

Devices of Ekphrasis? A Multimodal Perspective on Viking Age Animal Art

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Abstract

Traditional discussions on Viking art assume two things: the existence of a monolithic Christian culture within medieval Europe that suddenly came to dispel the equally well-defined pagan culture up North, and the existence of two categories of art, i.e. pictorial narratives on a monumental scale that carried meaningful messages versus applied arts on practical devices that were devoid of deeper meaning. A new concept of ekphrasis challenges these ideas and suggests that these devices can be referential objects for poems. By leading the discourse around ekphrasis onto practical devices with Animal Art and their polysemic layers of meaning, we explore the borderland between pictorial, oral and written texts and explore mental spaces. This way, we challenge the traditional hierarchy that places writing above other modalities and reconstruct a new way of 'reading' artefacts that better reflects the oral culture of Viking Age Scandinavians who were in the process of accepting canonic Christendom.

Introduction

Whenever discussing Animal Art someone will throw in a quote by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1091–1153) in which he resents the use of visual art (fig. 1. including quote; cf. Neiß forthcoming). There is little doubt that Bernard's critique struck a chord with his contemporaries. And yet, he remains

hard to interpret. Some claim he mocked fellow monks who preferred contemplation on images over the written word and use him as evidence for the argument that Animal Art was meaningless décor. Others focus on Bernard's choice of words, according to which his brothers would rather *read* pictures than books. The fact that medieval people tended to do their reading aloud indicates an encounter between pictorial and verbal modality. But the overall appearance of the cultural framework for this meeting of modalities remains unclear. Did Animal Art function as pictorial writing (Borg 1985: 89–90; Camille 1992: 62–64)—or did the monks instead contemplate on a verbal story to guide them through the visual labyrinth of Animal Art? Writing affects the way we think (Ong 1982: 94–133). Despite the proverb that a *picture is worth a thousand words*, modern Europeans tend to limit their visual depictions to statements that could be realized through writing. However, this does not constitute a universal law: during the course of human history, the delimitation between modalities was constantly renegotiated (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 21 f.). Historically, the West lacked a favoured modality, which resulted in a fluid transition between written, verbal and pictorial language well into the modern period (Wandhoff 2003: 4–6). Back then, people tended to read written words aloud and equate the effects of words and images to that of real-life actions (Raible & Beck 2002: 308), and did not distinguish clearly between pictures and writing characters. Consequently, we are in need of a practice-oriented definition that separates reading from ekphrasis. Viking Age Animal Art originated in an oral culture that had only marginal use of writing (cf. Bianchi 2010), and we cannot rule out that some people used pictograms or ideograms as alternative writing systems. Therefore, we define ekphrasis as a verbal statement that derives from interplay with non-verbal modalities and whose message appeals to the audience's 'inner eye' – that is their imagination (cf. Wandhoff 2003). Reading aloud refers to all attempts to vocalize statements made in a medium, or that which fulfils Walter Ong's (1982: 100–104) requirements for a writing system (i.e. a storage medium and a set of graphemes and conventions that help readers reproduce the grammatical relation of words).

How pronounced then, was the border between verbal and visual medium in Viking Age society? Viking Age poets described their own craft with

the verbs *smíða* or *skapa*. *Smíða* referred both to metal craft and carving in bone or wood, and *skapa* to the act of shaping objects, poems and human fate. The analogy between poets and artisans is mirrored in the self-revelation of the skald Bragi Boddason—who supposedly invented the entire skaldic genre—as ‘*skapsmið Viðurs*’ (‘thought-smith of Viður > Óðinn’) and ‘*hagsmiðr bragar*’ (‘skilful smith of verse’; Clunies Ross 2005: 1–2; Kristoffersen 2010: 262, 269). According to the manual of poetry written by the famous Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241), skalds used technical terms from metalcraft and carving. The final poem was considered craftwork with physical properties. It could be gifted away, was the subject of art criticism and became a memorial to its author (Clunies Ross 2005: 25, 95; Gade 2000: 65; Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 2004: 196–197; Marold 2005a: 25, 571; Poole 2005: 555). It seems that the intellectual work of poets, metalworkers and carvers were considered comparable (Clunies Ross 2005: 84). Following this formulation, we suggest considering the products of their crafts as comparable entities.

Decorated monuments versus practical devices

There are two research imbalances that traditionally decouple style from pictorial content, as well as from the actual artefact. The first one conceives of Animal Art as devoid of meaning. Historically, this was promoted by a combination of two factors. On one side, there is the Eurocentric concept of art that distinguished between ‘art for art’s sake’ and ‘the applied arts’. On the other, there is an evolutionary idea of cultural progress that entailed a pessimistic view on décor-producing, non-European cultures that were not expected to have reached the necessary intellectual level to connect pictures with meaning (Müller 1880: 188, 399, 403). Art historians’ classifications of ‘Oriental’ and ‘Primitive art’ hearken back to this idea (Morphy 2010: 269–270). As a result, scholars more often focused on dating, distribution and attribution than on the conceptual analysis of the artefacts in front of them (Høilund Nielsen & Kristoffersen 2002: 17; Morphy 2010: 268–269; Neiß 2004: 10–11; 2009: 91–92; Wicker 1999: 166–167). This view has been paralleled in the encounter of European scholars with Islamic art, which they approached with etic research aims (such as style, iconography etc.), which meant that they were predisposed to overlook the emic significance, function and meaning of their

