, the Fyrkat *vǫlva* had almost certainly visited the Borgring fortress, perhaps as part of her military functions.[15] One wonders where the other missing parts from the Fyrkat brooch are now – including four small gold mounts from its top side.

For the understanding of the Fyrkat grave it is, however, especially important that a wealth of information on contemporary aristocratic women's grave goods is now available.

New Understandings

The story of the woman in the Fyrkat 4 grave evolves. Information from the rediscovered plaster cast D is eagerly awaited, although X-ray photos have already revealed traces of fine textiles there (→ **Chapter 25**). Technical and natural science investigations (now part of normal procedures) of enigmatic artefacts and their appearances when new will surely answer questions. Far-flung comparative studies of the 'eastern' and other unusual artefacts will probably provide good parallels and provenance. Is, for example, the 'bird's feet pendant' (no. 28) an import, or was it manufactured in Denmark under influence from Western Slavic lands, perhaps from the emerging Piast state in Poland? Contacts were close at the time, and other examples are known in Denmark, while closely related ornaments were produced locally – press models of similar pendants have been found at the harbour of Hedeby.[16]

And some artefacts may now be reinterpreted. What was, for example, the function of a narrow and unusually long (20.5 cm) second whetstone of fine dark schist in the grave (no. 20)? And why use toe-rings[17] (no. 25)? Importantly, the small and possibly gilt 'beaker' (no. 6) could be the end mount of a staff,[18] which had possibly left faint traces in the grave; when the plaster cast with the roasting spit (no. 3) was excavated, it was observed (as related from memory several years later) that there were traces in the spit's corrosion layers of a stick with a section roughly like a broomstick. It appears on the two reconstruction drawings of the grave,[19] but its length is unknown. This elusive stick could have fitted into the 'beaker', which was found near its possible top (see Fig. 24.20). Price has already interpreted the stick as one of the *vǫlva*'s tools.[20] A shining end mount would make it into a splendid and very visible staff.

Today, another promising way forward is to consider the *vǫlva*'s grave goods as an entity and to identify in more detail what is normal and what is unusual. Based on current knowledge of funerary assemblages in contemporary and slightly older female graves in Denmark, it appears that nearly everything is unusual in one or more ways. Appropriate graves for comparison would be wagon graves, such as two well-furnished ones at Thumby-Bienebek near Hedeby, one grave in the Fyrkat region at Hørning, one in the immediate neighbourhood at Sønder Onsild, and grave 20 at the Fyrkat cemetery itself.[21] It appears that, although grave 4 contained normal artefact types, such as a casket or box, whetstones, shears, a spindle-whorl and some beads, most of these were of unusual types.

Further, grave 4 contained, as already mentioned, artefacts imported from eastern lands, such as the copper alloy bowl, and broken artefacts including the Gotlandic brooch and perhaps the drinking horns. Other artefacts seemed to have functioned in unusual ways, such as the brooch from Gotland and the presumed toe-rings, and some had magic properties. It is also an unusual feature that the grave held so many artefacts with (once) shining surfaces: the top mount of the staff (the 'beaker'), the mounts of the small iron 'staff' (or wand), the bowl, the silver trinkets and 'bird's feet pendant', a gold covered pendant (no. 33), the mirror, the ornaments with gold and silver thread, and the surface of the shears (no. 21), which was tinned. Besides, the casket had unusually prominent hinges and a lock-plate, all covered with white metal of a kind which is known mostly from fine riding gear in aristocratic male graves.[22]

In a room lit by an open fire shiny surfaces would be particularly visible and would glitter when the person holding the artefacts moved. They would certainly be good 'props' at ritual performances in a fire-lit hall. As demonstrated by theatre plays taking place in the 18 m long hall of a reconstructed fortress house at Fyrkat, such a hall was well suited to performances (Fig. 23.6). The unusually worn and broken artefacts may have helped to produce in the audience a sense of 'otherness' and transgression during performances, and the long staff with its shining head would be well suited to mark entrances and climaxes. There seems to be no evidence of sexual ambiguity in the Fyrkat *vǫlva*'s belongings – except possibly two triangular features seen in X-rays of plaster cast D. They may belong to a male cloak.[23]

All this suggests that all or nearly all artefacts in grave 4 were used in the *vǫlva*'s ritual performances, and, together

Figure 23.6 View of the hall of the reconstructed fortress house at Fyrkat. Photo by Holger Schmidt.

with the fortress houses, they offer new insights into how such rites may have been carried out. The reason why the items followed her into the grave may be that time was running out for pagan magicians in the 970s, and that such ritual accessories were becoming unacceptable. She must have been one of the last powerful *vǫlur* in Denmark.

The burial custom and grave goods moreover illuminate the *vǫlva*'s status and the religious importance of women in the pre-Christian religious sphere. She was clearly buried with respect, and details of some of her belongings are paralleled in aristocratic graves elsewhere, such as the white metal patterns on mounts of her casket, the 'bird's feet', and the wagon body burial custom. She must have been part of the elite – and she may have known the man from the burial at Bjerringhøj, Mammen. He lived not far from Fyrkat and died in 970 or 971.[24]

Notes

1. Cited in Roesdahl & Nordqvist 1971: 16.
2. On Svend Søndergaard and C.G. Schultz in relation to the Fyrkat excavations, see Olsen & Schmidt 1977: 18–20. On the excavation of the cemetery and the fate of the artefacts at the National Museum of Denmark, see Roesdahl 1977: 73–4. See also Roesdahl & Nordqvist 1971.
3. Brøndsted 1936. The state of research on Viking Age aristocratic burial at the time is discussed in Roesdahl 2021.
4. Olsen & Schmidt 1977; Roesdahl 1977.
5. Roesdahl 1977: 73–8 (cemetery), 78–130 (catalogue of graves, grave goods, and platform), 130–43 (summary and discussion of grave goods, 144–51 (discussion of cemetery, burial customs, and the dead), 168–72 (the date), English summary: 185–207.
6. First published in Roesdahl & Nordqvist 1971; latest survey and discussion in Eisenschmidt 2021.
7. It was found in 1993 in the former office of C.G. Schultz and must have been on a deep shelf in a low built-in cupboard there. Some X-ray photos were taken and sent to me, and the plaster cast was then stored and generally forgotten until 2021, when I reminded the National Museum of its existence.
8. Roesdahl 1977: 150, 192. I was inspired by travels in Arabia and Central Asia, from where I had brought back many ornaments, which I used freely. Cf. also a preliminary interpretation in Roesdahl & Nordqvist 1971: 30–1. During publication work I had indeed (as appears from my notes) considered the identification as a *vǫlva*, but I found the evidence too inconclusive for publication.
9. Vierck 2002: 45 and Abb. 12B. Some details must be wrong, but the general impression is convincing.
10. Price 2002. On the Fyrkat grave and grave goods 149–57, 185–6, 200. See also Price 2019: 105–13, 121–2, 141–2, 160, map on p. 148 *et passim*, cf. index.
11. Roesdahl 2004. The latest evidence on the date of Fyrkat and the other Trelleborg-type fortresses, and their interpretation, is discussed in Roesdahl & Sindbæk 2014a; 2014b. The well-known Danish author Ebbe Kløvedal Reich (died 2005) wrote a play *Mandebod – et spil om den sidste sejdkvindes endeligt*, which was based on the idea of cooperation between the *vǫlva* and a Christian priest. It was performed in the reconstructed Fyrkat house in 2004.
12. Pentz *et al.* 2009. A brief version was published by Pentz & Price 2013.
13. Kock & Sode 2002; Pentz *et al.* 2009: 221–2.
14. Price 2019: 120–4; Jessen & Majland 2021.
15. Christensen *et al.* 2021: 11–12.
16. Gardeła in press.
17. The only toe-rings from this period that I have come across are from the Finnish cemetery at Luistari. It has two children's graves in which rings were found on toes (graves 118, 139) – see Lehtosalo-Hilander 1982, vol. I: 122–4, 132–3 and Plates, vol. II: 123. These rings are, however, different from the Fyrkat rings. A possible toe-ring of copper alloy was identified in the Myklebostad '*vǫlva* grave' – see Price 2019: 150.
18. It is heavy (68.3 g) and must have been cast. According to notes from conversations with Holger Arbman and Mårten Stenberger in the 1960s, they both thought it might be from a club/mace but knew of no parallels. I found it too small for a weapon and did not mention it in the publication.
19. Price 2002: fig. 3.23, and 2019 fig. 3.29; Pentz *et al.* 2009: fig. 14. In both cases the staff is longer than the spit. But there is no evidence for this, as the end of the plaster cast was at the top of the spit (see Fig. 24.24). The only information on

the staff is cited together with the description of the spit in Roesdahl 1977: 91 (no. 3). It ought to have been described separately.

20. Price 2019: 160 and the distribution map on p. 148 (the description of the stick/staff is not precise and some of the discussion consequently irrelevant). Staffs have also been discussed by Gardeła (2016).
21. Müller-Wille 1976, graves 7 and 21; Voss 1991. See also Roesdahl 1976, grave no. VII; 1977: 113–16 (grave no. 20 held a whetstone, a pebble, iron mounts from a casket and its key, two silver spiral beads, an amber bead, and textile traces). See also Eisenschmidt 2021.
22. Roesdahl 2021: fig. 3. On the metal, see Jouttijärvi 2021.
23. Prominent triangular textile decorations are seen on the cloak of Cnut the Great on the well-known drawing from 1031 (see for example Williams *et al*. 2013: 155), and they are also known from the male Mammen grave in Jylland – see Munksgaard 1991: 151–3.
24. Iversen 1991.

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24

The Fyrkat 4 Grave

Peter Pentz

The Setting

The Viking Age ring fortress of Fyrkat is located on a low and narrow promontory in Onsild Ådal, at the head of Mariager Fjord in Jylland, Denmark. The fortress was excavated and reconstructed in the period 1951–1973 and subsequently meticulously published by Olaf Olsen and Holger Schmidt.[1] During the excavation works, a burial ground was recognised 50 m north-east of the fortress, and this was presented by Else Roesdahl in her publication on the artefacts from the fortress and its neighbouring cemetery.[2]

No traces of Viking Age activities were recorded on the site prior to the building of the fortress,[3] although it cannot be totally excluded that burials took place here before and/or after the lifetime of the fortress itself. There is, however, only little doubt that the cemetery was associated with the fortress, since postholes from what must have been a bridge, or perhaps rather a platform, running between the graves and strictly parallel with the east–west street of the fortress were identified.[4] According to the most recent dendrochronological analysis, the Fyrkat fortress was most likely constructed in 974/975, and since the Viking Age fortresses in Denmark are believed to have functioned for a rather short period of only, c. 25 years,[5] the dates of the burials all fall within the period from c. 975 until 1000. This was the period immediately following the 'official conversion' to Christianity (c. 963), as commemorated in king Haraldr blátǫnn's (Harald Bluetooth's) declaration on his rune stone in Jelling.[6] While not an ordinary cemetery due to its connection with the fortress, and while it is moreover believed to have been built on royal initiative, the archaeological remains from the site nevertheless provide valuable insights into the burial practices of a recently converted community.

Unlike later medieval cemeteries, the burial ground apparently had no boundaries or a ditch separating it from the surrounding landscape. Systematic excavations of the burials commenced in 1954, and over the following six years c. 30 inhumation burials were recorded of which three were identified as women's graves and one as a male, the grave goods being the gender markers. Ten burials contained grave goods ranging from a simple knife to very rich furnishings. Nine burials were interpreted as children's graves, due to a length of less than 1.5 m of the pit – a relative high proportion of children, and a situation different from most Viking Age burial grounds in Denmark. However, it is possible that additional burials exist beyond the limits of the excavation and that the sample recovered cannot be considered representative of the fortress' population as a whole.

All graves were aligned on an east–west axis with minor deviations, a circumstance which could indicate influence from Christian practise; however, the east–west orientation is common in late Viking Age burials in Jylland, whether they be Christian or not.[7] The comparatively high percentage of children could also point towards a change in customs, since children's graves are often sparse or even absent from Viking Age pre-Christian burial grounds.[8]

Most of the graves were simple rectangular pits cut into the sub-soil. While the geological conditions had left very few traces of the skeletons (only three graves contained faint traces of corpses), evidence for containers survived in 18 cases.[9] Two of these containers were clinker-built wagon bodies, both containing women. Female burial in wagon bodies was a widespread funerary custom for aristocratic women in tenth-century Jylland.

The Platform

There were no postholes nor ditches found to suggest that a house or roofed building stood in the burial ground. Running

parallel to the graves (and thus to the east–west axis of the fortress), we see three, sometimes four, parallel rows of postholes from what has been interpreted as a platform or bridge (Fig. 24.1).[10] The size of these postholes seems to exclude the plausibility of them as having supported a roofed structure. Rather, they appear more similar to those found inside the fortress supporting the wooden-paved roads. Planks must have been laid across rows of trusses forming an almost 40 m-long raised platform. The width of this platform was c. 5 m for the first c. 25–28 m, narrowing into c. 3 m for the remaining c. 10 m. The bridge was laid precisely east–west, with a direction towards the northern gate of the fortress, but there is no indication that the bridge extended further than the post holes indicate.

The burials were laid out parallel to the platform and without any of them encroaching into the structure, although one of the two wagon body graves – grave 20 – was placed very close to what must have formed the edge of the planks.

It is tempting to interpret the bridge or platform as a kind of stage for the performance of mortuary rituals, although similar platforms from other Viking Age burial grounds are unknown. Else Roesdahl has proposed that the platform or bridge represented a transitional phenomenon for the in-between period before the Christian rites became well-established.[11] The actual presence of baptism in these early years of Christianity is unknown, and the replacement of deep-rooted pre-Christian burial practises with Christian was not sudden but evolved and changed over an extended period of time.[12]

Figure 24.1 Postholes from the alleged platform as seen from west. To the right the graves nos. 14, 10 and 7. Photo by Svend Søndergaard, National Museum of Denmark.

No direct parallels to the bridge exist, but it might be worthy of note that the contemporary cemetery outside the ring fortress of Trelleborg was connected to the fortress itself by a plank road.[13] This could in principle have served the same purpose as the broader one at Fyrkat.

The Structure of the Burial Space

No elements indicating that the burial ground was marked were found. The number of burials was around 30, but since the extent of the site is unknown, a total excavation of the area might increase this number. The graves were clustered around the aforementioned platform, and they seem to have followed an east–west direction parallel to the orientation of the east–west axis of the ring fortress. Hence, it must be concluded that the fortress and the burial ground were part of one design.[14] While the compass orientation of the graves resembles the arrangement of the burial ground at Trelleborg, some of the burials here probably preceded the fortress itself.[15]

The burials may have been marked by stones, posts, or tufts. Stones found at some of the burials and postholes scattered across the cemetery may be the only evidence of grave markers. All were burial pits dug into the sandy subsoil at a depth ranging from c. 0.20 to 1 m.[16] In 18 graves out of the total of 30 the deceased were buried in containers, which is a relatively high proportion. The preservation of the skeletons was poor and did not allow for any other conclusions than that both women and men were represented. Subadult skeletons are generally even less well preserved, but judging from the size of the burial pits, the number of buried children was established as nine, a relatively higher share than could be expected for a Viking Age cemetery in Denmark.

Grave 4

In October 1954, the excavator of the burial ground, Svend Søndergaard, initiated the uncovering of a grave only a few meters to the north of the platform.[17] This grave aroused his curiosity and astonishment even before the first soil was removed. Measuring 4.85 m in length and almost the same in width, the size of the burial pit, which was named 'grave 4', exceeded all other pits in the cemetery. As Søndergaard worked his way through the layers over the following days, his first impression of the grave's special significance was

Figure 24.2 Fyrkat 4 grave as seen from west during excavation 1955. The rivets that held the planks of the wagon body are clearly visible and the contour of the head of the deceased is seen below. Photo by Svend Søndergaard, National Museum of Denmark.

confirmed. Eventually, the excavation was carried out over a period lasting a whole year.

The pit was dug one meter into the subsoil, the deepest of all the burial pits on the site. The cross sections recorded in the excavation clearly reveal that the pit was lined with clay, forming a kind of chamber. Already in the first cleaning level, the upper part of a wagon body was identified (Fig. 24.2). This rectangular frame measured about two meters in length and was one meter wide, the depth being c. 45 cm. The material was probably oak. More than 140 nails and rivets had been used for building the wagon body from planks. The container was found to have been covered by a lid, and the wagon body itself was supported in the pit by its undercarriage (Fig. 24.3).[18]

Although better conserved than most of the people interred in the cemetery, the remains of the buried person were scarce. Today, only fragments from the jawbone and some tooth enamel are preserved in the plaster cast D, awaiting further analysis. However, upon excavation, faint traces of the legs and an outline of the upper body parts allowed for an estimation of the height of the buried individual to c. 1.70 m. The deceased – apparently a woman, judging by the grave goods and the wagon body burial – was found in extended supine position with her right arm bent across her waist and the other arm extended alongside the left side of her body. Both arms may have been bent at the moment of deposition, one of them having slipped down later during the decomposition process where the roofed wagon body delayed the infiltration of soil for what may have been a relatively long period of time.

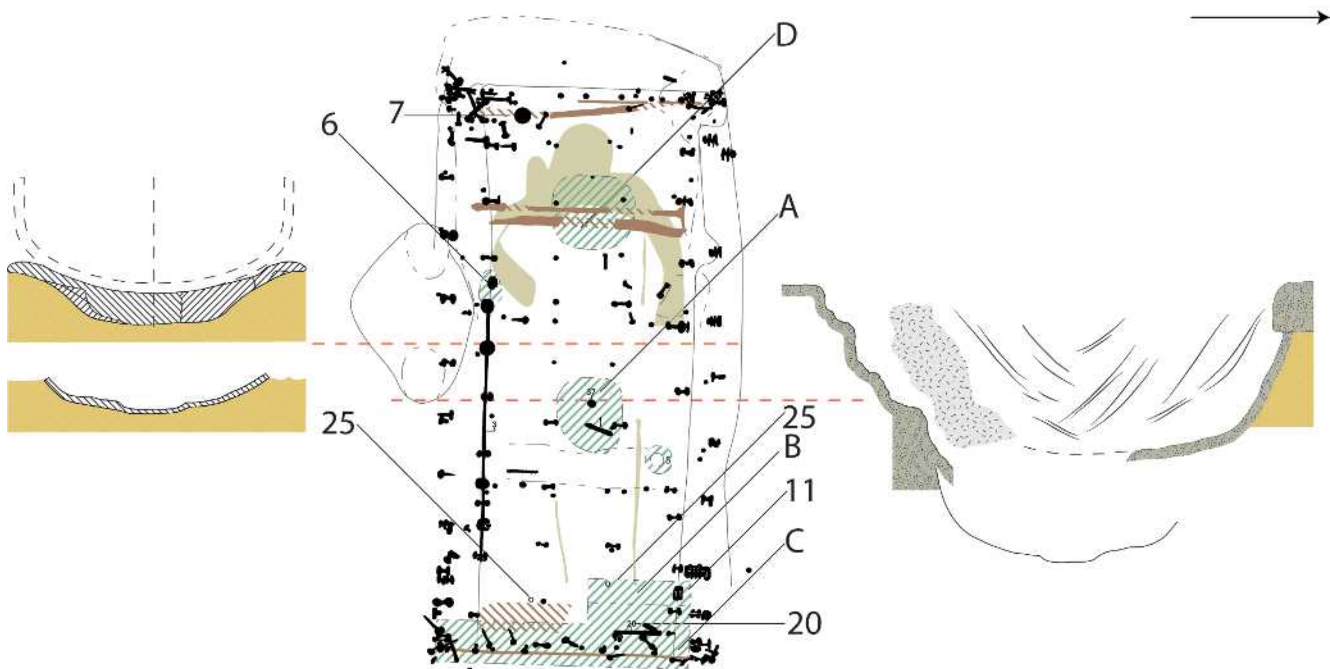

Figure 24.3 Fyrkat 4 grave: plan and sections. Numbers refer to artefacts; letters refer to plaster casts. The outline of the body is shown in grey. After Roesdahl 1977. Drawing by Orla Svendsen, amendments by Mads Lou Bendtsen.

Grave Goods

The list below and account of the artefacts within the burial are not intended as a replacement or repetition of the systematic and detailed description given by Else Roesdahl in her 1977 publication, but rather as an updated overview, annotated and interpretative, supplemented by recent scientific analysis of some of the objects. Roesdahl listed 52 numbers (numbers in brackets refer to the inventory number in the National Museum of Denmark):

1. Knife (D 174-1966)
2. Whetstone (D 160-1966)
3. Roasting spit (D 173-1966)
4. Fragments of drinking horns (D 175-1966)
5. Copper alloy bowl (D 203-1966)
6. Copper alloy container or beaker, traces of gilding (D 167-1966)
7. Box brooch (D 169-1966)

8.–19. Fragments of a wooden box with lock, key, and fittings (D 198-1966, D 199-1966, D 205-1966, D 206-1966, D 208-1966, D 209-1966, D 210-1966, D 211-1966, D 233-1966, D 235-1966, D 238-1966, D 246-1966, D 2595-1966, D 2596-1966, D 2597-1966, D 2600-1966)

20. Whetstone (D177-1966)
21. Scissors in wooden case (D 207)
22. Spindle whorl of burned clay (D176)
23. Fragments from a ‘pin’, ‘rod’, or ‘staff’ with copper alloy fittings (D 204a, b-1966)
24. Four fragment of iron hooks or clasps (?) (d 245-1966)
25. Two small silver rings made of plain bands with hooked terminals (D 170-1966)
26. Fragments of twisted silver chain (D 163-1966)
27. Small ring of silver wire (D 165-1966)
28. Fragments of silver pendant (the so-called ‘bird’s feet pendant’) (D162-1966)
29. Silver miniature chair (D 165-1966)
30. Circular silver pendant (D 164-1966)
31. Small silver fragment with a loop (D 166-1966)
32. Small pewter fragment, decorated (from the wooden box) (D 172-1966)
33. Pendant or strap-end, copper alloy, decorated and fire-gilded (D 161-1966)
34. Pin, copper alloy and fire-gilded (D 234-1966)
35. Copper alloy band, folded into a small tube (bead?) (D 157-1966)
36. Two beads of glass (D 159-1966)
37. Shards of glass (mirror) (D 171-1966)

38.–49. Textiles, leather, silver- and gold threads (D 156-1966, D 158-1966, D 160-1966, D 178-1966, D 239-1966, D 240-1966, D 241-1966, D 243-1966, D 247-1966, D 248-1966, D 202-1966, D 204a, b, c-1966)

50. Bone fragments (D 242-1966, D 296-1966, D 297-1966)
51. Owl pellet (?) (D 295-1966)
52. Numerous henbane seeds (D2603-1966)

The objects that accompanied the interred person into the grave can be divided into four major groups based on their location in the wagon body. The first zone covers the area immediately below the woman’s chin, corresponding to plaster cast D in the excavation plan, a second zone in the middle of the burial corresponding to the stomach region and plaster cast A, and a third zone at the eastern end of the wagon body covering in the broadest sense the area where the feet of the deceased must have been and analogous with plaster casts B and C. The last group consist of those objects ‘residual’ to the first three groups.

The Area Below the Chin/the Upper Chest

Plaster cast D remains unexcavated (→ **Chapter 23**). During excavation, golden threads were recorded in this area.[19] Visible silhouettes on the surface of the cast and x-rays clearly reveal lavish embroidered textiles, silver and gold threads (for an initial description of these, see → **Chapter 25**). Additionally, the x-ray photos show possible human remains in the form of tooth enamel and bone material, conceivably from the jawbone. This means it may be possible scientifically to retrieve important information about the buried person.

The Lower Chest/Pelvic Area

Encircling the stomach and upper pelvis area, the artefacts from this section can hypothetically be interpreted as hanging from a belt, although traces from such a belt were never found. Hence, there is a possibility that the objects were not suspended but wrapped in cloth (this would then have been textile no. 45).

The excavated plaster cast A (Fig. 24.4) comprised a whetstone with a suspension hole (no. 2) (Fig. 24.5), a knife (no. 1), a fragmented and twisted silver chain (no. 26), a small ring of silver wire (no. 27), a fragmented pendant of silver (the so-called ‘bird’s feet pendant’) (no. 28), a silver miniature chair amulet (no. 29), a small circular silver pendant (no. 30), a silver fragment with a loop (no. 31), a gilded pendant or strap-end (no. 33),[20] a gilded copper alloy pin (no. 34), a copper alloy band, folded (no. 35), two glass beads (no. 36), glass shards (no. 37), fragments of leather, textiles, and gold- and silver threads (nos. 45, 49), and numerous seeds of henbane (no. 52).

It must be assumed that, if a belt was originally buried in the grave, it was likely made of textile or leather. The knife (Fig. 24.6) would have been hanging from this belt. The identification of the artefact as a knife rests on the fact that knives are the most common of all grave goods in Viking Age burials and they are conventionally placed near the belt. Upon excavation, however, no traces of the

blade were seen. The surviving handle material is yew wood, an unusual choice since the use of ash for knife handles was preferred over all others sorts.[21] The handle has been reinforced by the use of wrapped wire in five bands, interconnected by a double twisted wire. This construction is identical to the handle of a knife from grave 22a at Fyrkat,[22] as well as from a contemporary wagon burial at Brandstrup, south-east of Viborg not far from Fyrkat.[23] The knife was possibly sheathed, but the sheath has left no clues in the archaeological record.

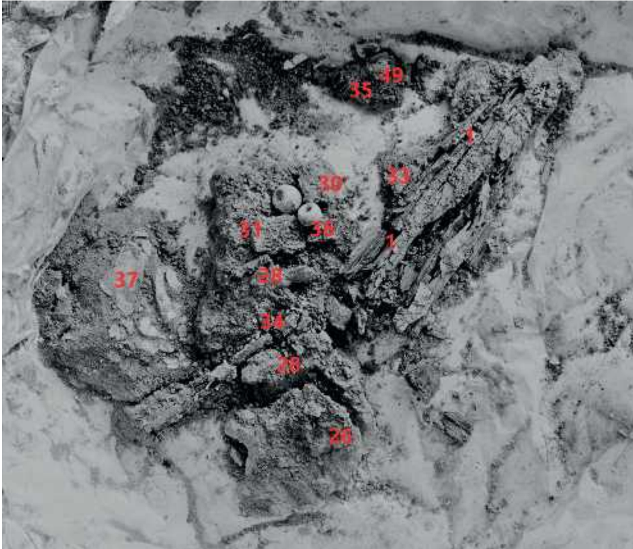

Figure 24.4 Photo showing plaster cast A before excavation. Numbers refer to artefacts. Photo by Knud Holm, National Museum of Denmark.

Precisely how the jewellery was worn is impossible to say. Some of the pieces have holes or loops for suspension, such as the miniature chair (Fig. 24.7). This chair has several parallels (→ **Chapter 32**). The quality of the silver used for the 'bird's feet pendant' is of high standard and the decoration has been identified as possibly of Western Slavic origin (Fig. 24.8).[24] Knud Holm, the excavator of the plaster casts, assumed that the circular silver ornament, no. 30, and the small silver ring or eye, no. 27, were parts of the 'bird's feet pendant'.[25]

The most unusual and astonishing find in the burial was the discovery of a substantial number of henbane seeds (no. 52) (Fig. 24.9).[26] The seeds were found somewhat sunken into the lower levels of the plaster cast. A small piece of leather (no. 49) might be the last remnants of a small bag or pouch originally holding the henbane seeds. The folded copper alloy band (no. 35) could be part of an arrangement for lacing this bag. The leather specimen has been analysed and it was discovered that it was actually fur (→ **Chapter 25**). This fur was determined to be skin

Figure 24.5 Two whetstones. Photos by Leszek Gardeła.

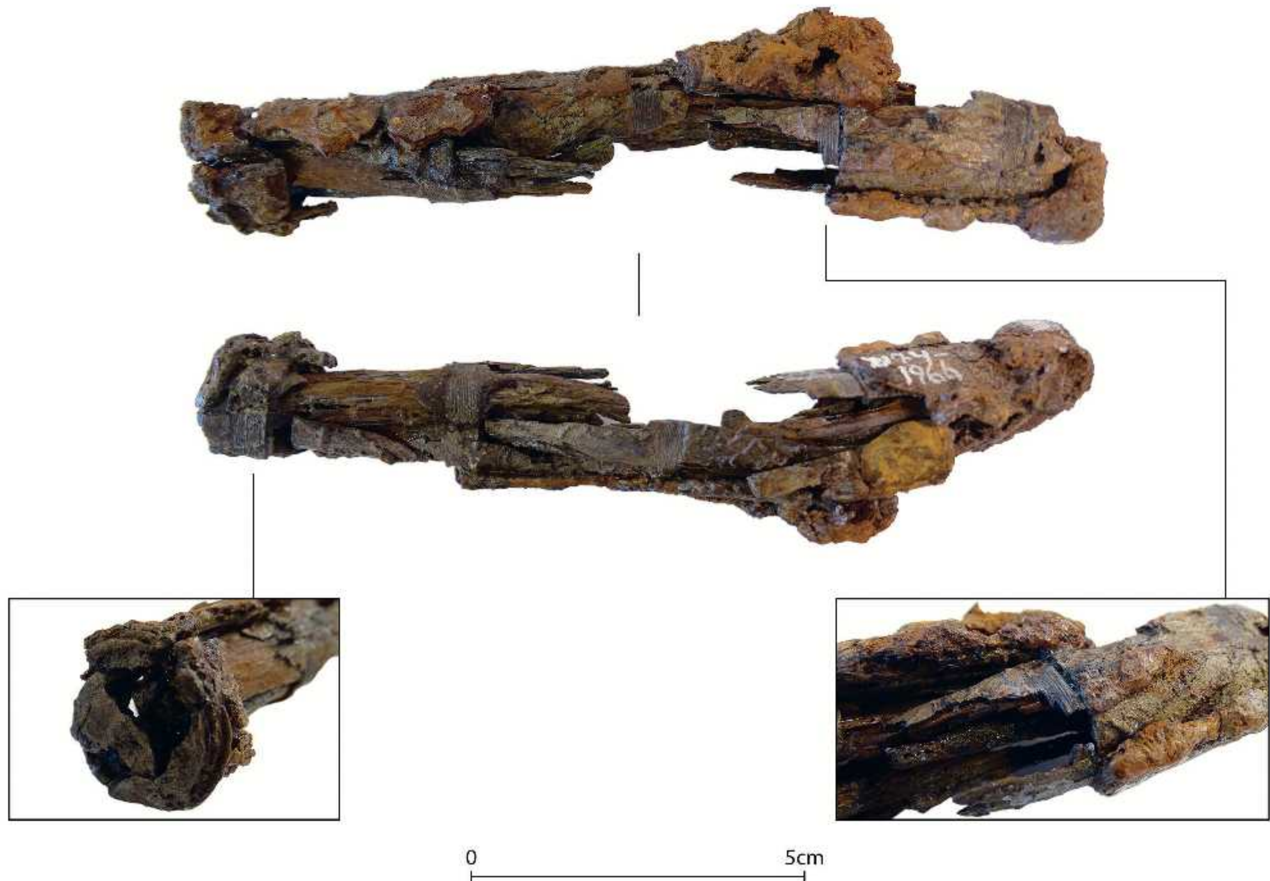

Figure 24.6 Knife. Photos by Leszek Gardeła.

from an animal of the marten family, or bear fur.[27] Although it would be more striking and theatrical, it would be less likely that the buried woman owned a bear fur pouch, considering that bears were not part of the fauna of Viking Age southern Scandinavia.

The rendering of the arrangement of the artefacts in the ensemble found below the chest of the interred woman by Hayo Vierck is probably a plausible suggestion (Fig. 24.10),[28] with some modifications, though. Although it was originally provided with a handle, the copper alloy bowl was found standing at the side of the buried person and its weight would not have allowed a suspension from a belt without serious inconvenience. Also, if the excavator's judgement of the relation between the circular silver pendant and the 'bird's feet pendant' is correct, these ornaments would have been suspended together.

A photo of plaster cast A shows the objects lying at the surface of the cast before excavation. The knife handle is seen in the centre surrounded by some of the other artefacts. The gilded pin (no. 34) is seen in continuation of the knife handle. The decorated elliptic gilded pendant (no. 33) underlies the knife handle, and it cannot be ruled out that this actually is a strap end (Fig. 24.11). The lump of fur (no. 49) is located at the side of the handle, close to the copper alloy tube or bead (no. 35), their 'togetherness' indicating that the tube was holding a drawstring;[29] the supposed fur pouch could have held the henbane seeds which were found deeper into the cast. The glass shards are also seen in the photo (no. 37); they could have been sewn into the dress, but the conclusive identification of the shards as being parts of a mirror[30] calls for speculations about the arrangement of the artefact ensemble. A fragile mirror would probably not have been suspended together with hard metal objects, and this points in favour of the idea that the group of artefacts were not suspended from the woman's belt, but rather buried in a blanket or other textile of which a piece was preserved (no. 45).

The Area at the Eastern End of the Wagon Body

Two plaster casts were prepared in the area around the buried woman's feet, at the eastern end of the wagon body; these are named plasters B and C. In this area, a number of wooden fragments, decorated iron, partly blanched fittings, and locking parts were found (nos. 8-19), including a key

Figure 24.7 Selection of small artefacts from Fyrkat 4: a) miniature chair; b) round pendant; c) square-shaped pendant; d) chain; e–f) beads. Photos by Leszek Gardeła.

Figure 24.8 So-called 'bird's feet pendant'. Photos by Leszek Gardeła.

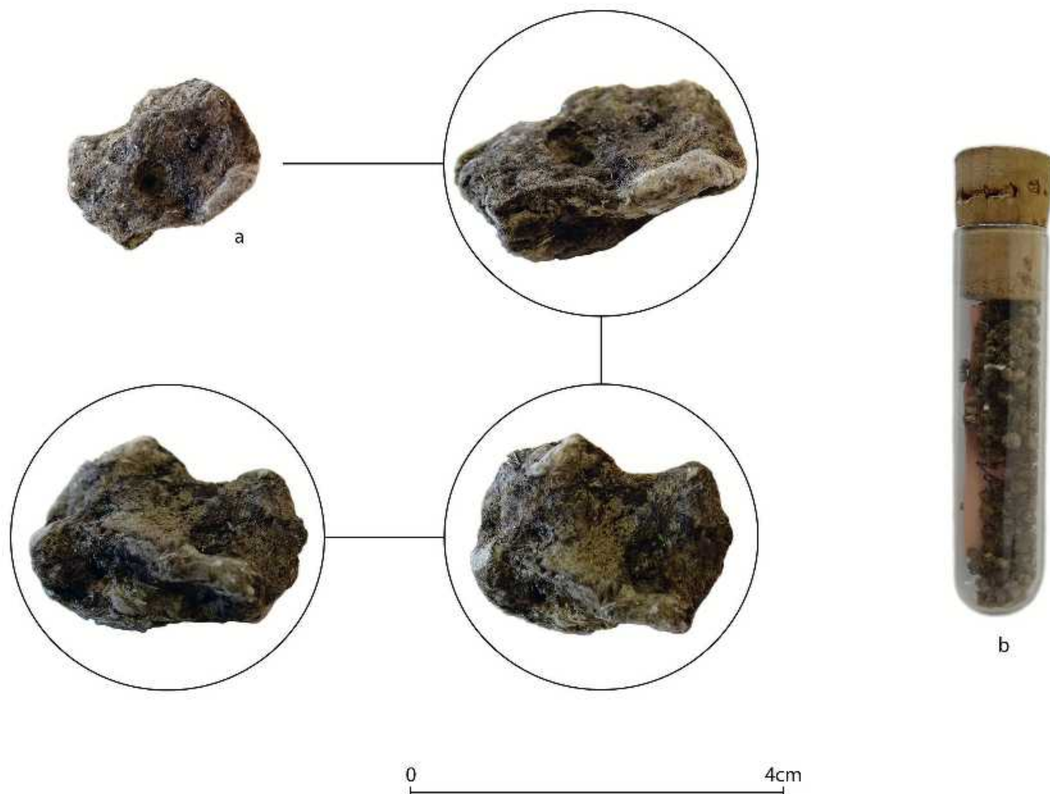

Figure 24.9 So-called 'owl pellet' (a) and henbane seeds (b). Photos by Leszek Gardeła.

Figure 24.10 Hayo Vierck's reconstruction of the arrangement of the artefacts from grave 4 suspended from a belt. Numbers refer to artefacts. After Vierck 2002, amendments by Mads Lou Bendtsen.

(no. 18). The fragments must have formed a wooden box (Figs 24.12–24.13). The wood has been identified as oak with some inserts (repairs?) of poplar.[31] From the area of the collapsed box and its nearest environment, several artefacts were recovered: a pair of scissors in a wooden case (no. 21) (Fig. 24.14), a spindle whorl (no. 22), a whetstone without a suspension hole (no. 20) (Fig. 24.5), bone fragments from a pig's jaw (no. 50), a lump or pellet (no. 51) (Fig. 24.9), fragments of small hooks (no. 24), fragments of textile, leather, golden threads (nos. 31, 38, 39, 41, 43, 44), two silver rings with hooked terminals (no. 25) (Fig. 24.15), and fragments of an iron 'pin', 'rod', or 'staff' with copper alloy fittings (no. 23) (Fig. 24.16).

The scissors and the spindle whorl are both well-known implements from Viking Age women's graves. The presence of the pellet and the pig's bone is more puzzling. The function of the iron 'rod' with copper alloy fittings is unclear (see discussion below).

The observations made by Knud Holm when excavating the plaster casts established that all of the mentioned items were held in the wooden box. His hand-written notes (Fig. 24.17) unequivocally affirm that a thin wooden layer covered the artefacts; especially for the iron 'rod', he noted that this specimen was covered by textile, but was lying under the wooden layer. There can be little doubt that the oak box was deposited with its contents in the burial pit at the feet of the deceased person.

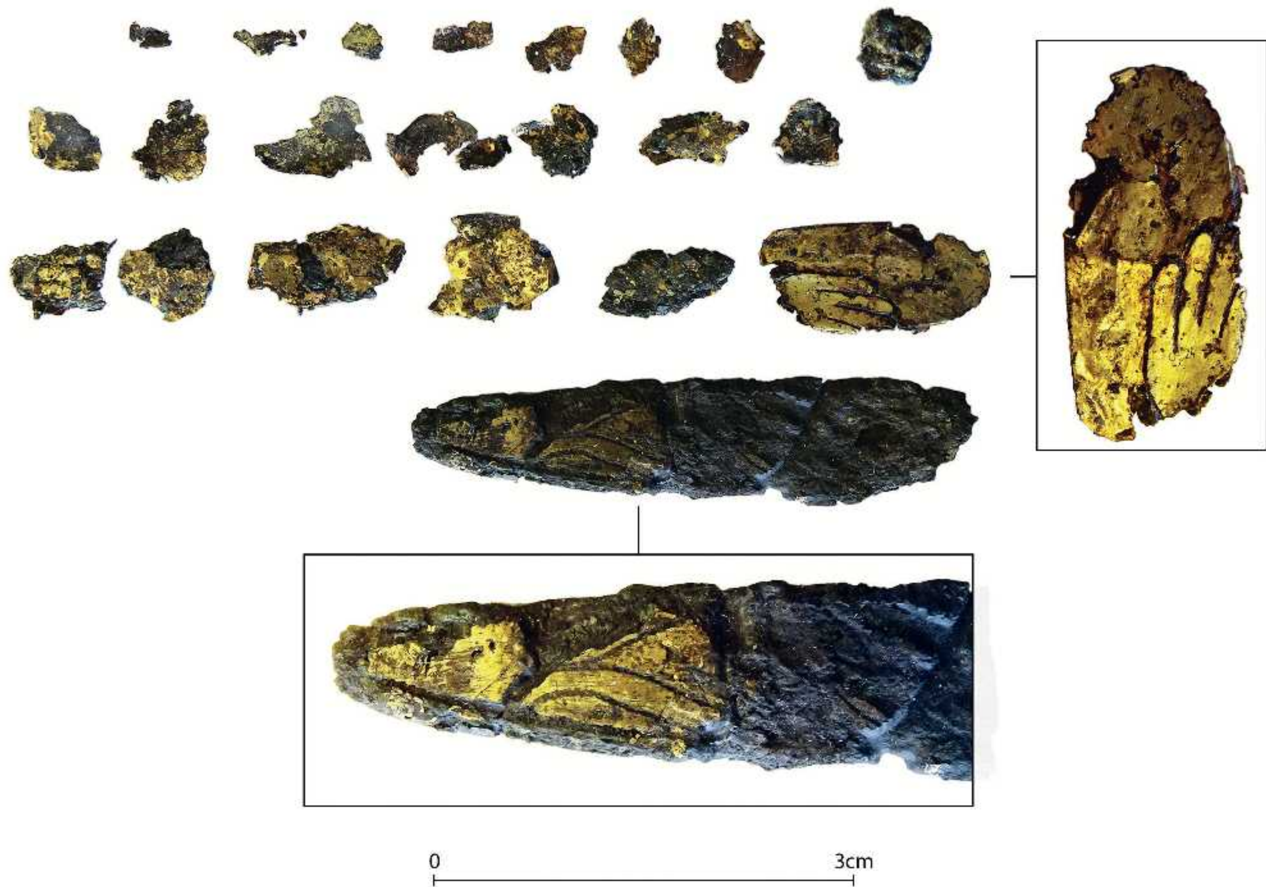

Figure 24.11 Possible strap end with decorated gold foil. Photos by Leszek Gardeła.

Other Finds in the Grave

A fragmented box brooch was found to the right of the interred person's head (no. 7) (Fig. 24.18). The brooch was placed upside down and not under the chin, where it likely would have been worn, and consequently the original purpose of the brooch as a fastener in the burial can be ruled out. Furthermore, its bottom plate and clasp were missing.[32] The brooch type is Gotlandic and is rarely found outside this island. Following the classification by Lena Thunmark-Nylén, the box brooch can be ascribed to the type 7b, a type produced from the early years of the 900s and used throughout the century and even into the early part of the next.[33]

At the body's right side an almost 1 m long iron spit or staff was found (no. 3) (Fig. 24.19). The head of the rod is pointed like a spear and it has a twisted shaft, except for the uppermost c. 15 cm; the upper terminal is provided with a ring for suspension. According to the excavator, the corroded spit had traces of a wooden stick which must have been positioned in direct contact with the spit.

Close to the suspension ring of the spit lay a small gilded copper alloy container (no. 6) (Fig. 24.20). The spherical container was initially interpreted as a drinking cup or a mace-head[34] (but see below and → **Chapter 23**).

Next to the buried person's left thigh, a solid copper alloy bowl was found standing *in situ* with its opening covered by a lid of plain grass (no. 5) (Figs 24.21–24.22). A small handle on the side of the bowl had broken off. No exact parallel to this bowl's double-conical shape is known from Viking Age Scandinavia; however, the profile implies origins in Central Asia (→ **Chapter 29**).[35]

In the eastern end of the wagon body, two silver rings – bands with hooked terminals – were located with a distance of c. 30 cm between the two rings (no. 25) (Fig. 24.15). Their position in the burial strongly indicates an identification of them as toe-rings, although such rings are unknown ornaments in the archaeological record of Viking Age Scandinavia, nor are toe-rings mentioned in Old Norse written sources.[36]

Decomposed fragments from ox horns were retrieved from the wagon body (Fig. 24.23); unfortunately, their precise location was not recorded. The number of horns is most likely two, since there are two terminals. The horns have been interpreted as drinking horns. Horns have been

Figure 24.12 Chest fittings. Photos by Leszek Gardeła.

Figure 24.13 Fragments of a lock. Photos by Leszek Gardeła.

Figure 24.14 Scissors. Photos by Leszek Gardeła.

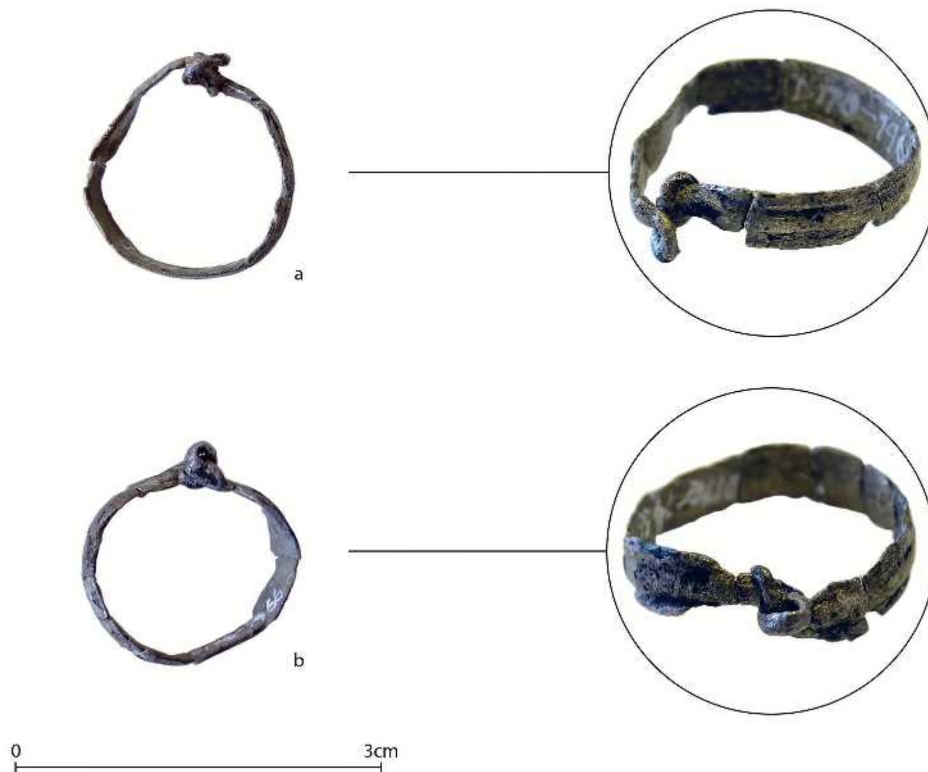

Figure 24.15 Presumed toe-rings. Photos by Leszek Gardeła.

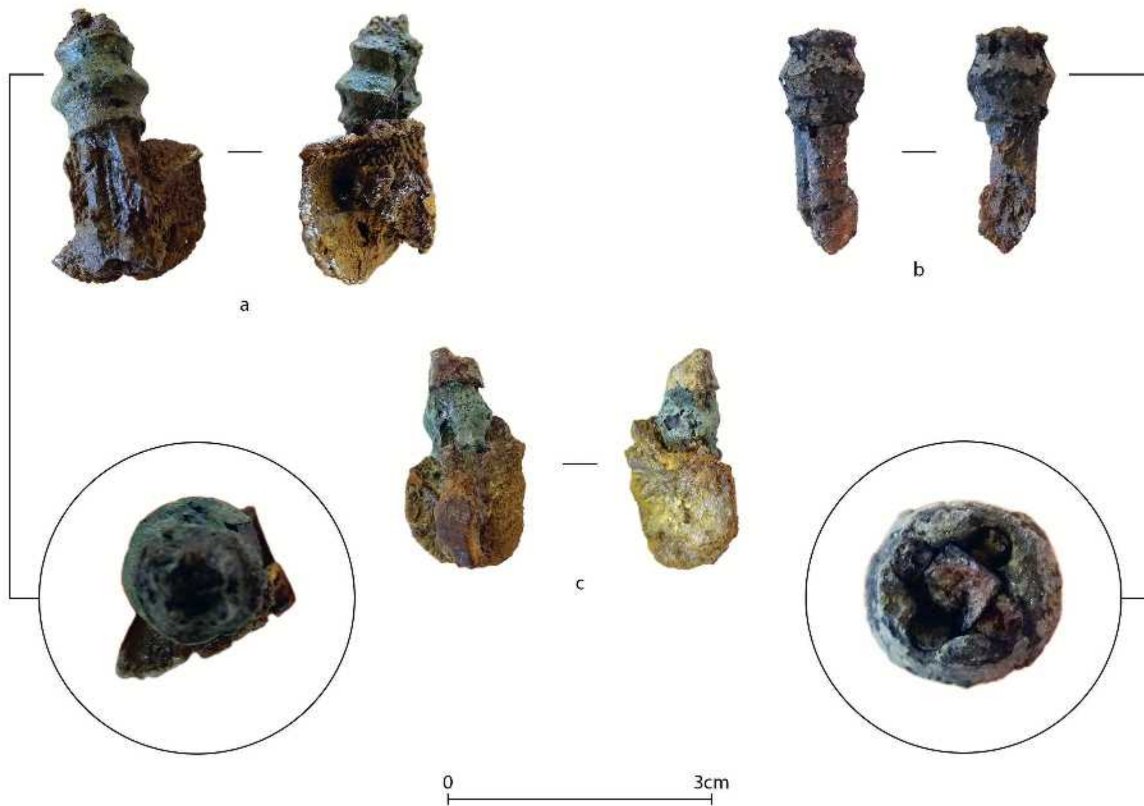

Figure 24.16 Pin or staff with copper alloy knobs. Photos by Leszek Gardeła.

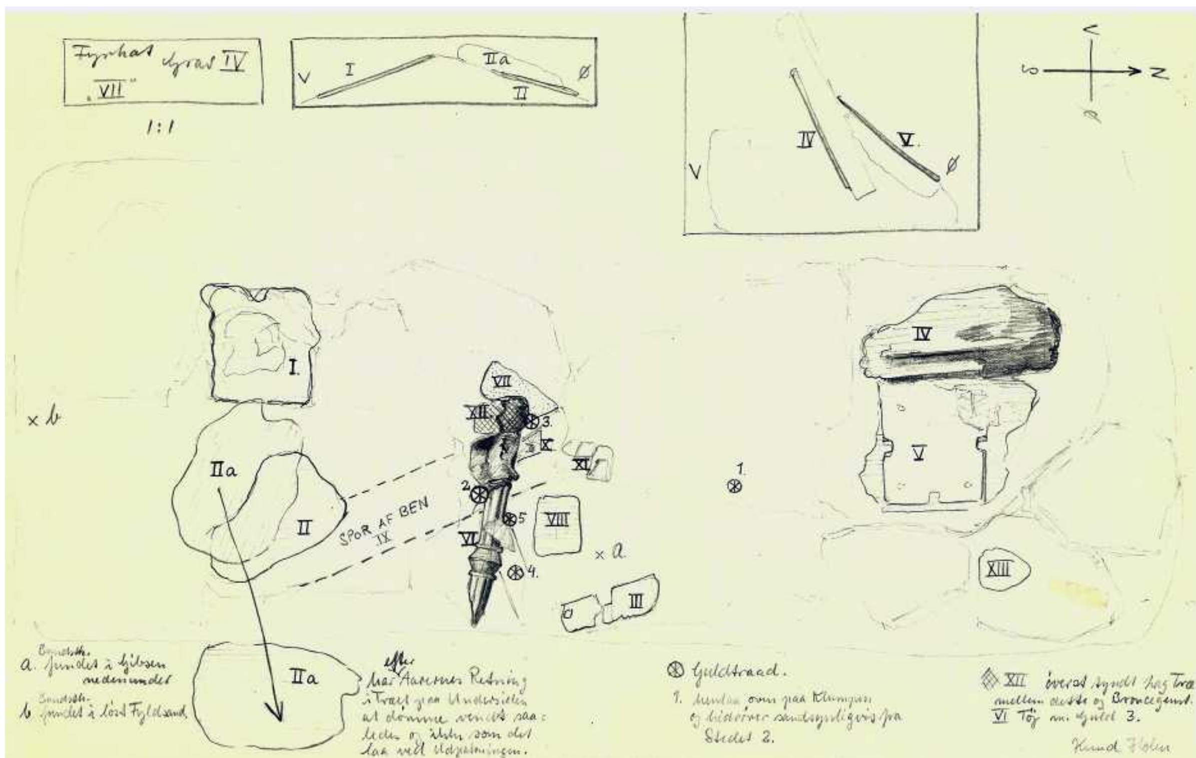

Figure 24.17 Knud Holm's handwritten notes and sketch of plaster cast B. Copyright by National Museum of Denmark.

Figure 24.18 Gotlandic box brooch. Photos by Leszek Gardeła.

Figure 24.19 Roasting spit or staff. Photos by Leszek Gardeła.

Figure 24.20 Small copper alloy beaker or decorative staff fragment. Photos by Leszek Gardeła.

Figure 24.21 Large copper alloy bowl with a missing handle. Photos by Leszek Gardeła.

Figure 24.22 Grass lid originally covering the large bowl. Photos by Leszek Gardeła.

Figure 24.23 Fragmented animal horns. Photos by Leszek Gardeła.

excavated from other Viking Age burials in Scandinavia, although they are rare in southern Scandinavia.[37] No fittings for the horns were found.

The Identity of the Buried Person

Based on the grave inventory, the sex of the interred person has always been regarded as female.[38] The grave goods and their position in the burial correspond closely to other late tenth-century Viking Age graves of wealthy women from Jylland[39] except for some notable peculiarities. In her 1977 description in the Fyrkat volume, Roesdahl repeatedly noted the amuletic or even magical character of some of the artefacts in the burial. However, it was Neil Price who in 2002 labeled the grave as that of a possible '*vǫlva*' or as a '*seiðr-woman'*s grave'.[40] A few years later, he theorised the complexity and uniqueness of graves as 'materialized narratives', emphasising the manipulation of objects and bodies in personalised funerals, for the purposes of performance and for constructing and communicating stories of the buried individuals.[41]

Although we cannot with certainty say that a specific item was owned and used by the deceased, the extraordinary character and sheer unexpectedness of some of these artefacts renders it probable that the grave goods actually belonged to the buried person and were, in Price's words, intended for communicating the identity of the dead woman and perhaps the mourners' construction of a 'materialized narrative'.

The miniature chair brings to the mind the description in *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 4, of the seat erected for Þorbjǫrg *lítil-vǫlva*. This seat constitutes the central point from which she connects to the otherworldly powers, and the stool therefore denotes her authority. But the mere occurrence of this item in the grave cannot be taken as evidence of the woman's identity as a *vǫlva*. Miniature chairs have been found in different contexts, and the symbolic meanings of the throne do not seem to be limited to ritual specialists alone.[42]

The most extraordinary and indicative find in the grave was possibly the fur pouch holding the henbane seeds. Henbane (*hyoscyamus niger*) belongs to the same family as the potato and tobacco plants and was probably known in Scandinavia as early as the Neolithic. Henbane seeds have also been found in many other parts of Northern Europe,[43] as well as in several archaeological Scandinavian contexts.[44] Henbane is known for its mind-altering properties, but other explanations for the occurrence of these seeds in the burial may be at hand. Already in 1977, Hans Helbæk suggested that the pouch containing the seeds served as a kind of amulet, a protective and magical device against evil.[45] Likewise, a function as a charm for obtaining sexual attraction has been mentioned as an option.[46]

Henbane also has narcotic and psychoactive properties. Not much is known about consumption of intoxicating substances in the Viking Age, with the exception of alcohol which played a major role at social events and seems to have been associated with wisdom and poetry. Henbane is included in the so-called *Bald's Leechbook*, an Anglo-Saxon recipe collection compiled in the early tenth century. In this medical book, henbane is recommended as a pain reliever, for instance against toothache.[47]

While material is available from the High Middle Ages, after writing became more common, and hints are given in Anglo-Saxon recipe collections,[48] evidence of the use of drugs and narcotics in the Viking Age is sparse in both the archaeological record and the Old Norse written sources.[49] In the Oseberg burial, a few seeds of hemp (*cannabis sativa*) were found.[50] Hemp was cultivated in Viking Age Scandinavia, but this was probably for the purposes of textile production[51] and not necessarily for use as a drug. However, being organic material and not being obvious grave goods, its scarce presence in the archaeological record should not be taken as evidence of the lack of drugs in the Viking Age.

The contents of the ovoid copper alloy bowl from grave 4 (no. 5) were analysed, and the substance inside was determined to be fat.[52] If mixed with fat, henbane could promote ecstatic and elicit hallucinations, and this could explain the presence of the seeds in the Fyrkat grave, as suggested by Pentz *et al*.[53]

The copper alloy bowl was not produced locally, but rather somewhere in Central Asia.[54] While artefacts which are clearly not native to a given region have the potential to provide information about economic processes, their spiritual powers have been emphasised by Mary Helms in her studies of exotic materials in societies.[55] The bowl and the other 'faraway' artefacts from Fyrkat grave 4, such as the 'bird's feet pendant' and the Gotlandic box brooch, could be visible evidence of the dead woman's access to foreign goods and hence of her possession of extraordinary skills, unavailable to the rest of the society. On the other hand, the fragmented Gotlandic box brooch, with its considerable wear or damage from heavy or long-term use, might instead be an indicator of the woman's insight into the past. In the eyes of the mourners gathered at the graveside, the worn brooch may have been seen as an amuletic heirloom or as a specimen of personal significance to the deceased and thus inseparable from the dead person's identity.

In the discussions of the buried individual's possible role as a *seiðr*-woman, the question of the staff, the diagnostic tool of the *vǫlva*, has been in focus.[56] An item formerly interpreted by several scholars as a 'staff'[57] was found in pieces at the junction of plaster casts B and C (Fig. 24.16). It was composed of a central, square iron rod bound on each side with four thin circular iron rods, decorated with copper alloy knobs. Today, most of the iron is gone, leaving only the knobs. The original length of the supposed staff cannot be determined, less than 10 cm has been preserved, but as noted by Price it is very small, having the size of a pen.[58] This size would probably be rather small for a *vǫlva*'s staff, although no standard length for such staffs exists. The sketch drawn by the excavator, as well as an x-ray of the plaster cast, show the rod to be pointed (Fig. 24.17), but this could also be the result of intentional or post-depositional damage. Intentionally bent or even broken staffs are not unseen in the archaeological material.[59] Roesdahl noted that the anatomy of the object is congruent with well-known Viking Age artefacts, such as keys and spits.[60] The observations by Knud Holm when excavating the plaster cast imply that the item was part of the wooden box's inventory; he detected a stratigraphy revealing a thin wooden layer on top, the textile with golden threads covering the puzzling specimen.[61] Conceivably, the thin wooden layer can be interpreted as the lid of the wooden box and, if this holds, then the alleged staff was inside it, covered by or shrouded in a golden textile. The length of this box was estimated by Roesdahl to have been more than 24 cm, as deduced from the distance between the hinges.[62] Compared to other containers from Viking Age burials, it appears that the Fyrkat box would not be capable of holding a staff of more than c. 45 cm. However, an alternative interpretation of this item as a pin or a fragmented key handle is quite plausible.

In searching for a staff in the proper sense, the so-called Fyrkat 'roasting spit', an item which is unusual in a Danish Viking Age burial context, must be seriously considered. At first glance, the anatomy of the spit, being twisted and with a lancet-shaped spearhead, seems problematic in terms of its practical use. However, a reconstruction of the roasting

spit was produced by Moesgaard Museum in 1971 and this proved to be fully functional.[63] Any direct parallel to the Fyrkat spit is unknown. A 0.85 m long iron rod found wrapped in textiles in the burial of the so-called 'pagan lady' from Peel Castle on the Isle of Man, possibly a Scandinavian woman,[64] was originally described as a roasting spit.[65] This interpretation was later challenged by Price and Gardeła, opening up for an interpretation of the buried woman as a sorceress or *vǫlva* and the alleged spit as her staff.[66]

During the excavation of Fyrkat 4, Knud Holm noted a wooden shaft the size of a broomstick, co-deposited with and parallel to the 'roasting spit'. The small drinking cup or mace-head was found at the top of the shaft (Fig. 24.24), partially corroded and with a distinct ring of rust, caused by its long deposition in the soil, close to the eye of the spit. If this item was not a beaker, this spherical and gilded object could actually be the terminal of a stick or wooden staff (see also → **Chapter 23**). This interpretation may find some support in the shape of the fitting with its collar forming a circular socket. The opening or socket was found pointing south and thus orthogonal to the wooden stick, but this position may have been a result of the collapse of the lid covering the wagon body or of rearrangements subsequent to the decomposition of the deceased woman's body. A small rupture in the collar of the 'beaker' could be a rivet-hole.

A close parallel to the 'beaker' was found in a burial at Stengade in Langeland, Denmark (Fig. 24.25). This copper alloy artefact was part of the assemblage of a woman's grave, the buried woman was in her 50s, and it was interpreted as a small container. The Stengade burial in which it was found, called BØ, had unusual grave goods and was among the richest at the burial site, just like the Fyrkat grave.[67] The Stengade 'beaker' is almost identical with its Fyrkat equivalent, except that it lacks the collar at the opening. It was found together with a sewing kit, both interpreted by the excavator as having been put into a kind of bag. The date of grave BØ at Stengade would seem to be the second half of the tenth century.[68] The Stengade 'beaker' contained six small plum stones; the reason for keeping and even depositing them together with the woman is unknown. Both of

Figure 24.24 Photo showing the plaster cast from the southern side of the burial before excavation. Photo by Knud Holm, National Museum of Denmark.

Figure 24.25 Beaker or container from a woman's burial at Stengade, Langeland, Denmark. Photo by Langelands Museum.

the two copper alloy 'beakers' are rather thin-walled and, if shaken, the plum stones in the Stengade 'beaker' would have emitted a soft rattling sound. Lacking the broomstick of its Fyrkat equivalent, the Stengade 'beaker' was disconnected from its stick before it was placed in the burial.

From our fairly limited knowledge of the ritual performances by female sorcerers, no mentions of rattles are known. However, in other cultures singing or chanting – which is part of the description of Þorbjǫrg *lítil-vǫlva*'s divinatory performance in Greenland[69] – was traditionally accompanied by drumming and rattling and together with the drum. The rattle is known as a classic shamanistic instrument.

If the Fyrkat 'beaker' was actually a terminal, the wooden staff with this gilded knob would have been a sceptre-like device with symbolic associations. Being hollow but holding minor hard objects, like damson plum stones, the copper alloy staff terminal could have worked like a rattle. Even if only hypothetical, this suggestion must be taken into consideration.

All three objects discussed above, namely the small pin in the wooden chest, the roasting spit, and the wooden stick with its suggested 'golden' spherical terminal, can be interpreted as staffs. Whether one of them – or none, or all – was a staff used in the practice of *seiðr* or related ritual activities is challenging to determine. Probably, we may assume with Leszek Gardeła that the staff 'became a tool for sorcery only when its carrier decided to use it in this manner and the participants of the ritual believed in her (or his) power'.[70] With this in mind, the discussion of whether roasting spits are kitchen utensils or magic staffs becomes irrelevant. It was their use and their owner that defined their functions.[71]

The same 'double' meaning and function possibly applies to many other artefacts, such as whetstones. Two whetstones were included in Fyrkat grave 4, one with a hole for suspension and another deposited in the wooden box. Objects with obvious functional purposes, such as whetstones or touchstones for assessing the value of precious metals, could certainly have symbolic meanings and functions not only in daily life but also in funerary contexts, and they could be used for the presentation or construction of social identities.[72] While the two whetstones in the Fyrkat grave may have been used for honing one or more of the objects, whether the knife, the roasting spit, or the staff/pin, they could potentially also have had symbolic meanings reaching beyond their conventional use. The discovery of not just one but two whetstones in grave 4 is unusual, but not unique. At Kaupang, only six graves out of 42 contained more than one whetstone.[73] The Trelleborg burial ground revealed a total of 27 graves containing small knives, in nine cases found together with whetstones.[74]

In the Fyrkat 4 grave, the pig's jaw bone fragment was found underlying the small iron pin in the wooden box. This rather prominent position would imply that it had some importance to the deceased person. However, as noted by Roesdahl, the find is not unique.[75] Gardeła suggested that the jawbone could have functioned as a sound tool, a musical scraper[76] which was used in some ritual or ceremony. This interpretation would, in a sense, correspond to the hypothetical rattle terminal of the wooden stick, both instruments being part of the sorcerer's 'performance kit'.

The jawbone fragment was not the only animal piece found in the wooden box. An approximately 2 cm wide lump of organic material had also been stored here (Fig. 24.9). This specimen was tentatively interpreted as an 'owl pellet'.[77] However, more recent examinations indicate that the accumulation is not a raptor pellet, although electron microscope observation shows that the assemblage in the lump apparently contains a shoulder blade from a rodent, possibly a mouse.[78] Other animal material in the grave were two (or more) ox-horns, already mentioned above. Understanding these horns as parts of a headgear is an attractive but highly imaginative thought, even though ethnographical analogies of horned headgear being part of shamanic paraphernalia are plenty. Horned and presumably female figures are also known from the Viking Age archaeological record – both from metal artefacts and the Oseberg textile. If the Fyrkat horns are interpreted as drinking horns, their occurrence in a late Viking Age burial in southern Scandinavia is unusual and some sort of fittings made of non-ferrous metal would have been expected, but no such ornaments were found.

Since the Gotlandic box brooch was placed with the upper side downwards, it must be assumed that its function in the grave was as a cup or a container for something and that it was not deposited empty. On the other hand, the inverted and bottomless brooch was found uncovered, in contrast to the copper alloy bowl the substances of

which had been protected by a carefully arranged grass lid. Of course, it cannot be determined with certainty whether the arrangement and the damage to the brooch reflect a situation linked to the burial itself and the rituals associated with it, but the distinctive location of this piece of jewellery by the deceased person's head rather points to the fact that the inverted box brooch and its contents had a special meaning.[79]

Two samples from the interior of the box brooch were taken, one from a green coating, another from white. SEM-EDS analysis revealed that the latter sample contains a lot of lead and a FT-IR spectrum showed that this is lead carbonate. It could not be determined whether this was a corrosion product originating from the container or whether it is the lead white pigment. The green layer contained lead, copper, and traces of tin, and the FT-IR spectroscopy showed that this is basic copper carbonate (malachite). This is undoubtedly copper corrosion.[80] Whatever the case, it is improbable that the box brooch container was deposited empty and open in the grave, so if the lead carbonate is to be understood as a corrosion product alone, there must have been something else in it. If, however, we accept that the lead carbonate in the box was something else and more than a residual by-product from the production of the brooch, the deep cultural register of lead white in its material connection with cosmetic paint must be acknowledged.[81] While there is rich evidence of the use of lead white in painting and cosmetics in antiquity and in medieval Europe, extant Old Norse sources do not mention it. However, the late tenth-century traveller Ibrāhīm ibn Ya'qūb al-Isrā'īlī al-Turtūshī, a native Sephardic Jew of the Cordoban city of Tortosa, reports that the men and women of the city of Shalashwīq (Haithabu/Hedeby) used 'a kind of indelible cosmetic to enhance the beauty of their eyes'[82] and some Viking Age metal figurines suggest striped face paint, if not tattoos, or perhaps they merely portray grimacing (Fig. 24.26).

Figure 24.26 Metal figure from Tissø, Sjælland, Denmark showing a presumably female character with striped (painted?) cheeks. Photo by John Lee, National Museum of Denmark.

If the depth of a grave relates to the social status of the deceased, it must be assumed that the individual buried in grave 4 was the most prominent person of all the dead at Fyrkat. And if the size of the pit itself also related to her status, this particular grave can be compared to the pit of the exceptionally rich wagon body burial known as chamber grave 5 from the southern cemetery at Haithabu/Hedeby;[83] here, the chamber measured 3.4 × 2.6 m, a size comparable to the pit of the Fyrkat 4 grave. Wagon burials seem to be the preferred burial type for noble women of the later tenth century, but the symbolic meaning of this fashion is unclear. One explanation connects the wagon to weddings and the status of married women (→ **Chapter 33**).

Most likely, the wagons found in the burials were not made specifically for the burial ceremony, but had been in everyday use, and we might even speculate that the buried person was also the owner of the wagon. This could indicate that the woman in grave 4 was local. If the linking of wagons to marriage is valid, it would be natural to assume that her domestic status was emphasised by the wagon. Hence, some of the grave goods, such as the wooden box with its spindle whorl, roasting spit, scissors, whetstones, and the possible pin or key (formerly interpreted as a 'staff'), decorated and symbolic, can be seen as gender-specific items linked to her identity. The drinking horns, if interpreted as such, herald messages concerning her role as hostess and *husfru*. All these artefacts seem to symbolise activities associated with the home and the hall.

Still, there seems to be more to the deposition of grave goods with this woman than simply a status as mother,

wife, or her role within the household. The henbane seeds, the exotic objects from faraway places, the amulets, the 'oddities' such as the presumed pellet and pig's jawbone together with the staff(s) or rattle point to a status based on more than merely kin and marriage. Just like the jewellery deposited in the grave was regarded as the deceased's possession, so were also the anomalous paraphernalia. In this light, the 'ordinary' household symbols found within the grave ensemble can also be seen as imbued with special powers. This woman was not interred with due ceremony and grave goods simply to exhibit, conserve, or further the family's standing within the community alone. As well as a family identity, she had a community identity, appropriately manifested by the ambiguity of the grave goods. Squeezing the lemon, it might even be claimed that the Fyrkat 4 grave can be seen as contradicting the assumption that all Viking Age women lived under the protection of a man.

The combination of high status, individuality, and the performance of *seiðr* among female members of the upper classes is not unknown in the written records. An early twelfth-century Irish source reports that the Scandinavian noblewoman Auðr, wife of the ninth-century viking leader Þórgísl, issued pagan oracles while seated on the altar in the church of Clonmacnoise,[84] thus transforming the altar into her throne. More into literary stereotypes perhaps, the notion of the noble female sorcerer is also dealt with in *Historia Norvegiæ*, where we are told that king Haraldr blátǫnn's sister, and wife of king Eiríkr blóðøx, Gunnhildr, learned sorcery from the Sámi people.[85]

***

If, for a moment, we put our reservations aside and allow some speculation, we may imagine parts of the ritual as it could have unfolded. We may envisage the extended and large-scale burial of the Fyrkat woman. Preparations would have been time-consuming and probably started even before the actual biological death. Being not only a valued member of a prominent family, but also having a salient role in a broader community, her death would have to have been announced in a wider area. The need to expend resources on recreating those relationships through display had to be fulfilled by including more than 'ordinary' grave goods, reflecting her important and special role within the community.

The burial ground chosen for the woman was not that of her family's estate, but the cemetery at king Haraldr blátǫnn's ring fortress, since this location provided a focus for narratives concerning the social relationships of the deceased. We can assume that the burial pit and the clay-lined grave chamber were prepared well in time before the actual deposition of the body.

At the day of the burial, the wagon with its contents would leave the eastern gate of the Fyrkat fortress accompanied by the mourners and move slowly along the ceremonial platform. What rituals those left behind performed is difficult to imagine; most likely one or more specialised mourners[86] would follow behind the vehicle while exercising their profession. Dressed in precious clothes, the body was placed in the burial pit. Before the attendants' eyes, her personal belongings, jewellery, knife, and more were wrapped in a cloth together with her special remedies, the fur pouch and its henbane seeds, the golden pin for mixing henbane and fat. At her feet, the wooden casket with her belongings would be shown open, displaying the mixture of domestic and magical objects lying on a piece of cloth embroidered with golden threads. The exotic copper alloy bowl with its contents of fat was placed at the side of the body. Her 'sceptre' – the stick or rattle with the gilded knob – and the roasting spit, imbued with powers as a seeress's staff, were both laid on the other side of the dead woman. A chosen member among the mourners would enter the burial holding the inverted Gotlandic box brooch in her hand and, under due ceremonies, singing and weeping, she would dip her finger in the contents of the open brooch and slowly draw lines of lead white stripes on the cheeks of the dead woman. Finally, she would leave the open box brooch beside the head of the deceased.

After the deposition of the body, the grave would be left uncovered for some time while more people travelled from neighbouring areas to view the body and hold further mortuary ceremonies. These encounters with the newly dead could have taken several weeks. Stages of this prolonged interaction are not visible archaeologically, but a fireplace at the southern edge of the burial pit may be the only remains of some of the rituals having been performed on the occasion (Fig. 24.27).[87]

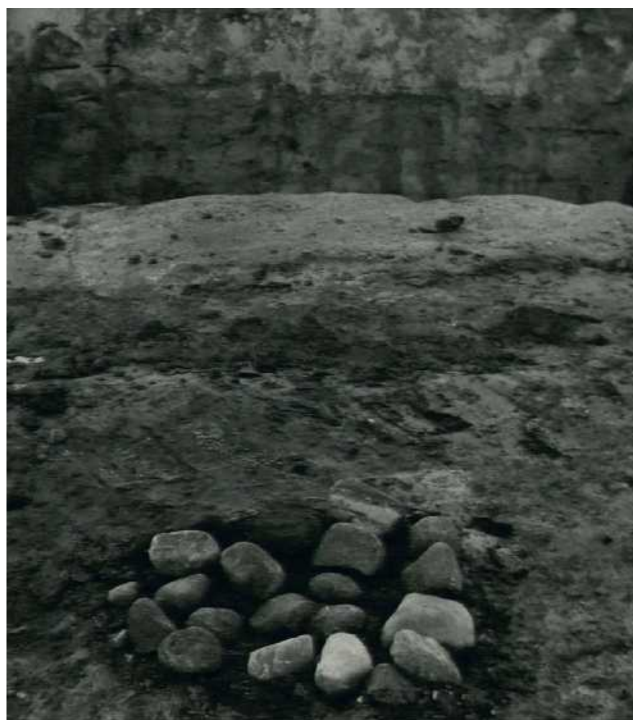

Figure 24.27 Fireplace at the southern edge of the burial pit for grave 4. Photo by Svend Søndergaard, National Museum of Denmark.

Eventually, the wooden casket was closed and locked.[88] A lid was arranged on top of the wagon body covering the dead woman and her grave goods. Afterwards, the pit was filled in. No actions were taken to prevent the deceased from exiting her grave.[89]

A Christian Cemetery?

As pointed out by Roesdahl, the burial ground at Fyrkat attracts special attention because of its precise date, corresponding to the first decennials after Christianity had been officially introduced by king Haraldr blátǫnn.[90] Although the inhumations date from this early Christian period, they are not located on a church site – at least, no traces were documented from any other structures than the platform which may have been an essential construction for the transitional burial grounds.[91] Still, as noted above, the cemetery has several features that align with Christian traditions.

The community at Fyrkat must have been newly converted or was, at least, of mixed belief. Probably any Christian clergy present would have acknowledged the importance of pre-Christian traditions of burial for communities of this kind. Whether or not there was controversy associated with the funerary practices taking place at the Fyrkat cemetery, we will never know, but we may suspect that religion in itself may not have been an issue within the transitional burial grounds, and there is no obvious difference between pagan and Christian graves during this period.

Although 'pagan' symbols were found in a few of the Fyrkat graves, such as an iron ring with miniature tools,[92] there is a difficulty in determining specific religious elements in graves of the transitional period. No definite commitment to pre-Christian practices, e.g. by the performance of cremation rites and animal sacrifice, can be established at the Fyrkat cemetery and the ways in which pre-Christian beliefs may have been expressed are problematic to define archaeologically.

The period of use for the cemetery was short. The archaeological evidence demonstrates that the site, once central to the occupants of Fyrkat, was abandoned and disappeared from public consciousness until it was rediscovered during the excavations of the ring fortress.

The builder of the Fyrkat fortress is believed to be king Haraldr blátǫnn, and we might have expected an intimate link between political and religious life at this particular site. However, for the buried at Fyrkat and probably also for Haraldr himself, being under political pressure from Christian Europe, it may have been fairly easy, as well as consistent with the traditional beliefs of the polytheistic pre-Christian religion, to simply include the newcomer Christ within their existing pantheon – even if he were eventually to oust the traditional gods. A community of newly converted Christians would not have rejected all of their former traditions overnight. Rather, new Christian traditions would have developed gradually, at least partly on the basis of former, pre-Christian traditions.[93]

This recalls Helgi bjóla, one of the early settlers of Iceland, who was 'of mixed faith'. He believed in Christ but still invoked Þórr on special occasions. Regardless of this, Helgi receives a favourable portrayal in *Landnámabók*.[94] Perhaps the members of the Fyrkat community were of 'mixed belief' like Helgi and it might be in this light that we must view the cemetery with the buried seeress at Fyrkat.

Notes

1. Olsen & Schmidt 1977.
2. Roesdahl 1977.
3. Olsen & Schmidt 1977; Dobat 2014: 55.
4. Roesdahl 1977: 77, 129–30; 2004: 154–5.
5. Roesdahl *et al.* 2014: 254–5, 486–8.
6. Gelting 2020.
7. Ulriksen 2011: 185.
8. Ulriksen 2011: 182.
9. Roesdahl 1977: 146.
10. Roesdahl 1977: 129; 2004: 154.
11. Roesdahl 2004: 154.
12. Lund 2013.
13. Nørlund (1948: 105) suggested that the cemetery of Trelleborg was in use before the fortress was built, and that the last burials took place while the fortress was still operational – putting forward the speculation that the last occupants of the site were buried at a nearby church. *Contra* Roesdahl 1977: 161–7 and Nielsen 1990: 141, 143–5.
14. Roesdahl 1977: 145.
15. Nielsen 1990: 137.
16. For detailed descriptions, see Roesdahl 1977: 146–7.
17. See also → **Chapter 23**.
18. For a detailed description of the removable body chart, see Wagner 1977: 84–90 in Roesdahl 1977. The Fyrkat wagon grave was the first of its kind to be identified (see → **Chapter 23** and Roesdahl 1977: 131–2). See also Roesdahl 1983 for discussion on wagon body burials. For possible spiritual implications behind the wagon body burials, see → **Chapter 33**.
19. Roesdahl 1977: 103, no. 40. The golden threads were lost during excavation and not inventoried in the musems records.
20. Determined as Scandinavian by Roesdahl (1977: 141). However, the fragmented pieces offer other interpretations of their origins, since the decorations also show Anglo-Saxon or Frankish features.
21. Claus Malmros (2009: 316) has analysed 73 knife handles and almost 90% were found to be made of ash. Another knife from grave 22 in the Fyrkat cemetery had a handle made of plum tree – this is again an unusual choice of wood.
22. Roesdahl 1977: 116.
23. Iversen & Nielsen 1995: 140–1, grave A. This wagon grave is dated to the last third of the tenth century. While a single band of twisted wire is a very common feature, handles with more bands interconnected by two-ply wire are not quite as usual. An illustrative example comes from Birka, grave Bj 709 (Arbman 1940: 244; 1943: Taf. 179:7) and Trelleborg (Nørlund 1948: Tav. XXVII.5; Roesdahl 1977: 116, 119, fig. 185).
24. Gardeła in press.

