Ritual Performance in the Viking Age

Edited by
Simon Nygaard
Sarah Croix
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Proceedings of the 39th Interdisciplinary Viking Symposium,
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Edited by *Simon Nygaard, Sarah Croix, and Søren M. Sindbæk*

PEER
REVIEWED

/ In accordance with requirements of the Danish Ministry of Higher Education and Science, the certification means that a PhD level peer has made a written assessment justifying this book's scientific quality.

Contents

Introduction

This volume contains the proceedings of the 39th Interdisciplinary Viking Symposium held on 20 May 2022 at Aarhus University. This long-standing series of symposia has for 40 years provided scholars with a forum for discussion of new ideas and for presentation of ongoing research projects within the broadly defined framework of Viking studies. The proceedings of each symposium have been published by the organising committees, rotating between the universities of Kiel, Copenhagen, Southern Denmark, Lund (from 2024) and – as in 2022 – Aarhus. The theme of the 2022-symposium was *ritual performance*, a research topic which brought together a group of scholars engaged in innovative and interdisciplinary research grounded in the study of religion and archaeology.

The performance of rituals is a key component to the understanding of the culture of Late Iron-Age and Viking-Age Scandinavia, which was marked by tremendous social and religious transformations. New approaches to social, political, and religious rituals are currently offering stimulating new perspectives on the period and the entanglements of symbolism, exercise of power, materiality, and agency. Research on finds such as iconographic objects or buildings associated with rituals, as well as new interpretations of well-known textual and material sources point to the continued relevance of the ritual perspective for exploring the Viking-Age mind-set.

The five chapters of this book pose questions of what, how, why as well as by or for whom rituals of various kinds were performed in the Viking Age in a predominantly pre-Christian context. By considering the involvement of people, words, things, and spaces in ritual acts, it seeks to deepen our understanding of ritual performance in the period from a truly interdisciplinary perspective.

In the chapter "Hornbearer and the Weapondancer," Sofie Laurine Albris investigates Iron and Viking-Age iconography as well as place and personal names. She argues for a potential ritual performative function for the Iron-Age figures known as weapon dancers, which are often seen wearing horned head gear. Furthermore, Albris ties this into an interpretation of the name **Hornburi* found on the Viking-Age Kallestrup runestone and in the Scandinavian placename record as a possible title for an Iron and Viking-Age ritual specialist.

Simon Nygaard focuses on runic objects, that is, stone monuments and portable objects, bearing a metrical inscription. In his contribution "A Ritual and Contextual Approach to Runic Poetry from Viking-Age Denmark: Some Analytical Examples," Nygaard develops the idea that metrical runic inscriptions can be seen as holding different ritual functions or as emphasizing the ritual function of the object they are inscribed on employing the analytical terms *rituals fixed in text* and *artefactual use of sacred texts*. He discusses the possible function of these objects using three categories of commemorative, monumentalized, and crisis function.

In his chapter "Slavic Paganism in Viking Age Denmark" Leszek Gardeła introduces the archaeology of Scandinavian–West Slavic contacts in the early Middle Ages. This is done in order to survey and analyze all the different artefact categories from Scandinavia that display associations with Slavic pre-Christian deities, mythical beasts, and entities, and discuss their parallels and affinities. Gardeła highlights the importance of these cross-cultural interactions and knowledge exchange between scholars of Scandinavian and Central European archaeology for the understanding of finds of these types.

Sarah Croix, in her contribution "Figurative Miniatures as Prolonged Echoes of Pre-Christian Rituals," presents a new and expanded catalogue and discussion of a particular class of figurative metal miniatures found in South Scandinavia: the "rider and standing figure motif". She argues for a classification with three separate sub-classes, each with slightly different iconographic detail, but possibly with quite distinct symbolic meanings. Croix proposes an interpretation of the scenes as relating to ritual rather than mythology per se. Additionally, the paper raises questions concerning the symbolic role of metal miniatures as amuletic items with a ritual power of their own.

In their chapter "Bodies of Intoxication: Psychoactives in Viking Ritual Practice" Marianne Hem Eriksen and Brian Costello shed new light onto the consumption of alcohol and other psychoactives in the Viking Age by dissecting how the processes of making and ingesting them were material and embodied. This contrasts with previous research which has mostly considered such practices in social or religious terms. Eriksen and Costello apply multiple strands of theoretical thinking to the selected evidence, thus bringing fresh insights into the topic of ritual drinking in the Viking Age.

As a collection, these contributions show the great benefits of interdisciplinary dialogue with the variety of sources at our disposal, for instance, by using the knowledge gained in one discipline to ask new questions of material associated primarily with other fields. It is our hope that these contributions will stimulate the discussion of ritual performance in the Viking Age and continue to advance the interdisciplinary research in the field of Viking Studies.

The editors,
Simon Nygaard, **Sarah Croix**, and **Søren M. Sindbæk**

Commemorations – Niels Lund. Rikke Malmros

Else Roesdahl

Niels Lund

It is entirely proper that the 39th Interdisciplinary Viking Symposium should celebrate the memory of Niels Lund, who, together with Gillian Fellows-Jensen and Torben Kisbye, founded this vigorous seminar series in 1982.

Niels was 82 years old when he died in late 2021, after a long illness. Despite this he continued to work right until the end. One of his last appearances was in a TV series about Vikings, where he sat white-haired and white-bearded, much like the wise Odin, on a chair in Lejre's reconstructed royal hall.

Niels was a historian with a capital H, and for many years he was Denmark's foremost Viking-Age historian. He concluded his life's work in 2020 with a very useful book *Jellingkongerne og deres forgængere* (The Jellinge Kings and their Predecessors). This book sprang from irritation over the many far-fetched theories about the oldest Danish kings. It is a real Niels-book: written sources are the best and most correct sources!

I first met Niels at the Viking Congress in Uppsala in 1969, and since then we have had a close relationship, even though we did not always agree on everything, including archaeology as a source for the history of the Viking Age and the Middle Ages. But we respected each other, and he was always immensely helpful with advice and action based on his deep knowledge of written sources. I greatly appreciated him. He was – as expressed by others after his death – a real man of honor!

He was immensely diligent and published lots of articles and several books about the Viking Age and early medieval Denmark – primarily about political history and leadership. Cultural history was not Niels' thing – he probably did not perceive it as 'real' history. He considered archaeology an auxiliary science; place-name research and numismatics were closer to him.

Much of his work has been published in English or in England, where he had very good friends and colleagues. This began when he studied with the legendary Peter Sawyer, who was at Leeds University at the time, and who continued to influence Niels throughout his life. Niels was also a prolific teacher and professor in history at the University of Copenhagen.

Today we remember his efforts in relation to the Interdisciplinary Viking Symposia in particular. Over the years he was probably the most diligent lecturer and article writer. Furthermore, until 2011, that is for about 30 years, he was one of the two representatives of the University of Copenhagen who organized the events, when held at that university, and also the publication of the lectures. For some years he was actually the only Copenhagen organizer.

It is to a great extent thanks to his efforts and commitment that the Interdisciplinary Viking Symposia are still alive and well.

Rikke Malmros

And there is someone else who we miss today, namely Rikke Malmros.

Rikke was an ever-faithful participant at the Interdisciplinary Viking Symposia, and many will remember her colorful appearances in those bright red and orange dresses and coats, and her learned questions and comments.

Rikke was 82 years old – like Niels Lund – when she died unexpectedly on the evening of 25 March 2022. This was after a fine retirement symposium for Jens Peter Schjødt and a lively reception, and she had been in good shape and enjoyed it all. So her last day was good.

Rikke has a large publication record. It was produced through hard work, because for various reasons she worked slowly. She was learned and deeply committed; she knew her sources and she used them in original ways. Her academic environment was the (then) History Department of Aarhus University and Statsbiblioteket (now The Royal Library).

Her specialty field was the Viking Age and the first half of the Middle Ages, and especially society and leadership – about which she had much discussion with Niels Lund over the years. Her research broke new ground, for example by using skaldic poems as sources for contemporary ships.

She published many articles, in *Historisk Tidsskrift*, *Aarbøger for Nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie*, and elsewhere. And also two books: In 2010 *Vikingernes syn på militær og Samfund. Belyst gennem skjaldenes fyrstedigtning* (The Vikings' view of war and society), which is a collection of articles published between 1985 and 2006, which formed her Ph.D. thesis, and, in 2019, *Bønder og leding i valdemartidens Danmark* (Bøndær (yeomen and free tenants) and lething in Denmark) about, among other things, the lething system and the complicated and disputed tax systems of the time.

Rikke was always cheerful and warm. Her publications are of great and continued importance, and she was always happy to share her great knowledge. We will miss her.

Else Roesdahl, School of Culture and Society, Aarhus University

Hornbearer and the Weapondancer

Sofie Laurine Albris

Introduction

At Hakonsgård on Bornholm, in Vestermarie Parish ca. 4 kilometres from the main town of Rønne, a settlement from the Late Iron Age and Viking Period was discovered in 2006 (parish no. 060305–539). There has been no excavation, so the site is only known from metal detector finds. The object assemblage from the site consists of Arabic and European coins, fragments of brooches, weights and silver ingots and the finds date the settlement to the Late Iron Age, Viking Age and Medieval period. This not a completely unusual combination of finds for one of the generally rich Late Iron and Viking Age farms on Bornholm. One object, though, is of a peculiar character; the small copper alloy bust of a man with a heavy moustache (object. no. C36920). The bust is hollow and seems to have been mounted on a staff or rod. His arms end just above the elbow, but are pierced, suggesting moveable lower arms were once attached to the figurine (Fig. 1). The torso has been deliberately pierced on his right side. On his head is a helmet-like adornment with a flat plate over the neck and a marked covering of the brow that shadows the eyes. On top of the head-dress there are large horn-like protrusions, unfortunately broken off at the ends. The figurine is unique, and thus difficult to date, but it likely derives from the Late Iron Age or Early Viking Period. In the first registrations and communications

Figure 1. Bust of horned figure from Hakonsgård, Bornholm. Left: front, photo by René Laursen, Bornholms Museum, right: back, photographed by the National Museum, Copenhagen.

to the press, the object is described as an Odin-figurine. But is this really a depiction of the Old Norse deity? What were the associations that such an image would evoke in Iron and Viking Age people, and what does its presence tell us about the find place?

Figures with horned headgear

Even though the Hakonsgård figurine is unique in its shape and appearance, it has many parallels. Images and figurines of human forms wearing horned headgear are a much-discussed group of motifs found across Scandinavia and northern Europe, mainly dated to the Late Germanic/Vendel Period and the Viking Age (cf. Helmbrecht 2008, Lanz 2021). The term "figures with horned headgear" is derived from a general survey of the motifs by Michaela Helmbrecht from 2008. She argues for the term "head-gear", as we cannot be certain that the head-dresses are helmets. If they existed in real life, which she finds probable, it is likely that such headdresses adorned with horns were meant for parading or ritual purposes rather than for use in combat. The horns on the Iron and Viking Age figurines sometimes end in birds' heads. This underlines their symbolic meaning – but does not exclude an association with horns, as the artwork of this period is well known as a multi-faceted and layered form of visual communication (cf. Albris 2020, 88 for further references).

Helmbrecht divides the images into two chronological groups, each with their characteristics (2008, 34–39): The first belongs to the Late Germanic Iron Age, where the motifs are mainly tied to male warrior elite imagery. She shows that the horned figure motif was widespread across Northern Europe in the Late Germanic Iron Age (6th–8th centuries), with many finds from both Scandinavia and England (2008, 40). The motif is mainly associated with a male warrior elite and the images are predominately full figure depictions found on helmet plates and sword scabbards. Helmbrecht further divides these motifs in two subgroups. In subgroup 1, the horned figure appears in scenes where they carry various weapons and seem to be moving or dancing (Fig. 2). In fact, the motif is also often described by the term the 'weapondancer' (cf. Price 2019, 320–23). The weapondancers sometimes occur in pairs and sometimes they are depicted next to a warrior clad in wolfskin (see also Høilund Nielsen 2001). In Helmbrecht's subgroup 2, the horned figure appears as a smaller individual depicted behind and hovering slightly above a horse carrying a rider.

Helmbrecht's study shows that the use of figures with horned headgear changes and becomes more diversified in her main chronological group 2, the Viking Age (2008, 41–42). There is now a wider range of contexts where the horned figures appear, and they can for example occur as pinheads and pendants or be depicted on tapestries and coins. The motif is still linked to social elites, but objects are found on both elite sites, trading sites and in graves, and in the latter case often connected with women, whereas the martial context seems to have weakened. Also, the motif is mainly found in Scandinavia and eastern Europe, showing changes in contact networks. In the Viking Age, the horned figure seems to have been a broadly established motif, but the depictions no longer reflect the details and motion of earlier images. The figures are more static and no longer dancing, having changed to an old-fashioned emblem of tradition and cultural memory (ibid., 42).

Figure 2. This die for helmet pressblech plates found at Torslunda on Öland is one of the most famous and discussed images of the horned figure, here depicted next to a warrior clad in wolfskin (after Stjerna 1903, Public Domain).

Although many finds have emerged since Helmbrecht's study, mainly due to the use of metal detectors, her overall considerations are still valid. In an MA-thesis from the University of Iceland, Nicolai Lanz has given a comprehensive and updated overview and discussion of the motif group, its research history and present status of finds. His study largely confirms Helmbrecht's results, and he emphasizes how the images of horned figures seem to go out of use when areas became Christianized, indicating a that this was a distinctively non-Christian motif (Lanz 2021, 233–36).

The background of the horned figure motif

There have been wide debates and speculations about the background and origin of the horned figure in Late Iron Age Scandinavian iconography through the last two centuries. It is not the purpose of this paper to elaborate on this research history or to establish a background of the motif (I refer to Lanz 2021, 7–59 for a thorough presentation of the research history). It must be noted however, that horned figures carrying weapons and performing some sort of ritual performances in the form of acrobatic dancing are found in Scandinavian Bronze Age iconography. These have been discussed by Flemming Kaul as representatives of a Bronze Age priesthood (2008, 54–55, 68–69; see also Vandkilde et al. 2022). Despite the parallels between Bronze and Iron Age iconographies, these phenomena are more than 1000 years apart and I find it unlikely that they reflect uninterrupted practices (for a different view see Gunnell 1995, 76; 2023, 509). However, there may be a possibility that they reflect some similar religious notions, or even that surviving Bronze Age imagery inspired Iron Age conceptual thinking. It has also been noted that a horned god, often called Cernunnos, 'the horned one' is known in Celtic religion and may be depicted on the famous Gundestrup Cauldron in the shape of a antlered seated figure (Kaul 2011, 89). Further, two figures with horned headgear and weapons,

apparently moving or dancing are seen on the short Gallehus gold horn on the top ring just below the runic inscription, together with two other armed figurines. This may show us that the idea of a horned and armed "dancer" existed already in the Migration Period.

Conceptions about horned figures go back a long way and seem to have been woven into both Germanic and Celtic mindsets, as well as in Egyptian, Roman and Greek religions for that matter. Some scholars have noted how one among many groups of Germanic elite auxiliary troops in the Late Antique Roman Army used horns as identity markers (Alföldi 1959). This group was named *Cornuti*, 'the horned', and they were supposedly known for war cries and ritual war dances. Their associated shield design in the Late Antique administrative document *Notitia Dignitatum* shows a set of horns ending in animal heads (fol. 96r). This was suggested by András Alföldi to be the background for the Scandinavian horned figure images (1959, see also Speidel 2004, 41–44).

In contemporary research, the main discussion relating to the horned figure images revolves around whether the images depict a human dressed in ritual gear or a god, here mainly Odin (e.g., Helmbrecht 2008, 42–43; Oerhl 2016; Price 2019, 320–23). Neil Price, however, also problematizes this type of interpretation (Price 2006). For the horned figure, the interpretation seems to derive partly from the association with spears and the birds' heads shown on some of the horns that can be viewed as Odin's ravens Huginn and Muninn, and partly from some of the images appearing to be one-eyed, among them the horned figure on the Torslunda plate whose eye had been struck out (Arrhenius and Freij 1992, 76). The Odin-interpretation has, as mentioned above, become common in popular interpretations and archaeological registration, where we generally see finds of mask and face motifs often being associated with Odin.

However, it is important to be cautious with these interpretations. Some of the horned figure images from the Late Germanic Period are depicted with such detail and realism that they must reflect something that existed in real life – not a mythological notion (Helmbrecht 2008, 46–48; Lanz 2021, 172). In particular, some of the horns seem to be depicted as strap-on headdresses that could well have been a part of ritual attire, and the appearance of the horned figure together with humans dressed in animal costumes on both Late Germanic and Viking Age depictions seems to show a particular ritual context, although this may have changed over time. The Late Germanic images found on weaponry show an active ritual dance or drama, whereas images found on the Viking Age Oseberg tapestry rather show a ritual procession or parade. This could be suggested to reflect that the horned figure in the Viking Age was symbolic or emblematic of something that at this time had become an archaic phenomenon.

Interpretations of the horned figures have drawn on iconography, enforced by the increasing amount of finds and their contexts – and attempts have been made to draw on written sources, both Classical and Old Norse. But the horned figure is not mentioned or described clearly in Old Norse literary sources, despite the texts mentioning of motifs such as *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar* that could represent the animal warrior figures sometimes found in the same images (Price 2019, 303–6), and perhaps also reflected in literary names (Breen 1997).

To supplement our understanding of the horned figure, we might look in another direction, namely onomastics.

Personal names as communication of social identities

Personal names have played a key part in discussions between philologists and historians of religion, concerning cult leaders and ritual specialists in Iron and Viking Age Scandinavia (Sundqvist 2003; 2022; Vikstrand 2009, 23–24). Here, I will briefly introduce the topic of personal names in general and sacral names in particular for the purpose of the argumentation that follows.

Scandinavian Iron Age and Viking Age naming customs belonged to a tradition in Indo-European and Germanic languages where personal names were created from words that were used in ordinary speech. The Swedish linguist and name scholar Thorsten Andersson described naming traditions in Germanic languages as circling around the three main themes of religion, hero/warrior worship and kinship (Andersson 1998, 17–18; see also Jackson 2015). In my own studies of the names known from the Scandinavian Iron and Early Viking Age runic corpus (based on registries in Peterson 2004; 2007; Åkerström 2019), I found that the semantic motifs in names can be divided into four main thematic categories:

1. Warrior ideals and battle associations, using words for battle, victory, weaponry, battle-related animals, noisiness and motion.
2. Leadership and social responsibilities, using words for ruling, kingship, fame, wisdom and advice, sacrality, performance, oathtaking, servitude, guardianship, protection and hospitality.
3. Appearance and personal character, using words that describe features such as hair colour, handicaps, moods and temper.
4. Group affiliations using words for kinship, ethnic belonging and place of origin.

The first two categories dominate the recorded material, especially regarding the names recorded in the Elder Futhark inscriptions. Together, these themes reflect a set of social ideals centred around the hospitable ruler and a warrior retinue. It is much discussed, however, how strong the emphasis placed on name semantics may have been in name choice and whether any meaning at all was ascribed to names (see discussion overview in Albris 2020, 83–84). Some names could be formed as semantically meaningless combinations of two elements, the so-called *dithematic names* that were common in several Indo-European naming traditions (Andersson 1998; Jackson 2015; Peterson 1988; 1994). Examples are *Frawaradaz* that combines 'quick, happy' and 'advice', or *Wagagastiz*, that combines 'wave' and 'guest'. Meanwhile, some names probably drew on meaningful functional designations such as various types of warriors, for example *Landawarjaz*, 'land-guardian' or *Saiwiharjaz*, 'sea-warrior' (Peterson 2010). For these cases, it can be difficult to distinguish names from other types of words especially because functional designations developed into personal names through their use as bynames (Bjørk 2022; Peterson 1988, 121–22, see below).

The most important factor in name choice was probably the need to state kinship relations. Yet I have argued that name semantics also worked on associative levels (Albris 2020, 89–92). This reasoning is based on the clear correspondences between name semantics and other ways of communicating such as iconography, ritual and poetry. For example, animal

symbolism is a prominent feature in both iconography and naming, with the same set of species being represented in names and images: wolves, bears, eagles, ravens, boars, snakes and horses. On a group of 7th–8th-century runestones from Blekinge, Sweden, we find three male names that illustrate how the warrior ideal was closely connected with animal symbolism and poetic ways of expression: *Haþuwulfaz, Hariwulfaz* and *Heruwulfaz*, dithematic compounds of respectively 'battle' + 'wolf', 'warrior/army' + 'wolf' and 'sword' + 'wolf'. Both *Hariwulfaz* and *Heruwulfaz* have counterparts in the Old English poetic warrior designations, *herewulf* and *heoruwulf* (Andersson 1998, 20–23; see also the discussions of wolf-themed names in Breen 1997 and Sundqvist & Hultgård 2004, and for the possible metric qualities of these inscriptions see Naumann 2018, 48–54).

Another example is the martial themes used in the popular female name elements *-gunnr* and *-hildr*, both meaning 'battle' and somehow mirrored in the many Viking Age depictions of women with weapons (cf. Andersson 2016, Deckers *et al.* 2021). These correspondences show that names could work as media within the general social discourse and rhetoric of Iron Age society (Albris 2020).

Personal names and designations are often the central, if not the only, content in runic inscriptions from both the Iron and Viking Age, and this emphasizes the importance of names and of communicating and disseminating them. From their beginning in the 2nd century CE, runic inscriptions were found on stone monuments as well as on objects such as jewellery, weapons and tools. Runic literacy was probably transferred within small circles, especially in the Iron Age (Imer 2015, 67–90, 131–32). Within these groups, writers and readers probably knew (of) each other and understood references to connections and qualities. Communicating the social identity through a name may have been an important reason for writing names, and the use of runes in the pre-Christian period can be characterized as social communication. Sometime in the Late Roman or Early Germanic Period, personal names also began to appear in place names, indicating that they were becoming important in the context of claiming rights to land (Albris and Dam 2019; Albris and Vasshus 2023; 28–30; see also Zachrisson and Vikstrand 2006; Zachrisson 2017).

Personal names and ritual functionalities in the Scandinavian Iron Age

The religious aspect was a key part of both male and female personal names, represented in so-called sacral names; names constructed with words that refer to religious phenomena (see also Albris 2023). Per Vikstrand has surveyed the pre-Christian Scandinavian sacral personal names, dividing them into three groups (Vikstrand 2009, 5–6): first are the 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* (see also Shaw 2011). The deity names are used as first elements in dithematic names together with various second elements in combinations that did not carry any specific meaning. The second group consists of names that incorporate the adjectives **hailaga* and **wīhaz*, with the meaning 'holy', used alone or combined with other elements. Formations with **wīha-* as a first element, *Vī-*, appears in a wide range of combina-

tions (Vikstrand 2009, 17–22). The use of **wīhaz*, however, is also much discussed and the interpretation is connected with many uncertainties (Vasshus 2022).

Vikstrand's third group is a range of male names that are believed to derive from originally meaningful compounds that designated cult functionaries. Such terms may have entered the general naming vocabulary via their use as bynames. It can be very difficult to discern whether we are dealing with a dithematic name (Vikstrand's first group) or whether a name is rather derived from an original meaningful compound (for further discussion see Bjørk 2022). For example, the linguist and onomastic scholar John Kousgård Sørensen argued that some formations with the male second element *-vēʀ* (*<*wīhaz*) originated in designations for cult specialists, and that this reflected the existence of a pre-Christian priesthood (Kousgård Sørensen 1989). This element is for example combined with the term god (*Gud-*), theonyms (*Thor-*, *Frø-*) or cult site designations (*Al-*, *Sal-*, *Vi-*, *Hargh-*) or words for a group of people (*Thiuth-*) (Vikstrand 2009, 11, 23). However, the wide range of combinations point towards this being an expression of variation naming, although the sacral content may not have gone unnoticed (see also Albris 2023, 285–89).

For other names, it is more evident that they originated in a meaningful compound. An example is the name *Veseti*, 'he who resides at, i.e. protects, the shrine' which is found in many Swedish runic inscriptions (Bjørk 2022, 44; Peterson 2007, 257). Incidentally, this is also the name of a 10th-century earl of Bornholm mentioned in literary sources.

Olof Sundqvist has pointed out how there seems to be a divide where linguists and name scholars have argued that sacral names indicate the existence of specialized ritual leaders in the form of an actual priesthood, whereas historians of religion and archaeologists argue that cult leadership was taken on as part of general leadership roles (see overview in Sundqvist 2022). Sundqvist reaches the conclusion that there is no evidence for a distinct priesthood, but that some degree of religious or ritual specialization must have taken place. For the present paper, it is sufficient to say that there seems to have been an interchange between various fields of communication, where a vocabulary of both ritual and other social functions influenced the vocabulary of names, and where we see an exchange between functions, names, visual art and poetry (Fig. 3).
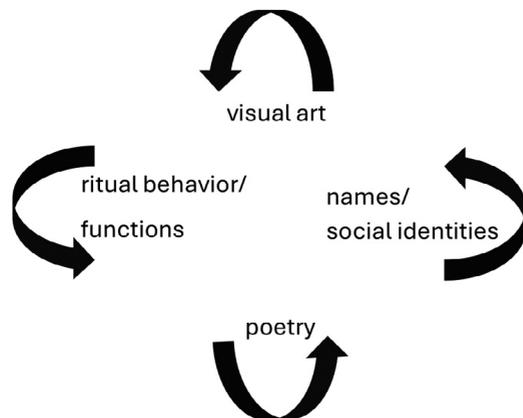
Figure 3. The interchange between various communication forms in Late pre-Christian Scandinavian society. Each communication domain extracts from and feeds back into a general set of concepts and ideas that are under constant transformation.
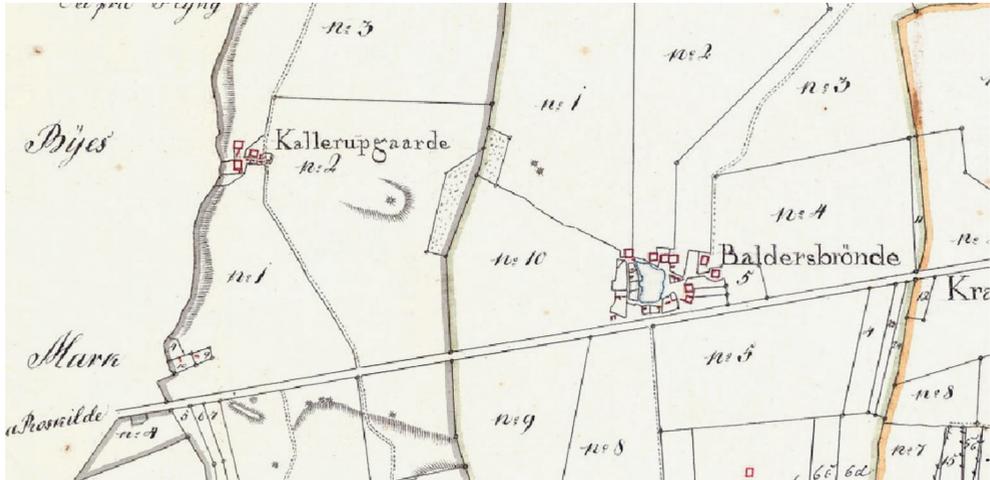
Figure 4. Parish map from 1817 of the Kallerup-area. The stone was found in the field east of Kallerupgaarde village. Here, we see a topographical formation that may have been the site of the stone settings. Today, the area is completely developed, and the place is a football field. © Kort og Matrikelstyrelsen.