chosen materials (Nejdet Erzen 2007: 69–70). The second imbalance involves the interconnection between pictures and their carriers. Silver brooches are for clothing, weapons for fighting, and stone monuments for commemorating the dead. Until recently, scholars tended to handle those carriers as neutral canvases. However, recent studies indicate that the same depiction acquires different meanings depending e.g. on the function and material properties of its carrier, as well as the perspective of the observer (Helmbrecht 2011).

These imbalances still influence modern research, for instance when researchers claim that Animal Art filled a symbolic function when they appear on monumental carriers, but not on metal devices (Fuglesang 2001: 165). An example of allegedly ‘meaningful’ décor derives from Jelling in Denmark where we find an ensemble of royal monuments that document the gradual rise of Christendom, amongst other two memorial stones. The larger stone from ca. 968 (fig. 2) features runes and pictures. According to Signe Horn Fuglesang, this design introduces a new layer of meaning that cannot be deduced from earlier rune stones. The written medium commemorates the Christianization of Denmark by Harald Gormsson. The pictorial medium reinforces the written medium in a medieval way—i.e. by alluding to a different narrative with a message that coincides with the written message concerning Harald’s agenda. In this way, text and decoration of the Jelling stone work together. The depiction of Christ follows European models but is presented in Nordic fashion (Fuglesang 2001: 163–164). Thus, the instrument of his martyrdom has given way to some vegetable tendrils that represent the tree of life which according to Genesis grew in Paradise (*Genesis* 2: 8–14 in Egeler 2013: 18) and that in a later stage of the cosmic drama provided the timber for the holy cross (Egeler 2013: 20; Gjedssø Bertelsen 2002: 16). Research scholarship typically identifies the depiction of the quadruped on the next side (fig. 2) as either a lion, wolf or dragon. Its significance has been explained as a symbol of Christ fighting against evil, the triumph over paganism, and as an emblem (Fuglesang 1981: 101; Graham-Campbell 2013: 98; Wilson and Klindt-Jensen 1966: 120). These interpretations are based on the rendering of the physical extremities and the mane of the quadruped that reminded many scholars of a beast of prey. Else Roesdahl has suggested that the Jelling beast could represent a stag instead (Roesdahl 2013: 869). This would not only

explain its headgear, but also elucidate its meaning. In this case, the leonine mane and claws of the beast are arguably explained as result of the same stylisation that occurs elsewhere in medieval representations of stags (fig. 4; cf. Catalogue 15, 16, 17). According to a common mythological trope of this era, the stag regularly regenerates its life by swallowing a snake and water from a spring (fig. 3 including quote). This condenses three themes that are associated with immortality, i.e. rejuvenating waters and two kinds of beasts that are connected to the circle of regeneration by shedding their antlers and skin, respectively. This myth has ancient roots and was incorporated into *Physiologus* and Pliny's *Historia Naturalis* (Rackham 1940: 116–119; Suárez López 2007: 3–6, 10). Christian authors like Saint Isidore of Seville (560–636) would later spread it throughout medieval Europe (Herrin 1989: 348; Walsh 1990: 416), where it symbolised a longing for God and the thirst for eternal life, which is quenched through the act of baptism (Egeler 2013: 21). The occurrence of stag and snake bestows the entire monumental ensemble of Jelling with a new layer of meaning—that of a giant baptistery (Roesdahl 2013: 872). The iconography of the stone could be an import from the Ottonian realm, where the myth was widespread and where Harald might have been baptized. And yet, we should not rule out that it could have been mediated through different channels, like coins and other visual art (e.g. Catalogue 5, 9; Franco Valle 2016: 24).

The common link between Jelling and the following objects lies in that all seem to relate to stags. The first one is a brooch from Gnězdovo in Russia that can be conceived of as an interactive sculpture. In their canonic form, sculptural brooches are cluttered with puzzle pictures, i.e. ambiguous compositions that change shape as the viewer changes perspective (fig. 5). Recent studies revealed hitherto unknown parallels between brooches and skaldic poetry in regards to context, cognition and imagery. Therefore, it is tempting to ask whether both cultural expressions were linked by means of ekphrasis (Neiße 2007; 2009; 2011; forthcoming). The Gnězdovo brooch represents a reconstruction of an older sculptural brooch (Neiße et al. 2012). As such, it lacks significant portions of the canonic iconography. The bottom plate features an equal-armed cross and eight ribbon-shaped beasts. The décor of the central boss contains different elements that depending on viewer perspective melt into an equal-armed cross (fig. 6b). It is surrounded by four quadrupeds