25. Handwritten note and pencil drawing in the archives of the National Museum of Denmark.
26. Helbæk 1977: 36; Roesdahl 1977: 143.
27. Brandt *et al*. 2022: 5, 9.
28. Vierck 2002: 45.
29. An alternative possibility is that of a bead (see Roesdahl 1977:140); two such beads were found in the burials AY and AV at Stengade, Langeland, Denmark (Skaarup 1977: 79, 81). However, these were found in a stringed armband and a necklace, respectively.
30. Kock & Sode 2002. See Steppuhn 1998 for parallels from Haithabu/Hedeby. See Gräslund 1973: 171 for mirror fragments from burials at Birka.
31. Roesdahl 1977: 95–6.
32. See Hedegaard 2016 for the technical details of the box brooch. Three of the box brooch's protruding gables are missing. A gable from a brooch of this type was found in the excavations of the ring fortress Borgring and this coincidence has led to speculations whether this gable is one of the three missing from the Fyrkat brooch (Christensen *et al*. 2021: 11).
33. Thunmark-Nylén 2006: 76, 86.
34. Roesdahl 1977: 134.
35. Pentz *et al*. 2009: 223.
36. See Roesdahl 1977: 138–9 for possible Russian parallels. Roesdahl also suggests the rings to be inspired from the Mediterranean where toe-rings are known from the Roman period; this is a plausible suggestion. A ring found in a woman's grave at Myklebostad, Norway, has been interpreted as a possible toe-ring (Price 2019: 150–1).
37. Roesdahl 1977: 133. Hofmann 2015.
38. A DNA analysis of the bones in Plaster cast D might establish more definite proof, if the surviving material is sufficient.
39. See Roesdahl 1977: 148 and → **Chapter 23**.
40. Price 2002: 149.
41. Price 2010.
42. See Jessen & Majland 2021 and → **Chapter 32**.
43. Rohde *et al.* 2012: 29–31.
44. Heimdahl 2009.
45. Helbæk 1977: 36.
46. Price 2019: 168–9.
47. Cameron, 1993: 12.
48. Hall 2013: 61.
49. See Price 2019: 168–9 for an overview.
50. Holmboe 1927.
51. Skoglund *et al*. 2013. Vindheim 2002 argues that since hemp is absent from the Oseberg textiles, as well as from ropes, a ritual use of the cannabis seeds is plausible. See also Larsson & Lagerås 2015 for the cultivation of hemp in Scandinavia.
52. Christensen & Taube 2009 (unpublished).
53. Pentz *et al*. 2009. See also Hatsis 2015 for 'The Witches' Ointment' and henbane.
54. Roesdahl 1977: 134; Pentz *et al*. 2009: 223.
55. Helms 1998, see also → **Part 5**.
56. Roesdahl 2004: 156; Gardeła 2016: 223; Price 2019: 141–2.
57. e.g. Price 2002; 2019; Gardeła 2016.
58. Price 2019: 141.
59. See Gardeła 2016: 215 and → **Chapter 27**.
60. Roeasdahl 1977: 143.
61. Handwritten note on his sketch from the excavation of the plaster casts (Fig. 24.17): 'Øverst tyndt Lag Træ mellem dette og Broncegenstand VI Tøj med Guld': 'At the top, a thin layer of wood – between this and the copper alloy object VI textile with gold' (the number 'VI', refers to the pin or staff).
62. Roesdahl 1977: 95.
63. Roesdahl 1971.
64. Symonds *et al*. 2014.
65. Wilson 2008: 48-50. Gardeła 2014: 35–6.
66. Price 2002: 160–1; 2019: 118; Gardeła 2016: 223. Roesdahl (2006: 338) maintains the roasting spit interpretation referring to the goose wing in the Peel Castle burial as being without magical properties, but just another domestic utensil, namely for use as a broom or flail to separate the grain from the straw or husks after threshing; evidence of this use exists from later periods. See also Price 2004: 116-117 for a discussion on relations between roasting spits and staffs of sorcery.
67. Skårup 1976: 179–86.
68. The date is assessed on the basis of the absence of oval brooches and the presence of a slightly dished circular brooch with two attachments on back, decorated with stylized animal ornament. See Skaarup 1976: 95, 179–80, pl. 35,1.
69. *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 4 (Storm 1899).
70. Gardeła 2016: 34.
71. Thus, the spear in the Gerdrup grave can also be interpreted as a kind of staff (→ **Chapter 28**).
72. Ježek 2016, 2019; Jessen & Taube 2021. Toplak (2017; 2021) mentions whetstones in burials as examples of objects entirely detached from the social status or profession of the deceased in reality.
73. Resi & Asvik 2008: 51.
74. Nørlund 1948.
75. Roesdahl 1977: 143.
76. Gardeła 2016: 74. Similar pig's jaws have been found in other Viking Age graves, such as the 'deviant' burial from Birka (Bj 959), a presumably decapitated female (Gardeła 2013; 2016: 49; 2017).
77. Roesdahl 1977: 104. Identified by Knud Rosenlund, Natural History Museum of Denmark.
78. Email communication of 9 July 2009 from Knud Rosenlund. Further analysis may shed more light on the nature of the pellet.
79. Parrott (2020: 103–5) argues that the intimate relation between the Gotlandic brooches and their owners must indicate that the brooch in the Fyrkat burial is evidence of a Gotlandic origin of the woman herself or, rather, considering the chronological discrepancy between brooch and burial, that the brooch was an heirloom and the deceased was of Gotlandic descent.
80. Christensen & Taube 2009.
81. Han *et al*. 2022. Hedegaard (2016: 5) assumes that the lead carbonate is nothing but the by-product of the production process.

82. See ’Ibrāhīm ibn Ya‘qūb on Northern Europe 965’ in Lunde & Stone 2012: 163. The colour used is not necessarily lead white, other possibilities exist, such as kohl.
83. Arents & Eisenschmidt 2010: 194, 200; Eisenschmidt 2011: 100.
84. Downham 2012: 15; Price 2019: 333.
85. Ekrem & Boje Mortensen 2006. See esp. p. 19 and 225 for a discussion on Gunhildr’s kinship with Haraldr blátǫnn.
86. See Price 2014: 179 for professional mourners.
87. See Roesdahl 1977: 84.
88. The positions of the bolts and spring of the lock allowed Else Roesdahl (1977: 97) to establish that the box was locked when deposited in the grave.
89. Stones were occasionally placed on top of deceased persons in graves, possibly to prevent the buried from rising again as a ghost (Gardeła 2013; 2017). In *Laxdœla* saga ch. 17 and ch. 24, written down in the thirteenth century, Hrappr dies and then reappears as a troublesome ghost, and in ch.76 a sorceress cannot rest in her grave, because a Christian church has been built on the burial ground and the prayers are disturbing her (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1934).
90. Roesdahl 2004.
91. Roesdahl 2004: 154, 157.
92. Roesdahl 1977: 101, 125, 140; 2004: 155.
93. Bønding 2021.
94. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999: 25–6.

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25

The Textiles from the Fyrkat 4 Grave

Ulla Mannering & Charlotte Rimstad

Introduction

The excavation of the Fyrkat 4 grave took place between 1954–1955. The textiles were subsequently analysed by textile conservator Else Østergård from the National Museum of Denmark and published in the book from 1977.[1] Since then, many other textiles belonging to rich graves from the same era have been analysed, enabling the Fyrkat material to be interpreted in a larger context of Viking Age textile production.[2] However, when the funerary assemblage of grave 4 was presented to the wider public again in 2009, focus was primarily placed on the interpretation of the burial as that of a *vǫlva*,[3] and no detailed study of the textiles from grave 4 was included.

Recently, the textile and skin remains from the Fyrkat 4 grave have once again been studied and analysed, allowing us to present the preliminary results and interpretations here. Below, the data from a recent analysis of the fur pieces from grave 4 are included.[4]

The textiles from the Fyrkat 4 grave are all small and poorly preserved fragments. The majority are less than a square centimetre in size and only few are still preserved in their organic state. The rest are mainly preserved in a mineralised condition, meaning that metal salts from the copper alloy and iron objects in the grave have penetrated into the textiles and threads and have replaced the original chemical structure. Such mineralised textiles can sometimes be analysed and provide basic information about the weave and other technical details. Chemical analyses, such as testing for organic dye stuffs and the execution of fibre analysis using optical microscopy, are usually not applicable to this type of textile preservation. Mineralised fibres can, on the other hand, be studied using Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM).[5]

For this study, new textile analyses using a Dino-Lite digital microscope have been applied. Furthermore, samples for dye and fibre analyses have been taken of the few textiles still in their organic state. Unfortunately, these results are not yet ready for publication and will be presented at a later stage. In this chapter, only the visual identification of colours and fibres are provided.

During the excavation in the 1950s, four plaster casts (A–D) were lifted out of the grave to be excavated in the conservation laboratory. The preserved textiles and skin finds were primarily recovered in plaster casts A–C, but for unknown reasons plaster cast D was never included in the initial publication and thus never recorded by Else Østergård.[6] In the course of this study, plaster cast D, deriving from the head/chest area of the grave, was very fortunately rediscovered, and it has turned out to contain important information that adds a new dimension to the interpretation of the dead person's outfit and status. The buried person is interpreted as a woman, and although we cannot be absolutely certain about this, the outfit also points in this direction. As such, she will be referred to as a woman in the following. The textile and skin material are primarily presented in terms of material and technique, as well as where in the grave the fragments were found. Based on the excavation plan, it is possible to link the majority of different textile and skin types to specific areas and in this way offer a new interpretation of their possible use and function (see Fig. 24.3).

Textiles

The current analysis of the preserved textile material shows that several different textile types were present in the grave. From the pelvic area, a tabby textile is preserved

with a minimum of 10 loose mineralised pieces which were recovered from plaster cast A (D156-1966). The pieces show multiple and pleated layers of the same kind of weave (Fig. 25.1). The largest fragment measures 1 × 1 cm and the weave is tabby with c. 50/30 threads/cm and a yarn diameter of 0.2 mm (Table 25.1). This is a very fine weave compared to other contemporary Viking Age textile finds.[7] In the same plaster cast A, lumps of an unidentifiable mineralised textile are seen on the knife (D174-1966) and on the whetstone/touchstone (D160-1966), which were found close to one another and may well have been placed in the grave together. On the whetstone/touchstone, the iron encrustations are recorded on the surface, and inside the pierced hole a round iron core/encrustation measuring 1.6 mm in diameter is preserved. In the hole, further remains of mineralised fibres are preserved and, taken together, this may be the remains of a suspension cord placed in the hole. Based on the fact that knife and whetstone/touchstone were situated so close to one another, and their possible functional connection, it is likely that the abovementioned tabby was used to wrap both objects, although it cannot be excluded that it was used for clothing.

Figure 25.1 Mineralised finely woven tabby (D156-1966). Photo by Charlotte Rimstad.

At the feet or below the feet in plaster cast B/C, fragments of several small and visibly blue and red threads were found (D244-1966, D247-1966). Their weave can, unfortunately, not be identified, but their colours reveal that they are most likely the remains of a weave which is represented by several other organic fragments (D202-1966) recorded as found in an unknown location within the grave. This weave is an unbalanced tabby made in clearly blue fibres, most likely wool. In one of the pieces, measuring 1.9 × 1.2 cm, it is possible to identify at least two closely connected layers of this weave. In the publication from 1977, it is noted that a reddish layer of fibre, possibly of vegetal origin, was visible between the layers of the blue tabby.[8] Today, this feature cannot be identified. However, the 7–8 red cords, also previously recorded, are still recognisable on top of the blue tabby (D202-1966) (Fig. 25.2). The cords are S-plied, made of two z-twisted threads (S-2z), and measure 0.6 mm in diameter, with a yarn diameter of 0.3 mm. They lie close to one another, but it is not possible to identify any weft or other threads that bind the cords. It is therefore difficult to ascertain whether these cords were part of a tablet-woven band or another kind of woven band or structure from which the weft threads are now missing. Samples for dye analysis and wool fibre analysis have been taken of the blue tabby and red cords, and the results will be presented in a forthcoming article.

Also in the area of the feet, some heavily mineralised plied cords were identified on a pair of scissors (D207-1966). They measure around 0.4–0.5 mm in diameter, with a

Table 25.1 Technical details of the textiles preserved in Grave 4.

Id. no.	*Position in the grave*	*Weave*	*Threads per cm*	*Twist direction*	*Yarn diameter in mm*	*Possible material*	*Visually detected colour*
D174 D160	At the pelvis, on knife and whetstone	Tabby	50/30–35 (measured on 2 mm)	z/z	0.2/0.2	Unknown	–
D202 D244 D247	Unknown position At the feet At the feet	Tabby	35/12	z/z	0.3/0.3	Wool	Blueish
D202	Possibly at the feet	Cords		S-2z	S: 0.6 z: 0.3	Wool	Reddish
D207	At the feet, on a pair of scissors	Cords		S-2z	S: 0.5 z: 0.3	Wool?	–
D204 a	At the feet, on staff	2/1 or 2/2 twill	25–30/unid.	z/z	0.3/0.2-0.3	Wool?	Light brown
D204 b	At the feet, on staff	Cord		S-2z	S: 0.6 z: 0.3	Wool?	–
D204 c	At the feet	Tabby?	20/~16	z/z	0.5/0.4	Wool?	–

Figure 25.2 Blue tabby with red cords on top (D202-1966). Photo by Roberto Fortuna.

yarn thickness of 0.3 mm. Due to the state of preservation, it is difficult to determine whether these cords were part of a tablet-woven band or perhaps similar to the red cords identified in D202-1966.

Other mineralised textile pieces were found in the area of the feet on an iron object with copper alloy fittings (D204a-c). Here, both twill and tabby structures are visible, but due to the preservation conditions it is difficult to determine if these surfaces belong to the same weave or not. A 2/1 twill weave has both a twill and a tabby face side, and this is probably why this particular weave was originally suggested as a plausible interpretation of the remains.[9] Based on the new measurements of the thread diameters on the different pieces, it is very likely that the tabby fabric is made using a slightly thicker thread diameter than on the twill pieces. This could indicate that they are, in fact, separate weaves. This, however, does not solve the question of whether the weave is a 2/2 or a 2/1 twill. Judging by the look of the fibres in their mineralised state, they are most likely all made of wool. Moreover, on fragment D204b, a single mineralised and S-plied cord is visible (Fig. 25.3).

The abovementioned pair of scissors and the iron object (D207-1966 and D204-1966) found in plaster cast B/C were most likely placed in a wooden box located at the feet of the woman. As such, the function of the identified textiles was probably as a kind of wrapping for the objects. It is thus possible that different weaves were used to wrap different objects, which makes the identification and function of the weaves less straightforward. Furthermore, a spindle whorl of burnt clay (D176-1966), weighing 4.5 g and measuring 1.2 cm in height and 2 cm in diameter, was also recovered

Figure 25.3 Mineralised twill with a cord on top (D204b-1966). Photo by Charlotte Rimstad.

Figure 25.4 Spindle whorl of burnt clay (D176-1966). Photo by Leszek Gardeła.

from the same area (Fig. 25.4). The pair of scissors and the spindle whorl are both linked to textile production and the very light spindle whorl would have been used to produce very fine yarns.[10]

Decorations with Gold and Silver Threads

Plaster cast D was taken from the head/chest area, and at the time of the excavation it was noted that the plaster cast contained gold threads. The plaster cast, which disappeared but has now turned up again, is today as intact as when it was lifted from the soil (Fig. 25.5). Altogether, the plaster cast measures 32 × 17 cm, and an X-ray has revealed that it contains important data about the position of various decorative elements placed around the head and on the chest.

From Figure 25.5 it can be seen that the head or the neck of the buried person was adorned with one or more bands. If the band is one continuous piece, it measures around 27–30 cm in length and 1.3 cm in width. The band seems to be adorned with a geometrical pattern made in silver threads, which clearly light up on the X-ray. The silver threads can also be traced in the soil, they are 0.3 mm in diameter and the silver thread lamella is 0.2 mm thick and S wound around a now missing core. As the band seems to be placed primarily below the mandible, it most likely edged the neckline of a non-preserved clothing item, and the two ends further seem to meet and slightly overlap on the chest.

Right below this band and at a distance of 6 cm from the mandible, two triangular features are visible, both on the X-ray and on the surface of the plaster cast. Each triangle is more or less equilateral with each side measuring c. 7 cm (Table 25.2). On the two upper sides, the triangles are framed by a 4 mm wide band-like structure, primarily created by 0.3 mm s-twisted silver threads wound around a now missing core. The silver threads are placed in densely parallel rows, indicating that it could be a kind of woven band with a silver-thread brocading. At the lower side of the triangles, a different band is visible on the X-ray. This band measures 1 cm in width and seems to have distinct edges, possibly the stave borders of a tablet-woven band. Most clear on the surface is the decoration seen inside both triangles: a wavy ornament made with s-twisted gold thread lamella wound around a now missing core. Moreover, this golden wave shape seems to have been completely framed by silver threads which may have filled out all spaces in the inner triangle. The technique used for this part is most likely simple laid-work embroidery (Fig. 25.6). The motif created by the gold threads is not yet fully detected and will require further analysis. Neither is it possible to recognise any feature that could comprise the background for the gold and silver threads. It could have been either leather or textile, but based on the fineness of the metal threads as well as comparative Viking Age finds, it is likely to have been silk.[11] How the laid gold and silver threads were fastened to the background material is also uncertain, as no stitches are preserved. Samples and lipid analysis will hopefully be able to clarify the origin of the background material in the future.

At a distance of c. 2.0–2.5 cm below either triangle, an 8 cm long row consisting of four spiral structures is seen on the X-ray. Traces of silver threads are visible on the surface, and in some areas these threads are incorporated into a thicker cord measuring 1.1 mm in diameter. The cords are placed in a spiral motif which may have formed decorative endings of the triangles, either made as a kind of embroidery or as a kind of passementerie. A third possibility is that the features represent four double-spiral clasps which could have been used to close a garment.

Apart from the decorations preserved in plaster cast D, silver and especially gold threads are also preserved in the foot end of the grave. These gold threads were originally observed and recorded in connection with small fragments of leather. The species of the leather has neither been tested nor otherwise identified. The largest fragment of continuously

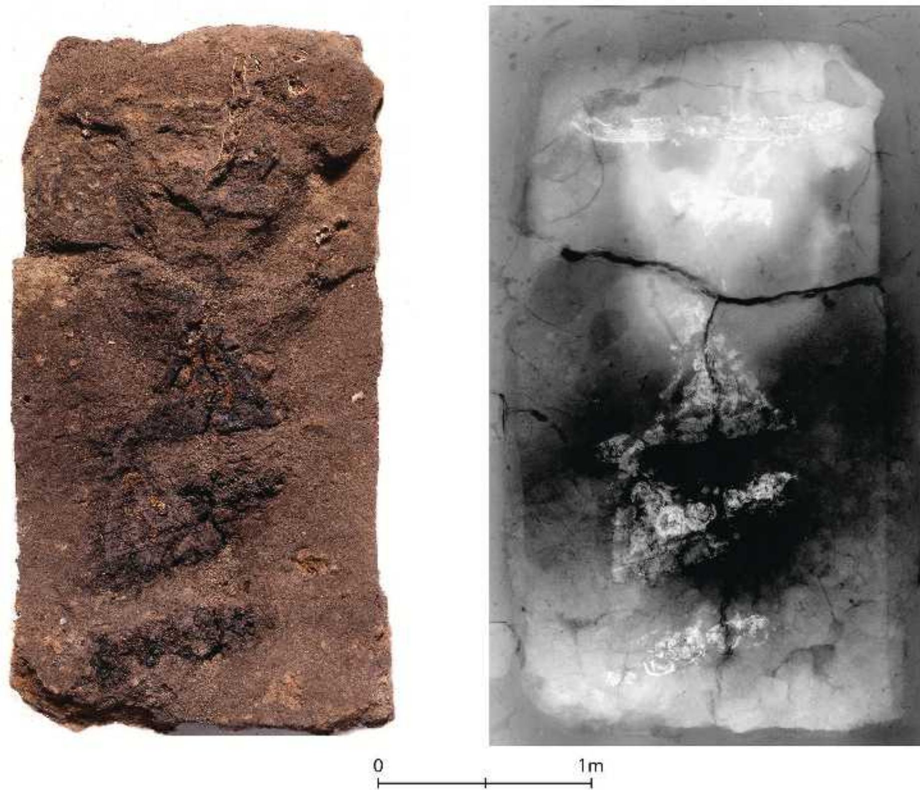

Figure 25.5 Plaster cast D as it is preserved today and the X-ray photo. Photo by Roberto Fortuna.

connected gold threads forms a c. 7 cm long and 0.9 cm wide band of parallel, densely packed threads (D178-1966). The flat gold thread lamella is s-twisted around a now missing core which was possibly made of silk (Fig. 25.7). Along the length on either side of the band, the gold threads have a 1.5 mm wide groove, which indicates that the band was sewn onto or woven into the non-preserved background. Other now loose gold threads likewise seem to have been attached in a similar manner (D239, D240, D241, D243-1966) and are possible fragments of this band. Small fragments of silver threads, measuring 0.2 mm in diameter, were also identified in the foot end (D248-1966). Given the placement of these precious metal threads in connection with leather placed at the foot end of the grave, it is tempting to interpret this as decoration on some sort of footwear.

Also among the textile pieces belonging to D247-1966, which are possibly linked to the blue wool tabby textile, a part of a gold thread is sticking out. The gold thread lamella 0.3 mm wide and was s-twisted around a now missing silk core. This shows that rather many gold threads, possibly with different uses, were part of the decoration of clothing items or other textile items placed in the grave. It is in this context worth mentioning that in Fyrkat grave 22a (band 0.9 wide and >3 cm long) and 22b (single gold thread), gold threads are also preserved. This indicates that similar gold features or techniques were present in these graves, and as such the decoration observed in grave 4 is not unique to this burial. In the

Figure 25.6 Close-up of plaster cast D, showing the two triangular features with gold and silver threads. Photo by Roberto Fortuna.

Table 25.2 Technical details of the metal threads preserved in Grave 4.

Id. no.	*Position*	*Metal thread*	*Type*	*Twist direction*	*Thread diameter in mm*	*Visually detected colour*
Plaster cast D	Neck area	Silver threads	Tablet-woven band? c. 27–30 × 1.3 cm	s-twisted around a now disintegrated core.	0.3 mm Silver thread lamella: 0.2 mm wide.	Black
Plaster cast D	On the chest	Gold threads	Embroidery	s-twisted around a now disintegrated core	0.3 mm Gold thread lamella: 0.2 mm	Golden with a reddish hue
Plaster cast D	On the chest, in the middle of the triangles	Silver threads	Fill in areas around gold embroidery	s-twisted around a now disintegrated core	0.3 mm Silver thread lamella: 0.2 mm	Black
Plaster cast D	On the chest, on the upper sides of the triangles	Silver threads	Small band, 0.4 cm wide	s-twisted around a now disintegrated core	0.3 mm Silver thread lamella: 0.2 mm	Grey/black
Plaster cast D	On the chest and the lower side of the triangles	Silver threads	Tablet-woven band?	s-twisted around a now disintegrated core	0.2 mm Silver thread lamella: 0.2 mm	Grey/black
Plaster cast D	On the chest, 2 cm below each triangle	Silver cords	Double spiral motif?	s-twisted around a now disintegrated core	Cords: 1.1 mm, consisting of 0.3 mm thick thread, tightly wound around a possible core	Grey/pinkish
D178-1966	At the feet	Gold band 0.9 cm wide	35 continuous threads in 1 cm	s-twisted around a now disintegrated core	0.3 mm Gold thread lamella: 0.2–0.3 mm	Golden
D239 D240 D241 D243	At the feet	Gold threads	Parallel threads	s-twisted around a now disintegrated core	0.3 mm Gold thread lamella: 0.2–0.3 mm	Golden
D247	At the feet	One gold thread	Sticking out from blue tabby textile	s-twisted around a now disintegrated core	0.3 mm Gold lamella: 0.2–0.3 mm	Golden with a reddish hue
D248-1966	At the feet	Silver thread	Small loose threads	s-twisted around a now disintegrated core	0.2 mm Silver lamella: 0.2 mm	Black

Scandinavian context, it does on the other hand place the grave among the absolute high-status graves containing silk, gold, and silver decorations.[12]

Fur

In the area of the pelvis, small fragments of fur were found (D158-1966) (Fig. 25.8). In the publication from 1977, the number D158 refers to three fragments of skin, probably deriving from sheep. Today, it is recognised that the preserved fragments are fur fibres with no or only little skin structure visible. The fragments were recently identified as belonging to the *Mustelidae* family.[13] It is likely that these tiny fragments are the last remains of a fur clothing. Similar fur items can be observed in many other contemporary high-status Viking Age male and female graves.[14]

The Deceased Person's Outfit

The current analysis of the textile remains in the Fyrkat 4 grave confirms the overall impression that their small size and poorly preserved state only have little to offer when it comes to the interpretation of the woman's outfit.

Figure 25.7 Gold threads in parallel lines (D178-1966). Photo by Roberto Fortuna.

Figure 25.8 Fur fragments of the Mustelidae *family (D158-1966). Photo by Roberto Fortuna.*

Nevertheless, the position of the textiles in the grave can in some cases give an indication of their use.

In 2002, a reconstruction drawing of the Fyrkat woman was made in which she is clad in a classical strap dress with an undergarment, but of course without the oval brooches which are not present in the grave. Furthermore, a wide, presumably tablet-woven, band decorates the lower part of the dress.[15] These clothing details cannot by any means be confirmed in the preserved textile material and are entirely the choice of the artist, as is also seen in many other cases.[16] A reconstruction drawing published in 2009 shows the woman lying in the body of a wagon, wearing a blue dress and a veil placed around her head, edged with a golden band. This reconstruction was made before plaster cast D reappeared and was thus based only on the textile remains without considering where in the grave they were found. A general dress design was therefore borrowed from the outline of another Viking Age female grave without oval brooches, namely the Hørning grave, in which a long tablet-woven band adorned the head area of the buried individual.[17]

In the current examination, the individual positions of the textiles have been included in the interpretation and, furthermore, the content of plaster cast D has contributed with new and more extensive knowledge about decorative features that most likely are related to the clothing of the Fyrkat woman. On the other hand, as none of the preserved textiles can be directly linked to specific clothing items, their functions remain open to interpretations.

The newly found decorative features from the head and chest region show that the Fyrkat woman, as previously suggested, presumably wore an outer garment of an unknown material, edged with a possibly woven band which was placed around the neck opening and gathered on the chest. Based on the thread course visible on the X-ray, it may possibly be a tablet-woven band with brocading made in silver threads. Similar tablet-woven bands are known from e.g. Hvilehøj, Hørning, and Bjerringhøj, as well as in some of the chamber graves from Hedeby.[18] Moreover, the garment was adorned with two triangular features on the chest, executed in gold and silver threads. The triangles are framed by narrow band-like structures in silver thread on two sides and a possible tablet-woven band, similarly of silver thread, on the third, possibly lower side. The decorations may have been linked to the bands around the neck opening as ornamental cape-band endings, but the triangles could just as well have been sown onto the garment as decorative elements placed along the edge. Their current and very vaguely indicated position may not reflect how they were originally attached to the garment, and thus there are many ways to interpret their use. Nonetheless, similarities with the triangular decorations on the beaver fur fragments from Hvilehøj (C4280b) and the pendants from Bjerringhøj (C137) are striking.[19]

As previously suggested, the small fragments of the bluish wool tabby could possibly derive from the lower part of a garment. The red cords lying on top may have had a decorative purpose, e.g. as part of a band, or they could be a way of reinforcing non-preserved seams. Given the placement of at least some of the fragments at the foot end, this garment would have been foot-long. The single gold thread discovered amongst the blue tabby is of the same type as those found further near the feet and it probably also belongs here, even though it cannot be excluded that it could have adorned the lower part of the garment. The gold threads found in the foot end are part of the most well-preserved pieces of textile, which have the shape of a narrow band, and as the threads are said to have been found with leather, it is likely that they derive from some sort of gold-embroidered footwear. Shoes with gold embroidery are known from both earlier and contemporary high-status finds in Europe, such as the shoes of St. Germanus, dated to the seventh century AD, and a shoe attributed to the eighth-century bishop St. Desiderius, but which is probably from the twelfth century AD.[20] Leather shoes decorated with similar, but more narrow, silk stitches were found in the grave of Queen Arnegunde, dated to the late sixth century AD.[21] Seen in this light, the interpretation of the woman as wearing shoes with gold decorations would therefore be highly unusual, though not unlikely, in a Danish Viking Age context. It would definitely place the woman in a league of her own compared to other Danish grave finds recorded so far. Also the *Mustelidae* fur, which could derive from an outer fur garment or be trimmings on a textile garment, support the socially privileged status of the woman.

Regarding the interpretation of some of the mineralised textiles and already known pieces, the majority seem to have been used as wrapping for the grave goods. The knife and whetstone/touchstone found in the pelvic region were probably wrapped together in a fine tabby textile. Likewise, the puzzling iron object (formerly interpreted as a 'staff') with copper alloy fittings was wrapped in a twill textile and the identified cord may have held the wrapping tight. Remains of a tabby textile was also found close to this item. Finally, the pair of scissors were wrapped in an unidentified textile type, which was perhaps decorated or tightened with a number of small cords. Wrapping grave goods in textiles, as seen in this grave, was a very common feature in the Viking Age and can be observed in many graves.[22] It is thus important to consider that textile finds in a grave context may have served other uses than clothing.

Even though the textile material in the Fyrkat 4 grave only leaves us a glimpse of the dead person's attire, there can be no doubt that she wore something extraordinary. The presence of gold and silver decorations around the neck and on the chest and in the foot area shows that the remaining

outfit, although not preserved, must to some extent have matched in terms of materials and techniques. This individual must have been of very high status with access to some of the most precious textiles and skin items known from the Viking Age.

Notes

1. Roesdahl 1977; Østergård 1977: 102–4.
2. Hägg 1974; 1986; 1991; 2015; Bender Jørgensen 1986.
3. Pentz *et al*. 2009.
4. Brandt *et al*. 2022.
5. Rast-Eicher 2008.
6. Østergård 1977.
7. Bender Jørgensen 1986: 319, 355–62.
8. Østergård 1977: 103.
9. Østergård 1977: 103.
10. Andersson Strand 2005.
11. Østergård 1991; Ræder Knudsen 2005.
12. Hedeager Krag 2005; Vedeler 2014.
13. Brandt *et al.* 2022.
14. Mannering & Rimstad forthcoming.
15. Price 2002: 153.
16. Gardeła 2018.
17. Voss 1961; Pentz *et al*. 2009.
18. Østergård 1991; Hägg 1991: 244–7; Hedeager Krag & Ræder Knudsen 1999.
19. Hald 1980: 113, 120.
20. Coatsworth & Owen-Crocker 2018: 380–5.
21. Volken 2014: 119.
22. Bender Jørgensen 1976; Bartel 2003; Mannering 2009.

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26

The Birka Sorcerers

Neil Price

Birka and its Burials

The site of Birka on Björkö island in Lake Mälaren, west of Stockholm, has long been recognised as a major market and the first urban centre of the Svear, the people of what is now eastern central Sweden.[1] Founded in the first half of the eighth century, the settlement was occupied for nearly 250 years, supporting a population of at least a thousand people and perhaps more.

The central area of the town, known as the Black Earth due to the organic residues of occupation that have stained its soils, fronted onto the water with a series of wooden jetties connecting to radial streets. The settlement is now bounded around roughly half of its perimeter by the remains of a major earthen rampart, probably with a parapet boardwalk and occasional gated towers, and it seems to have once continued to enclose the whole town. At their south-west terminus, these defences connected to a hilltop fortification, and the whole protective system was completed by a semi-circular, partly submerged timber barrage in the lake, controlling access to the waterfront. Outside the landward walls, Birka was essentially surrounded by cemeteries, a veritable necropolis of burial mounds that can be divided into at least seven distinct zones: four clusters of burials that probably represent some kind of extra-mural population, and three major grave-fields located respectively north of the hillfort, on the shoreline below it to the south, and largest of all, the massive Hemlanden cemetery around the north-east edge of the main wall (Fig. 26.1). Many of these grave-fields seem to have their own character and distinctive burial forms, with an emphasis on particular kinds of individuals and status.

The borders of the currently visible cemeteries coincide so exactly with the edges of modern fields and roads that it is clear many, perhaps even the majority, of burials have been removed above ground by agricultural activity since the abandonment of the town. The Hemlanden cemetery, in particular, probably once extended all along the rampart as far as the hillfort. While some 3000 burial mounds are currently visible, when geophysical surveys are taken into account, the island seems to have originally contained at least 5000 such graves, and conceivably many more. The majority are cremations under mounds, though with huge variation as to both inner and outer form, but there are also chamber graves (110 are known), a few fragmentary boat burials, and in addition a variety of apparently unmarked inhumations, amongst others.

There is a sense in which Birka, and especially the material excavated from its cemeteries, has for more than a century provided a kind of research baseline for the understanding of the Viking Age in Sweden. The settlement area has been only minimally explored (perhaps 5% of its area has been investigated), leaving remote sensing surveys using georadar and other methods to reveal the urban layout. The burials, however, have received considerable attention, mostly in the late nineteenth century when approximately 1100 mounds were excavated by the pioneering archaeologist Hjalmar Stolpe. One of the first fieldworkers to use graph paper, his documentation was unusually meticulous for the time and has enabled generations of subsequent researchers to make great use of the Birka archive. Ever since the results began to be published in the early 1940s, the contents of these graves, and the mortuary behaviour that can be inferred from them, has formed one of the primary datasets of material culture and funerary ritual in the Viking world.[2]

The Birka 'Sorcerers'

In the present discussion of burials that can be plausibly connected with practitioners of magic, the urban setting

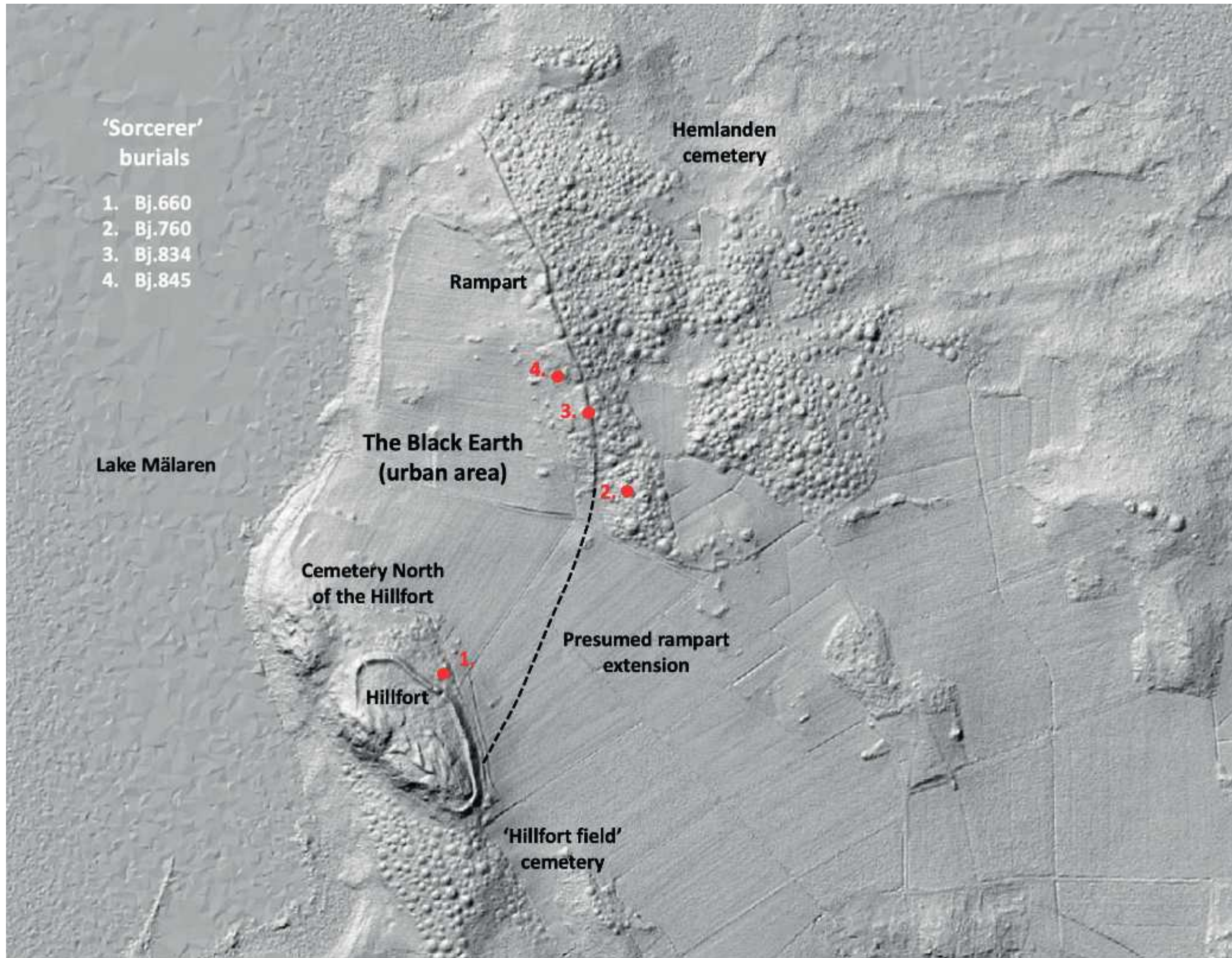

Figure 26.1 Birka and its proximal cemeteries, with mounds depicted from the aerial LiDAR survey. The four 'sorcerer' burials are indicated in red. Base map Lantmäteriet and Riksantikvarieämbetet; modifications by the author.

of Birka is important in that it provides one of the best understood contexts for some of the clearest examples. Among the 1100 excavated Birka graves, four have come to prominence in the past two decades as those of possible ritual specialists, of a kind that may conceivably equate to the *vǫlur* of the sagas. For most of the twentieth century these four graves – three chambered inhumations and one cremation – were interpreted simply as the resting places of high-status women, of interest for small details of the grave goods but otherwise generally unremarkable examples of such individuals. However, this changed with the renewed interest in Old Norse spirituality and its ritual practices, including sorcery, that began to gain momentum in Viking studies during the latter years of the twentieth century.

While studies of sorcery, especially *seiðr*, were hardly unknown before, it is fair (though embarrassing) to say that scholarly attention became particularly focused after the publication of my own doctoral thesis *The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia* in 2002, which attempted a new exploration of magic through, amongst other things, the possible burials of its practitioners.[3] The Birka 'sorcerer' graves formed a major part of that analysis and were thereby brought to a new audience, though at the time it seemed that there were only three examples, records from two of them having become confused in the 1940s. However, probably the first to connect the textual *vǫlur* and their sisters with the specific 'toolkit' of sorcery found in excavated burials – in particular the characteristic iron staffs that have occupied many researchers since – were the curators of the Norwegian exhibition *Den sterke kvinnen*. In the scholarly report that accompanied the popular publications, they specifically took up the Birka burials as examples of female sorcerer graves, which was to my knowledge the first time this link had been made (Fig. 26.2).[4] In the course of the past two decades, as this present book demonstrates, sorcery has come to occupy a central and (with twenty years of hindsight) surprisingly self-evident place in the study of Norse belief and ritual behaviour. The Birka burials have been constantly referenced and re-evaluated throughout this process.[5]

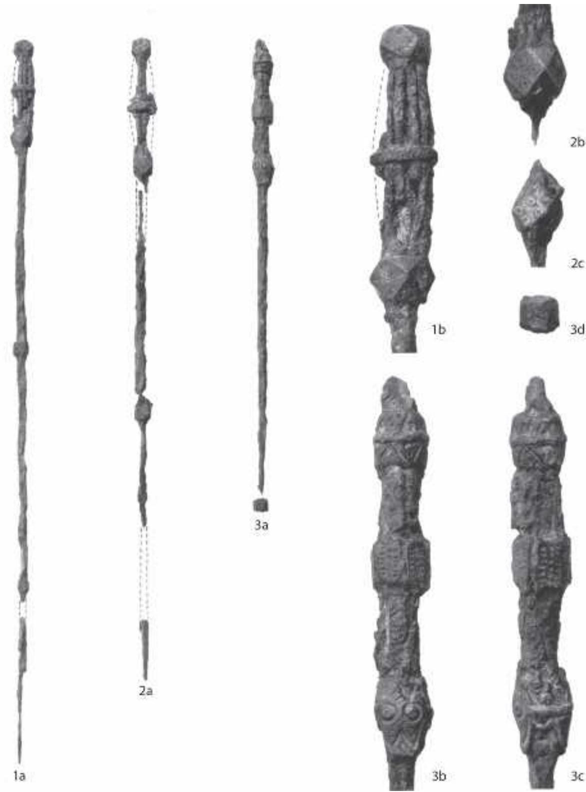

Figure 26.2 The three possible staffs of sorcery from Birka graves Bj. 760 (marked 3a–d, and once wrongly designated to Bj. 660), 834 (1a–b), and 845 (2a–c), photographed in the late 1930s; all three objects are in a poorer state of preservation today. After Arbman 1940: Taf. 125.

As with other graves of this kind, throughout the various studies of the past twenty years, the primary attribute argued to define a sorcerer burial is the inclusion of an iron staff (→ **Chapter 30**). In addition, there are other details of clothing, arguably 'ritual' equipment, hallucinogens, and the presence of possible 'charms' or amulets that have all been claimed as elements of a ritual performer's equipment.[6] Across the original three, and subsequently four, Birka burials, the various combinations of such features made these particular graves something of a collective archetype for the ongoing identification of sorcerers in the archaeological funerary record. In the following brief review, the four burials will be presented in outline, together with aspects of their interpretation, current problems, and alternative readings of the artefactual assemblages.

The Birka graves in question are the three chamber burials Bj. 660, 834, and 845, and cremation Bj. 760.[7] Bj. 660 is located in the cemetery north of the hillfort, at the very edge of the settled area, while the other three graves are to be found in and around the southern end of the standing rampart in the Hemlanden grave-field (Fig. 26.3). While essentially no human bone survives from these burials, the finds are in good condition and now stored in the magazines of the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm.

Cremation Grave Bj. 760

In the south-western edge of the Hemlanden cemetery, east of the earthen rampart, Stolpe excavated this modest mound and cremation.[8] Containing only a pottery vessel, perhaps used as a container for the ashes, two beads and nails from some kind of wooden object, the grave is one of the least remarkable from the site. However, among the finds is also one of the best-preserved iron staffs from Birka, clearly labelled by Stolpe as belonging to Bj. 760 (Fig. 26.4); strangely, however, there is no documentation of its location in the burial.

Since this spectacular object is unburnt, Arbman suggested that it may have been deposited above the cremation layer at a later stage of the rituals – behaviour that may have parallels elsewhere, for example at Jägarbacken in Närke and Klinta on Öland.[9] However, due to its absence from the main burial description, Arbman also put forward the idea that Stolpe made a mistake in the labelling, and that the staff actually came from grave Bj. 660, a chamber inhumation for which the field drawings clearly show a well-preserved artefact of that kind, but which Arbman could not locate in the museum archive. This suggestion of documentary confusion was supported by several subsequent scholars, and repeated by me in 2002.[10] This situation changed when Gunnar Andersson and Leszek Gardeła decided to test the veracity of Stolpe's labelling, and after a new search managed to locate the very fragmentary remains of what had clearly been the staff from Bj. 660, labelled as such.[11] There is thus now no doubt that *both* Bj. 760 and 660 contained iron staffs, exactly as Stolpe had claimed.

We can say little about Bj. 760 beyond the bare facts above, and can only speculate about its occupant given that we have no sex determination and so few objects. On the basis of the staff, and by comparison with other examples found in better-preserved graves, it does seem likely that this too was the burial of a sorcerer.

Chamber Grave Bj. 660

This burial, the staff from which was recently relocated, is one of the better-preserved of the possible sorcerer graves.[12] Situated at the foot of the hillfort slope at the edge of the town, Bj. 660 was constructed as a chamber nearly 2 m deep, 2.45 m long and 1.5 m wide, built without timber walls but with posts at each corner which perhaps supported a roof (though it is unclear whether the posts had been removed before the grave was sealed – the structural implications of this are hard to understand from the excavation records).

The occupant, of whose body only the teeth survived, had apparently been laid out supine, wearing clothing offset by two oval brooches with a complex bead necklace strung between them (Figs 26.5 and 26.6). On this latter was a pendant with a spiral design, perhaps a miniature shield, that may have been an amulet. Beneath the proper right oval brooch was one of the most famous objects from Birka,

Figure 26.3 A fine copy of J.J. Nordstrand's survey of the Hemlanden cemetery and the surviving rampart on Björkö, completed in 1889. The possible 'sorcerer' graves are indicated in red. After folio insert in Arbman 1942, with modifications by the author.

Figure 26.4 The staff from Birka grave Bj. 760, originally misattributed to Bj. 660. Photo by Gabriel Hildebrand, Swedish History Museum, Creative Commons.

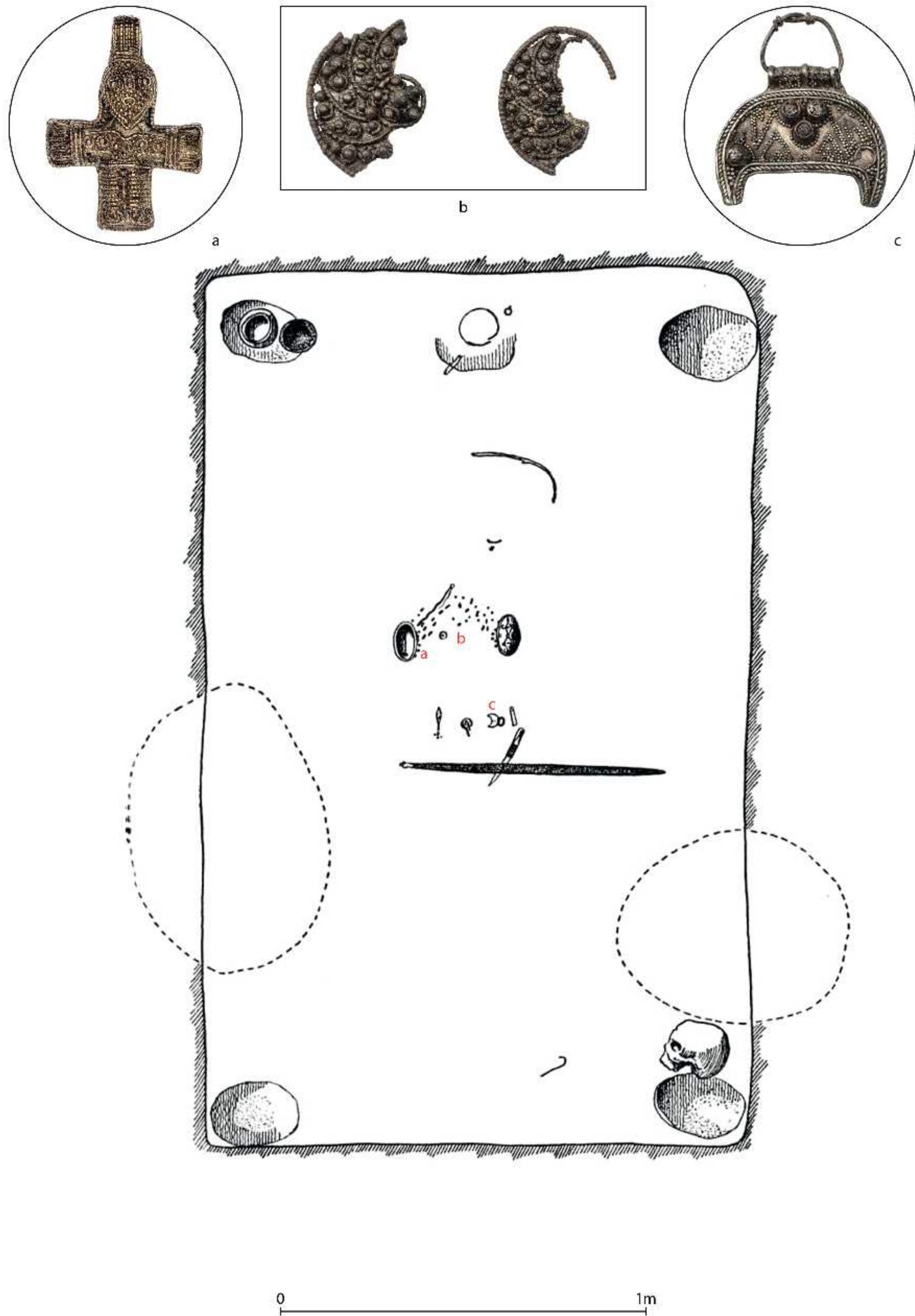

Figure 26.5 Plan of Birka grave Bj. 660: a) silver crucifix; b) two fragments of a possible miniature shield; c) silver lunula pendant. Drawing by Harald Olsson after Arbman 1943: 232. Photos by Gabriel Hildebrand (a) and Ola Myhrin (b), Swedish History Museum, Creative Commons. Image design by Leszek Gardeła.

Figure 26.6 Reconstruction of Birka chamber-grave Bj. 660 as it may have appeared when the burial was sealed. Drawing by Þórhallur Þráinsson.

a silver crucifix in granulated work; it may have been part of the necklace, or fixed to the brooch with a silver chain. Around the waist was a belt, with attached toiletry implements, scissors, awl, whetstone, knife, and a Slavic lunula pendant with possible ritual significance in its original context. Other clothing details include a headband around the temples, made of silver-worked silk, and edging in similar material that may have lined a shawl. The various items of jewellery had shifted as the body decayed, making their original positions uncertain, but it seems that the person may also have been wearing a gold nose-ring on which a single glass bead had been threaded; the ring may conceivably have been worn in the lip instead.

A number of ceramic vessels, boxes, and a bucket had been laid out around the body and the sides of the chamber, on one of which was a conical glass beaker of Continental type. There may also have been organic material such as textiles, leatherwork, or wooden objects, filling the apparently empty spaces of the grave, but there is now no way to tell.

Across the body just below the waist, with its expanded end perhaps held in the hand, was an iron staff, described by Stolpe as 'an iron object decorated with a bronze knob at one end'. Although its position was clearly shown in the field drawing, a placement of some obvious prominence, as described above the object itself was long thought lost until recently rediscovered. In the intervening years it has clearly suffered badly and now survives in a much more fragmentary state than it evidently appeared when excavated (Figs 26.7 and 26.8).

The dignity and wealth of the burial, including exotic objects such as the conical glass and lunula pendant, testify to this being the grave of a person of importance, interesting in the context of the staff. The oval brooches in particular are of a kind that has been argued to belong only to individuals of the highest status, and also provide our closest date estimate of the first decades of the tenth century.[13]

Figure 26.7 The 13 iron fragments from the staff in Birka grave Bj. 660, rediscovered in the Swedish History Museum in 2009 by Gardeła and Andersson. Photo by Gabriel Hildebrand, Swedish History Museum. Creative Commons.

Figure 26.8 The bronze mount from the staff in Birka grave Bj. 660, rediscovered in the Swedish History Museum in 2012 by Gardeła and Andersson. Photo by Gabriel Hildebrand, Swedish History Museum. Creative Commons.

The location of the burial, close to the hillfort, also brings out some intriguing parallels. Another 'sorcerer' burial, grave 4 from the Fyrkat circular fortress in Denmark (→ **Chapters 23–25**), is also associated with a military fortification.[14] The crucifix too may have Danish connections, as the only parallels are found there from Ketting in Als and Aunslev on Fyn, two pieces so similar in construction that they may come from the same workshop or even the same hand.[15] The Birka crucifix is reproduced in numerous publications as a presumed possession of one of Sweden's 'first Christians', and yet it seems highly unlikely that the person who wore it in grave Bj. 660 was a follower of the new faith at all – or at least not in an uncomplicated way (here too, there are parallels, in that the Fyrkat '*vǫlva*' received the most elaborate burial at the heart of the installation erected by Denmark's most aggressively Christian king, a burial which also contained objects of Slavic origin). It is even possible that its placement beneath an oval brooch was deliberate, and that it was thus worn hidden.

Everything combines to suggest that the person in the Birka grave was an individual with access to supernatural power, perhaps able to call on new spiritual forces as well as those hallowed by tradition, and clearly a prominent member of the urban community.

Chamber Grave Bj. 834

Along with the elaborately drawn-out and intricate construction of boat burial Ka.294-296 at Kaupang in Norway,[16] Birka chamber grave Bj. 834 is probably the most complex of all the possible 'sorcerer' graves. At 4 m long and 2 m wide, and almost 2 m deep, it is also one of the larger of the Birka chambers, located beneath the southern sector of the earthen rampart, quite close to Bj. 760.[17] It appears

that the rampart had been repaired here, or else this relates to a later phase of its construction (raising the interesting possibility that the location of this unusual burial there may have been selected to coincide with the new defensive work). The sides of the chamber were lined with planks, revetting the walls around the bare earth floor, and a low platform some 0.3 m high was raised at the east end.

In the main part of the chamber, two individuals seem to have been buried, though the only human bone that has survived is one set of teeth (Fig. 26.9). The arrangement of the bodies, and indeed the reading that there were two people present, is dependent partly on the particular combination and location of objects, and partly on comparisons with another, better-preserved Birka chamber grave, Bj. 644, which appears almost identical in disposition and which definitely did contain a double burial.[18] Although opinions differ, in that some scholars have argued for sequential rather than simultaneous interment, the consensus is that two people – mostly probably male and female (though see below for the difficulties of establishing sex or gender in these graves – were arranged seated on the same chair or stool, with the woman sitting on top of the man (Figs 26.10a–b). A chain appears to have held them in place, until the decomposition of both humans and chair resulted in the characteristic distribution of artefacts (worn on the bodies) that is repeated more clearly in Bj. 644. Seated burial is known from other Birka graves, and occasionally from other sites, as well as being described in a contemporary Arab source and a number of medieval Icelandic sagas.[19] Interestingly, both here and in the other seated 'sorcerer' burial Bj. 845 (see below), the dead were placed so as to be facing the town.

One of the bodies seems to have been wearing a cloak with a penannular brooch, and a belt from which hung a sheathed knife, fighting knife, and a pouch of dirhams of which the latest was minted c. 918. The other body was wearing two oval brooches and a necklace, with signs of a silk-edged shawl held together by one of several other silver and bronze brooches. An Arab coin had been turned into a pendant, and several others had probably been worn at the person's waist in a pouch, with a TPQ date of c. 932. There seems to be a relatively clear signalling of normative gender in the clothing and accessories, but there is no certainty of this.

An assembly of toilet implements had been placed beside the presumed location of the chair, and besides those, a scabbarded sword. Leaning against the west wall of the chamber, behind the bodies, a shield had been placed with its face to the timber, and next to it an iron staff had been laid, or perhaps had fallen, having also leant against the wall (Figs 26.11 and 26.12). Several boxes and buckets lay around the east end of the chamber, close to the raised platform, along with a bundle or quiver of arrows and presumably a bow, since decayed.

On the platform itself, two draught horses had been carefully arranged in a compact pattern, harnessed with expensive bridles, tackle, and strap-distributors, decorated with mounts. One of them was shod with crampons, perhaps implying a winter burial; crampons for human shoes were also found in the grave. The presence of the harnessed horses suggests an absent wagon, which in funerary contexts is usually associated with women,[20] though it is of course uncertain what implications this has, if any, for the relative importance of the two occupants in Bj. 834.

The placement of objects in the burial gives at least a limited chance to determine a sequence of actions in the course of the funerary rituals, and one feature in particular stands out here: the throwing of a lance into the chamber, which must have been one of the last acts before its closure. The weapon had been cast with considerable force into the revetment at the front of the horse platform, penetrating more than 30 cm into the wood. It had clearly passed over the bodies in the chair, which cannot have been placed there afterwards, since the shaft would have got in the way. As well as providing evidence of a vivid action, the performance itself has implications, since in several Old Norse textual sources the casting of a spear over something is a form of dedication to the god Óðinn.[21]

Bj. 834 clearly presents an unusual and complicated funerary tableau, difficult to interpret, or even to understand in terms of exactly what has occurred. The staff is the only object that can be plausibly associated with the practice of sorcery, but its presence in the grave is no accident, and it is positioned in a manner suggestive of prominence. Together with Bj. 760 and 845 (below), the burial forms a small cluster of 'staff graves' at the southern limit of the wall bordering Hemlanden and should be considered in that context.

Chamber Grave Bj. 845

The chronologically latest of the Birka staff graves was Bj. 845, a mounded chamber constructed just inside the rampart next to a gate – meaning that those entering or leaving the town would have passed it. The chamber was a relatively small affair only 1 m wide and 1.8 m long, with walls partly lined with logs.[22] Of its single occupant only the skull remained, but from the position of the accompanying objects it seems that here too the dead person had been buried seated (Fig. 26.13).

Details of clothing and dress include two unique oval brooches and two circular bronze brooches, and a number of necklaces of which one contained dirham pendants dating at latest to c. 943. The basic outfit seems to have been covered with a woollen cloak lined and trimmed with beaver fur, and perhaps fastened with one of the brooches. Around the temples, the person had been wearing a silver-embroidered silk band, near identical to the one found in Bj. 660. A belt held a small whetstone and an iron knife, and some shears

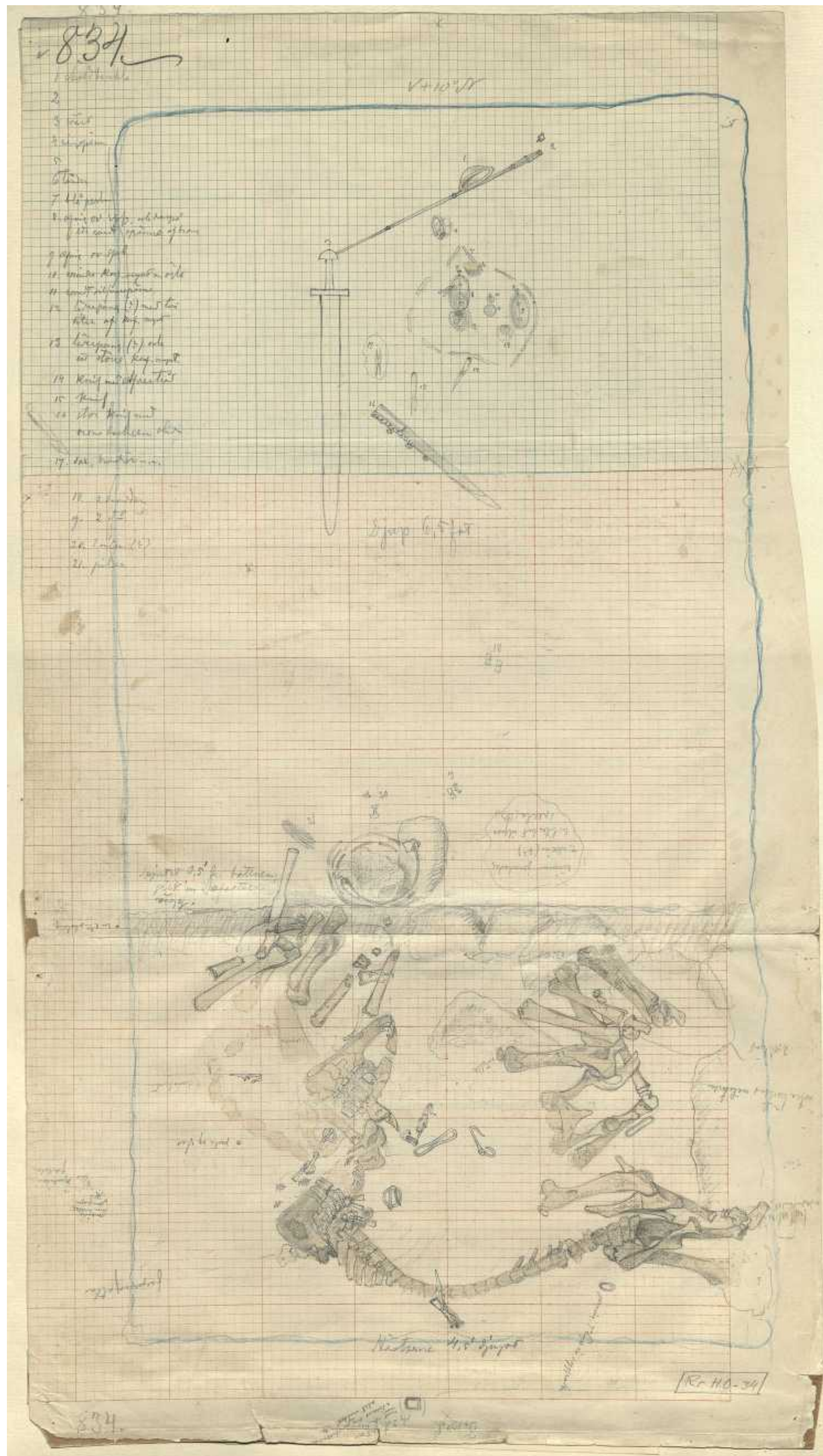

Figure 26.9 Plan of the double inhumation in Birka chamber-grave Bj. 834. Field drawing by Hjalmar Stolpe, ATA Stockholm. Public domain.

Figure 26.10 Reconstruction of the double inhumation in Birka chamber-grave Bj. 834 as it may have appeared when the burial was sealed, seen from above and the side. Drawing by Þórhallur Þráinsson.

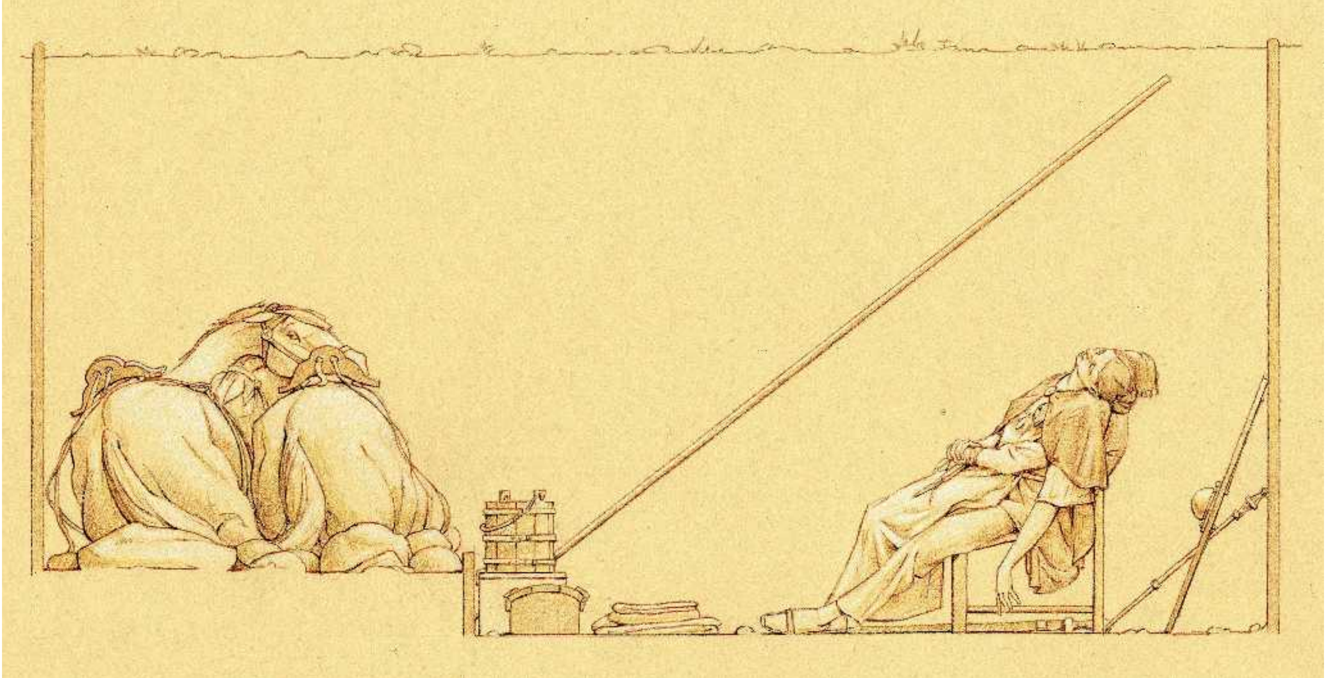

Figure 26.10 (Continued)

Figure 26.11 Detail from one of the shaft mounts on the staff from Birka grave Bj. 834. Photo by Christer Åhlin, Swedish History Museum. Creative Commons.

Figure 26.12 Detail of the expanded head of the staff from Birka grave Bj. 834. Photo by Christer Åhlin, Swedish History Museum. Creative Commons.

and tweezers may once have rested on the person's lap before falling as the body decayed.

Apparently resting across the knees of the corpse was an iron staff, with the pointed end resting inside a wooden bucket next to the presumed location of the chair. The staff may even have been held in the dead person's hands (Fig. 26.14). Although specific meanings are hard to grasp, the presence of buckets of this type are a common feature of the Birka 'sorcerer' graves, and the direct association with the staff in Bj. 845 is intriguing. A similar connection may attach to another object in the burial, a decorated iron box studded with rivets and with three intricate animal-head clasps, which lay in the south-east corner of the grave. The only parallel for this artefact is a similar box in the Oseberg ship burial, which there contained objects that have been interpreted as relating to sorcery.[23] It is impossible to say whether these are 'magic' buckets and boxes, but a purely coincidental link seems unlikely.

Reading the Staffs

Just as the Birka graves became a kind of archetype of possible 'sorcerer' burials, so over the years have the staffs found in them also become a touchstone for alternative readings. From early interpretations of the objects as cooking spits, to later arguments that they are best seen as measuring rods for textiles, the discussion has now passed to webs of deliberate ambiguity that blur the staffs' function and iconographic associations with other objects.[24] However, even (or especially) when this ambivalence is taken into account, the interpretation of the staffs as very much tools of sorcery still seems relatively secure, not least in the light of later work that recasts them as symbolic distaffs, used to 'wind back' the thread of the practitioner's soul as it travels in trance.[25]

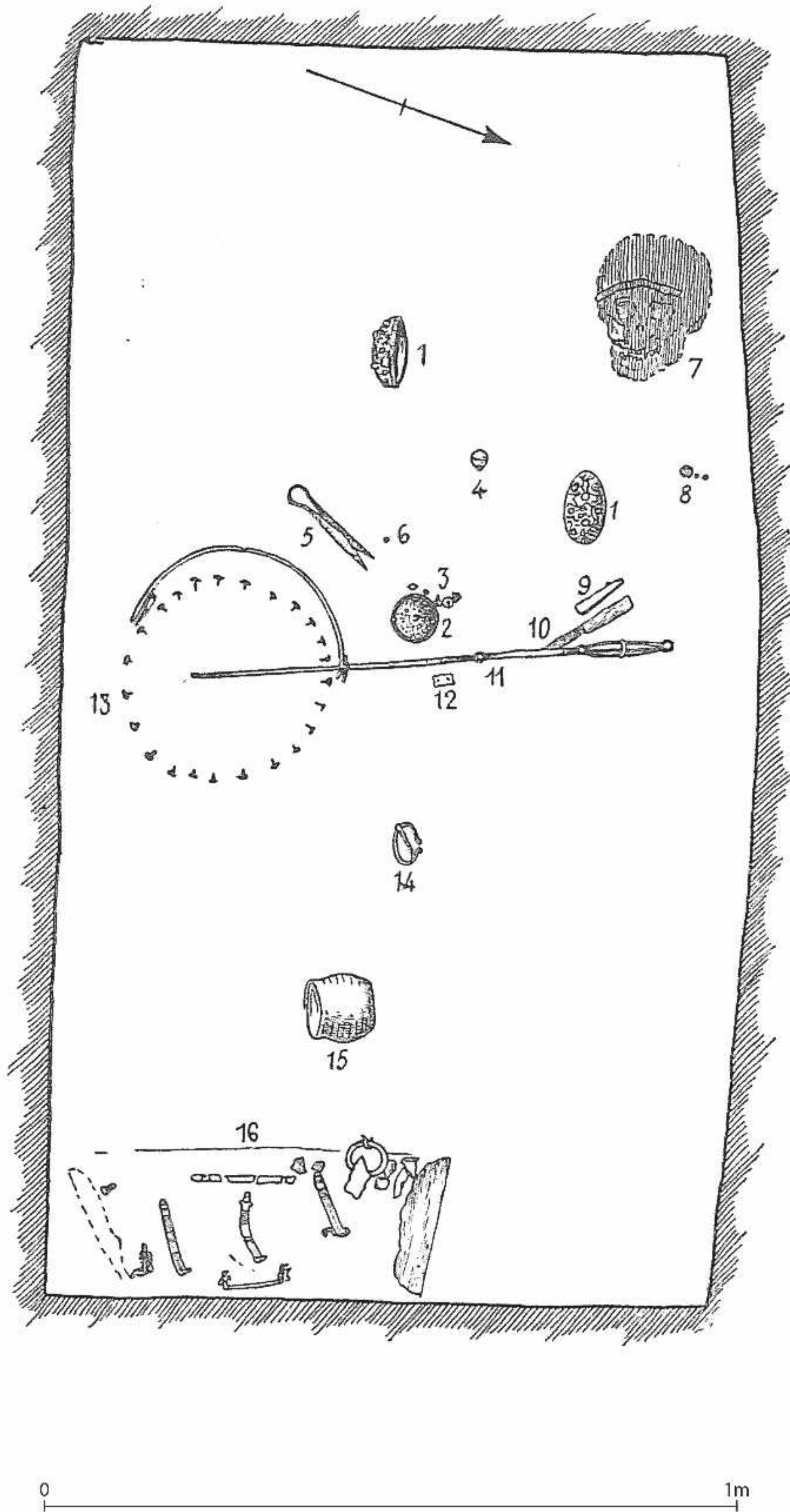

Figure 26.13 Plan of Birka chamber-grave Bj. 845. Drawing by Harald Olsson after Arbman 1943: 320.

Figure 26.14 Reconstruction of Birka chamber-grave Bj. 845 as it may have appeared when the burial was sealed. Drawing by Þórhallur Þráinsson.

Gendering the Birka Graves

Both before and after the interpretation of the burials as the graves of sorcerers, their occupants were universally gendered as women. In the three chambers, hardly any human bone survives and osteological analysis is impossible; for the cremation, the analysis of burnt bone poses the usual problems; no genomic studies have been undertaken. In the absence of direct skeletal study, the individuals' identities have long been extrapolated on the basis of artefacts and clothing. It seems clear that at least the three individuals in the chambers were buried wearing what would conventionally have been seen as women's dress: oval brooches, bead necklaces, and so on. However, the problems of conflating sex and gender, and the ambiguities of identity signalling, are familiar in archaeology, and very much apply here.[26]

It is important that necessary scepticism about arbitrary gender readings should not give way to projection, and it is surely likely that the majority of burials with occupants dressed this way *were* probably women – but perhaps not all. In the absence of human remains, as for the most part in these Birka burials, there is an added layer of uncertainty. This becomes doubly acute in the specific context of sorcery, and the effeminising qualities of *ergi* as attached to men who performed magic. So far as is known, no burial of a male sorcerer has been reliably identified, not least because there is so little information as to their equipment or dress. But what if the 'feminine' qualities of magic applied to this too? As I wrote in the second edition of *The Viking Way*: 'I looked again at Þórhallur Þráinsson's reconstructions of the Birka "sorceress" graves Bj. 660, 845 and their kind, and began to wonder if I might in fact be looking at the "missing" *male* sorcerers. It is an intriguing thought'.[27]

People of Power

The person in Bj. 660 was clearly strikingly dressed, with silver clothing details that would have flashed in the sun, and there are obvious similarities with the appearance of the person in Bj. 845. We know little of the staff-bearers of the other two graves, though at the very least they seem to have been individuals of status, if only to judge by the elaborate and visually arresting iron objects that they carried. These were all people who would have been recognised in the streets of Birka, treated with respect, perhaps even fear. Their graves are not utterly out of the ordinary, but indicative of high-investment nonetheless. The seated burials, and whatever is going on in Bj. 834, also imply some special kind of post-mortem existence, and perhaps an ongoing relationship with the town.

Without further excavation, there is currently no way of knowing if there may be others of their kind in the Birka grave-fields. With so many thousands of burials still an unknown quantity, it is by no means unlikely. The date range of the graves is broadly speaking confined to the tenth century, but it is uncertain if these people lived at the same time. Did they know each other, and was there social room for more than one of them? Were they women of power, or men with a subtly different kind of skill, or would they have seen themselves differently again? There is no reason to suppose that they all shared an identity, just because they all bore staffs.

The Birka 'sorcerers' were in one way the beginning of an interpretative journey that opened up new paths in the archaeological, as opposed to textual, interpretation of the Viking Age and its spiritual practices. That voyage continues, and we have probably not yet heard the last of Birka's more unusual citizens.

Notes

1. Magnus & Gustin 2009.
2. Geijer 1938; Arbman 1940–1943; Gräslund 1980; Arwidsson 1984–1989. For a biography of Hjalmar Stolpe, see Erikson 2015.
3. Price 2002, which also contains extensive references to the history of research in this field.
4. Adolfsson & Lundström 1997: 13.
5. In particular, see Gardeła 2016: especially 324–33; Price 2019: 84–97, 136–9.
6. See Price 2019: ch. 3 and discussions throughout the present volume. For staffs, see Gardeła 2016.
7. All burials at Birka are coded 'Bj.' for Björkö island, followed by the number originally assigned to them by Stolpe, representing the sequence in which they were excavated.
8. Arbman 1943: 277–8; Price 2019: 84–5.
9. Arbman 1943: 278; Petersson 1958; Hanson 1983: 8, 24; Price 2019: 96–103, 152–3.
10. Arbman 1943: 278; Kyhlberg 1980: 274; Arwidsson 1986: 165; Price 2002: 128–31, 181–3.
11. Gardeła 2016: 57–9.
12. Arbman 1943: 231–3; Price 2019: 85–8.
13. Jansson 1985.
14. Price 2019: 105–13.
15. Eisenschmidt 2013; Beck 2016.
16. Price 2019: 113–15.
17. Arbman 1943: 304–8; Price 2019: 88–95.
18. The complex disentanglement of the funerary rituals of Bj. 834 are presented in detail in Price 2019: 88–95, to which the reader is referred for a detailed discussion.
19. Robbins 2004; supported by Gräslund 1980: 37.
20. Hägg 2009; Snædal 2010.
21. The most vivid texts include *Ynglinga saga* 9, the *Vǫluspá* poem, and an episode in *Flateyjarbók*. For references, see Nordberg 2002; Price 2019: 95.
22. Arbman 1943: 319–20; Price 2019: 95–7.
23. Price 2019: 115–18.
24. Arwidsson 1986; Bøgh-Andersen 1999; Gustin 2004: 129–33, 2010; Gardeła 2016: chs 5–6.
25. Heide 2006.
26. See Price 2019: 341 for a summary of this work.

27. Price 2019: 341. One may also note the pervasive, and deceptively definitive, impact of reconstruction drawings on public perceptions of the *vǫlur*, in particular the beautiful illustrations by Þórhallur Þráinsson commissioned for *The Viking Way* back in 2002. The nature of such images as visualised interpretations is discussed further in Moen *et al.* in press.

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27

The *Vǫlva* from Gutdalen: Identity, Belief, and the Performance of Power in Viking Age Western Norway

Julie Westlye, Leszek Gardeła & Klaudia Karpińska

In the early 1900s, a farmer in Hjelledalen made a series of significant discoveries on his land located in the innermost reaches of Nordfjord on the western coast of Norway. At his farm, called Gutdalen, stood a vast grave field, scattered with over thirty ancient mounds of different shapes and sizes. Having breached several of the mounds, the farmer unearthed the graves within them and subsequently delivered all the artefacts and osteological remains to the Bergen Museum along with his own careful documentation. However, due to unknown circumstances, many of these documents were since lost, and in lacking satisfactory context the finds remained understudied and largely unknown to the international academic community. This chapter tells the story of the rediscovery of the Gutdalen grave field, specifically the rediscovery of a particular Viking Age grave B5525 which contained an iron rod or staff, animal bones, unusual jewellery, and a wide array of other goods.

Although a substantial part of this chapter focuses on discussing the symbolism and possible ritual nature of the objects placed in the Gutdalen grave, it is important to remember that they are all part of a larger context and are directly related to what was once a living, breathing person. In recent years, we have seen an ontological shift in how we approach archaeology and anthropology. New theoretical perspectives, often collectively referred to as 'neomaterialism', have challenged the human vs things dualism, which was a hallmark of nineteenth- and twentieth-century research. These new approaches allow us to steer away from anthropocentric views on material culture and encourage a different perception of humans, nature, and the material world as actants on equal footing, recognising their potential for shaping the surrounding reality in a plethora of ways. Combining these more inclusive perspectives on human–material relations with a similarly complex understanding of identity, we may approach the material in a new way. Using the feminist concept of intersectionality, in combination with theories and concepts of 'personhood' and 'citation', we can attempt to understand how identity is (re)constructed in life and in death.