The Kallerup Runestone

The Kallerup or Høje Taastrup Runestone (DR 250) is a granite stone, c. 165 cm tall. It was found in 1828 by peasant Jens Larsen while ploughing a field by the main road in Kallerup Gårde, a village in Høje Taastrup Parish on Zealand a little east of Roskilde (Fig. 4).

The accounts in the archives of the National Museum about the find situation are sparse (parish no. 020207–12 and 10), but they express how the stone was almost completely hidden underground and with the inscription facing down when it was discovered. In his dissertation from 1841 about the supposed inscriptions at Runamo, Icelandic philologist and Copenhagen professor Finnur Magnusson describes how he went to inspect the stone on site on the 1st of June 1828 with E.C. Werlauff, Rasmus Rask and C.J. Thomsen (Magnusson 1841, 466). They observed the stone lying in the field close to three large stone settings, placed close together in a line, but at that time mostly destroyed by stone masons collecting boulders for construction. The locals called the site Gjettetinget or Jættetinget, 'The Giant's thing-site' (Fig. 4). These stone settings could have been Neolithic dolmens, but it is highly likely that they were ship-settings, a monument type known from burial sites such as Høj Stene and nearby Lejre (cf. Høegsberg et al. 2021, 42), and connected with runestones at Färlöv in Scania, Glavendrup on Funen, Tryggevælde on Zealand, and Bække and Jelling in Jutland (Øeby Nielsen 2005, 125–26). The registrations in the Danish National Sites and Monuments database suggest that the stone was located in an area with a certain amount of Bronze Age mounds. The stone itself has Bronze Age cup marks and an inscription running in two vertical bands (Fig. 5):
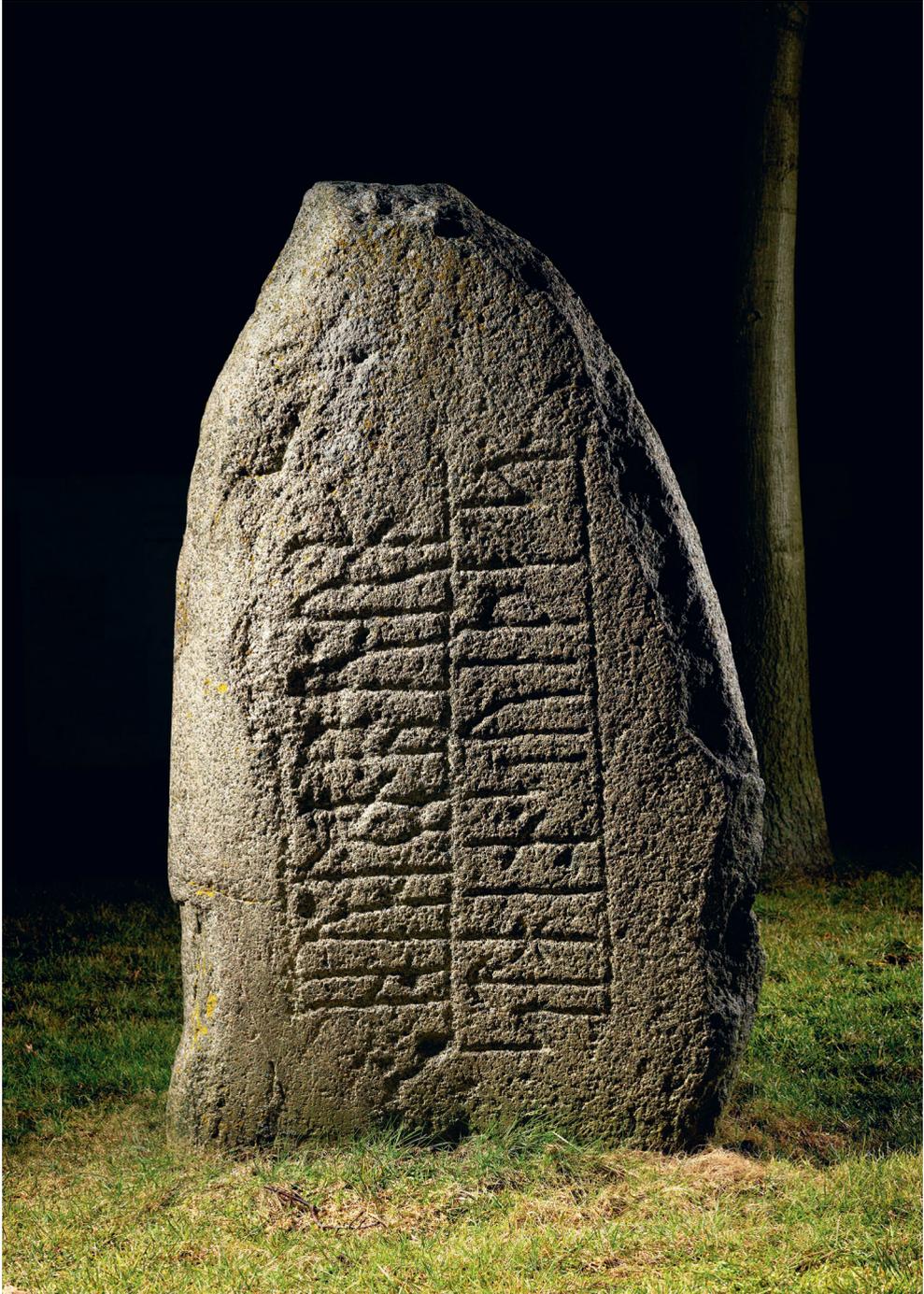
Figure 5. The Kallerup runestone can today be seen near the find place in the church yard outside the Ansgar church, Hedehusene. Nationalmuseet, Roberto Fortuna CC-BY-SA.

ʜurnburᴀ
stᴀin · suiþks:

This translates as "Hornbori's stone, Swiþings [descendant]". The stone is dated based on the rune types to the Late Germanic period, c. 675–800 (Imer 2015, 125). Thus, this stone is a part of a small group of 8th-century South Scandinavian stones, called the Helnæs group. To this group also belongs the more famous Snoldelev rune stone (DR 248), found not far from Kallerup, and from Fyn the Helnæs, Flemløse and Avnslev stones, as well as the group of stones from Blekinge with wolf names mentioned above (Imer 2014, 166–67). As we shall see below, several of the inscriptions in this group have played key parts in the understanding of pre-Christian ritual leadership.

The stone commemorates a person with the male name *Hornbori*, descendant of *Swiþing*. The latter is understood by Peterson as a male byname, based on a word that is counterpart to modern Icelandic *svíðingur*, with the modern meaning 'miser' (Peterson 2007, 212). However, this meaning may be derived from an earlier meaning 'wise, understanding, cunning' (see Magnusson 1841, 467, Heggstad *et al*. 1990, 424–25). Peterson explains the name *Hornburi* as a compound of the word *horn* and a nomen-agentis formation to the verb *bera*, 'bear, carry', i.e., translated as 'hornbearer' (*-*bura* being an n-derivation to the zero grade of the verb *bera*, Peterson 2004, 30; 2007, 117–18). She also notes a translation 'horn-blower' and further references Jöran Sahlgren (1935). This is for Sahlgren a rather speculative paper where he tried to explain the Swedish parish name *Hornborga* (1378 ii Hornboro) as derived from a term for a (female) horn-blowing water demon equivalent to the creature *Näcken* known from folklore. Sahlgren, however, later reconsidered this interpretation and suggested that the place name *Hornborga* was rather derived from a Swedish dialect word for the stickleback fish, called *hornbar*, which he translates as 'hornbearer' (Sahlgren and Erixon 1955, 47 f.).

The personal name *Hornburi* has, to my knowledge, never been discussed in the context of the iconographic motif of the figure with horned headgear. However, I think it likely that we have here a linguistic designation that could have been used to denote the functionality we see represented in iconography of the horned figure. Below, I will explain why.

Understanding the name Hornburi

The name *Hornburi* is probably one of the cases where a personal name was derived from a compound appellative from the general language, and maybe it should be seen as a byname rather than a personal name proper. The suggested meaning 'horn-blower' seems to be derived from a word occurring in a sentence in an Old English version of the legend of Saint Helena: *Hleopon hornboran, hreopan friccan*, 'the trumpeters ran, the heralds yelled' (reference in Widmark 1961, 167). The translation of the Old English word *hornbora* to 'trumpeter, horn-blower' seems to be based solely on this one text (Bosworth-Toller 2014a). An Old English adjective, *hornbæra* is however translated as 'horned, having horns, corniger' (Bosworth-Toller 2014b).

There is linguistic evidence to show that a compound *hornbora/hornburi/hornbero* in Germanic languages could have meant 'having horns', 'characterized by horns' in a wider

sense. In Old Saxon and Old High German, a corresponding compound word *hornbero* or *hornobero* could be used for the hornet, referring metaphorically to the insect's large antennae (Nussbaum 1986, 252, Widmark 1961, 167–68). In fact, other names for this animal such as Danish *gedehams*, Swedish *geting*, and Latin *crabro* also refer to these 'horns'.

In a discussion of the same Swedish parish name *Hornborga* that was the subject of Sahlgren's considerations, Gusten Widmark argued that in early Scandinavia there must have existed an appellative **hornbori* where the verb *bera* should be understood more widely than 'to carry'. It would simply denote something that is 'having/being characterized by horn/horns (of some kind)'. The existence of such an appellative is witnessed by its occurrence in several topographical place names in Norway, Sweden and Iceland, where they describe the shapes of mountains or rivers (Wahlberg ed. 2016, 108, 130; Widmark 1961, 166–71, 170–71; see also Sahlgren 1935, 49–53). Widmark further remarks that as a designation of a 'bodily characteristic' this word could easily come to work as a personal name through use as a byname. That *Hornburi* was widely used as a personal name or designation is attested by its occurrence as a specific in several Scandinavian compound place names, listed by Sahlgren (1935, 51):

Sweden: *Hormestad*, Södermanland (1338 in hornborastum)
Norway: *Homborstad*, Davik (1333 i Honborastadhum),
              Hommerstad, Løyten (1358 i Hornborstadhum)
              Hommerstad, Stange (1418 j Honborstadhum)
Denmark: *Horbelev,* Falster (1250 Horbærlef)

These occurrences can be added to the runic name found on the Kallerup stone, showing that the use as a name was widespread and well established across Scandinavia in the Iron Age. Interestingly, the specific only occurs combined with the older name types *-stad* and *-lev* and is not found combined with generics from the Later Viking Age such as *-torp*. The names in *-lev* are believed to have been coined in the period c. 300–800 CE, while names in *-stad* are thought to have been active from the Roman Iron Age into the Viking Age (see Albris and Vasshus 2023, 28–30 for further references). In these place names, we may have a personal name *Hornburi*, but we could also have to do with a sort of functional designation or title. As Lena Peterson has shown, some specifics occurring in *lev*-names seem to be derived from functional warrior designations, and it is possible that some words for cult functionaries are also reflected in *lev*-name generics (Peterson 2010; see also Albris 2015, Kousgård Sørensen 1989).

The occurrences of the term/name *hornbearer/Hornbearer* on the Kallerup rune stone connected with a large monument and in the *lev*-name *Horbelev*, a place name type connected with land rights, suggest that the men that could be thus designated were high-status individuals. This, in addition to the wide occurrence of the designation, suggests that we are not dealing with nicknames referring to bodily appearance, but to some sort of social role.

On the above background, I suggest that the personal name *Hornburi* is derived from a functional term, **hornburi*, 'hornbearer' which referred to the ritual performers depicted as figures with horned headgear. The male name bearers seem to have been high-status indi-

viduals that had the duty/obligation and privilege/honour to act as the horned performer in certain rituals.

This hypothesis is based on several indications such as the corresponding timeframe of iconography, runic name and place name generics; on the observation that other functional terms occur as specifics in *lev*-names; on the frequent use of sacral and ritual terms in personal names; and on the generally high degree of correspondence between iconography and the vocabulary of personal names and designations. The horned figure is, as described above, a well-established and broadly represented motif in 6th–10th-century artwork, whereas horn-blowers are seldomly depicted. I have only found one clear example, a possible depiction of the god Heimdall blowing his horn on the Jurby stone cross on the Isle of Man. Other examples of humans carrying horns in iconography are mostly females with drinking horns, seen on gold foils and Gotlandic picture stones (cf. Oerhl 2023, 195, 198).

The fact that the word/name **hornburi*/*Hornburi* only occurs as specifics in older place name types points towards the designation already having gone out of active use by the (Later) Viking Age. This corresponds well with the observation by Helmbrecht and Lanz that the horned figure motif by the Viking Age became more simplified and stylized, perhaps now referring to a phenomenon that, although widely known, was mainly a thing of the past (Helmbrecht 2008, 42; Lanz 2021, 233–36). This may also explain why the horned figure does not play a key part in Old Norse literary sources. It must however be noted here that the sources list a dwarf name *Hornbori*, mainly interpreted as 'horn borer/horn driller', as dwarfs are perceived as craftsmen (Gould 1929, 949). It can be difficult to distinguish between words for drilling and bearing respectively in Old Scandinavian languages (see discussion in Nordström 2021, 8–12). Widmark also discussed this dwarf name, suggesting that we could either have two homophonic names derived from different backgrounds or that the dwarf's name could refer to some physical appearance of the dwarf, such as a hunchback (Widmark 1961, 168–70). I will leave it to others to discuss this matter, but we can note that a version of the horned figures in iconography is a small horned 'helping' figure hovering behind horses on helmet plates (Helmbrecht 2008 subgroup 2, mentioned above).

The hornbearer and roles of pre-Christian ritual leadership

One of the most widely discussed representations of the horned figure is the depiction together with a wolfskin-clad warrior, which in itself has been a subject of wide discussion (cf. Høilund Nielsen 2001). It seems likely that the constellation of the wolf warrior and horned warrior reflects a concrete ritual carried out by costumed performers, perhaps connected with preparations for or re-enactment of battle. It has been suggested that wolf-names known from runic inscriptions such as the Blekinge stones mentioned above are somehow related to the wolf warrior (Sundqvist & Hultgård 2004; see also Albris 2020, 81–82). One of these, the Stentoften runestone (DR 357), further refers to ritual leadership by commemorating a sacrifice of nine bucks and nine stallions (Imer 2015, 264). Ritual leadership is at the forefront of many of the inscriptions on stones in the Late Germanic Iron Age called the Helnæs group. The Snoldelev

stone (DR 248) mentions a *þulr*, a ritual specialist probably trained in memorizing and reciting important common cultural memory and information (Brink 2005, 104–6). That inscription further links to a monumental arena referencing a place called *Salhaukum*, the sal-mounds (the nearby village of *Salløv*, Imer 2015, 255). On two of the stones from Fyn, Helnæs (DR 190) and Flemløse 1 (DR 192), the commemorated is a man named *Rhuulfr*, described as **nuRa kuþi**. Whereas **nuRa** is uninterpreted, **kuþi** is generally thought to be the runic equivalent to Old Norse *goði*, a social and ritual leader (Sundqvist 2020, 2022, 13, 23–25). This term is also found on the Early Viking Age Glavendrup monument (ibid. 27–30, DR 209). Concerning the Kallerup inscription, an identification referring to a ritual function thus fits well with other inscriptions from the same period.

As we can see, there may have been a whole gallery of specialized ritual roles and (perhaps loosely) connected terms at play in the Germanic Iron Age and Viking Age. As Deckers *et al.* have observed in their study of moulds from Viking-Age Ribe, the variety of iconographic elements found in amulets, brooches and pendants could reflect an ensemble of themes from ritual performance (Deckers *et al.* 2021, 50–54). The images found in reconstructed moulds of one workshop showing miniature weaponry, armed females, horses etc. closely resemble the assembled motifs seen on the Oseberg tapestry. The tapestry most likely depicts ritual processions, maybe in connection with a funeral (Murphy & Nygaard 2023). On the tapestry fragments, we also see horned figures appearing to take part in ritual processions together with warriors dressed as animals, as well as armed women, horses, wagons etc. as we saw on the metalwork (Fig. 6; see also Price 2019, 320–23).

Deckers *et al.* suggest that the metalwork imagery worn by Viking-Age people may have been representations of ritual performances rather than of mythological scenes and that such objects may have harnessed the power or potential of the ritual they represented (Deckers *et al.* 2021, 54). We may perhaps see the correspondence between naming customs and ritual functionalities in a similar way. There need not have been a direct, one-to-one relation between sacral names and ritual leadership, rather they both reflect some concepts and functions at play in society. When it comes to *Hornburi*, however, it never survived as an ordinary personal name, and therefore I think it was rather a functional term than an equivalent to the various sacral elements that were used in variation naming.

If we return to the horned figurine found at Hakonsgård on Bornholm, such an object may have been a representation and embodiment of the ritual, while it could also be a way to reference the status and privilege of the hornbearing character. The piercing on the right side of the Hakonsgård bust could be further suggested to reference the myth of Odin's self-harm while hanging on the world tree, or to ritual initiations related to this myth (see Sundqvist 2009, 661). While Hakonsgård is a find-rich place, it is inferior to such places as Uppåkra and Tissø where horned figures are also found, showing that this representation did not occur only at the top social levels. Could people who used the horned figure motif have been acting as hornbearers themselves or be associated with (maybe descended from?) people with this 'office'? These are mere speculations, but if we accept the interpretation of the name *Hornburi* as a functional term referring to the horned figure from iconography, this enforces the argument that the imagery does not only depict mythological scenes, but real-life ritual scenes. It will also mean that the role as hornbearer was formalized in some way. In this view, the term
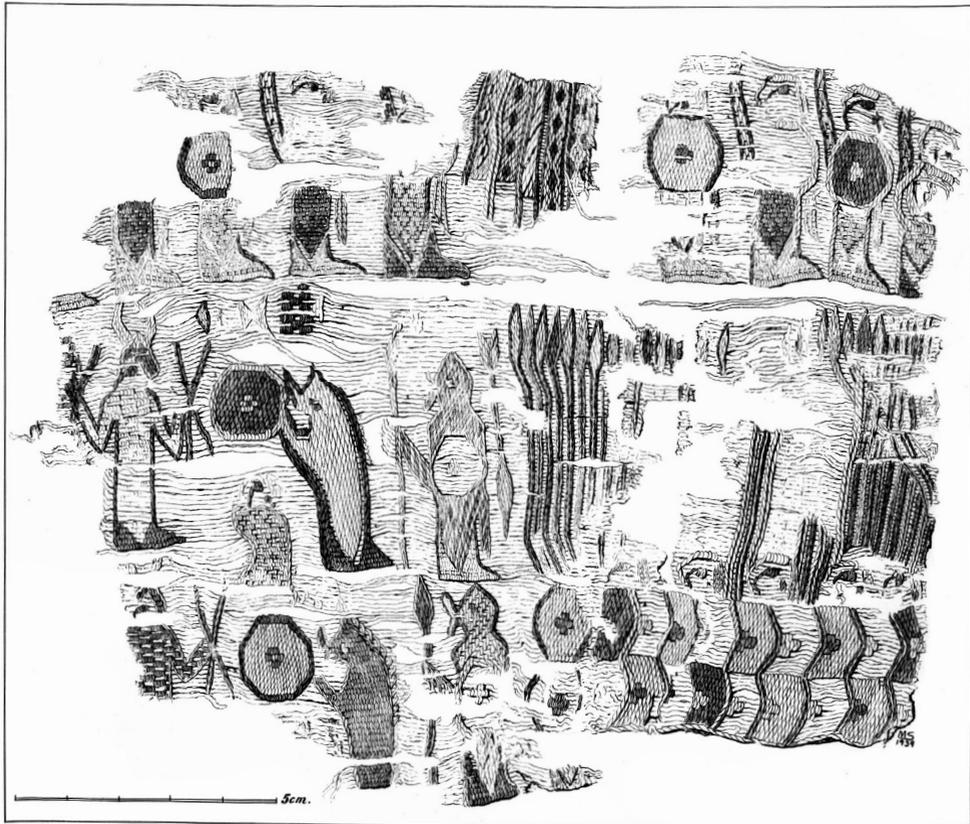
Figure 6. Fragment 16 of the Oseberg Tapestry. On the left, two horned figures are seen holding crossed sticks. Behind them are figures in animal dress. Drawing by Mary Storm 1939. Universitetsmuseene, C55000, bestillingsnr: Cf22355. License CC BY-SA 4.0.

*hornburi and the derived name *Hornburi* were marks of distinction with close associations to the martial and ritual sphere. Even if the horned figure may have been an archaic notion by the Viking Age, the use of stylized representations of this figure could be ways of appropriating the esteem in which this role may have been held.

Conclusion

We have shown that the horned figure was a widespread and well-known motif in the Late Germanic Iron-Age and Viking-Age art, although becoming more diverse and stylized in the later part of this period. The images of figures with horned headgear suggest an established performative ritual function, possibly referencing the god Odin in some way.

There are correspondences between iconography and personal names and how religious and ritual functionalities fed into the personal name material. This paper has argued that the word/name **hornburi*/*Hornburi* found on the 8th-century Kallerup runestone and in several Iron Age place names was likely derived from a word meaning 'having or characterized by horns'. This particular use of the name *Hornburi* indicates that the name-bearers were of high status and that the name is rooted in a widely used functional designation in 5th–10th-century Scandinavia. Like other (sacral) personal names, *Hornburi* may have roots in a defined ritual function or category of cultic performer called a *hornbearer*, corresponding with these images. The hornbearer was one figure in a gallery of ritual performers that also included people dressed in animal gear and taking part in processions and/or weapondancing. The presence of the name/title in place names and on a runic monument indicates that the men denoted by this term were also connected with some sort of land rights. This suggests that the hornbearer function was a duty/obligation and privilege/honour performed by high-status individuals that had other roles in society besides ritual leadership.

The lost Kallerup monument, which I find likely could have been a ship-setting, can thus be seen as a memorial to a ritual leader as well as to a local ruler or magnate.

Both name occurrences and developments in horned figure imagery suggest that the hornbearer as a ritual specialist was a tradition that was most vivid in the Late Germanic Iron Age, while the Viking Age saw a transformation into a more formalized repetition or referencing of the rituals and the ritual function. The use of horned figures in amulets and maybe on sticks and staffs may be referencing the ritual or invoking the special status of the individuals termed as hornbearers. If these conclusions are right, the coupling of a personal name/designation **hornburi*/*Hornburi*, with the image of the horned figure from iconography enables us to move a tiny step further in understanding ritual performers and their roles in the religious life of pre-Christian Scandinavia.

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Acknowledgements

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A Ritual and Contextual Approach to Runic Poetry from Viking-Age Denmark: Some Analytical Examples

Simon Nygaard

Metrical runic inscriptions, or runic poetry, are found scattered across Scandinavia and the North Atlantic islands with dates ranging from c. 400–1300 CE (Hübler 1996, 11–12; Naumann 2018, 11). Runic poems are often recognized as part of runic inscriptions, but their function and provenance are seldom investigated in their own right.

The purpose of this chapter is primarily to suggest the functions objects bearing metrical inscriptions from Viking-Age Denmark may have fulfilled, and secondarily to suggest some ways in which the metrical parts change, influence or reinforce the function behind the runic inscriptions of which they are a part. These suggestions are made by placing the relevant inscriptions in a broad social context in order to provide new insights into their contemporary – possibly ritual – Viking-Age use as well as the relevance and significance of their metrical form. Based on previous research and editions of metrical runic inscriptions, this chapter gives three examples of runic poetry from Viking-Age Denmark[1] that are considered representative of this selected geographically and temporally limited corpus, which is being prepared as part of the project *Runic Poetry and Ritual Performance*.[2] On the basis of this corpus, a more comprehensive contextual model that builds on the approach outlined in this chapter will be prepared for future publication.

The selected metrical inscriptions, the Aarhus stone 5 (DR 68[3]), the Randbøl stone (DR 40) and the Ribe skull fragment (EM85;151B), are analysed in the chapter using a Sieversian metrical approach described below as well as a theoretical-analytical model from the study of religion inspired by ritual studies and the study of sacred texts. The approach and theory used in the chapter will be presented in the following.

Approach

There is a great deal of disagreement within runic studies regarding which criteria must be met for one to speak of a runic inscription as being metrical (the discussion is summarized by Naumann 2018, 14–15). Frank Hübler (1996, 30–37; cf. also Schulte 2010) must be considered the most critical voice (however, see Wulf 1998 for appropriate criticism of Hübler's work), while more nuanced presentations are given by, for example, Edith Marold (2012). In this chapter, Marold's view of what constitutes a metrical inscription is followed: one should be able to recognize a metrical structure in the inscription based on established verse schemes, as seen, for example, in Eduard Sievers' work on the Germanic long-line (1893; cf. Marold 2012, 63–68). In contrast to later Old Norse poetry, which is largely strophic and therefore consists of several long-lines in combination, a runic poem may, and often does, consist of just one long-line.

A: ́⊥ × | ́⊥ ×
B: × ́⊥ | × ́⊥
C: × ́⊥ | ́⊥ ×
D: ́⊥ | ́⊥ ̀⊥ × or ́⊥ | ́⊥ × ̀⊥
E: ́⊥ ̀⊥ × | ́⊥ or ́⊥ × ̀⊥ | ́⊥
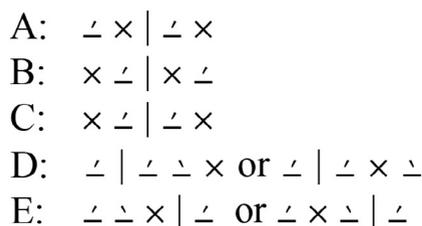
Figure 1. Sievers' five basic verse types, cf. Sievers (1893, 33–35). After Marold (2012, 67).

Sievers' model for metrical analysis of Germanic poetry (1983) is based on the perceived rhythm of groups of words, a rhythm defined by a limited way of combining stressed and un-stressed syllables (cf. Fulk 2016; Marold 2012). Sievers considers verse as groups of a minimum of two metrical units called *feet* which are separated by a metrical break, or *caesura*. The feet consist of one syllable with primary stress, called a *lift* (́⊥), one (or more) unstressed syllables, termed *dips* (×), and occasionally also syllables with secondary stress, called *half-lifts* (̀⊥). A combination of two feet makes up a *half-line*. Conventionally, stressed syllables contain long vowels (*Sāᴙ*) or diphthongs (*hialb*) or, in words of two or more syllables, a short vowel followed by two or more consonants (*uþin*). A word with two short syllables is, however, considered metrically equal to a long syllable (*manna*), a phenomenon called resolution, and may thus fill out a stressed position in a foot. The feet can be combined in a variety of ways resulting in five basic half-lines or verse types, A–E (Fig. 1), with a number of subtypes (see Marold 2012, 66 for a full overview of Sieversian verse types). Two half-lines may then be combined to form a *long-line* in which stressed syllables in each half-line are bound together by *alliteration* where all vowels alliterate, but only identical consonants or consonant clusters alliterate. In addition to the long-line, in Old Norse poetry a so-called *full-line* exists in which, as a rule, three stressed positions (lifts) are present and a minimum of two of the lifts alliterate (Sievers 1893, 82-90; see the Randbøl stone below). This is the model that will be used in the metrical analysis of the inscriptions in this chapter.