(fig. 6a). Our second object is a box from the Basilica of San Isidoro in León (fig. 8, 9), that was consecrated in the eleventh century when the remains of the aforementioned writer Saint Isidore were transported from Seville to León. The openwork relief of the box in León is carved out of deer antler (Morales Romero 1991: 40) and features a large bird with a three-dimensional head. Between the jumble of tendrils that cover the box, one can spot seven smaller beasts, identifiable by their round eyes. Due to the cylindrical shape of the item, one needs to turn it slowly to appreciate the décor in its entirety. During the course of this manoeuvre, the elusive imagery seems to gradually transform, and one becomes aware of one new shape after the other. As with other puzzle pictures, the onlooker needs to engage in a physical and intellectual exercise to discern what is represented (Franco Valle forthcoming). Box and brooch share a few characteristics. First, they derive from craft traditions that are associated with the verb *smíðaða*. Second, they represent practical devices that need to be manipulated rather than just contemplated, like the Jelling stone. Third, they both feature Scandinavian Animal Art with puzzle pictures that need to be deciphered with the aid of movement, i.e. a kinesthetic modality. This means that they crave close interaction with their onlookers who potentially ascribed them an agency of their own (cf. Kopytoff 1986). Fourth, both might have served as referential objects for ekphrasis.

An updated definition of Viking Age ekphrasis

Amongst the poetic genres of Scandinavians, eddic and skaldic poetry occupy a special place, as both transitioned from Viking Age oral culture to medieval text culture. They differ in form, function and transmission. The *Poetic Edda* is a collection of poems with mythological and heroic content that appears to go back to an obscure oral tradition. The stanzas survived first and foremost in a manuscript called *Codex Regius*. Eddic poets regarded themselves as custodians of ancient lore and remained anonymous. Skaldic poetry, in contrast, was exercised by fame-seeking poets who eulogised the dead and the living by means of a poetic language full of metaphorical allusions to eddic and occasionally, Christian themes. Skaldic stanzas survived as more or less complete quotations in several hundred manuscripts, including many sagas that embed them in situational contexts whose authenticity is up for de-

bate. Skaldic poets celebrated their own artistry and tried to make a name for themselves. However, the boundary between these two genres cannot always be drawn satisfactorily, and it remains up to debate whether skalds were active in the eddic genre (Gade 2000: 62–65; Guðrún Nordal 2003: 339; Simek 1993: 287). Within Old Norse studies, ekphrasis is considered a praise poem (Fuglesang 2007: 203). The oldest example (*Ragnarsdrápa*) describes different images on a shield. It was supposedly composed during the early eighth century by the semi-mythical Bragi Boddason and is considered an example of object-based ekphrasis (Fuglesang 2002: 132–133; Lie 1952; McTurk 2004: 111–112). Another ekphrasis (*Øxarflokkr*) dates to the twelfth century. It was composed by Einarr Skúlason who describes an axe (Clunies Ross 2005: 129). A recurring problem lies therein, that the genre of ekphrasis offers few clues to reconstruct the iconography of their referential objects (Fuglesang 2002: 139). In their quest for the pictorial sources of Viking Age ekphrasis, scholars tended to focus on monumental art with naturalistic images instead of practical devices with animal art (Clunies Ross 2007: 162, 182; Heslop 2009a: 13) — despite the fact that Einarr's description of his axe seems to mention Animal Art (fig. 7). Thus, scholarly discourse remained overshadowed by logocentric thinking which places verbal modality in a superior position to pictorial modality. This fed into the idea that ekphrasis related to narrative pictures that were, in turn, related to oral myth (Clunies Ross, 2007: 162; Fuglesang 2007: 216).

Such a traditional approach has drawn criticism from scholars who are familiar with classic and medieval ekphrasis and tend to regard the impulse to reconstruct referential pictures as old-fashioned positivism. One criticism highlights the tendency among scholars in perceiving the saga-based framing stories of ekphrasis as genuine descriptions of their context instead of artistic inventions; another criticizes the use of an obsolete genre concept that defines ekphrasis as picture describing poems, whereas other disciplines regard them as poems that create mental pictures, spaces and actions (Heslop 2009a; 2009b, 2009c). Therefore, Kate Heslop advocated focusing on the narrative function of skaldic ekphrasis and the mental images it creates. This led her to certain results that will be relevant for our later discussion. First, ekphrasis makes us envision an imaginary object and observe it through the eyes of the

skald. Second, ekphrasis creates an internal textual reflection in the sense that the material properties of its referential object mirror elements of the alluded narrative—for instance when the golden inlays of Einarr’s axe correspond to certain elements of the myths that he evokes, like Freya’s golden tears or Fróði’s gold mill. Third, Einarr’s description of the axe also appeals to our synesthetic senses, as he repeatedly evokes the feeling of holding it. The circumstance that ekphrasis pays more attention to imaginary allusions than referential objects made Heslop suggest we have little reason to believe that they referred to real objects (2009a: 1–15; 2009b: 9–10; 2009c: 383). A text fragment that seems to fall in line with Heslop’s vision of ekphrasis was preserved through a runic inscription on a piece of red deer antler from Fishamble street in Dublin (Catalogue 11). It dates ca. 1000 and reads:

hurn:hiartaR * la:a ys aR

“The hart’s antler lay at the river mouth”

(Birkett 2011: 19, n5; Looijenga 2003: 109, 172, 285).