Intersectionality as a method aims to examine how different social categories intersect and provide the basis for different forms of experience.[1] Utilising intersectionality as a heuristic tool allows us to approach identity with an understanding of its composite nature and opens the possibility of perceiving any one person's identity differently depending on the social context they are engaged in at a particular time. Applying this to archaeology involves not assuming that any single social category was more socially important than another but also that there were differences within certain categories (for instance, women) depending on how they intersected with other social categories (for instance, economic class or ethnicity).

In line with the concept of intersectionality, Chris Fowler has argued that personhood, or the question of what it is to be a person, is always relational.[2] Personhood is seen as a continuous process with varying cultural expressions. It is both obtained and maintained through entangled relationships between different actants, through life and after death. These relations involve humans, but also animals, places, things, and immaterial aspects. In this way, how a person perceives themselves and how they are perceived by others can change depending on the different relations they are engaged in at any one time.

In discussing the finds from Gutdalen on the following pages of this chapter we also refer to the 'concept of citation'. Introduced by Howard Williams in 2016, the concept of citation is a useful tool for exploring:

> practices of selection and deployment of artefacts, substances, images, architectures, monuments, and spaces that, separately and in combination, created mnemonic material references to other things, places, peoples, and times.[3]

Utilising these different methods and theories we may open our interpretations to view identity as an ongoing process, and in this way avoid isolating any single role or aspect of identity as the essential part of the subject of study. In line with the insight gained from these new perspectives, we seek to position the grave from Gutdalen in a larger cultural framework. Through investigating the funerary assemblage against the background of its local environment and comparable graves from Norway, as well as by drawing on analogous finds from across the Viking world, we attempt an understanding of the buried person and their possible roles and importance in their local community. In this way we seek to unravel the many relationships that could have formed between persons, objects, and places.

The Cultural and Natural Landscape

The Gutdalen farm lies in Hjelledalen, a valley in Stryn in Vestland on the west coast of Norway. Hjelledalen is the easternmost settlement along the Nordfjord fjord, located at the dead end of the waterway (Figs 27.1a–b). The valley is narrow and framed by steep mountains, giving access to both high mountain landscape, providing good grazing grounds, and sheltered farming landscape in the lowlands. The name 'Gutdalen' likely evolved from 'Gautdalr', which derives from 'gaut', roughly translating to 'overflow' or 'flood'.[4] To this day the Oppstryn river that runs through the valley is prone to seasonal flooding (Fig. 27.2). Hence, current farms are placed on high terrace ground north of the river, sheltering the farms during flooding. This is also where the largest concentration of grave mounds is located, implying that late Iron Age people may also have preferred this area for building their homes.

At first glance, Hjelledalen appears geographically isolated. The tall mountains of Hjelledalen and the narrow Oppstryn river would seem to make travel both by land and water limited at a time before modern roads, restricting movement to the interior of the current area of Oppstryn. It is likely, however, that the difference in sea level in the late Iron Age would have made it possible for small ships and boats to pass through the river during high tide, granting the people of Viking Age Gutdalen access to greater Nordfjord and the many settlements along its shores.[5] At second glance, even the mountains are no boundary for travel: just east of Gutdalen, the mountain pass of Kamperhamrane creates an entry point to the inland, and from here a series of narrow valleys carve a path into the resource-rich area of Gudbrandsdalen. Kamperhamrane is among the oldest known travel routes by land between western and eastern Norway.[6] The oldest known account of its use comes from a section in *Sverris saga*, describing events from the late twelfth century.[7]

Figure 27.1a Map of Oppstryn with marked locations of Viking Age graves containing iron staffs. Image design by Julie Westlye.

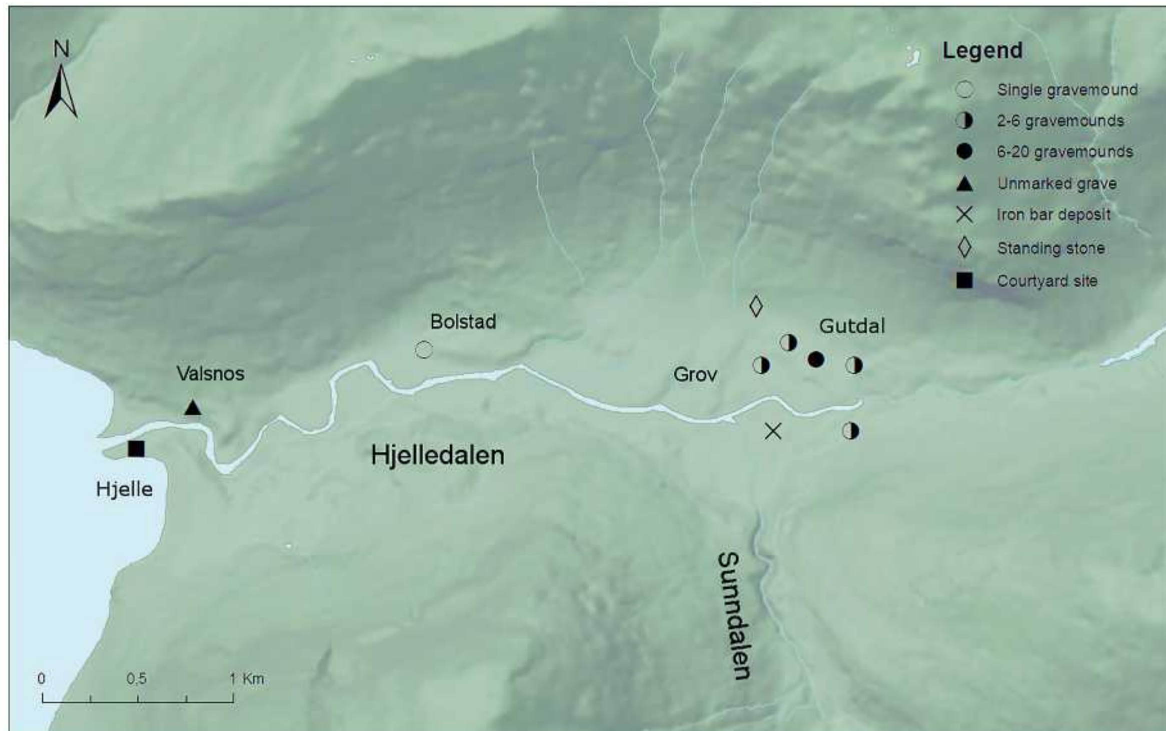

Figure 27.1b Map of Hjelledalen showing the location of grave mounds and other noteworthy finds in the area surrounding Gutdalen. Image design by Julie Westlye.

Figure 27.2 Aerial view of Gutdalen. Photo courtesy of Mons Rune Guddal.

The access road into Gudbrandsdalen must also have been important prior to the Middle Ages. As well as allowing travel to and from eastern regions, it would also grant the people of inner Nordfjord access to the power centre at Hundorp and to the iron smelting sites in the valley.[8] The many graves containing smithing tools found in inner Nordfjord support the idea that iron could have been transported from the east into Stryn through Kamperhamrane.[9] It is possible that the position of Gutdalen so close to the very starting point of this route was an economical advantage, granting the opportunity to control access to certain merchandise. A large deposition of iron bars close to the current farm certainly supports the idea that import and storage of iron did happen to some degree.

The place name Gautdal is briefly mentioned in *Saga Inga Haraldssonar ok brœðra hans* (also known as *Inges saga*). One passage of the saga names one of Ingi's men as the son of a certain Eindriði of Gautdal.[10] Haakon Shetelig interpreted Gautdal as Gutdalen in Stryn.[11] If this reading is correct, it would be the only place in Stryn ever mentioned in the *fornaldarsǫgur*, suggesting it might have been remembered as an important location in the early medieval period.

The discovery of a ninth-century courtyard site at Hjelle south of Gutdalen, shows that the area may have had prominent functions in the early Viking Age.[12] According to recent re-interpretations of Norwegian courtyard sites, it is likely to have been a central assembly site.[13] The Hjelle site is thought to have mainly functioned as a judicial institution and would likely have supported ritual activities as an integral part of judicial practice.[14] The site's main period of use was in the ninth century, although there are also some traces showing limited activity within the houses up until the eleventh century.[15]

What makes Gutdalen unusual in relation to other places in Stryn, and even Nordfjord as a whole, is the sheer number of grave mounds concentrated within this small area. The grave field of Gutdalen was once the location of more than thirty mounds, several of which measured more than 20 m across.[16] This is the *largest* concentration of Iron Age mounds of any farm in Stryn.[17] Finds have been documented in fourteen of the mounds at Gutdalen. Only seven have been artefactually dated to the Viking Age, the rest are more generally attributed to the late Iron Age.[18] Eight graves are believed to be female graves, based on characteristic jewellery types. The five graves presumed to be male contained mainly weaponry and tools, but it is noteworthy that also beads and kitchen utensils were present in the assemblages. The two most richly furnished graves in Hjelledalen are both assumed to be female. This includes the aforementioned grave with the staff, as well as an early Viking Age grave at Folva containing several oval brooches, textile equipment, and riding gear.

Looking more closely at the different grave finds form Hjelledalen, most high-status graves can be dated to the early Viking Age based on the typology of the objects they contain.[19] Apart from the grave with the staff, the most richly furnished graves can all be dated on an artefactual basis to the ninth century, coinciding with the main phase of activity at the courtyard site. Looking at the types of weapons and tools in other graves from Hjelledalen, most graves can be tentatively dated on the basis of artefact types that stem from the period before the end of the tenth century, including items more often than not belonging to the early Viking Age. Therefore, it seems pertinent to conclude that the grave field went out of use during the tenth century. However, many of the grave mounds at Gutdalen bore signs of having been breached prior to their examination and some of their contents were likely removed, hence the dating of these graves is unspecific.[20] Also, as previously mentioned, finds were only recovered from less than half of the mounds on the grave field. As we do not have the full picture, we cannot draw any definite conclusions on the phases of use for the Gutdalen grave field.

(Re)discovering the Gutdalen Grave

During the 1890s, Kolbein Gutdal excavated 36 grave mounds on his land, comprising the area of current Gutdalen and parts of nearby Grov and Folva.[21] According to the archival records held at the University Museum of Bergen, this was done with great care and respect for the past. The documentation Kolbein Gutdal delivered to the museum along with his findings includes careful drawings of several of the graves' layouts, showing an understanding of the importance of archaeological context, something that was uncommon (especially among amateurs) at the time. Unfortunately, when the grave goods from B5525 were delivered to the museum, the head conservator had fallen ill and in his absence information on the find's location was misplaced.

The history of the rediscovery of the Gutdalen grave begins when the authors of this chapter were studying Viking Age graves from western Norway. When reviewing archaeological material related to the practice of Norse magic, it turned out that one of the Norwegian iron staffs was recorded in the Unimus artefact database[22] as belonging to a Viking Age grave marked B5525, but the context of the find was described as 'unknown'. The first hint leading towards the (re)discovery of the original location of the grave came from one of the volumes of *Bergens Museums Årbok*,[23] a yearbook listing archaeological finds acquired each year (until the mid-1990s) by the museum as a result of professional and amateur excavations. Here it was stated that the original notes on the staff's context had been lost, but that the grave presumably was found somewhere in Nordfjord. The second hint was discovered during an examination of Viking Age artefact assemblages at the University Museum of Bergen. The box in which the staff from B5525 was held contained

a handwritten note simply saying 'Gutdalen'. There are several places in Norway named by variants of the name Gutdalen, Gutdal, or Guddal. Following previous knowledge that the grave was found somewhere in Nordfjord, the search soon narrowed to the location of Hjelledalen in Stryn.

Continuing the search for more specific details on the grave context, the logical next step was to review Per Fett's comprehensive registration catalogue of finds from western Norway.[24] In his list of mounds discovered at Gutdalen, Fett mentions a grave mound where the associated finds could not be located in the records. He also lists three grave finds from the museum registers with unknown context, labelled B5525, B5561, B5909, one of which he believes probably represents the missing Gutdalen find. According to Fett, one now removed mound on Grov most likely contained B5909, leaving either B5525 or B5561 as likely being the missing Gutdalen grave. In Fett's work there is no firm conclusion on which option is more probable.

With some uncertainty about the context of the grave with the staff still remaining, a survey of old documents in Topark (the museum digital archive) was undertaken. A letter exchange between Fett and the owner of the Gutdal farm provided the final proof: in these letters the son of Kolbein Gutdal (the original finder of the graves) clearly describes a female grave with a cooking spit (in Norwegian *stekespidd,* now commonly interpreted as an iron staff), jewellery, and pendants discovered within a mound located 80 m west of the old farmstead (Topark doc: 013635). The described location in the letters matches the location of the mound which, as Fett assumed, contained either the grave B5525 or B5561, increasing the probability that the grave with the iron staff was indeed found here.

The Grave Assemblage

Like many other graves containing staffs, the Gutdalen grave can be dated typologically to the tenth century. The mound most likely containing B5525 measured approximately 4 m in diameter and was 1 m high, but originally it may have been larger.[25] The ploughing activities that eventually erased all the mounds within the cemetery had likely already affected its appearance by the time it was measured. The internal layout of the grave is unknown. Looking at the condition of the bone material and grave goods, however, it was clearly a cremation grave. Especially the beads and tongue shaped brooch(es) are heavily affected by fire, which leads to the assumption that they were placed centrally on the pyre, probably as part of the deceased person's costume.

By situating the Gutdalen grave in the context of burial traditions of the local area, we may speculate on other aspects of the mortuary process.[26] Cremation graves dominate the late Iron Age Hjelledalen material. Based on their available documentation, it appears that the remains were often placed inside a small chamber, approximately the size of a coffin, dug into the earth and covered with a stone tile roof. In some instances, the chamber walls were also lined with tiles. Occasionally, a layer of fine sand covered the chamber floor, and sometimes a thin layer of clean earth was spread on top of the chamber roof before a mound constructed mostly of stone was built on top. This manner of burial seems to dominate in the area with only a few exceptions, and we may speculate that the grave containing the staff was constructed in a similar manner.[27] If this was indeed the case, the burned remains and artefacts were likely moved from the original location of the pyre and could have been spread out somewhat randomly in the chamber. Alternatively, they could have been placed in some kind of receptacle. As will be discussed further below, a large soapstone vessel presumably found in the grave may have been used as a container for bones/and or objects of special significance.

The Staff

The largest object from the Gutdalen grave is an iron staff which survives in decent condition but is bent in half at an acute angle. Originally measuring over 100 cm in length, the staff terminates in a basket-shaped 'handle' consisting of six twisted rods, five of which have an additional iron ring attached. The rods that form the 'handle' are fastened to the central shaft of the staff with polyhedral knobs. The upper end of the staff is formed into a loop (Fig. 27.3).

Objects analogous to the Gutdalen staff are known from approximately forty graves distributed across Scandinavia and the wider Viking world (→ **Chapter 30**).[28] When their first examples were discovered in the nineteenth century, Scandinavian archaeologists labelled them as roasting spits. This interpretation gained a strong foothold among later specialists, such as Haakon Schetelig[29] and Jan Petersen,[30] and remained virtually undisputed until the end of the twentieth century. In the 1990s, however, a new reading was proposed: striking correlations between the design of the iron staffs and the textual descriptions of magic accoutrements in Old Norse poetry and sagas led to the conclusion that the iron rods may have belonged to ritual specialists and served as emblems of their status and power.[31] Although this reinterpretation was initially approached with reserve, further interdisciplinary research provided strong supporting evidence.[32] Today, Old Norse and Viking Age scholars generally agree that the iron rods *were* used as ritual tools and that their resemblance to domestic utensils like roasting spits, keys, or whip-shanks was premeditated and symbolically charged.

Although the staffs from archaeological contexts have many common features – for instance the so-called 'basket handles' – it is clear that they were never mass produced and that their designs were tailored to the individual needs and tastes of their manufacturers, owners, and users. The manner of deploying them in funerary contexts, however, shows evident patterns, leading to the conclusion

Figure 27.3 Iron staff from Gutdalen (a–b). The staff fits perfectly inside the soapstone vessel which possibly stems from the same burial context (c). Photos by Klaudia Karpińska. Image design by Leszek Gardeła.

that – regardless of the considerable geographical distance between the burial sites in Norway and Sweden – the mourners followed roughly similar scenarios of mortuary behaviour. For instance, this sometimes involved deliberately bending the staffs before burial or placing large stones over them. Inflicting intentional damage to objects prior to their deposition in graves is a recurring theme in Scandinavian Viking Age archaeology. Not only staffs but also other items occasionally received similar treatment, especially spearheads and swords.[33] In Gutdalen two graves contained bent swords: B6403 and B7894. The former also held a bent sickle, whereas the latter was devoid of other purposefully damaged objects.[34] There are many known examples of bent and broken Viking Age swords from Stryn and also nearby Gloppen.[35] Both Stryn and Gloppen are thought to have been economic centres as well as sword production sites.[36] The underpinning reasons for inflicting deliberate damage to precious goods may have been manifold: to render them useless to potential robbers, to annihilate their special powers, or to metaphorically 'kill' them in the hope that they would pass over to the otherworld together with the deceased.[37]

Research on Viking Age burial customs across Scandinavia also shows that some staffs were buried over or very close to the bodies of the deceased (implying a special kind of bond with their presumed owners) or, in the case of cremations, in an upright position: the most evocative example of the latter custom is known from the cemetery at Klinta in Öland, where a bent staff had been placed upright inside the grave in such a way that the staff's decorative handle projected outside the burial pit.[38] A similar case has been noted at Jägarbacken in Närke, Sweden where a staff had been placed vertically in the grave.[39] It is noteworthy in this context that the shape to which the Gutdalen staff has been bent aligns perfectly inside a soapstone bowl that presumably forms part of this grave's assemblage – this suggests that the staff may have been buried *inside* this vessel in an upright position (Fig. 27.3).

Soapstone Vessel with an Iron Handle

In addition to the iron staff, the Gutdalen grave assemblage includes a c. 22 cm long fragment of an iron handle with voluted ends (Fig. 27.4b). It is possible that this find was part of a wooden bucket with iron fittings (the remains of which might perhaps be among the indeterminate iron fragments associated with B5525). However, there is also another possibility.

Under number B5405 in the University Museum of Bergen a big bowl is stored, which according to curator Brita Hope (pers. comm. 11.04.2019) could have been mislabelled and might instead belong to the Gutdalen grave. The vessel is heavy, dark in colour, and semi-spherical in shape (26.5 cm in diameter, c. 17 cm high). It has smooth sides, a flat rim, and a small hole in the bottom (Fig. 27.4e). The bowl is made of soapstone/steatite, a raw material often used to produce eating and drinking vessels in Viking Age Norway.[40] On opposite sides inside and outside the vessel one can notice rusty stains and corroded fragments of rivets and mounts used for attaching a handle which would allow the pot to be hung over the fire or to be more comfortably carried.[41] The aforementioned iron handle from the Gutdalen grave fits the diameter of the soapstone bowl, so it is possible that it originally belonged to this vessel. Iron handles are relatively common components of soapstone pots discovered in Viking Age graves and settlements.[42] To our knowledge, however, only one grave from Norway (grave Ka. 1 from Kaupang) contained a soapstone vessel used as an urn.[43] Interestingly, a quick experiment conducted in 2019 at the University Museum of Bergen showed that the bent staff from Gutdalen fits perfectly inside the bowl (Fig. 27.3). Therefore, it is permissible to speculate that the soapstone vessel was not only a burial gift or personal possession of the deceased but that it served as an urn for the bones and/or as a container for the staff and/or other grave goods.

An alternative reading, supported by a note written by Per Fett, is that the soapstone vessel did not belong to graves B5405 or B5525 but instead to grave B5526. A further premise that challenges the idea that the soapstone stemmed from B5525 is that at some point a fragment of *some* vessel was apparently still attached to the aforementioned iron handle from B5525. Since no significant damage to the soapstone vessel's rim is seen today, it is possible that the iron handle from B5525 actually belonged to another type of container. In view of the conflicting arguments for and against the attribution of the soapstone vessel to graves B5405, B5525, and B5526, we must openly admit that it is currently impossible to take a definitive stance on the matter of its provenance.

Brooch

Among the costume elements labelled under B5525 is an almost completely preserved copper alloy tongue-shaped brooch, as well as several small fragments of a second copper alloy object, perhaps an identical brooch or another kind of artefact (Fig. 27.5a–b).

The tongue-shaped brooch (9 × 5.5 cm) is similar to Rygh's[44] type 664 and consists of two main components: a top plate with openwork animal ornaments and a flat unornamented bottom plate. Because of the strong patina, only part of the decoration of the obverse is discernible today. It depicts a ribbed body and head of an animal (or fantastic beast) as well as several volutes probably representing bodies of snake-shaped creatures. The reverse of the brooch is also richly decorated. The damaged pin-fastening mechanism in the centre consists of two profusely ornamented copper alloy bars laid on top of each other at a right angle and riveted to the base. The arms of the transversely laid bar are adorned with symmetrical knots. The longitudinally laid

Figure 27.4 Large iron rings (a); iron handle (b); key (c); small iron rings (d); soapstone vessel (e). Photos by Leszek Gardeła and Klaudia Karpińska. Image design by Leszek Gardeła.

Figure 27.5 Copper alloy brooch from Gutdalen (a–b); beads (c); green glass (d–e); spindle whorls (f); comb (g). Photos and image design by Leszek Gardeła.

bar terminates in a hammer-like triangular head which also carries knotted ornaments; they are fashioned to resemble so-called 'triquetras' which appear on a variety of Viking Age objects.[45] Interestingly, there are nine knots on the fastening mechanism.

The damaged ornament on the obverse of the brooch is difficult to reconstruct in detail. However, based on similar finds from Kornsá (Iceland; museum no. 1780/1880-6-7),[46] Bu (Ullensvang, Norway; museum no. B4599),[47] Gryten (Borgund, Norway; museum no. Å975),[48] Västbyn (Frösön, Sweden),[49] and Birka (Adelsö, Sweden; museum no. SHM 5208)[50] we can speculate that this decoration consisted of one or two zoomorphic beings entangled with snake-shaped creatures or ribbons. These ribbon-shaped ribbed beast decorations are characteristic of tongue-shaped brooches in the Jellinge style, which originated in Denmark.[51] Tongue-shaped brooches are rare finds compared to other metal elements of the female attire. To our knowledge, approximately ten of them have so far been recorded in Scandinavia and the wider Viking world.[52] Several specimens, like the brooches from Birka and Bu, have suspension loops to which metal rings with bead necklaces were attached; they were most likely worn on the chest with the beads spread from shoulder to shoulder. It is noteworthy that all known examples of tongue-shaped brooches only carry decoration on the obverse, whereas on the reverse they have simple pin mechanisms. The presence of the decoration on the reverse of the Gutdalen brooch makes this find absolutely unique.

We can speculate that the ornaments of this artefact possessed not only decorative functions but also had special significance for the owner/wearer of the brooch. It is possible that the snake-shaped decoration on the obverse alluded to serpentine creatures known from Norse mythology such as, for instance, Miðgarðsormr and Niðhǫggr.[53] Because snakes live on the surface, underground, or in the water – essentially 'betwixt and between' worlds – we may speculate that they were seen by the owner/wearer of the brooch as mediating animals or spirit creatures providing certain advantages, for instance protection or guidance. Perhaps, in a conceptual sense, the snake-shaped ornaments corresponded with or in some way complemented the meanings attributed to the small snake pendant also found in the Gutdalen grave (see below).

Of particular interest is also the ambiguous ornament on the reverse of the brooch, which resembles a hammer or a schematised tree: when the brooch was worn, it would have been so close to the body that only the wearer would be aware of its existence. The design could have alluded to Þórr's hammer Mjǫllnir, miniatures of which (with similarly decorated heads) are known from numerous female graves discovered across Scandinavia (→ **Chapter 29**).[54] If instead the décor on the reverse of the Gutdalen brooch was viewed as a tree, it could have alluded to the ash Yggdrasill and its symbolism.[55] It is also worth noting that the nine knots of this ornament could also have held special importance. In Old Norse literature, the number nine is associated with Óðinn, fate, magic, and sacrificial acts.[56] When viewed in this perspective, the number of knots could perhaps hint at the occupation of the wearer/owner of the brooch and their role as a ritual specialist. It also cannot be excluded that the unusual ornament on the Gutdalen brooch combines all of these different meanings or that the wearer/owner ascribed other symbolism to it which is bound to forever remain obscure to us.

Copper Alloy Pendants

The Gutdalen grave included as many as nine copper alloy pendants, two of which are elongated and resemble human-like faces or masks with bulging eyes, prominent noses, and large mouths (Fig. 27.6). Characteristic interlace motifs that cover their surface leave no doubt about their stylistic and chronological attribution. Similar pendants, ornamented in the Mammen style and dated to the tenth century, are very rare in Viking Age Norway but they occur frequently elsewhere in the Viking world (i.e. Denmark, Iceland, Russia, Sweden) where they are usually found stray, in settlement sites and in female graves. One intriguing feature of these pendants is that their imagery sometimes resembles a 'puzzle picture' – depending on the viewer's perspective, the expression of the face/mask can change from 'calm' to 'angry' or even 'aggressive' (Fig. 27.6b). Over the last two decades, face- or mask-shaped pendants have received considerable scholarly attention, and some specimens have been interpreted as possible representations of prominent deities like Óðinn and Loki.[57] These interpretations largely rely on extant Old Norse texts that mention bodily modifications the two gods were subjected to – namely, Óðinn sacrificing his eye in exchange for profound wisdom and Loki having his mouth stitched as a form of punishment for his mischief – and associate these texts with the décor of those pendants which bear intentional modification to one of the eyes or have the mouths sewn shut. While *some* pendants can be convincingly interpreted as representations of divine figures, this is certainly not the case of the finds from Gutdalen – here, the eyes and mouths are intact.

The fact that the two Gutdalen pendants are identical additionally speaks against seeing them as representations of a specific deity and begs the question of why someone would wish to wear two effigies of the same god. In this light, the meaning-content of these finds is likely to have been different from that of other face- or mask-shaped pendants encountered across the Viking world.

Another specimen from the set of copper alloy pendants from the Gutdalen grave takes the form of a coiled snake; small convex dots cover its body and the animal has a prominent head with bulging eyes (Fig. 27.6a). Similar metal pendants, usually made of copper alloy but occasionally also of silver and gold, are known from Denmark and

Figure 27.6 Copper alloy pendants from Gutdalen: snake-shaped pendant (a); mask-shaped pendant (b); round pendant with interlace motifs (c); round pendant with spiral motifs (d). Photos by Klaudia Karpińska and Leszek Gardeła. Image design by Leszek Gardeła.

Sweden as well as from two localities in Norway: Trå[58] and Hoen.[59] Although the former comes from a grave and the latter from a hoard, both were part of elaborate necklaces which consisted of an impressive variety of pendants and beads (→ **Chapter 31**). One particularly noteworthy detail is that the Trå grave also held a large iron staff as well as luxurious goods made of metal and glass. These features combined have led several scholars to consider the occupant of the Trå grave as a ritual specialist.[60]

The remaining seven out of the nine copper alloy pendants from Gutdalen are round. One of these has Terslev-style ornamentation whereas the other six are probably identical and carry two antithetic s-spiral motifs which flank a central convex 'boss'. Artefacts of this type, also known as 'disc-shaped pendants', are very rare in the Viking world: several examples are known from Birka in Uppland, Sweden,[61] one from an unspecified location on Gotland,[62] and approximately ten from Denmark (Fig. 27.7). The closest and only analogies in Norway, five in total and fashioned in a slightly more simplified manner than those from Gutdalen, come from a cremation grave from Arnestad in Sogn og Fjordane. Interestingly, this grave contained an iron staff, two oval brooches, beads, as well as various utensils for spinning and cooking. As in the case of the aforementioned grave from Trå, the remarkable assemblage of the Arnestad grave has led several scholars to consider it as belonging to a person versed in magic.[63] It is worthy of note that the cremated remains of the deceased, presumably a woman, had apparently been placed inside a large iron cauldron – this appears to be a relatively common practice in western Norway, which reinforces the aforementioned idea that at Gutdalen the bones had likewise been deposited in a receptacle, in this case a soapstone bowl.

Rattle/Rangle

Among the miscellaneous iron objects in the Gutdalen grave are multiple large iron rings, several of which are bound together with an oblong iron implement (Fig. 27.4). Taken collectively, these items resemble the so-called *rangle*, or rattles.

Close to 300 rattles have been discovered in Norway. Their findspots are mainly concentrated in Vestfold and other eastern counties, which attests to their popularity in this part of the Viking world.[64] In his comprehensive work on Viking Age tools, Jan Petersen argued that rattles ought to be seen as part of horse equipment, as they are often found

Figure 27.7 Selection of round pendants with spiral motifs found in Denmark. Image design by Leszek Gardeła.

in graves containing other objects related to riding.[65] Cajsa Lund later expanded on Petersen's hypothesis, concluding that the rattles' primary function was to serve as draught lines for horses pulling wagons and sledges.[66] Apart from the Oseberg grave, however, there are no known examples of wagons or sledges being found in the same context as rattles.[67] On the other hand, at Løve in Vestfold, Norway a rattle has been discovered together with a horse in a burial context and may possibly have been worn around the horse's neck, clearly implying some connection between horses and rattles (→ **Chapter 20**).[68] In the Gutdalen grave the only other objects that may be associated with horse riding are a few strap fittings.

Sigurd Grieg was one of the first researchers to suggest that the rattles from the Oseberg grave were used to scare away malevolent spirits.[69] Later, Arne Emil Christensen[70] and Anne Stine Ingstad[71] similarly argued for a ritual function of these objects, seeing them as part of processional gear. In a more recent interpretation of the Oseberg grave, Jan Bill has provided compelling arguments to view the rattles as items linked to apotropaic practices.[72] This builds on earlier hypotheses suggesting that rattles were used for protective magic.

Interestingly, in the earliest description of the Gutdalen grave the curious rings are listed as 'ten iron rings connected with a loop that was fastened to wood'.[73] It may be that in this particular case the rings/rattles were attached to a wagon or some other vehicle or wooden implement. They are unlikely to have functioned as part of a draught line, however, as they differ considerably from the elements of fastening mechanisms reconstructed by Cajsa Lund.[74]

Quite possibly, as Petersen has proposed, iron rings and rattles may have been gear for horses, while at the same time possessing magic properties.[75] So-called medieval 'ring-staffs' (in Norwegian *ringstaver*) that were used for shepherding livestock serve as a good conceptual analogy. The ring-staffs and the sound they made were attributed magic properties in folklore, while still maintaining a practical function.[76] In conclusion, the Viking Age rattles may have been used in a similar way: to herd livestock or scare away wild animals, while simultaneously possessing apotropaic qualities.[77]

The Osteological Material

The osteological material from grave B5525 comprises variously preserved avian and mammalian bones. In the course of her investigation of the contents of the Gutdalen grave in April 2019, Klaudia Karpińska identified several avian remains belonging to an indeterminate species of an average bird (the size of a chicken) (Fig. 27.8).[78] She later consulted her results with Ramona Harrison, an environmental archaeologist specialising in zooarchaeology from the University of Bergen. After a follow-up examination of the osteological material from B5525 in December 2020, Harrison came to the conclusion that in addition to the avian remains the grave assemblage also comprised twelve fragments of burnt bones probably belonging to a human

Figure 27.8 Avian bones from Gutdalen. Photo by Klaudia Karpińska.

individual. Regrettably, without specialist analyses, further particulars cannot be provided (Ramona Harrison; pers. comm. 5.02.2021).[79]

One feature of the bird bones noted by Karpińska can already be used for further interpretations, however: they were not burnt during the burial ceremony. Gutdalen thus turns out to be (as of yet) the *only* Viking Age grave in Norway with uncremated bird remains, but it is noteworthy that unburnt bird bones have been noted in several Viking Age cremation graves in Sweden, which offer an insight into the significance of birds in unusual mortuary contexts.[80]

Overall, unburnt bones of birds have been documented in seven cremation graves in Uppland, Sweden and two on Öland, Sweden.[81] They mainly belong to almost completely preserved skeletons of unsexed chickens (*Gallus gallus domesticus*) often of a very young age. The bird bones occur both with female and male osteological remains (the majority of which cannot be sexed or aged) and a plethora of domesticated and wild animals (also including other species of avifauna) and artefacts. Interestingly, in the majority of these graves, the birds are the only unburnt animals.[82] It appears that in the course of funerary ceremonies chickens were sometimes placed close to urns, under them, or together with human ashes inside the containers.[83] Most chicken bones have no cut marks. One exception is a chicken (probably a cock) from grave 16/80 at Ärvinge 157A which likely had its legs cut off. Rather than being related to the preparation of food, this may have been a symbolic act intended to deprive the animal of the ability to walk.[84]

It is permissible to assume that unburnt chickens had some special roles to play during the last phases of these funerary ceremonies. For instance, they may have been seen as creatures endowed with a sense of personhood or as valuable commodities and status symbols. Their particular behaviour or plumage may also have been significant in one way or another.[85] Chickens may thus have been intended as gifts for the dead, ancestors, deities, or other supernatural entities.[86] Furthermore, it is not unlikely that the presence of these animals in mortuary contexts served a role in communicating the identity and occupation of the deceased to those gathered at the graveside.[87]

Medieval textual sources suggest that in Norse societies chickens could be regarded as possessing special abilities. The eddic poem *Vǫluspá* (sts 41-42) mentions three cocks (Gullinkambi, 'Comb of Gold'; a rusty cock; and Fialarr, 'Deceiver') sitting in Valhǫll, Helheim, and Gálgviðr ('Gallows Wood'), respectively, whose crows proclaimed the beginning of Ragnarǫk.[88] The poem *Fjǫlsvinnsmál* (sts 18, 23), on the other hand, describes a cock with feathers shining like lightning which sits on the tree Mímameiðr.[89]

Special roles of cocks and chickens are also clearly emphasised in non-Norse texts that pertain to the ritual activities of Scandinavian societies. In *Gesta Danorum*, for instance, the Danish chronicler Saxo Grammaticus mentions a woman who throws a cock's head over an unusual barrier and into the otherworld. In the otherworld, the bird miraculously comes back to life, regardless of the incompleteness of its body.[90] In the well-known account of a chieftain's burial at the Volga, the Arab traveller ibn Faḍlān describes two acts of chicken sacrifice: in the course of the first one a hen and a cock are sacrificed together with other animals, whereas in the course of the second act a hen is decapitated by a slave girl (→ **Chapter 13**).[91] As is evident from these different accounts, chickens (cocks and hens) can be associated with fate, death, and the otherworld. Their mediatory abilities are also emphasised, and it appears that these animals have the capacity to cross the borders between worlds.

In light of the above, it is likely that those chickens whose unburnt remains were found in the above-mentioned graves in Sweden had been regarded by the mourners as fauna with special mediatory agency and/or seen as psychopomps capable of transporting the dead to the otherworld.[92] As of yet, bird remains from the Gutdalen grave have not been assigned to specific species level. Therefore, it is challenging to interpret the meanings of avifauna in this particular funerary context. We can only speculate that the animal was associated with similar symbolic concepts and served as an expression of human–avian relations, a gift, a sacrifice, and/or an active agent facilitating the journey to the otherworld.

Unveiling Gutdalen: *Vǫlur*, *Seiðr,* and the Performance of Identity and Power

Close and contextual analyses of the contents of the Gutdalen grave leave no doubt about its special nature. The finds include rare metal jewellery, some of which may have been imported from very distant locations outside Norway, as well as a selection of costly utensils and other goods. The largest object within the assemblage is a metal rod with a 'basket handle' reminiscent of iron staffs discovered in a number of opulent and presumably female graves in the nearest vicinity as well as elsewhere in Scandinavia and beyond.

In the sections above we have already hinted at the possibility that several items in the grave's assemblage carry deep symbolism linked to Old Norse pre-Christian beliefs. In other Scandinavian funerary contexts, snake-shaped pendants and iron staffs similar to those found at Gutdalen tend to be associated with predominantly female individuals who – as implied by medieval written sources – presumably used these items as ritual paraphernalia and evocative indicators of their exceptional position and role in society. Instead of immediately mimicking and transposing these ideas onto the Gutdalen grave B5525, we make an attempt to situate this remarkable find in the broader context of relevant textual and archaeological sources as well as theoretical frameworks, hoping to elucidate the messages they may collectively convey about the *construction* of the deceased person's identity in life as well as in death.

We begin with a brief review of relevant accounts from Old Norse literature. There has been a long standing debate among literary scholars concerning these sources' historical veracity and the challenges of using them as windows to the Viking Age past.[93] In approaching Old Norse texts pertaining to magic, one should always bear in mind that they were put to parchment several centuries after the events they claim to describe and by people who, unlike many of the sagas' characters, adhered to Christian worldviews. Nevertheless, when approached with appropriate caution and situated against the more reliable background of archaeology and other related disciplines, it is possible to elucidate from these texts prolonged echoes of the distant past. In the context of the present study, it is noteworthy that a number of researchers have independently demonstrated that the sagas' descriptions of magic practices and practitioners (as well as the tools of their trade) closely correspond with the artefactual material recovered from Viking Age graves and other symbolically charged archaeological contexts.[94] It thus feels justified to cautiously use these texts in our investigations of the Gutdalen grave.

Seiðr *Practitioners in Old Norse Literature*

Old Norse textual sources such as *Eiríks saga rauða*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, and *Laxdœla saga* lead us to believe that *seiðr* practitioners were important figures in Viking Age society albeit often evoking ambivalent reactions. For this reason it is commonly thought that some of them were compelled to live in isolation or to constantly remain on the move. Surviving texts also emphasise the sexual undertones of *seiðr*, claiming that men who practised it would be prone to accusations of unmanliness or even sexual perversion.[95] On the other hand, however, there are hints suggesting that some *seiðr* performers had unconventional gender identities, something that perhaps predestined them to play special roles in society (→ **Chapter 3**). Bearing these issues in mind, in approaching graves with staffs and in interpreting them as graves of potential *seiðr* workers, we should be careful in immediately ascribing binary gender identities to the deceased, either on the basis of the grave goods that accompany them or based on osteological and genetic analyses. The ways in which these people saw themselves, as well as the manner in which the wider society perceived them in life and in death, may have been much more nuanced and fluid than we can imagine today. This may also have been the case with the individual from Gutdalen.

As demonstrated in the preceding chapters of this book, Old Norse sagas are replete with accounts of Viking Age funerals. While many of the 'saga burials' never happened in real life – simply because they concern purely fictitious characters – the specific details of the mortuary ceremonies, grave constructions, and artefactual assemblages that the sagas convey actually *do* find close reflections in the archaeological record across the Viking world. Particularly relevant in the context of our discussion on Gutdalen is a passage from *Laxdœla saga* describing the re-opening of a grave of an Icelandic sorceress (→ **Chapter 20**). As we learn from this saga, the sorceress had been interred with a large staff as well as a brooch of indeterminate type; and both items were immediately recognised by the people who witnessed the exhumation as 'material markers' of a '*vǫlva* grave'. Interestingly, a number of cremations and inhumations with iron staffs known from Scandinavia also include brooches of different types (e.g. oval, equal-armed), and the Gutdalen grave is no different in that regard. Furthermore, as we have seen above, the Gutdalen brooch represents not only a very rare type of ornament but one that is uniquely decorated, implying that it was not mass-produced but individually commissioned. Even when the brooch was no longer in use, those who knew its owner would probably recognise it immediately. The brooch could thus have been seen as a kind of 'material extension' of the buried person.

One further detail from the abovementioned *Laxdœla saga* is worth considering here: namely, the location of the *vǫlva* grave underneath the floor of a church. Archaeological excavations across the medieval world, including areas settled not only by Scandinavians but also by other cultural and ethnic groups, show that the process of religious conversion often involved the appropriation and 'translation' of old and numinous sites into new places of Christian worship. One way of reading the saga passage is that the original location of the *vǫlva* grave had once been a 'place of power', in other words a place in the pagan landscape that was important enough to also compel Christians to erect their temple there. In transposing this thought onto the archaeological funerary record and its wider landscape context, we can see that the graves with staffs are typically situated in prominent locations, within or close to regional and trans-regional trading hubs and centres of power (→ **Chapters 23–24** and **26**): this was also the case of Gutdalen where – as we have argued above – a local assembly site was likely situated.

The Archaeology of Ritual Specialists: Gutdalen in Norwegian Context

Including Gutdalen, as many as twenty-three iron rods/staffs have been found in Norway. Collectively, they comprise half of all known specimens from the entire Nordic area.[96] The items are mainly concentrated in the west coast area of Vestland county, in settlements scattered along its deepest fjords.

For many of the Norwegian graves a possible connection to the realm of magic can only be inferred from the presence of the staff. Out of the twenty-one graves with known provenance and decently documented contexts and contents, only eight contained objects that have previously been argued to carry religio-mythical symbolism and/or to be indicative of ritual behaviour.[97] However, these objects are never exactly the same.[98] If these are to be seen as

material markers of graves of ritual specialists, then clearly there was no consensus among the people of the Norwegian fjords as to what objects or ritual instruments, apart from the staff itself, would identify them as such (at least no such pattern is crystal clear to us today based on the objects that are preserved in the graves). The same can be argued when looking at the staffs; as previously stated, they clearly share some characteristics, but at the same time they are very diverse in terms of their appearance.

Different local expressions are also apparent in the varying manner of burial: some Norwegian graves with staffs are marked on the surface with stone settings or mounds and some are not marked at all; the treatment of the dead includes cremation layers, cremated remains in different containers, as well as inhumations; the material and human remains were sometimes arranged in a boat, while others were interred in wooden coffins, stone tile coffins, or small chambers.[99] Thus, as with Viking Age graves in general, we see a high degree of variation. Although the social categories and roles associated with a person certainly could have informed the manner in which they were treated in the course of the funeral, cultural and individual circumstances also played an important part in the way graves were constructed. The content and context of the Gutdalen grave does not fit into any neat pattern of similarly constructed graves, at least not when looking solely at the Norwegian material record. Regardless of this, there are similarities between the graves that provide hints as to how presumed ritual specialists were perceived by their contemporaries.

Historical and archaeological research demonstrates that genealogy, friendship ties, and the maintenance of different social networks was important in life as well as in death.[100] Some features of the construction of graves containing staffs can be viewed as an expression of this. The Norwegian graves are consistently located close to other visible graves, presumably in connection to important farms. Some graves with staffs are secondary in a mound with an older central grave and some represent the central grave in a mound containing several graves. In some cases, the remains were buried in older coffins or next to older graves. As implied by the spectacular boat grave at Vinjeøra in Trøndelag, knowledge of the location of older graves could sometimes be passed on through generations.[101] Taking this into account, it seems likely that the manner in which persons associated with staffs were buried could be part of a conscious 'technology of remembrance'[102] intended to claim and maintain a connection between the buried individual, the farm, and the settlement, as well as important ancestors. Thus, in contrast with the idea of the ritual specialist as someone on the fringe of society, the archaeological evidence of Norwegian graves with staffs indicates that the mourners wished to associate the buried person with the community and with the home, rather than to isolate them and maintain a safe distance from them.

Another recurring feature of the Norwegian graves with staffs is the frequency with which high socio-economic status is marked through the selection of grave goods. With very few exceptions, the Norwegian graves with staffs are richly furnished, the assemblages consistently including foreign objects such as glass and/or insular metalwork (→ **Chapter 31**).[103] Among the more convincing hypotheses seeking to explain the presence of expensive and exotic goods in both Norwegian and Swedish graves with staffs, is the idea that the owners of these items were in some way connected to the world of commerce.[104] This is not to say that the staff itself is a symbol of trade relations and not at all a ritual instrument, but rather that the grave goods of possible ritual specialists convey more complex metaphorical themes than just simple 1:1 relationships between objects and vocations of the deceased.

When looking at the physical features of the grave monuments as well as their placement in the landscape and their internal layout, the Norwegian graves with staffs seem more connected than *dis*connected to their local environment and community. However, as previously mentioned, the ritual actions of breaking and bending staffs or placing large stones on top of human or material remains are recurring motifs in the graves of possible ritual specialists. Expressions of such actions can be observed not only in the Gutdalen grave, but in several other cases from Norway. Utilising the theories of identity, personhood, entanglement, and material citation outlined in the introduction to this chapter, we may gain a better understanding of the meaning behind these deliberate ritual acts.

Personhood and (Dis)entanglement

Funerary practices lead to the transformation of social relations within the community and to a 'radical shift in the personhood of the deceased and those they leave behind'.[105] The funerary rites that eventually led to the creation of the assemblage of osteological material and artefacts from Gutdalen, today labelled as B5525, brought the local community together in a process that involved remembering, forgetting, as well as removing the deceased person from and/or reintegrating them into the society.[106] The act of cremation led to the almost complete eradication of this individual's physical form and the destruction or transformation of the items they potentially used in their lives. The iron staff was probably laid on the pyre together with the corpse and afterwards intentionally bent, as if to practically and metaphorically kill it or to emphasise that its role would no longer be the same. Knowing the special characteristics staffs have in Old Norse literature – where they serve as the iconic attributes of ritual specialists and objects endowed with a sense of identity and agency (as implied by the fact that some of them carry personal names) – it is permissible to speculate that also the Gutdalen staff was among the deceased person's most valued possessions, perhaps even a material extension

of the self. As Chris Fowler argues, in some societies the relations between people and objects were so close that the boundaries between them could become blurred. In other words, some items may have been regarded as parts of people and/or as possessing their own personhood.[107] In today's world we can see clear expressions of this idea in the way some soldiers perceive their military equipment: the US 'Rifleman's Creed', for instance, says explicitly that the rifle is expected to become an *integral* part of the soldier's body.[108]

The mortuary acts conducted in connection with grave B5525 at Gutdalen may also have reflected the kind of ambivalence towards ritual specialists that shines through in the sagas, essentially a combination of reverence and fear. The staff and other alleged ritual paraphernalia – previously presumably serving as things endowed with their own personhood as well as carriers of religious meanings and markers of the deceased special status (e.g. amulets, brooch) – were now transformed (or destroyed) and laid in the ground so that nobody else would be able to use them. At the same time, the location of the grave within an existing cemetery and in relation to the farm indicates a wish to retain a connection between the dead and the living, preserving their personhood through maintaining their ties with the society. This duality in the treatment of the dead and their objects is also a recurring feature in other Norse graves with staffs. In this way, it seems the ritual acts conducted at Gutdalen expressed two paradoxical ideas simultaneously: the preservation of personhood and relationships and their disentanglement or destruction.

Considering what we know of Old Norse society, it is possible that one's role as a ritual specialist was not fixed and was not viewed as a defining element of a person's identity, at least not in all circumstances. As we have seen, the way different people in different places buried possible magic workers varied greatly, suggesting that they expressed their identities through varied mortuary acts. This is consistent with our understanding of Old Norse ritual behaviour in general, which we have come to learn was not codified by a structured and unified worldview (as in the case of Christianity), though this may be a layman's impression based on the scattered and sometimes contradictory information about Norse myths and other expressions of belief that exist in medieval written sources.[109] Research into both archaeology and texts shows that the boundaries between humans and animals, men and women, life and death were not always clear cut in Norse mentalities, but could stretch, bend, and disappear.[110] With this in mind, it seems likely that a role as ritual specialist was equally fluid and relied on a variety of factors.

In her studies on Iron Age clothing from the perspective of intersectionality, Bettina Arnold has criticised approaches that associate objects' perceived practical function with the deceased persons' roles in life.[111] As many researchers have noted before, a weapon grave did not necessarily belong to a warrior. Arnold argues that this way of thinking underestimates prehistoric people's imaginative capacity to engage in composite imbrications of meaning.[112]

In line with entanglement theory proposed by Ian Hodder[113] and the theory of 'material citation' introduced by Howard Williams,[114] staffs may have had a plethora of different meanings and functions to the people associated with them. Their symbolic content could be relational and dependent on the particular context within which they were used.[115] Thinking through intersectionality, the same can be applied to the person using the staff: the roles which they were perceived to act out may have been subject to change, depending on the particular human and material relations they were engaged in at any one time. Their identity would then not be clearly defined as any single unit but would consist of a combination of different intersecting aspects, such as gender, ethnicity, economic class, etc., each being more or less important to express depending on the context. It is then not unlikely that the presumed ritual specialist from Gutdalen could have invoked fear in one situation, in another been a respected high-status individual, and yet in another viewed as an (extra)ordinary family member.

Interpreting the Gutdalen grave from the perspective of the latest theories of identity, the role of the ritual specialist may have been only one facet of the deceased person's identity, and the roles and social categories they inhabited may have been very fluid. Taking this into account, we may interpret the ambivalence towards ritual specialists in a new way: the combination of fear and respect evoked by their presence may not have been reactions to their power alone, but a recognition of their multifaceted identities. The rich objects that accompanied them in death, and possibly in life, as well as the apparent inclusion of the deceased person in living society, indicates that some aspects of their identity, beyond that of ritual leadership, were important to mark and to maintain a relationship with. At the same time, other aspects might have been perceived as dangerous and necessary to keep in check or even 'pacify', otherwise they could prove troublesome for the living. In this way, the Gutdalen grave assemblage can be seen as expressing people's varied approaches to the buried individual's identity: as a high-status individual, as a relative, as an important part of the society, and as a potentially dangerous 'social other'. Where some aspects of their identity may have induced fear and caution, others could have induced feelings of respect and familiarity.

The Performance of Power at Gutdalen

As discussed previously, the Hjelledalen valley was the nodal point for travel between Nordfjord and Gudbrandsdalen, creating the possibility to control trade to and from the inland. The courtyard site indicates that Hjelledalen

had central functions in the early Viking Age, possibly both within the political and the ritual realm. In addition, the high number of mounds once visible on the Gutdalen farm surely indicates a strong elite presence. Still, the many challenges presented by the lack of detailed documentation has hampered the possibility to identify Gutdalen as a central place in Viking Age Oppstryn.

Helge Sørheim has argued that the historically important area of Kyrkjeeide, on the other side of the Stryn water, may have been a local centre in late Iron Age Oppstryn.[116] The establishment of a stave church during the medieval period identifies it as having had some central functions at that time.[117] Four mounds and cairns of varying sizes and two unmarked graves have been found on Kyrkjeeide, some of which contained several richly furnished Viking Age graves.[118] It is thus likely that Kyrkjeeide was a place of importance also in the late Iron Age. Despite the possibilities of an elite presence at Kyrkjeeide, when comparing the archaeology of the two places – especially when considering the courtyard site – it seems likely that Gutdalen had a stronger position in the power networks of Oppstryn during the early to middle Viking Age. Eventually, the site of Tonning located to the west of Kyrkjeeide became the most important settlement of inner Nordfjord, and it is still considered to be the centre of Stryn.[119] As the political structure changed toward the end of the Viking Age and power became increasingly centralised, the local centre at Gutdalen may have become obsolete. Considering the fact that there are no remarkable finds or older churches in Hjelledalen from the medieval period, it seems likely that whatever power originally rested at Gutdalen gradually was transplanted to the western settlements closer to greater Nordfjord. In view of the surviving late Iron Age and medieval period archaeological remains from inner Nordfjord, it seems that if Gutdalen was a local power centre, its displacement likely happened at some point during the middle to late Viking Age.

In archaeological investigations of the accumulation of power in central places, there is an apparent consensus that rituals were an important tool for rulers to maintain their prominence and control.[120] Hence, the success of rulership hinged on the leader's ability to hold several different roles simultaneously, or at least to be in command of more than one source of power. However, when discussing female performers of public rituals, there is an apparent consensus that they operated on the fringes of society, a hypothesis largely based on the ambivalent reactions to ritual performers described in Old Norse literature.[121] In contrast to this, however, Olof Sundqvist[122] has argued that some texts indicate that female ritual performers actually were well integrated into society. Furthermore, he argues that they could be part of the highest social strata and perform rituals in the course of public ceremonies.[123] These communal events – for instance feasts – could serve as media through which power was maintained and legitimised. Understood in this way, the female ritual specialist may not have been a lone and isolated figure, but rather part of a larger system of power.

As we have seen, both the objects in the Gutdalen grave and the likely ritual slaughter of a bird in connection with the burial are formally and conceptually closer to finds from other parts of Scandinavia than to those from Norwegian contexts. More specifically speaking, the closest analogies to them can be encountered in eastern Sweden and in several Danish locations. In this context it is interesting to note that eastern Sweden represents the second largest concentration of graves containing staffs. Furthermore, we may note that some special objects that are commonly encountered in rich graves and hoards in Sweden and Denmark, in Norwegian context appear almost exclusively in graves with staffs. This is the case with a specific type of silver beads, where three of the four specimens which are known from mortuary contexts in Norway all appear in graves with staffs.[124] Interestingly the fifth specimen is also found in a remarkable grave containing an iron rod, although in this case the rod has no preserved handle.[125] We may speculate that the person buried at Gutdalen was in some way connected to the same network as the staff bearing individuals from eastern Sweden. For whatever purpose, it seems that the presumed ritual specialist from Gutdalen had access to certain types of 'exotic' objects that either were more frequently imported to eastern Sweden and Denmark or that may even have been produced there.

Despite the implications that some female ritual specialists could be integrated into the ruling class, there is a divide in how literature describes different types of people who dealt with the supernatural. Olof Sundqvist acknowledges that the people with power to manipulate real world events through divination rituals, such as the performers of *seiðr*, are often shrouded in mystery and met with ambivalence, whereas other figures, especially the group he identifies as *husfreyar* or 'housewives' are described in positive terms and appear as part of a household.[126] We are then left with the impression that there is a clear difference between 'fringe' performers of divination rituals and other, more publicly accepted, ritual specialists. However, the archaeological evidence from Gutdalen and other Norwegian graves with staffs does not leave the impression of a similar separation having been marked in the burial record. The grave assemblages consistently display wealth and contain exotic objects typically associated with people representing the highest social strata. Furthermore, the sheer amount and type of grave goods is akin to that displayed in other graves on the same farm that do not contain staffs, proving that the presumed ritual specialists were treated in similar ways in death to other high status individuals.[127] As the graves with staffs correspond in terms of their construction and content to other rich graves in the same area, a

plausible conclusion is that they all belonged to the same socio-economic class.

Taking all of the above into account, the possible ritual specialist buried at Gutdalen may have been one 'tool' or 'agent' in a complex strategy of power. They may have been controlled by the elite, or have been part of the ruling class themselves, as has been argued for many male leaders responsible for ritual activities.[128] Indeed, the grave's position within a cemetery comprising mostly rich graves, likely attached to a powerful farmstead, may allude to the person having kin-ties to a prominent family residing at Gutdalen. With this in mind, it may be that the individual buried in grave B5525 was not only active in ritual performance, but also part of an elite network of exchange with ties to the ruling elite of Oppstryn.

Conclusions

The local cultural and historical context of the Gutdalen grave and the goods buried within it leave no doubt that its occupant was a person considered special in their time. The artefactual assemblage carries deep symbolism linked to myths and rituals described in the sagas. The incomparable rarity of the objects also evokes a feeling of 'otherness' that is mirrored in saga texts describing the performance of magic rituals. It is highly probable that the person buried at Gutdalen *was* a ritual specialist, similar to the staff-bearing ritual performers that can be identified in literature. However, there is little to support that the person buried at Gutdalen was a fringe actor or liminal figure in the same sense as the *vǫlur* and their kind known from Old Norse mythical accounts. Rather, the grave assemblage indicates a person of means, possibly connected to elite networks of trade, with a clear affiliation to the Hjelledalen society. This does not exclude that this individual was met with ambivalent reactions. As we have seen, aspects of the Gutdalen grave's construction and the treatment of objects indicate that its occupant was approached with a mixture of caution and reverence.

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Unlike the living culture, literary descriptions of cultural acts or ideas are fixed snapshots unfazed by the passing of time. Though textual sources give a clear indication of the attitudes people may have had towards certain ritual performers, the accounts we encounter in the sagas are usually not real lived experiences. As we have seen, the way different people in different places buried possible ritual specialists varied greatly, suggesting that they expressed their identities and their rituality differently. What roles and power the person buried at Gutdalen had in life, and what emotional responses they evoked from their peers, we may only speculate. As noted above, so called 'warrior graves' are not necessarily always graves of actual warriors. Thinking through intersectionality, even if their occupants were warriors, it is important to remember that this was not *all* they were. The same can be said about the so-called '*vǫlva* graves' and related phenomena. Identity is constructed through the ongoing process of being in the world and relating to and engaging with the surrounding animate and inanimate environment. As such it is ever-changing and relational. Thinking in this way, whatever aspects of a past individual's identity were highlighted through the selection of grave goods cannot be expected to encompass their whole being. As researchers, we should not only think of the Gutdalen grave assemblage as evidence of a possible 'ritual specialist', but rather as the remnants of a complex and multifaceted person that may have had many fluid and overlapping roles in their society.

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Notes

1. For an overview of intersectionality as theory and method, see Carbado *et al.* 2013.
2. Fowler 2004; 2016.
3. Williams 2016a.
4. Shetelig 1932: 205.
5. Sognnes 1979
6. Hosar 1994; Standal 1995; Storbråten 1976; Solvang & Geiran 2021.
7. *Sverris saga*, ch. 133. Storm & Bugge 1914: 142–3.
8. Larsen 2016a; 2016b.
9. Sørheim 2018.
10. *Saga Inga Haraldssonar ok bræðra hans*, ch. 6. Holtsmark *et al.* 1989: 592–3.
11. Shetelig 1932. According to Gustav Storm (1989: 593) it could also refer to Guddal in Kvinnherad.
12. Olsen 2005.
13. Olsen 2003; 2005; 2013; Storli 2006; 2010.
14. Olsen (2005: 349) argues that judicial and cultic-ritual practice in the Iron Age was interwoven to the point where judicial facilities probably also took care of religious ceremonies. This was perhaps primarily expressed through collective practice, as implied by a field of large cooking and fire pits located in relation to the courtyard site.
15. Olsen 2005.
16. Shetelig 1932; Fett 1961.

17. For a summary on registered mounds in Stryn, see Fett 1961.
18. Fett 1961.
19. This statement is based on Julie Westlye's studies of all the artifacts connected to the museum numbers listed under the Gutdalen finds in Per Fett's *Førhistoriske Minne fra Vestlandet: Stryn* (1961). The studies involved thorough examinations of artefact photos and descriptions in the online database Unimus. The typological comparisons are based on the work of Jan Petersen (1919; 1928; 1951), Bergljot Solberg (1984), Eva Moberg (1992) and Iben Skibsted-Klæsøe (1997). These analyses were partly conducted during the production of Julie Westlye's Master's thesis in the period between 2017–2018, at which point several of the objects were also inspected at the University Museum of Bergen.
20. Fett 1961.
21. Shetelig 1932.
22. www.unimus.no
23. Schetelig 1904: 25–7.
24. Fett 1950–1976.
25. Fett 1961.
26. The summary of burial traditions in Hjelledalen presented in the following is based on the descriptions provided by Per Fett (1961) and on archival research drawing from the University Museum of Bergen's online find databases (Unimus and Musit).
27. At least three mounds contained a chamber that was built inside the mound, on top of the original surface (B5030, B5032, B5909), and at least two presumed grave finds were mentioned as showing no trace of a chamber (B5244, B6489), though we cannot be sure of the latter as they were non-expertly excavated.
28. Gardeła 2016.
29. Schetelig 1912.
30. Petersen 1951.
31. Adolfsson & Lundström 1993.
32. Heide 2006a; Gardeła 2016.
33. e.g. Artelius 2005; Aannestad 2018. See also Kurasiński 2011 for cross-cultural examples of the ritual destruction of weapons in mortuary contexts.
34. B7894 comprises two different grave finds, mixed together and no longer separable.
35. Ianke 2018.
36. Moberg 1992.
37. Aannestad 2018; cf. Grinsell 1961; 1973.
38. Schulze 1987; Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 77–80; Price 2002: 142–9, 184–5; Gardeła 2016: 342–4.
39. Hanson 1986; Bøgh-Andersen 1999: 82; Price 2002: 194–5; 2019; Graner 2007: 52–60; Gardeła 2016.
40. Hansen & Storemyr 2017.
41. Baug 2011: 319.
42. Baug 2011: 319–20.
43. Stylegar 2007: 88.
44. Rygh 1885: 21.
45. Hellers 2012: pls. 16:b–c, 17:d, 31, 32: b–c, 34–5.
46. Kristján Eldjárn & Adolf Friðriksson 2000: 370–1.
47. Brooch from Bu (Unimus).
48. Brooch from Gryten (Unimus).
49. Jönsson 2010: 123–4.
50. Brooch from Birka (SHM Database).
51. Wilson & Klindt-Jensen 1966: 95–118; Graham-Campbell 2013: 82–8.
52. Petersen 1928.
53. cf. Gardeła 2020: 49–50.
54. Jensen 2010.
55. Simek 2006: 375–6.
56. Sołtysiak 2003: 234–6; Simek 2006: 232–3; Gardeła 2022.
57. Schaadt & Grundvad 2016.
58. Kaland 2006.
59. Fuglesang 2006.
60. Price 2002; Kaland 2006; Gardeła 2016; 2020.
61. Arbman 1940: Taf 98; Duczko 1985: 32–9.
62. Thunmark-Nylén 1998: Taf. 170.
63. Price 2002; Gardeła 2016.
64. Based on data collected from Unimus at least 280 rattles have been found in Norway. New research into all the individual finds is required to produce a more accurate number.
65. Petersen 1951.
66. Lund 1974.
67. Melsom 2003.
68. Resi 2013; Gardeła 2021.
69. Grieg 1928.
70. Christensen 1992
71. Ingstad 1992
72. Bill 2016.
73. Schetelig 1904.
74. Lund 1974.
75. Petersen 1951.
76. Melsom 2003.
77. Nordland 1956.
78. These bones are: 1 proximal epiphysis (with proximal fragment of diaphysis) of the left humerus, 1 proximal epiphysis (with proximal fragment of diaphysis) of the right humerus, 1 furcula without the epiphysis of the right clavicle, 1 right carpometacarpus, 1 right coracoid with damaged distal epiphysis, 1 distal epiphysis of the left femur, 1 flat and thin bone fragment (probably part of the sternal keel), 1 small curved bone fragment (probably part of sternal keel).
79. According to Harrison, the following bone fragments are stored under museum number B5525: 1 femur shaft (possibly human), 1 long bone fragment (broken, likely a tibia) 1 rib (iron amalgamated), 1 small fragment of vertebra or coccyx, 1 bone fragment (possibly skull fragment [calvarium]), 1 skull fragment (calvarium), 6 indeterminate fragments of mammal bones (2–6 cm long). Harrison observes that any final analysis will require consultation of the museum's comparative modern faunal collection.
80. These cremation graves often contained single unburnt bird bones, usually found in the mound layers. It is challenging to interpret the meaning of these remains: they can belong to animals which were only partially cremated or have no special significance at all, i.e. they could simply have been swept from the surface during the process of constructing the mound.
81. The graves from Uppland are: mound A4 from Arninge (Arninge RAÄ 75; SHM 34083), mound A3 from Hedvigsdal (Hedvigsdal 6A; SHM 34261), grave A43:1 and mound A49 from Valsta (Valsta RAÄ 59; SHM 34069), mound 1

from Viby (Viby RAÄ 33; SHM 34810), and graves 16/80 and 16/81 from Ärvinge (Ärvinge 157A; SSM 48240). For further particulars, see Sigvallius 1976: 12–13, 27–9; Brynja 1982; Svensson 1983; Äijä 1988: 37–40, 49–50; Sten & Vretemark 1988: 147, 150; Biuw 1992: 216; Hedman 1996: 136–7, 161, 164, 173; Andersson 1997a; 1997b: 50–1, 57–8, 153–5; Sten 2013: 224, 226–7. The graves on Öland with unburnt bird bones are from Södra Barby (Södra Bårby RAÄ 27:2; KLM 35 531) and Klinta (grave 59:3; Klinta RAÄ 59, SHM 25840). For further particulars, see Källström 1996: 13–14; Petersson 1957; Schulze 1987: 55–61; 1996: 79–80, 107; Svanberg 2003: 253.

82. One exception is mound A49, which contained an unburnt skeleton of a dog laid over a cremation layer (Andersson 1997b: 154–5). Other graves contained single unburnt bones of cattle (usually teeth), which may represent intentional deposits of incompletely cremated animals or bones swept from the surface of the site and lacking any special significance.
83. Chicken remains deposited inside urns: mound A4 (Arninge), mound A49 (Valsta), grave 16/80 (Ärvinge 157A). Chicken remains found by urns: mound 59:3 (Klinta), grave 16/81 (Ärvinge 157A). Chicken remains found beneath urns are only known from a grave from Södra Bårby.
84. Sigvallius 1976: 28.
85. Armstrong Oma 2010; DeMello 2012; Hill 2013; Boyd 2017; Kost & Hussain 2019.
86. Price 2010; Williams 2006.
87. Note that in addition to bird remains in grave 59:3 at Klinta an iron staff was found.
88. Dronke 1997: 18.
89. Larrington 2014: 262–3.
90. Friis-Jensen & Fisher 2015: 65–7.
91. Montgomery 2000: 16–17.
92. cf. Oehrl 2010; 2020.
93. e.g. O'Donoghue 2004; Clover & Lindow 2005; Clunies Ross 2010.
94. Price 2002; Heide 2006b; Gardeła 2016.
95. Ström 1974; Solli 1999; Price 2019; Mayburd 2014.
96. This number is based on Neil Price's (2019) revised list of possible staffs, which mentions a total of 25 provenanced and unprovenanced Norwegian staffs of both iron and wood. Price's nr. 4 'Gutdalen' and nr. 12 'Nordfjord' both represent the same find, namely the Gutdalen staff which is the topic of this chapter, and thus one of these entries must be excluded. The possible staffs referred to here include iron rods with one or more identifying feature characteristic of type III, as described by Price (2002; 2019). The wooden staff from Oseberg must therefore be excluded from the comparative material.
97. This includes a button on bow brooch from the grave in Fure, Askvoll (see Arrhenius 1962; Glørstad & Røstad 2015; Westlye 2019: 60); a Thor's hammer ring from Hilda, Innvik (see Westlye 2019: 59); a set of amulets from Arnestad Ytre, Gloppen; a rattle/*rangle* from Hopperstad, Vik (see Dommasnes 2018: 54; Westlye 2019: 59); a reliquary from Melhus, Overhallen (see Heen-Pettersen & Murray 2018); a necklace of beads and amulets and an inscribed ladle from Trå, Granvin (see Kaland 2006); a slaughtered dog in a bowl at S. Bikjholbjerget, Kaupang (see Stylegar 2007).
98. The only exceptions are the pendants from Arnestad Ytre and the snake pendant from Trå in Granvin, both comparable to the material from the Gutdalen grave.
99. For a summary on the content and construction of graves with staffs from Vestland, see Westlye 2019: 32–46.
100. Ringstad 1987; Gaskins 2005; Fahlander & Oestigaard 2008; Price 2008a.
101. Sauvage & Lorentzen 2021.
102. Williams 2003.
103. Westlye 2019: 35–46.
104. Gustin 2010; Sørheim 2011; 2014; Dommasnes 2018.
105. Fowler 2004: 44.
106. On the complex processes of remembering and forgetting in prehistoric and medieval mortuary practices, see Williams 2003; 2006; Price 2010.
107. e.g. Lund 2017; Knutson 2020.
108. Brunning 2019.
109. Andrén 2005; Sundqvist 2007.
110. Lund 2017; Knutson 2020; Røstad *et al.* 2020.
111. Arnold 2016.
112. Arnold 2016: 842.
113. Hodder 2012.
114. Williams 2016a; 2016b.
115. Gardeła 2016: 234.
116. Sørheim 2018.
117. Nilsen 1976: 6.
118. This statement is based on a review of all registered Viking Age finds from and around Kyrkje-Eide. The finds were reviewed by utilising the databases Askeladden.ra, Unimus, and Per Fett's *Førhistoriske Minne fra Vestlandet: Stryn prestegjeld* (1961)
119. Standal 1995: 34; Sørheim 2018: 290.
120. Steinsland 1991; 2000; Sundqvist 2002.
121. Price 2002: 325, 328; Steinsland 2005: 307; Sundqvist 2007: 71; Hedeager 2011: 126; Gardeła 2016: 81-82.
122. Sundqvist 2007; 2020.
123. Sundqvist 2020.
124. Petersen 1928: 168; Westlye 2019: 38, 64.
125. This is the grave from Vinjum, Aurland in Vestland. Helge Sørheim (2011) has previously argued that this represents the grave of a ritual specialist.
126. Sundqvist 2020.
127. Westlye 2019.
128. Sundqvist 2016.

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Burials of Ritual Specialists? Case Studies of the Graves from Trekroner-Grydehøj and Gerdrup, Sjælland

Ole Thirup Kastholm & Jens Ulriksen

Introduction

Burial rites reflect perceptions of life and death in a society. As societies change over time, so do their perceptions of death and how to properly treat the dead through burial rites.[1] Most of us are familiar with the burial practices of our own time and place, but we also have an awareness that tradition is constantly challenged by new expressions, thus creating new traditions. Burial practices in other parts of the world may seem unfamiliar or even strange. If curious and bold enough, you may be enlightened by asking a local person about the practice. Of course, this is not possible regarding burial practices of the Viking Age. Not only did they occur more than a thousand years ago, but also during a time with quite a different cosmology, mentality, and ethics. Instead, we have to try to understand the background for the ritual behaviour of which remnants can be found through the excavation of graves. This is not an easy task. Not only are we unable to completely repress our own cultural background when interpreting the archaeological remains, but the beliefs and the ritual spheres of the Scandinavian Viking Age are likewise enigmatic to modern interpreters. In spite of written sources, such as Norse sagas, chronicles of Western Europe, and reports by Arabic diplomats, there are but a few hints connected to the ancient cosmology of Scandinavia. It is, in short, challenging to establish a clear impression of the ritual behaviour and beliefs of the peoples of Scandinavia in the period when Norse mythology prevailed.

When Neil Price in 2002 published his elaborate study on Old Norse sorcery, religion, and shamanism in relation to war, he suggested that a small number of Viking Age female graves belonged to performers of sorcery.[2] Price highlights that the Norse texts include a plethora of different designations for sorcerers, of which the term *vǫlva* remains the most popular among present-day archaeologists and non-professional history enthusiasts.

Price's study opened a gateway to more daring interpretations of the archaeological find material.[3] His focus on Viking Age cosmology and 'deviant' or 'mystical' burials has inspired scholars to look at cremations and inhumations with an eye to whether connotations of or associations with ritual practices and religious beliefs can be interpreted from the grave furnishing, as well as from the treatment of the corpse.

Inspired by such investigations into sorcery, two archaeological finds from eastern Denmark have attracted particular interest when trying to track down the ritual specialists of the Viking Age: these are the inhumation graves from Trekroner-Grydehøj A505 and Gerdrup B. The 'main' deceased have been referred to as *vǫlur* (sg. *vǫlva*), since complex and seemingly mystical elements encircle both graves.

In this chapter, the authors offer a presentation of the two graves, as well as their own interpretations of them. The elements featured in the graves are compared and, in conclusion, the authors seek to assess to what extent these archaeological remains can be interpreted as the final resting places of two *vǫlur*.[4]

The Regional Context

Both graves are located near the inner waters of Roskilde Fjord, Denmark. Together with Isefjord, Roskilde Fjord forms an extensive body of water that stretches approximately 40 km from the open sea, the Kattegat, to the north, southwards and deep into the central parts of Sjælland. Here, the aristocratic residence at Lejre and its satellite settlements dominated the cultural landscape from c. AD 500–1000.[5] The narrow fjord being a controlled water,[6] the coasts are characterised by landing places,[7] and the body of archaeological finds shows both wealth and import.[8]

Figure 28.1 Map of the Roskilde Fjord area showing burial grounds from the late Iron Age/Viking Age. Gerdrup is shown with a dot and Trekroner-Grydehøj with a triangle. Illustration by Ole Thirup Kastholm, ROMU, with background data from the Danish Geodata Agency.

The extensive activities during the late Iron Age and Viking Age are also evident in numerous burial places from this period dotted around Roskilde Fjord. The sites of Trekroner-Grydehøj and Gerdrup are located only some 5 km apart, not far from present-day Roskilde (Fig. 28.1).

The Term *Vǫlva*

As mentioned above, *vǫlva/vǫlur* is the term most commonly used to designate ritual specialists dealing with *seiðr* in the Old Norse prose corpus, according to Neil Price.[9] The concept behind the term, though, has been debated concerning both the exact etymology of the word and the precise definition of the character of the ritual specialist behind it.[10]

Acknowledging that *vǫlva* has today become a more or less general term for a (Viking Age) sorceress, we will in this chapter use it as such – as a broad category of ritual specialists rather than a strict one.

The Gerdrup Grave B[11]

Find History

In 1981, the find of a Bronze Age sword was reported to the museum in Roskilde (Fig. 28.2). The museum visited the find place, and it was evident that the sword originated from a destroyed burial mound. Furthermore, a number of dark patches were observed in the newly ploughed field, which were thought to be cremation graves. A small trial excavation was carried out, which confirmed the existence of such graves, as well as an inhumation grave. Two graves were examined in 1981 one of which was Gerdrup B. A larger excavation campaign in 1983 revealed more graves spanning from the Late Neolithic until the Viking Age (Fig. 28.3). A total of approximately 11 graves has been excavated, but the site is not yet considered fully examined.

Topographical Setting and Local Context

The site at Gerdrup is located around 350 m inland from the eastern coast of Roskilde Fjord, just over 7 km north of the city of Roskilde. Gerdrup B was located on a small peninsula in the wetlands of a river valley, only about 4 m above sea level, and the other graves were placed immediately to the north of it, on the sloping hillside of the valley.

Just south-west of the grave area there is a bridge crossing the river. Although the bridge itself only dates from AD 1661, this narrow point in the river valley is the natural place to cross for travellers going north or south along the fjord coastline. It is thus the optimal place for a ford prior to the bridge.

The surrounding cultural landscape is dotted with the remains of burial mounds, some of which still stand as monuments. On the hills just north of the grave, at least 15 mounds have overlooked the valley, and the area is generally known for its numerous burial mounds. These were mostly erected in the Early Neolithic and Early Bronze Age, but in several cases, they are known to hold secondary burials from later periods, either in the immediate vicinity or inside (Fig. 28.4).

Despite the landscape's wealth of ancient burial monuments, archaeological excavations have only been carried out to a limited extent. Therefore, our insight into settlement patterns from, for example, the Viking Age is by no means complete, and we only know of dispersed finds. Located on the ridge of the hill above Grave B, traces of settlement from the Late Viking Age or Early Middle Ages have been found, but without in-depth investigations having taken place – which could uncover potential older phases.[12] Apart from this find, you have to look more than 2 km to the southeast to find definite settlement traces from the Iron Age.[13]

Layout and Inventory of the Grave

Gerdrup B is a Viking Age double grave. The grave cut measured 2.5 × 1.6 m on the surface of the subsoil and

Figure 28.2 Topography of the late nineteenth century around the location of Gerdrup (red dot). Illustration by Ole Thirup Kastholm, ROMU, with background data from the Danish Geodata Agency.

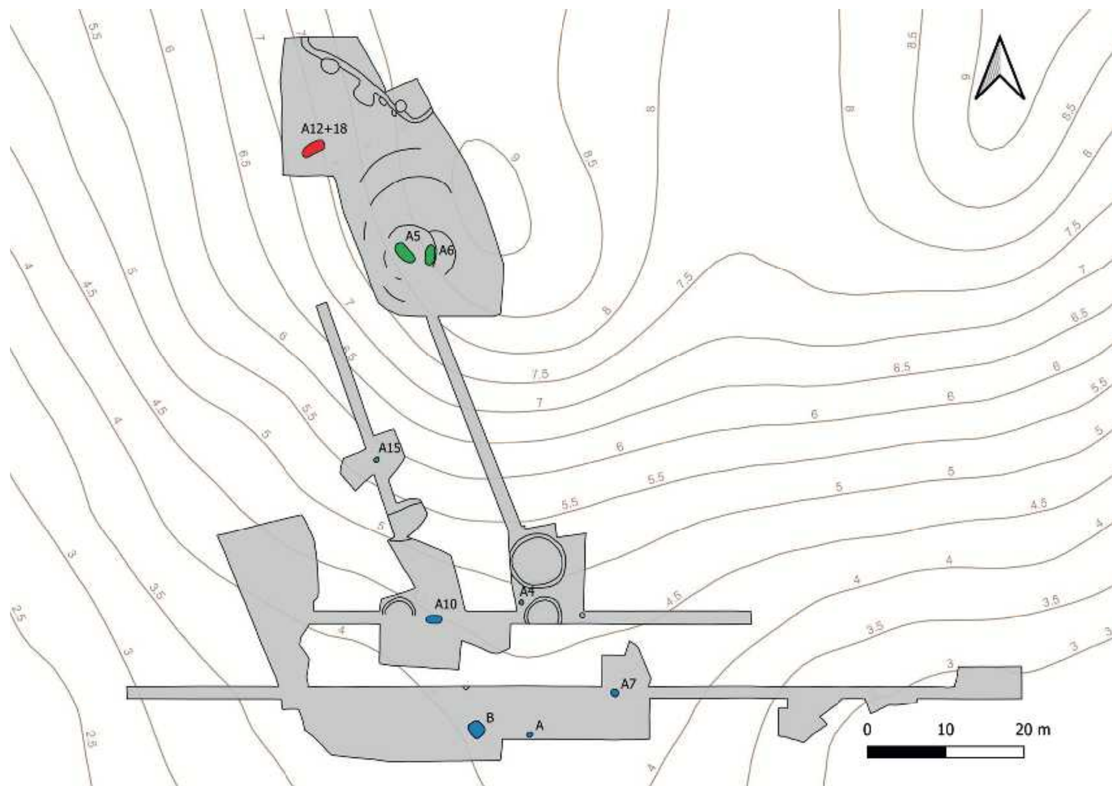

Figure 28.3 The burial ground of Gerdrup. Plan of the areas excavated in 1981 and 1983. Blue: Iron Age features. Green: Bronze Age features. Red: Stone Age features. Illustration by Ole Thirup Kastholm, ROMU.