As already noted, in this chapter the focus is on the function of objects bearing metrical inscriptions. In the *category of function* of the contextual model, a number of subcategories are suggested: *commemorative function*, *monumentalized function,* and *crisis function*. The categories of the model will be constructed on the basis of *contextual runology* (Düwel 2008, 16–17; cf. Bianchi 2010; 2018; Imer 2015, 16–20; Jesch 1998), the focus of which is placed separately on what Klaus Düwel (2008, 16) has termed the "außerschriftliche[n] Kontext": for instance, the location of the runes on the object, the original location of the object in the landscape, where this is either known or able to be approximately inferred from the content of the inscription, the archaeological context of the object, the basic aim of the research project (and of the researcher) and of course the contents and meaning of the inscription (cf. the significantly revised section in the 5th *Runenkunde* edition; Düwel and Nedoma 2023, 16–18). Due to this chapter's concern with the context beyond or outside of the text, the inscriptions and the objects on which they are found will, inspired by e.g. Ing-Mari Back Danielsson, be seen as performative, ritualized memory places and objects with the capacity and potential to shape, transform and maintain (collective) identity (cf. Koesling 2021). Back Danielsson's work (2015, 64–65) is inspired by, among many other approaches, theories of affect. In our context this may be said to cover the

embodied process of interaction with the runestone: what the stones want from the beholder, and what the stones affect the beholder to do with, for instance, their placement in the landscape or the placement of the inscription. In this sense, Back Danielsson is also primarily interested in the stones' *außerschriftliche Kontext*, although in a different way than in the present chapter, defined by the stones' physical placement in the landscape – something that is much easier to survey in a Swedish setting than in the Danish context, due to the limited amount of runestones whose original placement we know with any degree of certainty (Øeby Nielsen 2005).

Theory

The Viking-Age runestones, which form the main part of this chapter's empirical material, can be seen as memorial stones that follow a more or less fixed pattern: "X (sometimes several individuals) erected this stone for Y." Sometimes the formula can be expanded with praise for the dead, prayers, or a carver's signature (Palm 1992). As Stephen Mitchell (2013, 283) has noted, it seems likely that ritual or ceremonial actions "accompanied the erection and dedication of such stones". The point of departure for this chapter is that the carving of the runes was also an act that, like many other crafts in the Iron Age, related to ritual (Østigård and Goldhahn 2007; cf. Malm 2010). In this chapter, it is further argued that every interaction with the inscriptions can be viewed as a form of ritual action, be it interaction by recitation, reading, aural reception or physical touch. This also applies to inscriptions on other materials than stone, such as objects made of wood, bone, lead, etc. (see MacLeod and Mees 2006, 2–4).

In this connection, it is essential to make it clear what the term *ritual* is taken to mean. Inspired by scholars such as Catherine Bell (1992), Émile Durkheim (1895), Roy A. Rappaport (1999, 24), and Victor Turner (1969), I view rituals as specific activities (both actions and utterances) performed by an individual or a group of individuals that often follows (more or less) established patterns that derive from a pre-defined tradition. The activities often take place at certain times, in certain places or spaces, and one of the purposes of the ritual actions is to promote group-identity and coherence. However, such ritual actions and utterances are not necessarily religious (Bell 1992, 13–17). Regarding religious rituals, these are often addressed to an Otherworld (sometimes its gods or other Otherworldly beings), characterized by numinosity (cf. Otto 1917) and liminality (cf. Turner 1969).

Using a contextual approach informed by the study of religion and ritual studies, it can be argued that the metrical runic inscriptions represent what Jørgen Podemann Sørensen (2005, 64) has called "skriftfikserede ritualer" or *rituals fixed in text*. This signifies a special form of text or utterance that basically acts on behalf of its recipient(s). These actions take place with each interaction that follows the first ritual act: by reciting, hearing, reading, touching the inscription, etc. With each subsequent interaction with the text, the first ritual act will be re-actualized – naturally to a varying degree that depends on many factors. Ritual actions and utterances can be based both on an oral tradition (cf. Nygaard 2024) and on a tradition based on written products. Within the study of religion, one can speak of religious ritual utterances as sacred texts, that is, texts (broadly understood) that play a role in religion and religious rituals (Schleicher 2017). These sacred texts too can be both oral and written (cf. Jørgensen

2023), and since runic inscriptions are written products that emerged from a culture that was dominated by oral tradition, they represent an exciting interplay between orality and textuality (cf. Harris 2008; Nygaard 2025) – also in their potential capacity as sacred texts. With inspiration from Durkheim, Otto and Jens Peter Schjødt (2008, 78–80), Emma Jørgensen (2023, 15) has proposed that in an Old Norse context sacred texts "claim access to trans-empirical, numinous knowledge", that is, knowledge of, for instance, the Other World, its inhabitants, or unseen powers reserved only for trained, initiated individuals. Considering the supposedly relatively limited access to the runes in Viking-Age society (cf. Imer 2021, 46–47) – an access that required, if not initiation, then at least extensive training – this definition is worth keeping in mind; even more so in connection with the work on the potential ritual use of and interaction with metrical runic inscriptions as rituals fixed in text mentioned above.

Based on both the concept of sacred texts and the idea of rituals fixed in text, it will be proposed that among the analysed metrical inscriptions there are representatives of the category of use defined by Marianne Schleicher (2017) as *artefactual use of sacred texts*. This category denotes the embodied and object-based use of a sacred text, which takes place, for instance, by hearing a runic inscription recited and thereby understanding it, by giving sound to an inscription through recitation, or by reading an inscription to oneself as a person versed in runic writing. In the understanding of this category of use, the sacred text confirms and substantiates the worldview held by the bearer of the culture and religion in question.[4] The contents of the sacred text are, so to speak, secondary, and it is taken for granted that the contents make sense as part of one's religious worldview. Through the artefactual use of the sacred text, *transitivity* is facilitated (cf. Malley 2004). Transitivity covers the process in which the text as an object creates a relationship between an individual and a religious community. Using this theoretical framework as an analytical model, it can be argued that some runic inscriptions could have fulfilled some of the above-mentioned functions in Viking-Age society and have continued relevance for its contemporary people through their repeated use of the inscriptions.

Categories of function

The inscriptions presented in this short chapter are intended to provide some analytical examples of the functional and contextual approach to runic poetry from Viking-Age Denmark. The inscriptions are divided into three subcategories of function, which have also been mentioned above: the commemorative, monumentalized, and crisis functions, which must be described here in slightly more detail.

The commemorative function must be said to be the general category, at least for the metrical inscriptions on runestones, as this function can be said to be an extension of the runestones' general aim. Hans-Peter Naumann writes in his edition of the Scandinavian metrical runic inscriptions from 2018[5] that the function of runestone poetry as the obituaries of their time was twofold: the metrical inscriptions 1) serve an encomiastic (i.e., highly laudatory) purpose and 2) consciously create distance "zur Masse der prosaischen Gedenkinschriften" (Naumann 2018, 19) that is, 'to the mass of commemorative inscriptions in prose' through the use of

metrics as a stylistic device. According to Naumann, the metrics, so to speak, reinforce the memorial function that the inscriptions in general already fulfil.

The monumentalized function occurs when the location of the runestone or the character and content of the inscription can be said to be part of a context that is in some way out of the ordinary for runestones: for instance, a location as part of a ship setting or on top or in connection with a mound (whether burial mound or not) or in connection with a funeral. The connection between runestones and graves was in early runological research often seen as primary in connection with the runestone's original location (Klos 2009, 15–17). Since then, however, researchers have become aware that this is far from the case, and that location near contemporary veins of transport and local borders must probably be considered the primary factor for the location of runestones in the Viking Age (Klos 2009, 17–20, 21–22; Øeby Nielsen 2005).

The crisis function applies to many of the inscriptions that can also be said to be magical (McKinnell, Simek and Düwel 2003). Crises are diverse and this function can cover inscriptions that are apotropaic and, for example, meant to ward off or protect against disease. Crisis, however, also covers the opposite – curses that are supposed to cause a crisis for the recipient; these kinds of metrical inscriptions are often found on amulets (MacLeod and Mees 2006; Pereswetoff-Morath 2017). In addition, there are also metrical inscriptions that can be linked to ecological crises as well as eschatological crises. Here, the most obvious examples are the Rök stone (Ög 136, cf. Holmberg et al. 2019) and perhaps the Skarpåker stone (Sö 154), which, however, are not treated any further in this chapter.

Analysis

In the following section, examples are given of objects with metrical runic inscriptions that, by virtue of their content and/or their *außerschriftliche Kontext*, can be placed in one of the three subcategories of function described above (commemorative, monumentalized, or crisis). The inscription is then introduced and analysed based on the chapter's contextual and ritual theoretical approach.

Aarhus stone 5 (DR 68)

This runestone (Fig. 2) is in many ways a typical runestone from the late Viking Age. The stone was raised by three men for their deceased fellow, Ǫzurr, who is praised in high terms in the inscription. The stone was found reused as a foundational stone under the chancel arch in Frue Kirke in Aarhus, Denmark in 1905. This reuse of the stone probably took place towards the end of the 13th century. Due to, among other things, the stone's plant and spiral ornamentation, which has been described as a mixture of the Mammen and Ringerike styles, the stone is dated to the end of the 10th century (Fuglesang 1980, 188). The contents of the metrical part of the inscription also find parallels in the similarly partially metrical inscriptions on the stones from Rörbro (Sm 5), Transjö (Sm 37), and Hovgården (Ög 77), which could indicate

Figure 2. The Aarhus stone 5, c. 970–1020. Photo: Roberto Fortuna, Nationalmuseet (CC-BY-SA).

that this is an example a common oral-poetic formula for use in memorial oral poems (see Nygaard 2025, 245-47; Wulf 2003, 976). In addition, a small cross can be seen at the end of the inscription, which testifies to the widespread use of runestones in the early Nordic Christian culture. Furthermore, the title *félagi* (fellow) suggests a connection to a perhaps nascent professional network of traders who, in the late Viking Age, raised runestones on a grand scale – perhaps to strengthen their mutual relations (Imer 2021; cf. Jesch 2001, 232–37). The original location of the stone is not known, nor can it be deduced from the contents of the inscription. It has been suggested that Aarhus stone 5 should originally have been part of a larger, public monument together with some of the other stones that are considered to be part of the Aarhus group (Roesdahl and Wilson 2006, 223). While this would place this stone in the category of monumentalized function, the arguments put forth by Roesdahl and Wilson are not sufficiently strong to build an analysis upon. Their suggestion rests on an association between the plural *s(t)a(i)naR* 'stones' on the Aarhus stone 2 (DR 65), which was originally found in a staircase during renovations at Aarhus Katedralskole, and the remaining stones of the Aarhus group of which two (stones 1 [DR 64] and 5) were found in Frue Kirke (DR p. 100, 105). The reference to more than one stone on Aarhus stone 2 is thought by Roesdahl and Wilson (2006, 222–23) to indicate a monument of standing stones like, for instance, Västra Strö in Skåne which includes two runestones (DR 334–35), one of which is also decorated with a mask (DR 335) as well as several uninscribed standing stones. However, too many uncertainties remain concerning the potential relationship between and original placement of the stones in the Aarhus group (of which the authors are aware) for us to build upon their suggestion for the classification of Aarhus stone 5. Nonetheless, the inscription can be transliterated and translated as follows:

Side A (-)usti: auk: hufi: auk: þiR: frebiurn: risþu: stin: þạnsi: eftiR: |: ạsur: saksa: filaka: sin: harþa: Side B kuḏan: trik: saR: tu: |: mana: mest: uniþikR: | saR: ati: skib: miþ: arnạ:

They, Tosti and Hofi and Freybjǫrn, raised this stone in memory of Ǫzurr Saxon/Sword, their fellow, a very good *drengr*. He died as the most unvillainous among men. He owned a ship with Arni.

The inscription has long been seen as partially metrical (cf. Naumann 2018, 76). However, it has been debated whether only the segment normalized as *SāR dō ˈmanna / ˈmæst[r] ūnīðingR* is metrical (‒ × | ᴗ × / ╯ | ‒ × ‒) a combination of a Sieversian verse-type A1 with resolution and a D4-type verse; the alliterations are marked with ʼ) or whether the entire last part of the inscription should be viewed as metrical and thus constitute a *helmingr* in *fornyrðislag*[6] (consisting of two alliterating long-lines separated by caesura). Naumann (2018, 76) follows Wulf (2003, 999–1000), who believes that it is only the previous long-line that even makes one think that there could be a verse in the subsequent part of the inscription (normalized as *sāR ātti skip með Arna*). This interpretation would require the reading of a combination of a verse of the D type with an irregular variant of the C type (with only a drop in the first part of the foot) with alliteration on *a* and (unlikely) caesura between *ātti* and *skip* (cf., however, Wulf 2003, 999–1000).

Figure 3. The two dotted m-runes of the Aarhus stone 5, possibly marking the alliteration of the metrical part of the inscription. Photo: Simon Nygaard.

Be that as it may, it can be argued that the metrical part of Aarhus stone 5 (whatever it consists of) fulfils the commemorative function and this in a way that fits well with Naumann's (2018, 19) proposal of a twofold function of the metrical inscriptions on runestones: the high praise of the commemorated, the beautiful ornamentation of the stone, and the use of metrics to create distance from other similar stones. The two dotted m-runes, which have no linguistic function (Imer 2021, 46), may even be said to mark the alliteration in the metrical part of the inscription (Fig. 3), as a way of visually underpinning the poetic structure of this part of the inscription (cf. Jesch 2017, 188–90 on the Rök and Karlevi inscriptions and possible visual markers of their poetic parts). Wulf (2003, 999) argues that many metrical inscriptions represent a tradition of occasional poems that were supposed to be "von Personen verfaßt wurden, deren Hauptgeschäft nicht das Verfassen von Versen war", 'composed by persons whose main occupation was not the composition of verse'. This would explain the possibly irregular metrics employed on, for instance, Aarhus stone 5. However, this notion of untrained composers also

seems to build on an understanding of such runic poems as literary products, and not products of an oral culture (Nygaard 2025). It does seem to possibly reflect a tradition of recording these occasional poems probably composed for the deceased's memorial ceremony, whether it coincided with a possible burial, the raising of the stone, or both (cf. Bianchi 2018). This inscription can thus be said to represent a ritual fixed in text which acts on behalf of Qzurr and praises him as the greatest *uníðingr* among men with each subsequent interaction with the stone's inscription. The inscription's use of the term *nið* (cf. Meulengracht Sørensen 1980) also inscribes it in a specific culture with a fixed code of honour, which is reinforced and assumed to be known to the relevant community whose collective identity the monument as a memory place and ritual fixed in text can be said to maintain. However, this runic poem does not seem to be a sacred text, since nothing transempirical or numinous is claimed to play a role in the inscription.

The Randbøl stone (DR 40)

A few runestones, such as the famous Karlevi stone (Öl 1; which is also partly metrical, cf. Jesch 2017), can be placed in a quite clear funerary context. This is also the case for the Randbøl stone (Fig. 4), which can be found southeast of Billund, Denmark. This stone is very interesting because it is the only Danish example of a runestone that can be placed in a burial context with such a degree of certainty, that is, on top of a presumed contemporary burial mound, where it also still stands *in situ* (DR, pp. 64–65; cf. Øeby Nielsen 2005, 135 on Haddeby stone 3, which was found by the foot of a presumably contemporary gravemound). In addition, the stone stands just 400 metres from the old main thoroughfare through Jylland called Hærvejen, which is also believed to have been used in the Viking Age (Sawyer 2002–5; cf. Øeby Nielsen 2005, 127–28).

The monument was found in December 1874 when a local stonecutter split a large stone that was partially submerged in a sandbank. After breaking it into several pieces, he discovered writing on the side of the stone facing down and reported it to the county authorities (the stone was subsequently preserved and reassembled). Runologist Ludvig Wimmer and archaeologist Conrad Engelhardt investigated the area in May 1875. The sandbank in which the stone had been submerged turned out to be a burial mound. The landowner had initially excavated the grave and found some bones and small stones (Danish *håndsten*) that were probably used to cover the body, and Engelhardt found more bones during his investigations, but no grave goods. The bones were considered to be contemporary with the runestone and to belong to a human approximately 30 years old, of indeterminate sex (DR, pp. 64–65). The archaeological context therefore suggests that we should place this runestone in the category of monumentalized function. The inscription can be transliterated and translated as follows:

tufi: bruti: risþi: stin: þansi: aft: lika: | brutia: þiR: stafaR: munu: | þurkuni: miuk: liki: lifa:

Tófi *bryti* (steward) raised this stone after the wife of the *bryti*. These staves will live very long for Þorgunnr.

Figure 4. The Randbøl stone, c. 900–970. Photo: Roberto Fortuna, Nationalmuseet (CC-BY-SA).

The stone was erected by Tófi *bryti*[7] (a title for someone who manages land, possibly for the king; a steward) for his wife. A reasonable interpretation of the inscription on the Randbøl stone is that the person commemorated on the stone and the person buried in the mound are the same: Þorgunnr. This female name is mentioned toward the end of the inscription in the metrical part. Þorgunnr is commemorated with a half-stanza or *helmingr* in the metre of *ljóðaháttr* (Naumann 2018, 70; Nielsen 1983, 117). The *ljóðaháttr* metre is made up of a long-line consisting of two half-lines separated by caesura and connected by alliteration. The long-line is followed by a full-line with two or three alliterating syllables. The half-stanza can be analysed as a catalectic D4-type verse combined with a D*1-type verse followed by a DA-type full-line with three lifts, the last two of which alliterate (normalized as follows):

Transcription	Metric analysis	Sieversian verse type (Sievers 1893)
'ÞēR stafaR	$-$ | $-$ ×	D4 catalectic
munu 'Þōrgunni	⏑ × | $-$ $-$ ×	D*1 with resolution in first foot
miǫk 'længi 'lifa.	$-$ | $-$ × | $-$ ×	DA full-line with three lifts

The half-stanza refers to the runes on the stone (*stafaR*, staves) and places them and the memory of Þorgunnr in a time frame that goes beyond human recollection (*miǫk længi*, very long). In this way, the inscription and the entire runic monument become part of the cultural memory of the society of which Tófi and Þorgunnr were a part. The monument can therefore be characterized as a memory place that maintains the collective identity of the group of people who were close to the couple. The metrical part of the inscription thus serves to reinforce the basic memorial function of the runestone.

The language in the prose part of the inscription on the Randbøl stone has often been characterized as set apart from a presumed everyday language (DR, p. 65; Naumann 2018, 71). For example, using terms like *liki* (equal, partner) instead of the more normal term for wife, *kunu*, as well as *lika brytia* (wife of the *bryti* or steward) instead of *lika sin* (his partner). The fact that the name of the deceased is not mentioned until the metrical part of the inscription, which is placed at the very end, can also be seen as a deliberate poetic and stylistic device. In this way, the inscription on the Randbøl stone fulfils the basic encomiastic function proposed by Naumann (2018, 19), in this case in the form of both verse and stylized prose.

In addition, the stone can also be placed in a clear burial context, which in itself places it in the proposed category of monumentalized function. Furthermore, the association with a contemporaneous burial gives us a unique ritual occasion for the erection of the stone and probably also for the composition of the runic poem, which can be argued to add further function to the monument as a whole. It would seem plausible that the inscription on the Randbøl stone was recited when the stone was erected. Building on Marco Bianchi's research on the intermediality of the also partially metrical Eggeby runestone (U 69; Bianchi 2018, 170–71), it must be considered a possibility that the inscription is based on a memorial poem or a eulogy that was probably performed at Þorgunnr's funeral. The partially metrical runic inscription in memory of Þorgunnr on the Randbøl stone can thus be argued to constitute a ritual fixed in text that, as described above, acts on behalf of the deceased with each subsequent interaction with the text. If this proposal is accepted, each subsequent

interaction with the Randbøl monument, for instance, a recitation or reading of the runes and thus the runic poem, recreates the initial ritualized recitation, which ultimately recreates part of Þorgunnr's burial ritual (cf. Naumann 2018, 227–28). This interpretation makes the content of the *ljóðaháttr-helmingr* self-fulfilling: the runes will provide a very long life for the memory of Þorgunnr – a life that has so far lasted more than 1000 years. However, while the inscription cannot be interpreted as a sacred text this is the case for the next inscription: the Ribe skull fragment.

Ribe skull fragment (EM85;151B)

The Ribe skull fragment (Fig. 5) is a piece of human skull, inscribed with runes that are metrically formed and which invoke pre-Christian Nordic gods to help against some kind of illness; an artifact that bears signs of possibly having functioned as an amulet. The skull fragment was found during an excavation in Denmark's oldest city, Ribe, in 1973. Ribe was founded in the early 8th century and the skull fragment, which measures 8.2×6 cm and is pierced between runes number 59 and 60, is dated to the year 725–750 on the basis of dendrochronological analysis of objects found in the same context as the skull fragment – that of a contemporary midden (Søvsø 2013). This inscription is therefore placed in the transition between the Iron Age and the beginning of what we call the Viking Age, which is also confirmed by the linguistics of the runic inscription (Stoklund 2004, 38).

　　According to some researchers, the inscription on the Ribe skull fragment is actually not very difficult to read (Marold 2003, 403) – this should, however, be taken with a grain of salt. The previously accepted reading based on Marie Stoklund's research (2004) has recently been challenged by Jackie Nordström (2021), who presents a new reading based on a digital microscope analysis of the skull fragment, resulting in a new interpretation of the inscription. This new interpretation is due to the rereading of two runes: Nordström reads rune 31 in the inscription as an n-rune (ᚾ) rather than i (ᛁ) and rune 41 as a t-rune (ᛏ) rather than a (ᚾ), which means that runes 27–31 are read as the (intentionally ambiguous) word *burins*, i.e. 'is borne' (i.e. with enclitic verb *es*, 3rd person singular, cf. Nordström 2021, 22) or the name 'Burinn' in the genitive, and runes 37–46 are read as the words *þæim dværgi*, 'that dwarf' (in the dative), referring back to the dwarf called Burinn (Nordström 2021, 22). This gives a more logical reading of the inscription than the previous attempts (DaRu, Ribe-hjerneskal), and at the same time it also presents us with the possibility of arguing for a more coherent poetic expression.

　　The inscription on the Ribe skull fragment has previously been interpreted as a stanza in *ljóðaháttr* by Niels Åge Nielsen (1983, 56–57; cf. Naumann 2018, 68). However, this has been criticized by Edith Marold (2012, 69–70), who rejects Nielsen's interpretation on the basis of a Sieversian metrical analysis based on Stoklund's reading of the inscription. However, on the basis of Nordström's new interpretation mentioned above, the inscription can be more convincingly analysed as metrically formed than was previously possible. The inscription can be normalized and translated as follows.
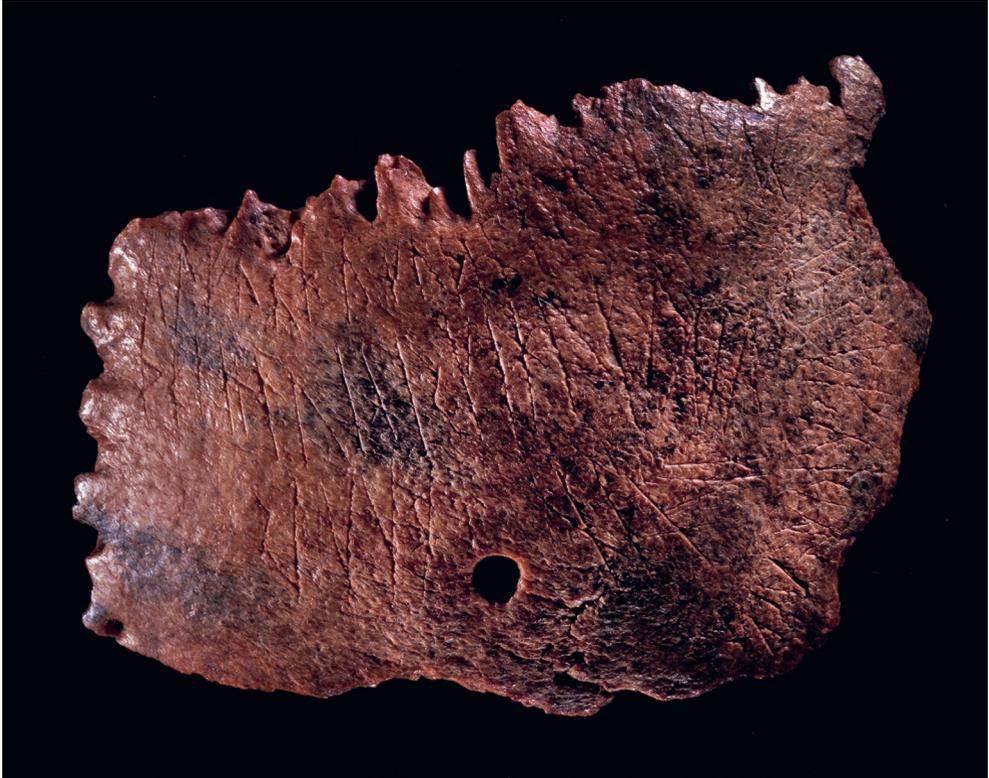
Figure 5. The Ribe skull fragment, ca. 725–750. Photo: Lennart Larsen, Nationalmuseet (CC-BY-SA).

‘Ulf^{u}R auk ‘Óðinn
auk ‘Hō-TýR.   ‘Hiālp burins
viðR þæim ‘dværgi.   Auk ‘dværgyniu.
Bour

Ulfúrr and Óðinn and High-Týr, help is borne against the dwarf [i.e., Burinn] and the dwarfess [hole] Bour [extrametrical].

Transcription	Metric analysis	Sieversian verse type (Sievers 1893)
‘Ulf^{u}R auk ‘Óðinn	⸌ × × | ⸌ ×	A1
auk ‘Hō-TýR.	× ⸌ | ⸍	C1 catalectic
‘Hiālp Burins	⸌ | ⸍ ×	D4 catalectic (enclitic *es*)
viðR þæim ‘dværgi.	× ⸍ | ⸌ ×	C1
Auk ‘dværgyniu.	× ⸌ | ◡ ×	C3 (with resolution)

In this inscription, we would be dealing with a series of metrical units whose internal relationship is not entirely clear. However, the final long-line is only metrically possible following Nordström's reading (cf. Marold 2012, 70). There seem to be five verses or half-lines (see Fig. 6). A half-line of the type A1 with internal alliteration followed by two long-lines (combinations of two catalectic verses of the types C1 and D4 followed by types C1 and C3 with resolution), which would constitute a *fornyrðislag* half-stanza. Alternatively, the first part of the inscription (*Ulfᵘʀ auk Óðinn*) is not intended to be metrical at all, while the rest of the inscription consists of two metrically shaped long-lines as argued above. Regardless, at least part of the inscription on the Ribe skull fragment is metrically formed.

Through a comparison with other runic inscriptions on amulets as well as Old Norse and Old English literature and mythology, Nordström substantiates previous interpretations of the inscription as an apotropaic, magical incantation to prevent illness (Nordström 2021, 17–21; Shell 2023, 130–31). The disease is here personified as the Old Norse otherworldly beings, *dvergar* (dwarves). This means that the inscription on the Ribe skull fragment is quite valuable as a source for pre-Christian Nordic religion, especially because it contains one of the earliest attestations of the name of the god Óðinn (as **uþin**; see Imer and Vasshus 2023, 83 on the earliest Óðinn attestation, as the Proto-Norse genitive form Wōd[a]nas, on the bracteate IK 738 from Vindelev) as well as the names Ulfᵘr (**ulfuʀ**) and Hō-týr (High-Týr/high god; **hutiuʀ**), probably also denoting gods. The identity of these last two deities has been much debated (see Marold 2003), and the possibility of this being an early example of a divine triad also exists (Shell 2023, 131–33). Suffice it to say here that they represent sacral recipients for the contents of the inscription.