According to one interpretation, the inscription was carved by some crafts-person who wished to express that this valuable piece of material had been acquired in a legal way (Barnes et al. 1997: 41). Yet the question remains why then would this someone choose to declare the material properties of this find, despite the fact that those should have been obvious to anyone who might dispute this claim of ownership. Self-referential rune inscriptions that evoke their material support—i.e. object and substance—are not entirely unusual (Looijenga 2003: 109). Scholars have been able to show that some of these inscriptions served some ekphrastic purpose (e.g. Herschend 2020: 82–85, 99). Therefore, it seems fair to suggest that the combination of stag and waters in the Fishamble street fragment is bound to evoke associations with the regeneration myth. The only question is—which version? We have mentioned how the triad of stag, snake and water influenced Christian thought. The fact that it returns within eddic poetry (see further down), indicates, arguably, some influence on Scandinavian mythology (Egeler 2013: 20–22). By associating the Dublin carving with the mythology surrounding stag and rejuvenating waters (or to its eddic equivalent; cf. Drobin 1991), we turn it into the kind of mem-

ory space that Einarr evoked in '*Øxarflokkur*' —in the sense that the materiality of the text carrier becomes a bearer of its own narrative. The most striking difference between Einarr's axe and the rune carver's antler from Dublin lies in the latter happening to be real instead of imaginary.

Iconographic (re-)interpretation

Before we can place the objects from Gnězdovo and León in the current research discourse surrounding ekphrasis, we need to address their potential messages. In 1996, Gustav Trotzig launched an interpretation of sculptural brooches that dealt with the iconographic schema behind the brooch type. He suggested that brooches consist of a fountain-like construction encircled by stag-like beasts (cf. fig. 5a). The occurrence of a similar combination of sculptures seen in the Lateran Baptistery led him to the conclusion that those brooches refer to the springs of Paradise. Although this sculptural group no longer survives, two-dimensional parallels are still preserved through pictures. A pictorial theme consists of the Tree of Life and Knowledge, which is nourished by the rejuvenating waters, before they split up into the four world rivers that quell the thirst of the stags (*Genesis* 2:8–14 in Egeler 2013: 18). Representations of the Tree of Life and the Springs of Paradise are still to be found in early medieval mosaics (Catalogue 6–7; Egeler 2013: 20–22), albeit with some variations: in one case, we not only observe a stag but also a serpent under the tree (fig. 10; Franco Valle 2016: 24–30). Regarding sculptural brooches, it needs to be noted that Trotzig's analysis omits a significant portion of the pictorial program of most objects, including all puzzle-pictures that appear more consistent with Old Norse than with Christian mythology. In contrast to Viking Age art, high medieval Christian art used puzzle-pictures only sparingly, albeit to express demonic themes that stood in opposition to a pious way of life (cf. Kuck 2002; fig. 1). One of the few circular brooches that happens to be almost devoid of them was the item from Gnězdovo (fig. 6) that underwent considerable alterations. The only remnants of the original are four quadrupeds with headgear that according to Trotzig's line of interpretation represent antlers. Otherwise, the restorer chose to erase large portions of the Animal Art. This way, the central boss turned into something that is reminiscent of Paradise Springs and the bottom plate (fig. 6b; that originally featured

puzzle pictures; cf. fig. 5b), into a combination of one equal-armed cross and eight ribbon-shaped beasts. Here, it should be noted that skalds paraphrased the cross as ‘life tree of the nation’ (*lífstré þjóðar*; *Liknarbraut* stanza 22, cf. Finnur Jónsson 1973b, 166; cf. the tendrils of the Jelling stone). It is tempting to assume that the people responsible for the iconographic modifications were not familiar with the original messages, despite being the descendants of the people who carried sculptural brooches into the East. Alternatively, they could have made a conscious decision to alter the pictorial message of the original brooch into a current Christian theme (Neiße et al. 2012). Thus, in the peculiar case of Gnēzdovo, the imagery appears polysemic insofar that it paves the way for constant re-interpretation. An observer with roots in Scandinavian tradition might have favoured a different reading than someone with a Christian agenda.

Signe Horn Fuglesang (2001: 165) argued that some symbolic meaning can be deduced from monumental objects, whereas the décor of non-monumental objects like those done in metal might have been purely decorative—which impacted her interpretation of the Cammin and Bamberg caskets (Catalogue 3–4). Both caskets display Animal Art and were used for secular purposes before they were re-dedicated as reliquaries. In her view, the casket in León is lacking exact antecedents to which it can be compared, as well as a specifically pagan iconography. This led her to suggest that it was created for a Christian context. This view can be questioned with reference to concepts from past research, that we set out to debunk at the beginning of this paper—that is, the dichotomy between fine and applied arts and the idea of artefacts as neutral canvases for stylistic expressions. In León, the great bird happens to be the dominating figure while seven serpent-like beasts do not appear simultaneously, but one by one as the human gaze moves around the cylinder (figs. 8, 9). This iconography remains much of a mystery, until one integrates two important factors into the equation, namely the provenience of the carving and the material properties of its carrier (Franco Valle 2016: 25–30). Since the carving was done following the Nordic style, it seems appropriate to associate its iconography with the eddic poem *Grimnismál* (stanza 26–35) that describes the world tree *Yggdrasill* (fig. 9 including quote). On top of this cosmic pillar, we find a bird that looms over other mythical beings, including seven serpents under the roots of the tree.