Figure 28.4 Burials in the landscape around the Gerdrup site (blue star). Red dot: Stone Age. Green dot: Bronze Age. Blue dot: Iron Age. Black dot: undated. Note the old crossing of the river valley just south of the Gerdrup site. Illustration by Ole Thirup Kastholm, ROMU, with background data from the Danish Geodata Agency.

Figure 28.5 Gerdrup B in situ*. The male to the left and the female, partly covered by boulders, to the right. Photo by Tom Christensen, ROMU.*

was north–south oriented, like most of the inhumations in the region.[14] It was 0.8 m deep, with sloping sides and a flat bottom. In the north-west corner of the pit was a large, naturally deposited stone. The grave fill consisted of turfs dug up from the nearby surroundings; the turfs could be clearly observed in the cross section of the grave and must once have covered an area of c. 50 m^2. They had been placed with the vegetation side facing downwards, as is normally the case in turf-built burial mounds. It is obvious from the section of the grave that it was filled in one operation and had not been re-opened.

The grave cut contained two skeletons, skeleton 1 to the west and skeleton 2 to the east (Figs 28.5 and 28.6).[15] Between the two skeletons were two small deposits of

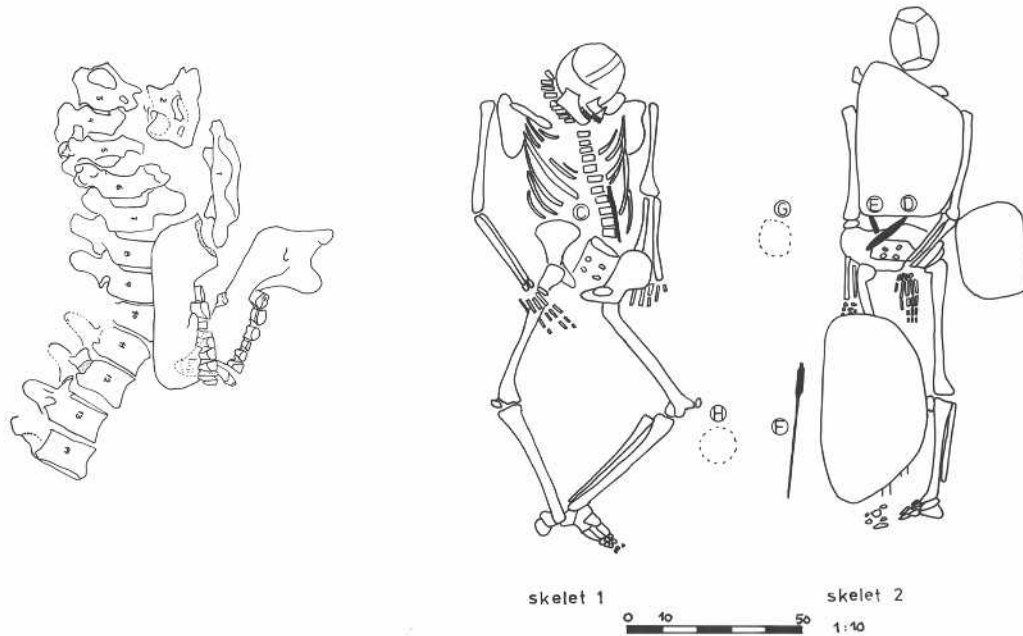

Figure 28.6 Gerdrup B plan (right) and details of the neck of the male (left). Drawing by Mette Høj, ROMU.

Figure 28.7 Details of the male in situ*. Left: the ankles. Right: the neck. Photos by Tom Christensen, ROMU.*

cranial bone fragments from sheep or goat. No traces of coffins were observed. Both the deceased persons lay with their heads towards the north.

Skeleton 1 was the remains of a 35–40 year-old male lying on his back. He had a worn iron knife with him. His legs were in an angular position, with his right leg crossing over his left. This gives the impression that his legs had been tied together by the ankles, although there were no preserved traces of rope or the like. His left arm lay by his side, whilst his right hand was resting on his groin. His head was angled down towards the left shoulder, and his neck had apparently been broken. The break had not left any preserved evidence on the bones, but the cervical vertebrae lay separately, in a way that suggested the bones had been pulled apart by hanging.[16] Because 'drop hanging' – pulling the neck vertebrae apart – as a distinct execution method is of more recent date,[17] the exact cause of death is up for discussion, but the overall impression of a bound and hanged person remains (Fig 28.7).

Skeleton 2 was the remains of a middle-aged female who lay on her back, with her left arm at her side and her right hand resting close to her groin. At the time of death, she had been partially toothless for several years and must have had the appearance of an old woman with a receding mouth. In

addition, her pelvis showed signs that she had given birth at least once. At her waist was an iron knife and a bone needlecase, which contained iron needles. By her right leg was a 37 cm-long iron spearhead, the tip of which pointed towards the foot end of the grave. Its socket contained the remains of a wooden shaft (Fig. 28.8). The spearhead is of Jan Petersen's type E, a type that is usually dated to the ninth century, but was apparently used until the beginning of the tenth century.[18] This is a classic type, although it is not very common amongst the Danish burial finds.[19] A noteworthy aspect of the burial of skeleton 2 was that large stones had been placed on top of the woman's body. There was no fill between the stones and the skeleton, so they must have been placed directly on top of the deceased.

The two individuals from Gerdrup B were recently included in a large study of Viking Age genomics that confirmed their biological sex.[20] Subsequent analysis of the mtDNA furthermore showed that the interred had a parent–offspring relation, i.e., they are mother and son.[21]

Figure 28.8 The spearhead from Gerdrup B. Photo by Flemming G. Rasmussen, ROMU.

Interpretation

Back in the early 1980s, the find of the grave aroused a great deal of interest. It deviated from the classic perception of the graves of the Viking Age, especially due to the mixture of gender-specific grave goods associated with the woman: a needlecase and a spearhead. This 'anomaly' was emphasised by the presence in the grave of a man who had apparently been killed, as well as by the large stones that had been placed on top of the woman's body. It was suggested that the grave might have been the resting place of a sorceress or *valkyrja*: a woman buried with a special status symbol – the spear – and a special grave 'item' – the killed man – and she was clearly intended to remain in the grave, so the stones were placed on top of her.[22]

The interpretation of Gerdrup B as the grave of a sorceress has been suggested by Leszek Gardeła.[23] Gardeła has proposed that the spear should perhaps be interpreted as a *vǫlva* staff.[24] The large stones are regarded by Gardeła as another indicator that the deceased was a sorceress, speculating that they may have been thrown down onto the woman, crushing her body, in an apotropaic stoning ritual.[25] Gardeła compares the scenario with a passage from *Eyrbyggja saga* (ch. 20), which tells of the sorceress Katla and her son Oddr who are executed after a misdeed. The man is hung and the woman is stoned to death in an isolated place (→ **Chapter 12**).[26]

A recent interpretation[27] has taken the full excavation context of the grave (only recently published[28]) and also the DNA-results into consideration. It stresses that the prominent location of the grave among existing monuments and its closeness to the river crossing clearly indicate its significance, and moreover that its careful construction speaks against any pariah-background, as in the Katla and Oddr-scenario, even though the parent–offspring relation seen in isolation does lend support to this interpretation. Instead, it is suggested that the woman was the main individual in the grave and that she was a high-ranking person, but the study does not define her exact function in society. It further suggests that the spear should be seen as a theatrical prop connected to the burial rituals, rather than a personal possession of the woman. Concerning the parent–offspring relation, a definitive explanation is yet to be proposed, but this hitherto unique situation naturally calls for some speculation. Given the mother's age and condition, it seems plausible that she died of natural causes, while her son was most likely killed to accompany her in the grave. We can only speculate about the reasons behind this unusual funeral

scenario. However, it is important not to interpret this from our own contemporary perspective. In spite of the biological parent–offspring relationship, the cultural link between the two individuals might have been different from our modern expectations. The two persons need not constitute (part of a) nuclear family in the modern sense. The biological relationship could have been irrelevant. Perhaps the male was not a part of the family anymore. Or maybe he was considered family but was not capable of carrying on living without his mother – perhaps due to some kind of disability. It may also be that he was under her protection in a way, which meant he had to die when she died and was therefore killed. Another option is that he voluntarily sacrificed himself, as is indicated in relation to the female slave in the chieftain's burial on the Volga River described by Ibn Faḍlān.[29]

The Trekroner-Grydehøj Grave A505[30]

Find History

Grydehøj is the name of a small hill in the now built-up area of Trekroner some 4 kilometres east of the town centre of Roskilde, Denmark (Fig. 28.9). Beginning in the late 1990s, more than 70 hectares of farming land were surveyed by digging many kilometres of trial trenches before the construction of roads and houses. During this process, a burial place on the isolated hill of Grydehøj was found in 2005 and excavated in 2007.[31]

The excavation revealed graves and burial monuments from the Late Stone Age, Early Bronze Age, Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age, and the Viking Age. During the Late Neolithic Period (c. 2000–1700 BC), three stone cists covered with one or more mounds were situated on the hilltop. In the Early Bronze Age (c. 1700–1100 BC), a mound was built neighbouring the stone cists to the west. Later, the mound was expanded to facilitate a new Early Bronze Age grave, and a ditch was dug around the eastward foot of the mound, probably to make the mound appear larger compared to the Neolithic mounds. From the very Late Bronze Age or the beginning of the Pre-Roman Iron Age (c. 600–400 BC) are three urn graves, buried at the western foot of the hill. During the late eighth or early ninth century AD, a Viking Age burial ground was

Figure 28.9 Topography of the late nineteenth century around the location of Trekroner-Grydehøj (red triangle). Illustration by Ole Thirup Kastholm, ROMU, with background data from the Danish Geodata Agency.

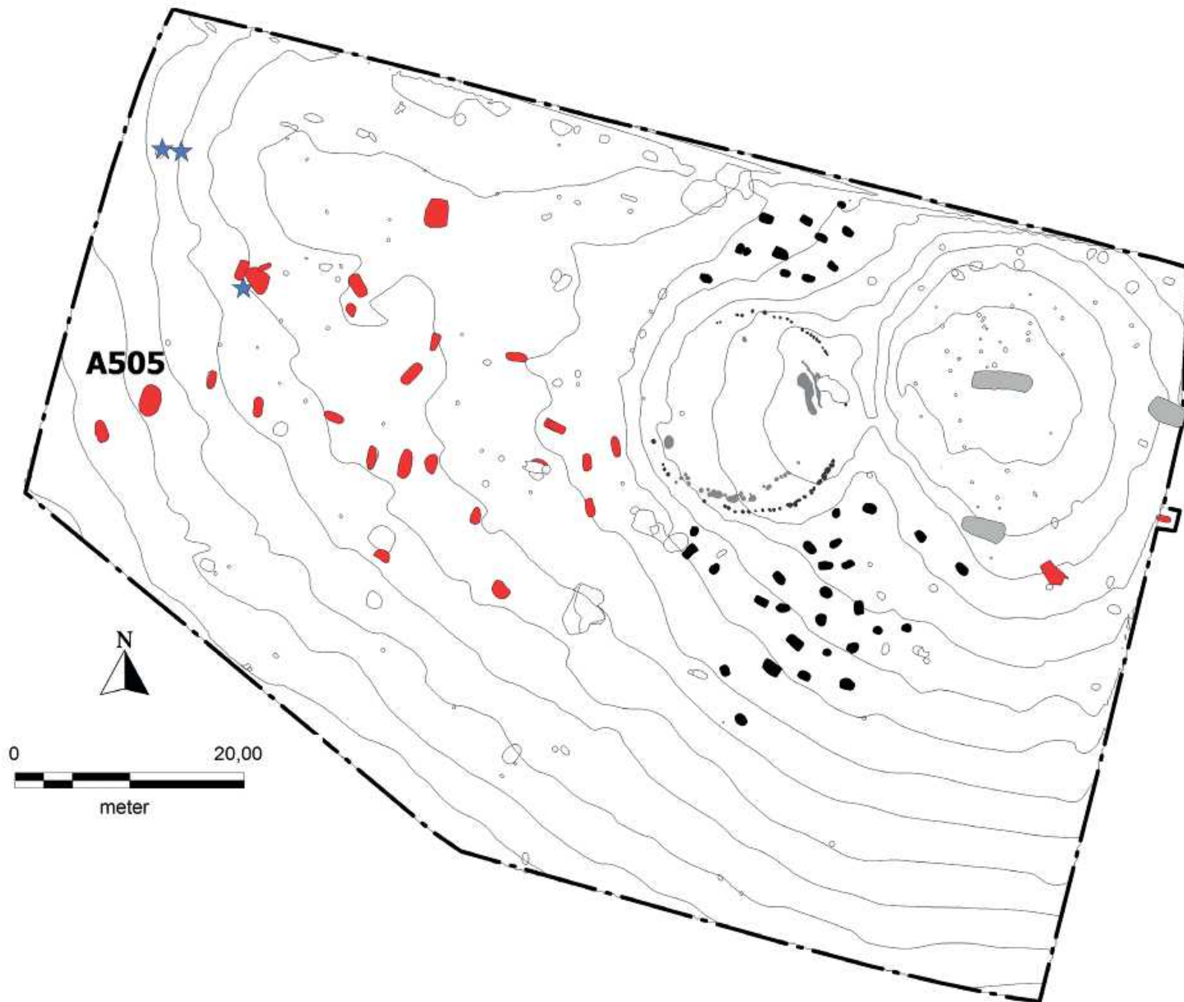

Figure 28.10 The burial ground of Trekroner-Grydehøj. The Viking Age inhumations are red and the location of A505 is marked. Late Neolithic stone cists are shown in light grey, the stone-lined perimeter of the Early Bronze Age mound in two phases is marked with dark grey, and cooking pits connected with the mound are black. The Late Bronze Age/Early Pre-Roman Iron Age urns are marked with blue stars. The level of the excavated surface has contour lines of 0.25 m intervals. Illustration after Ulriksen 2018.

established with the old cluster of mounds as a point of departure. The 27 inhumations were primarily found on the western slope of the hill (Fig. 28.10). Of the 27 Viking Age graves, 20% were oriented east–west, some with a slight deviation towards north-west, while 80% had an north–south to NW–SE orientation. Altogether 23 skeletons were registered, 13 in a supine position and 10 in a crouched position. Two single graves contained additional burned human skeletal material, while five graves held two persons. Four of these five burials even contained parts of at least one additional individual. The graves with two individuals could be divided in two groups: double burials where the bodies were interred at the same time in the same pit, and primary/secondary burials characterised by a primary grave with one individual and a secondary grave dug within the boundary of the first one.

Topographical Setting and Local Context

Trekroner-Grydehøj is situated in the southwest corner of the land belonging to the village of Marbjerg, some 1200 m to the north-east (see Fig. 28.9**,** top right corner). There is no archaeological evidence indicating that the village existed during the Viking Age and, despite the thorough surveying and trenching of the many hectares closest to the burial ground, no traces have been found of a contemporary settlement, not even stray finds of metal or pottery. Approximately 1100 m to the south-south-east the excavation of a house of Trelleborg type and two accompanying pit houses containing amongst other objects Baltic Ware reveal a settlement from the late tenth century or the beginning of the eleventh century.[32]

The top of the hill is the highest point of terrain within a radius of 1 km. In the late nineteenth century, the hilltop was

40 m a.m.s.l., but modern agricultural treatment has totally eroded the mounds and taken at least 1 m off the hilltop.

Layout and Inventory of the Grave

The grave cut was found on the slope. An oblong shape of dark soil and stones in the subsoil of sandy till measured 1.8 × 2.8 m and was oriented north–south (Fig. 28.11). The grave was excavated by removing the stones and fill in artificial 10 cm-thick layers while documenting the planum multiple times and with meticulous focus on the whereabouts of the objects and skeletal parts of humans and animals. Thus, it is possible to reconstruct the sequence of burials in detail.

The original grave cut was 2.6 m × 1.57 m and dug 0.42 m into the subsoil. According to the cross section of the grave cut, it has been filled up with a mix of top soil and subsoil (Fig. 28.12). Whether a person, an animal, or objects were buried at this point could not be established. After a while, the grave cut had been re-opened and the body of a woman (*Individual III*), 166 cm tall and 25–30 years of age at the time of death,[33] placed in a supine position in the mid-axis with her head at the north end (Fig. 28.13). A large boulder

*Figure 28.11 A505 after the removal of a stone carpet mostly consisting of flint. The large bones on the far side of the grave are parts of an interred male (*Individual II*). The eastern side with the large boulders is in the foreground. Photo by ROMU.*

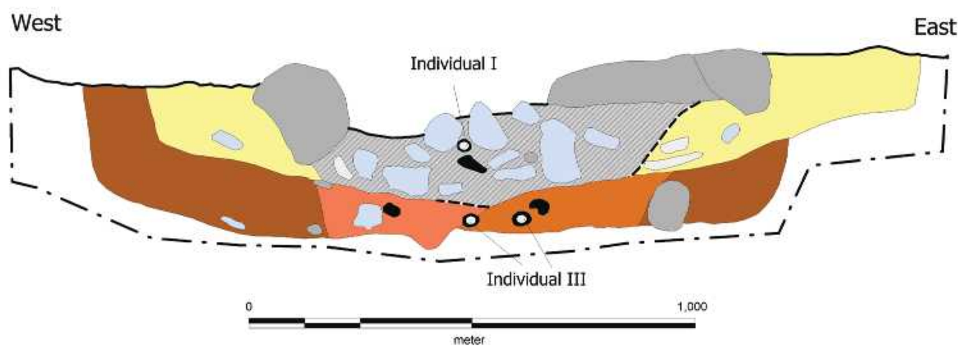

Figure 28.12 Cross section of grave A505 seen from the south. The original grave cut is dark brown. The re-opening made for Individual III *is light brown. A later opening is reddish. The secondary grave cut is yellow. The upper dark patch containing* Individuals I *and* II *is grey. Stones of flint (light blue) and chalk (light grey). Boulders are dark grey. Illustration after Ulriksen 2018.*

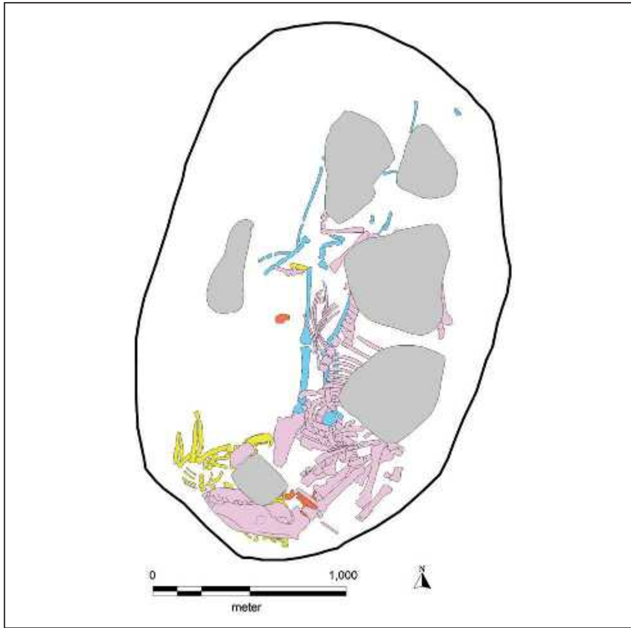

Figure 28.13 Lower levels of grave A505. Blue: Individual III. *Light red: horse. Yellow: dog. Brown: sheep or goat. Grey: boulders. Illustration after Ulriksen 2018.*

Figure 28.14 The bottom of the grave seen from the north. At the northern end is the skull of a woman facing west. Her body is lying in a supine position with the right hind leg of the horse on top of her abdomen (centre of picture). Photo by ROMU.

covered both her skull and parts of her torso. Peculiarly, the skull was placed upright on the *foramen magnum* facing west in a 'nest' of hand-sized stones (Fig. 28.14). The weight of the boulder and the decomposition of the body may have caused the dislocation of the cranium, but considering its preservation and position in relation to the rest of the skeleton and the boulder, it is more likely that the head was removed from the body before or during the burial ceremony.

During the course of the funeral, a number of items were deposited along with the woman, for instance the iron handle of a small bucket, a wooden box with a closing mechanism of iron, a heavily worn knife, the handle of another knife, as well as a small copper alloy rivet and substantial iron eyelet for securing a load to a saddle (Fig. 28.15). By her right hand was an object looking like an 11 cm-long arrowhead, but made of solid copper alloy and cast together with a short iron blade or point (Fig. 28.16). The other end was tapered and fitted into remnants of wood or bone, probably from a shaft kept in place by a copper alloy band coiled around it.

Near the right thigh of the woman was a poorly preserved cranium from a goat or sheep and a dog's jawbone. In the south end of the grave, a dog cut into two halves, part of a sheep, and a sheep foetus were arranged and partly covered with a small angular menhir. At this point, a stallion seems to have been killed, placed along the east side of the grave cut, and partially covering the woman and the dog (Fig. 28.17). Finally, four boulders were placed in the eastern half of the grave cut, two of them resting on top of the horse while a third boulder was placed over the presumably cut-off head and torso of the woman. A fourth boulder was placed on her righthand side. Then the grave was filled. After an uncertain amount of time, a section of the grave cut was re-opened, 1.72 m wide and 0.32 m deep, but a bit displaced towards the east. The boulders on top

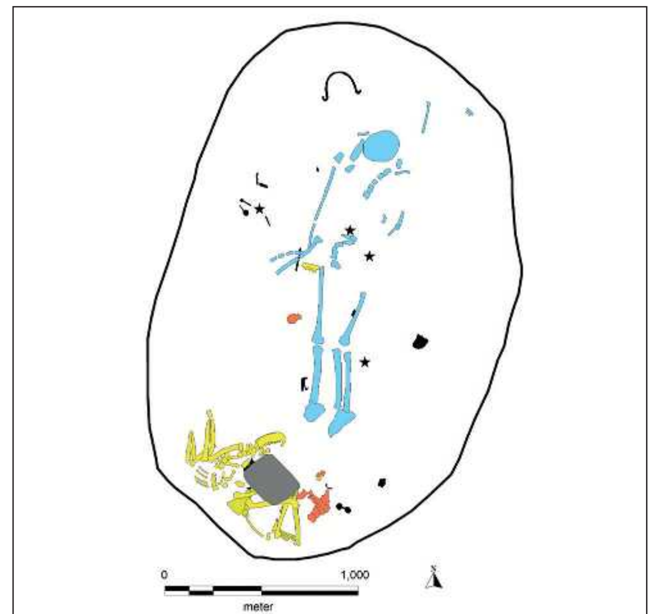

Figure 28.15 Bottom of grave A505. Blue: Individual III. *Yellow: dog. Brown: sheep or goat. Black: artefacts. Grey: boulder (menhir). Illustration after Ulriksen 2018.*

Figure 28.16 Copper alloy piece with an iron point. Photo by Cille Krause, ROMU.

Figure 28.17 The southern part of the grave with the stallion in the eastern part with its neck around the menhir. The front part of the dog is visible to the west of the menhir. Photo by ROMU.

of the woman and the stallion would have been visible but remained untouched. The reason for this re-opening is not clear, but in the central part of the grave, the cross section created during excavation showed a disturbed area that went right to the bottom of the original grave cut. Somewhat later again, another grave cut was dug between the large boulders. From top to bottom, this secondary grave was filled with a mix of top soil and stones of granite, chalk, and flint, the latter dominating in the upper 20 cm of the fill. Between the stones, the skeletal remains of a woman, 35–40 years of age (*Individual I*), were found, incomplete and in no strict anatomical order, though her head was in the north end and her legs towards the south. The skull was partly covered by a heavy boulder and was turned 180 degrees, so that the top of the head pointed to the south. Whether the turning of the skull is due to post-depositional movements because of decomposition, or the head was cut off before the burial is not clear.

Together with this woman were found parts of *Individual II*. Only the right hand, a part of the pelvis, and the left and right femurs were present, but their size and shape suggest that they belong to a man 35–45 years of age. There were no artefacts related to *Individuals I* and *II*, but parts of a medium-sized dog were scattered among the stones above the human remains.[34]

The dating of the burial of *Individual III* relies on an AMS 14C dating of a tooth from the stallion, which suggests a dating between AD 720 and AD 970, but most likely during the ninth century.[35]

Interpretation(s)

The complex character of grave A505 – i.e., the fact that it contains more than one individual, and presumably sacrificed animals, covered by a layer of stones and several boulders – is not exclusive in Viking Age Denmark. Nevertheless, some of the recognisable elements in the A505 do seem to have a twist compared to other graves.

In A505, there were skeletal remains of three humans. This is not unique in any way. At Trekroner-Grydehøj, 25% of the graves with preserved skeletal remains contained more than one individual.[36] Traditionally, a grave such as A505 would have been termed a double grave, often interpreted as that of a master and his/her slave, with the latter executed at the time of the funeral to accompany the former in the grave.[37] However, A505 cannot be termed a double grave, because the persons were not interred in the grave at the same time. Consequently, the 'master and slave' interpretation is challenged, even though it could be argued that the slave(s) were added at a later stage of the burial ritual.

Another suggestion associated with the phenomenon is that some of the graves with more than one individual could represent a *vǫlva* accompanying a deceased person to the Otherworld.[38] The identification of the female as a *vǫlva* rests on the presence in the grave of a staff-like object of iron, analogies to which were previously interpreted as either whip shanks,[39] measuring rods,[40] or roasting spits.[41] In 2009, Leszek Gardeła suggested that other types of staff-like objects such as spearheads may be linked to *vǫlur*.[42]

This brings the peculiar metal point in grave A505 into consideration (see Fig. 28.16). The combination of the two metals is exceptional and the weight of the point suggests that it is not a practical arrowhead; it is likewise too small to be the blade of a spear. Instead, the point may have been perceived as a symbolic spear related to Oðinn who, according to Old Norse literary sources, was a master of *seiðr*, a form of magic also performed by *vǫlur*.

Besides the supposed pointed magic staff, the presence of the stallion attracts attention. The stallion was at least 15–16 years of age when it was killed and had a height at the withers of c. 1.24 m. There were no objects in the grave linked to riding or to a wagon. Only the eyed pins of iron may be connected to the horse as tackle for securing luggage to a saddle. In Denmark, there is a limited number of graves from the Viking Age that include horses.[43] Typically, 'sacrificed' horses appear in male graves together with elements of riding gear and weapons. Sacrificed horses are less frequent in female graves, where the equipment associated with the horse will typically be a draught harness. Including grave A505, there are less than a handful of inhumations in Sjælland that contain sacrificed horses. Chronologically, graves with riding gear and/or a sacrificed horse are uncommon before the tenth century.[44] Remarkably, the AMS 14C-dating of the stallion from A505 indicates that there is a 65% chance that the interment happened between AD 770 and AD 900. Comparable inhumations from other parts of Denmark and Sweden typically have the horse placed at the foot-end of the grave and also contain either riding gear or harness tackle. Furthermore, where osteological surveys have been conducted, the horses were of a height of around c. 127–140 cm at the withers and were in their prime by the time of death, i.e., 4–8 years of age.[45]

Hence, grave A505 differs in several ways from most other inhumations with a person and a horse in Viking Age Denmark. In general, burials with horses are perceived as a sign of the high status of the person interred. A505 was not furnished with precious jewellery, but the complex burial ritual, the absence of riding gear and draught tackle combined with the assumed magic staff most likely signals an extraordinary status. The horse held an important position in Old Norse mythology (→ **Chapter 17**). Skinfaxi and Hrímfaxi hauled the sun and the moon across the sky, and both Sleipnir, Óðinn's eight-legged horse, and the steed carrying Freyr's envoy Skírnir on his mission were able to travel between worlds. The horse also appears to have had an important role in *blót*, a ritual practice that could include the sacrifice of animals, and subsequently the eating of their flesh by the participants, as described in *Hákonar saga góða*.[46] Important in the present context is that the horse also seems to have been a psychopomp animal that could bring the dead spirit to the next world.[47] This may be the reason for the presence of the stallion in grave A505: an escort for the woman more than a means of transportation in a worldly sense. Furthermore, if we pursue the interpretation that this woman is a *vǫlva*, the stallion provides a connection to Óðinn, the divine master of *seiðr*. Yet, a certain part of a stallion seems to have played a significant role in a ritual known from the tale of *Vǫlsa þáttr*.[48] The text describes a ritual of fertility performed at a farm led by the lady of the household and involving the entire household chanting lyrics of unequivocally sexual character while holding the dried, preserved, and linen-wrapped phallus of a slaughtered horse. Some researchers have argued for symbolic associations between *seiðr* and ritualised masturbation.[49] The magic staffs of the *vǫlur* may be perceived as phallic symbols, and the *gǫndull*, possibly the type of staff in grave A505, may have served as an epithet for 'penis'.[50]

Additionally, there are some extraordinary elements in the treatment of the woman's body in A505. The head seems to have been removed from the corpse, probably cut off post-mortem and placed on the *foramen magnum* facing west and clearly in an unnatural position related to the skeletal parts of the neck and body. The reason for this may have been her position as a performer of *seiðr*. This has also been suggested as a reason for placing large boulders and stones on the deceased, keeping a malicious revenant from leaving the grave.[51]

The Notion of Something Special

In the following, specific elements of the graves will be emphasised, in particular those that might indicate that the (main) interred was a *vǫlva* or some other kind of ritual specialist.

Biography and Layout of the Graves

If we look beyond the most general similarities between the two graves – that they are both inhumations with a north–south orientation and with the main interred placed in a supine position – they have quite different layouts and biographies.

Gerdrup B comprises the remains of a single event, i.e., the two individuals were buried in the same grave at the same time and it is thus a 'real' double grave.[52] The man had a knife with him while the woman had a knife and a needlecase. Between them were two skull fragments from a sheep or a goat and a large spear. Two boulders were placed on top of the woman and one by her left side. It is worth noting that the man actually was the biological son of the dead woman, and that he probably had his feet tied together and his neck broken. Also, the spear related to a woman is uncommon. A special feature is the fill of the grave, which turned out to be turfs carefully placed in the same way as if building a mound. Whether this 'inverted' mound once had a real mound on top of it is unknown.

Trekroner-Grydehøj A505 seems to be the result of multiple events with a primary bottom-level grave containing

an interred woman and a diverse inventory. The woman, the stallion, and the halved dog were obviously kept in place by large boulders. After the grave had been sealed, a new grave was dug into the fill. At this stage, another female was interred and covered with a layer of stones, some of which had likely been selected because of their white colour. Among the stones were parts of a human male and a dog but no personal items at all. Whether A505 was originally marked on the surface is unknown.

If we accept that the Gerdrup B female and the lower female in the A505 grave are the main individuals buried in these two graves, then the other individuals – or parts of them – can be regarded as people of secondary importance or 'companions'. In both cases, however, we may speculate that the secondary individuals are to be seen as sacrifices or as another kind of component within the main grave; thus, they are not burials in the conventional sense.

Spear – Point – Staff?

An interesting category of artefact that appears in the two graves is the pointy device: in Gerdrup a spear and in Trekroner-Grydehøj a unique copper alloy/iron point. Both have been regarded as magic or symbolic artefacts, possibly connected to '*vǫlva* staffs'.[53]

The long and slender spearhead from Gerdrup B is a weapon of a clearly defined Viking Age type and fully functional in combat. Judging from our textual sources, the spear appears to be an important weapon used by both warriors and kings.[54] In a South Scandinavian burial context, the present example from Gerdrup B is only paralleled by three specimens of the same type from Hedeby and perhaps one from the island of Amrum.[55] However, it is not the spearhead itself, which has attracted the attention of archaeologists and historians. Rather, it is the unusual contents of the grave and the spearhead's obvious relation to the woman underneath the boulders. Further, it has been suggested that a spearhead pointing in the direction of the foot-end of the grave is an unusual positioning that indicates some 'special significance'.[56] A precise demonstration of the nature of this 'special significance' is obscure, though it has been suggested that spears either stuck into the bottom of the grave cut or thrusted into the grave were the results of acts carried out during the burial ritual, dedicating the dead person to Óðinn.[57]

The copper alloy piece with the iron blade from Trekroner-Grydehøj A505 is unique. It bears some resemblance to an arrowhead, but weighing c. 32 g it is twice as heavy as the average iron arrowhead of the time. Accordingly, it would be of no use as a projectile. The combination of a brass or bronze body amalgamated with an iron blade is unusual both for a tool and a weapon in the Scandinavian Viking Age context. Instead, this pointed object may have been part of a *seiðr*-staff.[58] In *seiðr* practices, the *vǫlva* took centre stage. The term *vǫlva* has been interpreted as meaning 'staff-bearer'; a staff (ON *vǫlr*) seems to have been the 'insignia' of the *vǫlva*. Even if, according to Snorri, he was taught by the goddess Freyja, the master of *seiðr* in Old Norse mythology was Óðinn. Opposing the suggested etymological connection between *vǫlva* and *vǫlr*, Clive Tolley has argued that no or only a few written sources combine the *vǫlva* and a staff, and that the term *vǫlva* means a seeress. Nevertheless, Tolley agrees that a staff may have had an importance in the ritual sphere.[59] In a new textual study of the relation between the *vǫlva* and the *vǫlr* in Medieval written sources, Tobias Mortensen concludes that the phenomenon of the *vǫlva* is first and foremost a literary motif representing a pagan opposition to a Christian protagonist within the story. Further, Mortensen argues that staffs previously suggested to belong to the ritual sphere of the *vǫlva* may very well be roasting spits or measuring instruments.[60] What speaks against Mortensen's argument is that even the visually most identical of the staffs have different lengths and thus cannot be measuring instruments; furthermore, it does not seem probable that they were used as roasting spits because most of them are too sizeable for this purpose.[61] An interesting observation that generally opposes a strictly profane interpretation of the staffs is their close visual resemblance to later wooden distaffs, as pointed out by Eldar Heide, who convincingly concludes that the iron staffs were symbolic distaffs and were used in acts of *seiðr*.[62]

In Old Norse texts, there are references to several different words for staffs, but accurate descriptions of their design and the context in which they played their part are absent.[63] Regarding the pointed 'staff' from A505, it may be what the Old Norse term *gandr* or *gǫndull* refers to. No actual description of the object exists, but the *gandr*/*gǫndull* may have consisted of a wooden shaft with a sharp point.[64] It is a matter of dispute in what way and with what purpose such an object was handled. It may be understood as a stick of magic associated with divination and sexual magic.[65] It has also been proposed that the *gandr/gǫndull* was used by the *vǫlva*, while in some kind of 'ecstasy', as a means of spirit travel.[66] Yet another implication has been suggested for spear-like *seiðr*-staffs, namely that they are symbols of Óðinn.[67] One of Óðinn's attributes was a spear, and the staff with the composite point from grave A505 may be understood as a symbolic spear.

Stones

The large boulders covering the main interred in both graves are another feature calling attention to itself. Whatever the reason for their presence, stones in graves are certainly not a unique phenomenon in Viking Age Denmark, unlike, for example, in Anglo-Saxon pre-Christian burials.[68] Several Viking Age graves are furnished with stones of various sizes. These can be present as a 'blanket' covering the grave, they can be part of the grave-fill, or placed directly on top of the deceased.[69] Anja Borch-Nielsen has examined

the phenomenon in 984 Danish Viking Age burials and concludes that there are stones in 24.5% of these.[70] It is most common in the region that holds Gerdrup and Trekroner-Grydehøj: In Sjælland, up to 37% of the examined graves are furnished with stones.[71] Borch-Nielsen states that the most common feature is stones in the top of the grave fill, whilst larger stones placed directly onto the deceased are rarer.[72] Targeted investigation has not yet identified systematic correlations between the presence of stones and the other characteristics of the burials concerned, such as the number of interred individuals, grave goods, sex, age, and the orientation of the grave cut.[73] Given their variation in size, number, and placement, the stones were probably not put in the graves for one purpose only, but they must have been put there intentionally and placed for a specific reason in each specific case. Borch-Nielsen speculates whether the stones might have marked social status,[74] whilst Gardeła suggests that they may be a sign that the interred was an 'agent of magic' in the cases where large stones have been placed directly onto the body.[75]

In Trekroner-Grydehøj A505, one of the stones differs from the rest: the compact, angular menhir in the foot-end of the bottom grave. The way the stone has been placed, partly on top of the dog cut in halves and with the stallion's neck and head curled halfway around it, there can be no doubt that the choice of stone and its relation to the animals are intentional. By all means, this is an extraordinary element in the burial ritual. Normally, a menhir is a single standing stone on the ground surface, and such stones are thought to commemorate a dead person. A phrase in the so-called 'Law of Óðinn' (i.e. *Ynglinga saga* 8) says that a menhir should be raised to honour a dead man who had acted bravely.[76] Perhaps the 'Law of Óðinn' has once had more 'paragraphs' or the woman in A505 was considered special in such a way that a menhir was of the essence but had to be concealed from the living?

Deposits – Secondary Burials – Sacrifices?

Both graves contained the preserved remains of animals and animal deposits, or 'animal sacrifice', which is not uncommon in Viking Age burials. Parts of cattle, sheep, pig, or fowl have traditionally been perceived as food provisions for the afterlife or the journey to the Otherworld. Horse and dog have typically been associated with the upper strata of the society related to war, hunting, and other high-status activities.

In Gerdrup B were cranial fragments from two sheep or goats, while Trekroner-Grydehøj contained rather more animal parts: a horse, parts of more dogs, scattered teeth of sheep or goat, other skeletal parts of a sheep/goat, and teeth from a sheep/goat foetus. Concerning Gerdrup B, the remnants of animals may be regarded as food stuff.

As for grave A505, the horse and the dogs are prominent 'sacrifices'. Even though both species are known from Viking Age graves, they are not common. Of c. 90 Viking Age burial sites in Sjælland, only a handful hold graves containing a person and a horse, and of these only two also include the remains of dogs. In A505 there were parts of a dog among the stones in the upper-level grave and the jawbone from another dog beside the woman at the bottom-level grave. Most intriguing is the dog at the foot-end of the grave cut because it resembles an element in the Arabic diplomat Ibn Faḍlān's description of the burial of a Rus chieftain by the Volga River in the 920s.[77] Ibn Faḍlān noted that among the sacrifices was a dog that was cut in halves and deposited among the other equipment of the deceased on board the funerary ship. Unfortunately, nothing is said about the meaning behind the act.

A505 also held a cranium of a goat or sheep, as well as a part of a sheep that was very likely intended to serve as meat for consumption. In contrast, the foetus can hardly be regarded as a ready food supply for the dead. In a tenth-century inhumation from Næstved, Sjælland, covered by a layer of stones, a person in supine position was found together with a comb, a knife, and the skeletal remains of a large dog, two young sheep, two newborn lambs, and a very young calf.[78] At least the latter three animals were much younger than the normal age for butchering, but whether they were intended to be a sort of livestock 'growing' in the grave and eventually attaining the right size and age to benefit the deceased is impossible to determine. Yet another interpretation is that the foetus and the very young animals may represent a religious concept of the cycle of life.

Analogies with Written Sources

In the written sources it is possible to point out passages that – to a greater or lesser extent – correlate with the picture we get from the archaeological remains. Although direct analogies between the material sources of the Viking Age and the later medieval literature have to be considered critically, it is not a serious option to exclude the use of the written sources if we really want an overall picture of the rituals and customs that surrounded Viking Age burials.

As mentioned above, Gerdrup B containing a mother covered with stones and her hanged son can be interpreted as reflecting a situation like the story about Katla and Oddr in *Eyrbyggja Saga* (ch. 20). But still, this is only part of the picture, as other elements of the Gerdrup B grave contradict the idea of two pariahs who were killed and buried in a desolate place. Stoning as a form of execution method used against (disliked or even feared) sorcerers and sorceresses is also mentioned in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, where the siblings Auðbjǫrg and Þórgrímr suffer such a fate (ch. 19). Gísli himself is likewise killed and afterwards buried under rocks in a liminal location (ch. 36). However, we do not get an explanation for the significance of the stones, neither in relation to burial rituals in general nor in relation to sorcerers specifically.

Normality, Variation, and Deviancy in Viking Age Graves

When dealing with Viking Age burials, it is indeed difficult to delineate what constitutes a 'normal' burial. Although general categories can be determined, the variation seems almost infinite.[79] This extensive variation in the archaeological source material entails difficulties in terms of distinguishing between 'normal' and 'deviant'.[80]

As more and more burials have been excavated by archaeologists, the special features of yesterday may be more or less normal today. This is true in the case of graves containing more than one individual and graves with boulders and stone carpets. Scrutinising more than the skeletal remains at the bottom of a grave and the objects closely connected to it add to the impression of ritual complexity. In the fill of a grave, there may be minor portions of burned bones and parts of skeletons from humans and animals. There may also be artefacts such as jewellery, tools, and pottery of which some are intact and some damaged. A study of the inhumations of Trekroner-Grydehøj together with another small burial ground, Kirke Hyllinge Kirkebakke, revealed that 69% contained artefacts at the bottom of the grave, while 56% had artefacts in the fill, most of which were damaged (90%).[81]

Who is the Main Character?

Double graves are often interpreted as belonging to a master and his/her slave, the latter being executed at the time of the funeral to accompany the former.[82] However, it has also been suggested that some graves with more individuals could represent a *vǫlva*, i.e., a seeress and sorceress, accompanying a deceased person to the Otherworld, thus raising the question of who the main character is. The intriguing early tenth-century burial Ka. 294–296 at Kaupang, Norway, offers more possibilities. In a c. 9 m-long boat a woman was interred in the stem lying head-to-head with a man placed in the middle part of the vessel. At his feet was a horse with a harness and in the aft of the boat was another woman buried in a sitting position with the head of a dog on her lap. The body of the dog was resting by her left-hand side together with an item that may be a sorceress' staff, while the rudder was to her right. Furthermore, the boat was placed over a male burial dating from the ninth century.[83] Frans-Arne Stylegar has suggested that the boat grave contained a high-status married couple accompanied by 'their' sorceress 'judging from her position at the rudder, steering the little family towards the realm of the Dead'.[84] A comparable situation – but without a boat – may be found in two graves from Birka, Bj. 644 and Bj. 834, in Sweden. In both of these chamber graves, a woman has been placed on the lap of a male who is sitting in a chair or on a stool. Bj. 834 holds a sword, a spear, a shield, female toilet implements, two draught horses with harnesses, and a staff (possibly a staff of sorcery). No wagon was present, but Neil Price speculates whether the draught tackle implies that the woman – the sorceress – was the most important among the two interred (→ **Chapter 26**).[85]

But how do we determine whether there was a main character in a burial with more than one person or whether they were equally important? After the excavation of Gerdrup B, it was suggested that the male was an unwilling victim, killed in order to accompany the female. He had only a knife, while she had a spear, a needlecase, and was kept in place by large boulders. Thus, he seems to be the inferior of the two. The results of the DNA-analysis revealing that they were mother and son does add a new perspective to the burial, but the apparently tied feet and the possibly broken neck still have to be explained. Even though we cannot know for sure, it seems that the woman was the main character in Gerdrup B.

Regarding A505 at Trekroner-Grydehøj, consensus has been that the woman at the bottom of the grave cut was more important than the upper-level woman and the remains of the male. This may be true, but for the sake of argument we need to consider that other situations may have been the reality. According to the section of the grave, the bottom-level woman, the horse, the dog, and the menhir were interred in a secondary grave cut. In other words, something had happened before she was placed in the grave. Unfortunately, what this 'something' was could not be determined during excavation. In theory, one of the upper-level individuals could have been the original interred person who was later removed and replaced by the bottom-level woman. Later, the bones of the original individual were then inhumed in the upper-level grave. This is of course pure speculation, but Viking Age burial rituals sometimes included exhumation or intrusion into graves in order to remove skeletal parts and objects (→ **Chapter 14**). At least some such remains may have been buried in other graves as part of rituals.[86]

Another guess is that the person buried in the first place, at the bottom of the grave cut, may have been some sort of 'forerunner' of a more important individual interred in the same grave in an upper-level and at a later point in time.

Gerdrup – Possibly a Sorceress

The Gerdrup grave is as a structure rather simple, being single-phased. The grave, however, features a number of elements that have often been emphasised as extraordinary: the stones, the hanged man, and the combination of female and weapon. While the stones, in fact, comprise a relatively ordinary element, the two other elements are rarer, though far from unique. To a large extent, the idea that this woman is a *vǫlva* rests on the spear being interpreted as a staff/item of magic. This is of course a possibility, but it remains within the field of speculation. The spear could also be understood as just a weapon without any symbolic meaning, or it may have a symbolic value beyond the realm of magic.

The most extraordinary feature of the grave is arguably the parent–offspring relation, which seems to be hitherto unique in a Viking Age context. Admittedly, this may change in the future, as DNA kinship studies of the archaeological record progress, as it does for other pre-historic periods.[87] The scenario with mother and son, though, may find a partial parallel in the account of Katla and Oddr.

In academic literature, the Gerdrup B grave is sometimes described as a solitary, desolate burial. This is nevertheless a confusion, caused by the fact that the full archaeological record of the Gerdrup cemetery was not published until recently. The double burial is part of a multi-period cemetery, as it is located near several older burial monuments, as well as a number of contemporary burials. Furthermore, it seems to be prominently situated at a topographical transit point, and it was constructed with care and effort.

Overall, this grave gives the impression of being built for an important woman. Maybe she was a *vǫlva*? Of course, we cannot reject this possibility, but the concrete evidence to support it is somewhat meagre.

Trekroner-Grydehøj – Probably a Sorceress

The facts of this site paint an extraordinarily complex picture of Viking Age burial rituals, including more re-entries into the grave, two presumably decapitated women and half the skeleton of a man, several 'sacrificed' animals, all covered with large boulders, and a layer of stones consisting of granite, chalk, and flint with white cortex. Admittedly, complex burials with more individuals, animals, boulders, and/or stone layers are known in the archaeological record without being connected to *vǫlur*. However, in this particular case, some of the features display a twist pointing in the direction of the extraordinary. The old stallion being way beyond his prime combined with the absence of riding gear or draught harness is peculiar as opposed to 'normal' burials with a man/woman and a well-equipped horse. Add to this the exceptional bronze piece amalgamated with an iron blade and indisputably having been mounted on the end of a shaft or stick. Interpreting this object as part of a *vǫlva*'s staff is, indeed, speculative. Nevertheless, it has proven difficult to establish any comparative profane tool or weapon of the same size and manufacture. Therefore, the combination of the pointed object and the other contents of the grave (together with the treatment of the interred compared with the presumed '*vǫlva* graves' from Scandinavia) suggest that A505 from Trekroner-Grydehøj may very well be one such grave.

Conclusion and Perspectives

The variety of Viking Age burial rituals is strange, even bizarre, to the twenty-first-century mind, and they form a playground for the imagination and allow a great deal of speculation. The bits and pieces, which have remained underground to be excavated more than 1000 years later, are severely decomposed, and the original inventory of a grave is never fully preserved. Further, the furnishings of a grave and the objects inside it were originally selected by the family of the deceased or by 'the community' for purposes that we can only imagine. We attempt to support our interpretations by critically consulting the written sources of the period and the centuries following the Viking Age. Amongst other things, this is how the *vǫlva* interpretation of certain graves has arisen.

Concerning the two graves discussed in this chapter – Gerdrup B and A505 of Trekroner-Grydehøj – they both represent rather complex burial rituals and involve the question about *vǫlur* as real-life persons and their possible traces in the archaeological material. The latter aspect has proved to be a difficult matter to ascertain. Emphasis has been placed on potential magic staffs as objects that may help identify a *vǫlva*. Even so, it is clear that the spear from Gerdrup B and the peculiar composite point from A505 demand a wider definition of a sorceress' staff than originally suggested by Neil Price in 2002. Although such wider definitions were provided by Leszek Gardeła in 2016, the interpretations of the staffs are still debated by other scholars, and so is the use of the term *vǫlva* as a reference to real-life women practising sorcery in the Viking Age.

Regarding Gerdrup B and A505, the bottom-line is that they are extraordinary burials even in a Viking world where burial customs were diverse to say the least. As for Gerdrup B, excavated some 40 years ago and already at that point related to the phenomenon of the *valkyrjur*, we are also facing the interesting element of how applying new methods such as DNA-analysis can radically change our perceptions and interpretations. The killing of a male *þræll* ('slave') was easy to comprehend, while the killing of a son to accompany his deceased mother is a different matter, at least to interpreters of the twenty-first century.

The lesson must be that, although the topic is 'death and burial' more than a millennium ago, the source material derived from these graves is of a kind that we must regard as very much alive and dynamic. Our perceptions and interpretations are not static, but change as long as the archaeological source material increases, new methods are developed, and research trends shift. The whole *vǫlva* question has a meta character that denies us the possibility of obtaining exact knowledge, but instead envelops the answers in hypotheses and speculation. Indeed, some would say that this very circumstance should make us abandon the subject altogether. We, however, advocate the opposite and applaud the attempts to link archaeological finds to the ritual and religious spheres of the Viking Age. It is precisely in virtue of the hypothetical and speculative that new questions and viewpoints arise.

Notes

1. Sørensen 2010; 2013.
2. Price 2002: 126–61 (see also the revised second edition from 2019).
3. For example, Gardeła 2008; 2009a; 2009b; 2011; Pentz *et al.* 2009; Ulriksen 2011; 2018; Kastholm & Margaryan 2021.
4. For detailed presentations of the graves, see Ulriksen 2018 and Kastholm & Margaryan 2021.
5. Christensen 2015.
6. Ulriksen 1998; Kastholm forthcoming.
7. Ulriksen 1998.
8. Baastrup 2013.
9. Price 2019: 72.
10. For example, Price 2019: 72–5; Mortensen 2022.
11. The Gerdrup grave B was first published in Christensen 1982. The Gerdrup burial field as a whole was first published in Kastholm 2016 and Kastholm & Margaryan 2021.
12. Christensen 1983; Kastholm 2016.
13. Langkjær 2009.
14. Ulriksen 2011: 182, fig. 20.
15. The analysis of the human skeletal remains was conducted by Dr Jørgen Balslev Jørgensen and MSc Pia Bennike, University of Copenhagen. In 2015, the remains were re-examined by Dr Niels Lynnerup, University of Copenhagen.
16. Bennike 1985: 116–17.
17. Andrew Reynolds has pointed out that drop hanging, where the neck vertebrae are pulled apart, is a phenomenon that was invented in 1760. Before that time, the cause of death when executed by hanging (without the drop) was a combination of suffocation due to impact on the vagus nerve in the neck and compression of blood to the brain due to the pressure from the rope on the sides of the neck (Reynolds 2009: 39).
18. Solberg 1984: 66.
19. Pedersen 2014: 93, 95.
20. Margaryan *et al*. 2020.
21. Kastholm & Margaryan 2021.
22. Christensen 1982: 26–8.
23. For example, Gardeła 2009b: 288–90.
24. Gardeła 2016. Cf. also Price 2002: 181–203; 2019: 337.
25. Gardeła 2009b: 289–90; 2011: 343–4.
26. *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 20 (Einar Ól. Sveinsson & Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 50-54); Gardeła 2009b: 289.
27. Kastholm & Margaryan 2021.
28. Kastholm 2016.
29. Kastholm & Margaryan 2021: 15–16 with further references.
30. The burial ground has previously been published partly and *in extenso* in Ulriksen 2011; 2018.
31. Ulriksen 2011: 171–81; 2018.
32. Christiansen 2018.
33. The analysis of the human skeletal remains was conducted by Dr Pia Bennike, Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences, University of Copenhagen.
34. The analysis of the fauna remains was conducted by conservator Kristian M. Gregersen, Natural History Museum of Denmark, University of Copenhagen.
35. AAR-10742: ^{14}C age 1178+/-36 BP. AD 720-970 (2σ), AD 770-900 (1σ).
36. Ulriksen 2011: 185–8.
37. For example, Ramskou 1965; Skaarup 1976: 178; Christensen 1982: 26–8; Andersen 1995: 98; Svanberg 2003: 93–4; Price 2008: 266–7.
38. Price 2002.
39. Brøndsted 1936: 290.
40. Arbman 1943: 320.
41. Bøgh-Andersen 1999.
42. Gardeła 2009a.
43. Pedersen 2014: 127–8.
44. Pedersen 2014.
45. Brøndsted 1936: 154; Eisenschmidt 1994: 224; Price 2002: 132.
46. *Hákonar saga góða*, ch. 18–19 (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941: 172–5); Sørensen 1991.
47. Tolley 2009: 544.
48. *Vǫlsa þáttr* is extant in *Flateyjarbók* (Guðbrandur Vigfússon & Unger 1860–1868). For the stanzas in *Vǫlsa þáttr* referred to here, see Heizmann 2012. The origin and age of the composition of the verses included in this story are disputed, but even though the oldest known written account is from late fourteenth-century Norway, it is reasonable to surmise that the poem contains elements authentic to the Viking Age when it comes to ritual performance. Cf. Price 2002: 217-223 with further references.
49. Kiil 1962; Jochens 1996: 74.
50. Price 2002: 217.
51. Christensen 1982; Reynolds 2009: 93; Gardeła 2011.
52. cf. Ulriksen 2011: 186.
53. Ulriksen 2011; 2018; Gardeła 2016.
54. For example, *Beowulf*, verse 1957–1958 (Fulk 2010: 214); *Egils saga*, ch. 43 (Bjarni Einarsson 2003: 57–8).
55. Pedersen 2014: 93 and Catalogue, Map 7.
56. Gardeła 2021: 96–100, and references therein.
57. Nordberg 2002. Regarding a possible thrusting of a spear into a grave possibly containing a *vǫlva* at Birka, Bj. 834, see Price 2002: 139.
58. Price 2002: 175–7; Gardeła 2009a.
59. Tolley 2009: 536–9.
60. Mortensen 2022.
61. Personal communication with L. Gardeła (29.09.2022) who has studied most of the staffs at first hand (see Gardeła 2016).
62. Heide 2006a: 235–56; Heide 2006b; cf. also Gardeła 2016: 176–85; Price 2019: 336–40.
63. Price 2002: 180; Gardeła 2009a.
64. Price 2002: 179, 181.
65. Price 2002: 177–78.
66. Price 2002: 178; Steinsland 2005: 322.
67. Motz 1996: 84; Gardeła 2009a: 200, 209–10.
68. Reynolds 2009: 81–5.
69. Ulriksen 2011: 194–7, and references therein.
70. Borch-Nielsen 2016: 14.
71. Borch-Nielsen 2016: fig. 2.
72. Borch-Nielsen 2016: 14, fig. 3.
73. Ulriksen 2011: 195; Borch-Nielsen 2016: 16.
74. Borch-Nielsen 2016: 16–17.
75. Gardeła 2011.
76. *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 8 (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941: 20–2).

77. Simonsen 1981.
78. Brøndsted 1936: 187.
79. cf. Svanberg 2003; Price 2010; Ulriksen 2011.
80. cf. Gardeła 2013; Kastholm 2016.
81. Ulriksen 2011: 168, 175, 197–200.
82. Ramskou 1965; Skaarup 1976: 183; Andersen 1995: 95–6; Moen & Walsh 2021.
83. Stylegar 2007: 95–101.
84. Stylegar 2007: 99.
85. Price 2002: 139.
86. Ulriksen 2011.
87. For example, Fowler *et al.* 2022.

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Part 5

The Sorcerer's Toolkit and Other Ritual Paraphernalia

29

Religious Paraphernalia, Amulets, and Other Elements of the Sorcerer's Toolkit: An Introduction to Part 5

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One of the many reasons why researchers and non-professional history afficionados are so attracted to Viking Age Scandinavia is the remarkable richness, quality, diversity, and symbolic content of the material culture of its people. Objects manufactured by Norse artisans were often adorned with intricate designs combining anthropomorphic figures, animals, and – in some instances – geometric and floral motifs. By studying their characteristic features, as well as the contexts of the artefacts' discovery and distribution, over the years archaeologists have been able to determine the transformations of Scandinavian Viking Age art and the intellectual currents that influenced it.[1] Largely as a result of amateur metal detecting endeavours that have been dynamically developing over the last two decades or so, the overall picture of the material culture of Viking Age Northern Europe has now improved significantly and become more complete compared to the state of research in the twentieth century.[2]

Among the many types of Scandinavian-style Viking Age objects encountered by scholars are items that appear to have had 'special' or non-mundane applications. Those finds that are particularly familiar even to non-specialists take the form of T-shaped pendants usually cast in silver or copper alloy (Fig. 29.1). As early as the nineteenth century, Swedish archaeologist Hans Hildebrand labelled them 'Thor's hammers' and this name has stuck to them ever since.[3] Today, at a time when the corpus of so-called Thor's hammers embraces more than one thousand specimens from all over Scandinavia, the British Isles, and the Continent, there is little doubt that these items carried religious connotations and most likely served as miniature representations of Mjǫllnir, the famed weapon of the Norse god Þórr.[4] In 2014, another convincing piece of evidence in support of this interpretation was added. As a result of metal detecting at Købelev on Lolland, Denmark, a small hammer with a very evocative runic inscription **hmar x is** which can be translated to 'hammer is' or more properly 'this is a hammer' came to light, confirming Hildebrand's assumptions (Fig. 29.1a).[5]

While the identification of miniature T-shaped pendants as Thor's hammers has proven to be fairly straightforward, scholars have encountered many obstacles on their path to understanding what many other 'special' items were used for, to whom they belonged, and *what* or *who* they represented. These interpretational challenges pertain not only to the hundreds of metal miniatures that come to light as a result of amateur metal detecting and in the course of professional excavations; similar problems arise also in connection with other categories of finds that are much larger in size and have more complex designs. The chapters within this part of the book seek to summarise our current knowledge about some aspects of this tantalising (and constantly growing) body of material and aspire to cast new light on its meaning-content, using an interdisciplinary array of methods and theoretical approaches. Special attention is focused on staffs, miniature chairs, wheels, weapons, weathervanes, and beads. Additionally, this part of the book covers the phenomenon of masking.

Staffs

The preceding chapters of this volume have demonstrated that archaeological examples of staffs take a wide range of forms and are made of a variety of materials such as iron, copper alloy, and wood. Their physical properties as well as the manner of their deposition in Viking Age funerary contexts permit the assumption that they were some of the most valued and probably most important elements of the

Figure 29.1 Selection of Thor's hammers from Denmark: a) Købelev. Photo by National Museum of Denmark; b) Holstebro Kommune (DIME 73273); c) Frederikssund Kommune (DIME 90099); d) Randers Kommune (DIME 45239); e) Unspecified location (Fibula.dk); f) Unspecified location (Fibula.dk); g) Ærø Kommune (DIME 102066); h) Brønderslev Kommune (DIME 137025); i) Brønderslev Kommune (DIME 109732). Image design by Leszek Gardeła.

toolkits of ritual specialists versed in magic. As we shall see further below (→ **Chapter 30**), the significance of staffs is also strongly emphasised in medieval textual sources, predominantly in the rich body of Old Norse literature, including sagas, eddic poetry, and other texts.[6]

In dealing with staffs from the Viking Age, one should also bear in mind that their Scandinavian examples – although in many regards unique – were not without precedents and had both formal and conceptual parallels in other pre- and post-medieval cultural milieus. Extant written and archaeological sources suggest that staffs were *widely* known in prehistory and antiquity, especially in the Greek and Roman worlds.[7] Regardless of the various socio-political and religious transformations, traditions pertaining to staffs continued to live on for many centuries. In the early medieval period, staffs were part not only of the Norse sorcerers' toolkit but were also witnessed – in different forms – among Anglo-Saxons,[8] Balts,[9] Slavs,[10] and other groups of people in Eurasia and beyond (Fig. 29.2). All these cross-cultural examples of staffs are still relatively understudied, partly due to their comparatively scarce material remains and the vagueness of textual sources that describe them. Since archaeology is an ever-changing discipline, however, the current state of research is probably prone to improve in the near future. Researchers would do well to look outside the box and beyond the borders of their academic disciplines and conventional areas of interest.

It is noteworthy that even though the introduction of Christianity led to the transformation or eradication of old traditions, pre-Christian ideas of magic staffs survived until modern times, in particular among individuals and groups that lived in relative isolation from the great centres of political and religious power. Therefore, in studying the *longue durée* of the idea of the magic staff, there is considerable potential in looking at how staffs were – and in some areas continue to be – understood among peoples who engaged in practices that fall under the umbrella term of 'shamanism'.[11] Nineteenth and twentieth century scholars were particularly eager to support their interpretations of archaeological materials using ethnographic parallels but

Figure 29.2 Selection of kriwula *staffs from the collections of Altertumsgesellschaft Insterburg (1905) in former Ostpreussen (a) and a representation of a Prussian pagan ritual specialist on the bronze door from the Gniezno Cathedral, Poland (b). Photos courtesy of Seweryn Szczepański. Image design by Leszek Gardeła.*

this trend has, regrettably, waned in the twenty-first century. When approached with adequate caution, cross-cultural endeavours can bring very fruitful results, as has been demonstrated for example by scholars in the Retrospective Methods Network interested in the rehabilitation of folklore and other ethnographic source material in research on earlier time periods.[12] Inspired by some of these revisionist approaches, further below the idea of the magic staff will be explored using a combination of archaeological and textual materials as well as drawing on cross-cultural parallels and other sources (→ **Chapter 30**).

Amulets and Miniatures

There is a tendency among researchers to label many of the small-scale Viking Age items found across Scandinavia and the Continent as 'amulets'. Over the course of time, the concept of 'amulet' has been variously defined. Today, however, the term 'amulet' is usually employed to refer to objects carried on a person or displayed on or within buildings. Amulets are believed to be charged with magical power and their main function is to ward off unwanted forces and misfortune as well as to provide wealth or enhance a person's potentialities.[13] As such, the concept of amulet is, arguably, not well suited as a catch-all concept for all sorts of miniscule objects based on their size alone.

In 1997, Marian Koktvedgaard Zeiten published a seminal contribution to the study of Viking Age 'amulets' entitled *Amulets and Amulet Use in Viking Age Denmark*. Here, Zeiten discussed different definitions of the concept of amulet, noting that the Latin word *amuletum* seems to derive from the Arabic *himala/hamala*, 'which means burden or object carried, referring both to the amulet itself and the string in which it hangs'. Further Zeiten argued that:

> A broad definition of the concept 'amulet', based on the etymology, is thus an object which can be carried on one's own person, often in the form of a pendant, to obtain some form of magical advantage. A more specific definition is any object which by close contact to its owner, or to any of his possessions, works for his good either by warding off evil from his person and property, or by bringing him advantages. According to this definition it is primarily the act of owning and carrying

> the object, because of its presumed apotropaic, medicinal or magical abilities, which makes it an amulet.[14]

In summing up her own views and those of other researchers', Zeiten ultimately proposed a working definition of 'amulets' as 'objects that are created specifically for a magical purpose, and that can be worn on a person.'[15]

One key problem in applying the term 'amulet' to Viking Age miniature finds based only on their size is that we can rarely (if ever) be certain if they were actually perceived by the people who once manufactured and/or carried them to serve a magical function, i.e. if they were 'created specifically for a magical purpose'.

Looking to Old Norse literature, one possible reference to 'amulets' is found in chapter 4 of *Eiríks saga rauða* where the costume and paraphernalia of Þorbjörg *lítil-vǫlva* are described.[16] It is said that among the things she carried at her belt was a bag containing *taufr*. The term *taufr* is often translated into English as 'charm', while in Danish and Norwegian it is interpreted as 'trolddomsmiddel' and 'trolldomsmiddel', i.e. an instrument for conducting magic.[17] What such instruments were, we do not know, but they must have been relatively small in size for them to fit into a bag carried at the *vǫlva*'s belt. Two other texts, namely *Hallfreðar saga* and *Vatnsdœla saga*, also mention small items associated with magic.[18] In both instances, they are anthropomorphic miniatures representing pre-Christian deities.

Due to the late dating of the accounts, we cannot know for certain whether the term *taufr* was ever used by Viking Age people to refer to 'real-life' objects similar to those mentioned in the texts – provided such ever existed. As such, the Old Norse textual corpus is not helpful in providing a suitable terminology for such items which we may today cautiously classify as 'amulets'.

In an important – although by now in some regards dated – study released in 2010 which sought to embrace all Viking Age Scandinavian-style 'amulets' from Scandinavia and Western Europe, Bo Jensen rightly noted concerning the terminology that:

> amulet might not be the best term for Viking Age miniature symbols but it is the term established in tradition and no better term springs to mind. There is a coherent body of material and we have to refer to these pieces by some name or other. I see that the term 'amulet' seems to foreclose problematic connections to pagan mythology, but I see no obvious alternative that solves that particular problem.[19]

Ever since the release of Zeiten's and Jensen's works, the term 'amulet' has been widely used in Viking studies to refer to different types of miniscule objects, especially pendants and figurines. Whether or not these items were ever understood to serve an apotropaic or magical purpose is not always easy to gauge, however.[20] In order to tackle the various interpretational challenges pertaining to this vast and diverse body of material, some researchers prefer to use the neutral label 'miniatures'.[21] In contrast to the problematic term 'amulet', the term 'miniature' does not immediately imply that the items in question had associations with magic but leaves such a possibility open. Moreover, since we know nothing about how Viking Age Scandinavians referred to small-size objects that were worn around the neck, at the belt, sewn onto clothing, or kept in pouches or bags, using the term 'miniature' is probably the most reasonable alternative to the term 'amulet'.

At the time of writing his *Viking Age Amulets in Scandinavia and Western Europe*, Jensen was familiar with approximately 1350 Scandinavian-style miniatures.[22] Over the last decade, however, the rapid development of amateur metal detecting as well as new excavation campaigns all across Europe have led to a considerable expansion of the corpus, not only in quantitative terms (now approx. 2000 specimens are known) but also in terms of the known artefacts' typological variety. Drawing on the work of Zeiten, Jensen, and other scholars, it is now possible to isolate the following general types of Scandinavian-style miniatures (Fig. 29.3):[23]

- Anchors[24]
- Animals[25]
- Anthropomorphic figures and anthropomorphic body-parts (arms, legs, heads)[26]
- Bowls and sieves[27]
- Chairs[28]
- Crosses[29]
- Masks or faces[30]
- Pendants with nine studs[31]
- Staffs[32]
- Thor's hammers[33]
- Tools[34]
- Weapons[35]
- Weathervanes[36]
- Wheels[37]

Judging by the archaeological contexts in which some of these items tend to appear, it is likely that they had strong associations with the sphere of religious belief, and in many instances it seems reasonable to suggest that they may have carried 'amuletic' functions. Sometimes, miniscule items of natural origin – such as animal bones, claws, and teeth as well as different kinds of fossils and stones – may also have had such connotations, and this interpretation is particularly valid if they are found in graves alongside other 'special' items. It is noteworthy, moreover, that occasionally in Viking Age Scandinavia, Stone Age axes may also have been used in ritual practices and/or viewed as items possessing 'amuletic' properties. The same can be said about re-used miniatures stemming from non-Norse cultural milieus, for instance the Western Slavic world, which have been encountered in Scandinavian graves in combination with Scandinavian-style miniatures; the best examples illustrating

Figure 29.3 Selection of Scandinavian-style religious paraphernalia from Denmark: a) casting mould, Trendgaarden; b) miniature pendant or applique showing a rider and a standing figure, Ribe; c) armed female figure, Vrejlev; d) female figure, Boeslunde; e) face/mask pendant; f) miniature pendant with nine studs, Havsmarken; g) miniature figure, Tissø; h) fossilised sea urchin turned into a pendant, Bregninge. Photos by Leszek Gardeła and National Museum of Denmark. Image design by Leszek Gardeła.

this phenomenon are the aforementioned bird-feet pendants from grave 4 at Fyrkat and the lunula pendant from grave Bj. 660 at Birka (→ **Part 4** and further below).

Based on contextual evidence, it is highly probable that miniature snakes and chairs were particularly important elements in the ritual specialists' toolkit and that they were used by people who practised *seiðr*. In the Scandinavian burial record such miniatures often appear alongside iron staffs (e.g. at Gutdalen and Trå in Norway) and/or together with other evocative miniature-types, such as masks/faces, a shield, a 'staff', and a sickle. Recent studies of the material and symbolic aspects of miniature snakes and chairs suggest that they were enmeshed in a dense web of correspondences with other items and concepts, a phenomenon Howard Williams calls 'material citation' and defines as:

> practices of selection and deployment of artefacts, substances, images, architectures, monuments, and spaces that, separately and in combination, created mnemonic material references to other things, places, peoples and times.[38]

Visual and conceptual references to the coiled snake motif can be easily recognised in the design of the Oseberg ship prow, in spiral ornaments on Scandinavian-style metalwork, as well as in the custom of bending swords in the course of funerary acts (Fig. 29.4). In Old Norse literature as well as European folklore,[39] the snake was a creature capable of transgressing the borders between worlds, and was often associated with ideas of potency, power, and transformation. One noteworthy example is when Óðinn, master of *seiðr* magic, shape-shifted into a snake to obtain the mead of poetry.[40] Miniature chairs (→ **Chapter 32**), too, seem to have been enmeshed in a dense web of 'citational relationships', and the same can probably be said about a number of other Scandinavian-style miniatures.

Exotic Objects

In speaking about religious paraphernalia such as amulets, miniatures, and other special items as well as the contexts in which they are found in the Norse cultural milieu, it is vital to draw attention to the fact that the graves of presumed ritual specialists often contain goods stemming from culturally and geographically distant areas, and which are thus exotic in nature. Of particular interest are

Figure 29.4 Selection of objects with the coiled snake motif: a) prow of the Oseberg ship. Photo by Eirik Irgens Johnsen / Unimus; b) snake pendant from Gørding. Photo by National Museum of Denmark; c) snake pendant from Aggersborg, Jylland, Denmark. Photo by Rikke Søgaard, National Museum of Denmark; d) snake pendant from Marslev, Fyn, Denmark. Photo by Rikke Søgaard, National Museum of Denmark; e) coiled sword from Vold, Grue, Hedmark, Norway. Photo by Kirsten Jensen Helgeland / Unimus; f) key from Sande, Vestfold, Norway. Photo by Kirsten Jensen Helgeland / Unimus. Image design by Leszek Gardeła. Not to scale.

the aforementioned bird-feet pendants from grave 4 at Fyrkat and the silver lunula from grave Bj. 660 at Birka (Fig. 29.5). The bird-feet pendants from Fyrkat were evidently of Western Slavic design and were probably manufactured somewhere in the province of Greater Poland (Pol. Wielkopolska, Ger. Grosspolen), essentially the area which in the tenth and eleventh centuries formed the very heart of the emerging Piast state.[41] Among the Slavs, pendants of this kind were part of so-called temple rings, a popular type of female head adornment usually worn attached to a headband, scarf, or veil.[42] Their presence in the Fyrkat grave is by no means surprising, given the strong ties Viking Age Scandinavians shared with Western Slavs; the Danish king Haraldr blátǫnn (Harald Bluetooth), who was probably the driving force behind the construction of the Fyrkat fortress, was married to a Slavic woman, and foreigners from the Slavic area were certainly present at his court and probably also in his retinue.[43] What is particularly interesting about the pendants found at Fyrkat, however, is that they appear to have been re-defined and worn at the belt rather than on the head. Regrettably, we will never know if the individual buried at Fyrkat actually used them in life or if they belonged to someone else who placed them in the grave in the course of the funeral.[44] Given the overall nature of Fyrkat 4, it is permissible to speculate, however, that the pendants *were* purposefully incorporated by the presumed sorceress as elements of her attire, for instance to emphasise her status, connections, and – perhaps – some sense of 'strangeness'. Surrounding oneself with items from literally and metaphorically 'another world' (in this case items from a foreign culture and connoted with a foreign belief system) may have been an asset or even a necessity if one dealt with the supernatural. It is worth reminding that the same grave also contained other 'exotica' in the form of two copper alloy bowls which were likely produced in the Middle East and thus must have travelled a long way before they eventually reached Denmark (Fig. 29.6).

The silver lunula found in grave Bj. 660 at Birka is as fascinating as the foreign goods from Fyrkat (Fig. 29.5). Like the bird-feet pendants, it also stems from the Slavic

Figure 29.5 Selection of foreign objects discovered in the graves of presumed ritual specialists in Scandinavia: a) bird-feet pendants from grave 4 at Fyrkat. Photo by Arnold Mikkelsen, National Museum of Denmark; b) pendant with an anthropomorphic motif from Klinta. Photo from Swedish History Museum online database; c) lunula from Birka grave Bj. 660. Photo from Swedish History Museum online database. Image design by Leszek Gardeła.

Figure 29.6 Two bowls from grave 4 at Fyrkat. Photos by Leszek Gardeła.

world, but it is challenging to pin down its exact provenance due to the wide geographical distribution of such jewellery.[45] Among the Slavs, lunulas were conventionally worn around the neck, often as part of necklaces, but in the case of grave Bj. 660, the silver lunula – exactly like the bird-feet pendants at Fyrkat – was re-defined and re-used as a pendant probably suspended from the belt. This correlation in regard to the re-use of foreign objects is intriguing and certainly deserves attention and further study.

Another example of appropriation and/or re-conceptualisation of foreign personal ornaments is the pendant found in the Klinta grave (Fig. 29.5).[46] This pendant, a reworked mount or fitting presumably showing a seated individual, was originally a belt adornment belonging to a group of ninth- and tenth-century artefacts which Oleksij V. Komar classified as the 'Subbotsy (Subotsi) type', referring to the antiquities of the early Hungarians of the era of their stay in Eastern Europe and later in the territory of the Northern Black Sea and the Carpathian Basin around 900.[47] This group portrays an array of human-like figures with various attributes in their hands, sitting in a manner reminiscent of the lotus position. The origins of the iconography of these anthropomorphic figures should be sought in Eastern Asia; they are influenced by Buddhist iconography (recalling the interest in oriental exoticism in Scandinavia as reflected by the Helgö Buddha) or in Sasanian and post-Sasanian toreutics.[48] However, it should be taken into account that images of an anthropomorphic individual sitting cross-legged are also frequently seen in the territory of the ancient Iranians, and then later among the Turks.

The figures depicted on the Magyar belt fittings all appear to be 'specialists' of some sort, their attributes potentially revealing their specialism. While it is possible to cautiously link the bird feet ornament to the Fyrkat woman's role as a magic worker and as a female being in general, it is uncertain what kind of ritual specialist (if any at all) the re-worked Klinta belt applique depicts – and thus whether the choice of this specific figure was arbitrary or deliberate. Close parallels are found in the hexagonal belt fittings from Ukraine and Russia such as in grave 2 from Subotsi, Ukraine[49] (proposedly showing professional dancers, with veil-like objects on both sides of the head, in the air after jumping upwards) and from grave 1, mound 32 in Katerynivka (Katerinovka)[50] in eastern Ukraine, as well as from equestrian burials from the ninth- to eleventh-century Uyelgi cemetery in the steppe zone of the South Ural region.[51] Sergej Botalov interpreted this type as belonging to the nomadic aristocracy of Southern Ural and Kazakhstan and dated the fittings to the ninth–tenth century.[52]

In addition to items of Central and Eastern European provenance, Scandinavian graves of presumed ritual specialists also contained other 'exotic' goods: for instance, Arabic dirhams re-used as pendants (Birka) and large carafe-like bronze vases (Aska[53] and Klinta[54]) with close parallels in present-day Tatarskij Tolkiš, Gouv. Kazan in Tartarstan and Ravat Hodja in Uzbekistan (Fig. 29.7).[55] As noted above, the Fyrkat woman also possessed bronze vessels, which likewise may have originated from Central Asia.[56] Since these distinctive artefacts are functional items, they were likely used and displayed in the course of rituals. In the case of Fyrkat, one of the bronze vessels was placed beside the dead woman and covered with a wreath of grass as a lid. Thus, it must be assumed that the container was laid in the grave still holding its contents; a recent chemical analysis has revealed that the vessel included animal or vegetal grease.[57]

The Fyrkat woman also had another interesting 'container': a Gotlandic box brooch. Since Gotlandic box brooches are uncommon outside the island itself, the brooch would probably also fall into the category of 'faraway' artefacts. Moreover, as noted by Else Roesdahl, the brooch was found to be worn, missing its bottom (to which a pin would originally have been attached) as well as three of its four gables.[58] The brooch, therefore, could not have served its conventional purpose as an element of costume: placed beside the woman's head, it was instead reused as a receptacle. Considering the general wealth of the grave (it was the most lavish one of all of the burials at Fyrkat), it is hard to imagine that the woman owned such a ragged container because she could not afford anything else. Rather, the object's poor condition demonstrates that it had meaning and value for her. Owning and displaying 'antiques' with long 'biographies' was likely important for Viking Age ritual specialists. The description of the accoutrements of Þorbjǫrg *lítil-vǫlva* in *Eiríks saga rauða* lends credence to this hypothesis: the text mentions that one of the woman's utensils was a knife with a broken tip. This seemingly insignificant detail in the narrative might be rooted in the same logic as the box brooch from Fyrkat, implying that Norse ritual specialists were particularly drawn to the old and the exotic.

