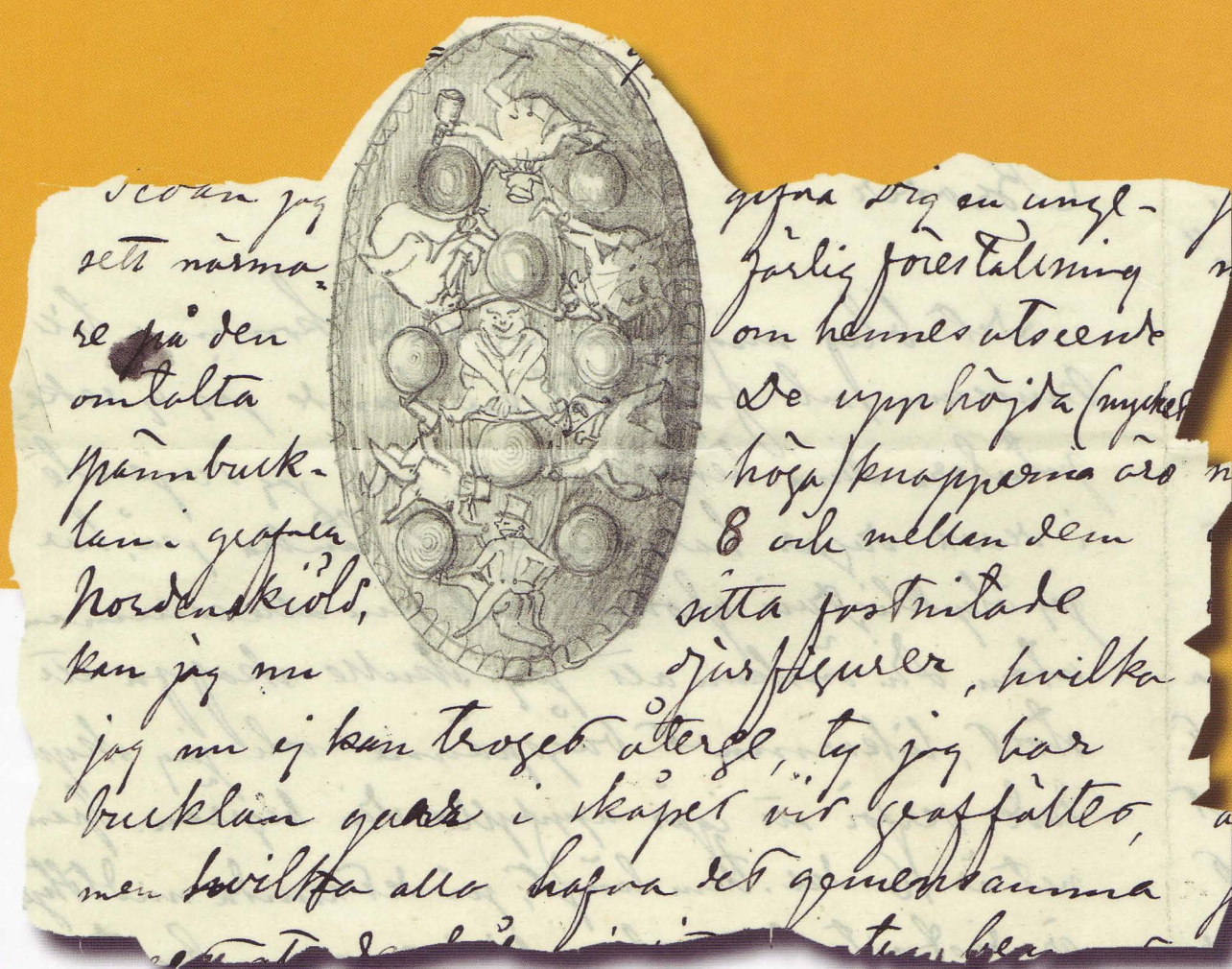


# Cultural interaction

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## between east and west

Archaeology, artefacts and human contacts in northern Europe



Eds. | Ulf Fransson | Marie Svedin | Sophie Bergerbrant | Fedir Androshchuk



# The Ornamental Echo of Oðinn's Cult

## Kontinuitetsfrågor i germansk djurornamentik II

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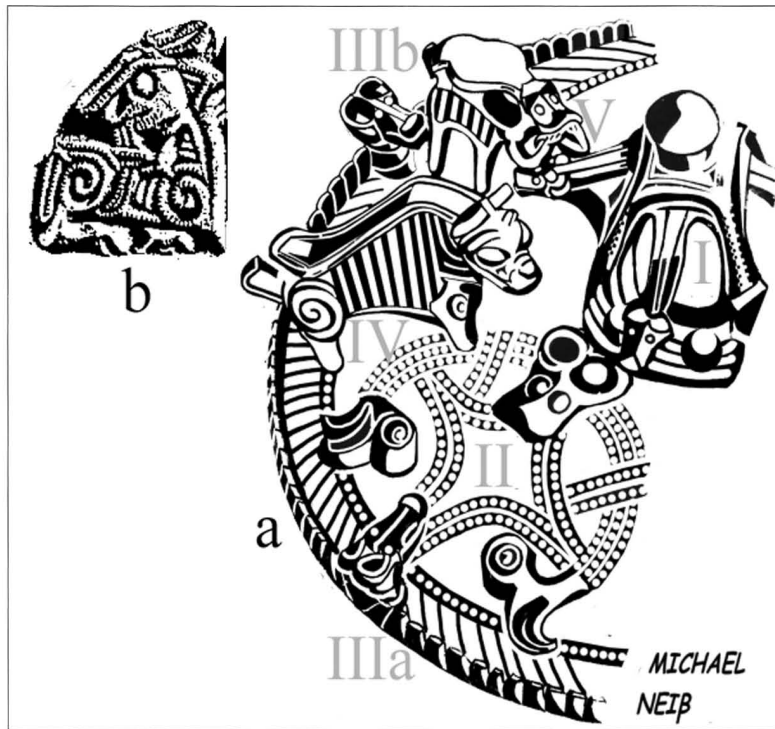


Fig. 1. Three-dimensional motifs and two-dimensional parallels: I–III – gripping beasts;

IV – great beast; V – masked person.

a) Circular brooch, Torsta, Tuna parish in Hälsingland, Sweden

(drawing: M. Neiß 2005).

b) Mounting, Borre in Vestfold, Norway (drawings O. Klindt-Jensen & D. Wilson 1965).

In regard to Viking-age ornament modern observers must learn to peek beyond the surface. The primary use of ornament as a playground for humour is a luxury of modern culture. Viking-age society wasn't so inundated by pictures, as we are in our days, in a culture otherwise dominated by oral transmission it would have been a waste not to use the pictorial medium efficiently, especially when the cost of production was so high, as would have been true of the extravagant artefacts included in this study. The purpose of my iconological study is to decipher the meaning of certain 'motifs' within Germanic animal ornamentation. My definition of styles is therefore solely based on parameters like detail-features and curvature (comp. Ørsnes 1969:19). The problems, caused by the lack of distinction between motifs and style throughout the history of research into Animal Art, were already stressed in part I of my iconographical study concerning the continuity in Germanic Animal Art – *Kontinuitetsfrågor i germansk djurornamentik I* (Neiß 2004:9f).

### A sacred picture – adapted within Vendel-age surface styles

Part 1 of my context-iconographical study (Neiß 2004) focused on the development of certain motifs throughout the Vendel Styles. A number of long-lived motifs were extracted from the corpus of Germanic Animal Ornamentation in order to interpret them iconographically. Differentiating between motifs and style has been essential for my methodology. Accordingly, motifs were disqualified in their role as indicators for different Animal styles. On the other hand, styles are solely perceived as indicators

for chronological or geographical differences. With inspiration from linguistics, I was able to demonstrate how two animals constitute a minimal pair within every style phase. Afterwards, those animal motifs were linked vertically, one established style phase followed by another, forming isolated motif-lineages from completely different ancestors. In order to mark these animals as a minimal pair, the goldsmiths used certain individual postures. Above that, a male assisted by a snake was repeatedly struggling against our minimal pair. Altogether, that motif structure returned in almost every phase of the Vendel Styles, commencing in the late Migration Era.