This association leads us to a closer consideration of the box material, which, in turn, serves as a springboard for a deeper dive into eddic mythology. The branches of *Yggdrasill* feed a stag called *Eikþýrnir* whose antlers gather dew. This water drips all the way beneath the roots of *Yggdrasill*. Here it becomes a spring called *Hvergelmir* that keeps the tree alive. This is the dwelling of the seven serpents and a serpent-like dragon called *Níðhöggr*, who is on such bad terms with the great bird that they spy on each other (Jónas Kristjánsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2014: 373–375). The aforementioned observation that one can only see a single creature at a time, whereas the León-bird remains a constant fixture, seems to strengthen the association between bird and *Níðhöggr*. The cognitive connection between the box material—deer antler—and the stag on the one hand, its mythological counterpart and the world tree on the other hand, seems to reinforce this cosmological association.

Discussion – reference objects for ekphrasis?

According to our chosen line of interpretation, the designer of the León box explored different modalities like pictures, materiality and movement to evoke a Nordic variety of the myth concerning stag, snake and rejuvenating waters that cut across the European continent during a period when Scandinavian people gradually adopted Christian thought. In the homeland of Nordic Animal Art, sculptural brooches often sport an iconography that seems to mirror mythological themes that were also preserved within skaldic poetry. And yet, the way in which the descendants of the Scandinavian settlers chose to remodel the Gnëzdovo brooch at a later point in time seems much more consistent with current Christian themes regarding the Springs of Paradise that flourished in the whole of Christendom, including the Kievan Rus. Inconsistent with the iconographic tradition of the West is the number of stags. It remains up for debate whether these differences are best understood as a result of opposition (considering the original brooch design) of different traditions (considering the differences between Eastern and Western Christianity), or of some cultural undercurrent connected to the hybrid culture of the Missionary Era that also came to leave its mark on the eddic poetry of Western Scandinavia—i.e. some time before it was fixed onto Medieval parchment. In contrast to Gnëzdovo, the iconographic program from León appears to have roots that

reach straight back to Nordic tradition. Therefore, it may be more than mere coincidence that its iconography is best understood with the aid of an eddic poem that, arguably, mirrors a similar stage of mythological hybridisation—i.e. from a point in time when the triad of stag, snake and rejuvenating waters had been fully integrated into Old Norse cosmology. Like the Scandinavian metal workers who cast the forerunners of the Gnëzdovo brooch, the carver of the León box employed the Nordic principle of puzzle-pictures by combining visual and kinesthetic resources in a multimodal way in order to convey a message (as anticipated by modern sociosemiotics; Kress & van Leeuwen 1996; cf. Franco Valle forthcoming, Neiß forthcoming). The final clue to our understanding of the León box is hidden within the choice of material. Its carving from antler helped us to associate the depictions of a bird and seven snakes to the mythological beasts of *Yggdrasill*. If our interpretation is correct, the designer of the León box would have actively employed the material properties of the box as a third modality in addition to picture and movement. This leads us back to the discussion of ekphrasis. During our examination, we identified four threads that make the León Box an ideal referential object for ekphrasis:

- 1) It contained puzzle pictures that are also to be found on older objects that arguably associate with ekphrasis.
- 2) Its iconographic message seems compatible with eddic poetry that was safekept by a group of cultural custodians that might have practiced skaldic ekphrasis as well.
- 3) Its particular properties could serve as a text-internal projection space.
- 4) Within the oral culture of Viking Age Scandinavia, ekphrasis was more likely object-dependent than in a culture with developed literacy (cf. Hines 2007).

As we learned before, Viking Art appears polysemic insofar that it allows for constant re-interpretation—at least up to a certain point. The fact that the iconography of the León box survived the centuries without heavy modifications seems to speak for the assumption that it was easier to reconcile its ico-

nography with current Christian thought than in the case of older practical devices with Animal Art.

Abbreviations

BNM – The National Museum of Bavaria (Bayerisches Nationalmuseum), Munich.

DR – Denmark, see SR.

GE – The State Hermitage Museum (Государственный Эрмитаж), Saint Petersburg.

GF – Gotland Museum (Gotlands Fornsal), Visby.

IR – Ireland, see SR.

KHM – Kulturhistorisk Museum, Oslo.

NMI – The National Museum of Ireland, Dublin.

MAK – Museum of applied arts, Vienna.

OPIA – Occasional Papers in Archaeology, Uppsala University.