In speaking about 'exotica' in funerary contexts, it is crucial to remember the colourful necklaces consisting of numerous beads imported from distant locations around the world – their significance in so-called '*vǫlva* graves' is investigated in detail in → **Chapter 31**. All these precious and intriguing objects probably served to enhance their owner's social status but they may also have carried other, more profound meanings and, in one way or another, may have been used in the practice of rituals. Overall, as highlighted above, they all contributed to the 'strangeness' of the magic performer.

One only has to study a few runic inscriptions to realise how much importance, prestige, and value Viking Age Scandinavians attributed to faraway travels and explorations. Mary Helms's observation that spatial distance often correlates with political and spiritual power[59] has become an established axiom in archaeological interpretations of the

Figure 29.7 Bronze jugs from Klinta, Öland (a), Tatarskij Tolkiš, Russia (b), and Aska, Sweden (c). Photo (a) by Ola Myrin, Swedish History Museum, drawing (b) after Arne 1932: 100 and photo (c) by Swedish History Museum. Image design by Leszek Gardela. Not to scale.

role of exotic materials in societies. Through her concept of 'esoteric knowledge', she has described how the foreign and the supernatural often is comprehended as one and the same. In itself, distance can constitute an esoteric resource simply because it is not local and psychologically challenging. Procurement of faraway goods was a way to make distant connections tangible. Since foreign lands were potentially dangerous, the acquisition of objects from distant areas raised the prestige of the owner. Moreover, people living in or stemming from foreign lands were often considered not only to be 'strange', but also to possess exceptional abilities or abnormal skills. Those who had access to such foreign skills – rituals, cultural practices, and myths which were unknown in their home community – were respected and feared. Items from and knowledge of foreign cultures were visible evidence for the possession of that knowledge.

While the political part of Helms' ideas has been extensively explored and developed in archaeology,[60] the spiritual side has been examined to a much lesser degree. However, it is both in the burials of the members of the political elite as well as in burials interpreted as '*vǫlva* graves' that the exotic material is found. Together with political leaders, ritual specialists shared a need for legitimation and authorisation, and foreign artefacts thus functioned as means of distinction from the rest of the society.

Being parts of the ritual specialists' toolkit, the exact function of 'antiques' and objects from faraway places within the daily praxis of their owners is not ascertainable through the archaeological record, but we may surmise that their actual value was far beyond simple exoticism. These 'ancient objects' can be equated with the aforementioned 'exotic artefacts' as being imbued with a sense of 'foreignness' – in a metaphorical way, this should be understood not in terms of geographical distance, but in terms of chronological distance. The value of such portable wealth or heirlooms was as symbols of the passing time, the transmission of generations. They provided a pathway through the ages, leading to ancestral knowledge. Possessing such items and controlling them in the course of public rituals may have been part of the construction of histories and myths about ancestral origins. The ultimate ability of the *vǫlur* and their kind to actively establish contact with or gain access to eras or conditions associated with cosmological ideas is portrayed in the poem *Vǫluspá* where the sorceress recalls and renders the beginnings of time and mankind.

Costumes and Masks

Except for the description of the remarkable costume of Þorbjorg *lítil-vǫlva* in *Eiríks saga rauða*, Old Norse written sources provide limited information about the garments worn by Norse ritual specialists. One recurring motif is that some of these individuals had cloaks, often in dark blue or black colour. Another noteworthy detail is the mention of a sorceress wearing trousers in *Ljósvetninga saga*[61] – perhaps a literary allusion to the idea that some of these people had fluid gender identities (→ **Chapter 3**)?

Regrettably, the preservation of organic remains in Scandinavian funerary contexts is usually not very favourable. Most of the Norwegian graves that contain iron staffs are devoid of skeletal remains, and textiles or leather garments only survive in tiny fragments, often fused with artefacts made of metal. For this reason, it is very challenging to determine how exactly real-life ritual specialists looked and what clothing they wore. We can only make educated guesses on this matter based on the jewellery they were buried with. Oval brooches, for instance, imply the presence of aprons, whereas round brooches suggest that the deceased had cloaks or capes. Beyond these very basic assumptions, little else is certain. It is worthy of note, however, that iconographic sources lead us to believe that masking may have played some role in pre-Christian ritual performances. Whether or not masks were used in the practice of *seiðr* specifically is unfortunately unknown (→ **Chapter 36**).

Conclusions

Apart from staffs and an array of small size paraphernalia made of different metals and organic materials, Viking Age ritual specialists may have employed other kinds of items in the performance of their rituals. These may have included weapons (especially axes and spears),[62] elements of furniture (for instance chairs) and larger constructions in the form of platforms or stages, like the enigmatic *seiðhjallr* mentioned in Old Norse texts.[63] Musical instruments may also have been used in one way or another by these people, but there is little textual and archaeological evidence to specify which instruments exactly where chosen. The occurrence of so-called *rangle* ('rattles') or large rings in some of the graves of presumed ritual specialists (Gutdalen, Løve, and Oseberg in Norway) give us hints about the jingling sounds that may have been produced in the course of their performances. Whether or not drums also served as elements of Norse magic acts is unclear, but it would not be surprising given the great popularity of drums in the ritual practices of the Scandinavians' northern neighbours, the Sámi people.[64]

Notes

1. On Viking Age art see, for example, Wilson & Klindt-Jensen 1966; Fuglesang 1980; Iversen 1991; Graham-Campbell 2013; 2021.
2. e.g. Martens & Ravn 2016; Hilberg & Lemm 2018; Klæsøe *et al.* 2020.
3. Hildebrand 1872. See also Andrén 2014.
4. On Þórr, see Simek 2006; Sonne 2013; Lindow 2020, and references therein.
5. Rasmussen *et al.* 2014.

6. See Price 2002; 2019; Heide 2006; Gardeła 2016a, and references therein.
7. de Waele 1927.
8. Griffiths 2006: 183; Gilchrist 2008: 127–8; Mortimer & Pollington 2013.
9. Mierzyński 1885; Tomicki 2000; Szczepański 2013.
10. Pokrovskaya 2007; Gardeła 2016a.
11. On staffs in shamanic cultural milieus, see Price 2002: 301, 325–7; 2019; Hóppal 2009: 242–3; Tolley 2009b: 521, 525–6; 2009a; Gardeła 2016a: 196–7, and references therein.
12. See the papers in the *Retrospective Methods Network Newsletter* and in Heide & Bek-Pedersen 2014.
13. Gaster 2005; Lecouteux 2005; Cadbury 2015. Sometimes scholars distinguish between 'amulets' and 'talismans', defining the former as designed to repel that which is baneful, while the latter impels that which is beneficial (Gaster 2005) However, often 'amulet' is used as an umbrella term for both these functions.
14. Zeiten 1997: 3.
15. Zeiten 1997: 5.
16. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson & Matthias Þórðarson 1935: 206–9.
17. e.g. Zöega 1910: 433. But see, Norw. 'trolldomsmiddel' ('instrument for conducting magic') (Heggstad *et al.* 2008: 630); ONP: Danish 'troldomsmiddel' ('instrument for conducting magic').
18. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1939. See also Perkins 2001.
19. Jensen 2010: 8.
20. See, for example, Fuglesang 1999; Samdal 2000; Vierck 2002; Jaguś 2003; Gräslund 2005; 2007; MacLeod & Mees 2006; Gardeła 2008; 2014; 2015b; 2015a; 2016b; 2017; Eniosova 2009; Jagodziński 2009; 2012; Pedersen 2009; Pedersen *et al.* 2014; Wamers 2017; Edberg & Söderberg 2018; Kalmring 2019; Fabriciussen Nielsen 2020.
21. e.g. Gardeła & Odebäck 2018; Gardeła 2020; 2021a; 2022c; 2022d.
22. Jensen 2010.
23. Many of the types listed here have several variants. For more particulars about them, see the references below.
24. On miniature anchors, see Zeiten 2002.
25. On miniature animals, see Gardeła 2020.
26. On miniature anthropomorphic figures, see Helmbrecht 2011; Christensen 2010; 2013; Arwill-Nordbladh 2013; Osborn 2015; Pesch 2018; Wicker 2020; Borake 2021; Croix *et al.* 2020; Deckers *et al.* 2021; Gardeła *et al.* 2022.
27. On miniature bowls, see Zeiten 1997: 23–4, and references therein.
28. On miniature chairs, see Jessen & Majland 2021. See also → **Chapter 32**.
29. On crosses, see Staecker 1999a, and references therein.
30. On miniature masks/faces, see Schaadt & Grundvad 2016, and references therein.
31. On miniatures with nine studs, see Pentz 2017; 2018: 18; Gardeła 2022d.
32. On miniature staffs, see Zeiten 1997: 24–5; Gardeła 2008; 2016a.
33. On Thor's hammers, see Novikova 1992; Filipowiak 1992; Zeiten 1997: 25–8; Staecker 1999b; 1999a; Nordeide 2006; Callais 2010; Jensen 2010; Sonne 2013, and references therein.
34. On miniature tools, see Zeiten 1997: 19–21.
35. On miniature weapons, see Gardeła & Odebäck 2018; Gardeła 2021a; 2022c. See also → **Chapter 34**.
36. On miniature weathervanes, see → **Chapter 35**.
37. On miniature wheels, see Jensen 2010; Gardeła 2014. See also → **Chapter 33**.
38. Williams 2016: 407.
39. On the supernatural abilities attributed to snakes in Anglo-Saxon, Slavic, Baltic, and other cultural milieus, see Majewski 1892; Perls 1937; Hatto 1957; Eckert 1998; Mianecki 2012; Brunning 2015; Gardeła & Kajkowski 2021; Kuusela 2022.
40. Faulkes 1998: 4.
41. On the development of the Piast state, see Buko 2008.
42. Kóčka-Krenz 1993.
43. On Scandinavian-Slavic interactions, see Roslund 2007; Naum 2008; Morawiec 2009; Gardeła 2019; 2022a; 2022b.
44. Gardeła in press.
45. Kóčka-Krenz 1993.
46. Petersson 1958.
47. Komar 2016; 2020.
48. Korol 2005: 157–8; Korol 2019; Klima 2018: 137.
49. Komar 2011: fig. 6, 12; Klima 2018: 137, 146.
50. Komar 2016: 546, fig. 1.
51. Botalov 2012: fig. 7, nos 64–7; Grib 2022: 94, 98. The type also occurs in burials of members from the nomadic Turkic tribe Kimak, see Arslanova 2013.
52. Botalov 2012: 129.
53. Arne 1924; 1932; Price 2002; 2019.
54. Petersson 1957; 1958; Price 2002; 2019.
55. Arne 1932: 100–8; Mikkelsen 1998: 43.
56. Roesdahl 1977; Pentz *et al.* 2009.
57. Pentz *et al.* 2009.
58. Roesdahl 1977: 138.
59. Helms 1988; 1993; 1998.
60. e.g. Dobat 2015.
61. Björn Sigfússon 1940. For an analysis of the ritual acts conducted by the cross-dressing sorceress from *Ljósvetninga saga*, see Gunnell 2021; Gardeła 2021b; 2021c.
62. On the possible use of weapons by Viking Age ritual specialists, see Gardeła 2021b.
63. On *seiðhjallr* and other elements of *seiðr*-related architecture in texts and archaeology, see Kiil 1960; Price 2002; 2014; 2019.
64. For detailed discussions on drums and drumming in Old Norse literature and archaeology, see Price 2002; 2019; Tolley 2016.

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30

Magic Staffs in the Viking World

Leszek Gardeła

The magicians, wizards, and sorcerers that inhabit the imaginary world of books, graphic novels, and movies are often portrayed as bearers of staffs. These undoubtedly special items vary considerably in both size and appearance – they can be as short as a forearm or resemble long walking sticks. It seems that writers and film makers share a preference for staffs made of wood, sometimes with crooked shapes and additional decorations in the form of stones, ribbons, or animal bones. Iron staffs are witnessed less frequently in literature and on the silver screen, the most representative example probably being the staff of Saruman in Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings*. Overall, one may thus get the impression that today's creators of fantasy worlds can hardly imagine magicians without their staffs, which have now become some of their most essential accessories, almost inseparable from them and serving as markers of identity, profession, and extraordinary skills. But is there any reality behind these portrayals? Do the staffs from books and movies have any 'real-life' counterparts?

The answer to these questions is affirmative. Iconographic and archaeological sources from as early as the Stone Age indeed confirm the existence of staffs serving as emblems of people who dealt with the supernatural. Some of the earliest examples of staffs, which may have held metaphorical meanings, are depicted in Central-Asian and Scandinavian petroglyphs and are shown held by anthropomorphic figures interpreted as 'shamans', gods, or otherworldly entities.[1] Another noteworthy group of staffs, often referred to as 'elk-head staffs', was in use between the sixth and second millennia BC in the area between the Eastern Urals and Northern Europe. They were usually made of antler and, as their name implies, adorned with realistically-carved elk heads.[2] It is possible that religious specialists and/or tribal leaders employed them as symbols of their rank and material markers of their ability to communicate with the world beyond.

Magic staffs were also common in the Greek and Roman civilizations. In both cultural milieus they could be carried by gods and humans and, as the available written sources lead us to believe, could have a plethora of applications. In a seminal study wholly dedicated to the idea of *The Magic Staff or Rod in Graeco-Italian Antiquity*, Dutch scholar Ferdinand Joseph Maria de Waele demonstrated that generally two types of staffs – rigid and flexible – were in existence among the Romans and Greeks. In the ancient world, staffs could be used in a variety of mantic practices, such as *rhabdomanteia*, *empyromanteia*, *hydromanteia,* and *necromanteia*. Among the best-known staff bearers from these cultural milieus were the Greek god of healing and medicinal arts, Asclepius, and divine messengers Hermes-Mercurius, but in antique texts and art staffs were also carried by soothsayers and sorceresses like Kirke and Medeia, as well as an array of other individuals with exceptional skills, for instance Teresias, Polyeidos, Kassandra, Kalchas, and Melampous. Memories of these ancient symbols of rank and magical power have prevailed for centuries, and can be frequently encountered today in the public space. For instance, the so-called Rod of Asclepius, essentially a serpent entwined staff, is widely used in logos of pharmacies and emergency medical services and forms part of the emblem of the World Health Organisation (Fig. 30.1).

This chapter seeks to demonstrate that Viking Age Scandinavians were likewise no strangers to the idea of the staff as a symbol of secular and supernatural power, and will discuss the different applications of staffs in Old Norse literary tradition as well as their possible archaeological

Figure 30.1 Logo of the World Health Organisation with a representation of the Rod of Asclepius. Public domain.

counterparts. Special attention will be dedicated to the material and symbolic aspects of two staff-like specimens discovered in Denmark and Sweden both of which are currently held in the collections of the National Museum of Denmark.

Magic Staffs in Old Norse Literature

By contrast to miniature paraphernalia and so-called amulets which rarely feature in medieval written sources (→ **Chapter 29**), staffs *are* mentioned a number of times in Old Norse literature. In this rich and diverse body of textual material staffs are typically carried by sorceresses (e.g. *vǫlur*, *spákonur*) and other magic-working females, but in some instances we also see them in the hands of men, both human and supernatural. Extant texts reveal that staffs could be used to maim others and steal their wits, control the forces of nature, or ride to the otherworld, to name just a few of their many applications. Their elaborate terminology reveals that they were made from various materials, usually wood but also iron, and that they were sometimes additionally decorated with stones or copper alloy.

The most detailed description of a staff from the Old Norse textual corpus is provided in *Eiríks saga rauða* (ch. 4). This item, simply referred to as *stafr*, serves as an attribute of Þorbjǫrg, an enigmatic Viking Age woman who visits a farm in Greenland to help the local community overcome a devastating famine. As we read in the saga:

> Staf hafði hon í hendi, ok var á knappr; hann var búinn messingu ok settr steinum ofan um knappinn.
>
> She carried in her hand a staff with a knob at the top; it was adorned with brass and set with stones at the top around the knob.[3]

The saga does not specify if the shaft of Þorbjǫrg's staff was made of wood or iron, but the latter alternative seems more likely. Staffs made wholly out of iron or possessing iron components are well known from other Old Norse texts, such as *Landnámabók*, *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*, and *Brennu-Njáls saga*. As will be demonstrated further below, they also appear to have tangible counterparts in the archaeological record.

In *Landnámabók* (ch. 289), a sorcerer named Loðmundr hinn gamli ('Lodmund the Old') uses a staff (*stafr*) to steer a flood away from his land.[4] The text describes how he places the staff in the water, holds it with both hands and bites on a ferrule attached to it. As a result of this curious act, the flood suddenly begins to turn westwards and back to where it came from. We may gather from this account that the staff must have been at least as long as a walking stick for the sorcerer to be able to set it up in the water, hold it with both hands, and bite on the ferrule.

In *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* (ch. 33) an item literally referred to as 'iron staff' (*jarnstafr*) is held by a supernatural being: a mountain giant whose head is higher than the mountains.[5] The text does not specify the purpose of this item, however. In *Brennu Njáls saga* (ch. 133) another iron staff – also referred to as *járnstafr* – appears in a dream of a man named Flósi.[6] Here, the staff is held by a certain Járngrímr, a mysterious figure clad in goatskin who is probably Óðinn himself in disguise. The saga describes how Járngrímr summons Flósi's men and then strikes downwards with the staff. A great clash is then heard and this heralds the imminent death of all those who have been called.

The corpus of Old Norse literature mentions several other ambiguous staffs or staff-like objects which may likewise have been made of iron. For instance, *Laxdœla saga* (ch. 76) speaks of the discovery of one such item, described as *seiðstafr mikill* or 'large *seiðr* staff', during the process of reopening a grave containing the skeletal remains of a *vǫlva*.[7] It is probable that this item was conceptualised by the saga writer as being made of metal not wood, otherwise it would have decomposed just like the human flesh. The eddic poem *Hárbarðzlióð* (st. 20),[8] on the other hand, mentions enigmatic items called *iarnlurki* or 'iron clubs' which are used by berserk women (*brúðir berserkia*) to threaten the god Þórr. It is unknown if these were just ordinary objects or magic accoutrements, but the fact that they were owned by women compared in the poem to she-wolves (*vargynior*) who were capable of 'bewitching all men' supports the latter interpretation.

As noted above, several Old Norse texts speak of staffs made of wood. In the eddic poem *Skírnismál* a staff refereed to interchangeably as *gambanteinn* and *tamsvǫndr* is used by Freyr's envoy, Skírnir, to cast a spell on a giantess called Gerðr.[9] The element *gamban-* clearly indicates that the item has magic properties whereas the element *tam-* suggests that it can be used to tame a person to the staff bearer's will.[10] The elements *-teinn* and *-vǫndr* connote with slender and flexible twigs and wands respectively, leaving no doubt that the staff in question is made of organic material. It remains

unclear how exactly Skírnir created his staff and if he used a tree branch or root for this purpose, but in light of comparative evidence – for instance Baltic crooked staffs known as *krivula*[11] – a root would have been quite appropriate. A staff known as *gambanteinn* also features in the eddic poem *Hárbarðzlióð* (st. 20): here, the protagonist called Hárbarðr (Óðinn in disguise), receives it from a giant named Hlébarðr. In this case, the magic item is used in a similar way to that seen in *Skírnismál*: namely, to manipulate the mind. Ironically, Hárbarðr uses it to steal the wits of the previous owner of the staff, Hlébarðr. Staffs referred to as *stafsprota*, which appear in *Ǫrvar-Odds saga* (ch. 2)[12] and *Vatnsdœla saga* (ch. 44),[13] seem to be formally, conceptually, and functionally similar to the *gambanteinn* and *tamsvǫndr* and are likewise used to manipulate human will.

Apart from the examples above, the Old Norse literary corpus contains mentions of other types of staffs with ritual applications. For instance, *Eyrbyggja saga* (ch. 4) and *Hákonar saga góða* (ch. 4) speak of an item known as *hlautviðr* which is employed as a 'sprinkler' in the course of a cult performance.[14] *Þorsteins saga bæjarmagns* (ch. 2), on the other hand, mentions a *krókstafr*, a crooked staff which is used by the main protagonist to travel to the Otherworld.[15] Unfortunately, little can be revealed about staffs called *skǫgarvǫndr* and *Lævateinn* – the former is only mentioned in *Norna Gests þáttr* (ch. 9) where it is held by a giantess clad in a black apron, while the latter appears in the eddic poem *Fjǫlsvinnsmál* and is said to be kept in a chest sealed with nine mighty locks. We do not know much about the appearance of *Lævateinn*, but it seems to be a crucial accessory that the poem's protagonist requires to complete his dangerous quest.[16]

In summation, (magic) staffs appear in different genres of Old Norse literature, including eddic poetry, *Íslendingasǫgur*, *fornaldarsǫgur*, and *þættir*. In the majority of cases, their descriptions are very vague, and our understanding of them is largely built upon their terminology which reveals details of their physical properties and applications. It is vital to draw attention to the fact that careful analyses of the various mentions of these items in literature, conducted by Neil Price[17] and Leszek Gardeła,[18] have shown that not all of them can be directly linked to the practice and practitioners of *seiðr*. There is also nothing in Old Norse accounts to suggest that the staffs had any role to play in the practice of divination. Therefore, there is no justification for using the term 'divination wand' to refer to possible archaeological examples of staffs.[19] The most popular motif one may encounter in Old Norse literature is that of the staffs' usage in acts of mental manipulation (i.e. to steal one's wits and instill confusion). Their role as 'material markers' and/or attributes of powerful figures – human and supernatural sorcerers and sorceresses, Giants, and even the god Óðinn himself – is also quite evident. Interestingly, even though one of the staffs is explicitly labelled as a '*seiðr* staff' (*seiðstafr*), it is never explained *how* exactly (and if at all) it was used in the practice of *seiðr* magic.

Clearly, in an attempt to gain more insight into what iron and wooden staffs may have meant to 'real' people of the Viking Age and how they may have functioned, one cannot rely solely on their considerably late and perhaps distorted or misleading descriptions in the literary corpus. As will be demonstrated below, a wealth of information can be garnered from careful and multidisciplinary analyses of archaeological finds.

(Magic) Staffs in Viking Archaeology

The idea that Viking Age iron rods with cage-like handles occasionally adorned with copper alloy may have served the role of 'magic staffs' was first put forward in the 1990s in the work of Gundula Adolfsson and Inga Lundström in connection with an exhibition entitled *Den starka kvinnan. Fran völva till haxa* (Eng. *The Strong Woman From Völva to Witch*) displayed in archaeological museums in Stockholm and Stavanger.[20] Initially, Adolfsson's and Lundström's admittedly bold idea was met with resistance and critique from the scholarly community, probably because it lacked the necessary contextual depth and interdisciplinary grounding. However, the reserved approach to this body of material changed considerably in 2002 when the topic of *seiðr* and magic staffs was investigated in great detail by Neil Price in his monograph *The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*.[21] Price's arguments pertaining to textual and archaeological examples of staffs, their appearance, role, and symbolism were widely accepted and later expanded in the publications of Eldar Heide[22] and Leszek Gardeła, respectively.[23] While Heide's work centered on linguistic issues as well as the symbolic associations of *seiðr* and staffs with the practice of spinning and Sámi rituals, Gardeła's monograph *(Magic) Staffs in the Viking Age* approached them in a multidisciplinary as well as cross-cultural manner and offered a comprehensive catalogue of their different examples assembled on the basis of first-hand analyses in museums in Scandinavia, Iceland, and Ireland.[24]

Today, scholars generally agree that it *is* possible to identify magic staffs in the archaeological record. To add more credence to this interpretation, however, the majority or all of the following premises ought to be met:

- The presumed magic staffs stem from richly furnished graves which contain objects commonly associated with people of high social prominence and/or having extensive inter-regional contacts (e.g. metal vessels, opulent jewellery, glass beads).
- The details of the staffs' construction correspond with the descriptions of staffs from Old Norse textual sources (e.g. copper alloy knobs, mounts, and/or rings attached to the shafts).

- The staffs are found in close proximity to the bodies of the deceased (e.g. by the side or directly on the human remains) and in positions implying their importance and perception as prized personal possessions.
- The same burial contexts contain other paraphernalia likely associated with the practice of magic (e.g. different types of metal miniatures/amulets, psychotropic substances).

To date, as a result of academic literature surveys, archival work, and new excavation campaigns, around forty possible magic staffs have been identified across Scandinavia and the wider Viking world. It is challenging to provide their exact number, since specialist do not fully agree on the interpretation of some of the specimens. The differences of opinion mainly arise from the fact that certain artefacts are poorly preserved or incomplete and/or stem from unprofessionally excavated graves. While some researchers are willing to except the imperfect nature of the data, others simply prefer to be more cautious. So far, the most extensive find corpuses have been provided in the works of Neil Price[25] and Leszek Gardeła[26] and their publications also include numerous illustrations as well as details of the staffs' morphometric features.

The burial contexts from which the Viking Age staffs originate vary considerably with regard to their internal and external composition: some of the graves are cremations, others inhumations, and may contain wooden chambers, coffins, wagons, or other containers for the human remains. On the surface of the cemetery the graves can be covered by mounds, cairns, or other constructions, some very elaborate others more simple (→ **Part 4**). Based on osteological analyses and the goods that accompany the deceased, it is possible to speculate that the majority of the staffs known to us today were interred with female individuals, although items interpreted as staffs also appear in graves that may have belonged to men.

The presumed magic staffs found in Viking Age graves take many forms, and upon analysing them carefully one may arrive at the conclusion that each of them is, in fact, unique. It is highly probable that they were manufactured in such a way as to meet the very particular requirements of their owners and/or to reflect their specific purpose as ritual tools. Regardless of this, many of the staffs share at least some common characteristics: they are typically made of iron and have a kind of 'cage' or 'basket' at one of the ends, a constructional feature consisting of a varying number of rods arranged around the central shaft. Several examples of staffs are also adorned with copper alloy knobs/mounts depicting real animals, fantastic beasts, or resembling polyhedral weights. In his monograph, Price distinguished two broad types of iron staffs: the first has what he terms 'expanded handle construction' (i.e. a basket- or cage-like construction) whereas the second type has no such handle construction. This terminology has been accepted by other researchers and will be followed here as well (Fig. 30.2).

It is essential to note that in investigating staffs from archaeological contexts, several scholars have observed that the various details of their construction and decoration are formally and/or conceptually linked to other Viking Age items. The 'cages' or 'baskets' of staffs belonging to the type with the 'expanded handle construction' allude to distaffs (which can have strong associations with the idea of spinning fate; → **Chapter 8**), keys, whip-shanks, lamps, and other items or their constituents (Fig. 30.3). Since these associations all seem deliberate and symbolically-charged, one may attempt to deconstruct their meaning-content using a combination of archaeological and textual sources. A factor which additionally supports the idea that iron staffs were endowed with special meanings is the fact that in burial contexts some of them were found deliberately bent, broken, and even crushed with stones. This treatment suggests that they may have been perceived as objects possessing their own agency or personhood[27] and/or animated with some kind of 'spirit' or 'force', perhaps one that had to be annihilated upon burial so as to prevent the staffs from falling into the wrong hands.

Below, we will take a closer look at two intriguing but still somewhat understudied items from Fuldby in Jylland, Denmark and Gävle in Gästrikland, Sweden which are currently part of the collections of the National Museum of Denmark and which have been interpreted by several scholars as possible magic staffs. Both specimens display unusual physical characteristics which make them stand out from the rest of the find corpus. With a view to verify their former documentation, for the purposes of this study, the items were re-analysed in 2022 by the present author and Peter Pentz. The following section discusses their material aspects anew in order to better understand how they may have been used and conceptualized by their Viking Age owners.

Two Case Studies: The Staffs from Fuldby and Gävle

The Fuldby staff was found by an amateur in 1868 in what has been interpreted as an inhumation grave additionally containing a fragmented iron stirrup (Figs 30.4 and 30.5). According to the archival records from the National Museum of Denmark, as well as the publications of Johannes Brøndsted,[28] H.U. Kleiminger,[29] Anne Pedersen,[30] and others,[31] the artefacts were found at a depth of approximately 60 cm, beneath or next to a large stone.

Due to the non-expert nature of the 'excavation', little is known about the Fuldby grave's construction and layout. As a matter of fact, it is not entirely certain that the Fuldby assemblage was a 'grave' in the proper sense of the word – it

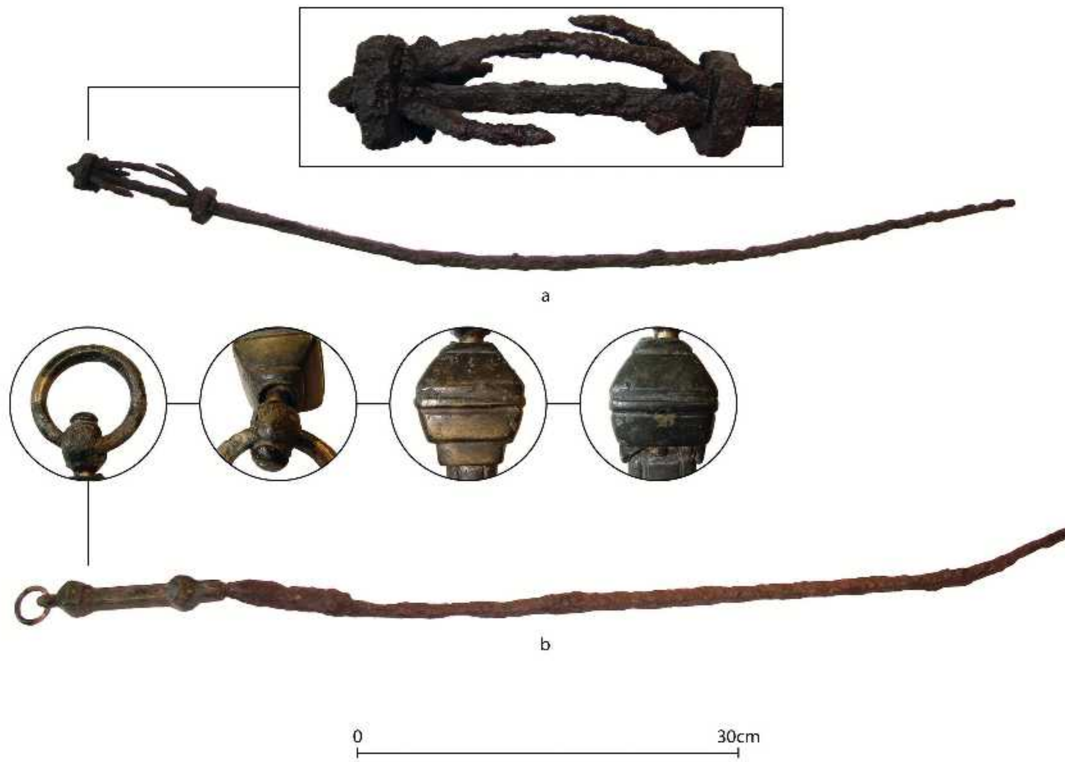

Figure 30.2 Examples of staffs with and without so-called 'expanded handle construction': a) Arnestad, Sogn og Fjordane, Norway; b) Hopperstad, Sogn og Fjordane, Norway. Photos by Leszek Gardeła.

Figure 30.3 Diagram showing formal and conceptual associations between staffs and other Viking Age objects. The staff in the centre was found at Gutdalen, Sogn og Fjordane, Norway. Illustration and photo by Leszek Gardeła.

Overleveret af Prokurator, konst. Branddi-
rektör C. V. Hansen i Sorö:
192. Et 21½" l. Redskab
af Jern af ukendt Bestemmelse, om-
trent af Form som hosstaaende Skit-
se. I den ene Ende er et Haandtag,
hvis Mellemstykke bestaar af 4 snoede
Stænger. Museet har et lignende Stykke
fra Gefle. –
193. Et Brudstykke af en Jern=Stig-
böjle af hosstaaende Form;
det er noget forbukket. –
Disse to Stykker ere fundne af Tjenestekarl
Jens Christensen hos Gaardmand Ole Olsen
i Fuldby ved Sorö. De laa tæt ved Gaar-
dens Bygninger, under eller ved en stor
Sten, som laa 1 Al dybt i Jorden. – Be-
sör 1 Rd. –

Figure 30.4 A note from the archives of the National Museum of Denmark mentioning the discovery of the Fuldby finds (a) and a fragmented stirrup (b). Photos by Peter Pentz.

may have been some kind of special deposit. However, if we choose to assume that the objects found at Fuldby formed part of a grave, we need to acknowledge the fact that this assemblage deviates from assemblages usually encountered in so-called equestrian graves in Denmark and other parts of Scandinavia.[32] Graves with stirrups normally contain various elements of riding equipment, such as spurs, bits, and/or decorative bridles, as well as single weapons (e.g. swords, spearheads) or whole sets of militaria. It is also noteworthy that in the vast majority of cases recorded around Europe, stirrups accompany men.[33] One example of a Viking Age female grave with stirrups was recently (re)identified at Birka and interpreted as the grave of a possible female warrior, but this case is in many regards exceptional.[34]

Interestingly, as soon as the presumed grave from Fuldby is situated against the context of other graves with iron staffs, it becomes clear that it is actually the *only* staff grave with a stirrup. Different elements of riding equipment have, however, been noted in some of the staff graves. For instance, a spur formed part of the burial assemblage discovered at Hellebust in Sogn og Fjordane, Norway,[35] whereas the well-known grave of the so-called 'Gausel queen' from Rogaland, Norway contained elements of a lavishly decorated horse bridle.[36] Harness parts were also identified in presumably female graves from Trå in Hordaland, Norway[37] and Birka in Uppland, Sweden (Bj. 834),[38] while a grave from Aska in Östergötland, Sweden[39] contained four harness-bow mounts. Furthermore, an opulent cremation grave from Klinta on Öland, Sweden held 'a fragment of reins distributor for a pair of horses'.[40] This comparative evidence clearly demonstrates that riding equipment (broadly understood) is not totally unusual in the graves of presumed ritual specialists, permitting speculation that horses were in one way or another important either for the dead or those who buried them (→ **Chapter 17**).

Let us now return to the Fuldby staff and investigate its morphometric features. Measuring 56 cm in length and weighing 393.4 g, in a general sense it closely resembles other iron staffs with expanded handle construction, especially those found at Birka, Gnesta, and Jägarbacken in Sweden (Fig. 30.6). Its handle consists of four twisted rods joined at the terminals by undecorated ring- and barrel-shaped mounts. Unusually, however, the shaft ends exactly where the handle begins and thus the rods are not

Figure 30.5 Staff from Fuldby, Denmark. Photos by Leszek Gardeła.

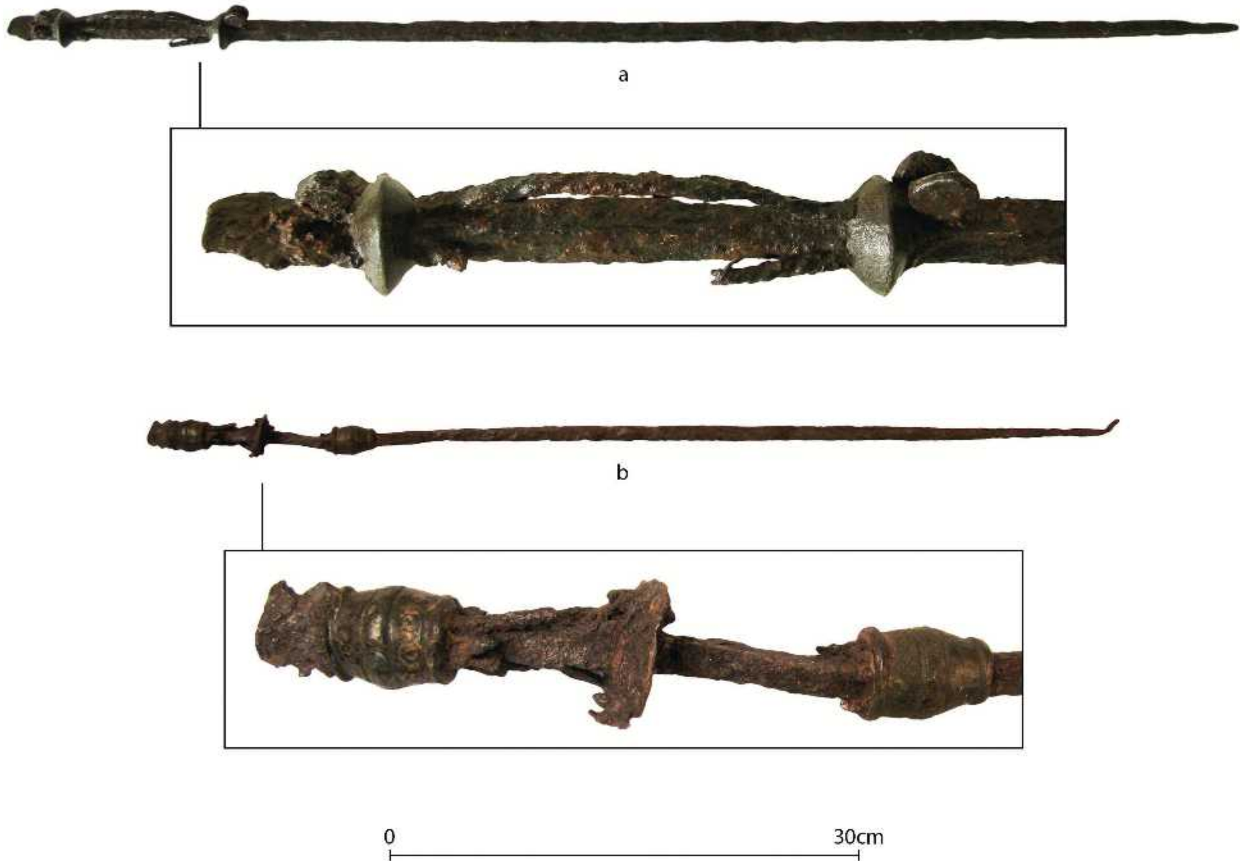

Figure 30.6 Staffs from Jägarbacken, Ånsta sn., Närke, Sweden (a) and Gnesta, Södermanland, Sweden (b). Photos by Leszek Gardeła.

grouped around it as in the case of virtually all staffs of the 'expanded handle' type. The shaft itself is also designed in an unconventional manner – while all other staffs have square-sectioned shafts, that of the Fuldby staff is round. Furthermore, the lower end of the shaft does not taper to a sharp point (as is usually the case) but instead is flattened and rounded. In some publications from the 1990s and early 2000s, the sharp points of iron staffs were considered as indications of their being used as roasting spits.[41] It is clear that the Fuldby staff could not have served this purpose, as it would have been very difficult to pierce and push a joint of meat along the shaft.

One important detail of the presumed grave from Fuldby that deserves attention is the presence of a large stone in the same pit. Regrettably, the documentation is too vague to determine if upon discovery the stone was lying directly over the staff or was stratigraphically above it, but the former possibility is quite likely. A similar case is known from an opulent tenth-century grave discovered at Kaupang in Vestfold, Norway.[42] Here, an iron staff with an expanded handle construction was found onboard a ship – next to the (seated) remains of a woman, possibly a sorceress – and pressed by a large stone. In order to unravel the symbolic meaning of this funerary act, one may turn to Old Norse literature where stones are frequently mentioned in episodes concerning magic workers (→ **Chapter 12**). Stones are usually the only objects that can cause physical harm to these people, and the violent communal act of stoning (often followed by the covering of the bodies with stones) is often conducted in the sagas as a form of punishment for malevolent sorcery.[43] As has been argued extensively elsewhere, it is therefore highly probable that the act of 'stoning' magic objects (in this case, staffs) was motivated by the desire to annihilate or neutralise their powers.[44] This may have been the intention behind the placing of the stone on the staff from the Kaupang grave. *Per analogiam*, the same idea may perhaps have guided the people at Fuldby. Intriguingly, upon re-analysing the Fuldby staff in 2022, it was noted that part of the shaft has a clear indentation, possibly a sign of damage inflicted by some heavy object (Fig. 30.5). Could this be the trace of the stone that was presumably laid on top of the staff?

Like the Fuldby specimen, the staff-like item from Gävle also comes from a poorly documented archaeological context (Fig. 30.7). According to Johannes Brøndsted, it was discovered together with a sword, arrowheads, and jewellery in a grave artefactually sexed as belonging to a man.[45] The Gävle specimen has an expanded handle construction

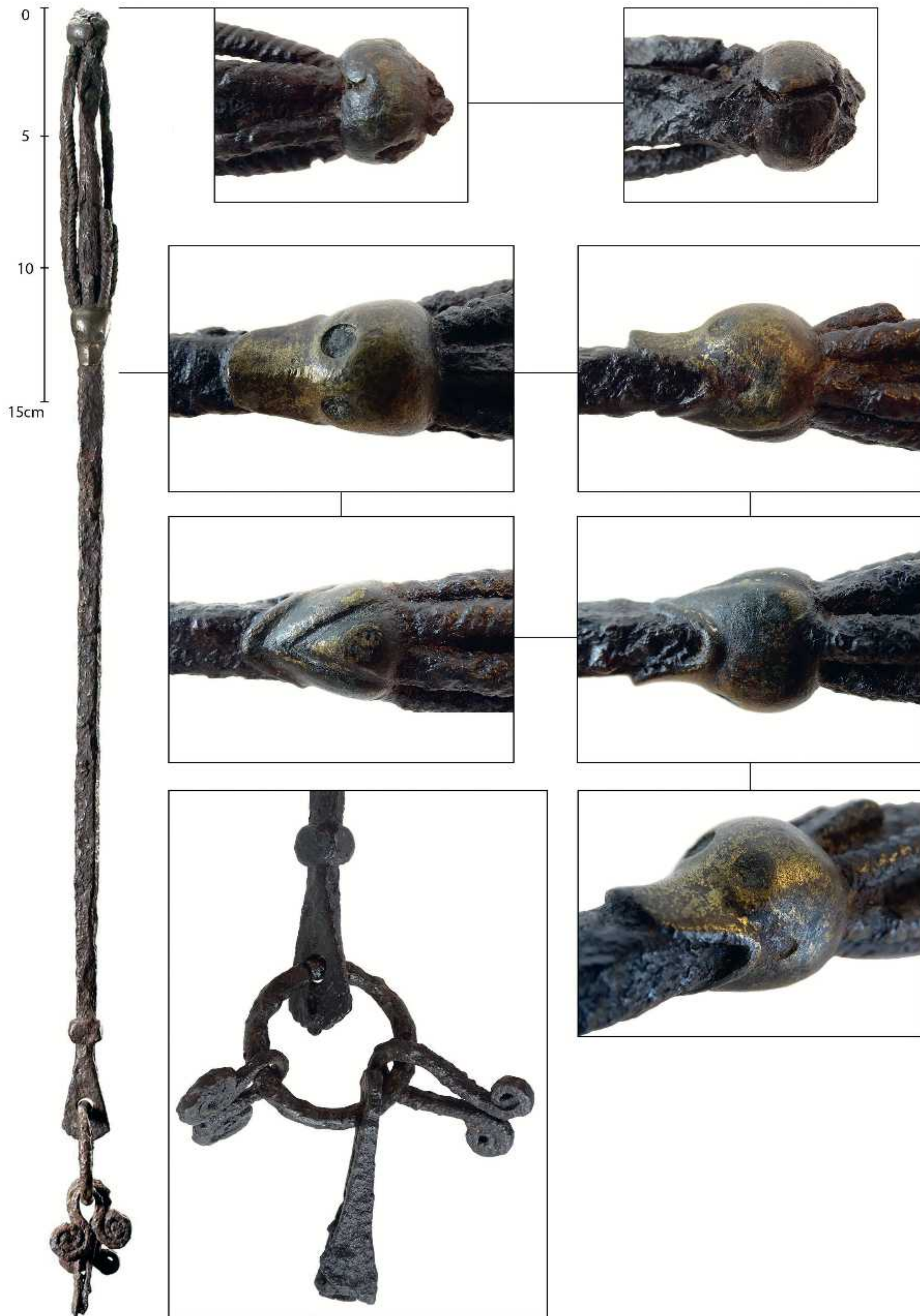

Figure 30.7 Staff from Gävle, Gästrikland, Sweden. Photos by Leszek Gardeła.

consisting of eight twisted rods grouped around the central shaft and bound with copper alloy knobs. The knob on top of the handle is ring-shaped, whereas the one at the opposite end resembles an animal head, presumably that of a bird, as implied by the realistically depicted beak. The animal head has two clearly marked eyes and on its bottom a puzzling triangular-shaped detail can be seen, perhaps representing an oversized, bloated throat.

The shaft of the Gävle find is 42.5 cm long and terminates in a copper alloy polyhedral knob and a flat perforated plate resembling an arrowhead with an iron ring attached. Three pendants or 'rattles' are suspended from this ring: two of these are shaped like omega symbols (4 cm and 2.7 cm long) with coiled spiral ends and one, folded in half, resembles an elongated rhomboid (5.5 cm long and 1.4 cm wide). The latter pendant was probably intended to hold a thong made of leather or textile.

When commenting on the Gävle find in his monograph, Price noted that:

> Despite similar finds in Finland and Sweden, there is no certainty that this object has been correctly interpreted, and the 'rattles' on the loop could equally imply a magical function (or a combination, as such rattles are common features of horse harness in the Viking Age). The resemblance to the staffs is very striking – the piece from Gävle may even be a staff – and adds yet another confusing dimension to these objects.[46]

Since 2002, the idea that the object from Gävle may have had a magic function has been widely accepted by archaeologists. In 2013–2015, the Gävle find was presented as a (magic) staff in the catalogues accompanying the large *Viking* exhibition held at museums in Copenhagen, Berlin, and London. In 2016, it was discussed in detail alongside different kinds of presumed magic staffs in Leszek Gardeła's monograph. At that point, however, no definite conclusion about the object's function was reached, although Gardeła leaned strongly to the view that it may have been a ritual item.[47] Following Price, he pointed out to the similarities this specimen shared with the presumed magic staffs from Birka and Klinta, especially as regards the occurrence of the animal head forming part of the handle and the presence of the polyhedral knob/weight on the shaft. Interestingly, the animal head motifs on the staffs from Birka, Klinta, and Gävle *all* have their mouths open and the shafts or rods pass through them, as if the animals were communicating with each other (Klinta) or sending/spitting (Birka, Gävle) something out.

Like Brøndsted and Price before him, Gardeła also drew attention to the fact that the Gävle 'staff' is formally very much alike iron whip-shanks known from Viking Age Rus and Finland. These relatively rarely discovered items are all made of iron and are generally less than 50 cm long (Fig. 30.8). They conventionally terminate in a flat arrowhead-like plate which is perforated and has an iron ring attached. Curiously, in many instances three pendants are suspended from the ring – two of these are omega-shaped and one is elongated and folded to hold an organic thong – exactly mirroring the details of the Gävle specimen. Some of the most representative examples of this artefact type, all dated to the Viking Age, have been found in Susdalskoe Opole (Russia),[48] the vicinity of Plakun (Russia),[49] Priladozje (Russia),[50] Maalahti-Kopparbacken (Finland),[51] and Urjala-Kuulaanmäki (Finland).[52]

Despite a range of close formal similarities to other items, the Gävle find is overall unique. What distinguishes it from all evident whip-shanks from Finland and present-day Russia is that it has a 'basket handle' and copper alloy decorations which the whip-shanks generally lack. It can thus be regarded as a 'hybrid object', which in an innovative and artistically very elegant manner combines the features of a north-eastern European whip with elements characteristic of some of the finest examples of probable magic staffs from Scandinavia. What still begs the question, however, is: could it have been a ritual accoutrement, and if not, what was its actual purpose?

The challenge of interpreting the Gävle specimen as an element of a magic-worker's toolkit lies in the fact that so little is known about the immediate context of its discovery. We do not have any field drawings, plans, or photographs showing how it was originally positioned in the grave. If, for instance, the Gävle specimen lay on top of the human remains or close to the deceased person's hand, we could argue that it had once been a prized possession. If it was pressed by a stone (like the Kaupang and, perhaps, the Fuldby staffs) or set up vertically in the ground then this could also imply its special importance, but we simply lack any solid evidence of such burial acts. The only way forward, therefore, is to focus on the Gävle's specimen's materiality and investigate the possible meaning-content of its various decorative features.

As noted above, the handle consists of eight rods which are S- and Z-twisted. If we count the central shaft, the number of rods will be *nine*. This is a number of great prominence in the Old Norse system of belief. Medieval literature pertaining to the Nordic world associates it with, *inter alia*, sacrificial acts that would allegedly take place every nine years in Lejre and Uppsala, the dangerous ordeal of Óðinn on the tree (on which he hung for nine nights), initiatory rituals, etc.[53] The significance of the number nine is also clearly witnessed in archaeology, the best examples being the so-called 'miniatures with nine studs', Jan Petersen's P51 oval brooches with nine decorative knobs, amulet rings with nine pendants, and so on.[54] If we decide to follow this path of interpretation, we could argue that the rods that form the handle of the Gävle specimen served as material references to the widely recognised Norse symbolism of the number nine. Intriguingly, there are at least two other presumed staffs from the region of Sogn og Fjordane in

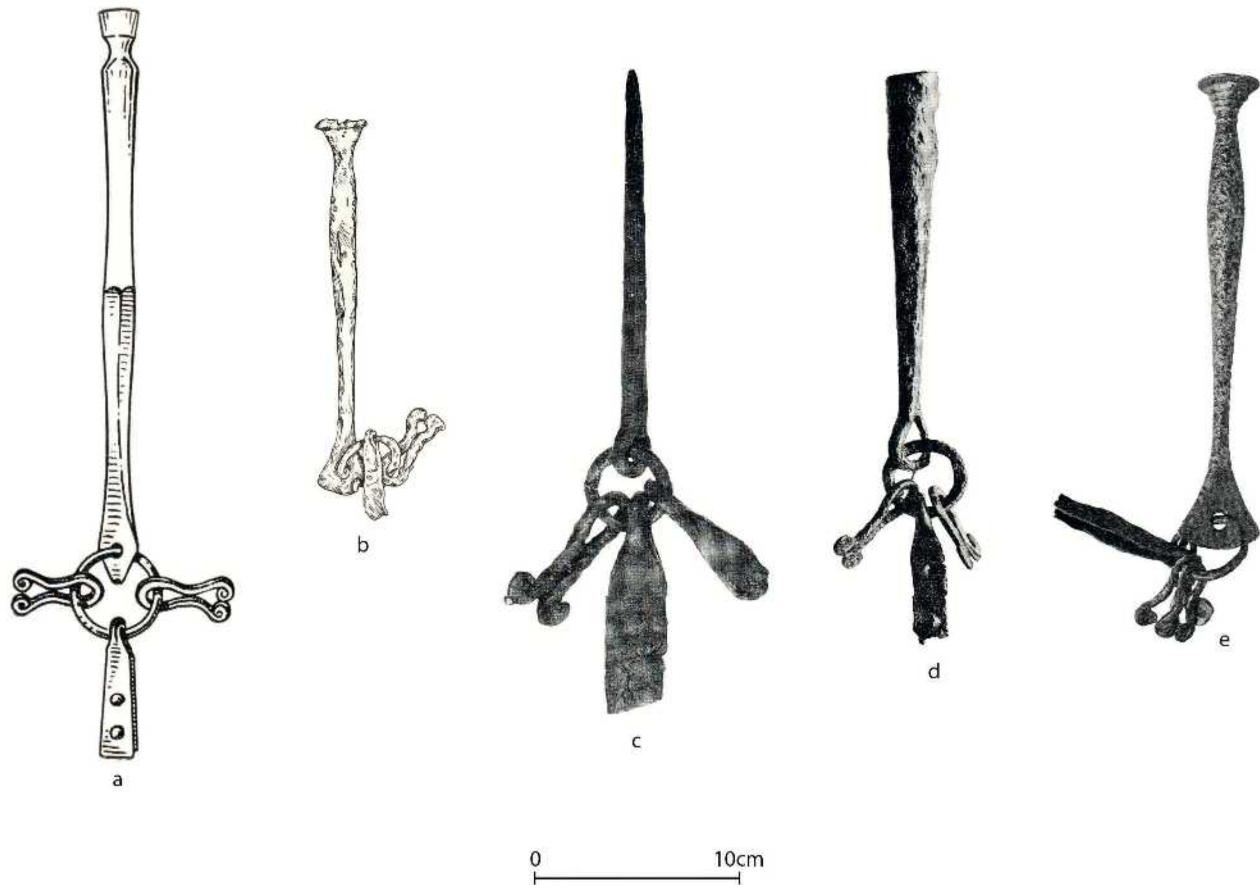

Figure 30.8 Selection of Viking Age whip-shanks from Russia (a–b) and Finland (c–e). After Kivikoski 1973; Sedov 1982: 87; Kolcin 1985: 362. Image design by Leszek Gardeła.

Norway that repeat this pattern: in the case of the staff from Øvre Hoyum eight rods encircle the central shaft, whereas the staff from Søreim has four double rods, giving a total of eight rods grouped around the shaft (Fig. 30.9).

The animal head may also have held special significance, although our understanding of it is clouded by the fact that it lacks diagnostic features that would permit a more precise determination of its species. In archaeological studies so far, it has been interpreted as either the head of a 'duck' or 'swan'[55] or more broadly as belonging to some kind of waterbird.[56] In the Old Norse system of belief, waterbirds appear to have been strongly associated with ideas of passing and the afterlife. In a recent study, Klaudia Karpińska has shown that on occasion Viking Age people were laid to rest with whole ducks and geese. Swans, on the other hand, were completely absent in burials but – as extant textual sources lead us to believe – were closely associated with the mythical *valkyrjur*. This evidence demonstrates that in the Viking mind waterbirds *did* serve as symbols, but it is challenging to determine what exactly they represented. It is highly probable that their meanings were never fixed and varied from place to place and from individual to individual.

The resemblance of the Gävle specimen to whip-shanks may also hold some special significance and allude to the idea of 'physical' and 'supernatural' movement: for instance, the peripatetic nature of certain Viking Age ritual specialists as well as their more unconventional and spiritual forms of travel to the otherworld. It is thus not completely unfathomable that, depending on the circumstances, the Gävle specimen had a dual function: on the one hand serving as a whip-shank used while journeying between farms on horseback or wagon and on the other as a magic staff employed in the course of ritual performances. It is worthy of note that the length of the shaft of the Gävle specimen corresponds closely with the length of modern Central and Eastern European leather whips known as *nahajka* which are used to this day by traditional horseback riders.

Conclusions and New Perspectives

The last twenty years of research on (magic) staffs have shown that they were some of the core accoutrements of certain kinds of Viking Age ritual specialists. The diversity of their forms and the multiplicity of their meanings are clear

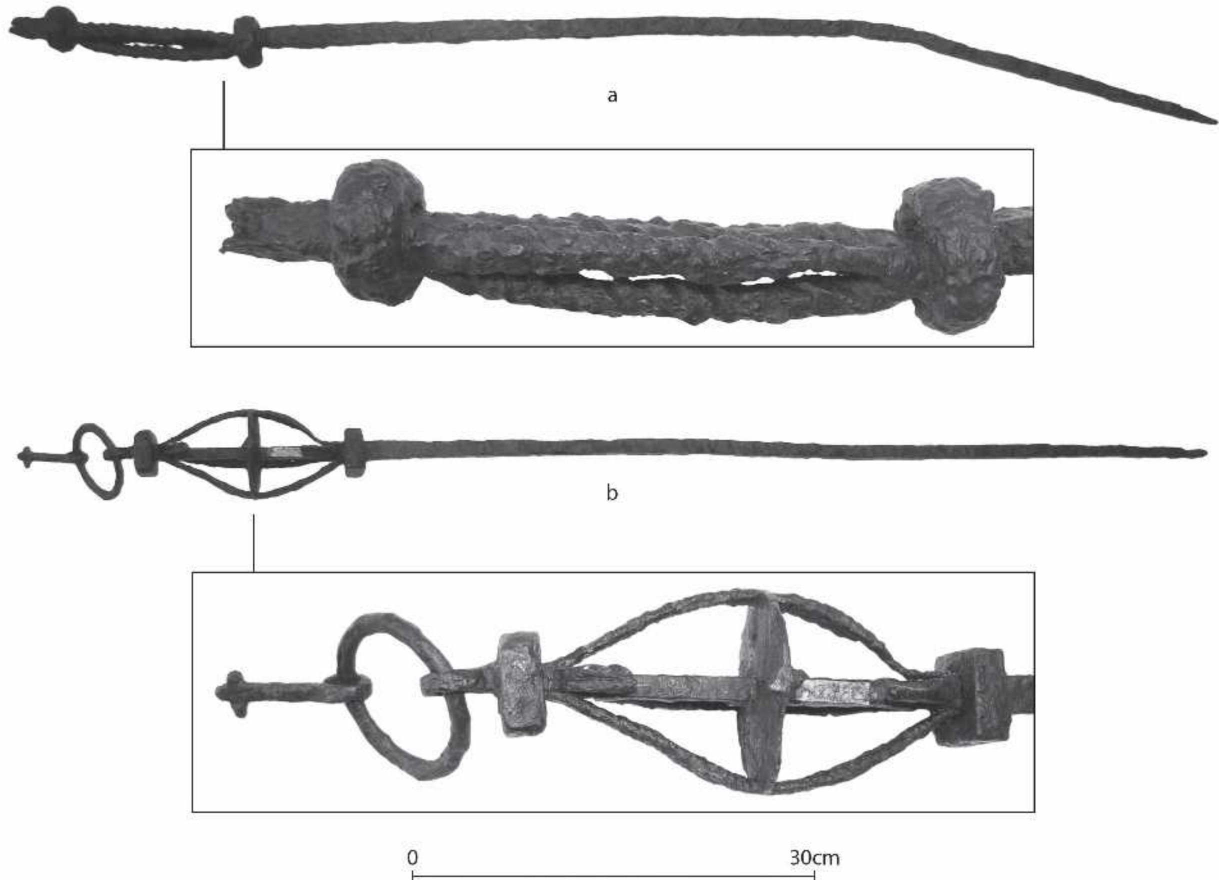

Figure 30.9 Staffs from Øvre Hoyum (a) and Søreim in Sogn og Fjordane, Norway (b). Photos by Leszek Gardeła.

both from careful analyses of their probable archaeological remains as well as from extant textual sources.

The comparative and cross-cultural evidence from prehistoric contexts and the Ancient world shows unequivocally that the idea of the magic staff had been well-established long before the Viking Age. It is not unlikely that at some point in time echoes of these old traditions reached Scandinavia and eventually affected the imagination and artistic tastes of Norse societies. The occurrence of wooden and iron staffs in both textual and archaeological sources pertaining to the Viking Age are probably the clearest signals of the potential transmission, adaptation, and transformation of old ideas.

Ultimately, this chapter has sought to demonstrate that in approaching possible (magic) staffs from archaeological contexts one should always remain cautious and critical. Not all archaeological specimens discovered in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries hold the same interpretative potential. What hampers our understanding of them is their often incomplete preservation as well as the rudimentary documentation of the contexts of their discovery. Although the staffs known to us today indeed share some morphometric similarities, each of them is essentially unique, and should be approached on a case-to-case basis. We must also keep in mind that the final decision whether or not a certain wooden stick, cane, root, or iron rod was a magic staff was always in the eye of the beholder. After all, *seiðr* and other forms of Viking Age ritual activity relied on the ability to influence and manipulate the human mind: the more convincing the ritual performer, the more powerful were the tools of their trade and the effects of their magic acts.

Notes

1. Rozwadowski 2008; Wamers 2015: 98–9.
2. Aldhouse-Green & Aldhouse-Green 2005: 73–4; Zhulnikov & Kashina 2010; Wamers 2015: 97–9.
3. Text and translation after Tolley 2009: 139–40.
4. Jakob Benediktsson 1986: 304–6; Hermann Pálsson & Edwards 1972: 116.
5. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941: 174; Hollander 2002: 174.
6. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1954; Cook 2001: 232–3.
7. Tolley 2009: 157–8.
8. Kuhn & Neckel 1983: 81; Larrington 2014: 68.
9. Kuhn & Neckel 1983: 73; Larrington 2014: 63.
10. For detailed etymological discussions of the term *gambanteinn* and personal names like Ganna and Gambara, see van Hamel

1932; Sturtevant 1956; Jarnut 1998; Reichert 1998; Simek 2006: 99; Gardeła 2016: 138–41.
11. Mierzyński 1885; Tomicki 2000; Gardeła 2016: 226–33; Szczepański 2013.
12. Guðni Jónsson 1976a: 207; Hermann Pálsson & Edwards 1985: 29.
13. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1939: 120–1; Wawn 2000: 263.
14. Orchard 2002: 197; Simek 2006: 151; Gardeła 2016: 144–6.
15. Guðni Jónsson 1976b: 322; Hermann Pálsson & Edwards 1985: 259.
16. Bugge 1965; Larrington 2014: 263–4.
17. Price 2002; 2019.
18. Gardeła 2016.
19. e.g. Brunning 2016.
20. Adolfsson & Lundström 1993; Lundström & Adolfsson 1995.
21. Price 2002; see also the second edition Price 2019. For reviews of Price's monograph, see Carver 2003; Townend 2003.
22. Heide 2006a; 2006b; 2006c.
23. Gardeła 2008; 2009; 2012; 2016.
24. For reviews of Gardeła's monograph, see Nygaard 2018; Mitchell 2020.
25. Price 2002 and updates in Price 2019.
26. Gardeła 2012; 2016.
27. Fowler 2004.
28. Brøndsted 1936.
29. Kleiminger 1993.
30. Pedersen 2014b: 28, 71.
31. e.g. Price 2002: 195; 2019: 154; Gardeła 2016.
32. On equestrian graves in the Viking world, see Braathen 1989; Pedersen 1997; 2014a; 2014b; Pedersen & Schifter Bagge 2021.
33. On stirrups in the Viking Age, see Świętosławski 1990; Pedersen 2014a.
34. Hedenstierna-Jonson *et al.* 2017; Price *et al.* 2019. See also Androshchuk 2018; Gardeła 2021.
35. Gardeła 2016.
36. Gardeła 2016; Armstrong Oma 2018.
37. Kaland 2006; Gardeła 2016.
38. Price 2002; 2019.
39. Arne 1932; Price 2002; 2019.
40. Price 2002; 2019: 100.
41. Bøgh-Andersen 1999.
42. Stylegar 2007. See also Gardeła 2016; Price 2019.
43. On stones and stoning in Norse and other cultural milieus, see Ström 1942; Gardeła 2016; 2017.
44. Gardeła 2016.
45. Brøndsted 1936.
46. Price 2002: 189.
47. Gardeła 2016.
48. Kolcin 1985: 362.
49. Sedov 1982: 87.
50. Gardeła 2008; 2016.
51. Kivikoski 1973: 87, Taf. 70.
52. Kivikoski 1973: 87, Taf. 70.
53. Sołtysiak 2003; Simek 2006; Tang 2015.
54. Gardeła 2022. See also Price 2014.
55. Gardeła 2016.
56. Karpińska in press.

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31

Necklaces and the Sorcerer's Toolkit in the Viking Age

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Viking Age necklaces meant more than meets the eye. Materials like glass, carnelian, and faience signalled access to the exotic. A stylish array indicated status among the elite. And unexpected inclusions – an uncommon set of beads, a surprising amulet, or a curious arrangement – might draw attention to the peculiarities of an assemblage or its bearer.

Medieval sources suggest that necklaces might sometimes have borne identities themselves, most notably the so-called Brísing necklace worn by the goddess Freyja in the poem *Þrymskviða*.[1] The thirteenth-century Icelandic antiquarian Snorri Sturluson explained that Freyja was so closely linked to this enigmatic necklace that the mention of one served as reference to the other.[2] A similarly named Brosing necklace associated with the king of the Goths in the Old English poem *Beowulf* implies an antiquity and spread to the idea that necklaces could possess identity.[3] And necklaces might have furnished identities to human bearers as well. Among the Franks, for example, the early medieval saints Genevieve and Balthild curated holy identities through their own connections to neckwear.[4]

Although most communities in Western Europe had abandoned wearing necklaces prior to the Viking Age, early medieval stories about Genevieve, Balthild, and the Brosing necklace continued to circulate there, indicating that necklace wearers in Northern Europe could use their neckwear to communicate not just with each other but with outsiders as well. A tenth-century metalworker's soapstone mould from Trendgården in Denmark affirms this suggestion that necklace elements could communicate religious ideas in an idiom that crossed religious divides.[5] The smith who used it could cast Thor's hammers side-by-side with Christian crosses, furnishing pendants to wearers who wanted to signal associations with either the Christian faith or a Norse alternative. The appearance, however, of non-Christian imagery in decidedly Christian contexts, such as an image of Þórr on the tenth-century stone cross at Gosforth in England, reminds us that Viking Age Christians could make use of images that we might otherwise link to adherents of a non-Christian belief system.[6] Non-Christians could presumably appropriate Christian imagery as well, troubling efforts to align artefacts with religious belief.[7]

Such observations demand a cautious approach to necklaces associated with ritual specialists from the Viking Age. Many of these ritual specialists, often known as *vǫlur* in written sources, presented themselves as female gendered through the use of material culture that could include necklace items.[8] The following discussion focuses on 25 such assemblages found with items linked to the *vǫlur* and their kind, specifically coiled snake figurines that may have served as religious amulets and iron rods that seem to have functioned as magic staffs. Attention to these assemblages yields insights into the chronological and geographical spread of ritual practices potentially linked to *seiðr* magic, the material connections that ritual specialists maintained both within and beyond their communities, and the ways in which everyday Scandinavians could have interacted with ritual specialists through the curation of shared material culture. But these assemblages also exemplify the difficulties of dealing with Viking Age necklaces and beads, and these must first be acknowledged.

Considerations

Leszek Gardeła has helped focus attention on the so-called magic staffs and snake figurines that seem to have marked some individuals as ritual specialists and magic workers during the Viking Age.[9] He has catalogued 19 archaeological finds with snake figurines, 42 with magic staffs, and two with both snake figurines and magic staffs. Necklace items accompanied 25 of these 63 finds, arising from two hoards as well as 23 out of 43 graves (Table 31.1). (The remaining 20 finds which included no necklace items came

Table 31.1 Assemblage catalogue.

No.	*Site*	*Country*	*Inventory Number*	*Context*	*Criteria*	*Beads*	*Pendants*	*Artifact Dating*	*Necklace Type*	*Necklace Dating*
1	Arnestad Sogn og Fjordane	NO	UM B7653	Cremation	Staff	4	6	900–1000		
2	Fure Sogn og Fjordane	NO	UM B4969	Cremation *chamber*	Staff	22	0	700–800	I.b	790–820
3	Gausel Rogaland	NO	UM B4233	Inhumation	Staff	6	0	850–860		
4	Gutdalen Sogn og Fjordane	NO	UM B5525	Cremation	Both	16	9	900–1000	XI.a	915–950
5	Hilde Sogn og Fjordane	NO	UM B5717 UM B5766	Cremation	Staff	6	9	900–950		
6	Hoen Buskerud	NO	KHM C750 *et al.*	Hoard	Snake	140	62	850–900	VIII.a	915–950
7	Hopperstad Sogn og Fjordane	NO	UM B4511	Cremation	Staff	25	0	850–900	IV.a	860–885
8	Kaupang Ka. 296 Vestfold	NO	KHM C5704	Inhumation *boat, multiple*	Staff	5	0	900–950		
9	Longva Møre og Romsdal	NO	UM B9471	Cremation *boat*	Snake	67	1	850–900	II/III.b	845–860
10	Myklebostad 4 Sogn og Fjordane	NO	UM B5764	Cremation *boat*	Staff	31	0	900–950	VIII.a	915–950
11	Trå Hordaland	NO	UM B6657	Inhumation *coffin*	Both	27	6	900–950	VIII.a	915–950
12	Veke Hordaland	NO	UM B6228	Inhumation *coffin*	Staff	116	1	900–950	VIII.a	915–950
13	Fyrkat 4 Nordjylland	DK	Hobro Fyrkat 4	Inhumation *wagon*	Staff	3	3	980–990		
14	Aska 1 Östergötland	SE	SHM 16560, 16429:1	Cremation	Staff	46	9	950–100	VIII.a	915–950
15	Bj. 632 Birka, Uppland	SE	SHM 34000	Inhumation *chamber*	Snake	68	17	850–1000	X.a	915–950
16	Bj. 660 Birka, Uppland	SE	SHM 34000	Inhumation *chamb., multi?*	Staff	28	3	900–1000	IX.b	960–980
17	Bj. 760 Birka, Uppland	SE	SHM 34000	Cremation	Staff	2	0	900–950		
18	Bj. 834 Birka, Uppland	SE	SHM 34000	Inhumation *chamb., multi*	Staff	6	1	925–100		

(Continued)

Table 31.1 (Continued)

No.	*Site*	*Country*	*Inventory Number*	*Context*	*Criteria*	*Beads*	*Pendants*	*Artifact Dating*	*Necklace Type*	*Necklace Dating*
19	Bj. 844 Birka, Uppland	SE	SHM 34000	Inhumation	Snake	29	7		VIII/IX.a	950–960
20	Bj. 845 Birka, Uppland	SE	SHM 34000	Inhumation *chamber*	Staff	4	3	925–1000		
21	Eketorp Öland	SE	OLM 22461, 36941	Hoard	Snake	82	22	c. 960	IX/X.a	960–980
22	Jägarbacken 15 Närke	SE	SHM 10243	Cremation	Staff	11	2	900–1000	XI.a	915–950
23	Klinta 59:3 Öland	SE	SHM 25840	Cremation	Staff	184	2	900–1000	XI.a	915–950
24	Hedeby 45 Schleswig-Holst.	DE	ALM KS Hb 11916	Inhumation *chamb., coffin*	Snake	10	3		VIII.a	915–950
25	Peel 1 Isle of Man	UK	MNH 1984-0016	Inhumation *lintel or cist*	Staff	68	0	900–1000	IX/X.a	960–980

from settlement sites, were discovered as single artefacts, or arrived in museum collections without documentation.) On the one hand, the selected assemblages likely represent only a fraction of those that could be linked to potential *seiðr* workers. On the other, the connections between these assemblages and *seiðr* work must be tested, as will be discussed below.

Necklaces occur in just over half the snake and staff burials, suggesting that *vǫlur* (and their kind) who wore necklaces stood out, even among other ritual specialists. All 25 necklace assemblages included beads, and 18 included pendants as well. Pendants were never found without beads. Altogether, these 23 graves and two hoards contained 1006 beads and 166 pendants. Individual assemblages range from two to 184 beads and zero to 62 pendants, with a median of 25 beads and three pendants, and an average of 40 beads and six pendants. These assemblages exhibit a substantial degree of variance and a distribution skewed to the right, meaning that most assemblages were middling or small but some assemblages were exceptionally large (Fig. 31.1). The two hoards rank among the largest of these assemblages in terms of beads and are the very largest in terms of pendants. Perhaps the presumed ritual specialists associated with hoards collected more beads and pendants than they were likely to wear, at least in the context of death.

Statistical approaches are, however, imprecise. The present study relies especially on publications, museum records, and photographs. Details vary, sometimes due to excavation conditions but more often due to the artefacts themselves. Some items have been fused or damaged through processes of cremation and others have been fragmented through the hazards of time or the dangers of recovery. Even well-preserved finds present problems. The unusual linking of beads and loops in a necklace from Trå, for example, indicates that beads were sometimes more than just objects on a string (Figs 31.2 and 31.3).[10] Modern efforts to divide necklaces into beads, pendants, and structural pieces like strings or spacers ultimately reflect our own systems of classification. We cannot know whether these categories would have likewise been meaningful to someone in the Viking Age.

In fact, little is known about the arrangement of most Viking Age necklaces, including the present selection. Some were disordered through cremation, others were scattered by ploughing, and still more were excavated without documentation. As such, all beads and pendants found in the surveyed assemblages are considered here, despite the fact that some of these items were not buried as necklace items. This includes not only items from the hoard assemblages mentioned above but also an uncertain number of items found in burials. In grave 4 at Fyrkat, for example, a small collection of beads and pendants were found at the individual's waist, and a unique copper bead likely functioned as part of a drawstring on a cloth or leather purse, while no necklace was found at the individual's neck.[11] Among cremation

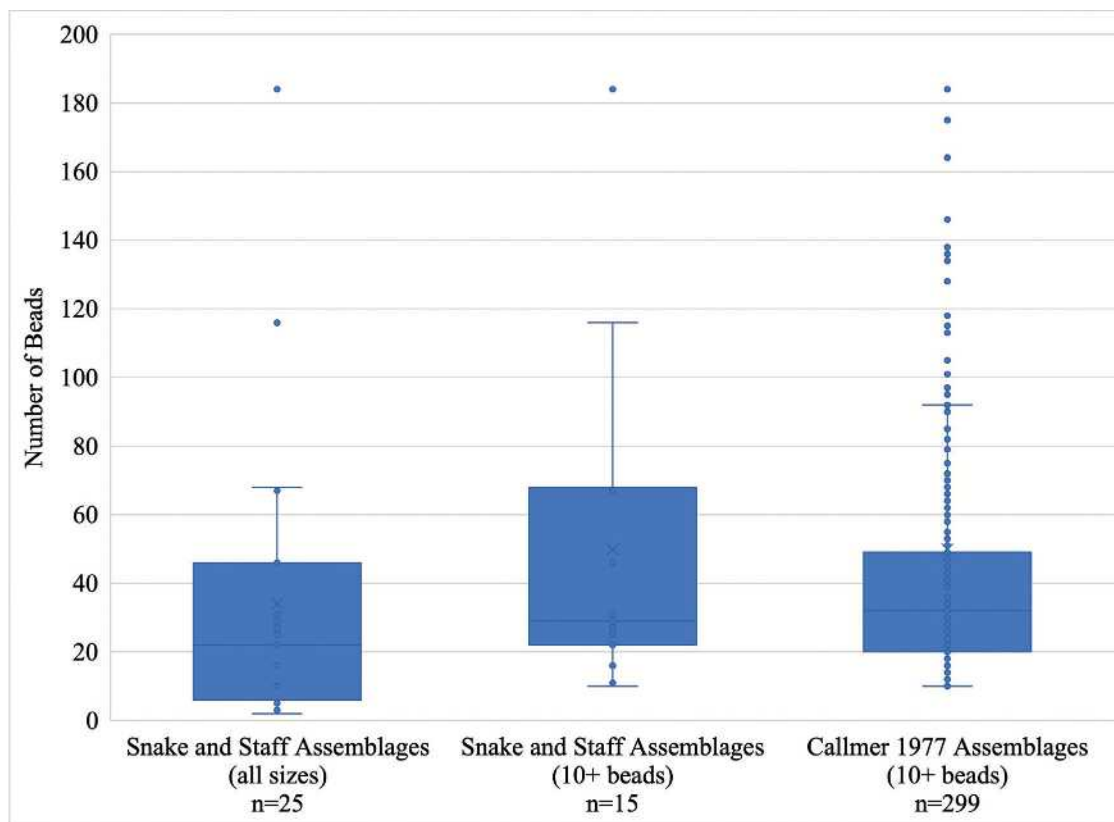

Figure 31.1 Bead assemblage sizes. This chart places the snake and staff bead assemblage sizes of this study in juxtaposition with the Callmer 1977 catalog of 299 Viking Age assemblages with ten or more beads. Note that Callmer inventoried six larger assemblages which are reflected in this analysis but fall beyond the range of the published chart. These assemblages included 243, 304, 365, 402, 603, and 1216 beads.

Figure 31.2 Interlinked bead and pendant assemblage from Trå, Norway (UM B6657). Photo by Svein Skare, University Museum of Bergen. CC BY-SA 4.0.

Figure 31.3 Loose beads from Trå, Norway (UM B6657). Photo by Svein Skare, University Museum of Bergen. CC BY-SA 4.0.

burials, conversely, we cannot typically know *whether* an item was worn, much less *where* it was worn. An inclusive consideration of necklace items thus seemed best suited to the evidence while encouraging attention to the kinds of things that beads and pendants could do for a ritual specialist other than being used just as necklace wear.

These constrains hinder efforts to identify shared characteristics that we might use to define '*vǫlva* necklace assemblages' as a type, so there is little immediate use in seeking common characteristics. Instead, the following analysis focuses on ways in which these assemblages were situated among broader trends of Viking Age necklace use. This analysis builds especially on Johan Callmer's pioneering work on Viking Age beads.[12] Ultimately, the beads and pendants surveyed for this study can tell us much, even if they were not always worn as parts of necklace groups.

In general, the assemblages in this study and the ritual specialists we might associate with them conformed to the fashions of their times. It was possible to assign Callmer types or near matches to 780 beads and general types or classes to 94 additional beads, leaving only 132 beads unclassified. Most of these unclassifiable beads had melted into lumps during the act of cremation. In addition, Callmer's system does not extend to some recurring types, including beads of bronze, silver, gold, fossil, amber, jet, and stones. A total of 56 beads fell into these categories and thus outside of Callmer's system, although they should not necessarily be considered exotic as such.

Callmer's system also makes it possible to classify assemblages of ten or more beads, based on the presence or prominence of certain bead types. It was possible to classify seventeen such assemblages of ten or more beads, including ten assemblages previously classified by Callmer himself.[13] Callmer concluded that his 32 assemblage types cluster into nine chronological Bead Periods, based on a correspondence analysis anchored to a small number of datable finds. As a consequence, attention to necklace assemblages often allows more precise dating for a burial or hoard than might otherwise be possible, permitting a unique look into the emergence and evolution of ritual practices associated with magic staffs and snake figurines.