This magical incantation, inscribed in runes on a fragment of a human skull, thus invokes pre-Christian Nordic gods to avert or prevent illness in the person who presumably used the artifact as an amulet, which seems indicated by the drilled hole in the skull fragment. This could also partially explain the word burin, 'carried', which can thus be read as a reference to the amulet having been physically carried (away?) (not worn as a necklace, however, since the hole does not show signs of wear from, for instance, a string; Eriksen 2020, 106; Benner Larsen 2004). The hole in the skull is followed by the extrametrical name of the dwarfess, Bour, which is thus separated visually from the rest of the inscription. This unambiguous naming of the otherworldly being causing the illness functions as a means to expel the cause of the disease by finding and identifying it. This sees parallels in the likewise metrical Canterbury charm (DR 419) and the Sigtuna copper amulet (U Fv 1933:134).

Where the metrical inscriptions previously analysed in this chapter have been examples of the commemorative function and the monumentalized function, this poetic runic inscription is an example of the category that I call the crisis function. The magical, metrical inscription on the Ribe skull fragment was probably composed and written to prevent or cure disease. It is therefore possible to interpret this inscription as a ritual fixed in text. Furthermore, the inscription on the Ribe skull fragment can be viewed as a sacred text. As described above, a sacred text is a text that invokes knowledge of something transempirical and numinous (cf. Jørgensen 2023), and facilitates transitivity (cf. Malley 2004), where the text as an artefact creates a relationship between an individual and a religious community. The Ribe skull frag-

ment can be seen as a magical amulet[8] with the potential to create this kind of relationship between individual and community.

The inscription on the Ribe skull fragment invokes beings from the Other World. In this way, insight into and knowledge of something transempirical and numinous is claimed: about both the beings that cause illness and those that cure it – that is, what their roles are in the religious worldview of the user of the amulet. The inscription as a sacred text must be said to confirm this worldview, where Óðinn (or a comparable Germanic version thereof) in particular is linked to curing diseases, as seen in, for instance, the Old English so-called *Nine Herbs Charm* and the Old High German *Second Merseburg Charm* (Schjødt 2020, 1130). It is also worth noting that in stanza 146, lines 4–7 of the eddic poem *Hávamál*, Óðinn tells of a spell that he masters. It is called *hjálp* or 'help' and helps with lawsuits, sorrows and all kinds of pain. Furthermore, the half-stanza 147 claims to be of use to the sons of men, who want to live as *læknar* or 'healers'. The Ribe skull fragments could have been an example of a *hjálp*-spell or a spell suitable for healers. As mentioned, the fact that the Ribe skull fragment has a hole in it has been thought to point to its use as an amulet in the Viking Age (cf. Eriksen 2020, 106), often linked to curing a headache of some sort (surveyed in Stoklund 1996, 2004), in this instance cause by dwarves. Perhaps the hole would then have been drilled to let out or vicariously alleviate the otherworldly cause of pain.

Furthermore, a metonymic and metaphoric relationship might have existed between the object and the illness in which the skull fragment might have both represented the ailment of the afflicted person at a sympathetic, *pars pro toto* level and at a more abstract level (Sørensen 2018). Such a relationship between an amulet and the ailment is it supposed to cure is common in magical thinking due to the idea of *object-based agency* of magical items (Sørensen 2007, 69–70) which here works in tandem with the *action-based agency* of performing the spell as a form of speech act (Sørensen 2007, 68; cf. Tambiah 1973) and possibly also the *agent-based agency* of the runecarver-cum-healer (Sørensen 2007, 65–67) although this can be only indirectly assumed. Furthermore, the use of metrics as well as the Svarabhakti vowel and the use of older forms of runes in this inscription can be said to fulfil some of the linguistic functions that are typically seen in magical utterances (Sørensen 2007, 87–88): it can be argued that the metre provides a special form of *prosody* when performing the utterance, while the older runes and the Svarabhakti vowel could represent a form of *archaic language* both of which are believed to enhance the magic efficacy of the spell for bearers of a particular culture. This particular effect seems to be specific to the metric inscriptions with magical contents. The skull fragment then seems to have been thrown on the midden in the context of which it was unearthed soon after having been made. This act would also be in line with the concealment of magical runic inscriptions on, for instance, medieval lead amulets (Imer 2021, 59) or magical papyri from, for instance the ancient Greek world. It can thus be argued that such an artefactual use of this sacred text would have created the relationship between the wearer and her religious community covered by the term transitivity. The Ribe skull fragment may thus very well be a first-hand source for a lived, religious ritual from the early Viking Age, which is formed as a crisis-preventing, metrical runic inscription carved on a fragment of human skull – a material that in itself creates a distance from other inscriptions.

Conclusion

In this brief chapter, I have presented three examples of analyses based on a contextual and ritual approach to runic poetry from Viking-Age Denmark with a functional aim, focusing primarily on the objects bearing inscriptions, secondarily on the role of metrics in the specific inscriptions. The examples have been representative of the three categories of function: Aarhus stone 5 as an example of the *commemorative function*, the Randbøl stone as an example of *monumentalized function*, and the Ribe skull fragment as an example of the *crisis function*. The two first inscriptions could be interpreted as *rituals fixed in text*, while the last inscription could also be seen as a *sacred text* intended for artefactual use. All inscriptions also potentially had a role as community-maintaining memory sites and objects. While it seems plausible that all runestones to some degree may be rituals fixed in text reiterating the ritual of raising the stone, the metrical inscriptions emphasize this intermedial connection between initial ritual act – be it runestone-raising or poetic performance – and linguistic, textual product. For metrical inscriptions with magical contents and effects, the metricity seems to have intriguing functions underpinning the perceived efficacy of the magical spell.

It has only been possible to present suggestions of the contextual model's usability here. Many more examples of metrical inscriptions will have to be analysed in future publications, where non-metrical inscriptions will also be included, to check whether or not the functional interpretation can be attributed to the metrics of the specific inscriptions.

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Acknowledgements

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Notes

1   Danish metrical Viking-Age inscriptions are defined as those known from Bornholm, Jylland, Lolland, Sjælland, Skåne, and Schleswig as well as individual inscriptions from, for example, Öland and England.

2   In the preparation of this corpus, the project will primarily use the inscriptions compiled by Naumann (2018), in *Danmarks Runeindskrifter* (DR, pp. 983–86) as well as the forthcoming publication *Runic Poetry* (SkP), supplemented by other relevant research.

3   The signa used in this chapter refer to the numbering in the national runic corpus editions, *Danmarks runeindskrifter* (DR) for Denmark and *Sveriges runinskrifter* (SRI) for Sweden.

4   In the hermeneutic use of sacred texts, which is the second category of use Schleicher presents, the focus is solely on understanding the meaning of the text and its content. This primarily takes place through reading, with the aim of assessing whether one accepts the content as part of one's worldview.

5   See Zimmermann (2021) where some significant problems with Naumann's selection of inscriptions and the analyses of the selection are rightly pointed out.

6   Nielsen (1983, 150), by contrast, sees the metre in the metrical part of the inscription as *ljóðaháttr*. However, Wulf (2003, 199–1000) rejects this with reference to the fact that there clearly seems to be a caesura after **skib**.

7   See Imer, Kitzler Åhfeldt, and Zedig (2023) for considerations of who the carver of this inscription was as well as the stone's relationship to a group of contemporary runestones from the same area, the so called Ravnunge-Tue group.

8   Cf. Scott Shell (2023, 12–38), who interprets the Ribe skull fragment as a magic object using a Peircean semiotic framework. Shell works from older interpretations of the inscription and thus arrives as at different interpretation from the one proposed here, in which the dwarf is fixated to then be conquered through using the hole as a sort of telescopic sight – a practice with parallels in (quite late) Swedish folklore (between 1690–1940).

Slavic Paganism in Viking-Age Denmark: Neglected Evidence and New Archaeological Perspectives

Leszek Gardeła

Introduction

Even though the corpus of textual sources pertaining to the sphere of pre-Christian beliefs in Viking-Age Northern Europe is limited and unlikely to expand in the foreseeable future (for overviews, see Lindow 2001; Orchard 2002; Simek 2006), archaeological research each year nuances our perception of pagan mentalities by adding new pieces to the ever-growing corpus of material evidence. In Denmark, these advancements are facilitated not only by ongoing excavation campaigns in well-known Viking Age towns, settlements and ringforts (which often reveal artefacts and/or structures associated with the sphere of belief) but also by commendable efforts of amateur metal detectorists who regularly survey various other sites (on metal detecting in Denmark and the legislation pertaining to this practice, see Dobat 2016; Petersen 2016). Owing to the detectorists' dedication and willingness to collaborate closely with professional archaeologists, the newly-discovered artefacts swiftly become accessible to the international academic community for examination and discussion.[1]

Over the last decade, numerous projects have centred on the 'material culture of pre-Christian belief' in Viking-Age Scandinavia. Particularly in Denmark, attention has been directed towards artefacts made of metal (iron, silver, copper alloy and gold) which – due to their overall form and iconographic features – are thought to have played significant roles in ritual and religious practices. Drawing on interdisciplinary theories and methods, it has become possible to revise and in many regards broaden previous interpretations concerning the meaning-content of a whole range of 'special' artefacts, including miniature representations of weapons (Gardeła and Odebäck 2018; Gardeła 2021; 2022c; 2023b; in press-a), anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines (Gardeła 2020b; Borake 2021; Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022), small-scale wheels (Petersen 2023), gaming boards/looms (Gardeła 2022d), chairs/thrones (Jessen and Ramsøe Majland 2021; Jessen 2023), whetstones (Jessen and Taube 2021) and weathervanes (Vlasatý 2023), some of which may have possessed 'amuletic' properties. Recently, researchers have also returned to the topic of staffs that may have been associated with the practice of Norse magic known as *seiðr* (Gardeła 2023a; Pentz 2023; for previous studies pertaining to staffs, see Price 2002; 2019; Heide 2006; Gardeła 2016a). Considerable attention has likewise been dedicated to broadening existing ideas concerning the well-known burials of presumed ritual specialists from the cemeteries at Fyrkat in Jylland (Pentz 2023; Mannering and Rimstad 2023; Roesdahl 2023; Gardeła in press-b) as well as Gerdrup and Trekroner-Grydehøj on Sjælland (Kastholm 2016; Ulriksen 2018; Kastholm and Ulriksen 2023).

After over two decades of intensive scholarly investigations into diverse expressions of Norse paganism, which culminated in the publication of numerous articles and edited collections (e.g. Andrén, Jennbert and Raudvere 2006; Raudvere and Schjødt 2012; Schjødt, Lindow and Andrén 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2020d; Gardeła, Bønding and Pentz 2023b and references therein), the time is now ripe to seriously consider if professional and amateur archaeological endeavours in Denmark can also contribute to a more nuanced understanding of pre-Christian mentalities of non-Norse groups that temporarily or permanently inhabited Scandinavia – namely the Western and Eastern Slavs. The goal of the present paper, therefore, is to pave the way for this untapped strand of research, and to investigate selected signals of Slavic pre-Christian belief in Viking Age Denmark.

Slavic-Scandinavian interactions: when and why?

It only takes a brief glimpse at the map of medieval Europe to realise that the territories permanently inhabited by Slavic people – especially those that are now part of northern Germany (i.e. Mecklenburg-Vorpommern) and Poland (i.e. Pomerania/Pomorze and Greater Poland/Wielkopolska) – lay remarkably close to Scandinavia. In the Viking Age, travel between Slavic and Scandinavian areas would have been possible either by land or by sea, and the journey could take from a day to several weeks depending on the point of departure and final destination. Archaeological as well as textual sources clearly imply that the Baltic Sea was not perceived as a border between worlds and cultures, but rather as a convenient waterway facilitating all kinds of interactions.

Today, the Slavs constitute the largest ethno-linguistic group in Europe. Due to their extensive geographical dispersion and differences in language, culture and religion, they are conventionally divided into three groups: eastern, western and southern. In the present study, a spotlight will be placed on the Western Slavs who in the Viking Age inhabited the lands extending roughly from the river Recknitz (Germany) in the west to the river Vistula (Poland) in the east and to the Sudetes and Carpathian mountains in the south (e.g. Kostrzewski 1962; Leciejewicz 1989; Brather 2008).

The Western Slavs had first settled the southern coasts of the Baltic as early as the seventh century AD, and in the centuries that followed erected impressive strongholds and established well-connected trade centres, for instance in places like Starigard Oldenburg and Reric/Gross Stromkendorf in modern-day Germany, as well as Wolin in modern-day Poland (Stanisławski and Filipowiak 2013; 2014; Rębkowski 2019a; 2019b). Archaeological excavations in Poland, Germany, the Czech Republic and Slovakia clearly demonstrate that the Western Slavs had versatile subsistence strategies and engaged in animal husbandry, farming and different kinds of crafts. They were particularly skilled in the manufacture of clay pottery, which in the Viking Age became one of their trademarks or 'material markers' (e.g. Buko 1990; Roslund 2007; Janowski, Dworaczyk and Gruszka 2024), but their craftspeople also had the capacity to produce high-quality objects out of organic material (wood, amber, antler, bone) and metal. Due to their broad dispersion, the Western Slavs naturally formed different sub-groups or 'tribes', each of which may have had slightly different material culture and customs. It is likely

that their dialects also differed, although not to the extent that communication between the groups would be hindered.

The geographical proximity to Scandinavian-settled territories, as well as roughly similar lifestyles that the Slavs and Scandinavians shared, made it possible for these two ethnic groups to establish and maintain cross-cultural contact. Surviving textual and archaeological sources demonstrate that in the Viking Age (and especially in its later part, i.e. the tenth and eleventh centuries) these interactions took myriad forms, ranging from peaceful trade relations and political alliances to various acts of hostility and violence (e.g. Morawiec 2001; 2009b; 2009c; 2019b; Naum 2008; Jensen 2022; Jagodziński 2023; Gardeła 2025).

The presence and presumably permanent settlement of Western Slavs in Denmark in the period between the tenth and twelfth centuries is clearly visible in toponymic evidence, especially in place names with the prefix *Vind-* (referring to the Wends, a name attributed to the Slavs) or with the suffix *-itse* (e.g. Østergaard 2007; Jensen 2022). Such locations can be spotted in southern Denmark on the islands of Falster, Lolland and Møn (e.g. Binnitse, Korselitse, Kuditse, Tillitse, Vindeby, Vindebæk).

In the context of this discussion, of particular importance is also the fact that both Harald Bluetooth and his son, Sveinn Forkbeard, were married to women of Slavic origin, implying close intercultural ties and mutual political interests between the different ethnic groups. Harald's Slavic wife was named Tófa/Tova, and her relationship with the Danish ruler is commemorated on a runestone found at Sønder Vissing in Jylland (Dobat 2009, 80, 94; Strzelczyk 2017, 172; Morawiec 2019a, 59–60; Imer 2016, 92–93, 144, 169, 179, 270, 319; Gardeła 2022a, 247–48). The inscription on the stone reads 'Tófa, Mistivir's daughter, wife of Harald the Good, Gormr's son, had the monument made in memory of her mother'. Although little is known about Tófa's biography, her father – Mistivir (also rendered as Mistivoi in Danish and Mściwoj in Polish) – was a prominent Western Slavic (Obodrite) chieftain who engaged in armed conflicts against the Ottonians. The marriage between his daughter and Harald may have been part of an intelligent political strategy, and a way to form and secure an alliance against common enemies.

Extant written sources are equally vague when it comes to Sveinn Forkbeard's Slavic wife – even her actual name remains a mystery and is variously rendered in medieval manuscripts (e.g. Prinke 2004; Morawiec 2009a). What can be established with a fair degree of confidence, however, is that this woman came from the Piast State, a geo-political entity established by Duke Mieszko I in the late tenth century that continued to grow in both size and prominence during the reign of his son, Bolesław the Brave (Labuda 2002; Zakrzewski 2006; Urbańczyk 2012; 2017). These cross-cultural marriages show evocatively that the Danish Viking Age elites maintained close relations with the Slavic world. They also demonstrate that Harald and his son sought allies among different Western Slavic groups (Obodrites and Piasts) that had conflicting political agendas that often could only be solved by the sword rather than through peaceful diplomacy. All these nuances of Slavic-Scandinavian political relations, echoes of which survive in medieval textual sources, shall not be pursued any further in the present paper (for more details, see Roslund 2007; Naum 2008; Morawiec 2009c; Gardeła 2022a; 2022e; 2025). Instead, we shall investigate the various archaeological traces of cross-cultural contact that lay hidden in the Danish soil.

The archaeology of the Western Slavs in Denmark

Ever since the early days of professional archaeological research in Denmark, excavators of Viking Age sites would encounter various items of Slavic provenance all across the country. Among these finds were fragments of clay pottery (Żak 1961; Brorsson and Stanisławski 1999; Roslund 2007; Naum 2008), complete or cut pieces of silver jewellery (e.g. Skovmand 1942), as well as weapons and elements of horse riding equipment (e.g. Engelhardt 1881, 144; Brøndsted 1936, 102–4). While some of these objects were immediately recognized as stemming directly from foreign (non-Scandinavian) milieus, others tended to be regarded as 'hybrid artefacts' produced locally (i.e. in Northern Europe) but combining formal and/or stylistic traits characteristic of several different cultural groups.

The most straightforward to identify were pottery shards, mainly because their features were so iconic and characteristic of the Slavic world, but also due to the fact that Viking Age Scandinavians rarely manufactured clay vessels themselves. Certain types of silver items were also relatively easy to classify as stemming from the Slavic areas. The most evocative among them were so-called temple rings (Ger. *Schläfenringe*, Pol. *kabłączki skroniowe*) which served as identifying female adornments, akin to what we would today regard as elements of the 'national costume'. Slavic women would wear temple rings attached to their headbands or veils, and in this way manifest their social status and distinct identity (on temple rings generally, see Musianowicz 1948–1949; Bukowski 1960; Kóčka-Krenz 1993; on Slavic temple rings in Scandinavia, see Żak 1968; Naum 2008; Gardeła in press-b).

As regards other types of items discovered in the Danish soil, their identification as goods stemming from Slavic territories was not immediately straightforward to past researchers. A case in point is the elaborate riding gear (stirrups and bridle) found in 1851 in a richly furnished grave at Velds in Jylland (Engelhardt 1881, 144; Brøndsted 1936, 102–4; Pedersen 2014a, 115; 2014b, 92, Plate 34; see also further below). For many years this equipment was thought to carry zoomorphic and floral ornaments associated with the Anglo-Saxon world, whereas in actuality – as new research has shown (Gardeła 2022a, 256–57; 2024b; in press-c) – their provenance should rather be sought in the Western Slavic area, most likely in the province of Greater Poland (Ger. *Grosspolen*, Pol. *Wielkopolska*).

The Second World War (1939–1945) and the isolation of Polish scholarship during the communist period (1952–1989), as well as the persistent linguistic barrier, led to a marked lack of communication and hampered the exchange of knowledge between Northern and Western European specialists in Scandinavian archaeology and Central-Eastern European researchers (Gardeła 2019; 2025). As a consequence of these unfortunate circumstances, Danish and Polish academics often adhered to outdated academic paradigms and had somewhat 'impressionistic' or simply misleading ideas of the Viking Age material culture of the respective areas. After the political transformations of the late 1980s and 1990s, as well as Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004, the former state of affairs is now a thing of the past. Today, interest in Slavic-Scandinavian interactions is growing at a rapid rate, both among professional scholars and amateur aficionados of history and archaeology (for overviews, see Gardeła 2016b; 2020c; 2025; Karpińska 2019). It is noteworthy that, as a response to these new trends, in 2022–2023 two exhibitions focused on Scandinavia's interac-

tions with Central-Eastern Europe were organized in Aarhus and Vejle (Asingh and Jensen 2022; Ravn and Lindblom 2022). These valuable outreach initiatives highlighted a whole range of aspects of cross-cultural interactions, with a strong focus on similarities between Scandinavian and Slavic ways of life but also with the intention to present subtle differences in the material culture of these peoples. As part of these exhibitions, some attention was also dedicated to Slavic artefacts found in Scandinavia that display links with the sphere of pagan belief (e.g. zoomorphic spurs and miniature quadrupeds – Gardeła 2022e), but overall this theme still remains rather understudied. In the following, we shall therefore explore the relevant material more closely.

Signals of Slavic pagan beliefs in Viking-Age Denmark

Unlike the Scandinavians of the Viking Age, the Western Slavs lacked a developed writing system akin to the runic script. It also took considerable time for Slavic chroniclers and writers to begin composing texts in their vernacular languages. Consequently, pre-Christian Slavic heroic tales and mythical knowledge were transmitted orally from one generation to the next, or through visual art. As a result, the original content of many of these stories is lost to us forever. Moreover, the narratives that have survived in medieval manuscripts and modern folklore are often heavily distorted and cannot be accepted as accurate representations. Therefore, scholarly investigations into Slavic pre-Christian beliefs present numerous challenges.

In dealing with written sources that actually stem from the time when the Slavs still adhered to their traditional beliefs (i.e. the 10th–12th centuries AD), one has to remain cautious and keep in mind that almost all of them were put to parchment by non-native writers who were either guided by somewhat hostile agendas towards the Slavs and/or failed to comprehend what exactly they were witnessing (e.g. Álvarez-Pedrosa 2021; Rosik 2023). In trying to gain more insight into the Slavic pre-Christian world of thought, today's researchers often resort to post-medieval material, for instance folksongs, tales and legends. However, using chronologically removed nineteenth- and twentieth century sources to investigate medieval mentalities requires great caution and rigor; while some pre-Christian motifs may have survived in folklore for centuries, others can be profusely distorted as a result of all kinds of socio-political influences.

Despite the various source-critical and methodological difficulties surrounding studies on Slavic paganism, most specialists today are in agreement that the Western Slavs had elaborate ideas concerning the cosmos and its various supernatural inhabitants (for overviews of Slavic pre-Christian beliefs, see Szyjewski 2003; Gieysztor 2006; Gardeła 2017; Kajkowski 2017; 2019; Szczepanik 2018; 2020). Even though Slavic worldviews and myths cannot be reconstructed with the same level of detail as those of the Norse people, it is still possible to tease out certain core ideas from the available material.

Using a variety of textual and archaeological sources, we can surmise that the Western Slavs worshipped a number of different deities who – among other things – were responsible for the spheres of fertility, prosperity and war. According to several medieval chroniclers, one characteristic feature of these gods' figural representations in Slavic temples was their multi-headedness (Rosik 1995; 2004). In his *Gesta Danorum*, Saxo Grammaticus provides a

detailed account of a temple in Arkona that housed a wooden statue of a deity referred to as Sventovit (in Polish Świętowit):

> Medium urbis planicies habebat, in qua delubrum materia ligneum opere elegantissimum uisebatur, non solum magnificentia cultus, sed etiam simulacri in eo collocati numine reuerendum. Exterior edis ambitus accurato celamine renitebat, rudi atque impolito picture artificio uarias rerum formas complectens. Vnicum in eo ostium intraturis patebat. Ipsum uero fanum duplex septorum ordo claudebat. E quibus exterior parietibus contextus puniceo culmine tegebatur. Interior uero quatuor subnixus postibus parietum loco pensilibus auleis nitebat, nec quicquam cum exteriore preter tectum et pauca laquearia communicabat.
>
> Ingens in ede simulacrum omnem humani corporis habitum granditate transcendens quatuor capitibus totidemque ceruicibus mirandum perstabat, e quibus duo pectus totidemque tergum respicere uidebantur.

> In the middle of the city was a level space, on which could be seen a wooden temple of fine craftsmanship, inspiring reverence not only for the splendour of its decoration, but also because of the religious authority attaching to the idol set up there. Elaborate carvings glinted over the whole exterior circuit of the building, varied figures and shapes wrought with crude, primitive artistry. A single door gave admittance. The temple itself was enclosed by two surrounding screens, one inside the other; the outer one was solid and topped with a red roof, while the inner consisted, not of walls, but of bright curtains, hanging between four pillars, and was only linked with the outer structure by the roof and a few ceiling panels.
>
> Within the shrine stood a huge effigy, in size surpassing the height of any human figure, and it was amazing to look upon it in that it possessed four heads and necks, two of which looked over its chest, two over its back.

> Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, Book XIV, 39.2–39.3. Text and translation after Friis-Jensen and Fisher 2015, 1274–77.

The existence of multi-headed figural representations of (presumably) supernatural beings is well attested in Slavic archaeology. The key example is the famous limestone idol discovered in the nineteenth century in the river Zbrucz in Ukraine (for various views on this iconic find, see Hadaczek 1904; Leńczyk 1964; Łapiński 1984; Komar and Chamajko 2013; Łuczyński 2015; 2019; Cieślik 2016). The idol is four-sided, stands over 2 m tall and in the top part has four heads or faces. Its elaborate iconographic programme, depicting several anthropomorphic beings and a horse, is divided into three vertical tiers, each of which arguably represents a different level of the tripartite Slavic cosmos (Fig. 1).

In the latter half of the twentieth century, another four-faced artefact was unearthed in Wolin, Poland (Filipowiak 1993, 29–34). However, this item is crafted from wood and is small enough to be easily carried in a pouch (Fig. 2d). It is possible that this particular specimen served as a portable effigy of a Slavic deity, in contrast to the Zbrucz statue, which likely originally stood at a sacred site.
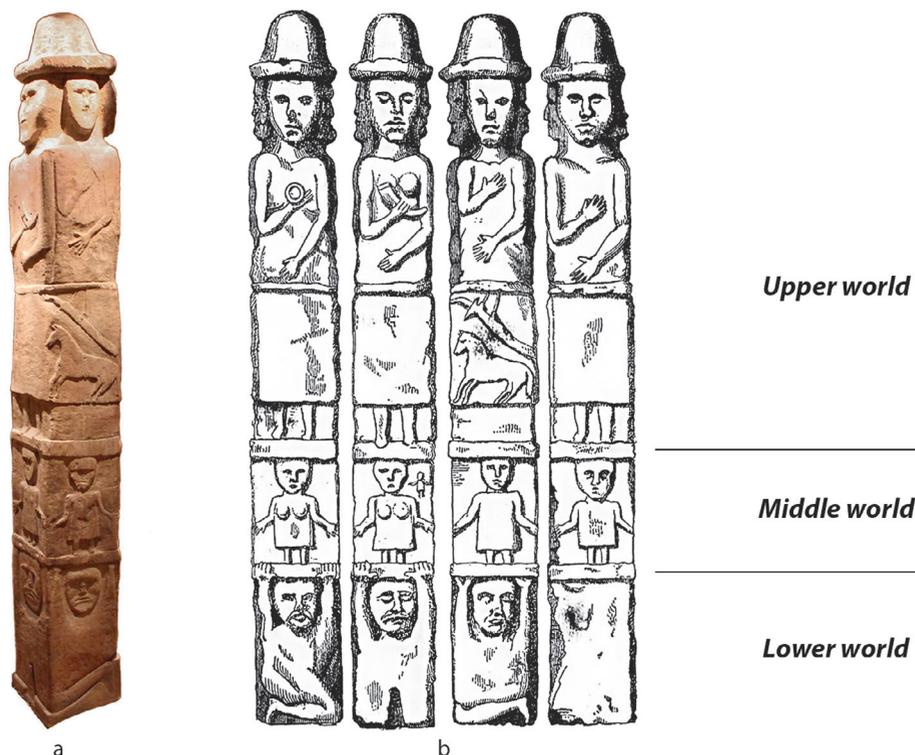
Figure 1. Stone statue known as Svantevit from Zbrucz (Polish *Światowid ze Zbrucza*). Photo by Leszek Gardeła, drawing after Leńczyk 1964. Image design by Leszek Gardeła.