RGA – R. Müller & H. Beck & D. Geuenich & H. Steuer & D. Timpe (eds.). *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde: von Johannes Hoops: zweite, völlig neu bearbeitete und stark erweiterte Auflage mit Unterstützung der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen.* Gruyter, Berlin.

SHM – The National Heritage Board of Sweden (Riksantikvarieämbetet), Stockholm.

SHM – The State History Museum (Statens historiska museum), Stockholm.

SPAB – Skaldic Project Academic Body.

SR – Samnordisk runtextdatabas.

Vg – Västergötland, see SR.

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CATALOGUE

Catalogue 1. Axe (Fig. 7). *Provenience*: Russia, oblast Vladimir(?; Влади́мирская о́бласть?) Suzdal(?; Суздаль?). *Literature*: Düwel 1986. *Description*: Iron/steel with silver plating and gold inlays. Featuring a ribbon-shaped beast that is being pierced by a sword. Eleventh(?) century.

Catalogue 2. Casket (Fig. 8, Fig. 9). *Location*: Spain, Castilla y León, León, Museo de la Real Colegiata de San Isidoro de León. *Inventory Number*: IIC-3-089-002-0009. *Literature*: Christys 2015; Franco Valle 2016; Martin 2019; Morales Romero 1991, 2004; Roesdahl 1998, 2010a, 2010b; Wicker 2019. *Material*: Red deer antler. *Description*: cylindrical box measuring 33 mm x 44 mm (Franco Valle forthcoming). Decorated in Mammen/Ringerike style. Both ends of the tube are covered with copper-alloy lids with openwork featuring tendril and knot motifs. One of them is nailed to the antler. Around 1000 CE.

Catalogue 3. Casket. *Provenience*: Germany, Bayern, Bamberg. *Inventory number*: BNM MA286. *Literature*: Fuglesang 1991: 86; Karlsson 1983: fig. 74. *Description*: Antler. Featuring Art in Mammen style. Around 980 CE.

Catalogue 4. Casket. *Provenience*: German Reich (nowadays Poland), Preußische Provinz Pommern, Landkreis Cammin (nowadays Województwo zachodniopomorskie, Kamień Pomorski), Cammin (nowadays Kamień). *Literature*: Horn Fuglesang 1991: 86; Karlsson 1983: fig. 87. *Description*: Antler. Featuring Art in Mammen style. Lost during WW2. Around 980 CE.

Catalogue 5. Coin (Fig. 3). *Provenience*: Germany, Schleswig-Holstein, Landkreis Schleswig Flensburg, Amt Busdorf/Bustrup, Haddeby (Haithabu)/Hedeby. *Literature*: Varenus 1994: 194; Malmer 1966: 67. *Description*: Silver. Featuring a stag and a snake, posing mouth to mouth. First half of the tenth century.

Catalogue 6. Mosaic. *Location*: Italy, Roma, Archbasilica Santi Giovanni Battista ed Evangelista in Lateran. *Literature*: Trotzig 1996; Egeler 2013. *Description*: Apse mosaic featuring two stags that are drinking from the rivers of paradise. Fourth to fifth century CE.

Catalogue 7. Mosaic (Fig. 10). *Location*: Italy, Roma, Basilica di San Clemente al Laterano. *Literature*: Egeler 2013. *Description*: A stag and a snake stand under the tree of life and pose mouth to mouth, while two other stags drink from the four rivers that flow from the spring beneath the tree. Around 1130 CE.

Catalogue 8. Pendant. *Provenience*: Sigtuna, Uppland, Sweden. *Inventory number*: SHM 29650:48. *Material*: Gold. *Description*: Pendant featuring a bird-like figure. Around 980 CE.

Catalogue 9. Runestone. *Location*: Great Britain, England, City of London, Saint Paul's Cathedral. *Literature*: Karlsson 1983: fig. 81. *Description*: Featuring quadrupeds with antlers and a snake-like beast. Around 1010 CE.

Catalogue 10. Rune/picture stone Jelling II (Fig. 2). One side features a stag-like quadruped and a snake, another side a depiction of Christ where the cross has been replaced by vegetal tendrils that allude to the tree of life. Illustration by Julius Magnus-Petersen (Larson 1912). Jelling II. *Location*: Denmark, Jutland, Vejle Amt, Jelling Sogn, Jelling kirke. *Inventory number*: DR 42. *Source*: Samnordisk runtextdatabas. *Description*: Runestone with pictures. 960 CE.

Catalogue 11. Runic inscription. *Provenience*: Ireland, Dublin, Fishamble street. *Inventory number*: NMI E172:9630; IR 12. *Literature*: Looijenga 2003: 109, 172, 285; Birkett 2011: 19, n5. *Description*: Younger Futhark inscription on red deer antler. Around 1000 CE.

Catalogue 12. Sculptural brooch, circular (Fig. 5). *Provenience*: Sweden, Hälsingland, Hälsingtuna socken, Torsta. *Inventory number*: SHM 6820 *Literature*: Neiß 2009. *Description*: Silver. The decor features a.o. twelve stable pictures and 26 puzzle pictures. Tenth century.