Fure: The First *Vǫlva*?

The earliest datable assemblage comes from a cremation grave at Fure in Norway (Fig. 31.4).[14] The necklace items are undamaged by fire and were likely kept separate from the deceased until after cremation. They consist primarily

Figure 31.4 Bead assemblage from Fure, Norway (UM B4969). Photo by Svein Skare, University Museum of Bergen. CC BY-SA 4.0.

of wound glass beads, and Callmer assigned this kind of assemblage to his Bead Period I, before Near Eastern bead imports became common. Callmer initially located this period between 790 and 820, although he now suggests somewhat earlier dating for a number of associated beads.[15] An earlier date might fit well with other finds in the grave, including a Oluf Rygh type 639 disc-on-bow brooch recently dated to between 725 and 800.[16]

The beads nonetheless suggest that the Fure assemblage cannot date much earlier than 790, despite one decorated blue bead that recalled much earlier motifs. Similar beads have been found, for example, with a woman buried at Haukenes in northern Norway around the year 500 (Ts. 6362).[17] In the 700s, these decorated beads were back in vogue, being produced in large numbers by craftsworkers at Ribe, Åhus, and other sites around the Baltic.[18] Closely dated stratigraphy at Ribe indicates that these beads were made there as late as 760.[19]

But the Fure assemblage also includes two gold-foil segmented beads imported from the Near East. These beads do not appear in the Ribe stratigraphy until the 780s, though a study of burials from Bornholm suggests they might have circulated somewhat earlier among Baltic elites.[20] One further bead likewise points to eastern connections. Museum records describe this bead as a large melon bead of gilded bronze, but photographs suggest it might actually be a faience bead with copper-alloy gilding.[21] Small numbers of Egyptian faience beads in similar shapes appear across Scandinavia throughout the Middle Ages but rarely if ever with gilding.[22] If this is in fact a faience bead, then it supports the impression that the Fure necklace was assembled at a time of intensifying connections to the east, so probably in the 780s or more likely the 790s.

This locates the Fure assemblage at the very end of the 700s and at the intersection of a number of significant phenomena. The necklace helps trace links through early urban networks eastward towards the sources of glass and imported beads, but an Irish cross piece repurposed into a buckle or brooch indicates links west. The most obvious source for such a find is certainly a viking raid. The *Annals of Ulster* records the earliest known raid on Ireland in 795.[23] An axe in the assemblage suggests that the Fure woman might herself have taken a hand in such raiding, but we should be cautious in assuming violent acquisition. The cross mount itself does not indicate whether its religious potency was drained or appropriated through capture, and Gardeła has pointed out that most axes found in female graves were multipurpose tools rather than dedicated weapons, raising the possibility that they held a ritual purpose more connected to woodworking than to warcraft.[24]

The presence of a probable magic staff seemingly affirms that the Fure assemblage was gathered by someone who appreciated the significance and possible power of ritual objects, perhaps including objects of Christian origin. These need not have been acquired through violence but might instead have been obtained through peaceful means that upheld their Christian value. The cross mount might first have traveled to Norway as part of a larger assemblage carried by Irish monks in self-imposed exile and willing to distribute treasured pieces to secure protection or encourage conversion.[25] Fragments of pots and handles in the grave might indicate that the woman of Fure was buried with baptismal paraphernalia as well. This raises the possibility that the Fure woman might have promoted rituals drawn from Christian practice, though the magic staff deters us from seeing her either as a local convert or as an Irish bride with missionary aspirations.[26]

Despite these many unknowns, the Fure grave remains significant as one of our earliest traces of ritual practices presumably related to *seiðr*. Four additional finds of magic staffs seem to date from before 800 – two from the weapon burials at Hellebust[27] and Mindre-Sunde[28] in Norway, one from a lavish weapon burial at Pukkila-Isokyrö[29] in Finland, and one from what might be a ritual platform at Lille Ullevi[30] in Sweden. Although insufficient human remains have been preserved to discuss the biological sex of the deceased, survivors placed items in their graves that seem to signal attributed gender roles. The three weapon burials suggest that masculine figures dominated early ritual staff use, while the Fure burial is the only assemblage that underscores possible female roles in early rituals involving magic staffs.

Furthermore, while finds from other early staff sites are dominated by Scandinavian artefacts, the Fure necklace places the evolution of early practices of *seiðr* magic and the ritual work of *vǫlur* and their kind in interregional contexts. On the one hand, the juxtaposition of staff and cross mount indicates that staff ritual practices developed in conversation with Christian practice, plausibly but not necessarily defined through violence. On the other hand, the prominent display of recently imported gold-foil beads identifies the Fure woman as a pioneer fostering new networks of exchange that would soon redefine Norse material culture through an influx of silver, glass, and semi-precious stones. Perhaps the presumed ritual specialist of Pukkila-Isokyrö – otherwise a geographic outlier among early staff burials – likewise played a role in forging connections between Scandinavian ritual specialists and bead traders coming out of the Near East.

Other Early Assemblages: Longva and Hopperstad

Two other assemblages dated to the early Viking Age likewise suggest early *vǫlur* and their kind kept up with emerging fashions. At Longva in Norway, a woman was buried with grave goods including not only a miniature snake figure but also a necklace undamaged by the cremation rite.[31] The snake figure was probably too large (∅ 3.9 cm)

to be worn as part of a necklace as it would have dwarfed other necklace items found in her grave. It might more likely have been worn as an ornament from the woman's belt or elsewhere on her dress. It was also one of three items in the grave made from jet, which had likely arrived from England via Kaupang, where craftworkers worked it into Scandinavian designs.[32]

As at Fure, necklace beads drawn from the east help balance the attention that other artefacts cast on local craftwork and the regions of viking raiding in the west. Almost half of the Longva woman's 67 beads were made in the Near East – 25 gold-foil beads similar to those buried with the woman from Fure, as well as 12 small blue beads made by pulling or drawing glass into tubes and slicing it into discs (Fig. 31.5). In addition, there were two cylindrical beads made from rolling small pieces of mosaic glass into a tube. One of these features a green eye motif then in use for architectural ornaments and flashy serving ware in Iraq.[33]

Many of the remaining beads were simple undecorated beads dominated by shades ranging from deep green (the colour of pine leaves) to dark blue (the colour of the sea). A few less common types were also present. A large mosaic bead (∅ 1.8 cm) represented an old style of bead then losing popularity. Most of the mosaic pieces in this particular bead look like small yellow spirals on fields of blue. Beads made from similar pieces appear, for example, 300 years earlier in the Haukenes assemblage mentioned above (Ts. 6362). This spiral motif became uncommon during the Viking Age except for on Gotland, where it remained a recurring mosaic element until the early 1000s. These spiralling motifs echo the figure of the coiled jet snake. There are also four unique green beads with yellow striping that might evoke the appearance of a snake skin. Finally, a dark bead catalogued in museum records as jade is, at least at first sight, indistinguishable from the jet material of the snake figurine. These snake-like items all suggest that the Longva necklace was assembled in part to underline the buried woman's connection to the snake figurine and the ritual work it likely represented.

A unique amber pendant further supports this suggestion (Fig. 31.6). It stands out as the only necklace item made from a recognisably local material, making it an exceptional expression of local identity among an otherwise exotic assemblage. The shape of the pendant is also unique.

Figure 31.5 Bead assemblage from Longva, Norway (UM B9471). Photo by Svein Skare, University Museum of Bergen. CC BY-SA 4.0.

Figure 31.6 Amber pendant from Longva, Norway (UM B9471). Photo by Svein Skare, University Museum of Bergen. CC BY-SA 4.0.

The pendant was cut to look like the profile of a woman, evoking a form similar to those found on *guldgubber* deposited at ritual sites by earlier generations.[34] It might likewise have anticipated the form of later 'valkyrie' pendants from Sweden and Denmark.[35] The perforation was drilled so that when the pendant was worn on a necklace, it would seem to face anyone standing in front of the wearer, focusing a sort of double gaze on the viewer. But at the same time, the pendant is difficult to identify as a female figure unless seen from the side. In this way, if the pendant were looking at you, she would seem to disappear.

If the pendant were worn as part of a necklace, its flash of amber could draw a viewer's gaze towards the wearer's breast. And as the viewer's gaze focused on the details of the pendant, the ritualised female form defined largely by its prominent breast would likewise amplify the significance of the human wearer's breast as well, communicating information about not only her gender but also her age, childbearing history, and perhaps marital status as well. The pendant thus entangled the Longva woman's apparent role as a ritual worker with emphatic attention to gendered aspects of her identity, perhaps challenging or displacing the masculine connections of *seiðr* ritual practice emphasised in earlier staff burials.

One further assemblage fits criteria for classification to the ninth century. At Hopperstad in Norway, a woman was cremated while wearing a necklace made mostly from blue beads similar to those from Longva and mixed with a handful of eastern imports.[36] In this case, however, the imported beads included carnelian. Carnelian beads like these arrived in large numbers alongside rock crystal beads in similar shapes between 860 and 885. One of these Hopperstad beads lacks a perforation, suggesting that it arrived as part of a bulk shipment. The burial of an unwearable bead presents something of a mystery, but its presence in the Hopperstad grave places its bearer in close contact with an apparently direct trade with the east. Other artefacts in the grave – weighing scales, a cut Arabic dirham, and a palm-sized lump of imported glass – likewise highlight mercantile connections.

Another one of the Hopperstad carnelian beads was cut into a faceted cube similar to one found at Torksey in England, where a viking army overwintered between 872 and 873. The Torksey bead gives an important *terminus ante quem* for the arrival of such beads in Northern Europe, and it also provides a single but suggestive indication that western raiding was linked to eastern trading.[37] The Hopperstad woman perhaps helped mediate these links, as she was buried, like the Fure woman before her, not only with eastern beads that signalled trade connections but also with an axe that might have served as a weapon or ritual tool.[38]

Also, like the Fure woman, the Hopperstad woman was buried with Insular and in some cases overtly Christian artefacts. This included pieces from a reliquary that appear to have been repurposed as trading weights as well as a set of vessels and a ladle which suggest liturgical or baptismal use. Helge Sørheim raised the possibility that the Hopperstad woman was a Christian immigrant buried with her dowry, while Egil Mikkelsen has similarly suggested that the Hopperstad woman was a Christianised Norse woman or even an Irish Christian.[39] As implausible as these suggestions seem in light of the present volume, they nonetheless push us to see the Hopperstad woman in another light, as an individual in close contact with Insular Christianity and possessing an assemblage of objects consistent with those in Christian use.

In fact, the Hopperstad necklace showcases an unusual mix of eclectic things, implying that its wearer was unlikely to assimilate into a single cultural package. As at Longva, an amber artefact – here a simple bead – communicates a sense of local rootedness that stood in tension with a larger number of imported beads from the east. Two unique beads push beyond this fashionable trend in imports to suggest an overt flair for the exotic. One of these beads has been identified as chalcedony while the other was made from a sea urchin fossil (echinus). At first glance, these items might have appeared as mundane off-white beads, but if they drew closer attention, Viking Age viewers would likely have had few references to identify what they were seeing. These beads were either acknowledged as unidentifiable or recognised as extremely rare.

The Hopperstad woman's grave also included a silver bead among its assemblage. This is a recurring type of bead in the Viking Age, round and decorated with spirals wound from silver wire.[40] As part of a presumed '*vǫlva* assemblage', these spiral coils echo the coiled snake figures found in the graves of other ritual specialists. This raises the possibility that other individuals found with similar beads likewise sought to link themselves to *seiðr* ritual work, regardless of whether they themselves were ritual workers.

Among the eight snake and staff assemblages in this study that are too small to be classified according to Callmer's system, only Grave S-1883 from Gausel has also been dated to the 800s based on other artefact finds, with a narrow window of 850 to 860 seeming most likely.[41] The five glass beads are broadly consistent with this dating, while a single faience bead points to connections east. The woman's necklace fashion was thus up to date, while her brooches suggest she might have been a trendsetter. She was buried with Jan Petersen type 51 brooches, making her one of the first individuals associated with this brooch type that would continue in popularity throughout the later Viking Age.[42] The Gausel necklace thus reinforces the impression that early Viking Age *vǫlur* were innovators rather than curators of ancient tradition, at least when it came to their sense of fashion.

Tenth-century Assemblages

Very few assemblages thus date before the year 900, and this generally aligns with other chronological indicators for *seiðr*-related practices and practitioners. Neil Price, for example, has catalogued 51 magic staffs and assigned them general dates.[43] He places five of these in the 700s or earlier, six in the 800s, four around 900, 27 in the 900s, and nine in the Viking Age without any further precision. Necklace assemblages allow an ever closer look into the appearance of this tenth-century florescence.

Tenth-century snake and staff assemblages typically have a strong presence of rock crystal and carnelian imports but are more precisely classified according to other bead inclusions. Wound glass beads typically make up the majority of these assemblages, although segmented beads increasingly occur among assemblages from the later 900s. Drawn cut beads rarely occur among rock crystal and carnelian bead assemblages from the 900s, making their absence a useful indicator as well.

Callmer ultimately identified 16 different necklace types datable to the tenth century, but the majority of assemblages in this study belong to three particular types that Callmer assigned to his Bead Period VIII, all potentially dating from 915 to 950. Six fell into a group including rock crystal and carnelian beads mixed with wound glass beads typical for the early 900s, three more simply have rock crystal or carnelian beads but lack drawn cut beads that would locate them in the 800s, and one consists primarily of rock crystal and carnelian beads but lacks diagnostic types for the later 900s. Regarding later assemblages, one necklace met criteria for Callmer's Bead Period VI (950–960), and three belong to his Bead Period IX (960–980). Thus fourteen of the seventeen assemblages dated in this study fit criteria for necklaces dated to the 900s, strongly favouring the period from 915 to 950.

This suggests the emergence of one or two generations of ritual specialists tightly bound across Scandinavia during the early 900s, curating shared necklace styles despite increasing variety among their contemporaries. The fact that people across the northern world decided to bury these women with a set of broadly similar grave goods likewise suggests that they fostered common sets of ritual behaviours among their immediate survivors.

Many tenth-century assemblages point to a tension between what had been received and what would be passed on. The particular mix of beads in the Hoen assemblage from Norway, for example, fits a type dated between 915 and 950.[44] Individual items from the hoard nonetheless suggest manufacture before 875, making deposition after 900 unlikely.[45] If the hoard was in fact buried before 900, then the person who collected it showed stylistic foresight in gathering a mixture of beads that would characterise future fashions – undecorated rings of blue or colourless glass, opaque rings and melon beads in green glass, white rings decorated with red wavy lines, and black rings decorated with alternating straight and wavy lines, often in yellow and red. The Hoen assemblage thus seems to mix old styles of metalwork with new styles of glass.

Grave 45 from Hedeby in Germany shows similar tension between tradition and experiment.[46] The artefacts generally pull towards a date no later than 900. The burial was equipped, for example, with an old-fashioned set of brooches classified as Petersen type 23. The style of these brooches harkened back to the so-called Berdal brooch series popular at the very beginning of the Viking Age, though the appearance of these brooches in Iceland indicate circulation as heirlooms or else continued production into the late 800s when Iceland was settled.[47] But the bead assemblage points to a later date, falling in the same Callmer category as the Hoen Hoard and so plausibly between 915 and 950. The burial ritual was likewise forward looking, as the woman of Hedeby 45 was buried with lavish grave goods in a wagon, a burial rite that became more popular in the later 900s.[48]

If early tenth-century assemblages point to shared fashions, behaviours, and a sense of community among the *vǫlur* and their kind before 950, four later assemblages suggest the networks that bound these women failed thereafter. This group consists of two burials from Birka in Sweden (Bj. 660[49] and Bj. 844[50]), the Eketorp Hoard[51] also from Sweden, and Grave 1 at Peel[52] on the Isle of Man in the Irish Sea.

Despite the strong chance that the Birka women were contemporaries and knew each other, their necklaces reflect different fashions (→ **Chapter 26**). The woman of Bj. 844 was buried with a necklace of rock crystal and carnelian as well as some wound bead types characteristic of the early 900s, but the presence of segmented and drawn cut beads indicate shifting trends characteristic of the period between 950 and 960. The woman of Bj. 660, however, established only tenuous links to the early 900s through a single rock crystal bead and a small number of wound beads echoing earlier styles. Her necklace instead featured a large number of segmented beads that had been relatively rare for preceding generations, suggesting that her burial occurred after new import preferences took over between 960 and 980.

The Eketorp Hoard and the Peel assemblage, meanwhile, both include a few large black beads decorated with eyes and interwoven wavy lines, but they lack few other comparable items despite both being large assemblages. Callmer recognised these black decorated beads as characteristic of the period between 960 and 980, a time in which many assemblages including the Eketorp Hoard and the Peel burial share few other common features. Late snake and staff burials thus conform to broader Scandinavian patterns in which necklace fashions diverged across the northern world, suggesting that the social networks that had facilitated shared sensibilities were likewise dissolving.

Figure 31.7 Select bronze pendants from Gutdalen, Norway (UM B5525). The Arnestad assemblage includes five bronze pendants that match the three in this image, as well as a single bearded face pendant matching the two on the bottom left. Photo by Svein Skare, University Museum of Bergen. CC BY-SA 4.0.

Regarding undated assemblages, the Gausel Grave S-1883 has already been discussed above as likely belonging to the 800s. Most other undated necklaces likely belong to the early 900s. The assemblage from Arnestad[53] in Norway, for example, is too small to classify, but it included pendants nearly identical to those buried with the Gutdalen[54] assemblage in Norway (Fig. 31.7), which meets criteria for necklaces buried between 915 and 950 (→ **Chapter 27**). Metal artefacts meanwhile suggest dates between 900 and 950 for the burials of Ka. 296[55] at Kaupang and Hilde[56] in Norway, as well as Bj. 760[57] at Birka in Sweden. For graves Bj. 834[58] and Bj. 845[59] from Birka, coins from the graves indicate they cannot have been buried earlier than 925. Only grave 4 at Fyrkat must date to the later 900s, based on its association with a ring fort built there by Harald Bluetooth around the 980s.[60] Graves with undated assemblages thus add further support to the impression that ritual practices associated with staffs and snakes peaked in the early 900s but diverged along with the social networks that had united them during the later 900s.

The implied florescence of ritual practices associated with the *vǫlur* and their kind in the early 900s allows consideration of how *seiðr* interacted with other Viking Age phenomena. Price has argued that *seiðr* was an essential element in the mindsets that normalised and encouraged viking violence, but western records of viking violence crescendo in the late 800s and taper off by the early 900s. Violence that does occur in the 900s is better associated with Norse communities living abroad rather than with the Scandinavian communities that buried many of the assemblages featured here in the early 900s. At first appearance, then, the necklace chronology suggests that these ritual specialists were in the wrong place at the wrong time for connections to viking violence.

Three factors mitigate this suggestion. First, the earliest assemblages are few but span a broad period of time, suggesting continuities unseen in the archaeological record. Second, the early assemblages at Fure and Hopperstad yielded objects best understood as relics of viking raiding, including not only Insular artefacts likely taken as plunder but also axes that might have been used as weapons. Possible weapons or shields also appear in assemblages from Gausel Grave S-1883, Hilde, Ka. 296, and Myklebostad Mound 4[61] from Norway, as well as from Bj. 834 and Klinta 59:3[62] from Sweden. Finally, Gardeła has argued that snake figurines could circulate for generations before burial.[63] The necklace assemblages point in the opposite direction as the individuals connected to the Hoen Hoard and Hedeby 45 seem to have been pioneers for new fashions. Thus some of the assemblages here dated to the 900s might in fact have been buried somewhat earlier during the peak of viking violence, while the subsequent burial of magic staffs and snake figures suggest abandonment of ritual practices associated with the *vǫlur* and their kind at the same time that broad Scandinavian involvement in viking raiding was likewise coming to an end.

Thinking Through Assemblages

Attention to assemblages and assemblage groups thus provides insight into the overarching dynamics of ritual practices associated with *vǫlur* and their kind, while individual items like the Longva pendant provide additional clues. Human forms are in fact a recurring theme, but there are few shared characteristics aside from the significant exceptions of Arnestad and Gutdalen. These burials included matching sets of bearded face pendants and round pendants featuring coiling designs. A bearded head also appears in three dimensions as a pendant in the Aska Mound 1 assemblage.[64] And bearded male heads appear on coins worn as pendants in the Bj. 632,[65] Hoen, and Veke[66] assemblages as well.

In addition to these examples of male head figures, four full male figures appear on pendants – one on the crucifix of Bj. 660, one on a pendant with a man gripping a snake in Bj. 845, one as a figure gripping a sword at his waist in the Eketorp Hoard, and one on a pendant with a kneeling and perhaps praying figure from Klinta 59:3. The Hoen

Figure 31.8 Silver pendant from Aska Mound 1 (SHM 16429: 1). Photo by Gabriel Hildebrand, Swedish History Museum. CC BY 2.5 SE.

Hoard meanwhile yields two ambiguous references to the human form – a plate pendant decorated with an interlace incorporating human elements and an oval pendant set with an old Roman satyr intaglio. Only the amber pendant from Longva and a silver pendant from Aska Mound 1 (Fig. 31.8) evoke feminine forms. As previously discussed, the Longva pendant likely drew attention to its wearer's necklace and breast. Similarly, the Aska pendant features a woman wearing beads and a brooch, leading some researchers to consider it a representation of Freyja wearing the Brísing necklace.[67]

Eleven assemblages thus feature human forms on 24 different pendants, including 12 coin pendants. Twenty represent male forms, two are ambiguously gendered and only human-like, and two represent female forms. Among the four full male figures, Christian connections are clearest in the crucifix of Bj. 660, while the Klinta pendant seems to feature a praying man and the Eketorp figure may have been taken from a reliquary.[68] Only the man gripping a snake on the Bj. 845 pendant seems to engage with imagery potentially related to *seiðr* practices. Conversely, both female pendants seem to evoke ritual connections – the Longva pendant by recalling *guldgubber* ritual deposits and the Aska pendant by plausibly portraying Freyja and her famous necklace. It thus seems that the *vǫlur* and their kind sometimes used female imagery to highlight their roles as *seiðr* workers, while male imagery likely served more diverse purposes. Male figures, in contrast, might have used female elements to help signal *seiðr* associations. Most notably, a silver figurine from Lejre in Denmark thought to represent Óðinn features a necklace depicted in almost exactly the same form as the necklace on the Aska pendant.[69]

References to other living forms are rare. The belt assemblage from Fyrkat included a pendant with three silver plaques resembling bird's feet attached by chains – analogies are known in the Western Slavic area (→ **Chapters 23–24** and **29**). Five long pendants from Aska fit a type sometimes described as animal claws or feet. The Aska burial also included an open-worked pendant featuring a beast. More ambiguously, animal interlace or gripping beast motifs appear on six pendants in the Hoen Hoard and three pendants in the Eketorp Hoard. Only snakes occur regularly, appearing as pendants in the Bj. 632, Bj. 844, Eketorp, Gutdalen, Hedeby 45, Hoen, and Trå assemblages. The pendant with a man gripping a snake in Bj. 845 might also be added to this list, while the jet snake from Longva was probably too large to be worn as a pendant. The figures of coiled snakes found in eight necklace assemblages thus stand in stark contrast to the scarcity and diversity of other animal imagery, reaffirming their presumed ritual significance.

Chair pendants also seem to have communicated special meanings. These have been found among the Bj. 632, Bj. 844, Eketorp, and Fyrkat 4 assemblages. Other pendants that might reference *seiðr* ritual practice include concave pendants that have been classified and described in somewhat divergent terms. The Hoen Hoard contains three pendants described as domes and three as sieves or strainers while Hedeby 45 included three bowls. Given the frequent occurrence of weapons in snake and staff graves – including eight in this study[70] – a shield pendant in Bj. 844 might also evoke roles commonly associated with *vǫlur* and their kind.[71]

More explicit religious references – Thor's hammers and Christian crosses – pose even greater difficulties in interpretation. Despite the popularity of Thor's hammers among neo-pagans today, crosses and crucifixes appear more frequently among the assemblages here. The clearest examples are the crucifix of Bj. 660, a Byzantine cross in the Eketorp assemblage, another pendant from the Eketorp assemblage with a cross scratched into its back, a plate pendant featuring a cross as its central motif in the Hedeby 45 assemblage, and a cruciform piece taken from a larger object in the Hoen Hoard. Additional gestures towards Christianity might be seen in the male figure praying on a pendant in the Klinta necklace, while other items found in the grave include a pair of cruciform fittings.

Thor's hammers are meanwhile found in three assemblages, but there is no indication that these were worn as necklace items.[72] At Hilde, nine Thor's hammers were kept on a ring likely kept separate from the necklace,[73] while four

were found on a similar ring in the Klinta assemblage.[74] Only one Thor's hammer could have been worn as a pendant, and this was found in the Eketorp Hoard, which included more pendants than were likely to be worn, at least among the burials in this survey. This imbalance challenges the assumption that Thor's hammers spread as a pagan counterpoint to the Christian cross, and it especially discourages us from seeing any special connections between the presumed ritual specialists studied here and a purported cult of Þórr.[75]

Unexpectedly, one of the largest groups of pendants – and one often closely linked to religious practice – involved references to literacy. Most notably, the Hoen Hoard included a sort of link inscribed with the Greek prayer, 'Lord, help thy servant John'. Clasps possibly taken from books were repurposed as pendants in the Bj. 632, Bj. 844, and Bj. 845 assemblages. Text appears on many of the 12 Christian coin pendants mentioned above, including some with the Carolingian motto 'Christian religion', while six graves included Arabic coins bearing the Islamic statement of faith or *shahada*. Other artefacts from these assemblages also point to literacy, including what may be a manuscript pointer in the Eketorp assemblage,[76] a bowl with an Old Norse inscription rendered 'into the hand basin' (*i muntlauku*) from Ka. 296,[77] copper strips with an indecipherable runic inscription that might be a ritual invocation from Klinta 59:3,[78] and a bronze vessel and ladle with a cryptic inscription perhaps referencing writing in the Trå assemblage.[79] It appears that Norse ritual specialists recognised the religious potential of the written word and curated their own version of literate connections and religious authority.[80]

Altogether, this evidence suggests that necklaces associated with snakes and staffs can tell us much about *vǫlur* and their kind, even if the necklaces themselves do not seem to have been seen as essential elements of *seiðr* ritual practice. Nonetheless, beads occasionally appear to have communicated esoteric knowledge or served a ritual purpose. In some cases, this is due to their unusual arrangement, whether as linking items in the Trå assemblage or as groups of similar beads looped together into pendants that hung like miniature necklaces. These necklaces-in-necklaces occur in the Bj. 632, Hoen, and Trå assemblages, and possibly in the Peel assemblage as well. The Hoen Hoard's largest such loop featured nine white glass beads, perhaps invoking a number of special significance paralleled by the nine Thor's hammers at Hilde and the nine copper alloy pendants at Gutdalen.[81] The assemblage from Bj. 632 meanwhile includes one ring with five green beads and another with three green beads. But other examples include only one bead, or else they mix colours and materials, such as a red glass bead paired with an amber bead and a unique silver pendant-on-a-pendant in the Trå assemblage. Furthermore, these beads on loops seem especially vulnerable to fragmentation or loss, as excavation records of the Bj. 632 beads, for example, diverge significantly from the assemblage as it survives today.

Necklace items were also sometimes used with ritual purpose, as suggested by their occasional discovery in unusual places. Most frequently, this involves beads or pendants located at the waist and presumably worn from the belt. Excavations indicate that this was the case at Bj. 660, Fyrkat 4, and Peel. The unperforated bead from Hopperstad provides another likely candidate, and rings with Thor's hammers found at Hilde and Klinta 59:3 might also belong to this group.

The Bj. 834 burial, meanwhile, made unique use of beads in ways that seem to have little to do with dress. A first individual seems to have been seated in a chair along with a few associated finds suggesting male gender. These finds included several beads made from bronze wire wound into spiral tubes. A second individual seems to have sat on the first individual's lap wearing jewellery that signalled female gender, including two faience beads. At their feet, a chest or box was placed along with a segmented yellow bead. Beyond that, a single yellow bead accompanied two horses slaughtered and buried at the foot of the grave. There may be no sure explanations for these specific bead placements, but it is nonetheless significant that beads could play an important role in large and complicated burial rites that also required attention to detail.

Finally, a small selection of unusual beads suggests that necklace items were sometimes curated for their uniqueness or rarity. The Fure burial included what might be a gilt faience bead, and faience beads also occur at Bj. 834, Gausel, Peel, and Trå. The Longva jade or jet bead is paralleled by a jet bead at Peel. Other stone beads – in addition to the common carnelian and rock crystal types – include a melon bead of pink stone from Arnestad, the chalcedony bead from Hopperstad, and a whetstone pendant from Jägarbacken Grave 15.[82] Fossil beads were found at Hopperstad (echinus) and Peel (ammonite).

A few other necklace items seem to have been reserved for use in small numbers. This includes necklace items made from amber, with one bead at Hopperstad, one bead and one female figure pendant at Longva, four beads with the necklace and two at the waist at Peel, one bead at Trå, and three beads at Veke. Silver beads might also have been used with pious restraint, with single silver beads occurring at Bj. 660, Hedeby 45, Hilde, Hopperstad, and Myklebostad Mound 4. Only the Eketorp Hoard contained more – 17 silver spheres, two silver bicones, and six beads of wound silver wire – providing yet another indication that hoarded items do not represent necklaces as such. Bronze beads could likewise have been worn frequently but are found only at Bj. 834 and Fyrkat 4 in small numbers.

Conclusion

Necklace assemblages thus allow a closer look at ritual practices associated with *vǫlur* and their kind among the

larger dynamics of the Viking Age. Although early staffs were found mostly with grave goods suggesting male burials, women seem to have established themselves as ritual workers over the course of the 800s as viking violence intensified. These women were sometimes linked to items likely plundered on raids as well as to weapons that could evoke this violence. At the same time, they embedded themselves in evolving urban networks that furnished imported goods from the east. They thus established themselves as trendsetters in both fashion and ritual practice, fostering shared material culture and shared behaviors that bound northern communities together through the peak periods of viking violence. But when viking violence began to ebb around the year 900, so too may the significance of the Norse sorcerers. By the year 950, many had been buried with the tools of their ritual work, suggesting an abandonment of the forms of *seiðr* that the *vǫlur* and their kind had fostered.

Although necklaces do not seem to have featured as essential elements in the sorcerer's toolkit, necklace items occasionally occur in contexts that suggest ritual use, while some ritual specialists or their survivors used necklaces to emphasise the gendered dimension of *seiðr* work. Thor's hammers are unexpectedly absent among these assemblages, whereas Christian connections occur with surprising frequency. Perhaps this should lead us to question parallels between magic staffs and bishops' crooks, chair miniatures and a bishop's cathedral seat, or monastic control over manuscript production and the many references to textual culture found among snake and staff assemblages. Necklaces thus help us think about the many connections available to *vǫlur* and their kind, and the choices they made played a role in shaping many developments we consider definitive to the Viking Age today.

Notes

1. *Þrymskviða* (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I: 422–7; Larrington 2014: 93–7). See also Arrhenius 2009.
2. *Skáldskaparmál*, ch. 20 (Byock 2005: 111–12; Faulkes 1998: 30). Snorri named Freyja as 'eigandi Brísingamens'. Loki, conversely, could be referred to as 'þjófr Brísingamens' ('thief of the Brísing necklace'), while Heimdallr was recalled for having fought with Loki over the necklace (*Skáldskaparmál*, chs 8 and 16; Byock 2005: 110–11; Faulkes 1998: 19–20).
3. Tolley 1996: 84–5; Fulk, Bjork & Niles 2008: 42 (verses 1192–201).
4. Yorke 2011.
5. Wamers 1997: 91.
6. Wamers 1997: 98–9.
7. Jensen 2010: 65–76, 139–41; Nordeide 2011: 38, 235–44.
8. O'Sullivan 2015; Price 2019: 172–82.
9. Gardeła 2016; 2020.
10. Callmer 1977: no. 43; Kaland 2006; Gardeła 2016: 316; 2020: 43–4; Price 2019: 150; UniMus 2021.
11. Roesdahl 1977: 83–104; Pentz *et al.* 2009; Gardeła 2016: 345; Price 2019: 105–14.
12. Callmer 1977; 1991; 1997; 2003; 2007; 2018; Delvaux 2017; 2022.
13. Namely: Aska Mound 1 (= Callmer 1977: no. 132), Bj. 632 (no. 249), Bj. 660 (no. 257), Bj. 844 (no. 272), Fure (no. 51), Klinta 59:3 (121), Longva (no. 66), Myklebostad Mound 4 (no. 60), Trå (no. 43), and Veke (no. 45). Callmer's classifications have been checked and in some cases corrected. Most notably, Callmer's inventory for Bj. 632 recorded 16 beads of type B056 (black wound beads decorated with stripes). With reference to images and other records of the assemblage at Historiska museet 2011a, this seems to be a bookkeeping error for 16 beads of type T007 (carnelian faceted cube beads), implying that the Bj. 632 assemblage should be reclassified from type IV.a (per Callmer 1977) to type X.a.
14. Callmer 1977: no. 51; Gardeła 2016: 290; Price 2019: 149–50; UniMus 2021.
15. Callmer 2007: 94; 2018.
16. Rygh 1885; Glørstad & Røstad 2015: 182–91.
17. Stamsø 1979; UniMus 2021.
18. Callmer & Henderson 1991; Callmer 1997; Sode 2004.
19. Feveile & Jensen 2006.
20. Høilund Nielsen 1987; 1997; Jørgensen & Nørgård Jørgensen 1997; Delvaux 2017; 2022.
21. UniMus 2021.
22. Callmer 1977; 2018: 35.
23. Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill 1983: 250–1 (s.a. 795.3); Downham 2017: 3–4.
24. Gardeła 2021a: 81–6; 2021b. The museum catalog at UniMus 2021 compares the Fure axe to Rygh type 559. This bearded axe type corresponds to Petersen type B, dated to the 700s, in Petersen 1919: 38, 40. Gardeła has noted no further examples of Viking Age women buried with Petersen type B axes.
25. Heen-Pettersen 2019; Mikkelsen 2019.
26. Compare discussion of the Hopperstad woman below, with reference to Sørheim 2011: 47; Mikkelsen 2019: 69–71. Among the Norwegian snake and staff burials, possible baptismal gear was also found at Hilde, Hopperstad, and Trå (Mikkelsen 2019).
27. Gardeła 2016: 296; Price 2019: 151.
28. Gardeła 2016: 304; Price 2019: 152.
29. Hackman 1938; Gardeła 2016: 345; Price 2019: 154.
30. Gardeła 2016: 345–6; Price 2019: 153.
31. Callmer 1977: no. 66; Gardeła 2020: 42; UniMus 2021.
32. Mainman & Rogers 2000: 2469–73, 2498–500; Resi 2011: 125.
33. Carboni & Whitehouse 2001: 147–53.
34. Mannering 2017: 17–70. In some cases on *guldgubber*, an outer garment such as a cloak divides the profile of a female figure at her upper torso, accentuating the outline of her breast.
35. Gardeła 2021a: 117–24. I thank Leszek Gardeła for this comparison.
36. Sørheim 2011: 32–42; Gardeła 2016: 300–1; Price 2019: 154–5; UniMus 2021.
37. Jarman 2021.
38. Gardeła 2021a: 81–6; 2021b. The Hopperstad axe compares with Rygh 557 or Petersen type A. This type is better

understood as a woodworking axe or hoe rather than as a battle axe.
39. Sørheim 2011: 47; Mikkelsen 2019: 69–71.
40. Duczko 1985: 72–8.
41. Børsheim 2001: 165–80, with dating at 72–8. See further Sørheim 2011: 17–28; Gardeła 2016: 292; Price 2019: 114–16; UniMus 2021.
42. Petersen 1928; Jansson 1985; Skibsted Klæsøe 1999.
43. Price 2019: 164–5. Compare Gardeła 2016: 116–17.
44. Fuglesang & Wilson 2006; Gardeła 2020: 31, 44–5; UniMus 2021.
45. Wilson 2006: 15–17.
46. Arents & Eisenschmidt 2010a; 2010b: 33–6; Gardeła 2020: 44.
47. Petersen 1928: 20–1.
48. Arents & Eisenschmidt 2010a: 194–7, 306, 340. For present purposes, the most notable comparison is Fyrkat 4 from the 980s.
49. Arbman 1940; 1943: 231–3; Callmer 1977: no. 257; Historiska museet 2011a; Gardeła 2016: 324, 326; Price 2019: 85–8.
50. Arbman 1940; 1943: 317–19; Callmer 1977: no. 272; Historiska museet 2011a; Gardeła 2020: 38–9.
51. Ekelund 1956; Burström 2020; Gardeła 2020: 45; DigitaltMuseum 2022.
52. Holgate 1987; Freke 2002; Gardeła 2016: 48, 346; Price 2019: 118.
53. Gardeła 2016: 288; Price 2019: 150; UniMus 2021.
54. Gardeła 2016: 294; 2020: 39–42; Price 2019: 152; UniMus 2021.
55. Blindheim & Heyerdahl-Larsen 1995: 25, pl. 10; Stylegar 2007: 95–9; Price 2010: 126–31; 2019: 113–14; Gardeła 2016: 312; UniMus 2021.
56. Petersen 1951: 432, 458; Gardeła 2016: 298–9; Price 2019: 150; UniMus 2021.
57. Arbman 1940; 1943: 277–8; Historiska museet 2011a; Gardeła 2016: 326; Price 2019: 84–5.
58. Arbman 1940; 1943: 304–8; Historiska museet 2011a; Gardeła 2016: 330–1; Price 2019: 88–95.
59. Arbman 1940; 1943: 319–20; Historiska museet 2011a; Gardeła 2016: 332–3; Price 2019: 95–6.
60. Pentz *et al.* 2009.
61. Callmer 1977: no. 60; Gardeła 2016: 306; Price 2019: 150–1; UniMus 2021.
62. Callmer 1977: no. 121; Historiska museet 2011b; Gardeła 2016: 342–3; Price 2019: 96–103.
63. Gardeła 2020: 53.
64. Callmer 1977: no. 132; Historiska museet 2011b; Gardeła 2016: 322–323; Price 2019: 103–5.
65. Arbman 1940; 1943: 210–13; Callmer 1977: no. 249; Historiska museet 2011a; Gardeła 2020: 37–9.
66. Callmer 1977: no. 45; Gardeła 2016: 320; Price 2019: 155 (catalogued as Veka); UniMus 2021.
67. Regarding the disc-on-bow brooch featured on this amulet, see Glørstad & Røstad 2020: 99–100.
68. Burström 2020: 254.
69. Christensen 2013: 71–2; Pesch 2018: 476–7.
70. Namely: Bj. 834 (sword, seax, spear, arrows, and shield, all presumed buried with a male in this double burial), Fure (axe), Gausel (shield), Hilde (shield), Hopperstad (axe), Ka. 296 (axe and shield, with other weapons also appearing in this multi-person grave), Klinta 59:3 (axe), and Myklebostad Mound 4 (spear).
71. Gardeła & Odebäck 2018.
72. More generally, see Jensen 2010: 65–72, 75–6.
73. Gardeła 2016: 298; Price 2019: 150.
74. Gardeła 2016: 342–3; Price 2019: 96–103.
75. For further critique, see Nordeide 2006; 2011: 38, 235–44.
76. Burström 2020: 257.
77. Stylegar 2007: 97.
78. Price 2019: 99.
79. Kaland 2006: 356–7.
80. Pentz 2022.
81. Gardeła 2022.
82. Hansson 1995; Historiska museet 2011b; Gardeła 2016: 338–9; Price 2019: 152–3.

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32

Miniature Chairs: On Seeresses, the Future, and Conflict

Mads Dengsø Jessen

Chair Pendants

Viking Age miniature pendants resembling small chairs have been registered in noteworthy find-contexts such as richly furnished graves and elaborate votive offerings, but also lately as metal detector finds (see Table 32.1; Figs 32.1, 32.2, and 32.3[1]). In cases where it has been possible to define the sex of the interred person, we always find a female. This has been taken as an indication that the chair pendants were part of the ritual life of *vǫlur*, female seeresses, and was part of their ritual paraphernalia.[2] But the chair shape itself has also been seen as a reference to the throne of Óðinn, as well as earthly kings.[3]

In this chapter, an examination that considers the morphology of the pendants, their find-contexts and possible use will be conducted. On this basis, an interpretation is presented that highlights the social position and divinatory capabilities of the females found with miniature chairs, as well as their possible roles in administering the social negotiation of 'the future' and of immanent threats.

Parallels and Morphology

Chair pendants have been found in more than 18 localities in different parts of southern Scandinavia and Schleswig-Holstein (the northernmost part of Germany). So far, they have only been found here.[4] With regard to their overall physical attributes, two different designs of chair pendants can be distinguished: 1) box-shaped and 2) barrel-shaped (Table 32.1). When it comes to the plastic adornment of the chair, the box-shaped design constitutes the more extravagant type of chair pendants. These regularly exhibit animal heads, ornaments, armrests, or other forms of intricate adornments. Within the box-shaped category, the Hedeby I [8], Mysselhøjgaard [2], and Nybølle [6] pendants follow an analogous design with a seated person (preserved on the two latter exemplars, but interpreted as missing on the Hedeby I [8] pendant)[5] on a seemingly oversized chair, accompanied by beasts and birds.[6] Other box-shaped chairs, such as Gudme [4], Tolstrup [7], and Birka Bj. 844 [12], are more neutral in their appearances, and these specimens are not much more than a low seat with just the indication of a backrest. These also seem to represent a more basic type of furniture making – they resemble stools rather than actual chairs. The Eketorp [14] and Agder [22] finds can be understood as exhibiting a sort of intermediate form of design that combines the ornamented surface of the more elaborate chairs and the low profiles of the simpler type. On the former, the seat is covered in a geometric ornament and the backrest is left plain, whereas the latter has a plain seat while the backrest shows an organic interlacing around its corners. All of the registered pendant chairs that can be ascribed to the box-shaped type are cast in silver,[7] and occasionally they show some kind of secondary processing. For example, the Mysselhøjgaard pendant has panels with niello inlay, and the Nybølle [6], Eketorp [14], and Agder [22] chairs show traces of gilding.

By contrast, the other type, the barrel-shaped pendants, are virtually identical and share very similar physical characteristics: a cut-out cylinder with a flat seat, no armrest, and an oval backrest that usually transitions smoothly into the rim of the seat. However, since exemplars of this type are found in silver, copper alloy, amber, bone, and antler, they cover quite a diverse range of materials. Also, the mode of production differs, and they may be carved, cast, and folded together from sheets of metal. Regarding their adornment, there is also a high degree of diversity, and the examples from Bornholm [1], Fyrkat [2], Gravlev [3], Birka Bj 632 [11], and the two finds from Fölhagen A/B [16, 17] all have

Table 32.1 Catalogue of chair pendants from Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Germany. The catalogue is an elaborated and updated version of the catalogue found in Jensen 2010.

No.	*Location*	*Design*	*Material*	*Context*	*Museum Number*
			DENMARK		
1.	Bornholm	Barrel	Silver	Hoard	NM 25580
2.	Fyrkat	Barrel	Silver	Grave, female	NM D165-1966
3.	Gravlev	Barrel	Silver	Hoard	Dnf. 10/04
4.	Gudme	Box	Silver	Settlement	FSM 6205/X55
5.	Mysselhøjgård	Box	Silver	Settlement	ROM 6410PX455
6.	Nybølle	Box	Silver	Detector find	C53078
7.	Tolstrup	Box	Silver	Hoard	NMI, C6676
			GERMANY		
8.	Hedeby I	Box	Silver	Grave, female	ALM KS Hb W394
9.	Hedeby II	Barrel	Bone	Private stray find	SH1979-221.1
			SWEDEN		
10.	Barshalder	Barrel	Amber	Grave, female	SHM 32181:8
11.	Birka Bj. 632	Barrel	Silver	Grave, female	SHM 34000 Bj. 632
12.	Birka Bj. 844	Box	Silver	Grave, female	SHM 34000 Bj. 844
13.	Birka Bj. 968	Barrel	Silver	Grave, female	SHM 34000 Bj. 968
14.	Eketorp	Box	Silver	Hoard	ÖLM 224617
15.	Folkeslunda	Barrel	Antler	Grave, female	SHM 35077/59
16.	Fölhagen A	Barrel	Silver	Hoard	SHM 3547
17.	Fölhagen B	Barrel	Silver	Hoard	SHM 3547
18.	Sandgårde	Barrel	Bronze	Grave, ?	SHM 21187
19.	Store Ihre	Barrel	Amber	Grave, female	SHM 22917:242B
20.	Unprovenanced	Barrel	Bronze	–	SHM 876
			NORWAY		
21.	Sarpsborg	Barrel	Silver	Detector find	C62189
22.	Agder	Box	Silver	Detector find	A2021/500

decorative filigree and (possible) gilding in intricate designs that at times cover the entire pendant. Other exemplars have rather disorganised circular stamps, as can be seen on, for example, Birka Bj. 968 [13]. The specimens made from copper alloy [18, 20] and organic material [10, 19] are simpler as they only rarely display any kind of decoration.[8]

However, the production of the pendants must have been more complicated than the somewhat mundane materials indicate at first glance, especially when softer material such as amber and copper alloy or silver foil was used. Consequently, both types of chair pendants were clearly crafted with great attention to detail in combination with refined and highly skilled craftsmanship. Especially when the minute scale is considered, the demand for artistic expertise in the processing of precious metals would have been particularly important in order to attain the high quality that quite a large proportion of the pendants exhibit. The miniature chairs belong to a class of pendants that display a high degree of ornamentation (such as some of the Thor's hammers and the coiled-snake pendants), whereas classes of miniatures (such as the various weapons and shield pendants) are the results of a more simplistic mode of production and are generally less decorated.[9]

The Shape of the Seat of a Sovereign

In the archaeological material, both barrel-shaped and box-shaped chairs are found. Chairs are represented in several different forms of media, ranging from picture stones and other kinds of iconography to written descriptions, as well as real-size versions of actual chairs. An examination of the use context(s) of chairs can help reveal whether there are any indications of them being used in a specific and recognisable way, which can, in turn, shed light on their wider cultural connotations.

Not many life-sized chairs that were (likely) used as thrones have survived the passage of time, but three of the medieval thrones of the Holy Roman emperors remain in more or less complete form. These are the very famous

Figure 32.1 The small miniature chairs are often found in conspicuous contexts such as in the elaborate Fölhagen hoard, which was found inside a dug-down copper bottle of oriental origin. Several silver arm rings, pendants, and coins (amongst other objects) were buried here, as well as two chair pendants. They are presented here as the eighth [catalogue no 16] and thirteenth [catalogue no 17] pendants in the topmost row of objects. Photo by Christer Åhlin, Swedish History Museum.

throne in the palace of Aachen, the Goslar throne from the eleventh century, and the fragmented Mainz throne from the eighth century. While the Aachen throne is the better preserved of the three, it is also the least decorated. Made of marble, the possibility for elaborate masonry was certainly there, but the throne, which was used for the crowning of the emperor Charlemagne (Carolus Magnus) in the year AD800 and still placed in the Octagon of the Aachen Cathedral, is remarkably simplistic in its design. The other two are cast bronze (Goslar) and carved lime-stone (Mainz), and both are decorated with leaf and palmette ornaments of different sorts. The decoration covers both front and back, indicating that they stood in a (semi)open spot, just as the Aachen throne seemingly did, since its back would have been visible to the public. Interestingly, even if the materials used for the thrones differ significantly and the decorations only partly follow the same path, the formal features of the three thrones are to a great extent overlapping. They are all comprised of three main parts: a high backrest, noticeable armrests, and a very obvious box-shaped seat. Whereas the backrests seem to differ slightly in design, they all have a concave upper line of the armrest. While the emperor thrones in Goslar and Aachen are virtually contemporary and were quite likely both commissioned on behalf of Charlemagne, the fact that the Goslar throne displays a strong likeness in design to the two earlier ones cannot be coincidental. All three surviving imperial thrones are box-shaped, and it cannot be ruled out that later emperors took inspiration from Charlemagne.[10] This design also differs from the general expression of the ecclesiastical seats of honour, such as the bishop's chairs, which had elaborate ornaments, globes, and knobs attached while maintaining a rather low profile without the large backrest.[11]

A significant number of the miniature chairs have been found in connection with burials (8, possibly 9, out of 22), and they probably ended up in graves as the personal adornments of the people who were interred.[12] In the wider European context, finding chairs or stools in burials is not a novel phenomenon pertaining to the Viking Age. A significant number of chairs have been found in Iron Age graves, but on the Continent, these are almost exclusively folding chairs (in essence faldstools).[13] They can be made of both wood and iron and are not obviously connected with any kind of special office or rule. However, they are intimately linked to richly furnished burials and the societal upper class. As such, the folding chairs were undoubtedly special gifts meant to demonstrate the prestigious and extravagant lifestyle of the interred, as well as the economic competence and social status of their families.[14] For the same reason, presumably, the folding chairs appear in both male and female graves, and would for men and women alike refer to their high-born background. Yet, apart from the shared reference to the chair's function as seating for venerable persons, none of the early chairs from the Continent bear any strong resemblance in design to the miniature chairs from Viking Age Scandinavia. Nevertheless, their context – richly furnished burials in prominent locations – seems to forestall the situation in Scandinavia centuries later. It should be mentioned that the famous Merovingian throne of Dagobert (used amongst other curious spectacles for the coronation of Napoleon Bonaparte) shares similarities with the folding chairs. It is of cast bronze with elaborate feline ornaments on the front legs and was presumably used by Dagobert for his royal obligations.[15] Back- and armrests have been added much later, and for that reason, the present physical appearance of the chair does resemble the box-shaped versions of the Scandinavian miniature chairs. Its initial shape was that of a folding chair, though, and a plausible reason for the different types of 'thrones' used during the Merovingian rule could be connected with their itinerant kingship. Because their official authority was closely associated with the kings themselves being physically present when judicial matters needed taking care of, they were obliged to travel the lands to administer their rule in the areas they visited. In these situations, the itinerant king would be accompanied by his court, and often their equipment would be carried along. A good example of this practice is found in the *Annales Laurissenses Minores*, where the last of the Merovingian rulers, King Childeric III, held the annual Marchfield-meeting.[16]

Figure 32.2 Chair pendants: 1 – Bornholm. Photo by Rikke Søgaard, National Museum of Denmark; 2 – Fyrkat. Photo by Arnold Mikkelsen, National Museum of Denmark; 3 – Gravlev. Photo by Mads Lou Bendtsen, National Museum of Denmark; 4 – Gudme. Photo by Mads Lou Bendtsen, National Museum of Denmark; 5 – Mysselhøjgård. Photo by Tom Christensen, National Museum of Denmark; 6 – Nybølle. Photo by Arnold Mikkelsen, National Museum of Denmark; 7 – Tolstrup. Photo by Mads Lou Bendtsen, National Museum of Denmark; 8 – Hedeby I. Photo by Hans Drescher, Helms Museum; 9 – Hedeby II. Photo courtesy of Museum für Archäologie, Schloss Gottorf; 10 – Barshalder. Photo by Christer Åhlin, Swedish History Museum; 11 – Birka Bj. 632. Photo by Christer Åhlin, Swedish History Museum; 12 – Birka Bj. 844. Drawing by H. Lange, Swedish History Museum. Not to scale.

No. 13

No. 14

No. 15

No. 16

No. 17

No. 18

No. 19

No. 20

No. 21

No. 22

Figure 32.3 Chair pendants: 13 – Birka Bj. 968. Photo by Christer Åhlin, Swedish History Museum; 14 – Eketorp. Photo by Per Torgén, Swedish History Museum; 15 – Folkeslunda. Photo by Antje Wendt, Swedish History Museum; 16 – Fölhagen. Photo by Christer Åhlin, Swedish History Museum; 17 – Fölhagen. Drawing courtesy of Swedish History Museum; 18 – Sandgårde. Photo by Christer Åhlin, Swedish History Museum; 19 – Store Ihre. Photo by Gabriel Hildebrand, Swedish History Museum; 20 – Unprovenanced. Photo by Gabriel Hildebrand, Swedish History Museum; 21 – Sarpsborg. Photo by Thomas Bjørnerud, Norges Metalsøkerforening; 22 – Agder. Photo by Sivert Losnegard, Norges Metalsøkerforening. Not to scale.

These were meetings whose primary role was to inspect the various Frankish and Gallo-Roman armies and militia, but they also involved the approval and announcement of new laws or various royal decrees:

> In die autem Martis campo secundum antiquam consuetudinem done illis regibus a populo offerebantur, et ipse res sedebat in sella regia circumstante exercitu, et maior domus coram eo.
>
> On the day of the Marchfield, according to old-age customs, the people offered gifts to the kings; on that day, the king sat on the royal throne, the army stood around him in a circle, and the mayor of the palace stood before him.[17]

The Marchfield took place in the open air, and quite likely the throne used would have been of a similar kind to the Dagobert folding chair.

A particular find, the so-called Throne of the Marsh, forms part of a rich, male boat grave in Wremen, Cuxhaven, Germany. As it is made of a hollowed-out trunk of an alder tree, it has a naturally rounded shape. Both the body and the backrest are covered with an intricate pattern of carvings, and holes around the edge of the body must stem from attaching a webbing for the seat. Apart from the backrest, the design looks very much like the small barrel-shaped pendants and could be regarded as an intermediate shape between the simple oval backrest and the more advanced box-shaped version. The chair comes with a small footrest and the Throne of the Marsh is dendrochronologically dated to AD 431, which underlines the *longue durée* of using chairs as status markers.[18]

Perhaps the most appropriate example of a chair is the one found in the lavish Oseberg ship burial. As part of the grave goods placed inside the body of the ship together with the interred females, a box-shaped chair was found. It is rather similar in design to the box-shaped type of pendants and has a broad and square body with a noticeable backrest.[19] The chair was placed midships near the mast and would perhaps have been facing the grave chamber, as if ready for the buried female when she had crossed into the afterlife and arose in her new existence. Furthermore, a conspicuous, ornamented wooden staff formed part of the grave assemblage; a staff which has been interpreted as possibly belonging to a *vǫlva*.[20]

Summing up, there are no instances in the archaeological record of chairs – life-size or miniature – that belong to simple contexts or graves; thus, chairs are unmistakably elite objects. Furthermore, at least in the Viking Age, a higher frequency of chairs appearing as grave goods in female graves can be seen, and here the chairs (miniature and life-size) quite possibly point to the special occupation of the seeress/*vǫlva* (for example, Fyrkat, Hedeby I, Oseberg, and the three Birka finds). A similar trend can be seen for other kinds of miniature pendants, such as the coiled snakes, where the relation to female burials is likewise unmistakable.[21]

Iconography and Text

However, assessing the connections between chairs and the seeress is not a straightforward matter, mainly so because the data is rather scarce. But the different types of sources we *do* have are still worth considering because they complement each other quite well and, in combination, they can provide a basis for plausible interpretations. Firstly, although it presumably dates to the thirteenth century, a description in chapter 4 of *Eiríks saga rauða* ('The Saga of Erik the Red') is often referenced when discussing the life and activities of Viking Age seeresses – and for good reason. Here, it is said how, in Greenland, a seeress called Þorbjǫrg (with the byname *lítil-vǫlva*, 'little *vǫlva*') is invited to the house of Þorkell, the most prominent farmer in the district, because famine and failing harvest has cast a shadow of destitution over his farmstead. Interestingly, in order to greet her properly and in a dignifying manner, a high seat is arranged with a pillow of chicken feathers, and Þorbjǫrg is seated on it.[22] Here, the seat can be recognised as both a privileged place with a fine pillow, and also as a focal point for Þorbjǫrg performing her divinations.

Another frequently mentioned example comes from the Gotlandic picture stones. More specifically, there are three related instances from Sanda Kyrka I, Buttle Änge I, and Alskog Kyrka.[23] However, as highlighted by Sigmund Oehrl – who has made the latest detailed and critical study of the Gotlandic picture stones – due to the poor state of preservation of the stones, earlier interpretations of the individual iconographic elements call for some reservation. As a result, he regards the Sanda Kyrka I stone[24] as the best point of reference for understanding the motifs: inside a building-like structure, a seated woman can be seen facing a likewise seated male person. Above her head, a bird, perhaps a swan or heron, points its beak at the back of an armed figure standing between them. The armed figure is presenting the seated male with a spear. The rest of the scene depicted on the stone, including parading 'warriors', conveys a ceremonial impression to the viewer – a special and important event is taking place. However, while Oehrl proposes a mythological interpretation of the meaning content of the pictures, I would advocate that, while mythological content can be detected, the stone also portrays the acting out of real rituals among humans. As religious rituals constituted the backbone of mythological understanding and reproduction, the two spheres should not be understood as separate entities of contemporary rituality. Thus, the motifs can be understood as ideal and mythological versions of ritual life, but at the same time, we should expect that comparable rituals (as simulations of the ideal) were, in fact, performed in real life.[25]

Finally, in the central part of the Överhogdal 1b tapestry (from Härjedalen, west-central Sweden), a person is seated on a chair on top of a mountain surrounded by several

antlered deer and horses, a few of which carry riders. On the side of the mountain towards the seated person, a rider holding what looks like an axe can be seen. The tapestry can be dated to the last decades of the Viking Age, but the actual meaning of the depiction is still debated and ranges from a seated Jesus with the archangel Michael to a sleeping Brynhildr and Sigurðr Fáfnisbani on the horse, among others.[26] Ruth Horneij, in particular, has advocated for mainly Christian content, but she also underlines the obvious syncretistic character of the motifs where local mythology and pre-Christian meanings can be detected.[27] Her point is well argued and, in any case, all interpretations view the seated person as a central protagonist who must be understood as an essential character in the scenario depicted on the tapestry.

The written sources on the Germanic peoples include several instances where females with divine abilities hold a prominent social position, even as leaders of populous tribes. For example, the renowned Germanic leader Veleda of the Bructeri is portrayed in *Historiae* by the Roman chronicler Tacitus,[28] and her political powers are intimately connected with her ability to perform divinations, especially with regard to her leading the resistance against the invading armies under the Roman Commander Cerialis.[29] The same goes for Ganna of the Semnonens who functioned as the seeress for the leaders of the tribe.[30] Despite coming from a different tribe, Ganna eventually became leader and in effect a successor of Veleda.[31] According to the Roman historian Dio Cassius, even the famous British Queen Boudica is said to have performed divinations before battle,[32] and her ability to divine was supposedly connected to the Britonnic war goddess Andrasta.[33] Also, among the early Frankish royal lineages, powerful seeresses are mentioned, and Gregory of Tours describes how Queen Faileuba of King Childebert II on numerous occasions performed magic in the court of the Franks.[34] In the later Old Norse texts, we find a royal seeress in the form of Queen Gunnhildr – allegedly the wife of King Eiríkr blóðøx ('Erik Bloodaxe') – whose magic abilities are mentioned in numerous sagas and were instrumental to her acting as Queen Regent to her son Haraldr.[35]

In the different sources describing what should most likely be regarded as seeresses (at times in combination with chairs), we again see a pronounced elite signature in terms of their social position. They form part of the repertoire of aristocratic life of the Germanic peoples, which is a trait that seems repeated in the Viking Age. Furthermore, a combination where seeresses, warriors, conflict, and/or weapons figure prominently begins to emerge in the archaeological data as well.

The Sites Represented

An important characteristic of the small chair pendants is their geographical distribution pattern. They seem to be closely linked to sites that, in the written records, have a positive royal description attached to them or that show signs of an unmistakable elite style of life. To the first category belong sites that were under the auspices of the early monarchy (e.g. Birka, Hedeby, and Fyrkat), as well as settlements that would quite possibly have hosted or even functioned as the main seat of the king and his retinue (Mysselhøjgaard/Lejre and Sarpsborg). The second category is less rigidly defined, but at least a couple of sites can be included in it (such as Fölhagen, Folkeslunda, Gudme, Eketorp, and possibly also Barshalder[36]), and we cannot rule out that some of the localities with miniature chairs which have not yet seen any kind of large-scale archaeological investigations could turn out to be more important sites than previously expected (e.g. Agder or Nybølle). That these pendants have a strong link to places with a distinct royal fingerprint has already been pointed out by Hayo Vierck,[37] and since then, this pattern of distribution has only grown stronger, as very prominent sites such as Lejre (an alleged main seat of the Skjǫldungr dynasty), Sarpsborg (Norwegian capital under King Óláfr II Haraldsson, later 'Olaf the Holy'), and Gudme (one of the richest find-spots in Iron Age Northern Europe) have been added to the pool of find-spots.[38] Furthermore, the symbolic connotations that this furniture *en miniature* holds seem closely connected to the actual activities one would expect to have taken place in and around the large hall-buildings that are often found at these localities.[39] The find from Mysselhøjgaard [5] even stems from inside one of the largest and most imposing hall-buildings at Lejre and has a Late Viking Age dating, as does the hall in question.[40] Furthermore, many of the sites display a century-deep history and are best described as *vici regius*.

Another noticeable characteristic of the archaeologically excavated sites where these pendants have been found is that they are (heavily) fortified and to a large extent known for their militaristic features. This, of course, goes for Birka, Eketorp, Fyrkat, and Hedeby, but the idea of a fortification, or at least a very sturdy topographical demarcation, also applies to the Mysselhøjgaard/Lejre situation, where a large palisade has recently been unearthed.[41] Whether the sites are characterised by fortification or have an aristocratic fingerprint, they are unquestionably sites where a significant segment of the population held a martial position. For the royal sites, a more or less stable pool of retinue warriors could be expected, whereas the fortified sites per definition must be intended for warrior-type inhabitants.

On this basis, we seem to be able to detect a relationship between the places where warriors would have been part of the daily activities and where the chair pendants are found. As such, a cautious interpretation is that there might exist a relationship not only between the seeress and the elite sphere, but likewise between the ritual capabilities of the *vǫlva* and her kind on the one hand and the responsibilities of the warrior on the other. Another indication of this relationship seems to be reflected in the iconographic

representations described above, where the seated persons are regularly accompanied by 'warrior' processions or armed riders, and possibly also in the fact that various types of miniature weapons are very common and demonstrate perhaps the broadest distribution across Southern Scandinavia of all the miniatures.[42]

Sacral Queenship, Divination, and Conflict

When trying to understand the function of the miniature chairs, several characteristics must be taken into consideration. Firstly, the small chairs seem to be intimately connected to the seeress's unique ability to perform divination, both from a literal as well as from a metaphorical point of view; literally, in the sense that a throne/chair, platform, or even stone[43] regularly appear as part of the scene where the divination is performed. Also, several of the miniature chairs show intense wear, often to the point where, for example, the means of suspension has broken [such as 2, 4, and 7]. Clearly, they were used and formed part of the seeress's personal items, and perhaps they were regarded as physical metaphors referring to her magico-ritual capabilities.[44]

Secondly, the high social position of Germanic seeresses is also strongly emphasised in extant written sources. Consequently, these examples serve to underline the often-overlooked phenomenon that females, if they were not the supreme ruler themselves, then at least occupied central roles in the Germanic chiefdoms and at the courts of the early monarchies. It can be argued that the behaviour and ritual obligations pertaining to these female leaders correspond with the concept of sacral rulership and are perhaps dependent on their genealogy.[45] What is particularly interesting is that these female leaders become rulers in times of conflict, when their magical abilities seem to converge with their social responsibilities. Perhaps the ability to perform divination should be understood as the very thing that gives them social authority?

Thirdly, scholars have underlined the centrality of socio-mnemonic features contained within the religious rituals administered by the sacral rulership in pre-Christian Scandinavia.[46] Viking Age Scandinavian societies were generally non-literate, and therefore oral performances took centre stage in the transmission and negotiation of collective memory through a variety of oral and bodily forms.[47] However, the foremost quality of the seeress does not relate to memory but is rooted in her ability to state (i.e. articulate through divination) a common future for the collective in question. Consequently, the seeress is occupied not with establishing a collective past but with unlocking opportunities to come.

Fourthly, several of the localities containing chair pendants exhibit a pronounced martial component, as do the artefacts miniaturised into different kinds of pendants. Could there be a hitherto overlooked relation between martial life and chair pendants? It is possible, and when the other data described above, such as the female Germanic rulers waging war against the Roman Empire, the Scandinavian depictions of warrior processions, or the characteristics of the find localities as well as the other types of miniatures, are considered, a theme of conflict and warfare is certainly present. In reality, this relation should perhaps not surprise us at all, because the main feature of the seeress is to foretell future events, and who would not want to know the outcome of a possibly fatal confrontation one is about to enter into?

In conclusion, Viking Age miniature pendants are generally interpreted as constituting some kind of apotropaic amulets intended to ward off unwanted forces.[48] Regarding the items which the miniatures replicate, there is a logical argument for them having protective abilities: shields, helmets, swords, spears, dangerous animals, etc. If one controls these in real life, they would provide different kinds of protective opportunities. But what about a chair? Having assessed the characteristics of the chair pendants – their morphology, their find and use contexts and distribution, their connection to the female lifeworld, and, not least, their possible relationship with sacral queenship and conflict – it seems likely that these chairs had a comparable apotropaic purpose. Only, they seem to refer to this magical function on a meta-level, pointing to the divinations performed by the seeress which were undoubtedly believed to have explicit protective outcomes because information about possible future events might prevent people from making dangerous decisions. As an amulet, the seeress' magical abilities are conjured by the chairs, and their apotropaic purpose could lie in bestowing the seeress with the power of foresight, as well as protecting her from losing this power. As such, we witness a recursive structure where both the wearer and the chair motif inherent in the pendant seem intimately connected to the activities pertaining to the supernatural skills of the seeress. Indeed, the magical abilities of the wearer, just as much as the qualities of the pendant itself, seem relevant for assessing how these items were believed to have any effect in the ritual world of the Viking Age. In that sense, it seems likely that the pendants are not just representations of the life-size chairs of the time, but that they feed off the concept of magic related to the seeress – the *vǫlva* and her kind. In their own right, the chair pendants were legitimate ritual objects.

Notes

1. Numbers in square brackets correspond to numbers in Table 32.1 (Catalogue).
2. Arrhenius 1961; Zeiten 1997: 5; Price 2002; Solli 2002; Roesdahl 2004; Pentz et al. 2009.
3. Drescher & Hauck 1982; Trotzig 1983: 365–6.
4. Gardeła 2014.
5. Drescher & Hauck 1982.

6. Mitchell 2018.
7. See Drescher & Hauck 1982 for a thorough description of the processes behind silver casting.
8. Hedeby II [9] might be an exception as this pendant could very well depict an actual barrel with staves and encircling bands (Kalmring 2019). Consequently, these carvings do not really represent ornamentation, but seem more likely to result from the attempt to produce a realistic version of a (barrel) chair.
9. Jessen & Majland 2021: 3–5.
10. In relation to the contemporary miniature swords found in South Scandinavia, a penchant for imitating continental artefacts is also evident, and the dominant form here seems to imitate life-size Carolingian swords, especially the archeological types K and O swords (Gardeła 2021: 35–6).
11. Schulze-Dörlamm 2004: 577.
12. Gräslund 2005: 379–80.
13. Folding chairs are known already from the Bronze Age, but in the present survey, only chairs from the Late Roman Iron Age onwards are taken into consideration.
14. Gütermann 2011: 65–70.
15. The actual date of the folding chair is debated, and the chair should be referred to with caution. It is, however, mentioned in the twelfth-century annals from the Cloister of St. Denis, Paris, where its restoration is described, so it cannot be any younger than that. This was quite possibly the time when the arm- and backrest were added (Güterman 2001: 47).
16. Goetz 2003: 157; Hartmann 2012: 64.
17. Text after Pertz 1826: 116; translation after Buc 2001: 108.
18. Schön 1995; 2015; Theune-Grosskopf & Nedoma 2006: 52.
19. Brøgger *et al*. 1917: table XV; Vedeler 2014.
20. Gardeła 2016.
21. See Gardeła 2020: 52–3.
22. Einar Ól. Sveinsson & Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 410–13.
23. Oehrl 2019a: 52–4; 2019b: table 25b/c and 29a.
24. Oehrl 2019a: 64–5.
25. See Hedeager 1997: 72–5; Schjødt 1999: 41; Patton 2009: 213–14; see also Bønding 2021: 89 for a similar argument.
26. Horneij 1991: 153–5.
27. Horneij 1991: 181–7.
28. Levene & W.H. Fyfe 1997: 213–16. It is worth noting that, in the entirety of his *Historiae*, Tacitus only mentions four Germanic individuals by name, and Veleda is among these four.
29. Simek 1993: 356–7; Dobat 2009: 135–9.
30. Tacitus, *Germania* 39 (Townsend 1894: 88–9); cf. Castritius 2005.
31. Dio Cassius, *Historia Romana*, Book LXVII/12 (Cary 1914–1927: 347).
32. Dio Cassius, Historia Romana, Book LXII/6 (Cary 1914–1927: 91–3).
33. Koch 2006: 52.
34. Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum*, IX.38 (Thorpe 1974: 525–6).
35. Dronke 1981; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 476–8.
36. Rundkvist (2003: 62–3) even underlines the high quality of the female grave furnishing to which the Barshalder [10] chair pendant belongs.
37. Vierck 2002: 45.
38. See also Jessen & Majland 2021: 15.
39. Lund Hansen 2011; Sundqvist 2011; 2015; Nygaard 2018.
40. Christensen 2013. See also Christensen 2015 for an overview of the historical references to the Lejre site.
41. Christensen 2019.
42. Jensen 2010: 51–2.
43. Leszek Gardeła has kindly pointed to the passage in *Grógaldr* (st. 15), where a ritual is performed while standing on a stone.
44. Jessen & Majland 2021: 13–14.
45. Jessen & Majland 2021: 13–14. Even in the case of Þorbjörg, mentioned above, it is said that she is one of ten sisters who all had the ability to make divinations (*Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 4; Einar Ól. Sveinsson & Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 206), thus implying that her family relations are important if her magical abilities are to be considered trustworthy.
46. Nygaard 2016; 2018; 2021; Bønding 2021: 65.
47. Nygaard 2020; Bønding 2021.
48. Arrhenius 1961; Zeiten 1997: 21–2; Gräslund 2005: 379–82; Gardeła 2014: 46; Gardeła & Odebäck 2018: 103–4. See Fuglesang 1989 and Jensen 2010: 7–10 for more critical definitions.

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33

Wheels for Freyja's Chariot? Wheel-shaped Pendants from the Viking Age

Peter Vang Petersen

Occasionally, finds of new artefact types offer surprising insight into the thinking and habits of past people. This chapter concerns, in particular, metal detector finds from the late Iron Age – a period which, in southern Scandinavia is characterised by 'poor' burial assemblages and where graves usually contain few burial goods. This is where field-walking by amateur archaeologists with metal detectors is of great value to archaeological progress. By continuously unearthing unknown types of jewellery with decoration of obvious ideological meaning, they challenge our ability to understand the conceptual world of past times.

Among other things, the growth of amateur metal detecting has resulted in a notable increase in the number of known wheel-shaped pendants, a form of Viking Age jewellery which used to be quite rare. The way these pieces were worn, and their extensive geographical distribution, suggests that they may have functioned as expressions of concrete and generally accepted ideas amongst pre-Christian dignitaries regarding the social and religious meaning of chariot riding.

Viking Age metal jewellery includes a number of types of miniature objects such as, for instance, weapons, tools, furniture, and elements of means of transport, which are all equipped with suspension loops or eyelets on their reverse, which allowed them to be worn as pendants presumably with a magical function.[1] The belief in the effect of such miniature 'amulets' was partly based on ancient ideas regarding the magical power of the raw material (metal), and partly on the belief that such miniature representations would be able to summon the divine powers of the carrier's religious beliefs associated with the artefact forms in question.

It is possible that these kinds of miniature objects represented attributes associated with certain gods, and they were therefore able to serve as links to these gods, which they were then able to summon (Óðinn's throne, Þórr's hammer, the cross of Christ). It is also possible that the miniature pieces functioned as symbolic substitutes of real, larger objects which could not easily be carried around, but which in miniature form could be worn as essential, magical protection against serious challenges in critical life stages, such as during illness, pregnancy, or travel.

No written sources explain the motives of the Viking Age Scandinavians for carrying amulets, but the clear tendency of the miniatures to depict gender-specific objects, that is objects specifically (albeit not always exclusively) associated with men or women, may suggest that the women who wore these pieces possibly did so, not so much for their own protection, as for the protection of their unborn children, whose gender was not yet known. It is possible that miniature pictures of horses, weapons, strike-a-lights, etc. served to imbue unborn boys with courage, whereas household utensils such as miniature forms of kitchen tools and chairs strengthened female attributes in unborn girls.

To carry amulets for the protection of unborn children may have been particularly relevant for young women of fertile age, and the value of those pendants probably declined as women grew older. The need for protective charms was probably not necessary after death either. So far as known, illness and child birth did not occur in the afterlife, and this may explain why amulets are relatively rare in Viking Age graves.

Wheel-shaped Pendants

The style of the wheel-shaped pendants of the Viking Age is quite naturalistic which leaves no doubt that they are representations of actual spoked wheels with broad rims and barrel-shaped hubs of Type C/1.[2] With their many spokes, commonly six to twelve, the Viking Age wheel-shaped

pendants deviate from contemporary and earlier types of circular wheel-cross pieces of amber and metal, which occurred from the Stone Age in a number of forms, with four-spoked wheel-crosses as the central motif.[3]

For millennia, wheel-crosses functioned as symbols of the sun as the supreme deity. The mobility of the wheel, in conjunction with the circular form of the sun and the tendency of the sunlight to form optical, sun-cross shaped halos in the sky[4] made the wheel-cross an early and powerful divine symbol. Pendants with four-spoked wheel symbolism are known from the Germanic Iron Age and the Viking Age (Fig. 33.1), whereas jewellery shaped as actual wagon wheels was introduced during the Viking Age.

This suggests that where the older forms of sun-cross jewellery served to summon the power of the supreme celestial deity, the Viking Age miniature wheels undoubtedly functioned more as representations of wagons as an important means of travel. Below, it will also be argued that particularly the ancestors' ideas of the cat-like creatures pulling the chariot of the goddess Freyja inspired the decoration in gripping beast style of wheel-jewellery, as well as on the only fully preserved wagon from the Viking Age, the magnificent Oseberg wagon (→ **Chapter 19**).

a

b

Figure 33.1 Late Iron Age pendants shaped as wheel-crosses and with fixed cast eyelets from Fugledegård (a) and Bakkendrup (b) near Tissø on western Sjælland. Photo by National Museum of Denmark.

Form

Only circular pieces of jewellery with projecting, barrel-shaped hubs are referred to as 'wheel-shaped' (Table 33.1; Fig. 33.2 and Fig. 33.3). Usually, the hubs are pierced with radial spokes in open-work, the rims of the wheels are broad, and in some cases undecorated.[5] However, most wheel-shaped pendants have rims with decoration which in the simplest form consists of radial bundles of lines, separating curved smooth cells. This gives the impression of smooth wheel rims separated into sections with one to four spokes in each section.[6]

Two pieces from Lille Karleby were decorated more carefully, and in these examples the rim sections between the radial dividing-lines have been filled with rows of oblique parallel lines.[7] A piece from Nørholm has decoration on both sides of the rim[8] but all other pendants are only decorated on the obverse face, which may seem odd considering the two-sided shape of the hub. Most of the pieces have a pronounced hub which protrudes from the obverse as well as from the reverse. The reverse of the pendants is usually undecorated and smooth.

In most cases, the space between the spokes was formed by casting the pieces in open-work technique and then filing the edges. However, a couple of examples from Vindinge and Neble[9] have spaces created after the casting by drilling out the gaps between the spokes. On the pendants from Lillering and Gudum C,[10] the spaces between the spokes have been indicated but not broken through.

Two pieces from Vindinge and Sønderholm Syd have cast eyelets.[11] All other miniature wheels were made without a cast eyelet.

Originally, the small miniature wheel pendants were made to be suspended from loose eyelets made from metal thread which went through the axle hole and which was then twisted above the piece to form a transverse eyelet. Several pendants were found with the original thread-based suspension, showing that the wheel-shaped discs were attached by the thread to a necklace, along with other pendants and beads, but they could rotate freely as they were orientated parallel with it. One of the pieces from Lille Karleby still has a yellow bead attached to the thread-based eyelet, showing how the bead was originally placed on the necklace next to the wheel-disc (Fig. 33.2).[12]

Decoration

The wheel rims of the generally richly decorated wagon from Oseberg today appear smooth and undecorated. No traces of paint have been detected on the Oseberg wagon or on any other wheels recovered from Viking Age contexts, but the apparent lack of paint could easily be due to a lack of attention or insufficient inspection by the archaeologists. Depictions on the Oseberg tapestries certainly show that Viking Age wagons may have had painted wheels with concentric or radial rim decoration in red and blue colours (Fig. 33.4).

Table 33.1 Catalogue of miniature wheels.