Apart from these well-known multi-headed representations of presumed Slavic gods, over the last few decades archaeological excavations in Poland and Germany have revealed examples of other anthropomorphic images probably associated with the sphere of Slavic pre-Christian belief. Either they are in the form of small standalone three-dimensional figurines or they constitute part of more elaborate artefacts, especially knife sheath fittings. Some of the most spectacular specimens of the latter kind are known from Oldenburg in Germany (Gabriel 2000) as well as Brześć Kujawski (Kaszewscy 1971) and Ostrów Lednicki in Poland (Szczepanik 2010; 2017; Gardeła 2024a with references therein).

Surviving medieval and post-medieval accounts also emphasize the importance of different species of animals, especially cattle, birds, boars, horses and snakes (Kajkowski 2012; 2015; 2016; Posselt and Szczepanik 2017; Gardeła and Kajkowski 2021; Gardeła 2024a; 2024b). Virtually all around the Slavic world these animals were attributed special roles and could, for instance, serve as divine messengers, carriers of souls (*psychopompoi*) and/or zoomorphic 'avatars' of the gods.

The prominence of animals is also clearly visible in Slavic material culture, especially from the period spanning the tenth and eleventh centuries, i.e. a turbulent time of state formation and religious conversion. Over the course of the last decade, archaeological excavations as

well as in-depth re-evaluations of archival material in Poland have contributed significantly to our understanding of the so-called 'animal style' in Western Slavic art (Gardeła 2018; Gardeła, Kajkowski and Ratajczyk 2019; Gardeła and Kajkowski 2021; 2023; Gardeła 2024a; 2024b; in press-c; in press-d; see also the seminal work of Żak 1959). As in the case of textual sources, it appears that the animals that were most eagerly represented on symbolically-charged objects were snakes, cattle, horses and birds. In the Western Slavic archaeological material from Poland, these animals are seen on elaborately designed metal artefacts such as zoomorphic spurs, knife sheath fittings, stirrups, elements of horse bridles, and various pieces of jewellery. Occasionally, they also appear on objects made of clay, wood, bone and antler (Kajkowski 2020). The fact that the animal style is most frequently seen on metal goods strongly implies that this was a style conceived and favoured by the elite. It is not unlikely that certain types of objects fashioned in the animal style, such as the aforementioned zoomorphic spurs, were designed and/or used by people closely associated with the first Piast rulers, namely duke Mieszko I (b. 922–945, d. 992) and his son Bolesław the Brave (b. 967, d. 1025).

Regrettably, the limitations of space prevent a comprehensive exploration of all the outlined themes. Nonetheless, current and emerging research on the animal style holds promising potential to uncover tangible evidence of Western Slavs and Western Slavic paganism during the Viking Age in Denmark. With that in mind, let us now turn our focus to the relevant archaeological discoveries.

Divine images

Currently, only one medieval artefact discovered in Denmark can be – albeit with some caution – regarded as a representation of a Slavic deity. The object in question was found in 1930 in the course of archaeological excavations in the town of Svendborg (Gerritsgade 30) located on the southern coast of the island of Fyn. It takes the form of a small wooden 'pin', approximately 13 cm long, the upper part of which has carved representations of four faces covered with a tall 'phallic-shaped' hat (Jansen 1989; 1990). The eyes are prominent and slightly slanted, the noses are long and straight, and the chins are pointy (Fig. 2a). The overall design of this object brings to mind the aforementioned finds from Zbrucz and Wolin. The hat on the Svendborg specimen is strikingly reminiscent of the one worn by the Zbrucz idol, whereas the features of the faces are rendered in a similarly schematic manner to those of the Wolin figurine. In the core publications of the Svendborg find by Henrik Jansen (1989; 1990), it was argued that it most likely represents the same pre-Christian deity that Saxo Grammaticus referred to as Sventovit/Svantevit. Ever since, this remarkable item has been referred to as

➤ **Figure 2.** Selection of Slavic multi-faced figurines: **a** – figurine known as Svantevit from Svendborg, Denmark. Photos courtesy of Svendborg Museum; **b** – figurine from Väsby, Sweden. After Helmbrecht 2011, 222; **c** – figurine from Tunby, Sweden. After Helmbrecht 2011, 222; **d** – figurine known as Svantevit from Wolin, Poland (Polish *Światowid woliński*). Photos by Leszek Gardeła. Image design by Leszek Gardeła.

a b c

d
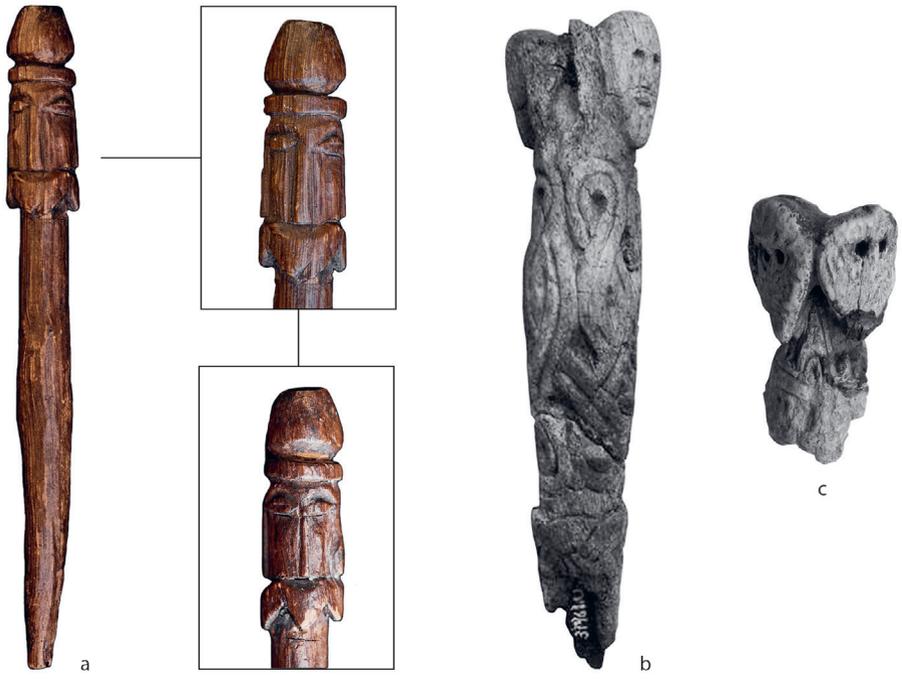
0   3cm

'Svantevit from Svendborg'. The object probably stems from the twelfth or even the thirteenth century, which is relatively late compared to analogous finds from the Slavic world that are conventionally dated to the tenth and eleventh centuries. It has therefore been argued that it belonged to a Slav who – regardless of their religious conversion – still held strong to their traditional beliefs. The presence and settlement of Slavic people in relatively close proximity to Svendborg is well-attested in place names, such as for instance Vindeby on Taasinge and Langeland, both of which have the characteristic *Vind-* prefix referring to the Vends (Slavs).

Although currently the 'Svendborg Svantevit' is the only presumably Slavic multi-faced/headed figurine found in Denmark, at least two other similar specimens are known from Sweden (Fig. 2b, c). The first one comes from Tunby in Västmanland and the second from Väsby in Uppland (Lamm 1987, 228–29; Helmbrecht 2011, 222; Gardeła 2014, 94–98). Both items are fragmentarily preserved (which makes it challenging to understand their original function), but based on their overall design, it is highly probable that they were created and/or used by people of Slavic provenance. In thinking about all of these four figurines with multiple heads (i.e. Svendborg, Tunby, Väsby, Wolin), it is noteworthy that they are small enough to fit into a pouch or bag, and that they could be easily carried around in a similar way to some of the well-known three-dimensional Scandinavian-style figurines, for instance 'Freyr' from Rällinge and 'Þórr' from Eyrarland (Perkins 2001; see also Price 2006). Regrettably, the lower ends of the Tunby and Väsby specimens are broken off, which complicates their interpretation, but it seems that the end of the Väsby find may have been pointed, allowing the user to set it up vertically, perhaps so that it could serve as part of a small portable altar. The same could be done with the Svendborg figurine which, as noted above, is preserved complete and has a tapered end. The lower end of the Wolin find, on the other hand, is rounded and thus the figurine cannot stand on its own unsupported – its purpose, as well as the activities people used it for may thus have been somewhat different.

Mythic animals

Although anthropomorphic representations of presumed Slavic deities are rarely encountered in the archaeological record in Denmark, there is a growing corpus of minuscule copper alloy animal-shaped figurines that are evidently linked to the sphere of Slavic pre-Christian belief. The most numerous among them are three-dimensional miniature quadrupeds, conventionally – albeit not always correctly – regarded as horses (Fig. 3a–f).

➤ **Figure 3.** Miniature quadruped figurines from Denmark and Poland: **a** – Råbylille, Møn, Denmark. Photo courtesy of Jens Olsen / Museum Sydøstdanmark; **b** – Bornholm, Denmark; **c** – Unspecified location, Denmark. Photo courtesy of Nationalmuseet; **d** – Bornholm, Denmark. Photo by Leszek Gardeła; **e** – Unspecified location, Denmark. Photo from DIME (ID: 185589); **f** – Billegravsgaard, Bornholm, Denmark. Photo courtesy of Nationalmuseet; **g** – Giecz, Poland. Photo courtesy of Agnieszka Łukaszyk; **h** – Wolin, Poland. Photo courtesy of Agnieszka Łukaszyk; **i** – Poznań, Poland. Photo courtesy of Agnieszka Łukaszyk. Image design by Leszek Gardeła.

At least three copper alloy miniature quadrupeds are known from Bornholm (Skov 2011), one has been found in Roskilde on Sjælland (Andersen 2001, 136–38), two in Tamdrup in Jylland and one in Råbylille on Møn (Gardeła 2022b). Virtually all of them are isolated finds, which makes it challenging to determine their purpose; it remains unclear whether they were lost, discarded or intentionally deposited in the ground, perhaps as part of some special ritual activity. As a matter of fact, the same problem pertains to analogous finds from Poland and Germany – they are all isolated finds, and cannot be easily associated with any particular architectural features, artefact clusters or the like (Łukaszyk 2012; Szczepanik 2019a; 2019b) (Fig. 3g–i).

As regards their morpho-metric aspects, all of the above-mentioned specimens from Denmark are also very similar to the Polish and German finds of miniature quadrupeds, suggesting that they may all have been made in the same workshop(s) or at least according to the same principles.

Over the many years of research on miniature copper alloy quadrupeds, scholars have argued that they may have been perceived by the Western Slavs as representations of horses associated with pre-Christian deities (Łukaszyk 2012; Szczepanik 2019a; 2019b). This interpretation rests upon several medieval written accounts that mention horses kept in Slavic pagan temples and used in elaborate divination rituals (e.g. Matusiak 1911; Słupecki 2008). The most vivid descriptions of these practices involving horses are preserved in the work of Saxo (Book XIV, 39.3) as well as in Herbord's chronicle (Book II, 33).

While the idea that the miniature quadrupeds might represent horses has been widely accepted in academia (e.g. Łukaszyk 2012; Szczepanik 2019a; 2019b), one has to bear in mind that there is actually considerable variation in the find corpus: some of the quadrupeds have saddles, others possess prominent 'horns' (which, alternatively, can be perceived as 'halos' or 'wreaths'), and the animals can have their heads facing straight or turned towards the back. Furthermore, several specimens have their tails raised upwards, as if indicating some kind of arousal or at least implying that the designers of these objects wanted to create an impression of the animals being in motion.

As the latest research by the present author has shown (Gardeła 2022b), there are strong reasons to believe that actually not all of the miniature quadrupeds were meant to represent horses *per se*. This is implied by the fact that some of them possess physiognomic features of other animals – especially the aforementioned 'horns' and perhaps even wings – which add a sense of hybridity to them. Remarkably, a creature that combines all these traits is clearly depicted on a metal plaque that forms the centrepiece of a wooden plate discovered in an eleventh-century chamber grave from the cemetery at Kałdus in Poland (Bojarski, Chudziak, Drozd, Koperkiewicz, Kozłowski and Stawska 2010, 230) (Fig. 4). The similarities between this presumably mythical beast and some of the miniature metal quadrupeds from Germany,

➤ **Figure 4.** Wooden plate from Kałdus, Poland with metal plaques depicting animals. Drawings after Bojarski, Chudziak, Drozd, Koperkiewicz, Kozłowski and Stawska 2010, 230, photos courtesy of Andrzej Janowski. Image design by Leszek Gardeła.
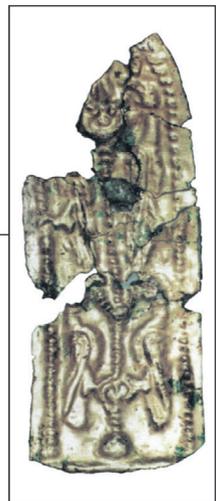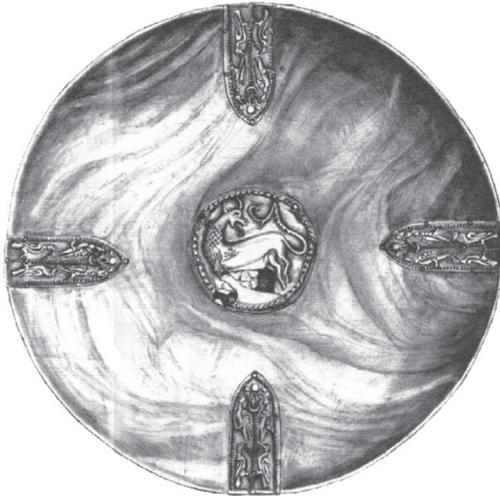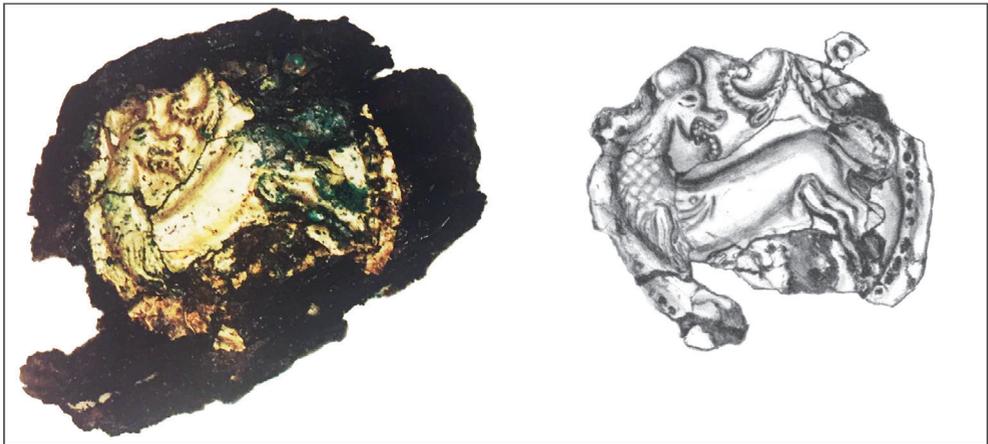
0 ⊢———————⊣ 8cm

Poland and Denmark are too striking to consider them as a matter of pure coincidence. Although in the absence of written sources and folkloristic material the name and role of this hybrid beast cannot be determined, we can speculate that it held special importance for the pagan Western Slavs. In combining the features of horses, bulls/cows, birds, it may have been regarded as a particularly powerful and potent supernatural being, perhaps even serving as an emblem of an elite group.

Returning to the miniature quadrupeds from Denmark, it seems highly probable that they were owned and used by Slavic people who settled in or at least travelled through Scandinavia. Their find locations (especially in Roskilde and Møn) support this view, since these places have provided other archaeological or toponymic evidence of Slavic presence. Regardless of whether we choose to see the quadrupeds as horses or supernatural beasts, there is little doubt that they played *some* role in the pre-Christian sphere of belief and ritual practice – they were certainly *not* children's toys, and they probably did not possess any particular utilitarian function. Instead, there are reasons to believe that the Western Slavic figurines were 'animated' in some way, for instance in the course of private ritual acts; some of them carry traces of intentional damage in the form of deep cuts (see, for instance, the front legs of the find from Møn), suggesting that people deliberately did *something* to them, presumably to evoke a desired effect in accordance with the principles of what is known as 'sympathetic magic'. It is worth pointing out that these figurines' size and overall appearance are markedly different from miniature horses from the high Middle Ages which are frequently encountered in Northern Europe, and which most likely served as weights – these two different categories of finds should not be confused.

Apart from the three-dimensional stand-alone quadruped figurines, recent archaeological research in Denmark has also led to a remarkable discovery of a Slavic *kaptorga* with realistic three-dimensional representations of animals (Kastholm, Nielsen and Jensen 2017; Jensen 2023). The term *kaptorga* is used in Slavic archaeology to refer to small rectangular or trapezoid pendants usually made of silver (e.g. Kóčka-Krenz 1993, 84–87; Zawol 2015; 2018). One characteristic feature of *kaptorgas* is that some of them can be (re)opened and serve the role of containers. The recently discovered *kaptorga* from Denmark, which formed part of a rich hoard from Lille Karleby on Sjælland (Kastholm, Nielsen and Jensen 2017; Jensen 2023), is partly damaged but it is clear that originally its surface was adorned with three horned quadrupeds, presumably cattle (Fig. 5). Close analogies are known from Poland, especially from the provinces of Greater Poland and Pomerania, but also from Stará Kouřim in the Czech Republic (Kóčka-Krenz 1993, 84–86). It has not yet been conclusively determined where

➤ **Figure 5.** Selection of Western Slavic *kaptorgas* with horned animal motifs: **a** – Lille Karleby, Denmark. Photo by Cille Krause / ROMU: Roskilde Museum; **b** – Dramino-Piaski, Poland. Photo courtesy of the National Museum of Szczecin; **c** – Wielonek, Poland. Photo courtesy of Agnieszka Łukaszyk; **d** – Dziekanowice, Poland. Photo courtesy of Agnieszka Łukaszyk. Image design by Leszek Gardeła.

a

b

c

d

0   3cm

exactly such luxurious artefacts were originally designed and produced, but it is noteworthy that the majority of specimens stem from territories that were under direct control or strong influence of the first Piasts (i.e. Greater Poland).

Kaptorgas with representations of horned quadrupeds are all roughly similar in their overall appearance but it is noteworthy that they tend to vary with regard to the number of animals they carry. For instance, each of the three *kaptorgas* found in a hoard from Dramino-Piaski in Pomerania has at least three quadrupeds (Horoszko, Piniński, Illisch, Malarczyk and Nowakiewicz 2016, 148–54, Plate XXII); the *kaptorga* from Łupawa in Pomerania has at least two horned quadrupeds (Horoszko, Piniński, Illisch, Malarczyk and Nowakiewicz 2016, 319–46, Taf. LVII), whereas one of the *kaptorgas* from Dzierznica II in Greater Poland has as many as five quadrupeds (Szczurek, Paszkiewicz, Tabaka, Bogucki, Illisch and Mularczyk 2017, Taf. XXI) (Fig. 5). In the context of this discussion, it is worth noting in passing that *kaptorgas* are not the only elements of Western Slavic jewellery that carry depictions of horned quadrupeds. These animals also appear in three-dimensional form on a rare variant of temple rings – interestingly, in this case the temple rings are always adorned with *three* cattle heads (Kóčka-Krenz 1993). The number three was an important number in the Slavic world, and may have been conceptually associated with the three-tiered cosmos and the three-headed god of the underworld known as Triglav or Weles (Wójtowicz-Deka 2024, 129–72).

Virtually all Indo-European societies held cattle in great esteem and regarded these animals as guarantors and indicators of wealth and prosperity, as well as potent symbols of power and fertility (e.g. Lincoln 1976, with further references therein). Interestingly, in the Slavic system of belief, cattle were also associated with Triglav/Weles (e.g. Uspieński 1985; Tempłowicz 2011; Łuczyński 2012). In extant texts from the Eastern Slavic area, Weles is sometimes referred to as the 'cattle god' and may in fact have been imagined as possessing some physiognomic features of these animals. In light of the above, it is permissible to speculate that the horned cattle on the *kaptorgas* that concern us here alluded to stories and beliefs associated with the Slavic god of the underworld and/or aspects of the cosmogonic myth. At the present moment, however, it remains unclear whether or not the inconsistent number of animals (three, four, five) represented on these items had some special significance.

Returning to the *kaptorga* from Lille Karleby, it is challenging to determine its function in connection with the hoard. Its occurrence alongside several Scandinavian-type 'amulets' in the form of miniature wheels (Petersen 2023) – and the fact that all these objects are complete or only with slight traces of damage – supports the idea that whoever was responsible for assembling the hoard was aware and respectful of their special properties. It is impossible to determine if the person(s) burying the hoard were Slavic or Scandinavian. In theory, both alternatives are possible. Evidence from Viking Age cemeteries at Birka and Fyrkat suggests that, under certain circumstances, Scandinavian ritual practitioners may have incorporated Slavic artefacts into their attire. For instance, the so-called Fyrkat *völva* was laid to rest with a Slavic temple ring, whereas another presumed sorceress from Birka was buried with a lunula pendant (see Gardeła, Bønding and Pentz 2023a; Price 2023; Gardeła in press-b, with further references therein).

Knife sheath fittings

In speaking about artefacts with animal motifs, it is crucial to note that in the Western Slavic world animals appear particularly prominently on copper alloy knife sheath fittings. Over the last several years researchers have dedicated considerable attention to this group of objects, arguing that their complex imagery may have alluded to Western Slavic ideas of the cosmos and served as models of the three-tiered universe. The presently-known find corpus of knife sheath fittings with zoomorphic motifs includes over forty specimens stemming predominantly from the province of Greater Poland, but some examples are also known from Pomerania, Silesia, Lesser Poland, Slovakia, and northern Germany (for overviews, see Szczepanik 2010; 2019c; 2020 and references therein; see also Gardeła 2020a; 2024a; Gardeła and Kajkowski 2021).

Although Slavic knife sheath fittings are relatively well-known artefacts in the archaeological record in Scandinavia, the vast majority of them do not represent the special zoomorphic variant that concerns us here (e.g. Feveile 2017; Ulriksen 2022). It is noteworthy, however, that over the last several years metal detectorists in Denmark have identified a previously unknown artefact type which takes the form of a thin long bar with presumed representations of quadrupeds standing on top of it (Fig. 6). Regrettably, all of the specimens discovered so far are fragmented and eroded, which severely hampers their correct interpretation. Notwithstanding their poor preservation, their overall form, size and material correspond remarkably closely with the abovementioned zoomorphic knife sheath fittings from Poland and other Western Slavic areas, permitting the careful assumption that they might indeed represent the same type of artefact. Time will tell whether or not this interpretation is correct.

Slavic war gear

Having examined different categories of artefacts whose ornamentation and symbolic significance seem linked to Slavic pre-Christian beliefs, it becomes evident that the Western Slavs communicated concepts rooted in their pagan worldview through animal motifs, whether realistic or fantastic. As demonstrated, certain creatures might have been directly linked to deities mentioned in medieval texts, while others served as enigmatic hybrid beings whose names, unfortunately, have faded into obscurity.

In discussing the material culture of Western Slavic paganism in Denmark, it is crucial to draw attention to yet another broad group of finds – namely, war gear. It is well known from various cultures around the world that weapons as well as riding gear are often used in ritual practices, endowed with supernatural powers and/or adorned with designs referring to the religious sphere. In the corpus of Viking Age artefacts found in Denmark it is possible to distinguish a number of militaria of foreign provenance that carry Western Slavic pagan symbols.

An outstanding example can be found in the aforementioned set of stirrups unearthed at Velds in Jylland. Each of the two strap fittings attached to these stirrups features an intricate three-tiered scene, showcasing a variety of animals. The bottom tier portrays two intertwined

a

b

c

d

e

f

g

h

hybrid creatures resembling winged snakes in profile, with a winged creature at their feet depicted from a top view. In the middle tier, there are two enigmatic beings with long arms and legs, or possibly two pairs of wings. Finally, the top tier presents a tree motif, presumably the tree of life, flanked by two birds (Fig. 7a). Deciphering the exact meaning of this imagery proves challenging. However, what immediately captures attention is the recurrence of the number three, akin to many other Western Slavic artefacts crafted in the animal style discussed earlier. This is evident in the composition's division into three tiers. The imagery may thus be cautiously interpreted as depicting the three-tiered Slavic cosmos with the various animals and fantastic beasts presumably serving as divine avatars, messengers or mediators between the worlds. With a considerable degree of source-critical caution, the snake-bird hybrids can perhaps be considered in the context of Slavic folkloristic accounts that speak of a creature known as *Żmij*, which was regarded either as a protector or adversary of humans (Tomicki 1974; 1982; Tomiccy 1975). Similar depictions of snake-like beasts (in analogous iconographic configurations) are visible on other Western Slavic objects, for instance on silver *kaptorgas* from Biskupin in Poland and Klecany in the Czech Republic, as well as on a copper alloy cheek-piece from Giecz in Poland (Fig. 7b, c). The broad geographical distribution of these artefacts clearly indicates that the hybrid beasts they portray were very well known to the pagan Slavs.

Yet another noteworthy Viking Age item found in Denmark, which carries an evidently Slavic pre-Christian motif, is an axe from grave 128 from the cemetery of Trelleborg on Sjælland (Nørlund 1948; Gardeła 2022a: 252–55; Gardeła in press-c). This axe is well known to researchers and history aficionados in Scandinavia, but it often goes unnoticed that one side of its blade carries an image of a winged creature (Fig. 8). Since this image is very schematic, it is challenging to determine whether its creator intended to portray a bird *per se* or an animal hybrid akin to those seen – for instance – on the Velds stirrups and conceptually associated with the aforementioned *Żmij* of Slavic folklore. The occurrence of such a zoomorphic motif on the blade of a luxurious axe nevertheless ought to be regarded as a manifestation of pre-Christian ideas and potentially an indication of the beliefs and perhaps specific group affiliation of its owner.