Catalogue 13. Sculptural brooch, circular (Fig. 6). *Provenience*: Russia, Smolensk oblast (Смоленская область), Gnëzdovo (Гнёздово). *Inventory number*: GE 992/93 *Literature*: Puškina 1998; Neiß et al. 2012. *Description*: Silver with (partly secondary) gilding & niello blackening. The bottom plate features puzzle pictures that represent ribbon-shaped beasts and crosses. The proximal bosses feature quadrupeds with a headgear that can be re-interpreted as antlers. The medial boss contains equal-armed crosses and triquetrae. A use-wear analysis reveals that different parts were manufactured at different times. The bottom plate and the central boss appear to be relatively new, and are decorated with niello. The four quadrupeds appear to be older as they display heavy wear. The different provenience of the parts has been confirmed through an independent XRF analysis (Eniosova et. al 2012).

Catalogue 14. Stone relief (Fig. 1). *Location*: Germany, Niedersachsen, Landkreis Helmstedt, Königslutter, Kaiserdom. *Literature*: Kuck 2002. *Description*: At the apse of the church building. Featuring a puzzle picture of a lying hunter with two rabbits versus a laughing devil. Twelfth century.

Catalogue 15. The *Trasenna* relief. *Provenience*: Nola, Italy. *Location*: Yale University Art Gallery. *Literature*: Herbert 1974. *Description*: Featuring a stag with a long mane and a Unicorn. Ca. 950 CE.

Catalogue 16. Tunic belonging to The Göss Vestments (Fig. 4). *Provenience*: Kloster Göß, Göss, Styria, Austria. *Inventory number*: MAK T 6905-1. *Literature*: Pollack 1938. *Description*: The garments made in silk and linen and profusely decorated with geometric patterns and fantastic beasts. 1260 CE.

Catalogue 17. Weathervane. *Provenience*: Norway, Viken, Heggen. *Inventory number*: KHM C23602. *Literature*: Fuglesang 1981; Graham-Campbell 2013: 124–126; Karlsson 1983: fig. 80. *Description*: Copper alloy. Featuring two beast-like quadrupeds with antlers and one sculptural deer figure. 980–1070 CE.

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Fig. 1. (Catalogue 14). Puzzle pictures in Christian art; a. Depiction of a fallen man who preferred hunting to a contemplative life and is now shackled by the tongues of his own quarry; b. The very devil who created this pitfall of sin is grinning back at the observer. The Königsutter Cathedral. Illustration by Jürgen Kuck (2002). Cf. Saint Bernard:

“What has this ridiculous monstrosity there to do, this strangely ugly beauty and this beautiful ugliness? [...] These horn-blowing hunters? You can see several bodies under the same head, and again several heads on one and the same body. [...] In short, there is such a large and strange variety of different forms everywhere that it is more pleasing to read in the marble than in the manuscripts and to spend the whole day admiring these details than contemplating God's law. Dear Lord! If one is not ashamed of all that folly, why can one not at least feel uneasy at all the expense?”

(Bernard of Clairvaux, *Apologia ad Guillelmum Sancti-Theoderici Abbatem*, XIIIn: 28; cf. Leclercq & Rochais 1968. 106; own translation).



Fig. 2. Jelling II (Catalogue 10). One side features a stag-like quadruped and a snake, another side a depiction of Christ where the cross has been replaced by vegetal tendrils that allude to the tree of life. Illustration by Julius Magnus-Petersen (Larson 1912). Cf. *Liknarbraut*:

*Leysti sinn at sönnu
sólballar gramr allan
lýð fyr lífstré þjóðar
líknarstyrkr frá myrkrum*

(*Liknarbraut* stanza 22).

“The mercy-strong king of sun’s hall [SKY/
HEAVEN > = God (= Christ)] freed truly all his
people from darkness by means of the life-tree of
mankind [CROSS]”

(SPAB).



Fig. 3.

Coin from Hedeby (Catalogue 5), featuring a
stag and a snake posing mouth to mouth, which
indicates that this iconography was circulating
before Jelling II. Image by Malmer (1966: 7). Cf.
Physiologus:

“When the stag reaches 50 years old looks for
the snake lair, and attracts it outside, putting
his nose close to the hole of the lair holding its
breath. Then the snake goes out and comes into
the mouth of the stag, and eats it. Then the stag
has to look for a river and drink, so it can live for
fifty years more. Otherwise, it will die. So said
the prophet David ‘Like the stag wants the fresh
water, so my soul wants you, Lord.’”

(*Physiologus*; cf. Theobaldus & Peters 1921:
31–33; Suárez López 2007: 4; own translation)



Fig. 4. Detail of the tunic of the Göss Vestments (Catalogue 16). The garments are richly decorated with depictions of different kinds of beasts. Stags and lions can be differentiated by their head-gear and their body shape. Stags are represented with stylized claw-like hooves. 1260 CE.