No.	*Location*	*Design*	*Material*	*Context*	*Museum Number*	*Comments*
			DENMARK			
1.	Furreby	12 spokes	Bronze	Stray find	NM C 27256	No traces of gilding or tinning
2.	Vindinge	12 spokes	Bronze	Stray find	NM C 30153	With a cast suspension loop
3.	Bislev, Vest for	12 spokes	Bronze	Detector find	NM C 34812	Tinned and decorated with incised concentric lines on the rim
4.	Bakkendrup	10 spokes	Bronze	Detector find	NM C 36670	Without piercing, flat reverse
5.	Lille Karleby	12 spokes	Silver	Hoard	NM C 41627	With gilding and niello inlay
6.	Lille Karleby	12 spokes	Silver	Hoard	NM C 41706	With gilding and niello inlay
7	Lille Karleby	12 spokes	Silver	Hoard	NM C 41762	With gilding and niello inlay, Y-shaped spokes
8.	Lille Karleby	12 spokes	Silver	Hoard	NM C 41785	With gilding. A glass bead is fixed on the suspension loop
9.	Lille Karleby	12 spokes	Silver	Hoard	NM C 41865	With gilding and niello inlay (?)
10.	Sønderholm Syd	12 spokes	Bronze	Detector find	NM C 43193	With a cast suspension loop on the flat reverse. Undecorated
11.	Neble	12 spokes	Silver	Detector find	NM C 44542	Gilded animal heads. Corrosion marks from iron needle on the obverse. The reverse has a grooves resembling shield decoration
12.	Skjern	7 spokes	Bronze	Detector find	NM C 47111	Traces of incised radial lines on the rim
13.	Gudum N	12 spokes	Silver	Detector find	NM C 48410	With gilding and niello inlay (?)
14.	Vindinge Nordøst	12 spokes	Silver	Detector find	NM C 50624	Gilded animal heads and corrosion from soldering (?) a needle holder on the reverse
15.	Nørholm	12 spokes	Bronze	Detector find	NM C 52171	Rim on both sides sectioned in six parts by tripled radial lines
16.	Foldagergård II	10 spokes	Silver	Detector find	ROM 2265	Hub has concentric ribs and the spokes have transverse notches. On both sides the rim is decorated with engraved concentric grooves
17.	Hesselbjerg, Randlev	12 spokes	Silver	Detector find	FHM 4016 x65,317,420	With gilding and niello inlay
18.	Lillering	12 spokes	Bronze	Detector find	NM C 61977	Corrosion marks from soldering (?) a needle holder on the flat reverse. Fields between the spokes are not open
			NORWAY			
19.	Hønsi	11/12 spokes	Silver	Grave, female	B 710	Rim decorated with a single concentric row of low bosses
			SWEDEN			
20.	Birka Bj. 29	>8 spokes	Silver	Grave, female	SHM 34000:Bj 29	With punched decoration on the rim
21.	Birka Bj. 844	12 spokes	Silver	Grave, female	SHM 34000:Bj 844	Transformed into a brooch by soldering a needle on the reverse
22.	Helgö	6 spokes	Bronze	Settlement	SHM 25075:948	Undecorated
23.	Skåne	12 spokes	Silver	Unknown	SHM 9822:812	Gilded animal heads and niello inlay
			POLAND			
24.	Truso (Janów Pomorski)	8 spokes	Silver	Emporium	MAH 1584/2007	With punched decoration on the rim and the spokes
			RUSSIA			
25.	Gnëzdovo	12 spokes	Bronze	Emporium	–	Rim decorated with cast concentric ribs

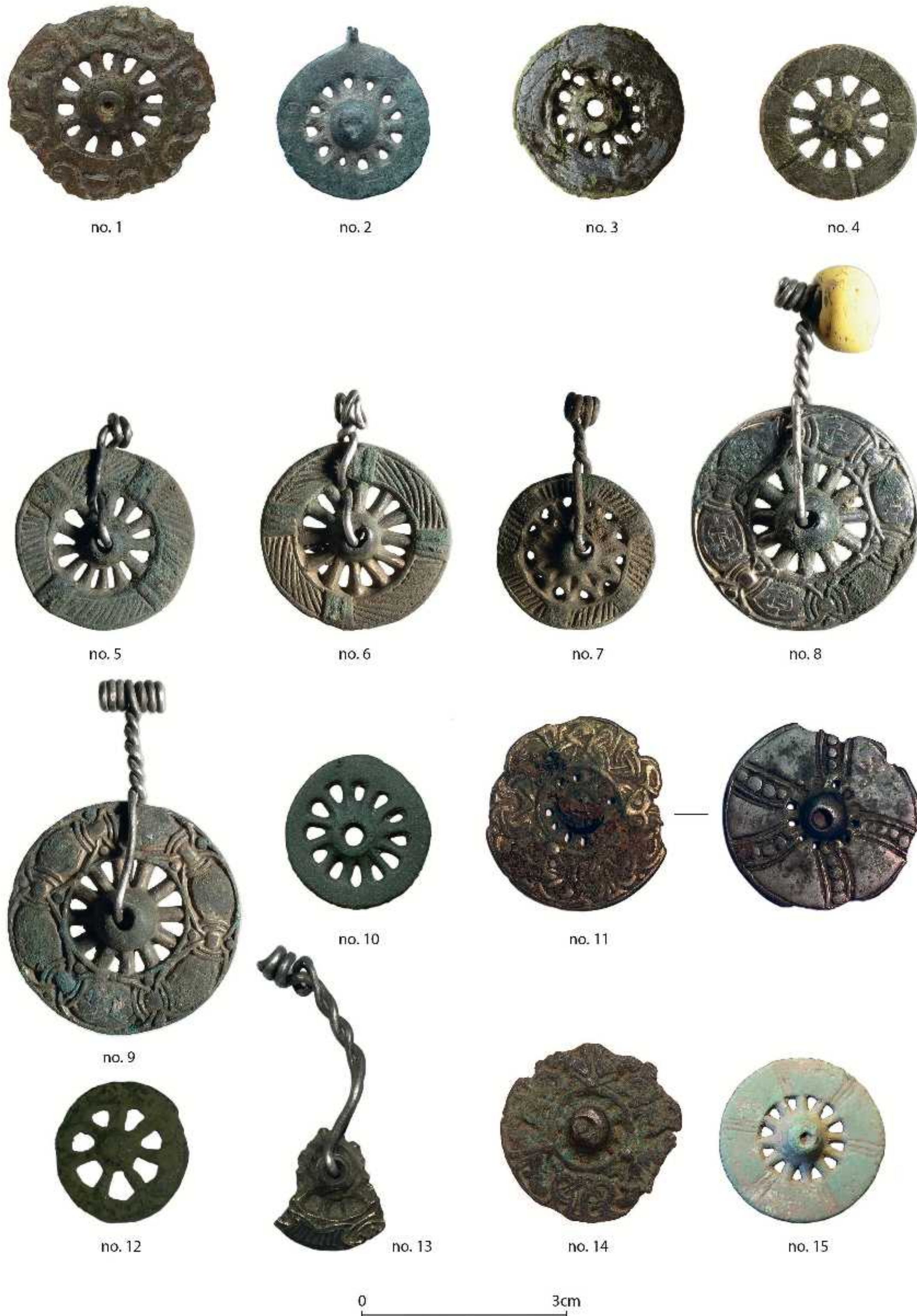

Figure 33.2 Wheel-shaped pendants: 1 – Furreby; 2 – Vindinge; 3 – Bislev; 4 – Bakkendrup; 5-9 – Lille Karleby; 10 – Sønderholm Syd; 11 – Neble; 12 – Skjern; 13 – Gudum; 14 – Vindinge Nordøst; 15 – Nørholm. Several pendants are found with the original thread-based suspension, showing that the wheel-shaped discs were attached by the thread to a necklace. The piece (no. 8) from Lille Karleby still has a little glass bead stuck on to the thread-based eyelet, showing that the bead was originally placed on the necklace next to the wheel-disc amulet. Photos by National Museum of Denmark (1–4; 10–15) and Cille Krause, Roskilde Museum (5–9). Image design by Leszek Gardeła.

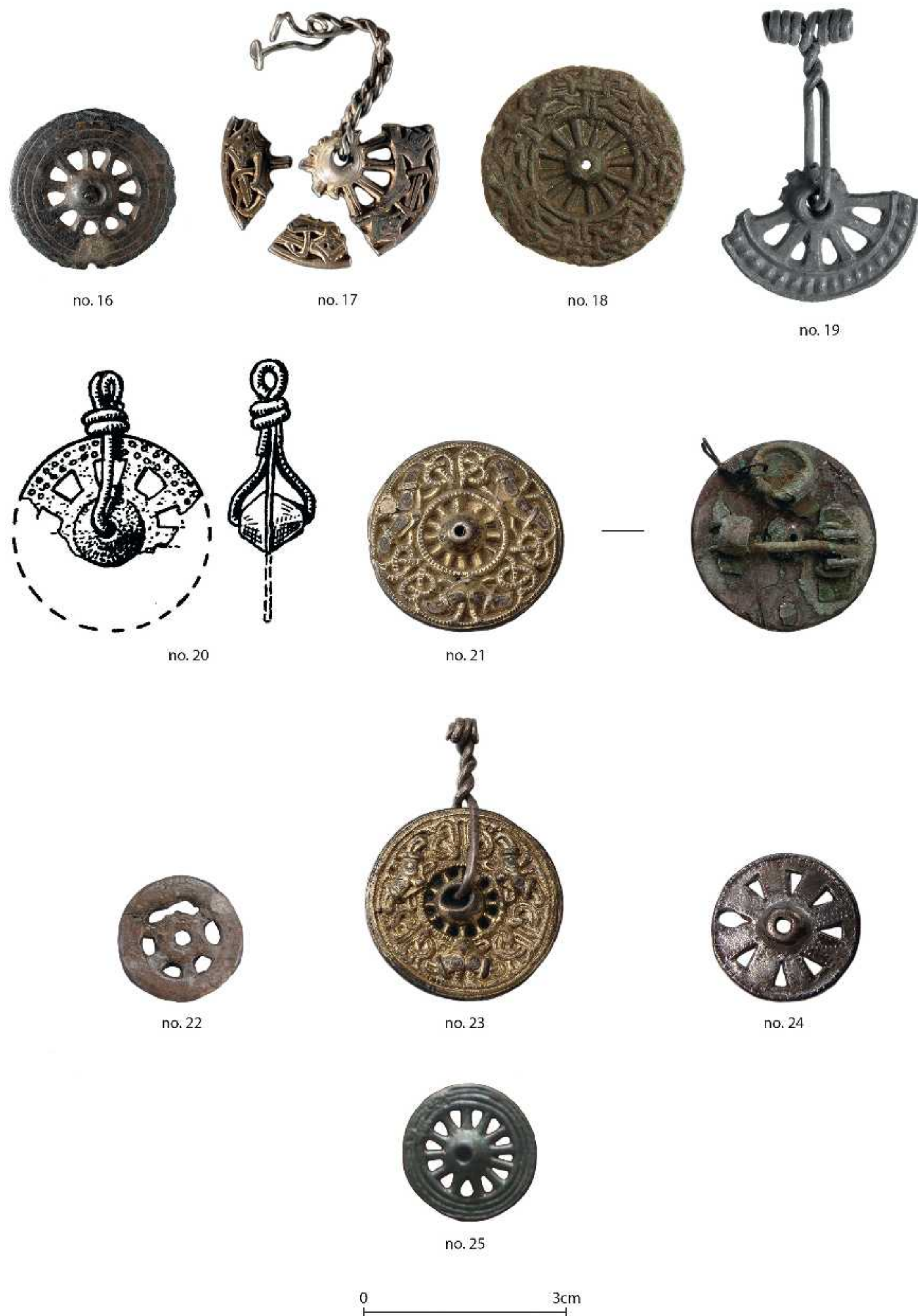

Figure 33.3 Wheel-shaped pendants: 16 – Foldagergård; 17 – Hesselbjerg; 18 – Lillering; 19 – Hønsi; 20 – Birka, grave Bj. 29; 21 – Birka, grave Bj. 844; 22 – Helgö; 23 – Skåne; 24 – Truso; 25 – Gnëzdovo. Photos by Roskilde Museum (16), National Museum of Denmark (18), Swedish History Museum (20–23), Leszek Gardeła (24), and Dan Carlsson (25). Image design by Leszek Gardeła.

Figure 33.4 The depictions on the Oseberg tapestries show wagon wheels with concentric or radial rim decoration in red and blue colours. Reconstruction (a) by Jenn Culler. Photo (b) by Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.

Like other wheels from the Viking Age, those from Oseberg are double-sided, which means that, in principle, it was possible to take them off, flip sides and reassemble them on the axle if necessary. However, from the Viking Age, only one wheel is known with double-sided wheel decoration (concentric narrow ridges), and it was found at Astrup Banke in south-west Jylland[13] (Fig. 33.5).

The wheel-shaped pendants include several pieces, which, like the Astrup wheel, are decorated with concentric ridges on the wheel.[14] A specimen found in Russia has circular rib-decoration cast onto the wheel rim.[15]

A silver pendant from Norway is unique by being decorated with a single concentric row of low bosses,[16] and the fragmented pendant from grave Bj. 29 at Birka in Sweden is decorated with concentric rows of punched dots on the rim.[17] Punched decoration in the form of small dots along the rim and spokes are also seen on the specimen from Truso/Janów Pomorski in Poland.[18]

Three pieces from Lille Karleby are made of gilded silver and decorated with relief, and are without parallel amongst the known wheel-discs. The rims of these miniature wheels are covered with gilded concentric interlace decoration.[19] The copper alloy pendant from Lillering is decorated with a simpler interlace pattern.[20]

So far, the wheel-shaped pendant from Furreby is unique, with its decoration of linked spirals in Carolingian style.[21]

Four silver pendants form an exclusive group having been decorated with full-face animal heads in the Borre style. The artistically most accomplished piece is a pendant from Skåne, Sweden, the decoration of which, in addition to the grimacing animal heads, also includes extended front legs with two-fingered, bent paws.[22]

Three other gilt silver pendants are decorated with niello-embedded animal heads in the Borre style, surrounded by an interlace pattern. Two are stray finds from Denmark[23] and the third was found in a richly furnished female burial from Birka in Sweden.[24] This group is characterised by plastic decoration on the wheel rims which includes full-face animal heads with curved mouths, round eyes, round snouts, and curved, protruding ears. The spaces between the animal heads are covered with an interlace pattern, which includes smooth as well as 'pearly' bands. A relationship may exist between this group and the carved, plastic animal decoration on the body of the Oseberg wagon, and although

Figure 33.5 Viking Age wheel with double-sided rim decoration (concentric narrow ridges) from Astrup Banke in south-west Jylland. Photo by National Museum of Denmark.

we do not know of any regular wagon wheels with similar carvings, it is quite possible that in the Viking Age, high-status wagons existed which had animal-style decoration on the wheel-rims.

Transformation of Pendants into Fibulae

A find from Neble[25] is remarkable as it appears to be a double-faced pendant with a cast wheel on the obverse and an engraved shield with a swirling pattern on the reverse.[26]

However, closer scrutiny shows that the apparent double-symbolism of this piece may be a result of remodelling. The pendant was cast and initially functioned as an ordinary wheel-shaped amulet until, at some later stage, it was turned and engraved with a shield motif on its smooth original reverse. The addition of the shield motif probably happened in connection with the transformation of the original wheel-shaped pendant into a shield-shaped disc fibula.

The wheel-shaped pendant from Birka, grave Bj. 844[27] (Fig. 33.3), has been remodelled into a fibula in a similar manner, and it is quite possible that this form of transformation, by soldering a needle onto a piece, left the notable solder and rust traces on the reverse of the pendant from Vindinge, Fyn.[28]

Distribution and Date

The first Danish wheel-shaped pendant was found in 1959, when the archaeologist Søren Nancke Krogh as a young boy discovered a piece near Furreby in northern Jylland (Fig. 33.2).[29] This happened decades before the use of metal detectors became successful within Danish archaeology, and in his paper on this rare piece Nancke Krogh was only able to list two similar wheel-shaped pendants from Birka[30] in addition to a number of pieces of wheel-cross jewellery from Scandinavia. In terms of the concrete interpretation of the wheel-shaped pendants, Nancke Krogh was in no doubt that they were miniature depictions of broad-rimmed, spoked oak-wheels of Oseberg type.[31]

The second Danish piece was found at Vindinge near Roskilde and came to the National Museum in 1975.[32] This pendant was also recovered in the 'old-fashioned' way, but all subsequent finds of wheel-shaped pendants, from the period 1999–2019, were discovered with metal detectors. This increased the number of finds substantially, and the type has now been found throughout the country, apart from on Bornholm. Sixteen of the eighteen Danish finds have been sent to the National Museum as Treasure Trove. The hoard from Lille Karleby has a special role due to its content and context. It includes, among other things, five wheel-shaped pendants combined with perforated and rolled-up coins and a variety of other pieces of female jewellery (Fig. 33.2).

It is most likely that the Lille Karleby hoard represents a complete set of exclusively female objects, including two silver bowls, a large penannular brooch of silver, a trefoil fibula of copper alloy, numerous glass beads and silver thread, as well as a large number of copper alloy and silver pendants.[33] The hoard represents the only Danish find of wheel-shaped pendants in context. All other pieces were recovered as stray detector finds from the plough soil, and the pendant type does not form part of burial goods or hoards of scrap metal from Viking Age Denmark. However, the absence of wheel-shaped pendants in Viking Age silver hoards is probably coincidental as, most likely, examples in silver were relatively rare. Only nine of the eighteen Danish specimens are of silver, whereas the remainder were cast in copper alloy.

In Norway and Sweden, where metal detecting archaeology has been less extensively applied than in Denmark, only a small number of wheel-shaped pendants are known. However, the Norwegian and Swedish examples are generally better contextualised and include, for example, the Hönsi burial in Norway[34] and two burial finds from Birka in Sweden.[35] In all three burials, the wheel-shaped pendants occur with fibulae, glass beads, and other female type pendants.

The richly furnished chamber grave Bj. 844, from Birka (Fig. 33.3), for example, contained a precious, wheel-shaped pendant of silver which had been secondarily transformed into a fibula by soldering a needle-clasp onto the reverse of the piece. The grave also contained a circular silver pendant, which had been transformed into a fibula in the same manner by adding a needle to the reverse. In addition to these disc-shaped fibulae of recycled silver pendants, the woman in grave Bj. 844 also carried two large oval brooches (→ **Chapter 34**).

Outside Denmark, wheel-shaped pendants are still rare, but they are distributed across a very large geographical area (Fig. 33.6). In addition to the two pieces from Birka, a beautiful specimen was retrieved from Skåne,[36] and a solitary burial find is known from Norway.[37] Two pendants have

Figure 33.6 Wheel-shaped pendants are distributed across a very large geographical area. In addition to the three pieces from Birka and Helgö (20–22), one burial find is known from Norway (19) and a beautiful specimen was retrieved from Skåne (23). Only one typical piece has been found south of the Baltic, in Truso in Poland (24), and one comes from Gnëzdovo in Russia (25). The absence of finds from England is remarkable. Map by Mads Lou Bendtsen.

been found south of the Baltic Sea, one piece from Truso in Poland[38] and another one from Gnëzdovo in Russia.[39] The absence of finds from England is remarkable.

The rarity of wheel-shaped pendants in hoards and burials makes it difficult to date them precisely. As most are stray finds, these pieces can only be dated broadly to the period AD 800–900. The presence of three specimens in rich burials (Birka graves Bj. 29 and Bj. 844 as well as the Hönsi burial) only dates these pieces to the period from the end of the 800s to the end of the 900s.[40] The context of the pendants from Lille Karleby allows these pieces to be more precisely dated. The coins in the collection suggest that the hoard was deposited at the earliest around AD 915, and its general composition suggests that it was buried in the middle of the 900s.[41]

The Interpretation of the Pendants as Amulets

There was never any doubt about the interpretation of the wheel-shaped pendants as miniature representations of broad-rimmed wagon wheels[42] but in terms of the symbolic meaning of the wheels, Nancke Krogh did not offer a specific interpretation. It was suggested that they might be symbolic representations of the sun, but no mention was made of a possible link to concrete or symbolic forms of Viking Age wagon transport.

Neither does Miriam K. Zeiten in her paper *Amulets and Amulet Use in Viking Age Denmark* suggest a specific interpretation of the symbolism of the wheel-shaped pendants. However, in addition to the traditional role of the wheels as sun symbols, she does mention their possible function as wagon symbols and thereby objects relevant to the burial rituals of the Viking Age. As potential ‘death-related amulets’, the wheel-shaped pendants may, for example, have had a function in relation to the transport of deceased women to the hereafter, or they may represent a parallel to the Jylland carriage body burials and to Óðinn’s chariot.[43] Zeiten also considers the possibility that wheel amulets may refer to Tacitus’ account about the chariot of the fertility goddess Nerthus, and that they may therefore have functioned as a fertility symbol warding off evil. She does not discuss any possible links to Freyja.[44]

In a later paper, *Amulette und Amulettsitte der jüngeren Eisen- und Wikingerzeit in Südskandinavien* (2009), Anne Pedersen excluded the wheel-shaped pendants from her discussion,[45] and in the dissertation *Viking Age Amulets in Scandinavia and Western Europe* (2010), Bo Jensen avoids any more detailed interpretation of the type. Instead, he expresses understanding for Nancke Krogh’s unwillingness to carry out detailed interpretations, and does not comment on Zeiten’s suggestions regarding the pendants’ possible relation to Viking Age ideas about women’s travel to the hereafter.[46] In 2014, Leszek Gardeła discussed the wheel-shaped pendants found in the area of present-day Poland and interpreted them as multivalent objects with a variety of symbolic connotations.[47] However, due to the generally homogeneous appearance of the type and its geographically extensive distribution across Viking Age Scandinavia, it must be obvious that wheel-shaped pendants had a specific symbolic meaning throughout the Viking Age world. It is quite obvious that this form of jewellery was related to transport, and the present author finds it self-evident that the wheel-shaped pendants’ association with the female gender is based on the preferred form of transport of Viking Age women: travel by wagon.

Freyja: The Goddess of Fertility and Death

In the present author's opinion, there are several things indicating a direct relationship between the wheel-shaped amulets and the worship of Freyja. Women's hopes regarding fertility and sexual happiness were presumably addressed to this goddess who in Nordic mythology was perceived as the central deity in terms of erotic- and pregnancy-related love. In the Viking Age, Freyja was the main female deity, and mythologically she was defined by three main attributes: the magnificent necklace *Brísingamen* which was forged by dwarves; the magical bird-skin *Valshamr* which allowed its wearer to take on the shape of any form of bird and fly between the worlds; and finally the cat-drawn chariot driven by Freyja when she attended the funeral procession in connection with the burial of Baldr.

Freya controlled not only love and fertility, but also magic, war, and death. In *Gylfaginning* and *Grímnismál* it is made explicit that Freyja shared the fallen on the battlefield with Óðinn so that half of them went to Freyja's estate Folkvangr, whereas the other half went to Óðnin in Valhǫll.

It must be assumed that Freyja was primarily worshipped by women. The apparent special relationship between wagons and Freyja may therefore be due to the fact that for ordinary mortals travel was always associated with some degree of risk. Travellers would therefore have been vigilant, and women who had to travel by wagon would have invoked the attention and protection of the goddess. It may have been particularly important to obtain Freyja's support and protection in connection with the two crucial journeys of women: the bridal procession and the funeral procession.

Roads for Funeral Processions

The importance of wagons as a means of transport in connection with the final journey of Viking Age women is supported by several sources, and new archaeological evidence is constantly being discovered which sheds light on the use of wagons in connection with funeral ceremonies during the late Viking Age.[48]

Obviously, there may have been practical reasons for the use of wagons for the transportation of the deceased to the burial site, but several details suggest that this use of wagons may mainly have been based on ideological reasoning. For example, special post-built, plank-covered roads were constructed, leading directly from Fyrkat and Trelleborg to the ring fortresses' cemeteries (→ **Chapters 23 and 24**). Other examples of Viking Age cemeteries linked to road systems are known from Gulli in Vestfold[49] and Næsby by Limfjorden.[50] A similar Swedish example is known from Rösaring near Sigtuna by the Mälaren lake in Uppland, where a 540m long, so-called procession road from the Viking Age had been constructed on the top of a 60m high, prominent ridge in the landscape.[51] In some of these cases, it is obviously difficult to determine whether these roads existed prior to the Viking Age, or whether they were constructed especially for the use in connection with funeral processions (→ **Chapter 11**).

Carriage Bodies Carved in Stone

Several of the picture stones from Gotland's so-called cist group depict women travelling by wagon, and it is almost certain that these stones formed parts of burial cists for women (→ **Chapter 11**).[52] In contrast to the tall, phallic- or keyhole-shaped picture stones mostly associated with men, riding horses and ships only occur sporadically on the short cist stones. In addition to the above-mentioned pictures of travelling women, the short picture stones also display other forms of wagon symbolism, such as their curved upper edges, which correspond to the upper edges of the depicted carriage bodies.[53]

It appears that the decorated stones, which formed the lateral sides of the cists, formally correspond to the carriage sides of the wagons used for the women's final journey.

Burials in Wagon Bodies

The ideas pre-Christian Norse societies had regarding the way women travelled to the hereafter were expressed in different ways in different parts of Scandinavia. In southwest Scandinavia, for example, such as Jylland and northern Schleswig, there are numerous chamber graves where women have been buried in wooden bodies of wagons.[54] In these cases, mainly round-bottomed, clinker-built wagon bodies of the same highly portable construction as the one from the Oseberg wagon were used.[55]

Usually, only little is preserved of these vehicle parts from burials, such as rivets, corner mountings, and carrying rings of iron. However, in two burials (no. 7 and 21) in the Thumby-Bienebek cemetery, 25 km north of Hedeby, enough wood was preserved to show that the wagon bodies were decorated with carvings and that their inner surfaces were covered with textiles. A couple of wagon bodies also had iron chains and bands fastened to the sides, with iron amulets in the form of 'staves' and Thor's hammers attached.[56]

'Stave' and Thor's hammer-shaped iron amulets were also discovered in a woman's burial near Ketting on Als where they were attached directly to the carriage. In this case it is important to note that although Thor's hammer amulets were fastened to the sides of the carriage, the deceased herself wore a necklace with glass beads and a Christian silver crucifix decorated with filigree.[57]

It has been suggested that wagon bodies found in burials only represent practical burial goods,[58] but the wide

distribution of this tradition across the Jylland peninsula, and examples of burials of accompanying horses, such as at Kosel east of Hedeby,[59] support the interpretation of carriage burials as an expression of a Viking Age belief that the carriages could function as a form of *pars pro toto* – a means of transport for high status women on their final journey to the hereafter.

Burials with Draft Horses

Burials with carriages are predominantly known from Jylland, but the *pars pro toto* idea regarding wagon-based travel may also be behind burials like the one at Elstrup on Als[60] and Søllested and Møllemosegård on Fyn, which are characterised by the presence of harness bows, traction chains, and other equipment for draft horses (Fig. 33.7).

Apart from the wagon body's rivets, corner mountings and possibly some carrying rings of iron, the wooden Viking Age wagons of Oseberg type contained no metal parts, and it may therefore be difficult to determine the possible presence of decomposed wagons in old, insufficiently investigated burials like the ones at Møllemosegård and Søllested.

Apart from the one at Rytterkær, no wagons or harness bows are known from Viking Age graves on Sjælland, but one burial at Gryderup near Boeslunde yielded wagon equipment such as horse bits and iron chains for a wagon hitch.[61] On the remainder of Sjælland and on the Swedish mainland no Viking Age women's graves are known with wagons or other wagon-related equipment. Possible exceptions are potential wagon burials at Rytterkær on Sjælland, Stävie in Skåne,[62] and Birka in Uppland.[63] Apart from Oseberg in Vestfold, no wagon parts have been reported from any Norwegian Viking Age burials (but see → **Chapter 27**).

Figure 33.7 In the richly equipped burial from Søllested on Fyn the pars pro toto *idea regarding wagon-based travel is characterised by its assemblage including harness bows, traction chains, and other equipment for draft horses. Photo by National Museum of Denmark.*

Several harness bows in bronze[64] have been recovered from Norwegian and Swedish burials, but this type of horse gear does not necessarily relate to wagon transport. In northern Scandinavia travel by horse-drawn sledges was the most important form of transport during the winter period, and the presence of four richly carved wooden sledges in the Oseberg burial suggests that sledge transport may have played an important role in connection with burials in central and northern Scandinavia.[65] Horse-drawn sledges are also depicted on some picture stones from Gotland, such as those at Levide and Grötlingbo.[66]

However, most of the Scandinavian graves from the Viking Age contained no remains of wagons or horse equipment, and if it was not for the texts of legends and sagas, the pictures on gravestones on Gotland and the textiles from Oseberg, it would have been easy to dismiss that wagon transport ever played any ideological role in the ideas of pre-Christian Scandinavians regarding the journey into the hereafter.

Fortunately, the Oseberg burial represents an indisputable example of a female burial, where a complete wagon formed part of the burial equipment. In addition, the tapestries found in this grave also depict several wagons with groups of horses, either controlled by people walking alongside the horse or by coachmen sitting at the front of the wagon.

The wagon scenes on the Oseberg tapestries most likely depict a noble funeral procession like the one described in *Gylfaginning* (ch. 49) in connection with the funeral procession of Baldr, and which proceeded in a solemn manner with the participation of many important mourners.[67] Þórr consecrated the funeral pyre with his hammer, and the procession was led by Óðinn himself, accompanied by his wife Frigg as well as a variety of *valkyrjur*, ravens, and other beings. Freyr came in a chariot drawn by the boar Gullinbursti. Heimdallr followed on his horse Gulltoppr, and Freyja had her chariot drawn by cats. Many giants also took part.

Compared with the scenes on the Oseberg tapestry, Gotland's picture stones have fewer actors, which may indicate that they reproduced scenes from a later stage of the final journey where the deceased after having been buried – alone and only accompanied by otherworldly followers – completed the final stretch of the Hel road to the underworld.

It is probably not ordinary mortals who are illustrated. Instead, the pictures probably refer to the funeral processions of mythological heroes and heroines. The tall picture stones with male connotations, for example, are thought to contain references to episodes in the heroic life of Sigurðr fáfnisbani,[68] and following this interpretation it is possible that the travel scenes on the short female-related cist stones represent legendary women, for example the *valkyrja* Brynhildr´s drive along the road to Hel.

Brynhildr's Journey to Hel

Brynhildr, the most renowned *valkyrja* of Norse mythology, incurred Óðinn's wrath by allowing the wrong king to be slain on the battlefield. She was punished for her disobedience by the war god, who put her into an enchanted sleep on the mountain Hindarfjell. In addition, Óðinn surrounded Brynhildr's bed with a wall of fire, and it required a superhero like Sigurðr fáfnisbani to break the spell and free the shieldmaiden, who then, for the rest of her life, felt a burning but unhappy love towards her liberator.

Disappointed, and riven with uncontrollable jealousy, Brynhildr arranged for Sigurðr to be murdered, and when her lover was dead Brynhildr did not want to live either. In the *Poetic Edda* it is told how two pyres were prepared, one for Sigurðr who was cremated first, following which Brynhildr was cremated on the other. We also learn how Brynhildr was placed in a wagon draped in precious tapestries, and that the *valkyrja* after the funeral drove her wagon to Hel.

Pre-Christian Scandinavians imagined that the road to the underworld Hel followed the Hel road, which led through dark and deep valleys to the river Gjǫll, which could be crossed by means of the Gjallar bridge paved with shining gold. Apparently, high status women always travelled over land by wagon (or sledge), whereas men usually travelled by horse. The maintenance of the conventions regarding the different and heavily gender-specific means of transport is supported by the archaeological recovery of goods from richly furnished burials, and not least by the detailed images on Gotland's picture stones which clearly depict scenes from travels and events directly related to the movements of aristocratic men and women.

Bridal Processions

When considering the great importance of women's travel by wagon in relation to the burial rituals of the Viking Age, it is obvious to also consider whether there were other important travels by wagon in the lives of aristocratic women, and where the outcome of the travel depended on the quality of the wagon and the gods' goodwill.

One particular occasion, the bridal procession, was undoubtedly surrounded by great excitement. This was a journey where a bride-to-be was to leave her childhood home and move in with her husband-to-be and his family.

Weddings were social events which did not leave special archaeological monuments or artefacts in the way funerals did. The importance of weddings in Scandinavian Viking Age societies is mostly indicated by handed-down myths, sagas, and poems. It is difficult to identify material remains relating to marriages with any degree of certainty, but it should be borne in mind that a considerable amount of Viking Age jewellery and personal equipment survives, and that it is permissible to assume that at least some of those objects were related to marriage customs.

Þrymskviða, for example, tells the story of Þórr's wedding, which was arranged when the giant Þrymr had stolen Þórr's hammer and refused to return it unless the goddess of love, Freyja, married him. When Freyja in the strongest terms refused to drive to the eager-to-marry giant, the gods decided that Þórr had to deal with this himself. Subsequently, Þórr had to put on a bridal gown and Freyja's precious necklace, Brísingamen, and dressed like this, and with Loki dressed up as bridesmaid, Þórr drove in bridal procession to Þrymr's estate in Jǫtunheimr.[69]

Another poem, *Rígsþula*, tells the story about the god Heimdallr's visits to three mortal families of different status. First he visits a poor couple, Å and Edda, whose son Þræl ('Slave') marries the crook-nosed girl, Thy, who appears at the farm with scratched feet and tanned skin.[70]

Following this, Heimdallr visits the slightly better off peasant couple, Afi and Amma, who arranges for a well-dressed maiden named Snør to be driven home to their son Karl ('Free man').

And finally, the poem tells the story about the god's visit to the aristocratic couple, Faðir and Móðir ('Father' and 'Mother'), whose son, Iarl ('Earl'), after having fought his way to glory and riches sends envoys along wet roads to the prince Hersir's hall to propose to his slender daughter, Erna, and subsequently has this white, beautiful maiden brought home as his bride.

The marriages described in *Þrymskviða* and *Rígsþula* were all arranged according to the principle that the bride had to leave her family's estate to be married and subsequently live on the estate of the groom and his family. The bride left her home dressed in her finery which, in addition to exquisite clothes, included precious jewellery. In *Þrymskviða*, for example, we hear how the groom's sister expected the bride to bring her precious gold rings. Undoubtedly, there were strict rules in the elite circles of Viking Age society regarding the size and character of the bride's dowry and, although this is not mentioned specifically in any written sources, the bride was probably allowed to keep the carriage available for her wedding, a carriage which may even have been constructed specifically for the bridal procession.

There is nothing to suggest that burial goods like carriages, women's clothes, or precious costume jewellery were made specifically for the funeral. The possessions of deceased Viking Age women frequently show signs of extensive use, and it should be borne in mind that the lavishly carved carriage of the Oseberg wagon was also, at the time of the funeral, an old piece.[71] The assumption that the carriage was originally made for the Oseberg woman's bridal procession gives us a key to the understanding of the vivid animal decoration on it. The rear end of the wagon appears to depict

a large battle between dog- and cat-like animals carved in early gripping beast style (→ **Chapter 19**). According to Norse mythology, the chariot driven by the goddess of love, Freyja, was drawn by cats, and the Oseberg wagon's portrayal of bewildered cat-like beasts battling aggressive canids may be interpreted as depicting 'the battle between the sexes', that is, a summons of sexual passion explained by a 'cat and dog' allegory for the passionate interaction between women and men.

Another scene on the side of the Oseberg wagon may also have marital relevance. It depicts a woman in a long dress who prevents a man wearing trousers from using his sword against a horseman. Traditionally, the scene is interpreted as a mythological jealousy drama with unknown actors. It is also possible that the scene may be a general reminder of sensible women's roles as moderators of their more impulsive husbands. Should this be the case, both scenes would – in the view of the present author – be highly relevant decoration of an aristocratic woman's bridal wagon.

Support of the idea of burial wagons' original function as elegant means of transport in connection with women's bridal procession may also be found in the notable use-wear on the intricately formed harness bows recovered from burials like those at Søllested and Møllemosegård. In both cases, the metal mountings display deep grooves from the wear of the reins, showing that the wagon equipment following had been extensively used before it followed the deceased into the grave. As a clear contrast to the many fierce motifs on the bronze mountings, a face-to-face portrait of a sedate couple appears at the top of one of the mountings from Søllested (Fig. 33.8), by some interpreted as a portrait of Óðinn and Frigg[72] and by others as a picture of the divine bridal couple, Freyr and Gerðr.[73]

Figure 33.8 This portrait of a distinguished couple appears on one of the harness bow fittings from Søllested. By some interpreted as a portrait of Óðinn and Frigg and by others as a depiction of the divine bridal couple, Freyr and Gerdr. Note the deep wear grove in the bottom of the rein hole. Photo by National Museum of Denmark.

Subsequently, and taking the aristocratic harness bows from Mammen as his point of departure, Ulf Näsman suggests that the details of the decoration on the Viking Age harness bows indicate that these forms of draft horse equipment were primarily produced for use in connection with aristocratic bridal processions.[74]

If the ceremonial carriages in Viking Age Scandinavia were produced for the bridal processions of high status women, and in the end were used secondarily in connection with these women's funeral processions, it would be quite relevant to decorate them with cat-related ornaments to attract the attention of Freyja. Not only was Freyja the goddess of love and fertility, she was also the goddess of death, magic, and war. As noted above, in *Gylfaginning* and *Grímnismál*, it is stated clearly that she shares the battlefield with Óðinn, and that half of the dead were sent to her estate Folkvangr, whereas the other half went to Óðinn in Valhǫll.[75]

The available, but sparse, evidence of wagon decoration in the form of carved, textile-covered carriages, decorated wheels, and precious harness fittings for draft horses, gives the impression of a well-developed transport culture among the Viking Age elite. Magnificently equipped wagons almost certainly attracted admiration amongst other travellers, whereas the decoration of the wagons probably primarily had as its purpose to provide the owners of them with effective pictorial magic to ward off accidents on the journey. Most likely, the core purpose of decorating the Viking Age carriages with carved pictures and iron amulets was to magically ward off all evil.

Bridal Processions in Folklore

It is significant how many of the late Iron Age ingrained traditions associated with seminal events in people's lives continued unaffected into Christian times.

We have many historical records regarding place names, myths, and songs expressing popular conceptions of the particular dangers relating to bridal processions. A well-known folk-song, *Elverskud*, tells of Hr. Oluf riding around, inviting guests to his wedding. Unfortunately, the groom-to-be falls into the clutches of merry elfin girls and he is damaged to such a degree that he has to crawl into bed and in the end he dies before his betrothed, Little Kirsten, arrives at his farm by carriage on their wedding day.[76]

In a similar way people believed until recently that, during the bridal procession, the Devil had the right to abduct brides who had broken a sacred, sworn vow. The deceitful bride was his if he could lay his hands on her,[77] but the bride's crucifix-decorated crown usually represented an insurmountable obstacle for the Devil. However, danger still lurked, and if an accident occurred and the wagon of the bride overturned, killing her, you could be certain that the Devil had taken her.[78]

The Wheel-shaped Pendants and their Link to Freyja

The wheel-shaped pendants likely represent wagon symbols, worn by Viking Age women to invoke happiness on journeys. As described above, a woman's journey into the afterlife would preferably be undertaken by wagon.

Several Norse gods owned special wagons or chariots which they used with varying frequency. The most prolific driver was Þórr, whose goat-drawn chariot was commonly heard rumbling across the sky, with sparks flying from the iron-rimmed wheels of the thunder-god's vehicle. Óðinn preferred to ride his horse Sleipnir, but some researchers have suggested that he also had a chariot.[79]

Although Freyr had a horse called Blóðughófi ('bloody hoof'), at Baldr's funeral procession he chose to drive a chariot pulled by the boar Gullinbursti. Also from the story about Baldr's death we hear that the goddess Freyja drove a chariot pulled by cats.

Wagons clearly also played an important symbolic role in connection with funeral processions where they functioned as a means of transport for the deceased as well as for a large number of the guests taking part in the funeral procession.

But the funeral procession was not the only important travel of consequence for a woman's happiness. Her bridal procession was of equally great importance, and as support on this journey, which signalled the beginning of a woman's adult life, and which was encumbered with great expectations and worry, she would carry powerful travel amulets.

As noted above, a small number of wheel-shaped miniatures have been found in female graves, but it is unlikely that the wagon-wheel pendants had as their primary function to protect the deceased on the journey to the afterlife. Only the two graves from Hønsi in Norway[80] and Birka Bj. 29 in Sweden[81] contained wheel amulets with still functioning original eyelets. The third burial, Bj. 844 at Birka, also contained a precious wheel amulet of silver,[82] but this piece had been altered and transformed into a fibula, like three of the stray Danish wheel-shaped pendants, which had apparently all been transformed into disc-shaped fibulae.

Of these pieces, the one from Neble had even been turned over and given a secondary shield motif on its new obverse face. The apparently common trend of transforming pendants into fibulae[78] probably means that, in many cases, wheel amulets lost their original function during the lifetime of their owners.

If the wheel amulets were mainly produced to serve young fertile women, it is possible that middle-aged women after their successful bridal procession and subsequent child births felt a greater need for a new brooch, than possession of an old, now obsolete wheel amulet, which had secured her a safe journey and healthy children. It is also possible that a wheel-shaped pendant transformed into a fibula could function as a dear memory of the dowry she received from her family home, a well-arranged marriage, and her strong children. With the old symbol still on the new fibula, Freyja's wheel probably still worked as an invocation of Freyja's protection on women's continued journey through Viking Age life.

And, finally, it cannot be ruled out that the amulets, in addition to protecting their bearer, also served as protection of the women's unborn children. If this is the case, it is also possible that miniature representations of horses, weaponry, strike-a-lights, etc. may have served to boost the masculinity and fighting spirit in unborn boys, whereas miniature pictures of household items like kitchen utensils, looms and stools might have improved the ability of unborn girls to manage a household. The latter group might also benefit from the wheel-shaped pendants if their function, as suggested, was to secure Freyja's protection in connection with future wagon travels.

Gripping Beasts and the Worship of Freyja

The presence of early gripping beast decoration on the Oseberg wagon and late, symmetrical Borre style heads on the wheel-shaped pendants[83] raises the question as to the general ideological meaning of the gripping beast decoration in the final years of paganism, from the occurrence of the Berdal style in the late eighth century until the disappearance of the symmetrical Borre beasts at the end of the tenth century.[84]

In contrast to the animal styles of the Germanic Iron Age, which primarily depict dangerous animals like wolves, eagles, ravens, and snakes, those of the Viking Age are characterised by playful, acrobatic animals, staring curiously at the observer, while gripping everything they can get their multi-fingered paws around.

Several researchers have described the gripping beasts as cat-like,[85] and there is little doubt that the pointed-eared animals on the Oseberg wagon really do represent feline cats (*Felis catus*). However, before we surrender to a general identification of all gripping beasts as stylised domestic cats, it should be borne in mind that the wildcat (*Felis silvestris*) by all accounts had become extinct long before the domestic cat had been introduced in the Nordic countries during the Iron Age.[86] It is unlikely that a domestic animal introduced quite late would have been given an important 'solo role' in Viking Age cosmology, as in the Scandinavian fauna there are several widely distributed animal species which also (particularly in older language) carried the suffix 'cat', and which, in terms of appearance and behaviour, show many similarities with the domestic cat.

This group includes first and foremost members of the *mustelidae* family, such as the ermine, the weasel, the polecat, and the pine marten. Particularly the polecat turned out to be relatively easy to domesticate, and the Romans, for example, kept tame ferrets for rabbit hunting.[87] Feline cats and the above-mentioned *mustelidae* have several things in common, such as their fine, soft furs, their agility, and their

ability to swiftly grip small prey with their paws. Other things they have in common include great curiosity, fury when teased, and great tenderness towards their offspring and (when tamed) humans. Finally, the hissing of the beasts when threatened has given these ‘weasels’ a reputation as being dangerous, in line with snakes.

It is quite possible that the Norse term *kǫttur*, used by Snorri Sturluson to describe Freyja’s draught animals, was not meant as a specific definition of a species, but as a term describing cat-like animals in a broader sense, including feline cats as well as *mustelidae*.

As far as known, there are no specific references to *mustelidae* in Norse mythology, but there are many reports from historical times about the respect the rural population had towards the small nocturnal predators, which liked to live near human habitation, and which, due to their nocturnal activities and subterranean movements in mouse tunnels, were associated with all kinds of magical properties.[88] It was, for example, unwise to refer directly to ermines and weasels, so as to avoid reprisal from offended animals certain euphemistic ‘taboo names’ were used, such as the Danish name ‘brud’ (Eng. ‘bride’) which is now used as the formal name of the species.

The cat animals’ magical reputation, erotic behaviour, and volatile temper are obviously the factors linking them to the goddess Freyja, and it is tempting to assume a direct connection between the gripping beast decoration of the copper alloy jewellery and the pre-Christian Viking Age women’s invocation of the period’s most important female deity, the cat-keeping Freyja.

The gripping beast decoration is particularly common on objects associated with the female gender, such as fibulae, pendants, keys, bow harnesses, etc. By comparison, similar gripping beast motifs are rarely found on objects traditionally associated with the male gender. As a consequence of this observation, Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson suggests that the Borre style had a general magical function,[89] and the presence of heads fashioned in the Borre style on several wheel-shaped pendants seems to support this chapter’s interpretation of the pendants as symbolic references to Freyja’s cat-drawn chariot, and that they functioned as amulets for Viking Age women on their wagon journeys along the roads of that time.

Notes

1. Gräslund 2005.
2. Schovsbo 1987: fig. 34.
3. Krogh 1969: 3–4, fig. 2.
4. Petersen 2020.
5. Cat. 2. Vindinge, C 30153, cat. 12. Skjern, C 47111 and cat. 10. Sønderholm Syd, C 43193.
6. Cat. 4. Bakkendrup, C 36670 and cat. 15. Nørholm, C 52171.
7. Cat. 5. Lille Karleby C 41627 and cat. 6. Lille Karleby, C 41706.
8. Cat. 15. Nørholm,C 52171.
9. Cat. nr. 2 Vindinge, C 30153 and cat. 11. Neble, C 44542.
10. Cat. 18. Lillering near Harlev, FHM j. nr. 6039 x1. cat. 13. Gudum C, C 48710.
11. Cat. 2. Vindinge, C 30153.
12. Cat. 8. Lille Karleby, C41785, and C 41784 (glass bead).
13. Schovsbo 1987: 247 nr. 116.
14. Cat. 3. Bislev, C 34812 and cat. 16. Foldagergård II, ROM 2265.
15. Cat. 25. Gnëzdovo.
16. Cat. 19. Hönsi, Vik, 2843.
17. Cat. 20. Birka grav 29.
18. Cat. 24. Truso, no. MAH 1584/2007.
19. Cat. 7. Lille Karleby C 41762, 8. Lille Karleby C 41785, 9. Lille Karleby C 41865.
20. Cat. 18. Lillering near Harlev FHM j. nr. 6039 x1.
21. Cat. 1. Furreby, C 27256.
22. Cat. 23. Skåne, SHM 9822:812.
23. Cat. 11. Neble C 44542, 14. Vindinge Nordøst C 50624.
24. Cat. 21. Birka grave Bj. 844, SHM Inv. nr. 34000.
25. Cat. 11. Neble C 44542.
26. Pentz 2020.
27. Cat. 21. Björkö grave 844, SHM Inv. nr. 34000.
28. Cat. 14. Vindinge Nordøst, C 50624.
29. Cat. 1. Furreby, C 27256.
30. Cat. 20-21, grave Bj. 29 and grave Bj. 844.
31. Krogh 1970: 150.
32. Cat. 22 Vindinge, C 30153.
33. Kastholm *et. al.* 2018.
34. Cat. 19. Hönsi, Norge.
35. Cat. 20-21, grave Bj. 29 and grave Bj. 844.
36. Cat. 23. Skåne, SHM 9822:812.
37. Cat. 19. Hönsi.
38. Cat. 24. Truso. Gardeła 2014: 108-109. One or two specimens (corroded and damaged) found in Wolin could possibly be parts of miniature wheels but they are not included here.
39. Cat. 25. Gnëzdovo. Carlsson & Selin 2012: 76.
40. Jensen 2010: 63.
41. Kastholm *et. al.* 2017: 70.
42. Krogh 1970: 150.
43. Weber 1973. Weber quotes eddic verse that should probably be interpreted as referring to this vehicle, which was seemingly a recognised part of Óðinn’s iconography.
44. Zeiten 1997: 23.
45. Pedersen 2009.
46. Jensen 2010: 63.
47. Gardeła 2014: 109.
48. Roesdahl 1978; Eisenschmidt 2021.
49. Nygaard & Murphy 2017.
50. Personal communication from Bjarne Nielsen, Vesthimmerlands Museum, Års.
51. Damell 1985.
52. Nylén & Lamm 2003: 171.
53. Snædal 2005: 11.
54. Roesdahl 1978, Eisenschmidt 1994; 2021: fig. 2.
55. Schovsbo 1987: 135.
56. Eisenschmidt 1994: 104-105.
57. Eisenschmidt 2013.
58. Schovsbo 1987: 34.

59. Eisenschmidt 2021: fig. 5.
60. Müller-Wille 1974; Dobat 2004.
61. Pedersen 1997.
62. Eisenschmidt 2013: 126.
63. Gräslund 1980: 24.
64. Arne 1934: 67; Ekvall 2020: 15–19.
65. Gräslund 1980: 25, 56; Sindbæk 2003: 186.
66. Nylén & Lamm: 2003: 102.
67. Faulkes 2005.
68. Andren 1993.
69. Neckel & Kuhn 1962.
70. Neckel & Kuhn 1962.
71. Grieg 1928: 17.
72. Dobat 2006: 187.
73. Steinsland 1990: 76.
74. Näsman 1991: 253.
75. Gardeła 2021.
76. Grundtvig 1882: 177.
77. Kamp 1877: 82.
78. Knudsen 1935: 163.
79. Weber 1973: 88.
80. Cat. 19. Hønsi, Vik, 2843.
81. Cat. 20. Birka grave 29.
82. Cat. 21. Birka grave 844, SHM Inv. nr. 34000.
83. Cat. 2. Vindinge, C 30153., cat. 11. Neble C 44542, cat. 14. Vindinge Nordøst, C 50624 and cat. 21. Birka grave Bj. 844, SHM Inv. nr. 34000.
84. Skibsted Klæsøe 1999: 117–18.
85. Skibsted-Klæsøe 1999: 117.
86. Toplak 2019: 17–18.
87. Thomson 1951: 471.
88. Brøndegård 1985: 161–72.
89. Hedenstierna-Jonson 2006: 313.

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34

Miniature Weapons in the Viking World: Small Things with Great Meaning

Leszek Gardeła

Weapons were almost omnipresent in the Viking world. Archaeological excavations imply that people of different age and social class had many opportunities to witness martial equipment in their homes and halls, while strolling the busy streets of towns and ports of trade, and, of course, during military expeditions and times of conflict. Different kinds of militaria also played prominent roles in human imagination and in orally transmitted stories, poems, and myths which often idealised the warrior's way of life and wove a vision of a prosperous *post mortem* existence for those who would meet their end in battle.

Taken collectively, all these different strands of archaeological and textual evidence clearly demonstrate that in Norse societies weapons such as swords, shields, spears, axes, and helmets were among people's most prized possessions – probably on par with jewellery and other luxury goods – and that some specimens were apparently so valued that they would be given personal names. Furthermore, Viking Age people seem to have shared a belief that weapons possessed their own agency and personhood as well as other qualities which would sometimes make them 'misbehave' or act against the will of their wielders.[1] It is vital to bear in mind, however, that weapons were not only used in martial contexts and that they played significant roles in other environments, especially in the sphere of ritual and belief.[2]

Over the last several decades, philologists, historians of religion, and archaeologists have devoted increased attention to different facets of martial activities in the North, both with regard to the portrayals of warriors, weapons, feuds, and wars in extant textual sources as well as to their more tangible traces in the material record.[3] As a result of these different scholarly endeavours, our today's understanding of the Viking Age sphere of war is far more sophisticated than ever before. We have also come to realise that not only men engaged in martial-related activities and that, occasionally, women could also take active part in them.[4] This chapter concentrates on just one of the many facets of the broad international and interdisciplinary debate surrounding weapons in the Viking Age, namely their miniature manifestations.

Miniature Weapons in the Viking Age: An Overview

Every year across Northern and Western Europe professional archaeological excavations and amateur metal detecting activities bring to light literally hundreds of new examples of miniscule metal artefacts, the majority of which are coins and jewellery.[5] The latter category of finds embraces a staggering array of pins, brooches, bracelets, and rings as well as small plaques and pendants which can take a variety of forms: anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, or resembling full-sized objects that would be encountered on a day-to-day basis in Viking Age settlements and towns (→ **Chapters 32–35**). Interestingly, recent overviews of this constantly expanding body of ferrous and non-ferrous artefactual material show unequivocally that miniature weapons were actually among the most popular miniscule items in the Viking world.[6]

The occurrence of remarkably realistic miniature representations of shields, swords, and spears in the archaeological record was acknowledged by Scandinavian archaeologists as early as the nineteenth century,[7] but it took scholars another one hundred years to develop greater and more inquisitive interest in this group of finds. Until the early 2000s, miniature weapons were conventionally interpreted as amulets, serving for example as indicators of their owners' devotion to Norse deities such as Óðinn,

Þórr, or Freyr, or seen as substitutes of full-sized militaria capable of endowing their users with special protection or other advantages.[8] As a result of a series of recent publications specifically dedicated to different miniature weapon categories, however, many former preconceptions have been revised and refined, leading to new ideas on what these items may have meant to the people of the Viking Age.[9] The sections below will summarise and broaden the latest research perspectives pertaining to miniature shields, swords, spears, and axes and will also introduce a newly-emerging group of objects resembling miniature helmets.

Miniature Shields

Viking Age artefacts conventionally referred to as 'miniature shields' look almost exactly like full-sized wooden shields commonly used in ninth- to eleventh-century Scandinavia, for instance those from the famous Gokstad burial in Vestfold, Norway[10] and the fortress of Trelleborg in Sjælland, Denmark.[11] Measuring approximately 3 cm in diameter and usually made of silver or copper alloy, the miniatures are *always* round. On the obverse they carry a representation of a central shield boss, whereas on the reverse they sometimes have small riveted strips of metal imitating the handles of their full-sized counterparts (Fig. 34.1). Some specimens also have special suspension loops attached to their edges.[12] The boards of the miniatures are often decorated with what is known as the 'running wheel motif' consisting of etched or punched lines radiating from the shield boss towards the edges (Fig. 34.1). Similar decoration is seen on other Viking Age artefacts, for instance anthropomorphic figurines.[13] It is noteworthy, however, that several miniature shields carry unusual ornamental motifs in the form of small circles (Fig. 34.1) or punched triangles with tiny pellets inside – such designs appear nowhere else in Viking Age iconography associated with shields.

To date, the majority of miniature shields have been recorded in Denmark and Sweden, but some specimens are also known from Finland, Germany, Norway, and Poland. A substantial corpus of artefacts of this type has also been noted in present-day Russia where they most likely belonged to Scandinavian migrants and settlers.[14] In a detailed study published by Leszek Gardeła and Kerstin Odebäck in 2018, it was estimated that by 2018 approximately 79 miniature shields had been known from Scandinavia, Western Europe, and Poland and more than 60 from Russia. As this study shows, miniature shields tend to occur in graves (cremations and inhumations), hoards, and settlement sites. Interestingly, in funerary contexts miniature shields appear to be associated predominantly with women, although one must bear in mind that the sexing of the human remains is usually based solely on the accompanying artefactual assemblages (i.e. female jewellery). The specimens from inhumation graves are found either singly or together with other pendants, sometimes forming elaborate necklaces. For instance, in grave Bj. 954 from Birka in Uppland, Sweden, a miniature shield co-occurred with a Thor's hammer, whereas in graves Bj. 844, Bj. 946, and Bj. 968 from the same site miniature shields were encountered together with other pendants presumably possessing religious connotations (Fig. 34.1). Particularly noteworthy is grave Bj. 844[15] which – in addition to a fragmentarily preserved miniature shield – held a miniature coiled snake pendant,[16] a miniature chair pendant, as well as a wheel-shaped pendant (→ **Chapters 32–33**). The overall impression arising from this body of data is that in funerary contexts miniature shields tend to accompany people belonging to the upper echelons of society. It is unlikely, however, that any of these individuals were warriors. Apart from the miniatures, none of their graves contain full-sized weapons, and the bones of the deceased do not carry any traces of combat-related trauma.

Drawing on our current understanding of miniature objects in past societies,[17] it is permissible to surmise that small shields in some regards echoed the properties and symbolic characteristics of their full-sized counterparts. In mortuary contexts, for instance, they may have warded the dead from unfavourable powers or protected the living from them. The idea that in the Norse world of thought shields were believed to have apotropaic qualities as well as the capacity to avert the effect of the 'evil eye'[18] can be found in *Gǫngu-Hrólfs saga* (ch. 33) where a shield is placed directly *over* the face of a sorcerer.[19] Despite its late chronology, this one-off account likely preserves echoes of authentic traditions,[20] but it cannot be used as definite proof that miniature shields had close links with 'actual' Viking Age ritual specialists, nor that the people buried with such items dealt with magic. It is vital to bear in mind that graves with miniature shields *do not* contain the iconic iron staffs (i.e. items regarded as the core attributes of magic workers; → **Chapter 30**) and generally lack other evocative paraphernalia associated with the practice and practitioners of *seiðr*. One noteworthy exception is the aforementioned grave Bj. 844 which, in addition to the miniature shield, contained snake- and wheel-shaped pendants that both seem to have been strongly linked to the sphere of Norse magic and its agents. We will never know for certain if this exceptional grave belonged to a ritual specialist, but if this was indeed the case, then perhaps the miniature shield was part of the deceased person's toolkit or was used as a means of symbolic protection against them.

After the release of Gardeła's and Odebäck's article in 2018, many new examples of miniature shields have been unearthed as a result of amateur metal detecting, especially in Denmark. Regrettably, since they are all stray finds, relatively little can be said about the Viking Age people who used them. Nevertheless, it is worthy of note that while some of these newly discovered specimens have their boards decorated in conventional ways (i.e. with the running wheel motif), others carry previously unknown designs that significantly expand our understanding of iconography and artistic tastes of Viking Age Scandinavians (Fig. 34.2). It is

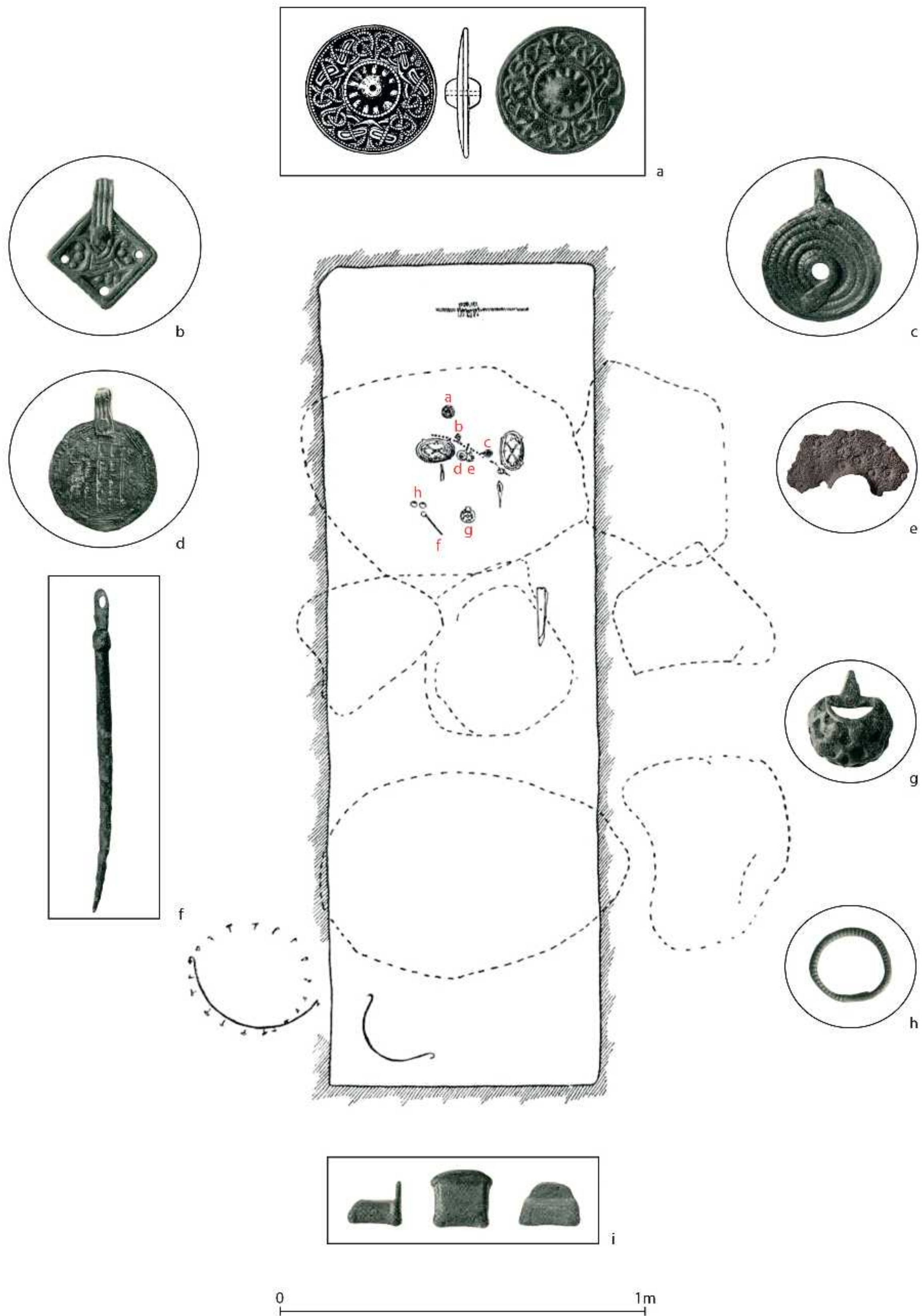

Figure 34.1 Grave Bj 844 from Birka, Sweden. Plan based on Arbman 1943: 318; Photos (a–d; f–i) after Arbman 1940: Taf. 92, 97, 99, 112, 138, 171. Photo (e) by Gabriel Hildebrand. Image design by Leszek Gardeła.

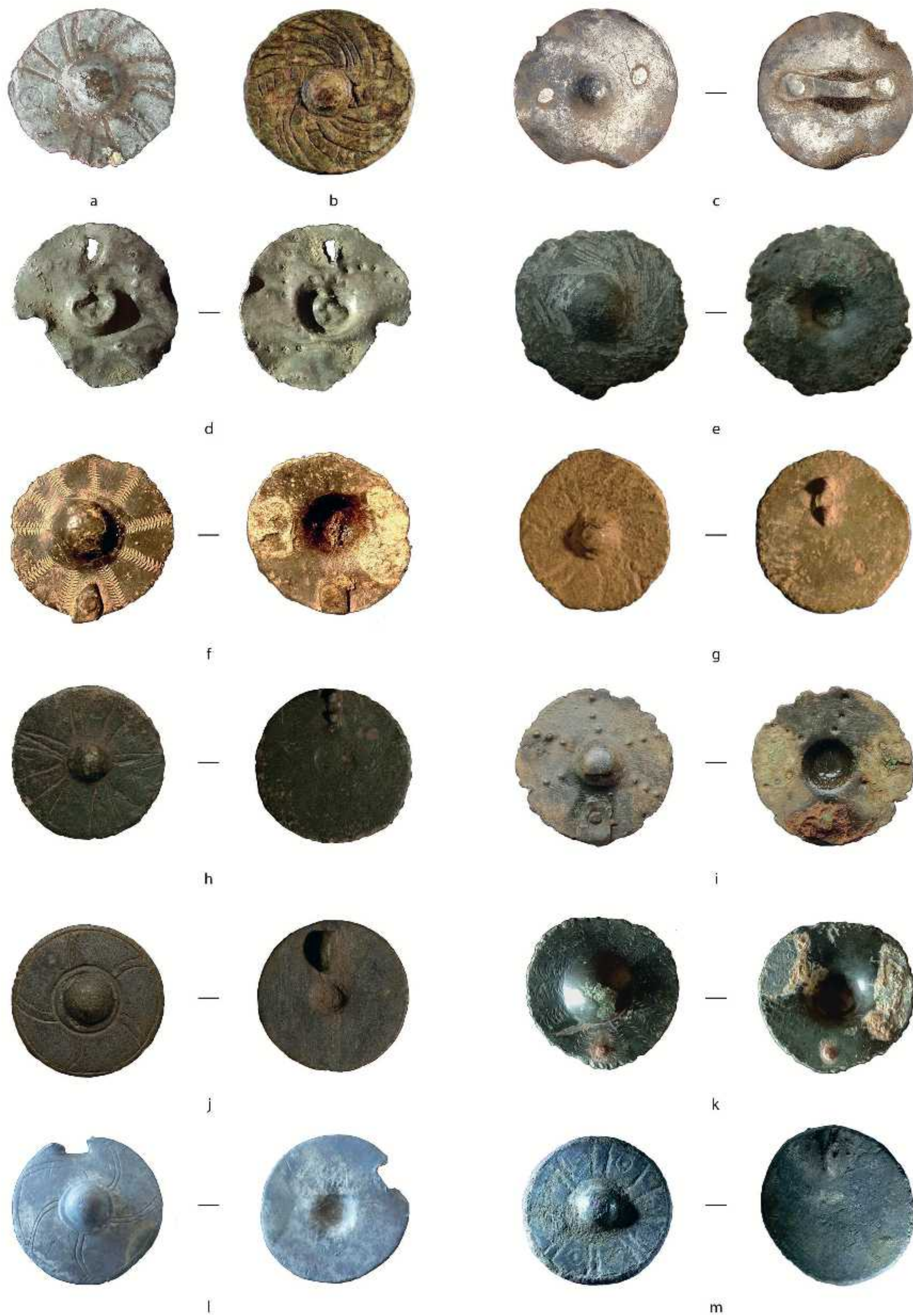

Figure 34.2 Selection of Viking Age miniature shields: a) Denmark (fibula.dk); b) Denmark (DIME 110578); c) Denmark (DIME 38403); d) Denmark (fibula.dk); e) Denmark (fibula.dk); f) Denmark (DIME 152125); g) Denmark (DIME 22049); h) Denmark (DIME 131205); i) Denmark (DIME 128855); j) Denmark (DIME 131021); k) Denmark (DIME 127260); l) Denmark (DIME 30934); m) Denmark (DIME 6285). Not to scale. Image design by Leszek Gardeła.

difficult to gauge if these motifs were symbolically charged or purely ornamental. Perhaps the meanings attributed to them were never fixed and always depended on the eye of the beholder.

Miniature Swords

Miniature swords constitute another substantial group of miniscule militaria encountered in the archaeological record across Scandinavia and elsewhere in Europe. The majority of the presently known Viking Age specimens are made either of copper alloy or silver and their length varies between approximately 3 and 6 cm. Many of them have small suspension loops on the reverse and some exemplars have perforated blades, probably allowing the user to hang the miniature sword on a string or ring.

Recent surveys of the geographical distribution of miniature swords indicate that they were especially popular in mainland Denmark and Sweden.[21] So far, only several specimens have been encountered on the Baltic Sea islands of Bornholm, Gotland, and Öland. Likewise, very few of them are known from Germany,[22] Norway, and Russia. The find corpus assembled by Leszek Gardeła in 2021 includes a total of 50 specimens (31 from Denmark, 14 from Sweden, 3 from Russia, 1 from Norway, and 1 from Germany).[23] As a result of amateur metal detecting, however, over the last two years several new examples have been recorded, mainly in Denmark (Fig. 34.3).

One truly remarkable aspect of this group of miniatures is how closely some specimens resemble full-sized swords – their details are sometimes rendered with such remarkable precision that it is possible to ascribe them to particular sword types that fall within Jan Petersen's weapon classification system.[24] It is noteworthy that a couple of miniature swords found in Denmark bear close resemblance to full-sized swords of Petersen's types K and O (i.e. Bejsebakken, Dragedyssegård, Nørholm Skole, Nørre Kongerslev, Skærvad, Stavnsager, and Voel II). One of the diagnostic features of their design is the elaborate pommel consisting of several 'lobes' or 'tongues' (Fig. 34.3a–d). Interestingly, full-sized K and O type swords are relatively rare in Scandinavia and are more characteristic of the Carolingian cultural milieu – a world with sophisticated traditions and rich material culture that was often admired and imitated in medieval Northern Europe.[25] As has been argued elsewhere, the allure of these outstanding and culturally-foreign weapons may have been so strong that Scandinavian artisans (and/or their patrons) considered it highly appropriate to represent them in miniature form.[26] In this particular case, size reduction should probably be seen not as diminishing the importance of what the weapons represented or alluded to, but quite the opposite, as a way to infuse them with new and perhaps more potent meanings and powers.

In contrast to the aforementioned miniature shields, miniscule swords rarely appear in funerary contexts.[27] Regrettably, due to the vagueness of the available archaeological documentation (resulting from the fact that most of the graves were discovered in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, often by amateurs), it is challenging to determine who the deceased buried with these items were. Moreover, in the absence of osteological and genetic analyses, the biological sex of these individuals also remains undetermined. Relying on the fact that across the Viking world small sized paraphernalia tend to be found predominantly in female graves,[28] we can hazard a guess that sword miniatures were also most commonly (or perhaps even exclusively) buried with women.

As the current research shows, miniature swords are also rarely encountered in hoards. Only three such instances have been noted at Klinta on Öland, Riddare on Gotland, and Randlev in Denmark. This is an aspect which again distinguishes them from the aforementioned miniature shields that occur quite prominently in connection with silver deposits, leading to the conclusion that in their hoards Viking Age people generally preferred to include miniscule representations of defensive rather than offensive weapons. Presumably, this was done to symbolically protect the hoards from being seen and from falling into the wrong hands.

Overall, the majority of miniature swords known to date come from settlement contexts and as stray finds. This implies that they were either intentionally deposited in the ground, accidentally lost, or for some reason discarded by their owners. It is noteworthy that as many as four miniature swords have been encountered in the course of archaeological excavations at Tissø in Denmark. This particular site is known to have witnessed intensive ritual activity[29] and thus it is highly probable that the miniatures were placed in the ground with some special intent in mind, for instance as ritual deposits referring to or substituting for the sacrifices of full-sized weapons in the nearby lake.[30] Similar motivations may have guided the deposition of miniature swords in Gamla Uppsala in Sweden,[31] a site of great prominence both in Viking Age reality and later medieval literary imagination, and a place where large-scale ritual activities were likely held (→ **Chapter 6**).

Miniature Spears

Compared to miniature shields and swords, miniature spears seem to have been less popular in the Viking world and also far less sophisticated in terms of their design and overall appearance. Usually cast or cut from sheets of metal, their length varies from approximately 3 to 10 cm. Based on the presently available body of evidence, we may surmise that copper alloy was the material most commonly used for their manufacture, although specimens made of silver, iron, and even wood have also been encountered in the archaeological record (Fig. 34.4). Similar to miniature swords, some examples of miniature spears have a suspension loop on

Figure 34.3 Selection of Viking Age miniature swords: a) Dragedyssegård, Denmark (C50772); b) Kalmergården (Tissø), Denmark (KN-794-2); c) Nørholm Skole, Denmark (C35874); d) Gamborg Vest, Denmark (C50690); e) Denmark (fibula.dk); f) Voel II, Denmark (C52641); g) Hedeby, Germany. Reproduced after Drescher 1983; h) Denmark (fibula.dk); i) Nørre Kongerslev, Denmark (fibula.dk); j) Ndr. Mulebygård, Denmark (C34643); k) Denmark (DIME 159475); l) Randlev, Denmark; m) Skærvad, Denmark; n) Hoby, Denmark (C36336); o) Engsiggård, Denmark (C47353); p) Tissø, Denmark; r) Mysselhøjgård, Denmark; s) Stavnsager, Denmark (C37483-3); t) Bandelundviken, Gotland; u) Holmegård Øst, Denmark (C44157); w) Tissø, Denmark (KU-187); x) Bulbrogård (Tissø), Denmark (FB-1273). Not to scale. Image design by Leszek Gardeła.

the reverse, while others have perforated blades or sockets. Based on these diverse characteristics, one may surmise that their function was varied and that they could be used as pendants and/or as hair or clothing pins. The specimens with a socket would be particularly suited for the latter purpose, especially if they were provided with organic (wooden or bone) shafts.

A survey published by Leszek Gardeła in 2022 lists a total of 34 Viking Age miniature spears (21 from Sweden, 6 from Denmark, 3 from Germany, 2 from Poland, and 2 from Ukraine).[32] Naturally, as in the case of other recently assembled corpuses of miniature objects, this list is not definitive and will require revisions in the future. New specimens are likely to be discovered in the coming years, either in the course of literature reviews and museum-based surveys or as a result of new professional excavations and amateur metal detecting.

Miniature spears – like other small militaria – tend to be encountered in a variety of archaeological contexts. The majority have been noted in settlement sites and some have been discovered stray. As in the case of swords and shields, it is often challenging to determine if they were deposited intentionally or accidentally lost or discarded. As of yet, only six miniature spears have been encountered in Swedish funerary contexts, i.e. at Birka (Bj. 581 and Bj. 944), Barkarby, Johannesdal, Köpingsvik, and Sandegårde.[33] It is noteworthy that they accompanied people buried in accordance with different funerary traditions involving cremation and inhumation. Due to poor bone preservation and the ambiguous nature of other artefacts from these burial assemblages, it is uncertain if miniature spears were more commonly associated with women or men. The former option seems more likely, however, since miniature items generally appear to have been preferred by the female part of the Norse society. Intriguingly, in one of the inhumation graves from Birka (Bj. 944), which held an individual of indeterminate sex, a miniature spear was found lying on the right-hand side of the body with its tip pointing towards the foot-end of the burial chamber. This peculiar position of the miniature echoes the placement of full-sized spears or spear-like items in the graves of presumed ritual specialists from Fyrkat, Gerdrup, and Trekroner-Grydehøj in Denmark (→ **Part 4**), and it appears that many exemplars of miniature spears were intended to be worn with their points directed down, i.e. towards the ground. This position may have been symbolically charged and perhaps alluded to the idea of marking with the spear – a ritual known from Old Norse textual sources (e.g. *Hávamál* and *Ynglinga saga*) and closely associated with Óðinn. In the iconography from the Viking Age and the Middle Ages, certain heroes, deities, and saints also tend to be portrayed with downwards-pointing spears, perhaps in reference to the episodes in their lives when they fought against chthonic beings and powers of darkness.[34]

Miniature Axes

Viking Age miniature axes are rarely witnessed in the Scandinavian archaeological record, and when they do appear they are rarely of local origin and design. As a matter of fact, the vast majority of miniature axes that have been recorded to date in Denmark and Sweden stem from Central and Eastern Europe. Their bearded or fan-shaped blades correspond closely to axes commonly used by Slavic and Baltic peoples, which makes it highly probable that at least some of them were brought to Scandinavia by non-Norse foreigners (Fig. 34.5).[35]

Over the last several decades scholars have been striving to understand the meanings miniature axes may have held, and several alternative ideas have been offered. Initially, miniature axes (of different types) were regarded merely as children's toys.[36] This view is now contested, and instead it is widely believed that – in addition to their likely role as clothing pins or pendants – miniature axes held symbolic meanings.[37] One idea is that miniature axes of the Slavic type were worn by (travelling) Rus warriors and members of the *drużyna* ('retinue').[38] The remarkably broad geographical distribution of these items (extending from Rus, through present-day Baltic countries to Poland, Scandinavia, and the British Isles) complicates this view, however, and there are actually no solid reasons to associate them exclusively with Rus or Eastern Slavs. Until recently, it was also thought that some miniature axes may have been connected with the widespread cult of St. Óláfr. This interpretation also seems improbable – at least with regard to the axes of the Slavic type – since most of the Central and Eastern European specimens stem from a period of time predating Óláfr's death and beatification. In view of the above, probably the most reasonable reading – and one that is generally preferred by researchers, including the present author – is that the Slavic variants were associated with Perun, an important pre-Christian deity of war and the sky.[39] If this reading is correct, miniature axes of the Slavic type could be regarded as Slavic counterparts to Scandinavian Thor's hammers.