Finally, it is crucial to note that very recently, as a result of a metal detecting survey conducted at Herslev on Sjælland, a remarkable fragment of a rare Western Slavic zoomorphic spur has been found. It takes the form of a copper alloy rod with an iron core, on top of which stands a realistically depicted horse with the head turned back (Fig. 9). Zoomorphic spurs are deemed to be some of the most luxurious elements of Western Slavic riding equipment. As recent studies show, they were used by militarized elites closely associated with Piast rulers. What is also special about these items is their rich iconographic programme, which probably

◄ **Figure 6.** Selection of presumed Western Slavic knife sheath fittings found in Denmark (**a** – Hoby; **b** – Allerslev; **c** – Bjergby; **d** – Gammel Lejre; **e** – Vester Kærby; **f** – Okholm) and two elaborate knife sheath fittings from Oldenburg, Germany (**g**) and Ostrów Lednicki, Poland (**h**). Photos (a, b, d, e) courtesy of Tobias Bondesson, photo (c) courtesy of Louise Stahlschmidt, photo (f) courtesy of Henrik Brinch Christiansen, photos (g, h) by Leszek Gardeła. Image design by Leszek Gardeła.
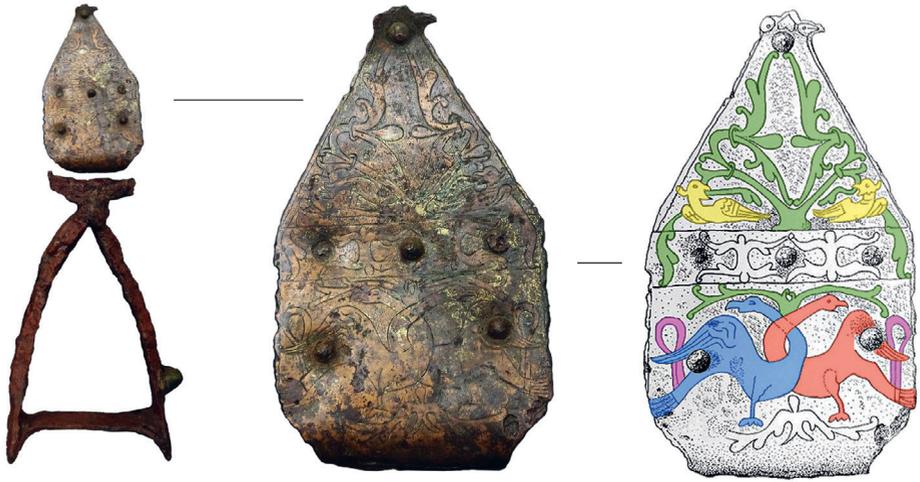
a

b
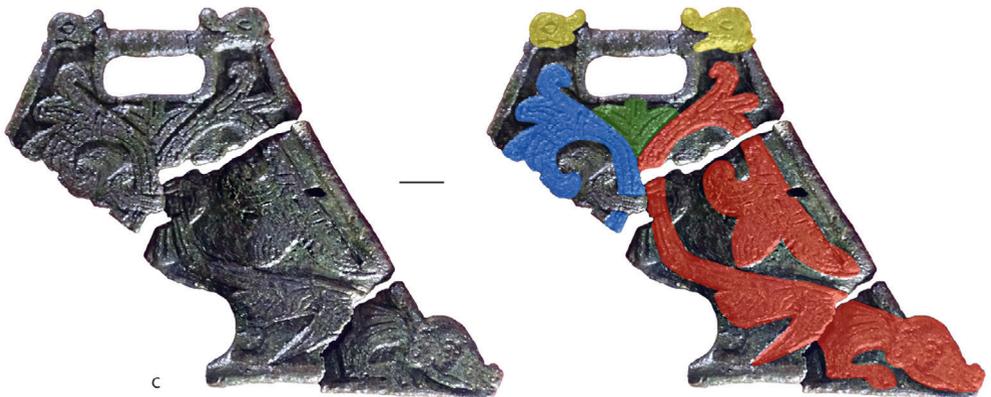
c

◄ **Figure 7.** Intertwined animal motifs on Western Slavic elite artefacts (note the corresponding iconographic details marked in blue, red, yellow, purple and green): **a** – stirrups from Velds, Denmark. Photos and drawing by Leszek Gardeła; **b** – *kaptorga* from Biskupin, Poland. Photo courtesy of Magdalena Zawol / Archaeological Museum in Biskupin; **c** – cheekpiece from Giecz, Poland. Photo by Leszek Gardeła. Image design by Leszek Gardeła.

served as yet another visual representation of Western Slavic cosmological ideas (Ratajczyk, Gardeła and Kajkowski 2017; Gardeła 2018; Gardeła, Kajkowski and Ratajczyk 2019). Due to constraints of space, it is not possible to delve deeper into this topic here, but the Herslev goad and its wider context is extensively discussed in another recently published article (Gardeła and Borake 2025).

Figure 8. Selection of Western Slavic objects with a characteristic winged creature motif: **a**, **b** – T-shaped axe from Trelleborg, Denmark. Photo courtesy of Nationalmuseet, drawing after Nørlund 1948; **c** – fitting from Lutomiersk, Poland. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography in Łódź; **d** – fitting from Ostrów Lednicki. Photo by Leszek Gardeła; **e** – fitting from Døvregård, Bornholm. Photo courtesy of Nationalmuseet; **f** – wooden *kaptorga* from Wolin, Poland. After Filipowiak 1993, 35. Image design by Leszek Gardeła.
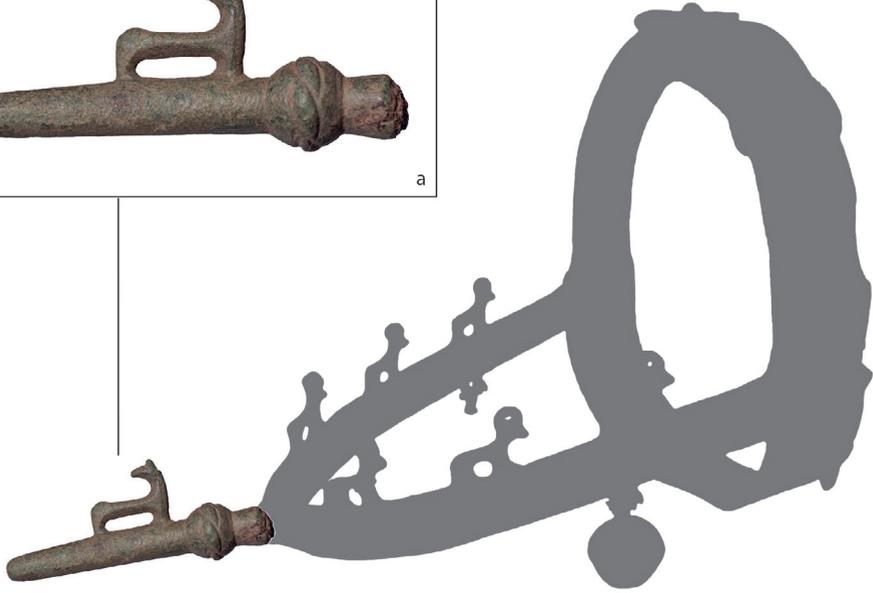
Miniature axes

So-called miniature axes are the last group of artefacts that ought to be mentioned in connection with material traces of Slavic paganism in Viking Age Denmark. As a result of metal detecting, six such artefacts have already been found (Fig. 10). In terms of their design, they closely resemble full-size axes that are typical of Central-Eastern Europe – they have broad blades with a characteristic protrusion in the lower part. Miniature examples that are nearly identical to the specimens discovered in Denmark are well known from the archaeological record in Poland, Russia and Ukraine as well as from several other European countries (Kucypera, Pranke and Wadyl 2011). They are conventionally dated to the 11th–12th centuries and regarded as items associated with the sphere of pre-Christian belief. The most convincing interpretation of their symbolic content – at least in the present author's opinion – is that they are linked to the chief deity in the Slavic pantheon, namely Perun, a thunder-god akin to the Norse Þórr. The majority of miniature axe specimens known so far are isolated finds, which poses problems in clearly determining who their users were. Several examples, however, have been noted in funerary contexts where they tend to accompany sub-adults. It is thus not unlikely that they were used by young people who have just entered or were about to enter the path of the warrior, and thus may have needed some form of supernatural protection from all the dangers this way of life entailed. A miniature axe – associated with the god of war and lightning and charged with potent symbolism – would thus have been quite an appropriate thing to carry on one's person.

Conclusions and emerging perspectives

This paper has offered a succinct overview of the material culture of Western Slavic pagan belief in Viking Age Denmark, surveying and analysing all the different artefact categories that display associations with Slavic pre-Christian deities, mythical beasts and entities. As we have seen, it has been possible to assemble a substantial portion of this corpus of objects owing to the efforts of amateur metal detectorists, which shows how important their activities are in furthering our understanding of the material culture of the Viking Age at large, but also in nuancing our perception of cross-cultural interactions in this important period in human history. Future metal detecting endeavours as well as professional archaeological excavations carried out across Denmark and other parts of Scandinavia will surely bring to light more finds associated with the sphere of pre-Christian belief, both that of the Norse population as well as the various other cultural groups they engaged with. To comprehensively grasp this growing collection of artefacts and its broader significance, it is imperative to collaborate closely with their discoverers. Improving communication between scholars from Scandinavia and Central

◄ **Figure 9.** Western Slavic spur goad from Herslev, Denmark (**a**) and a reconstruction of a zoomorphic spur from Ciepłe (**b**). Photo (a) courtesy of Flemming Fabriciusen-Nielsen, photo (b) courtesy of Tomasz Czyszczoń (Montanus Historical Jewellery). Image design by Leszek Gardeła.

a

b

c

d

e

f

0   (b, c, f)   4cm

◄ **Figure 10.** Selection of Slavic miniature axes found in Denmark: **a** – Unspecified location in Norddjurs Kommune, Denmark. Photo from DIME (ID: 9398); **b** – Unspecified location, Denmark. Photo from Detektor Danmark; **c** – Nørholm, Denmark. Photo courtesy of Nationalmuseet; **d** – Unspecified location, Denmark. Photo from Detektor Danmark; **e** – Unspecified location, Denmark. Photo from Detektor Danmark. Image design by Leszek Gardeła.

Europe is also key to this endeavour. It is hoped that this contribution will spur the debate and pave the way for new academic inquiries and fruitful international collaborations.

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Note

1   Artefacts discovered by Danish metal detectorists are regularly presented online, in particular on the DIME portal (www.metaldetektorfund.dk), as well as on special websites such as Detektor Danmark (www.fibula.dk) and various Facebook groups.

Figurative Miniatures as Prolonged Echoes of Pre-Christian Rituals

Sarah Croix

Introduction

Whether grand or mundane, rituals are transformative actions anchored in the physical world. These actions are eminently material, although their effect may equally be social, emotional, psychological or metaphysical. Reiteration lies at the heart of rituals, as if their potency faded over time and needed to be reactivated. Representations of rituals through multiple media, including their description in texts, their visualization in images or their materialization through symbols may act as technologies of perpetuation of the event, its participants, its goals, and its means. For Viking-Age Scandinavia, representations of pre-Christian rituals occur in texts, many of which were written by Christian authors several decades or centuries after the events they claim to relate, as well as in contemporary images, such as on the tapestry fragments from the Oseberg ship-burial and the Gotlandic picture stones. While archaeologists have proposed numerous identifications of ritual paraphernalia, specialists and sites, as well as sought to reconstruct ritual processes through their physical remains, the possible visual representations of rituals have received less attention.

The aim of this chapter is thus twofold: 1) to present a new classification of a group of figurative miniatures made of metal, principally found in South Scandinavia and used as pendants, leading to a discussion of the use of a base form and a range of set motifs to compose three different narrative scenes; and 2) to propose that one of the three sub-classes is a representation of a particular moment in a ritual process, possibly a *blót*, prompting an appraisal of these objects as amulets, i.e. as potent objects capturing the (social, religious) efficacy of the ritual and communicating it to their wearer and those gazing upon it. Through a close analysis of the finds, it is argued that shifting our attention from a reading of images as a direct echo of narratives known in myths and stories towards an acknowledgement of the importance of media and materiality in both actions and representations may provide new insights into a potentially much broader range of ritual practices and communication strategies in pre-Christian Scandinavia.

Background

Figurative miniatures from Viking-Age South Scandinavia have been the object of extensive research in recent decades. Scholars have engaged in nuanced and critical discussion of their

uses, sometimes expressing a certain uneasiness towards seeing these objects as more than jewellery (pendants or brooches), i.e. as potent objects functioning as amulets (Fuglesang 1989; Zeitzen 1997; Jensen 2010; Pedersen 2009). Instead, focus has often been placed on the identification of their imagery by association with characters, motifs or episodes from stories echoed in the Old Norse mythological corpus captured in texts and – probably – on the Gotlandic picture stones (e.g. Petersen 1992; Zeitzen 1997, 10; Pentz 2018). Attempts at establishing a systematic correspondence between images and myths have, however, overall proven inconclusive (Helmbrecht 2011), warranting the search for alternative understandings (Price 2006, 182; Eriksen 2022).

New data emerging from excavations and the public recording of private metal-detector finds have injected fresh blood into the field of research (see e.g. Wicker 2020). The "Thoughts behind Things" (*Tanken bag Tingene*, National Museum of Denmark) project has capitalized on accumulated metal-detector finds to study a broad range of miniatures (e.g. Gardeła 2022a; 2022b; Pentz 2022; Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022), branching towards the discussion of the materiality of ritual practices and specialists (Gardeła, Bønding and Pentz 2023). In parallel, the "Northern Emporium" excavation project has shed further light on the production of figurative pendants in the workshops of early Viking-Age Ribe based on casting-mould impressions (Croix, Deckers and Sindbæk 2020), the short stratigraphic sequence of workshop deposits in which they occurred proving that they belonged to the same iconographic programme, shaped by the same hands and minds in the second quarter of the 9th century (Deckers, Croix and Sindbæk 2021). Deckers et al. called the figures of this programme the members of a "cast" mostly encountered in South Scandinavia, contrasting with an East Scandinavian tradition dominated by female, unarmed miniature figures. Similar scenes such as those of the Ribe "cast" were there reserved for commemorative monuments, i.e. the Gotlandic picture stones, rather than worn on the body. These figures also resonate with the performances depicted on the – contemporary – Oseberg tapestries: the blurring of boundaries between species and genders, the recurrent figure of the horse, the brandishing of weapons, and the carts, of which the wheel-like amulets may be a *pars pro toto* representation.

Contextualizing the Ribe "cast" in such a way raises the question of whether its interpretation as evocations of communal ritual may apply to its associates as well, i.e. the "rider and standing figure". This particular class of figurative pendants, combining two anthropomorphic figures and a horse, did not occur among the find assemblage from the plot excavated in Ribe in the "Northern Emporium" project but has been previously found together with a horse pendant on a neighbouring plot (Feveile and Jensen 2006a, 145). The figure was recently reappraised by Gardeła, Pentz and Price (2022, 101–4), who addressed the gender ambiguities of the human figures across their corpus and stressed the possibility of different readings emerging from finer nuances in similar motifs (ibid., 117–19). While other anthropomorphic figures, sometimes associated with chairs, have previously been read as representing a deity or a ritual specialist connected to the performance of divination rituals such as the *seiðr* (Christensen 2013; Borake 2021; Jessen 2023; Zeitzen 1997, 21–22), the idea of capturing and miniaturizing an action performed during a ritual is yet to be fully tested for the "rider and standing figure" motif. Among the whole corpus of Viking-Age figurative miniatures probably worn as pendants, this class is unique in depicting more than one anthropomorphic figure. The

implied interaction, together with the acknowledgment of the *Bildakt*, the efficacy of images (Bredekamp 2018), shifts the focus of the investigation from deciphering what the scene is representing, as a merely passive image, to what the scene, its participants, and the object itself are *doing* – inside their own story-world and to those who interacted with them.

The double-figure pendants: a new classification

For the present study, images of double-figure pendants published up to May 2025 have been consulted (45 finds; see list with references in Appendix). A close analysis of the corpus has permitted further classification of this seemingly homogenous group into three sub-classes, tentatively labelled here as: 1) The welcoming scene; 2) The offering scene; 3) The dragon-slayer scene (Fig. 1).

Used as pendants or appliques rather than brooches (Helmbrecht 2011, 65–74; 306; Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, 111), all finds display two anthropomorphic figures facing each other, as well as a horse. The traits that vary, and thus form the basis of the new classification, are small details of ornament and rendering of the human figure associated with the horse, which in most cases forms the left part of the scene (the only two finds where the positions of the two human figures are swapped are incomplete and thus not included in the analysis). The second standing figure, nearly invariably to the right of the scene, also displays some finer

Fig. 1. Examples of the three sub-classes of the "rider and standing figure" motif. A. Sub-class a, find from Nonnebakken, OBM 9782 x181 (photo: Nermin Hasic, Museum Odense; reproduced with permission); B. Sub-class b, find from Tissø, KN 855 (photo: Roberto Fortuna and Kira Ursem, The National Museum of Denmark; reproduced under CC BY-SA license); C. Sub-class c., find from Varming By, SJM 894 x115 (photo: Museum Vest; reproduced under CC BY-SA license). Interpretative line drawing: Sine Grove Saxkjær. More or less to scale.

variation in the rendering of some details, but its overall composition (the long dress with a train, some form of headgear, a shield, often a sword, and a drinking horn) remains consistent. Additionally, three finds combine traits belonging to more than one of the three main sub-classes, which suggests the existence of an overall pattern of transfer and reinterpretation of a generic motif into more contextually specific forms and meanings.

1) The welcoming scene (Fig. 1A)

This sub-class is formed by a group of seven fairly readable finds as well as seven that are poorly preserved and for which the reading of the scene is less certain. It also represents the broad interpretative consensus on this type of miniatures (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022). The scene, which may have its roots in the late Antique "adventus" motif (Vierck 2002, 24–29), is commonly put into perspective by comparison with similar motifs on the Gotlandic picture stones, with examples featuring a rider being greeted by a standing (female) figure with a horn (Oehrl 2019a, 47–50). Previous readings have linked the scene to Valhalla imagery known from the Old Norse literary corpus, with two Valkyries deciding on the warriors' destiny (Petersen 1992). More recently, the scene has been related to the Sigurðr cycle, where Sigurðr rides to claim the hand of Brynhild/Sigrðrífa (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, 123–25), as well as, more tentatively, as representing an armed woman entering Fólkvangr and receiving Freyja's greetings (id. 120–23).

On the chosen example (Fig. 1A), the figure to the left, the rider, appears to be sitting upright on the horse. The rider has a long, knotted hairstyle. In contrast with the idea of an "adventus" scene implying that the rider is a male warrior, the long, knotted hair is code for the female gender; however, some elasticity should be applied when projecting a specific gender identity onto this figure (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, 116–19). The rider wears a cloak whose fabric is rendered with parallel lines. Cloth is rendered in a similar way on what may be the leg of the rider, indicated by the slightly bent knee and the foot, held perpendicular to the lower leg but parallel and alongside the belly of the horse. The rider holds a blade-weapon, a sword or a long knife. The horse is fitted with a harness, elegantly treated with two parallel lines, as well as some kind of cloth on its hind. It is unlikely to represent a shield, as the form is not round, and the motif is treated in a similar way as the elements of the rider's clothing. Under the horse's belly, the empty space is filled with a square piece bearing a chequered motif. It does not seem to have any relation to the horse's or the rider's attire. This impression is reinforced by the fact that this piece occurs independently as a pendant, perhaps indeed as a symbol of the "cloth of destiny" (Gardeła 2022a).

2) The offering scene (Fig. 1B)

This sub-class is formed by a group of seven fairly readable finds as well as four that are poorly preserved and for which the reading of the scene is less certain. To my knowledge, this reading has not been previously proposed. While the overall composition of the scene remains similar

to sub-class 1, as well as the long, knotted hairstyle for the figure to the left, it differs from it in the fact that this figure is not actually riding the horse. What appeared as the leg of the rider on sub-class 1, with its bent knee and foot, is here rendered as a straight member with a much smaller extremity. Where such details are visible, this extremity is treated in a similar way as the figure's left hand holding a blade weapon, that is, with a bracelet or a cuff and even details of the fingers. This little hand seems to be holding the horse at its elbow. On the Tissø find in Figure 1B, what would then be an arm is treated as a smooth surface with small dots, in a similar way to the shoulders, the top of the head and the hind of the horse, suggesting a fabric used as a headdress and as a cloak, which, on this find at least, seems to extend onto the horse's hind. This detail is, however, not as clear on the other finds.

As the treatment of the legs of the horse in two rows testifies to the artisan's ability to create depth and perspective, this would make the cloth underneath the belly of the horse the lower part of the left figure's dress, thus integrating the motif of the "cloth of destiny" into the dress, perhaps to further highlight this figure's particular role. The weapon this figure is holding in their left hand also seems to be one-edged on most examples, with one case where it is double-edged. This might suggest another kind of blade-weapon than a sword, such as a knife. Another important detail is that the horse's harness is here replaced by a spear, whose blade points towards the front of the horse and the shield of the standing figure to the right. The shaft continues to the horse's croup, and it thus appears that the figure to the left is holding it against the side of the horse, tightly tucked under their armpit.

3) *The dragon-slayer scene (Fig. 1C)*

This sub-class is formed by a group of four fairly readable finds, three of which unpublished. Apart from the overall composition and the standing figure to the right, it differs markedly from the two previous sub-classes on several levels. The figure to the left appears here to be represented only by their upper body and to be sitting on the horse's back. Instead of being upright, the rider's neck seems slightly bent in relation to the rest of the upper body, with the head looking downwards. While some kind of headgear is present, the long-knotted hair is lacking, as is the left arm and the blade weapon. On two examples (cat. no. 28–29 in Appendix), the right arm is clearly rendered, showing a bent elbow and a hand holding a spear. The position of the spear differs markedly from that of sub-class 2: here it is held in a diagonal position, pointing downwards towards the front legs of the horse, in the alignment of the rider's gaze. A shield with an emphasized boss hangs to the side of the horse, its representation being prioritized over that of the rider's leg. Most mysterious is the element placed on the ground under the horse. Here, the open field created by the horse's legs is not filled by a "cloth of destiny" but by a nearly vertical, straight line, seemingly shown as being in front of the horse's left hindleg. In all but one case, this line is connected to a motif resembling a drinking horn. Its depiction is, however, extremely minimalistic, the space available is rather small, and it may well represent something else.

Recently, Sigmund Oehrl (2019b) has identified a new image of a rider fighting an animal on a Gotlandic picture stone. In that connection, he traced several parallels which

highlight the longevity of the equestrian motif, including the fight against beasts and other forces of chaos, and its multiple reinterpretations from late Antiquity to the Viking age on various kinds of media. This includes, for example, motifs on the helmet plates from grave I in Vendel (Helmbrecht 2011, fig. 11 f. and g.). The posture of the rider on sub-class 3 is strongly reminiscent of medieval images of equestrian saints slaying dragons, such as Saint Georges, at the same time as it ties in closely with the Old Norse repertoire usually drawn from to interpret otherwise silent images, including the welcoming scene, such as the myth of Sigurðr the Dragon-slayer. Ninth-century Carolingian manuscripts are rich in calvary illustrations, showing how spears were held by horsemen in various circumstances. The orientation of the spear on sub-class 3 is unambiguously similar to scenes where horsemen are striking enemies on the ground with their spear in the Stuttgart Psalter (e.g. folio 071v). Rather than in a Christian European perspective, the motif could thus equally be stretched into a pre-Christian Nordic one.

Templates, patterns and motifs: the compositional repertoire

The impression of a "variation on a theme" that the three sub-classes suggest may be explained by several interlinked processes of composition using a base form and a small number of motifs selected from a geographically widespread but iconographically narrow repertoire. This process is reminiscent of pattern composition in textile production, for example, where templates of individual motifs can be selected, placed and combined in multiple systems to create new patterns which can then be replicated in new iterations. A similar way of composing images in Viking-Age Scandinavia has previously been proposed for the Gotlandic picture stones (Kitzler Åfheldt 2015) and it was very likely part of workshop practice for non-ferrous metal workers as well. Comparison between casting-mould fragments with impressions from Ribe and finished oval brooches shows that several elements were added to the objects after casting (Feveile 2002, 21), and the blank, identical finds from Hedeby (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, fig. 1) were clearly the products of the serial production of a motif-less base form. This base form, a horse and two anthropomorphic figures, was consequently defined during the manufacturing process by adding further motifs (Fig. 2): the shield or wheel, the cultic apron or dress, the drinking horn, the weapon(s), etc. The notion that these motifs were conceived as separate entities is supported by the fact that these also occur as single pendants (Gardeła 2022a; 2022b; Gardeła and Odebäck 2018).

Based on the current state of evidence, double-figure pendants were likely produced in the non-ferrous metal workshops of the South Scandinavian emporia, Ribe and Hedeby. The particular quality of the Tissø finds, as well as a regional concentration on Western Zealand and Eastern Funen, might suggest production of such items at elite residences as well. Anthropomorphic pendants are an innovation of the early Viking Age, a period which sees a renewal of the iconographic repertoire overall. There are plenty of anthropomorphic representations from the earlier parts of the late Iron Age (bracteates, Gotlandic picture stones, models for helmet plates, entangled human forms with animal forms on metalwork, gold-foil figures;
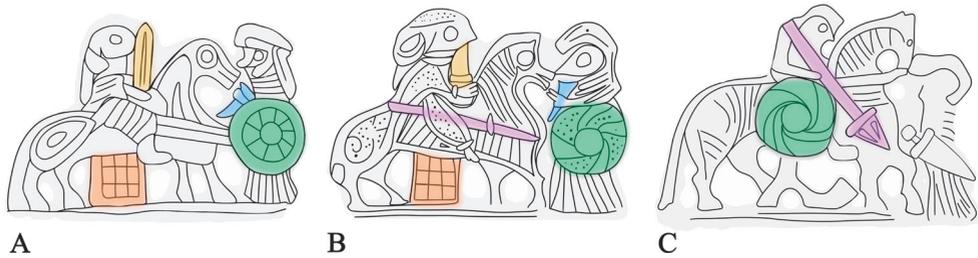
Fig. 2. The repertoire of motifs combined with the base-form on the "rider and standing figure" pendants. Interpretative line drawing: Sine Grove Saxkjær, with additions by the author. More or less to scale.

Helmbrecht 2011, 361), but none that singled out the human form and materialized it into a wearable item or constructed scenes with a narrative. The broad geographical distribution of the double-figure pendants (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, figs. 1 & 2; Deckers, Croix and Sindbæk 2021, fig. 6), added to the fact that the corpus is largely composed of unique items, suggests that the base form and its repertoire of motifs was not under any single workshop's monopoly and speaks in favour of the versality of the base form and the figurative repertoire. Mastering the different motifs opened up a broad range of creative pattern compositions for the artisan and opportunities for deliberate and nuanced storytelling, as the pendants seem to work as "abbreviations" or symbolic short-cuts for more elaborate narratives (*sensu* Helmbrecht 2011). The three hybrid examples (cat. no. 31–33 in appendix) combining elements of different types, may then be read as the product of the high degree of compositional freedom afforded by this form of patterning, or as a poor attempt at emulating an observed motif without fully understanding its symbolic content.

While the individual motifs may be strongly evocative in their own terms, their use in combination gives insight into a symbolic world in which context and relationality between part-elements is decisive for deciphering a particular mode of expression – not dissimilar to the kennings of skaldic poetry. Although the compositional differences between the three sub-classes are minor, they carry important implications, in terms of iconography, "story-worlds" and function.

The offering scene: a ritual practice?

While current interpretations of the double-figure pendants as welcoming scenes coincide nicely with sub-class 1, and while sub-class 3 finds its echo in some scenes on the Gotlandic picture stones and other early medieval iconography representing horsemen fighting the forces of chaos, sub-class 2 has no obvious reading and no exact iconographic parallels so far. In the light of the interpretation of the Ribe repertoire as "cast members" of collective rituals, the image may be read, tentatively, as an offering scene.

Even considering the relatively small size of Viking-Age horses (between 125–144 cm in Iceland, Rúnar Leifsson 2021, 262), it is unlikely that the position of the right arm and hand of the left figure is to be taken literally as holding onto the horse, unless this individual had exceptionally long arms. Instead, this position may represent the control the human had over the animal as if it was giving it away, while it allowed them to hold the spear. Rather than being functional, the spear may be acting as a symbolic referent to the otherworldly recipient of the offering (read: Odin). The fabric covering the left figure's shoulders seems, at least in one example, to englobe the hind parts of the horse, visually merging the human and the animal figures. The raised left arm, demonstratively holding a large knife or perhaps a sword, appears ready to strike the animal. In that understanding of the scene, the combination of the knife-holding figure with that of the armed figure to the right allows clarification of the role of the latter as well. Contrary to some of the anthropomorphic pendants of singular, armed female figures known from South Scandinavia, with which it shares the trailed garment, the helmet and the shield, the right figure in this scene is not wielding a sword but is keeping it in its scabbard, thus freeing one hand to hold a horn up to the head of the horse. Perhaps the figure is impersonating the divine recipient of the offering or acting as the mediator between this world and that of the recipient, ready to collect in the horn the gushing blood of the horse whose throat is soon to be cut.