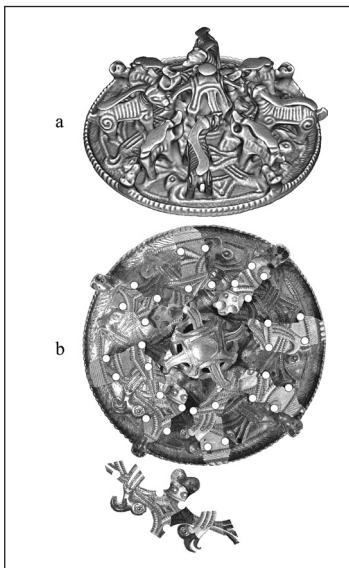


Fig. 5. Sculptural brooch from Torsta (Catalogue 12); a. Seen from a low angle; b. Seen from a high angle: The bottom plate features a number of puzzle pictures, some representing a gripping beast. Illustration by M. Neiß.



Fig. 6. Sculptural brooch from Gnēzdovo (Catalogue 13); a. seen from a low angle: The original proximal bosses represent quadrupeds with a head-gear that the Christian restorer might have re-interpreted as antlers. The restored medial boss features an equal-armed cross that might allude to the tree of life; b. Seen from a high angle: The restored bottom plate features a combination of eight snakes and an equal-armed cross. The restored medial boss features an equal armed-cross that might allude to the tree of life. Illustration by M. Neiß.

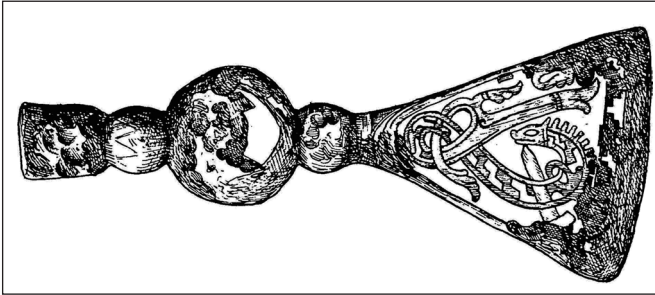


Fig. 7. Axe (Catalogue 1). Visualizing the myth of Sigurðr the dragon slayer? A ribbon-shaped beast is being pierced by a sword. Andrei Bogoljubsky's axe. Illustration by N.N. (Düwel 1986). Cf. Einarr Skúlason:

*Sjá megu rétt, hvé, Ræfils
ríðendr, við bró Gríðar
fjörnís fagrt of skornir,
foldviggs, drekar liggja*

(Einarr Skúlason, 'Øxarflokk' stanza 10).

"They can rightly see how dragons, beautifully engraved, lie near the eyelash of the Gríðr <giantess> of the helmet [AXE > AXE-BLADE], riders of the horse of Ræfill's <sea-king's> land [(lit. 'riders of Ræfill's land-horse') SEA > SHIP > SEAFARERS]"

(SPAB).



Fig. 8. Scandinavian casket in San Isidoro de León (Catalogue 2). Carved in red deer antler. Decorated in Mammen/Ringerike style. Both ends of the tube are covered with copper-alloy Around 1000 CE. (©Museo de San Isidoro and Rebeca Franco Valle). Cf. Poetic Edda:

*Eikþyrnir beitir hjörtr
er stendr á höllu Herjaføðrs
ok bitr af Læraðs limum;
en af hans bornum
drýpr í Hvergelmi,
þaðan eigu vötn öll vega.*

(*Grímnismál* stanza 26; Jónas Kristjánsson
and Vésteinn Ólason 2014: 373)

“Eikthyrnir, the hart
On the hall that stands,
Eateth off Læráth’s limbs;
Drops from his horns
In Hvergelmir fall,
Thence wend all the waters their way.”

(Hollander 1962, 58).

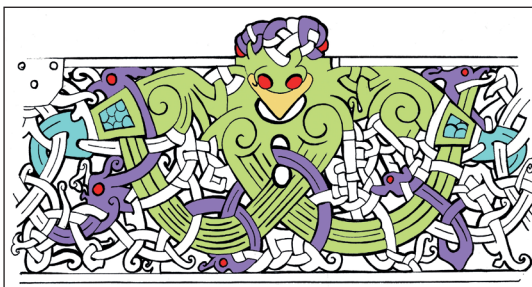


Fig. 9. Extended view of the casket of San Isidoro (Catalogue 2). A great bird-like beast highlighted in green dominates the space. Two triple-offshoot arches spring from a double shell-spiral right below the beak of the bird (in orange). These are the wings of the animal. The legs and claws are marked in blue, and can be identified by the sections texturized with spots or scales. The other seven beasts can be spotted by their round eyes, marked in red. Their snake-like bodies are highlighted in purple. Note that two of the smaller snakes spring from the head of the bird-like animal. (Design by Franco Valle, 2016).



Fig. 10. Mosaic in the apse of the Church of San Clemente al Laterano in Rome (Catalogue 7). A stag and a snake, posing mouth to mouth, stand beneath the tree of life while two other stags drink from the four rivers that flow from the spring. 1130 CE. Illustration by Michael Neiß, mixed medium with watercolours.