In the Slavic cultural milieu miniature axes tend to be found stray or in funerary contexts. They have been encountered in several children's and young men's graves (Dziekanowice, Poland; Gorodiszcze, Russia; Nikołskoje, Russia; Mitjajew, Russia; Opole Nowa Wieś Królewska, Poland; Sarkieł-Biełaja Wieża, Russia) and in two graves of presumed women (Kołczino, Russia; Wyżumski III mogilnik, Russia).[40] Interestingly, in most instances they were placed by the right hip or leg of the deceased. As some researchers have argued, it is not unlikely that miniature axes were given to young boys after important rites of passage (for instance *postrzyżyny*, i.e. the ritual cutting of hair) and perhaps with the intention to signal their transition from childhood to adulthood. The occurrence of such miniatures in graves may be seen as an expression of the mourners' unfulfilled hopes and desires pertaining to their loved one's

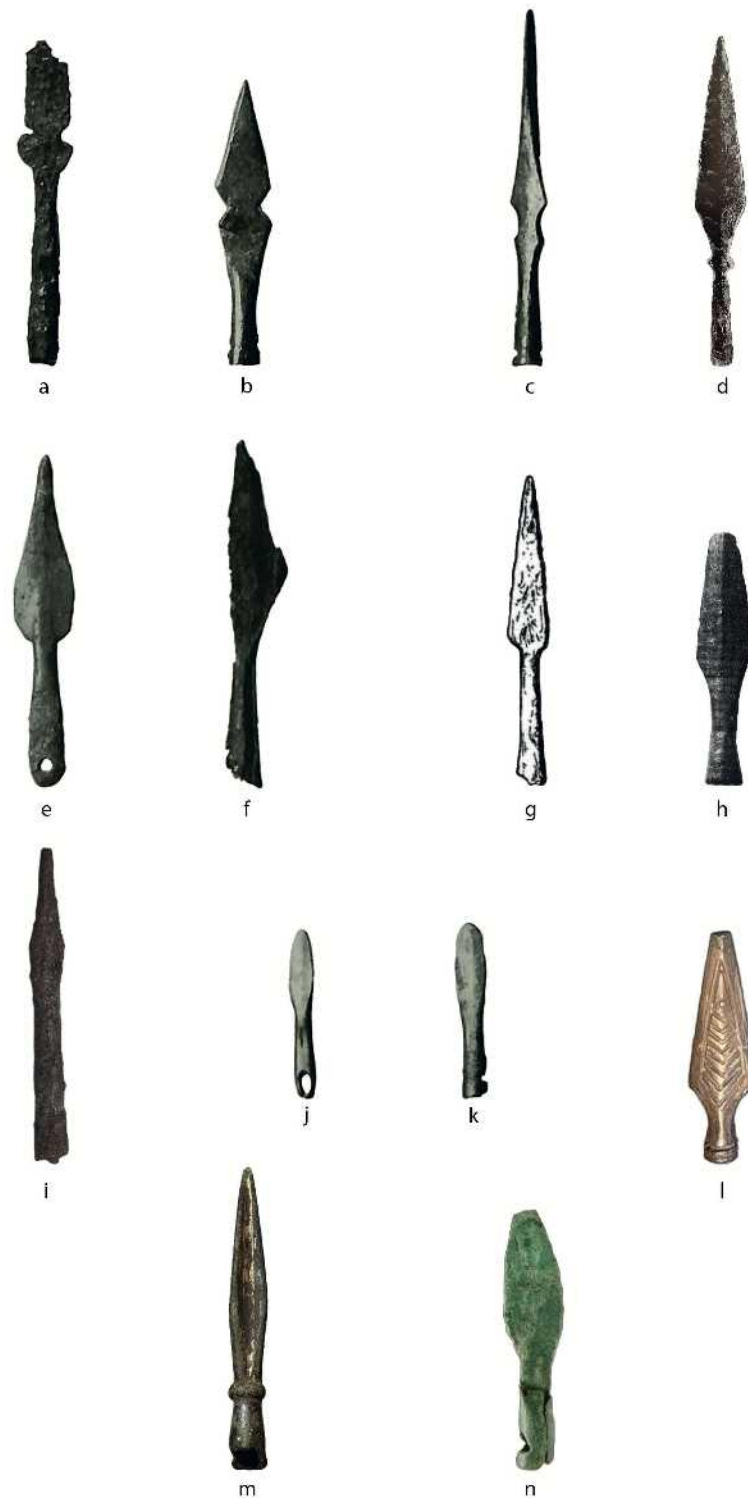

Figure 34.4 Selection of Viking Age miniature spears: a) Helgö, Sweden. After Arrhenius 1961: 146; b) Birka Svarta Jorden, Sweden. After Arrhenius 1961: 146; c) Barkarby, Sweden. After Arrhenius 1961: 146; d) Hedeby, Germany. After Elsner 1992: 79; e) from the Bruzelius collection, Sweden. After Arrhenius 1961: 148; f) Vasterljung, Sweden. After Arrhenius 1961: 148; g) grave Bj. 944 from Birka, Sweden. After Arbman 1943: 370; h) Århus, Denmark. After Andersen & Madsen 1985: 63; i) grave Bj. 581 from Birka, Sweden. After Birkaportalen; j) Gashagen, Sweden. After Arrhenius 1961: 148; k) Birka Svarta Jorden, Sweden. After Arrhenius 1961: 148; l) Trelleborg, Denmark. Photo by Leszek Gardeła; m) Holbaek Kommune, Denmark (DIME 97926); n) Tissø, Denmark. Photo by Leszek Gardeła. Not to scale. Image design by Leszek Gardeła.

Figure 34.5 Selection of Viking Age miniature axes: a) Denmark (DIME 9398); b) Denmark (fibula.dk); c) Denmark (fibula.dk); d) Denmark (DIME 4437); e) Denmark (fibula.dk); f) Denmark (DIME 84550). Image design by Leszek Gardeła.

future. If this interpretation is correct, miniature axes in the funerary record can be regarded as objects facilitating the (re)creation of identity and memories of the dead.

In looking holistically at the complete corpus of miniature axes encountered in Scandinavian Viking Age archaeological contexts, apart from doubtlessly foreign exemplars, we may try to isolate specimens that may have been produced locally or at least used by people belonging to the Norse cultural milieu. In the early twentieth century one such item was discovered at Svingesæter in Sogn og Fjordane, Norway in a richly furnished female grave.[41] Cast in copper alloy, this elegantly-designed miniature has a fan-shaped blade resembling the blades of full-sized axes of Jan Petersen's type M (a type relatively common in the North)[42] and is provided with a tapering shaft which is fully integrated with the blade (Fig. 34.6). The true function of the Svingesæter miniature remains unknown. It may have been a clothing pin which perhaps served the additional role of a status symbol and amulet.[43] In view of the fact that the woman from Svingesæter was interred in a seated position and in clothes adorned with high-quality jewellery (oval brooches, beads), we may hazard a guess that she was someone important and special in the community and/or that she was a foreigner. It is interesting to note that the custom of seated burial is extremely rarely encountered in Norway[44] and is more characteristic of mainland Sweden and Rus.[45] In this context we may also recall the famous eye-witness account of Ibn Faḍlān who mentions a deceased Rus chieftain propped up with cushions inside a tent erected on the deck of a burial ship[46] (→ **Chapter 13**) or the seated burials of several prominent saga protagonists, for instance Gunnarr of *Brennu-Njáls saga*.[47] As some researchers have argued, the idea behind seated burials may have been to create an illusion of life in the grave so as to facilitate post-funerary communication between the living and the dead.[48] All these archaeological and literary parallels and hints certainly add puzzling dimensions to the Svingesæter grave and its occupant, permitting very careful speculation that the woman was involved in or responsible for some activities associated with cult and/or magic. Perhaps the small copper alloy weapon that accompanied her had a special role to play in these practices?

As of yet, the closest analogies to the miniature axe from Svingesæter have been found at Bjaland in Norway and in Dublin in Ireland as well as in Aggersborg and Avnsøgård in Denmark. The contexts of their discovery, however, reveal nothing about the identities, professions, and lifeways of their original users. Until more examples of miniature axes are found in well-preserved and meticulously documented funerary contexts, our conclusions concerning their meaning-content must therefore remain very tentative.

Miniature Helmets

Helmets are the last group of miniature weapons to be considered in this chapter (for a discussion on miniature weathervanes/banners, see → **Chapter 35**). Their corpus is relatively small compared to the aforementioned shields, swords, spears, and axes, but they nevertheless form an important group of objects that can provide valuable hints about Scandinavian Viking Age artistic tastes and worldviews. Items that can be interpreted as miniature representations of helmets have only been found in Denmark and Sweden. Interestingly, as of yet, no such finds have been encountered in Norway, Iceland, and other areas that in the Viking Age fell within the remit of Norse settlement and influence. This limited geographical distribution permits us to consider them as a somewhat special and region-specific artefact type.

Before presenting selected finds from the presently-known corpus, it is vital to note that in previous scholarly discussions objects of the kind that concerns us were conventionally regarded by researchers not as 'miniature helmets' *per se* but as three-dimensional 'heads' or 'helmeted heads'.[49] Today, these initial interpretations can be put to question, however, since many of the newly-discovered specimens not only look remarkably similar to well-known archaeological examples of full-sized helmets (especially those stemming from the Vendel period, such as the specimens from Vendel, Valsgärde, and Sutton Hoo),[50] but they are also hollow inside, which implies that – just like real helmets – the miniatures could be fitted onto something.

Probably the best-known example of a miniature helmet – and one that is frequently reproduced in various publications pertaining to the Viking Age as well as replicated by historical re-enactors and jewellers – is a specimen found in a cremation grave at Aska in Hagebyhöga in Östergotland, Sweden (Fig. 34.7b). It is made of silver and its frontal part portrays a masculine-looking face with a prominent moustache and large eyebrows. The eyes are slightly slanted and the nose appears to be covered by a nose guard, which – on top of the presumed helmet – transforms into a kind of crest with a suspension loop on top. Seen from above, the crest, together with the nasal guard and the elaborate ornaments on the reverse of the pendant, takes the form of a bird with spread wings. Similar visual references to birds can be seen on full-sized helmets, especially the one from the Sutton Hoo grave – in all likelihood they were symbolically charged and served as 'material metaphors'.

Due to the characteristic decorative features of the Aska specimen, bringing to mind helmets of the Vendel period, it has been rightly argued that it may have been quite old when placed in the grave. In his 2002 monograph, Neil Price suggested that 'it had been adapted for use as a pendant having originally perhaps been made as a mount for a handle of some kind'.[51] The Aska find is an object that escapes straightforward interpretation, and certainly different readings of its meaning-content are possible. While some researchers see it as a possible representation of Óðinn, Price argues against this view noting that the

Figure 34.6 Artistic reconstruction of the Svingesæter grave by Mirosław Kuźma. Copyright by Leszek Gardeła and Mirosław Kuźma; a) oval brooch; b) beads; c) the original miniature axe. Photo by Leszek Gardeła; d) replica of the miniature axe. Reconstruction by Grzegorz 'Greg' Pilarczyk. All photos by Leszek Gardeła.

head has two eyes. He suggests that it might instead have referred to Mímr whose severed head was a source of wisdom for Óðinn.[52]

In our attempts to comprehend this find better, it is necessary to consider it in context and to draw attention to other items that formed part of the same funerary assemblage. Apart from the miniature head/helmet, the Aska grave held a staggering array of high-quality objects; among them were oval broches, various kinds of glass and rock crystal beads, a trefoil brooch, a pendant seemingly depicting a 'pregnant' woman (by some scholars regarded as a possible representation of the goddess Freyja), five berlocks, an iron kettle, a metal fork, a bone plaque, various iron fittings (perhaps the remains of boxes or chests), elements of an elaborate horse bridle, a bronze jug with an Arabic inscription, and an iron staff.[53] The presence of a staff[54] – the size and overall appearance of which closely corresponds with presumed magic staffs known from other archaeological

Figure 34.7 Selection of Viking Age miniature helmets: a) Unspecified location, Denmark (C38674); b) Aska, Sweden (photo by Gabriel Hildebrand); c) Unspecified location, Denmark (C43073); d) Denmark (DIME 48191); e) Denmark (C44576); f) Solberga, Sweden (after Arne 1932); g) Denmark (C55717); h) Denmark (DIME 85003); i) Denmark (DIME 31124). Image design by Leszek Gardeła.

contexts in Scandinavia (Fig. 34.8) – is a strong signal that the deceased person *was* a ritual specialist. When viewed against this background, it is probable that the miniature head/helmet was an item endowed with special meanings and potency. We will likely never know for sure *who* or *what* it was intended to represent, and it is probably futile to hazard a guess whether it could be Óðinn (the two eyes perhaps referring to the time before his eye-sacrifice and initiation), Mímr, or another deity or supernatural being. In the opinion of the present author, more informative than any attempts to impressionistically infer the meaning ascribed to it by its user(s) is the simple fact that the pendant was buried with items clearly associated with the practice of magic (i.e. the staff and probably the 'pregnant woman' pendant). Assuming that at least some of the peculiar goods buried at Aska actually belonged to the deceased person, we may interpret the head/helmet pendant as part of the presumed ritual specialist's toolkit: a miniature they may have needed in the performance of their rituals and/or an item that marked their knowledge of the world beyond (and its non-human inhabitants) and/or which signaled their special role in society. As of yet, the Aska find is one of only two miniature helmets that have been discovered in funerary contexts. The second specimen stems from a grave from Solberga in Sweden (the particulars of which are unfortunately very vague).[55] It is similar to the Aska pendant in both size and overall form, but the face is more schematic and only the eyes and nose are represented. Perhaps future research will lead to the discovery of another similar item in a rich burial context, which will support, refine, or refute the interpretations proposed above.

The Aska and Solberga specimens were found before the Second World War. Since the time of their discovery at least ten artefacts which may be regarded as part of the same group have been uncovered. They all come from Denmark and are all different, but they do share some common features both as regards their size and overall design. The most evocative examples are those from Bejsebakken, Havsmarken, Kirke Hyllinge, Neble/Boeslunde, Skjern, and Tissø (Fig. 34.7). They all appear to depict male faces (as implied by moustaches and/or beards) and the heads/helmets all have crests on top. Furthermore, like the finds from Aska and Solberga, they are all hollow inside, meaning they could be fitted onto something. The specimen from Tissø is particularly striking, with a crest resembling decorative elements of Roman Iron Age helmets or modern punk-rock hairstyles. What is remarkable about all these finds is that their eyes are prominently marked but never damaged – this trait indicates that they were probably not meant to represent the one-eyed god Óðinn. Moreover, *all* of the newly-discovered miniature helmets from Denmark appear to have been intended as pendants – they either have small suspension loops or other features that would allow drawing them on a string or chain.

Overall, miniature helmets are an intriguing category of Viking Age miniatures. In creating them their designers clearly followed the same 'idea' and 'formula' dictating the overall appearance of the items. At the same time, however, the artisans were also free to improvise and tailor the final product to their own artistic tastes or to the desires of whoever commissioned the miniatures. Based on their distribution, it seems that miniature helmets were more common in Viking Age Denmark than in Sweden (implying that the Aska specimen may have been an 'import') but this impression may be false due to the greater popularity and intensity of amateur metal detecting in the former country.

Conclusions

This chapter has sought to provide an overview of the latest international research on miniature weapons in the Viking Age. As we have seen, with the exception of bows, arrows, knives, and various elements of riding equipment, virtually all kinds of offensive and defensive weapons commonly used in Northern Europe were represented in miniature form. Investigations of the function and presence of these items in funerary contexts have shown that they accompanied both women and men, but it is clear from the archaeological record that in most cases they were associated with the female part of the society. It is not unlikely that *some* of these women were in one way or another involved in the practice of magic but it would certainly be a stretch to assume that *every* individual buried with a miniature weapon was a ritual specialist.

One particularly striking aspect of this substantial (and constantly expanding) body of material is that no two specimens representing the different weapon-categories are ever exactly the same. As highlighted above, even though their designers clearly shared certain ideas as to how the items 'should' look, they seem to have had a lot of artistic freedom in creating them. Another notion worthy of highlighting is the notion of scale – even though the miniatures of swords, spears, shields, and axes that concern us here are roughly contemporary and stem from a period between the ninth to the late tenth century, their scale is *highly* varied. When placed side-by-side, only miniature swords and shields have 'correct' proportions and reflect the proportions that exist between full-sized swords and shields. Miniature spears/spearheads, on the other hand, are usually proportionally much larger than miniature swords, but their proportions to miniature helmets are generally 'correct'. Does this mean that the different small size militaria could not have been used 'together', for instance in the course of ritual performances? Or does it mean that certain types of miniatures were deliberately larger, perhaps to make them more visible or to emphasise their greater agency or potency? These and many other questions still require answers. Seeing how fast the corpus of miniature paraphernalia has grown over the

Figure 34.8 Selection of objects from Aska, Sweden: a) jewellery (oval brooches, berlocks, trefoil brooch, pendants); b) iron staff. Photo (a) by Gabriel Hildebrand, photos (b) by Leszek Gardeła. Image design by Leszek Gardeła.

last decade and how nuanced our understanding of it has become compared to the state of research at the beginning of the twentieth century, it is likely that in the near future our knowledge of the matter will see further improvements. Professional archaeologists and metal detectorists are thus encouraged to document new examples of miniature weapons very meticulously and to draw attention not only to their material aspects but also to the immediate context of their discovery.

Notes

1. Knutson 2020. On the archaeology of personhood, see Fowler 2004.
2. On Viking Age weapon symbolism and the use of weapons in ritual practices, see Ellis Davidson 1998; Artelius 2005; Wickholm 2006; Raffield 2014; Brunning 2015; Maddox 2020; Mayburd 2020, and references therein. See also Górewicz 2019; 2020; 2021.
3. See, for example, Peirce 2002; Marek 2005; Androshchuk 2014; Pedersen 2014a; 2014b; Hjardar & Vike 2016.
4. On women and their associations with weapons and martial-related activities, see Hedenstierna-Jonson *et al.* 2017; Price *et al.* 2019; Gardeła 2021b, and references therein.
5. For the latest discussions on metal detecting and the formal regulations concerning this practice in Scandinavia, see Martens & Ravn 2016; Hilberg & Lemm 2018; Klæsøe *et al.* 2020.
6. Jensen 2010; Gardeła 2014; in press.
7. See, for example, Rygh 1885.
8. Näsman 1972; Arrhenius 1961; Fuglesang 1989; Zeiten 1997: 15–19.
9. Gardeła 2021c; 2022; in press; Gardeła & Odebäck 2018.
10. Nicolaysen 1882.
11. On full-sized shields in the Viking Age, see the recent work of Warming *et al.* 2020; Odebäck 2021.
12. On miniature shields in the Viking Age, see Gardeła & Odebäck 2018; Odebäck 2021.
13. Helmbrecht 2011; Henriksen & Petersen 2013; Gardeła 2021b; Gardeła *et al.* in press.
14. See, for example, Novikova 1998; Duczko 2004: 113, 130–131; Eniosova 2009; Leontev 2017: 170, 175; Makarov 2017: 207–8.
15. Arbman 1940: Taf. 92, 97, 99, 112, 138, 171; 1943: 317–19.
16. On miniature snake pendants, see Gardeła 2020.
17. e.g. on the phenomenon of miniaturisation, see Bailey 2005; Davy & Dixon 2019.
18. On the concept of the ‘evil eye’ in different cultural milieus, see Hocart 1938; Dundes 1992.
19. Hermann Pálsson & Edwards 1980: 111.
20. On the various correlations between Old Norse textual descriptions of atypical/deviant burials and actual Viking Age funerary customs revealed in the course of archaeological excavations, see Gardeła 2013a; 2013b; 2017. See also → **Chapter 12**.
21. Jensen 2010; Gardeła 2021c.
22. Drescher 1983.
23. Gardeła 2021c.
24. Petersen 1919.
25. On K and O type swords, see Androshchuk 2014; Pentz 2010.
26. Gardeła 2021c: 35–8.
27. Gardeła 2021c: 31.
28. Zeiten 1997; Jensen 2010; Gardeła 2014.
29. Jørgensen 2002; 2005; Lund 2010: 56–7; Holst *et al.* 2017.
30. Gardeła 2021c: 34.
31. Seiler & Magnell 2017: 191–2, 195, 198–201, 205.
32. Gardeła 2022.
33. For further details on these graves and their contents, see Gardeła 2022: 405–8.
34. For a thorough analysis of the downwards-pointing spear motif in early medieval funerary contexts and iconography, see Kurasiński 2014. On spear symbolism see also Creutz 2003; Artelius 2005; Wickholm 2006; Gardeła 2010; 2021b; Maddox 2020, and references therein.
35. On Central and Eastern European miniature axes in Scandinavia, see Kucypera *et al.* 2010; 2011; Edberg & Söderberg 2018.
36. e.g. Schetelig 1911; Paulsen 1939: 159; Nadolski 1953.
37. For critical reviews of the different interpretations attributed to Central and Eastern European miniature axes, see Felis 2005; Kucypera *et al.* 2010; 2011; Kędzierski & Wyczółkowski 2014.
38. e.g. Makarov 1992; Wołoszyn 2004; 2006.
39. On Perun, see Gieysztor 2006; Lyle 2009; Łuczyński 2011; Tempłowicz 2011.
40. Kucypera *et al.* 2010, and references therein.
41. Schetelig 1911.
42. On Jan Petersen’s M type axes, see Kazakevičius 1996; Kurasiński 2005.
43. Gardeła 2021a; 2021b; in press.
44. For examples of seated burials in Viking Age Norway, see Mokkelbost 2007; Stylegar 2007.
45. For examples of seated burials in Sweden and Rus, see Robbins 2004; Mihajlov 2011.
46. Mackintosh-Smith & Montgomery 2014.
47. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1954.
48. On various kinds of interactions between the living and the dead in the Viking Age, see Price 2010; Gardeła 2013c; 2016b; Klevnäs 2016.
49. e.g. Arne 1932; Price 2002; 2019.
50. On Vendel period helmets from Scandinavia, see Mortimer 2011, and references therein. On the Sutton Hoo helmet, see Marzinzik 2007; Price & Mortimer 2014.
51. Price 2002: 158.
52. Price 2002: 158.
53. For a full list and a detailed discussion of the finds from the Aska grave, see Arne 1932.
54. On the staff from Aska, see Price 2002; 2019; Gardeła 2016a.
55. Arne 1932.

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35

Wearing a Banner: Cloak Pins with Miniature Weathervanes

Tomáš Vlasatý

The material culture of north-east Europe of the ninth–tenth century includes, among other things, at least eight interesting and relatively uniform copper alloy objects that could be interpreted as miniature flags or weathervanes. Most of the examples come from archeological excavations of the nineteenth and twentieth century, and although they are often-quoted objects, their meaning has until recently been a mystery for researchers. This chapter presents an updated list of finds and discusses their different forms and current interpretations. Moreover, it places this type of artefact in the context of full-sized banners, flags, and weathervanes used in the Viking Age.

Miniature Weathervanes: A Presentation of the Find Corpus

At the moment, we are aware of at least eight miniature weathervanes, originating from seven localities. The oldest example comes from the site of Tingsgården, Åland, found in a barrow on the land of a local landlord most likely in 1881 (Fig. 35.1a).[1] Inside the barrow, the landlord found a wooden riveted coffin with remnants of coal, bones, and an iron object. An archaeological survey was conducted in the summer of 1903 by Björn Cederhvarf from the National Museum of Finland, who documented the find and transported it to the museum in Helsinki. Soon, the landlord's son made yet another discovery in the barrow – a damaged bronze item with stylised animal ornamentation – a miniature weathervane which was 52 mm long, 37.5 mm wide and weighed 17.6 g. The variant of the weathervane is typical by its two pole sockets and no animal on the yard. Today, the object is stored in the National Museum of Finland,[2] and the Åland Art Museum in Mariehamn displays a very successful replica together with a pole.

Another similar miniature weathervane was excavated in the Black Earth (Svarta jorden) on the island of Björko, Sweden, during the excavations led by archaeologist Hjalmar Stolpe at the end of the nineteenth century (Fig. 35.1b).[3] It is 45 mm long and 35 mm wide. The material is gilded copper alloy. Currently, the item is stored in the Swedish History Museum together with an 85 mm long pole.[4]

The third almost identical miniature was excavated in Menzlin, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Germany, in 1999 (Fig. 35.1c).[5] As far as we can judge, it is about 50 mm long and 38 mm wide. The vane is stored in the Archaeological State Museum Mecklenburg-Vorpommern.[6]

A miniature of a slightly different shape, with three pole sockets and a yard ending with an animal head terminal, was discovered during the excavation of a Viking Age marketplace near Häffinds, Bandlunde, Gotland, Sweden in 1984 (Fig. 35.1d).[7] The object is made of copper alloy, measures 53 mm × 42 mm or 54 mm × 43 mm[8] and weighs 26 g.[9] At the time of excavation, this particular weathervane brought interest mainly due to having been the first one that differs from the previously mentioned examples. The object is now stored in the Gotland Museum, Visby.[10]

A completely shape-identical copper alloy weathervane was found in 2002 during excavations in Söderby, Uppland, Sweden, lead by Bo Petré (Fig. 35.1e).[11] It was unearthed in a particularly interesting cremation grave A 37 dated to the tenth century.[12] It seems the grave was deliberately dug within a Bronze Age barrow. Prior to the act of cremation and subsequent burial, the dead (presumably a man) was laid on a bear fur along with dogs, a horse, a chest, a long knife, a silver-passamenterie decorated piece of clothing, two oriental silver coins from the ninth century, a comb, a whetstone, two ceramic cups, and an iron necklace with a hammer pendant. The miniature weathervane that

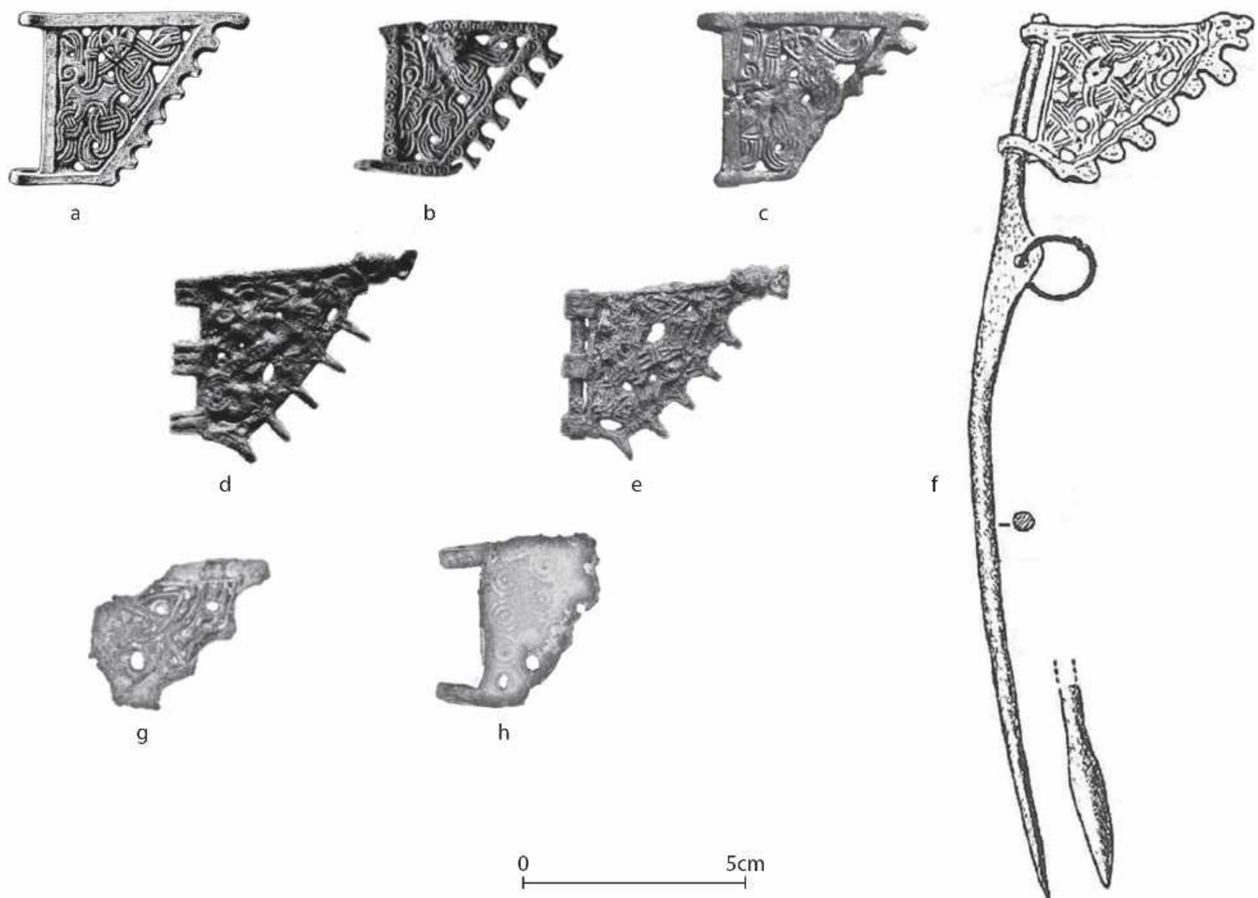

Figure 35.1 Finds of miniature weathervanes: a) Tingsgården; b) Birka; c) Menzlin; d) Häffinds; e) Söderby; f) Novoselki; g–h) Gropstad. Based on Lamm 2002: Bild 4; 2004: fig. 3; Shmidt 2005: il. 11:2.

accompanied this person is 48 mm long, 37 mm wide, and weighs 19.9 g. Three pole sockets hold a copper alloy circular shaft, which is broken on both ends. The grave has been dated to the tenth century. Currently, the weathervane is stored in the Swedish History Museum, Stockholm.[13]

After the publication of the Söderby weathervane, Jan Peder Lamm received a message of yet another object from Russian archaeologist Kirill Mikhailov, researcher at the Institute for the History of Material Culture, St. Petersburg. The miniature weathervane was excavated in Novoselki village, Smolensk area (Fig. 35.1f). The message also included a drawing, produced by Mikhailov himself after the discovery was made in 1996. The drawing showed that the item was of the same type as the Häffinds and Söderby finds, though with a different number of pole sockets – only two instead of three and mounted on an iron shaft. Lamm stated that the find originated from grave no. 4.[14] However, this was marked as incorrect after the publication of E.A. Schmidt's article in 2005. Schmidt claims that the miniature weathervane was actually found in grave no. 6, along with a spearhead, a knife, and a ceramic cup.[15] The miniature weathervane was depicted with a long needle and a ring in the form of a clothing pin. Personal interviews conducted with archaeologists Sergei Kainov (State Historical Museum of Moscow), Kirill Mikhailov, and jeweller Vasily Maisky indicate that Schmidt's drawing is a reconstruction, the weathervane is actually broken to pieces and lacks the central part with the ring. Regardless of this, there is no reason not to trust Schmidt's reconstruction. The artefact is stored in the Smolensk State Museum-Preserve.[16]

Supposedly in 1971, a highly damaged cremation burial was uncovered near Gropstad at Dala-Floda, Sweden, containing two fragmentary castings of miniature weathervanes of a different shape than the previously known specimens.[17] Both were made of copper alloy and vary in shape, level of preservation, and decoration. One of them does not show any trace of pole sockets, has more significant tassels, and is of Borre-style design (Fig. 35.1g).[18] By contrast, the other one has pole sockets, but lacks the tassels – instead, it has a perforation, which could have been used for tassel attachment – and is decorated with simple concentric circles (Fig. 35.1h).[19] Currently, the weathervanes are stored in Dalarnas Museum in Falun, Sweden.

For the sake of clarity and to ensure that the catalogue of finds is as complete as possible, we can add that one of the artefacts from the Kvarnbacken burial ground resembles a

vane, but it is probably a remnant of a brooch or pendant.[20] Furthermore, at least one unpublished object, similar to one of the Gropstad vanes, was obtained by metal detector activity in Denmark.[21] Finally, it is necessary to note that one weathervane appeared in the form of a pendant in Hermann Historica auction house, but it is most likely a fake.[22]

Looking at the finds, we can clearly isolate two relatively standardised types of miniature weathervanes – the 'Birka type' (Fig. 35.1a–c) and the 'Häffinds type' (Fig. 35.1d–f) – along with the unusual and atypical pieces represented by the Gropstad examples (Fig. 35.1g–h).[23] Next, we will take a closer look at the presumed function of these objects.

The Functional Aspects of Miniature Weathervanes

Speaking of the function of miniature weathervanes, Jan Peder Lamm had three theories. According to him, they were mainly status symbols and pieces of artistic value. At the same time, he held the opinion of the objects being a part of boat-models, similar to ship-shaped candlesticks that we know from Norwegian churches of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.[24] The third supposed function was a seafaring navigation tool. Lamm suggested the weathervanes could have been used to help with determining the angular height of astronomical objects. This theory was pursued before Lamm by Engström and Nykänen but was evaluated as improbable and inconclusive.[25]

When revised, the theory of boat models does not fit most of the finds listed above. The boat-shaped candlestick platforms are at least two centuries younger and we only know one 'pair-find' of the weathervanes from Gropstad. A more convincing theory would be to view these miniatures as analogies to horse gear flag-shaped fittings that we know from Borre, Norway and Gnězdovo, Russia.[26] Thus, the most probable option is that the Viking Age socketed miniature weathervanes were parts of clothing pins, as the aforementioned example from Novoselki implies. It seems that the poles were tapered in the socket part, while having the tip widened and flattened. Below the weathervane, there was an eyelet for attaching a textile string, which was used for fixing the pin. The resulting pin was probably meant to fasten cloaks, similarly to the widely-used ringed pins (Fig. 35.3).[27] The geographical distribution of miniature weathervanes spans the Baltic Sea and the territory of Old Rus (Fig. 35.2). In terms of construction as well as geographical distribution, the most similar group of objects are so-called dragonhead pins, which were summarised by

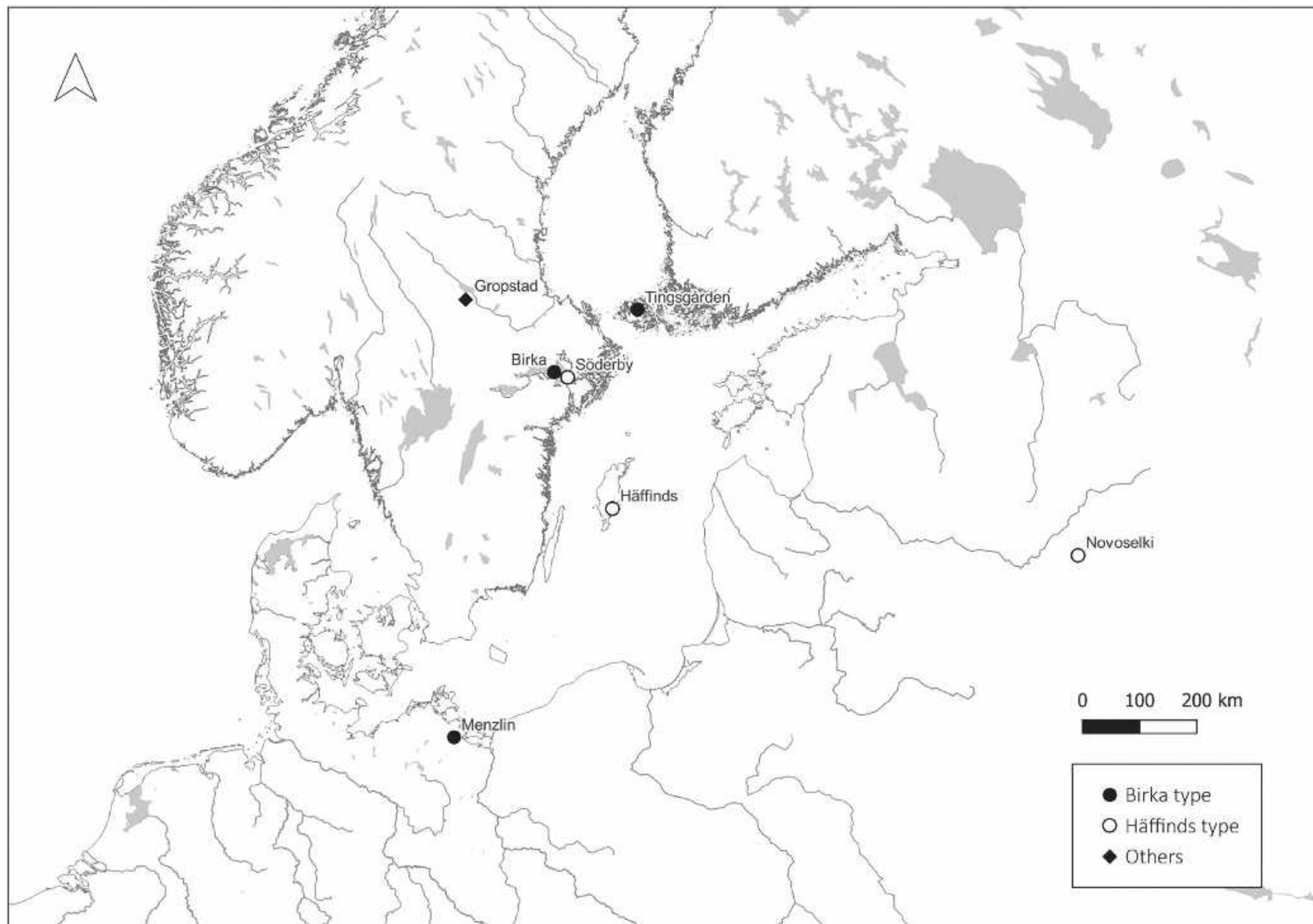

Figure 35.2 Geographical distribution of objects positively identified as miniature weathervanes. Image by Kristián Jócsik, Tomáš Vlasatý.

Figure 35.3 A modern reproduction of the miniature weatherwane from Birka. Photo by Christopher Kunz.

Kalmring and Holmquist.[28] Dragonhead and weathervane pins can thus be understood as one formally diverse group of objects that symbolise ship parts, bows, or masts. Both types of artefacts suggest a centralised manufacture, leading to the conclusion that they were distributed (for instance as gifts) among people belonging to high social strata.[29]

When it comes to chronological aspects of miniature weathervanes, some authors advocate dating them to the ninth century, which is based on conventional dates for the Borre-style rather than on the broader archaeological contexts from which the specimens stem.[30] As mentioned above, the find from Söderby is generally dated to the tenth century. Contextually, the grave of Novoselki can be dated in a similar way. The Birka finds most likely date to before the last quarter of the tenth century. It is not unlikely that all of the abovementioned examples of both main types date to the tenth century, especially its first three quarters. Interestingly, some dragonhead pins have a similar date.[31]

Flags and Weathervanes in the Wider Viking World

From Anglo-Saxon England, Viking Age Scandinavia, and Old Rus we have a limited but relatively uniform body of information about flags and weathervanes. Due to issues of preservation of organic material, usually finds made of metal (especially sheet metal) survive in the archaeological record – such finds have been recorded in present-day Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and the Baltics.[32] From a craftsmanship point of view, these are extremely laborious and expensive items that resemble miniatures in many aspects. They are always quarter-circle or triangular in shape and are usually made of gilded copper alloy and occasionally of silver. Zoomorphic and other figural ornaments or crosses dominate their décor which is either hammered or in openwork style. Three-dimensional animals are sometimes placed on top of the weathervanes, as in the case of the miniatures belonging to the ‘Häffinds type’. Tassels, apparently made of organic material, were attached to the prepared holes. This archaeological overview of Viking Age weathervanes can be concluded by mentioning spearheads that have a wire wrapped around the socket, probably originally intended for attaching a linen pennon.[33]

Another valuable source of information concerning weathervanes and their different shapes, variants, and materials is iconography, usually preserved in manuscripts as well as on tapestries, coins, and carvings in stone or wood. The fact that the flags and vanes are depicted in such ‘formal’ sources and that they sometimes appear on coins indicates their importance.[34] In summary, Viking Age weathervanes can take the form of simple ribbons tied in half, rectangles without tails or with up to five tails, or they can have quarter-circle or triangular shapes without or with tassels, and finally they can resemble three-dimensional dragon banners. The depicted material is undoubtedly a fine textile or sheet metal. When the depicted objects show some decoration, it often contains bird motifs, crosses, or geometric shapes. Flags and vanes are often depicted in such a way that we do not see their exact location, but sometimes they are in the hands of infantry, cavalry, or attached to ships’ parts. In this context, it is crucial to emphasise that weathervane miniatures most likely show vanes mounted on ship masts or ship bows. In general, iconography of the eighth-tenth centuries shows sheet metal vanes on masts (e.g. the Karlby, Sparlösa runestone and the Stenkyrka Smiss I),[35] while pictorial sources of the eleventh-thirteenth centuries show vanes attached to ship bows.[36] The Gotland stone from Stenkyrka Smiss I, which corresponds in shape to the ‘Birka type’ vanes, shows a significant resemblance to the weathervane miniatures.[37] In the latest academic literature, the stone is dated to the tenth century.[38]

Weathervanes in Textual Sources and their Rich Symbolism

All that was said above is in compliance with textual sources that speak of weathervanes resembling textile flags (Old Norse *merki*), usually used by footmen, and metal sheet weathervanes (Old Norse *veðrviti*), which are employed in naval contexts.[39] In extant texts, textile flags are afforded much more attention than their metal counterparts. It is beyond doubt that they were extremely valuable items, and some even had their own names. Clearly, they were personal symbols of nobles and were professionally made of excellent

fabrics, usually silk. The decorations, often depicting a raven symbol, were embroidered into the fabric.[40] A member of the ruler's court was entrusted with the supervision of the flag – this person presumably stored, cleaned, and erected the flag on command (Old Norse *merkismaðr*). Prominent people stayed around the flag on the battlefield, which was why the armies always focused primarily on gaining enemy's flags.

The symbolism associated with the flags is remarkable – they were treated as living objects that were capable of independent decisions and had the capacity to bring victory or defeat to the bearers. *Encomium Emmae Reginae* says that the embroidered raven symbol appears spontaneously on the flag at the time of the declaration of war.[41] *The Annals of St Neots*, on the other hand, add that if the army was to win, the raven would flutter its wings, while in the case of an impending defeat, the raven stayed inactive.[42] In *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar,* the king trusts his flag blindly, claiming that the banner always brings victory to the bearer.[43]

The gilded weathervanes, unlike the textile flags, seem to be the equipment of the flagships of Viking Age magnates. The only other information we have about them based on written sources is that they are symbols of supreme luxury, that they could be removed and re-deployed, that they were shining, made a distinct sound, and that they helped determine the direction of the wind.[44] It is not possible to determine whether the same symbolism was associated with the textile flags. We can only speculate that the vanes functioned similarly to detachable wooden animal heads on ships' bows, i.e. the animals depicted on them were meant to frighten any chaotic agents dwelling along the journey.[45] At the very least we can say that during the Viking Age the weathervane was perceived as a property of the ship's owner and as a precious symbol referring to naval activity and personal reputation. Not every ship owner could afford such an accessory though. The weathervane was undoubtedly affordable only to a relatively small and elite group of people who owned massive and lavishly equipped vessels.

What does all this suggest about the use of weathervane miniatures? Their owners and bearers seem to have formed a small, closed, privileged group of people who moved in the Baltic Sea area and up the extensive river systems all the way to the Old Rus. In general, travelling by sea could be typical for this group of people, which is one of the possible reasons for the shape of the miniatures, which refers to the banners used on ship masts. Production of miniature weathervanes in present-day Sweden, including Gotland, can be expected sometime during the tenth century, and it cannot be ruled out that this was the official fashion of royal courts in Sweden. Based on our current knowledge of the distribution and manner of wearing of analogous pins, it is most likely that miniature weathervanes were also worn on the right shoulder and probably served as cloak fasteners.[46] At the same time, these remarkable miniatures served as material markers of prestige and privileged lifestyle.

Notes

1. See Salin 1921: fig. 21; Kivikoski 1973: abb. 948; Ekberg 2002; Lamm 2002: bild 4c; 2004: fig. 3c.
2. Inventory number 4282:13.
3. See Salin 1921: 3, fig. 4; Lamm 2002: Bild 4a; 2004: fig. 4a; Sörling 2018: 59.
4. Inventory number 5208:188.
5. See Schirren 2000: abb. 136:1; Lamm 2002: bild 4d; 2004: fig. 3d; Kleingärtner 2014: abb. 21:8, taf. 3:25.
6. Inventory number remains unknown to the author, but it is certain it belongs to 1999 season finds.
7. See Brandt 1986; 2002; Lamm 2002: bild 4g; Thunmark-Nylén 2006: 366–7, Abb. III:40:7:I; Östergren 1985: 22.
8. The first measurement is stated by Thunmark-Nylén (2000: 92), the latter by Lamm (2002: 39; 2003: 60).
9. See Lamm 2002: 39.
10. Confirmed by Ny Björn Gustafsson. Inventory number remains unknown to the author.
11. See Lamm 2002: bild 4b; 2004: bild 3b; Petré 2011: 60–1.
12. See Lamm 2002: 39.
13. Catalogue number 36192 (F2).
14. See Lamm 2002: 40; 2003: 61.
15. See Shmidt 2005: 196, Il. 11:2.
16. Inventory number 23656/1-9.
17. See Frykberg 1977: 25–30; Lamm 2002: Bild 4e–f; 2004: Bild 3e–f.
18. Inventory number DM 09000-3.
19. Inventory number DM 9000-1032 respectively. The author is indebted to museum staff Eva Carlsson and Per Eriksson for documentation.
20. See Kivikoski 1963: taf. 44:5.
21. The object was found by Gerhardt Gudmand Esryd-Jørgensen in early April 2022 at the latest. It resembles the object DM 09000-3.
22. See Kunz 2021.
23. Thunmark-Nylén accepts this division in her work. See Thunmark-Nylén 2006: 367.
24. Lamm 2002: 40; 2003: 61; 2004: 138. For ship-shaped candlesticks, see Blindheim 1983: 96, fig. 7.
25. Engström & Nykänen 1996. For response, see Christensen 1998.
26. See Myhre & Gansum 2003: 27 and Lamm 2004: fig. 9.
27. See, for example, Graham-Campbell 1984; Thålin 1984.
28. Kalmring & Holmquist 2018.
29. As suggested by Kalmring & Holmquist 2018: 753.
30. See Schirren 2000; Jöns & Bleile 2006: 90–1.
31. Kalmring & Holmquist 2018: 753.
32. Denmark: site Lolland (see Blindheim 1983: fig. 20). Norway: sites Heggen, Høyjord, Tingelstad (see Blindheim 1983: figs 5–6, 9). Sweden: sites Grimsta, Källunge, Söderala (see Salin 1921; Biörnstad 1958; Blindheim 1983: figs 1–3). Baltics: sites Haapsalu, Izrekapinis (see Kulakov 1999: 222; Jets 2013: 81–9).
33. Creutz 2003: 121, fig. 11:29.

34. For coins, see Dobrovol'skij *et. al.* 1991: fig. 2; Hjardar & Vike 2016: 87.
35. See Nylén & Lamm 1978: 105; Nordgren 2009; Bischoff 2017: fig. 15a.
36. For example Lamm 2003: 57; Blindheim 1983: 93.
37. See Salin 1921: Fig. 20. The stone is stored in Visby, inv. no. GF 3428.
38. Norr 2008: 90; Guðmundsdóttir 2012: 1032.
39. Cleasby & Vigfússon 1874: 424, 688; Baetke 2006: 416, 706.
40. See, for example, Lukman 1958; Wild 2008.
41. Campbell & Keynes 1998.
42. See year 878 in Dumville & Lapidge 1984.
43. *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar*, ch. 22 (Linder & Haggson 1872).
44. Most importantly, see *Saga Ólafs hins helga*, ch. 168 (Linder & Haggson 1869); Ívarr Ingimundarson, *Sigurðarbǫlkr* 16 (Gade 2009).
45. See, for example, Bruce-Mitford 1970.
46. Thålin 1984: abb. 2:3.

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36

The Magic of the Mask

Terry Gunnell

There can be little question that the discovery of a mask in an archaeological dig (like those masks found in Hedeby in 1979–1980 and Stóra-Borg in southern Iceland in 1978; Figs 36.1 and 36.2) has to be one of the most revealing finds that can be made with regard to the information it provides about the culture it originally belonged to. As I have previously noted in an article from 2012,[1] if it has eye holes, we can assume not only that the mask was worn by someone but also that it was almost certainly observed by others, something that implies that a performance of some kind took place. This performance involved a performer; the observers (who are naturally participators in the

Figure 36.1 Animal mask from Hedeby (tenth century). Photo by Matthias S. Toplak, Viking Museum Haithabu.

Figure 36.2 Wooden mask from Stóra-Borg, Iceland (sixteenth century?). Courtesy of Þjóðminjasafn, Reykjavík, Iceland.

Figure 36.3 Later Nordic masking. A Julbock *and* Julgeit *(Christmas goats, male and female) from Vemdalen, Härjedalen, Sweden. Courtesy of Nordiska museet, Stockholm, Sweden.*

Figure 36.4 Later Nordic masking. Image of Lussia *and a* jolesvein*, Forsand, Rogaland, Norway. Courtesy of Norsk Etnologisk Gransking.*

performance); a performance space with borders (something that is immediately created the moment the performance starts); a performance period (with a clear start and finish) that must have been planned in some way beforehand; and a recognised story or activity involving recognised characters, with socially bound associations.[2] The adoption of the mask in front of others would have also immediately meant a new balance of power as new social dynamics temporarily entered the performance space, if only because the loss of facial contact means that the audience would have felt itself to be at a disadvantage, somewhat vulnerable and uncertain: while they are unable to see the masker's face, the audience members are aware that they themselves can be observed by the masker who has become a hybrid being, part human and part object, the loss of the ability to show facial expression meaning that gestures and movement have to be larger, while the texture of the mask itself means that the voice of the wearer will have changed (Figs 36.3 and 36.4). At the same time, what was once a static object (the mask) has suddenly come to life. In short, new rules have entered the space, the performer being well-aware that they have more freedom and less need for inhibition than before. With regard to the way the mask itself is understood, comparative folkloristic and anthropological research has shown that traditional masks are often kept out of sight when they are not used for performances (adding a degree of secrecy and 'return' or 'arrival' to their re-appearance), and commonly have particular 'owners'/'performers'. On other occasions, they are specially made/remade for the

performance (by particular, recognised mask-makers using particular materials, sometimes working only at particular times) and then destroyed afterwards (sometimes as part of particular ritual traditions). This means that as objects, they demand respect, not least because they contain power and freedom, something that in turn implies that the bringing out and the putting away of the mask itself will often involve a degree of ritual and a link with the past, ancient, reused masks also carrying within them a sense of connection to the forefathers or other previous wearers. Most important of all, like all forms of drama,[3] the masked performance as a whole always introduces a sense of liminality and double reality to the space, something that Lars Lönnroth has called 'den dubbla scenen' ('the double scene').[4] In terms of ritualistic activities, if it is connected to the mythological world or ancient history, it can introduce a degree of what Eliade called 'sacred time',[5] something that is likely to add a greater degree of 'performativity' to the words stated and the actions carried out during the performance.[6]

Masks (which can include the use of heavy make-up) can naturally be worn as a form of play,[7] but their effects on those watching (see above) naturally remain the same. For logical reasons, they commonly form part of ritual activities, ranging from the political to the religious, and not least because of their effects on both the performer and the audience. There is logically a close connection between masking and shamanistic activities (such as those of the *vǫlur* and *seiðmenn*),[8] something most clearly seen in the horned costume worn by the Mesolithic female 'shaman', whose remains were found in Bad Dürrenberg in Germany in 1934, and were relatively recently re-examined (Fig. 36.5).[9]

As Neil Price has noted, however, the physical archaeological evidence of masks that were definitely related to religious activities in the Nordic countries and the Nordic diaspora are near non-existent. It is essentially limited to the implications of the potential white make-up and veil found with the woman in the Fyrkat 4 grave, a figure who is regularly interpreted as having been a *vǫlva*.[10] It is difficult to interpret how the earlier-noted tenth-century masks from Hedeby (and those later twelfth- and thirteenth-century leather masks found in Novgorod, Riga, Kampen, and Ghent) might have been used, since material that might provide context for them is lacking (considering the role of the latter masks,[11] their dating suggests that they, like the mask from Stóra-Borg (see above), were related in some way to folkloristic tradition and/or entertainment). With regard to the use of masks in the Old Nordic world, we are thus, for the main part, limited to pointing out images, and essentially 'images of humans doing something that is comparatively inhuman, or abnormal.'[12] As I note in my earlier article, because of their dating and form:

> Such images naturally lack evidence of *stages* or obvious marked off acting spaces and audiences, making it impossible to differentiate between images of people who are engaged in daily activities and images of people who might be *acting* someone else – like a god – that might be engaged in a daily activity. Furthermore, images always raise the question of whether real life is being depicted, or activities in another (supernatural) world.[13]

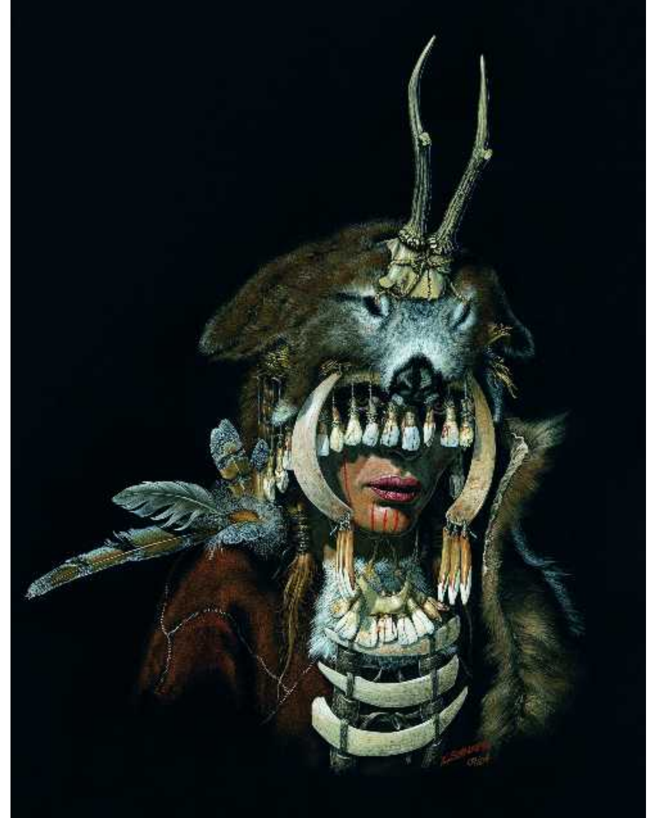

Figure 36.5 Reconstruction of the costume of a Mesolithic female 'shaman' from Bad Dürrenberg, Germany (c. 7000 BC). Karol Schauer. Courtesy of Landesamt für Denkmalpflege und Archäologie Sachsen-Anhalt, Halle, Germany.

What will nonetheless become clear in the following brief review is that the depictions in question all appear to reflect real-life practices (if not events). Most have roots in totemistic belief of some kind and the idea that the wearing of the mask (commonly associated with animals of some kind) bestows the wearer with the power of the animal in question. For logical reasons, one can see associations (if distant) with shamanistic practices. None of the examples given appear to have pure entertainment value. Each, in some way or another, appears to have close connections with the world of religious belief and practice.

The earliest example from the Nordic area takes us right back to the earlier-mentioned 'shaman' of Bad Dürrenberg and underlines immediately the aforementioned links suggested as existing between the mask and shamanistic activities. It takes the form of a petroglyph from Amtmanness in Finnmark in the northern part of Norway dating to between

2700 and 1700 BC showing a figure with bent legs and legs wearing a horned animal mask and what appears to be an animal skin (Fig. 36.6). One of comparatively few human figures in the petroglyphs from this area (most images are of wild animals), there is good reason to place this figure alongside other images from the same area showing another horned figure and a group of figures standing on a boat that appear to be wearing bird masks.[14] Our knowledge of masking traditions practised by the Sámi and Finno-Ugric peoples living in these parts in much later times[15] provides valuable context for these petroglyphs, suggesting they should be associated with the sound of drums and *joik*-like chants (all of which suggest further movement),[16] something supported by the fact that neither of the two horned figures appears to be standing still.

Large-scale evidence drawn from the numerous Bronze Age petroglyphs of southern Sweden and Norway in the period between 1,500 and 500 BC underlines that masking (involving among other things the continued use of horns, and then winged bird costumes, much like those still worn in eagle dances by the Native Americans of New Mexico) still formed a central part of religious activities (Figs 36.7 and 36.8).[17] As I have noted earlier, even if the images in question are supposed to depict activities in a mythological world, then that is evidently a world that reflects the reality that the petroglyph carvers knew and experienced.[18] Most scholars today believe that the images in question are based on ritual activities that took place around certain sacred sites,[19] something supported by the fact that numerous *lurer* horns like those depicted on the petroglyphs have been found in the ground.[20] Further support for this idea comes in the shape of the small images found at Grevensvænge and Fardal in Sjælland and Jylland, Denmark, of a female acrobat in a corded skirt, in a bent pose very similar to that of various acrobats shown leaping over ships depicted in the Swedish petroglyphs; another kneeling female figure wearing a corded skirt; and the well-preserved remains of a female body wearing a similar corded skirt found in a Bronze Age mound near Århus.[21] The horned figures on the petroglyphs are meanwhile echoed in the shape of another

Figure 36.6 Petroglyph of a 'shamanic' figure from Amtmanness, Finnmark, Norway (2700–1700 BC). Courtesy of Knut Helskog.

Figure 36.7 Petroglyph of a horned dancer from Vilhelmsberg, Simris, Skåne, Sweden (Bronze Age). After Gunnell 1995.

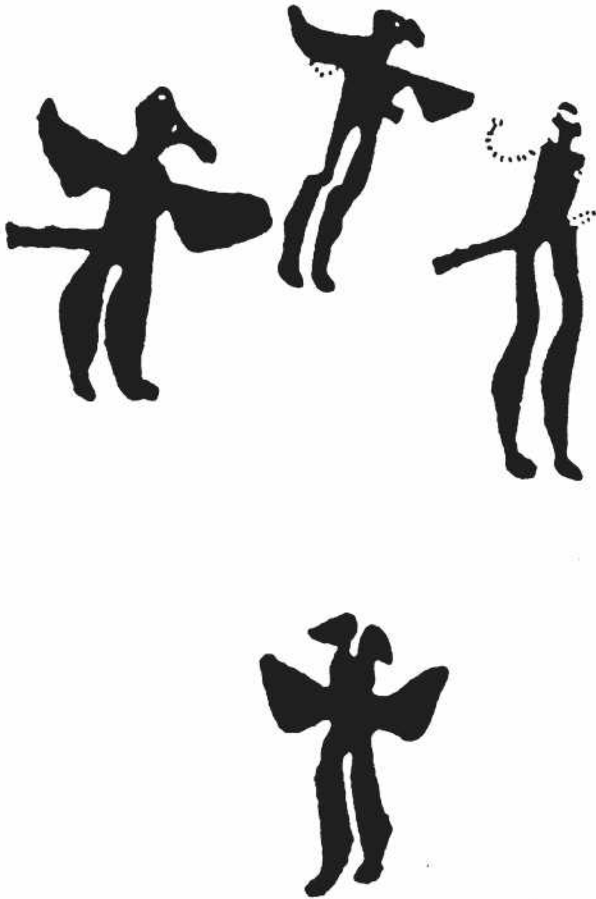

Figure 36.8 Petroglyph of masked winged figures from Kallsängen, Bottna, Kvilla, Bohuslän, Sweden (Bronze Age). After Gunnell 1995.

small figure found at Grevensvænge in the same context, wearing a helmet with horns of a similar shape to those found on many of the petroglyphs.[22]

The evidence noted above underlines that a very similar religious culture existed in both southern Sweden and Denmark at the time, and that elements of totemism remained within this religion. While the horned helmets of Grevensvænge do not cover the face, the suggestion that they were still connected with changing role in some way and also drawing on the power of the animal is backed up by a pair of other Bronze Age horned helmet-masks found in Viksø, Sjælland, in Denmark which are decorated with eyes and what seems to be a beak, and appear to have covered at least part of the face.[23] Horned helmets of this kind would naturally have been somewhat impractical in battle. The probability must be that they too had a religious purpose that was associated not only with power, but also performances involving music (reflected by the *lurer*), dance, and acrobatics.

That humans (and especially women) in the Bronze Age occasionally took on the role of birds as part of funerary rituals in the Bronze Age is meanwhile given support by several images carved onto two of the large standing stones found in the Bronze Age grave at Kivik, in Skåne in south-east Sweden. The images in question (which were evidently only meant to be seen by a few chosen people) show female figures in long dresses and wearing bird headdresses or masks of some kind.[24] Their bird-like headwear is echoed in a small bronze object from Glasbacka, Halland, also in southern Sweden which is designed to go on top of a staff.[25] As I have earlier noted,[26] one can perhaps see here early manifestations of the later Nordic *valkyrjur* (sometimes associated with ravens);[27] and not least the figure of the winged 'Angel of Death' who apparently officiated at a Viking funeral on the Volga described in some detail by Ibn Faḍlān (→ **Chapter 13**).[28] Also worth considering with regard to the bird costumes noted above are the account of how Óðinn (also referred to in one place as 'Arnhǫfði' or Eagle-head) transforms himself into an eagle in *Snorra Edda*; and those telling of how the goddesses Freyja and Frigg are said to own falcon skin/costumes, Freyja's being borrowed on two occasions by Loki to fly between worlds (→ **Chapter 16**).[29]

While radical cultural change appears to have taken place in Scandinavia at the end of the Bronze Age, some continuation of tradition evidently existed in the field of religious activities, and not least with regard to the horned figure and the use of animal costumes as part of ritual performance. One notes images of fighting animal-headed men, another horned man, and an apparently bearded woman on the now-lost golden horns sacrificially deposited at Gallehus in Jylland, Denmark in about 400 AD;[30] and from the Age of Migrations (around 500 AD), the tiny, potentially masked figures depicted on the golden Ålleberg neck ring from Västergötland, Sweden;[31] and several helmet masks with clear facial features from Vendel and Valsgärde in Uppland, Sweden, and Sutton Hoo in Anglo-Saxon England.[32] Indeed, the latter of these masks stresses that an unclear line between mask and helmet seems to have existed during this period, something perhaps reflected in the fact that the same word (ON *gríma*) was used for both.[33] Regarding the helmet from Sutton Hoo, it has been pointed out that when the helmet is worn, the sound of the wearer's voice changes notably,[34] and in shadow, the eyes of the wearer would not have been visible.[35] In firelight, however, one of the ruby-circled eyes would have been lit up (due to gold foil having been deliberately placed behind the stones), drawing logical comparisons with the one-eyed figure of Óðinn. All in all, the implication is that like the Viksø helmets, helmets of this kind would have had a ceremonial role which would have involved changing the sound, appearance, and nature of the wearer in the ears and eyes of observers, introducing a strong degree of liminality into the performance space, simultaneously having influence not only on the wearer and

Figure 36.9 Bronze helmet plate dies, showing masked figure from Torslunda, Öland, Sweden (sixth–eighth century). Courtesy of Swedish History Museum, Stockholm, Sweden.

observers but also the performative power of everything the wearer did or said.

With regard to the connections between helmets, masks, gods, and performativity, further context is provided by a sixth-seventh century helmet-plate from Torslunda, Öland in Sweden (Fig. 36.9), which comes from the same general period as the helmets noted above.[36] The helmet plate in question depicts a masked man in an animal costume holding a spear accompanied by another figure, one-eyed[37] and wearing a horned helmet (with bird heads on the end of the horns). This latter figure appears to be dancing and carries two spears. As Nicolai Lanz has shown in his recent wide-ranging MA thesis,[38] this figure, whoever they are meant to be (perhaps Óðinn – or more likely someone performing the role of a god), was evidently well-known across a wide area of Germanic and Nordic territory during the Migration period: they reappear as a pair on helmet plates found on earlier-noted Sutton Hoo helmet; and in solo form on the Anglo Saxon Finglesham belt buckle and other objects from several Germanic sites (bracteates from Pleizhausen, Gutenstein, and Obrigheim).[39] With regard to the animal-man figure beside the horned man/woman, a very similar image appears alone on a stone from Källby, Västergötland.[40] More intriguing, however, is that both figures also appear together in two other places in finds associated with the Viking period: first of all in a grave from Ekhammar, southern Sweden, where both figures appeared individually in amulet form;[41] and then on the famous tapestry found with the Oseberg ship burial from south-east Norway, from the mid-ninth century.[42] The fragmentary tapestry appears to depict a ritual procession of some kind and human sacrifice. Among the numerous other figures that appear on the tapestry are dancers, adorants, and what seem to be a number of women wearing bird and boar masks.[43] The horned figure with two weapons appears twice here: once in trousers beside a similar masked animal figure,[44] and then once wearing what seems to be a long dress in front of a number of masked female figures (Fig. 36.10).[45] As with the earlier-noted petroglyphs, all the evidence here seems to suggest that the tapestry reflects activities known in real life, something that would seem to be supported by the later written accounts describing the large religious festivals that apparently took place regularly at Gamla Uppsala during the Viking period. Based on an eyewitness account from around 1050 (before Sweden was converted), Adam of Bremen describes how a man recounts having observed pagan rituals (including song) taking place here, as in a 'theatrum'.[46] Over two hundred years later (in the early thirteenth century), the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus, perhaps influenced by Adam's work and perhaps by oral tradition, also talks of 'mimetic' performers dancing and playing music at the same gatherings.[47] Both accounts lend support to the idea noted above that masks still formed part of ritual 'performance' in Scandinavia even in the Viking period.

Of course, there is good reason to believe that the figure in the animal costume on the Torslunda helmet places, on the Källby stone, in the Ekhammar grave, and on the Oseberg tapestry was meant to depict one of those warriors referred to as *berserkir* and *úlfheðnir* in the Viking Age poem *Haraldskvæði*, sts 20–21[48] and later Icelandic sagas. If this is so, it would certainly add weight to the idea that the totemistic animal mask was still seen as giving its wearer additional supernatural power. (Indeed, all the evidence suggests that these warriors lost control of themselves as they entered battle.[49])

As noted at the start, the evidence of the felt animal masks dating to c. AD 1000 found in Hedeby adds further support to the idea that animal masks were still being used during the Viking period, although as has been stressed earlier, the background of these particular masks is unknown.[50] The idea that they could have played a role in connection with festival ritual and martial activities nonetheless gains some support from a historical account recorded by the Byzantine emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus in his *Book of Ceremonies* from c. 953. The account in question describes an intertwining circle dance involving weapons which the Germanic Varangian Guard (at this time predominantly made up of Scandinavians) apparently presented for the Byzantine emperor in Constantinople at Christmas time.[51] Constantine notes that several of the dancers were wearing animal masks. He also calls the dance the 'Gothikon', which implies the involvement of Nordic warriors from Gotland or Öster- or Västergotland in Sweden. The probability is that the performance was a traditional ritual dance of some kind, and there is good reason to assume that it might be

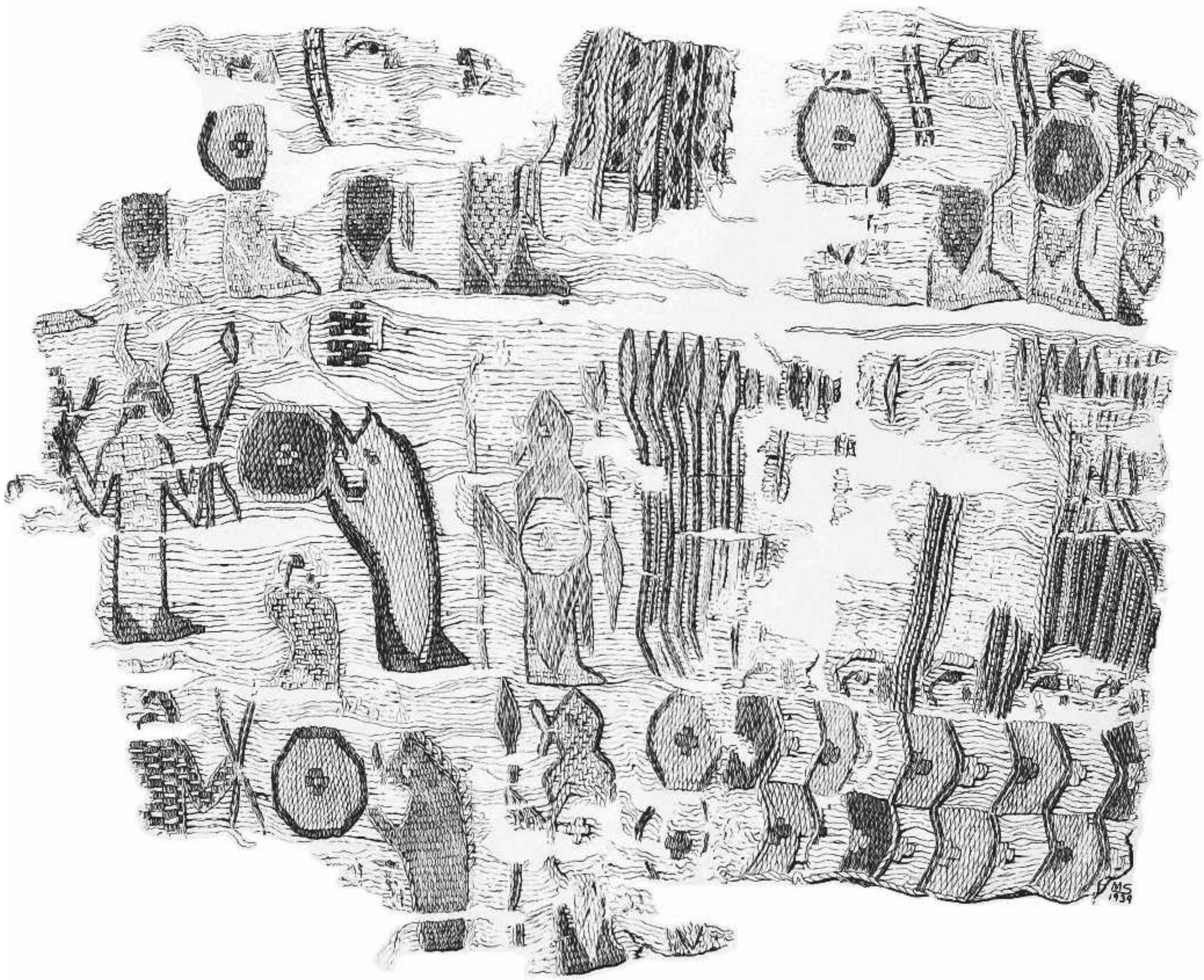

Figure 36.10 Masked female figures from the Oseberg tapestry (mid-ninth century). Image: Mary Storm. Courtesy of Marianne Vedeler and the Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.

reflected in a near contemporary wall fresco found in the Cathedral of Hagia Soffia in Kiev.[52] Placed in the context of images of entertainments presented at the Hippodrome in Constantinople for the emperor, it shows two warriors, one wearing a mask (with an open-mouth which would make it an impractical helmet), while the other bears an axe, the traditional weapon of the Nordic Varangian Guard.

All in all, on the basis of the evidence noted above, it appears evident not only that masks (and dramatic activities of one kind or another) played a role in various ritual activities in the north from the late Stone Age until the arrival of Christianity, but also that they were seen as providing a connection to the supernatural world. It would not come as a surprise for one to be found in the grave of someone who had the role of a *vǫlva* or seeress.

Notes

1. For logical reasons, this present article draws heavily on this earlier review of masking traditions in the Old Nordic world (Gunnell 2012), which in turn builds on the information provided in Gunnell 1995: 36–80; see also the review of Bronze Age material given in Maraszek 2010. On the specific masks noted above, see further Hägg 1984; Mjöll Snæsdóttir 1990; Gunnell 1995: 73, 76, 146–7; Bregenhøj 2012.
2. On the nature of performance, see further Gunnell 2010; Gunnell & Rönstrom 2013; Schechner 2020.
3. See further Gunnell 1995: 10–12.
4. Lönnroth 1978.
5. Eliade 1958: 388–408. For the above section, see further Gunnell 2012: 189–93. With regard to the nature, roles, and effects of masking, see further Honigmann 1977; Muensterberger 1986; Tonkin 1992; Emigh 1996; Gunnell

2001; 2007b; forthcoming; Meller 2010. See also the powerful description of the experience of wearing a traditional masked costume in the Faroe Islands in Heinesen 1970 (translated in Heinesen 1983). For further information on Nordic masking traditions past and present and a number of studies of how Nordic mumming 'works' in performance, see Gunnell 2007a. Regarding other European traditions, see Botteldoom *et al*. 2012; Ruiu 2016.

6. On performativity, see further Schechner 2020: 231–2.
7. On the differences between play and ritual, see further Schechner 2020: 121–202.
8. See further Eliade 1964: 165–8; Rutherford 1986: 47–8. Note: There is no intention here to enter into the endless question of whether 'shamanism' *per se* existed in the Old Nordic world (see further Tolley 2009). The use of the word 'shamanistic' here reflects my belief that *elements* of the rituals and beliefs associated with shamanism can definitely be found in the extant source materials from this area.
9. On the grave of the Bad Dürrenberg figure, her accoutrements, and her physical disability which may have enabled her to induce states of unconsciousness at will, see further Stutz 2003; Porr & Allt 2006; Landesmuseum für Vorgeschichte website.
10. Price 2019: 105–13, 127–9.
11. On the masks from Novgorod, Riga, Kampen, and Ghent, see Gutjahr 2012: 150–2, 154–8.
12. Gunnell 2012: 183.
13. Gunnell 2012: 183.
14. On these figures and their potential connections to shamanistic activities, see further Davidson 1967: 25 (and plate 5); Simonsen 1986: 208; Helskog 1988: 15, 53–5, 66–7, 86, 112; Gunnell 1995: 37–8.
15. See also Honko 1993: 117–40, on comparable bear–masking traditions from the Khanty area, as well as for information about Sámi bear rituals in later times.
16. For the sound of *joik* and its connection to shape-changing, listen to, for example, 'Návdi/ Fasa' 'Bierdna' on *Hippjokk* (1996) by the Swedish group Hedninga: Silence SRSCDD 4737.
17. For a range of different approaches to the Bronze Age rock carvings over time, see further, for example, Eckhoff 1891–1893; Bing 1913; Müller 1920; Almgren 1926–1927; Gudnitz 1962; Gelling & Davidson 1969; Almgren 1977; Nordbladh 1986; Schjødt 1986; Hultkranz 1989; Janson et al. 1989; Coles 1990, 1994; Gunnell 1995: 37–49; Hygen & Bengtsson 2000; Coles 2005; Goldhahn 2008. Regarding the evidence of masks from this period, see also Maraszek 2010. On these particular masks, see further Coles 1990: 26; 2005: 38, 46, 49; Hygen & Bengtsson 2000: 153. Interestingly enough, the bird costume images appear in areas where, in later times, traditions could be found in which people would dress up in stork costumes to welcome the arrival of spring: see Knuts 2007: 152–7. With regard to the Eagle dances of New Mexico, a number of films are available on Youtube: see, for example, the Zuni Eagle Dance.
18. Gunnell 1995: 35–45.
19. See Hygen & Bengtsson 2000: 143–68; Coles 2005: 51, 120–8; Goldhahn 2008: 22. The idea that these sites were used for ritual activities is supported by the evidence of fire and broken pots at the foot of the petroglyph rocks: see Hygen & Bengtsson 2000: 156–8.
20. See, for example, Hygen & Bengtsson 2000: 163.
21. See Glob 1974: 51–64, 160.
22. Glob 1974: 143, 164–5; Gunnell 1995: 44.
23. See further Gunnell 1995: 43–4; Hygen & Bengtsson 2000: 166; Meller 2010: 19.
24. See Glob 1974: 108–13; Gunnell 1995: 47–9.
25. See Maraszek 2010: 153.
26. Gunnell 2012: 186–7.
27. See further Murphy 2013; Price 2019: 274–88.
28. Montgomery 2000: 18.
29. See Faulkes 1998: 4–5, 24, 30; *Þrymskviða*, sts 5 and 9 (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I: 422–423). See also Gunnell 1995: 63, 82.
30. See Olrik 1918; Oxenstierne 1957; Gunnell 1995: 49–53.
31. See Holmqvist 1960; Gunnell 1995: 57–8.
32. See Arent 1969; Bruce-Mitford 1974.
33. Indeed, the closely related names Grímr and Grímnir are both said to have been used by the god Óðinn in the eddic poem *Grímnismál* ('the Words of Grímnir' (the Masked One)), sts 46 and 49 (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014, I: 377–8).
34. Angela Care–Evans, on the BBC 4 television programme, *Masterpieces of the British Museum: The Sutton Hoo Helmet* (2006), dir. Lucie Donahue. As Care-Evans states: 'It actually enhances your voice: It makes the voice echo and drop in tone, so that too would actually give the wearer some extra sort of persona, if you like.'
35. Price & Mortimer 2014.
36. See further Arent 1969; Gunnell 1995: 66–72.
37. On discussions of whether the figure is meant to be one-eyed or not (and proof that it is), see further Lanz 2021: 7–34.
38. See Lanz 2021.
39. See Arent 1969; Gunnell 1995: 63–6; Price 2019: 308–9, 320–3; and especially Lanz 2021 for detailed descriptions of all of these figures and more, along with information about their find contexts and interpretations over time.
40. See Price 2019: 309–10.
41. Gunnell 1995: 65; Price 2019: 310; Lanz 2021: 80–1.
42. See Hougen 1940; 2006; Krafft 1956; Gunnell 1995: 60–6; Vedeler 2019.
43. See Hougen 2006: 36; Vedeler 2019: 39, 72, 76, 80–9, 116–23.
44. See Hougen 2006: 39; Vedeler 2009: 72.
45. This latter image (see Hougen 2006: 36; Vedeler 2019: 76) only became public in 2006 with the appearance of the fourth volume on the Oseberg grave finds, dealing with textiles. Interestingly, there are more female figures in masks than men in the images on the Oseberg tapestry, something which is perhaps related to the fact that this is the burial of a female.
46. Schmeidler 1917: 258; Tschan 1959: 207; Gunnell 1995: 78–80.
47. Olrik & Ræder 1931–1957: 144; Gunnell 1995: 76–8; Ellis Davidson 2002: 172.
48. *Haraldskvæði* (Fulk 2012).
49. See further Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2001.

50. With regard to other evidence of masking from this period, it has also been argued that the image on a Viking Age rune stone found near Moesgaard in Denmark has a number of qualities that look somewhat mask-like (see, for example, Price 2019: 129–31) although once again this is largely based on surmise.
51. See Kaus 1895; Gunnell 1995: 72–5; Pettitt & Søndergaard 2001: 623–4 (and 659 for another intriguing account of an early Danish tradition involving a straw figure called Bovi that comes to life as part of a dance associated with birthing ceremonies).
52. See Gunnell 1995: 71–3.

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