No evidence confirming the existence of this practice in such details in pre-Christian Scandinavia survives a severe source-critical assessment. Its likelihood is, however, supported by a broad range of fragmentary information. Horses played a variety of roles in pre-Christian rituals (Tang and Ruiter 2023). In settlement contexts from the late Iron Age in South Scandinavia, they are a recurrent presence in "special deposits" (*sensu* Hamerow 2006; Carlie 2004, 124–29; Müller-Wille 1971, 180–85; Magnell 2019, 306–10), although what makes such deposits "special" is far from straightforward (Morris and Jervis 2011). Horse remains that may be products of rituals have been identified in a few places in Viking-Age Denmark (Henriksen 2015; Gotfredsen et al. 2015), including at Tissø (Gotfredsen 2006) and on the site of Ribe's pre-Christian cemetery (Feveile and Jensen 2006b, 78–79). The deposits themselves may represent the last few steps of a potentially long ritual process and are overall not very informative of its agents and moments. Nevertheless, they attest that horses were indeed killed, their bodies cut and curated in various ways before being deposited, on their own as well as in connection with the mortuary rituals of humans, such as the well-known equestrian graves (Pedersen and Schifter Bagge 2021; Pedersen 2014), in a time and place contemporary with the sub-class 2-pendants. At least during mortuary rituals in Viking-Age Iceland, it seems that horses were hit on the forehead with a hammer-like tool before their throat was slit while their heart was still beating (Rúnar Leifsson 2021, 264). The *modus operandi* may have differed for other types of rituals.

Concerning the textual evidence, the sacrifice of horses is mentioned in late Viking-Age Latin sources, including Thietmar of Merseburg and Adam of Bremen, whose accounts should be taken with a grain of salt – or two (Simek 2022). Meanwhile, the Old Norse corpus from medieval Iceland recounts the practice of the *blót* – a sacrifice involving bloodletting including of horses (Näsström 2002; Magnell 2019). More cryptic, but perhaps more reliable, is the runic inscription on the Stentoften-stone in Blekinge. The reading of the inscription,

dated to the 7th century and long debated (Santesson 1989; Williams 2001), is currently understood as follows:

> With nine rams, with nine stallions HaþuwulfR gave good growth. HariwulfR … I master of the runes (?) bury here potent runes. With no cessation of sorcery, a malevolent guile's death for the man who breaks it [i.e. the memorial]!

While open to interpretation, the first part of the inscription can be understood as commemorating the offering of animals – including male horses – and informs on the purpose of the sacrifice: annual prosperity. The need to record the ritual event through monumentalization, combined with the curse against the destruction of the stone, evokes a desire to crystallize and perpetuate the effect of the ritual over time – following a principle perhaps not so dissimilar to the *Gedächtnis* formulated for durable material expressions in Ancient Egypt by Jan Assman (1991, 16–31). This raises the question of the existence of similar "prolonged echoes" utilizing other medias.

Previously described as occasions for almost theatrical enactments scripted through citations of known stories (Williams 2016; Price 2010), mortuary rituals could potentially involve the evocation of various roles and responsibilities in the material commemoration of the deceased. A number of pre-Christian burials from the Viking world have previously been proposed as that of ritual specialists based on the interpretation of grave-goods as ritual paraphernalia (Price 2006; Gardeła 2008; Kaland 2006). These specialists are now frequently referred to as *völur* by association with the term known from the Old Norse textual evidence. Rather than trying to seek literary correlates for the knife-holding killer depicted on the subclass 2 pendants, to seek echoes of such performative actions in the contemporary mortuary record may be a more fruitful avenue.

Although knives are by far the most ubiquitous type of personal items placed in Viking-Age burials in Denmark, a non-exhaustive survey focusing on South Scandinavia has only yielded a very small number of instances where the deceased may have been laid in the grave pit holding a knife in their hand [Table 1]. Overall, items deliberately placed in hands are rare (for example, Grave A292 at Trekroner/Grydehøj, with a needle-case in one of the individuals' left hand, Ulriksen 2011, 215–16; or Grave 8 at Virentofta, with a weaving-sword in the individual's right hand, Thäte 2007, cat. no. 145). The low number is due to two factors: 1) typically very poor preservation of skeletal remains for inhumation graves in Viking-Age Denmark; 2) taphonomic processes during which the position of the hand and the knife/item might have shifted. Furthermore, the graves may have been disturbed, or there may be multiple burials in which objects cannot readily be associated with one individual or another. To expand the corpus, burials with more than one knife have been included, as they may suggest that one of the knives had another function than being a personal item. Admittedly, whether it was part of the ritual instead (e.g. Nordberg 2002) is difficult to ascertain, especially without skeletal remains informing about body position, but instances where the objects seem to have particular association to the body or other grave-goods were considered.

In her dissertation on "deviant burials", Eva Thäte lists three graves in which the deceased was holding a knife in one hand: at Kumle Høje, at Virentofta and at Nästa. A grave from

Bogøvej contained two knives: one on the body's right breast, perhaps as the usual piece of personal equipment, and one on the body's lap. This second knife was remarkably longer than the first (20.8 cm, blade 11.5 cm, against 8.8 cm) and bore an elaborate silver inlay decoration. A somewhat similar situation is encountered at Næsby, Jutland, where a small knife was placed on the deceased's upper body, and a slightly longer one with silver and gold wire was grouped together with a whetstone and a key on the lower part of the body. Two knives were also placed in one of the graves at Galgedil (Funen); one by the lower left arm of the deceased, perhaps on their lap, and a second one between their spread legs. Grave A505 at Trekroner/Grydehøj (Sjælland), besides containing two knives laid with other "tools" rather than on the body, has previously been interpreted as belonging to a ritual specialist (Ulriksen 2018; Kastholm and Ulriksen 2023). As a cherry on the argumentative cake, it even contained the body of a relatively small (124 cm at the withers) stallion and a unique spear-like object.

Both male and female individuals are present among this small group, in graves which are not particularly lavish but which often display some peculiarities in the light of the mortuary practices otherwise attested at their respective burial grounds, such as a close spatial connection to a prehistoric monument, or the possible use of a wagon-body as coffin. Outside South Scandinavia, one can find a more famous and ostentatious grave, previously interpreted as a *völva* grave – the so-called pagan lady of Peel (Gardeła 2014; Freke 2002, 66–69). Besides various items that may be related to the seeress's tool-kit, there were also two knives; one (21.5 cm) was in its sheath and had a handle decorated with silver wire, as seen at Bogøvej and Næsby. Both knives were in the general belt area, but while her right arm is partly preserved the left is missing – could the elaborate knife originally have been placed in her left hand?

The careful positioning of the deceased's body and of various items around them may have created a particularly powerful tableau. Although inhumed bodies often give the impression of being asleep rather than up-and-about, holding a knife evokes active handling. Perhaps such actions in life were so powerful and bound to the deceased's identities that they ought to be visualized as they were commemorated.

Visualizing rituals: from pendants to amulets

From a possible understanding of the sub-class-2 pendants as the visualization of a ritual scene, follows the question of the potential purposes and uses of such a form of portable, figurative material culture. Previous research in Viking-Age miniatures in Scandinavia has stressed the difficulty of assessing their functions, thus rather focusing on identifying the figures and scenes they display. Thus, less attention has been paid as to why they are formed the way they are and why it made sense to represent and wear scenes involving anthropomorphic figures doing *something*. Suspension loops on the back indicate they were worn as pendants or perhaps stitched on clothing. They do have ornamental qualities, and one could just stop at the fact that they were worn as pretty, shiny things. Their figurative character, however, suggests further significance. People, animals and objects were shrunk to miniature size to be made wearable and entered into intricate compositions. Many show traces of wear, previously interpreted as evidence for repetitive, perhaps ritualized activation of the motif (Helmbrecht 2011). Regard-

less of whether one believes they are representations of stories or rituals, whether they tell of heroic deeds, power, and mystery, or of sacrifices, world-changing events and communication with the divine, they all ooze potency, which would hardly have been sidelined for the benefit of aesthetic purposes only. But why capture, miniaturize and wear around such images? Returning to the notion of amulet may thus be useful.

An amulet is by definition a powerful object, a material actor in some form of apotropaic personal magic, aimed at repelling demons, shielding from witchcraft or curing illnesses. In a Viking-Age context, however, the identification of amulets is far from straightforward. Most potential amulets are archaeological finds, sometimes retrieved in burials but often without other context than the plough-soil; thus, a magical intention and purpose can only be assumed (Gardeła, Bønding and Pentz 2023, 405–6). They include objects made by the human hand – artefacts – either cast, cut or pressed, objects of organic or mineral materials used in their natural state (Zeitzen 1997, 2), as well as textual amulets and charms (MacLeod and Mees 2006; Pereswetoff-Morath 2019). These categories align with the much larger body of evidence from the Greco-Roman world, where animal, vegetal and mineral substances could be used in their natural state, while other objects drew their apotropaic power from the visual symbols they carried, given form either through images or words, including mass-produced, cast-metal pendants (Bohak 2015, 85–86). Some of these figurative pendants could represent known deities, but also more complex scenes (Michel 2004).

Amulet research has previously relied on the notion of "sympathetic magic", where the amulet mirrors the evil it is meant to repel (Frazer 1994, 26), thus operating by citation, quoting from a broad repertoire of material metaphors. While this may be true in many instances, this relationship often appears entirely arbitrary and variable, defying any notion of absolute system (Bohak 2015, 89–91), as for example in 19th- to early 20th-century England (Cadbury 2015, 205). Referentiality can occur through the use of materials carrying particular meaning (often a materialization of an abstract concept) (Heilskov 2022). But amulets can also draw their efficacy from having been made by or in contact with particularly powerful persons or used for particularly dramatic events, for example the San la Muerte amulets made by a former convict out of used bullets today in Argentina – the bullets carrying both the death of the person they killed and their spirit (Burnot 2022) – or crucifixion nails in the Roman world (Robison 2002, 51–52). They can bear motifs, either in the form of images or texts (Skemer 2010), which can be magical in themselves, or whose efficacy is activated through their being materialized via representation/inscription (Bohak 2015, 90). The casting, carving, drawing or printing of images or words onto an object may "transform the substance – metal, gemstone, or scrap of papyrus – into a thing that works" (Frankfurter 2004, 659). However, while the meaning of the words may be deciphered (often with great difficulty, for epigraphic, linguistic or cultural reasons), the meanings of images are not as readily understandable. Some may relate to known stories or myths, but many do not, suggesting the existence of a popular repertoire untold by preserved written texts.

Visual citations of rituals on amulets are not common but are far from unknown. In 7th- to mid-6th-century BCE Carthage and Sardinia, ritual masks, possibly representing a demon invoked in curing rituals, were miniaturized and worn as amulet pendants (Orsingher 2020). In the late Antique Christian tradition, a broad range of biblical motifs occurred on pendants,

including the sacrifice of Isaac and perhaps the most famous sacrificial event in world history: the crucifixion of Christ, where God let his son be killed as an offering made to expiate the sins of all humanity. This one-time event has been visualized and materialized in countless forms throughout the Christian world. The cross, as the main tool of the sacrifice, has become an abbreviation, a symbolic shortcut for the whole story.

Cross-pendants have been a staple of Christian material culture for nearly 2000 years and are often seen by archaeologists as markers of religious identity, but they are also potent objects with apotropaic qualities. Worn directly on the body, they may ward off evil while being used for personal devotion when gazed upon, thus fully conflating the functions of prayer paraphernalia and of amulet, as recently suggested for 8th- to 9th-century CE *enkolpia* (Dell'Acqua 2023). The visual and material representation of the ritual act onto a three-dimensional object can thus be said to achieve two things: it channels intangible potency from the divine sphere in such a way that it becomes effective in the worldly sphere; it captures it beyond the time of the event and perpetuates its efficacy through time. If we accept the idea of the representation of a ritual scene for the sub-class 2-pendants, when worn as amulets they would have been able to channel and prolong the effect of the ritual onto the world beyond the ritual's own time.

The seemingly secular context of production for the double-figure pendants – the non-ferrous metal workshops of Ribe and Hedeby, at least – should not prevent us from considering their interpretation as amulets. Apart from the fact that dichotomous notions of religious and secular are largely irrelevant in most pre-modern societies, these workshops may not have been so foreign to our notion of "religious". Although research in religious material culture has overall been more interested in the functions of amulets rather than their fabrication and its makers, the latter have been identified as both secular people (like in Argentina today and the cult of San la Muerte) and as religious specialists, wizards, sorceresses and the like, acting outside the frameworks of official and public religion (like in Antiquity). In pre-Christian Scandinavia, the question of the identity of the amulet-maker has not truly been addressed, in line with the general uneasiness towards the positive identification of amulets from archaeological contexts. While current trends would probably see the *völva* – or seeress – as an all-round religious specialist, the metalsmith should not be forgotten as a possible candidate.

In the Old Norse worldview, the metalsmith is indeed surrounded with an aura of magic, mastering world-changing mysteries and harnessing fire to transform rock into liquid into hardened metal (e.g. Barndon 2021). Previous research has discussed the playfulness of metalworking artisans in a time of religious change, tackling both the beast and the cross as ornaments on oval brooches similar to those produced in Ribe or Hedeby (Sindbæk 2014). The quality of the Tissø finds, as well as the serial production implied by the casting moulds in Ribe and Hedeby, is reminiscent of the religious souvenirs produced at the pilgrimage centres of the later Middle Ages. Although this mode of production may contrast with the idea of amulets as personal magic made by witches in the margins of society, the research history of amulets counts plenty of examples where mass-produced items were indeed used as amulets, from the ancient world until 19th-century England as mentioned above. The medieval Christian religious badges were not mere "souvenirs" but also effective objects, acting through the divine images they sported and through their manufacture in the near vicinity of a holy place (e.g. Rasmussen 2021, 91–97). While this last factor is yet to be proven for Ribe and Hedeby, it could easily apply to the Tissø

finds, where public cult most probably played an important role in the activities defining this multifunctional centre. Could the Tissø amulets have been produced in connection with major ritual events, and perhaps offered as potent gifts to prominent participants? And could the Ribe serial-produced examples be a cheaper way of harnessing the power of the ritual than by conducting it oneself (the sacrifice of a stallion not being affordable by just anyone)?

Conclusion

Viking-Age imagery routinely mingled a variety of beasts, beings and patterns, taking on multiple iterations via a broad range of media. In our efforts to comprehend what we see, we may consider which stories they might be depicting just as much as why motifs had to be visualized and materialized in a particular way. The figurative pendants form a case in point in this chapter: as innovations appearing in the early Viking age, they open the door to a visual world where the crucial moment of a particular event, involving multiple agents, was miniaturized to, in turn, be worn on the body.

The revaluation of the corpus of pendants representing two anthropomorphic figures and a horse led to subdividing it into three sub-classes, the first conforming to the current *stand der forschung* (the welcoming scene), the third resonating with known equestrian motifs (the dragon-slayer scene), and the second prompting a new reading of the scene as that of an offering. Echoes of this ritual may be found in a broad range of fragmentary sources, and the role of its main performer, the figure holding the knife in preparation for the sacrifice of the horse, may have found its expression in the mortuary rituals conducted for the burial of a small number of individuals.

The figurative pendants' aesthetic qualities should not lead one to overlook the significance of the event they represent. Its materialization and visualization in miniature form can be understood as a tool for channelling and prolonging the efficacy of the ritual in time and for the benefit of the object's wearer, thus making it equal in function to known amulet types from other regions and periods. When placing Viking-Age material culture in a broader perspective, one is forced to reflect beyond the limits of the fragmentary material upon which many of our interpretations are based.

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Acknowledgments

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Online resources

DIME: https://www.metaldetektorfund.dk

Portable Antiquities Scheme: https://finds.org.uk/

Museum Vest's online database (SJM find records): http://sol.musvest.dk

Stuttgart Psalter, Cod.bibl.fol.23: http://digital.wlb-stuttgart.de/purl/bsz307047059

Appendix. List of examples with references to used illustrations

Sub-class 1
Hald Hovedgaard (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 10; Plate 1)
Hedeby (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 41; Figure 1, p. 100)
Hedeby (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 42; Figure 1, p. 100)
Hedeby (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 44; Figure 1, p. 100)
Nonnebakken (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 17; Plate 2) – Fig. 1a
Tissø (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 28; Plate 4)
Vindeby (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 30; Plate 4)

Sub-class 1 – possible
Busenevej (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 2; Plate 1)
Hedeby (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022; Figure 1, p. 100)
Hindsholm (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 13; Plate 2)
Hjadstrup (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 14; Plate 2)
Neble (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 16; Plate 2)
Store Rørbæk (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 23; Plate 3)
Ågårdsmark (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 33; Plate 4)

Sub-class 2
Fausing (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 4; Plate 1)
Find 1541 (DIME: https://www.metaldetektorfund.dk/ny/fund/?dimeid=1541)
Find 71099 (DIME: https://www.metaldetektorfund.dk/ny/fund/?dimeid=71099)
Havsmarken (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 12; Plate 1)
Stentinget (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 22; Plate 3)
Tissø (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 25; Plate 3)
Tissø (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 27; Plate 3) – Fig. 1b

Sub-class 2 – possible
Peterborough (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 50; Plate 2)
Ribe Posthus (Petersen 1992, fig. 4)
Tygstrup (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 29; Plate 4)
Unknown findspot (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 34; Plate 4)

Sub-class 3
Find 217086 (DIME: https://www.metaldetektorfund.dk/ny/fund/?dimeid=217086)
Find 199108 (DIME: https://www.metaldetektorfund.dk/ny/fund/?dimeid=199108)
Varming By (SJM 894 x105) – Fig. 1c
Hedeby (Helmbrecht 2011, nr. 256, Abb. 2, p. 68)

Hybrid

Bylaugh (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 48; Plate 1)

Ribe Dagmarsgade (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 19; Plate 3)

Sønder Tranders (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 17; no. 24; Plate 3)

Non-identified

Engløkken (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 3; Plate 1)

Find 8738 (DIME: https://www.metaldetektorfund.dk/ny/fund/?dimeid=8738)

Terp By (SJM 1115 x1)

Fjelsted (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 6; Plate 1)

Gudum (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 9; Plate 1)

Hedeby (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 40; Plate 2; Helmbrecht 2011, nr. 257)

Neble (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 15; Plate 3)

Sankt Thøgers Kirke (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 21; Plate 3)

Truso / Janow Pomorski (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 47; Plate 4)

Unknown findspot (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 35; Plate 4)

Øster Lindet (Gardeła, Pentz and Price 2022, cat. no. 32; Plate 3)

Varming By (SJM 894 x62+x115)

Find 336087 (DIME: https://www.metaldetektorfund.dk/ny/fund/?dimeid=336087)

Site	ID	Body	Grave	Knife position Other remarkable objects	DNA (Margaryan et al. 2020)	References
Bogøvej (Langeland, DK)	Grave BA	F (osteo) R hand parallel to body L on lap	W–E, in wagon + chamber	2 knives: 1. (20.8 cm). In/near L hand (long, with silver inlays), tip to SW + whetstone on L hand; 2. (8.8 cm). On R breast, tip to NE, with 5 beads	VK288: F, "Swedish-like"	Grøn et al. 1994, 30–34
Galgedil (Funen, DK)	Grave AQQ_2 (Double burial)	M (osteo) >45 Supine with "frog-legs", elbows bent outwards (folded hands?)	S–N, in iron–fitted coffin (small boat, wagon body?)	2 knives: 1. By L lower arm, tip to SW, with whetstone, tip to NE; 2. Between the legs, tip to NE		Coll. 2018; Croix 2025, 142–4, Table 10.1
Galgedil (Funen, DK)	Grave LS	M (osteo) R hand on lap L hand slightly bent towards it	N–S	In/near L hand ("long" in report) Whetstone next to and parallel to lower R arm	VK446: M, "Danish-like"	Coll. 2018; Croix 2025, 142–4, Table 10.1
Kumle Høje (Langeland, DK)	Grave H	M (osteo) Deformity from injury to lower leg	WNW–ESE	In R hand		Thäte 2006, 269; cat. no. 17; Kjær Kristensen & Bennike 2001
Næsby (Vesthimmerland, DK)	Grave A120	F (artefacts)	WNW–ESE	2 knives: 1. (7.0 cm). Upper body. 2. (12.3 cm). Lower body (with silver/gold wire) + whetstone and key		Nielsen (no date), no pagination.
Nästa (Småland, SW)	Grave 7A	M(?), 35–45	NW–SE Under mound	In/near L hand Whetstone		Thäte 2006, 269; cat. no. 155; Svanberg 2003, 206–7
Trekroner/Grydehøj (Sjælland, DK)	Grave A505 (Triple burial, in sequence)	F (osteo), 25–30 Supine, arms probably parallel to the body	N–S, in pit, with stone–packed fill	1 knife and 1 knife-handle, together on a box next to the upper R arm; spear-like object in between and parallel to the body		Ulriksen 2018; 2011
Virentofta (Scania, SW)	Grave 2	F(?) Supine, slightly flexed	NW–SE Body under three boulders	In R hand Oval brooches		Thäte 2006, 269, cat. no. 145; Svanberg 2003, 290

Table 1. Burials from South Scandinavia in which a knife was possibly placed in one of the deceased's hands as well as burials including two knives close to the deceased's body.

Bodies of Intoxication:
Psychoactives in Viking Ritual Practice

Marianne Hem Eriksen and Brian Costello

Introduction

The drunk and frenzied Viking is a trope in line with associated stereotypes of bloodthirsty warriors and senseless violence. However, enough evidence remains to suggest that intoxication due to alcohol, and perhaps other psychoactive substances, was integral to many aspects of life in the Late Iron/Viking Ages. After all, apparently there is no other word for 'sober' in Old Norse than *ódrukkin* – 'un-drunk'. Viking bodies were, in many ways, bodies of intoxication. One of the aspects of life that alcohol permeates is ritual practice.

To the extent that this has been studied, the use of alcohol conventionally links to ideas of frenzied warriors and berserkers, or to feasting. Some research over the last few decades has related intoxicants to ritual practices, specifically that of the *völva* – the female ritual specialist (e.g. Price 2019). More broadly Germanic work has centered elite drinking culture and the role of the 'lady with the mead-cup' (Enright 1996) and the female leader of the household as a powerbroker, mediating power relationships within the warrior-band through pouring of alcohol. What Iron and Viking age studies have not contemplated in much detail so far is the fundamentally material and embodied process of making and ingesting alcohol or other psychoactives by taking and incorporating them into the body, generating specific embodied reactions in specific settings. Drawing on seminal work in anthropology and philosophy, this paper centers alcohol as a form of material culture, providing tangible sets of sensory experiences, but ultimately destined to be destroyed through the process of ingestion.

Current archaeological discourse sees ingestion, whether of animals, plants or fermented crops, as not only (at times) performative and ritualized, but as embodied material culture and as part of an archaeology of the senses. Materials are taken into the body, sustaining and altering it in the process. This paper draws together evidence for the use of alcohol, psychoactives and intoxication with concepts of embodiment and sensory experience in ritual practices of Iron and Viking Ages. By centering the intoxicated body and alcohol as embodied material culture, we can perhaps also push beyond the gendered tropes of 'man-the-warrior' and 'woman-the-server' – but rather begin to see how a range of bodies were influenced by psychoactives themselves as well as by the accompanying drinking paraphernalia.

Ultimately, this approach to alcohol provides a different lens through which we can understand the role of intoxicants in ritual and writ large – as something that merges with the body and transforms it in turn. Viking bodies were, in many cases literally, bodies of intoxication. Yet, intoxication and ritual performance could also be used as an instrument of oppression and violence.

Eating and relating, drinking and destroying:
perspectives from sensory archaeology, anthropology
and the philosophy of eating

How can we move beyond tropes of drunken, frenzied Vikings and do some theoretical work on the intersection between psychoactives, ritual practice and the body? This section brings three thinkers, from archaeology, anthropology and philosophy, into conversation with one another to develop epistemic reflections around intoxication. We can take our first cue from the archaeologist Yannis Hamilakis. In his important work on archaeology and senses (2013), he made a concerted effort to enrich our narratives about the past though considering embodied and sensorial experience. Hamilakis writes about how food and drink has conventionally been approached in studies of the past:

> "It was forgotten that food and drink substances had colour, taste, and smell and that they produced bodily pleasure (or pain), intoxication, altered states of consciousness, emotions, and feelings. [It was as if Archaeology] suffered from collective amnesia which caused their practitioners to engage in a discourse that talked about species and their ecological and economic aspects, rather than plants and animals with physical characteristics and effects: plants that emitted smells and that, when eaten, had characteristic even memorable tastes, [or] would have caused distinctive effects on the human body such as intoxication, sleepiness, or hallucinations, amongst others." (Hamilakis 2013, 50)

This quote efficiently places us back in our bodies. It reminds us that ingesting food or alcohol is a foundational embodied experience, not a pure economic-rational practice devoid of emotion, experience and the senses. Although we cannot grasp the exact sensory inputs of the past, we are doing the past a disservice by not considering the experiential aspect, whether of everyday life or moments of heightened ritual charge. The production and ingestion of intoxicants can be a way of seeing to the body and its emotional and ontological wellbeing.

Moving from sensory experience, the anthropologist Michael Dietler (2006) has worked on the understanding of alcohol (and other intoxicants) as the subject of analysis. First of all, Dietler points out that the term 'alcohol' is a culturally specific, and quite recent, analytical category. The category 'alcohol' lumps together a variety of substances on the basis of the presence of ethanol that produces psychoactive effects. The concept of alcohol as a collective term linking such things as beer, wine or spirits is actually a product of the nineteenth-century temperance movement. We may be lumping things together, then, that in an emic perspective were completely different substances. Different liquid entities may not have been conceptually related at all in specific historical situations; they may have been understood in practice-based and situational ways. Alcohol may not even have been recognized as a drink: in many cultures, alcohol is understood as a particularly nourishing kind of *food*.

Moreover, alcohol, as other foodstuffs and psychoactive plant substances, is in itself material culture. Cooking and brewing are technical processes of transformation involving heat and fire, akin to other forms of *making*. Because alcohol consumption requires constant replenishment, it ties in with a range of other technologies and practices: agriculture, labor,

knowledge and power. Who made the alcohol, who had access to it, who served it – these are not neutral questions but tie in with larger social and political structure. Ultimately these technical processes create certain types of objects. What sets these objects apart from other socio-technical products is that intoxicants constitute material culture that are meant to be destroyed through the ingestion process. Alcohol is taken into the body and thus disintegrated, while altering the body in the process.

Third, in her recent book *Eating in Theory,* philosopher Annemarie Mol (2021) troubles the conventional ways philosophers assume a mind/body split. Mol argues that capital-T 'Theory' in the humanities and social sciences privileges the thinking, human mind over all other parts of the world – thereby also splitting the human in two: a lowly body with 'profane' bodily needs and a superior mind that thinks and cogitates about the world. This critique aligns with now longstanding efforts to challenge dichotomies of mind/body and nature/culture across the social sciences, philosophy, and science and technology studies.

What sets Mol's approach apart is that she uses the body's metabolism – quite literally – as a way to understand fundamental aspects of the world (see also Kay in press). What would happen, she asks, if philosophy exchanged 'thinking' about the world with 'eating' the world? This approach in some ways dovetails with Dietler's argument of alcohol being material culture destroyed through the ingestion process. Mol similarly sees eating as a foundational way of relating to the world. We use our bodies to tend crops and herd animals and relate to lots of beings-in-the-world, and then we ingest them, and thus take the world into our own bodies. 'From stuff on my plate, food becomes me,' Mol writes. She reflects that, fundamentally, eating has allowed her to grow, to become an adult, to write, to teach and to be a philosopher. Foodstuffs, or drink, pass through our bodies, become building blocks or are excreted. The world moves through our bodies, Mol argues.

What these three strands of scholarship do is re-situate ingestible material culture including alcohol and other psychoactives from an abstract space of symbolism and representation to a corporeal space of embodiment and experience. Bodies are permeable, they are made to take stuff in and excrete stuff out, there is a metabolism to the human experience that cannot be transcended. The ingestion of intoxicants would have had tangible consequences in the past (as much as it does in the present) – it will have altered liver cells and life expectancies, it will have shaped social interactions and ritual performance, and it may have sparked joy and violence.

In this article, we aim to build on these theoretical reflections to tease out new ways to understand intoxication in the Viking Age. We draw on varied evidence from textual and material sources to identify shared motifs which allow us to explore how alcohol and other intoxicants may have been conceptualized and experienced. In the following we explore four aspects of intoxicants and psychoactives: their *making*, their *ingestion*, their link to bodily *transformation*, and finally, to *transgression*.

Making

While recognizing this as a contemporary umbrella term, alcoholic substances were likely the most common psychoactives in the Late Iron Age and Viking period of Scandinavia (but see

'*Transforming*' below). Alcohol came in multiple forms, such as beer, mead and fruit wines; potentially also as fermented milk-products, known from later medieval Iceland, and imported wine (e.g. Gjerpe 2001; Guerrero Rodríguez 2007). The Eddic poem *Grimnir's Sayings* (stanza 19) famously states that 'on wine alone weapon-good Óðinn always lives'. However, wine was likely rare, with scarce evidence of import or potential grapevine cultivation within the Scandinavian homelands (e.g. Gjerpe 2001; Henriksen *et al.* 2017), although amphorae have been found in e.g. York and likely glass wine vessels found in Kaupang (Hagen 1995; Gaut 2007). The Eddic poem *Alvíssmál* – the All-wise's Sayings – provides several Old Norse words for alcoholic drinks, including *ǫl* ('ale')*, bjórr* ('beer'), *mjǫðr* ('mead', 'honey') and others.

What do we know about the making of alcoholic products in the Viking Age? The most common, perhaps preferred, alcoholic drink was likely beer[1], which we mainly focus on here. Historical evidence of beer in Scandinavia comes from the end of the early medieval period and into the high Middle Ages (Unger 2004), as well as anthropological studies of traditional brewing techniques from the 20th century CE (Nordland 1969; Garshol 2016; Brunstad 2019). Wider works on pre-modern beer and beer brewing allow for further interpretations of intoxication in Iron and Viking Age worlds (Bennett 1996; Unger 2004). For example, Bennett's work (1996) on brewsters from later medieval England highlighted the continuous need to brew, as ale turns sour without the use of preservative hops. Others have utilized experimental archaeology in an effort to replicate and understand past brewing techniques and processes (Garshol 2016; Laitinen 2019; Rosa Brusin 2021, 27), and we draw on several of these insights here.

The *chaîne opératoire* of alcohol production was an expansive process involving a multitude of human and non-human actors engaged in long-term processes. It included plants and herbs, draught animals and ploughs, pots and stones, and bees (for honeyed mead). Human and animal bodies provided labor, skills and practice. Malting was the process of roasting germinated grains to produce fermentable sugars (Dineley 2004; Stika 2011). This malt would then be heated using boiled water (mashing), releasing the sugars into the mixture called the wort (Larsson *et al.* 2019: 1963). Additives provided flavor and could consist of any local herbs or plants: sweet gale (*Myrica gale*) was likely the most prominent during the early and later Iron Age (von Hofsten 1960; Behre 1999; Balic and Heimdahl 2015), with hops (*Humulus lupulus*) becoming the main additive in the later medieval period, as its preservative qualities provided a significant shelf life to beer in general (Behre 1999). The widespread use of sweet gale instead of hops indicates that every day, weaker beer would only last approximately 2–4 days before souring (Bennett 1996; Behre 1999; Pajic 2021). Thus, household brewing likely took place frequently, potentially multiple times a week, in order to supply fresh beer for daily sustenance. Yeast would be added after the boil, so as not to kill the organism with too much heat. Wild yeasts have been found to be used in Scandinavia which could be used continuously from one brew to the next (Keyland 1989; Viklund 2009; Larsson *et al.* 2019, 1963).

The archaeological evidence of beer is somewhat ambiguous. Beer itself, being a perishable foodstuff and ingestible material culture, doesn't leave an archaeological footprint, but evidence of its production is identifiable through various materials. Malt, or germinated grains roasted to prepare them for the brewing process, has been identified in storage pots at Østerbølle, Denmark, dated to the first century CE, as well as at the ringfort at Eketorp, Sweden in the 6th century CE, and large amounts of malt remains found within a 9th-century hall from Uppland,

Sweden, demonstrating the storage of brewing ingredients (Helbæk 1938; 1966; Viklund 1989). Archaeobotanical evidence of sweet gale and hops, the two most prominent beer flavorings and preservatives, has been found in great abundance across Scandinavia and wider northwest Europe from the early medieval period (Behre 1999). In one case, the process of malting has been identified within kilns at the Iron Age ritual complex of Uppåkra, Sweden (Larsson *et al.* 2019). Although kilns can be used for multiple purposes (pottery, cooking, etc.), the high quantity of germinated barley indicates its specific use for the malting of grains. Brewing stones or 'bryggestein' have been found at Late Iron Age farmsteads across Scandinavia, and although somewhat ambiguous, were likely utilized to transfer heat in the mashing process (Grønnesby 2017, 146–47). A reinterpretation of Norse bathhouses or saunas also points to evidence of potential brewing locations in the northern Scottish Isles and Iceland (Dineley and Dineley 2013).

Overall, the brewing process did not necessitate much specialized equipment, and the labor of brewing was undertaken by single households as well as wider group farmsteads (Bennett 1996; Grønnesby 2017). However, the production of a palatable beer required skills and expertise, including knowledge of suitable ingredients and plants, specific temperatures, cooking, fermentation processes, storage, and so on. Moreover, the making of alcoholic substances was imbued with ritual allusions in the written sources. Snorri's Edda[2] tells us how the truce between the warring Æsir and Vanir clans of gods was sealed by all those present spitting into a vat (*Skáldskaparmál* 57). From the vat emerged the creature Kvasir, a being so wise that he could answer any question. Ultimately, however, two dwarves killed Kvasir and mixed his blood with honey, creating mead – a substance that makes anyone who drinks from it a poet or a scholar. Ethnographically there is some evidence of using spit as a yeast-starter in fermentation processes, and some scholars discuss whether the Kvasir narrative hints at this practice (e.g. Guerrero Rodríguez 2007, 113). Likewise, in a Christian context, Jochens (1995, 127) points out that brewing would sometimes require divine intervention through miracles. The process of making alcohol may have been imbued with concepts of otherworldly processes and powers.

There would inevitably be better brewers than others. The intoxication of guests within a household would not only reflect hospitality, but highlight the prowess and expertise of the brewer and intoxicant. Yet the identity of the brewers is largely unknown to us. While some scholars state that brewing was women's work (e.g. Jochens 1995) we do not really know who was in charge: whether it was a lowly task delegated to subalterns within the households or executed by the house owners. It is possible that not only the ingestion of alcoholic substances was connected with ritual performance (see below), but that the process itself (or the brewing of specific batches) demanded ritual knowledge and particular acts to ensure that the substance was made right.

Ingesting

Beer and other alcoholic substances may have been understood as a foodstuff that nourished and sustained the body. Evidence from the high medieval period suggests that beer was a

common staple of people's diets, mostly in weaker strength (approximately 1–2% alcohol by volume) produced for daily consumption (Bennett 1996, 17; Rosa Brusin 2021, 12). As the ingredients mostly consisted of grains and herbs, this daily beer was in the high medieval period a normal dietary component consumed by individuals of all ages (Unger 2004, 2–3), which may have been true for the Viking Age as well. This means that even children may have ingested low-alcohol beer on a daily basis. This everyday ingestion of weaker beers presumably took place around and within the longhouses that still seem the prevalent form of non-urban architecture in the Viking Age. Whether people would also consume alcohol in the fields, while herding animals to summer shielings, etc., we can only speculate.

But alcohol was also intimately connected to all forms of punctuating life events. Crucially, multiple rites of passage in Old Norse, Old Swedish and Old Danish are compound words with 'beer', such as *erfðarøl* ('inheritance-beer'), gravaöl ('grave-beer'), barnsøl/barsel ('child-beer') and so on (e.g. Steinsland 2005). Consequently, it is worth pointing out that alcohol seems so ingrained in life events, whether joyful, sad or anything in between, that people could not talk about significant bodily events such as childbirth or death rituals without drawing on words for intoxicants. Even medieval law codes, such as the legal obligation to brew beer for *jól*, signified the expectation to intoxicate in times of gathering. After all, celebrating jól was termed 'drikka jól'. Stronger beer was likely brewed specifically for gatherings such as funerals, weddings, rites of passage, ritual holidays or other celebrations (Rosa Brusin 2021, 71). Alcohol produced and consumed during times of social gatherings or feasts is interpreted to have been stronger and thus to intoxicate people much more easily than the weaker beers imbibed daily.

Intoxication was thus an expected and understood social practice when gatherings were held. No matter what type of event was being held (political feast, wedding, funeral, religious event), all were seemingly built upon the expectation of beer- or mead-drinking, horn- or vessel-sharing and overall intoxication. In scholarship, intoxication is often slotted into interpretative schemes of hierarchical political acts (see below) or large-scale religious events. While we explore some of these below, we want to briefly note Lars Erik Gjerpe's (2001) counterpoint to how the ingestion of alcohol is understood. He reminds us that while there can be large-scale political and religious aspects to imbibing, communal feasts and celebrations also play other, important functions. Drinking together may also in the past have been about the joys of getting drunk, friendship, drunken brawls, settling minor disagreements, sexual encounters, games and playfulness, and many other forms of sociality. By ingesting the world (*sensu* Mol 2021) in the form of psychoactives, relations can play out in altered ways.

Spaces and paraphernalia related to drinking

Larger feasts and gatherings, especially those hosted by a local leader or powerbase, seem to have taken place in larger halls, or in cult buildings. Hall buildings can be understood as ritual spaces where certain acts 'bundled bodies, politics and performance in rich ways that would have produced specific affects, memories, and emotions among onlookers and partitioners' (Eriksen 2023, 63). This is no less true for formalized feasts and practices of intoxication. Archaeologically speaking, a recurring trait of the halls is the inclusion of glass drinking

vessels within archaeological assemblages (see Eriksen 2023). The connection between hall buildings and intoxication is also prevalent in the later written sources. Poetic phrasing such as Old English *medoheal*, *beorsele*, Old Norse *mjǫðrann*, *bjórsalr* combine the words for 'mead' or 'beer' with various names for 'hall'; thereby intimately connecting the hall with alcoholic consumption (Lönnroth 1997, 33).

Pouring and serving alcohol has been widely interpreted as a ritualized performance in Germanic societies, with the 'lady of the mead cup' embodying a specific role in pouring alcohol for the warrior retinue feasting in the hall; working not only as a server but assigning rank through the order in which she served (Enright 1996). When the warriors or other guests ingested food and alcohol provided by their leader, they in some sense were partaking in a Maussian form of gift exchange (1954), where they were fed and served and given a feast in return for their service and their loyalty. What sets the gift apart in this instance is that it was to be ingested – as Dietler (2001) points out, as a participant you *eat the social debt* and it is now part of your body. The food and alcohol ingested will have altered the bodies of the feasting partitioners as well as transformed social bonds, debts and obligations.

The vessels that were held, filled, shared and drunk from likewise played a central role within these bundled social, ritual and political performances. A variety of forms and compositions of drinking vessels have been found, potentially indicative of use for a specific beverage type (Gaut 2007) and necessitating the knowledge on proper use. The most notable vessel type is the drinking horn (Fig. 1b), which appears in the sagas and in iconography as well as the archaeological record (Hofmann 2015). Previously studied for their development (Krauße 1996), their archaeological contexts (Gehrecke 1950; Müller 1955), their iconography (Magerøy 2000), and more recently their use and symbolism throughout the Viking Age (Hofmann 2015), drinking horns were exceptional vessels used for the process of intoxication. Their roles within social and ritual practices are still not fully understood in terms of social protocols, and their selective final deposition within a sparse number of burials. The vessels will however have encouraged specific forms of embodied practice or *techniques du corps* (sensu Mauss 1973).

Drinking scenes and iconographic representations of figures offering drinking horns have been identified in the Gotlandic picture stones and in smaller objects such as silver pendants (Fig. 1a), often interpreted as depicting a female-gendered person offering alcohol as part of Enright's 'lady with the mead-cup' motif (above). Archaeologically, drinking horns themselves are most often identified by their metal fittings, as the keratinous horn does not survive well within the ground (Hofmann 2015, 243; O'Connor *et al.* 2015). A rare example of preserved drinking horns has been found within bogs near Skudstrup, Denmark, where, prior to over-curation, carvings could be identified upon the vessels (Gruß 1931). The majority of drinking horns excavated from burial contexts are dated to the Iron Age, their numbers diminishing during the Viking Age (Ellmers 1964–65; Steuer 2006, 255; Hofmann 2015, 243). However, statistical differences in the number of horns found are problematic as horns without metal fittings do not survive to be identified. Most of the drinking horns have been identified within female-gendered graves, with very few examples of inclusions within male-gendered burials (Gebühr 1994; Hofmann 2015, 244). When included as grave goods, drinking horns tended to be deposited in pairs (Hofmann 2015, 244). Rather than simply portraying an owned object within a burial, a pair of drinking horns indicates multiple participants taking part

Figure 1. a) Silver pendant from Klinta, Öland, of an anthropomorphic figure carrying a drinking horn. Photo: O. Myrin /SHM (CC BY 4.0). b) Viking-Age drinking horn metal fittings from chamber burial in Birka, Sweden (Bj 523). Photo: C. Åhlin/SHM. CC BY 4.0.

in inebriation together. Thus, interred pairs of drinking horns recall the inherently social practice of intoxication.

Furthermore, though, the practice of using drinking horns also inherently means that intoxication was achieved through another body – the animal itself. Participants were literally ingesting drink into their body via an animal body; and perhaps on certain occasions that of a specific animal – as the pairs of drinking horns from burial contexts have been found to come from a single individual ox (Hofmann 2015, 244). The choice of using animal body parts to ingest specific forms of liquids, rather than for example ceramic vessels, was not random, but speaks to specific ideas of how intoxicants should be distributed, served, and taken into the human body.

Transforming

Some evidence points to the use of other forms of psychoactives beyond alcohol in the period. One popular hypothesis is that the 'berserk-fury' of warriors, including biting, howling and perhaps taking on the shape or skin of a bear, was induced by the ingestion of fly agaric (*Amanita muscaria*) (Hedeager 2015 with references)[3]. Moreover, a famous burial from Fyrkat, northern Jutland – interpreted as the burial of a magical practitioner, a *völva* – contained hundreds of seeds of henbane (*Hyoscyamus sp.*) and a bowl with a substance which, combined with the seeds, causes hallucination (Price 2019, 169). Neil Price connects henbane with *seiðr* magic; emphasizing that the psychoactive can produce a strong sensation of shapeshifting and flight, which may link with the shamanistic aspects of seiðr. Intriguingly, another famous burial with possible links with seiðr is the Oseberg burial, which included cannabis seeds distributed among cushions as well as in a leather pouch (Price 2019, 169, with references). Finally, the famous ibn Fadlan account[4] mentions that the young woman who is raped and murdered is

given something to drink – 'nabidh' – that makes her confused and inebriated. We return to this story below. In sum, while there is little conclusive evidence for widespread use of hallucinogens and other psychoactive substances in the Viking period, it seems very likely that they had intimate knowledge of plants and their properties, and that the embodied reactions to psychoactives could be utilized in a range of different ways.

Psychoactives, then, were in the Viking Age linked to a number of practices: political acts of feasting, alliance-building and gift exchange; embodied practices of food consumption, satisfaction and metabolism; and likely as a natural part of social interactions, community-building, friendship and sexuality. However, two further roles intoxicants played are worth briefly noting: we will start with exploring psychoactive substances as an instrument for transformation, before turning to the darker sides of intoxication and interpersonal violence.

When studying bodies and body-politics in the Viking period, there is at times a mismatch between bounded, monolithic identities presented in scholarship ('warrior', 'völva', 'housewife') and the complexity in the archaeological and written material we encounter. All evidence – archaeological, textual, philological -- points to really complex constellations of beings crisscrossing human-animal or human-object divides in the Viking Age (Eriksen 2017; Eriksen and Kay 2022; Eriksen and Ratican in press; Gardeła and Kajkowski 2023; Ratican 2020). A crucial example is the idea of *human-animal transformation*, expressed in animal art, iconography and textual sources; perhaps also in the inclusion of animals in burials (Croix 2023; Eriksen 2020; Eriksen and Ratican in press; Hedeager 1999; Mundal 1974). From written sources as well as archaeological material, a picture is painted of a highly composite self, interwoven with the larger kingroup or clan, with *hamingja*, the embodied 'luck' of the kin, with portable objects such as swords, and with animals. The famous passage in *Ynglinga Saga* (chapter 7) states that Odin '… could transform his shape: his body would lie as if dead, or asleep; but then he would be in shape of a fish, or worm, or bird, or beast, and be off in a twinkling to distant lands'.

In contrast to some conventional understandings of Viking burials, there is little to indicate that the Viking body was inherently seen as a bounded and delineated entity. In contrast, (some) bodies may at times, or in death, have been split, fluid and transcendent (e.g. Hedeager 2010; Eriksen 2020). The idea of 'soul journeys' like the one attributed to Odin above, has been connected with shamanism, perhaps influenced by circumpolar traditions (Price 2019). Some scholars make straightforward connections between shamanistic practices and psychoactives, not without merit, as these are linked in many cultures.

However, we argue that there is more to be developed regarding bodies, intoxication, and ritual practices. Some bodies, or all bodies at particular moments, were clearly open for transformation, for other states of being. Perhaps that openness, as has been suggested, has been captured in some of the anthropomorphic depictions of the time. The intense stare of bodily depictions has been linked with the finds of henbane mentioned above. Some also speculate whether repeated motifs of animal-human hybrids, such as the 'winged women' known from iconography (Fig. 2), poetry and folklore, relates to an embodied sense of transformation (Back Danielsson 2007). Are we here seeing bodies under transformation, affected by henbane or other psychoactive substances, which allow sensations of flight or other bodily transformation in specific ways?

Figure 2. Woman in feather cape – or a woman with wings? Gold foil figures, the left object c. 1.5 cm tall, Bornholm, c. 6th century CE. Photo: Lennart Larsen/Nationalmuseet, CC BY SA.

While this can be neither confirmed nor refuted, we find it more productive to focus on how transforming grain and honey and plants into ingestible substances, taken into the body, may have been part of an inherent openness to the world, as part of Viking ontologies. These substances are sometimes referred to as 'mind-altering', but of course they alter more than the mind. The entire sensory apparatus is affected, including smells, tastes and perceptions, as is the immediate surrounding world. What makes psychoactives so fascinating is exactly their role in taking the world into the body. The world (local plants, grains grown in the nearby field; honey traded from far away or a known hive, all mixed together through the hands and knowledge of community member) moves through the body, is ingested, metabolized and excreted, the capacities of the ingesting bodies transformed and altered in turn (sensu Mol 2021). However, the same qualities of intoxicants that make the body permeable to transformation also make it vulnerable for transgression.

Transgressing

Some evidence indicates that alcohol and psychoactives could be weaponized and used as instruments of violence, also with ritual overtones, in these societies. If we are to move alcohol and other psychoactives from an abstract space of symbolism and representation to a corporeal space of embodiment and experience, this means acknowledging the use of intoxicants as an instrument for harm.

We draw out two examples here: One is the aforementioned infamous ibn Fadlan account of the sexual violence and sacrifice of a young enslaved woman on the river Volga in 922 CE (based on the Montgomery 2000 translation). As a general comment, ibn Fadlan offers the following observation of the Rus' relationship with alcohol: 'They are addicted to alcohol, which they drink night and day. Sometimes one of them dies with the cup still in his hand.' He also mentions how a third of the deceased's wealth is to be spent on alcohol for the funerary rite.

From the moment the enslaved girl 'volunteers' to be sacrificed with her master (however we are to understand that irreversible speech-act), she is treated differently. Over the course of the next nine days she is given new body adornment, and she is waited on by two other enslaved women, who 'even occasionally wash her feet'. 'Every day the slave-girl would drink [alcohol] and would sing merrily and cheerfully.' On the day of the funeral, the girl is brought from tent to tent where the chieftain's men have intercourse with her, one after the other. These sexual acts may relate to the subsequent ritual of the erected doorway, where she is lifted over a door to be enabled to see into the otherworld (Eriksen 2013). She is then lifted onto the funerary ship and given several cups of *nabidh* (translated as alcohol) over which she chants before she drinks, and she is described as 'befuddled'.

Her intoxication (or fear?) seems to make her unable to enter the constructed burial chamber on the deck of the ship; ultimately the woman leading the proceedings drag the enslaved woman by the hair into the burial chamber, at which point six men have intercourse with her – rape her – and the young woman is ultimately stabbed and strangled to death. The *nabidh* – which may have included other psychoactive substances as well as alcohol (Roesdahl 1982, 19) – plays a prominent role in the unfolding events here, from being part of the division of the inheritance to the preparation of the enslaved girl's body as sacrifice. The *nabidh* is a form of material entity that helps facilitate ritual rape and murder.

In a completely different kind of text, alcohol is also used as an intentional instrument for violence. In *The Poem of Volund*, the captured smith Vǫlundr famously takes his revenge on the king, Níðuðr, through a number of violent acts. He lures the two sons of the king to his smithy and transforms their bodies into objects – their skulls become silver drinking cups, their eyes become jewels, their teeth become brooches; and he sends these objects as gifts to the king, queen and their daughter respectively. But his vengeance extends further. Vǫlundr finally lures Bǫðvildr, the king's daughter, into the smithy by promising to mend her ring. He gives her beer until she passes out in her seat, and rapes her. He leaves her pregnant, as was his intent. Confronted by her father, Bǫðvildr exclaims (stanza 41): 'I did not know how to strive against him; I was not able to strive against him!'

These texts are from different genres (medieval poetry and a diplomatic account), written in different cultural contexts and languages (Old Norse and Arabic respectively). However,

both contain a narrative of the coercion of women's bodies for sexual exploitation and violence facilitated by psychoactive plant substances. Seeing as this motif exists both in later poetry and historical outsider accounts, and in the more recent past, we cannot dismiss the notion that intoxication and violence was an embodied reality and lived experience of Viking societies too – not dissimilar to contemporary culture of date-rape drugs and sexual violence. Indeed, consumption cannot be separated from sometimes harrowing social and political structures, beyond our familiar tropes of feasting and warriorhood.

Concluding reflections

This brief article has offered some developing reflections on how the ingestion of alcohol and other psychoactive substances in the Viking Age was not only (at times) performative and ritualized, but should be understood as embodied material culture and through an archaeology of the senses. Materials were taken into the body, sustaining and altering it in the process. It entailed complex, multispecies production chains of knowledge, making, labor and power. Alcohol was a component of daily life, entwining domestic practices of harvesting crops, cooking, and preserving material in either barrels or storage. Yet the making and ingestion of alcohol was simultaneously mundane and extraordinary, drunk within households on a daily basis as well as imbibed to inebriation at social gatherings, feasts and celebrations. In the creation of the most common inebriating material, beer, the brewer had the choice, through available plant materials, knowledge and practice, as to whether to create a foodstuff or a strong intoxicant, depending on the situation.

This paper has highlighted how multiple daily social and ritual practices were entwined and revolved around the consumption of intoxicating materials. Beer, among others, was an expected and necessary component within ritual practices and performances of the Late Iron and Viking Age worlds. Gatherings that featured inebriation could encompass social and political negotiations, but moreover a physical and mental immersion potentially involving comfort and hospitality; or sexual or life-ending violence. The Old Norse concept of 'un-drunk' signifies how alcohol was a material substance ingrained in diverse modes of sociality. To ingest intoxicants involved bodily performance, animal bodies, specific herbs and grains, capacity for ontological transformation, ritual acts and many other elements in complex, bundled ways.

Finally, we hope to have demonstrated that thinking more creatively about ingestion writ large – not as a 'lowly' or 'natural' practice, and beyond a high-order ritualized political act – has significant potential. The tastes, comforts and joys of ingesting intoxicants, the spaces and paraphernalia of drinking, how psychoactives alter bodily capacities and boundaries, and not least how ingesting is a fundamental way of relating to the world, open new horizons for how we understand the past.

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Notes

1 The terms beer and ale differed depending on time period and region. Generally, during the medieval period, ale did not utilize hops while beer did. However, for convenience this paper will use the contemporary definition of beer, which includes both top-fermenting ales and bottom-fermenting lagers.

2 Snorri's Edda or *The Prose Edda* is an Icelandic textbook attributed to the Icelandic chieftain Snorri Sturluson thought to be compiled in the 1220s, of which the oldest surviving manuscript dates from the 14th century (Clunies Ross 2005, 157).

3 However, it should be noted that the idea of the *berserkr* as a frenzied warrior is contested in recent scholarship, where it is argued that this is a Victorian construction rather than a Viking-Age reality (see Dale 2021).

4 In the summer of 921, Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān ibn al-ʿAbbās ibn Rāshid ibn Ḥammād – usually referred to as ibn Fadlan – was sent as an emissary by the Abbasid caliph Muqtadir in Baghdad to the upper reaches of the river Volga. On his way he encountered a group called the Rus. Their origin is contested, but scholars suggest that this group (presumably as heterogenous as other contemporary Scandinavian groups) had some origins in Viking Sweden (e.g. Hraundal 2014; Price 2008). ibn Fadlan's eyewitness report of a Rus ship burial describes, among other things, Viking material culture and ritual practice.

The performance of rituals is a key component in understanding the culture of Late Iron-Age and Viking-Age Scandinavia, which was marked by tremendous social and religious transformations. New approaches to social, political, and religious rituals are currently offering stimulating new perspectives on the period and the entanglements of symbolism, the exercise of power, materiality and agency. Research on finds such as iconographic objects or buildings associated with rituals, as well as new interpretations of well-known textual and material sources points to the continued relevance of the ritual perspective for exploring the Viking-Age mind-set.

This volume contains the proceedings of the 39th Interdisciplinary Viking Symposium, held on 20th May 2022 at Aarhus University. The five chapters of the book pose questions of what, how, and why as well as by or for whom rituals of various kinds were performed in the Viking Age in a predominantly pre-Christian context. By considering the involvement of people, words, things, and spaces in ritual acts, it seeks to deepen our understanding of ritual performance in the period from a truly interdisciplinary perspective.

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