I was able to trace the lineage of the motif-structure consisting of a man, a ribbon-shaped beast and an h-shaped beast back to a sacred bracteate-picture dating to the Migration Era (Neiß 2004). The motif-structure's subject was Oðinn's victory over *Miðgarðsormr* and *Fenrir*. The orally transmitted myth also survived the following centuries and was finally preserved on Icelandic parchment, telling us about how *Fenrir* got his lock-jaw and how the serpent grew around all Middle Earth until it swallowed its own tail (Hauck, 1978:389f, 1988:17–52; *Gylfaginning*: strophe 33). Employing the skaldic *Oðinsheiti* (Falk 1924:23, 26, 42; Hauck 1988:23) the snake was identified as one of Oðinn's animal-shaped assistants, perhaps also serving as a harbour to his wandering soul (*Ynglingasaga*: chapter 7).

As an example of the Viking-age afterlife of that old two-dimensional triad, the Klinte disc-on-bow-brooch can be mentioned (fig. 2b). To reduce an old question of style research to its minimal essence, I would seek the roots of the two-legged beast (fig. 2b:II) of Jelling Style in a genuinely Scandinavian tradition of two-dimensional surface ornamentation (for evidence and earlier literature see Thunmark-Nylén 1995:557–566). Accordingly, the postures on the Klinte brooch are analogous with the Vendel-Age iconographic concept (Neiß 2004:18ff). Due to the Klinte brooch's relatively wide motif-structure (comp. Thunmark-Nylén 1998: Table 47), however, one could argue *Miðgarðsormr* and *Fenrir* (fig. 2b:I–II) no longer served as attributes to the person above. Unfortunately, some damage to the bow of the Klinte brooch makes it impossible to decide for sure whether the person was ever decorated with two snakes (fig. 2b:III) – always a reliable attribute of Oðinn. On the other hand, other postures and gestures, with a remarkably ancient ancestry within two-dimensional art, are to be found. The legs are pointing upwards and the person appears to be pulling his own hair. Pulling facial and other hair indicates the person's magical activity (Gjerder 1964; Hauck 1981:222) and acrobatic postures reflect shamanic ecstasy (Hauck, 1994:261f). This very 'jumper' and 'shouter' (same hand-position, no hair pulling) is known to us from contemporary gold filigree figures on Gotlandic H-bracteates (fig. 5b–c). From there, he can be traced (via Vendel-age E-bracteates) back typologically on a certain motif-complex within Migration Period B-bracteates (Gaimster 1998:125ff). As Karl Hauck clarified, the jumper on B-bracteates represents Oðinn (as above).



Fig. 2. Vendel Style E motifs and their Jelling Style successors: I – ribbon shaped beasts; II – great beasts; III – gripping and acrobatic 'beasts'. a) Disc-on-bow brooch, Gumbalde, Stångå parish on Gotland, Sweden (drawings: I – B. Salin 1904; II – M. Neiß 2004; III – B. Salin 1904). b) Disc-on-bow brooch, Valla, Klinte parish on Gotland, Sweden (drawings: I – M. Neiß 2004, II – L. Thunmark-Nylén 1998, III – M. Neiß).

### The gripping and the great beast – two three-dimensional newcomers!

An advantage of old two dimensional art was that the artists were inspired to fill the entire surface using harmonically disintegrated motifs (fig. 2a:I, II), which also promoted the creation of puzzle pictures (Neiß 2004:fig. 24, 25). Diminishing space for surface ornamentations, the concept of plasticity, on the other hand, may enable the artists to vary the size and placement of certain motifs, creating new readings (e.g. importance or distance, fig. 3:I–II, 4). Judging by their significant increase, three-dimensional conventions are one of the features that most distinguish Viking-age metalwork from that of the Vendel time. According to a 'traditionalist' perception, Viking-age expansion also meant a first opening of Nordic ornamentation to European art since the Migration Period (Karlsson 1983:12–44). Practically, the idea of plasticity as a native feature (e.g. in woodcarving) is difficult to prove, and yet there is no convincing evidence for a direct import of con-

crete motifs. Rather than being side-tracked into an investigation of the origin of the gripping beast, I intend to ask instead how it was integrated into early Viking-age Art.

During 5<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> centuries three-dimensional metal ornamentation was rather rare and logically by no means one of the casters' main skills (Capelle 1994:168f). The gripping beast is something of an established school book example of a 'new' plasticity, suddenly emerging within the Early Viking-age motif-combinations of Vendel Style E (e.g. Steuer 1994). At Gumbalde, the striking contrast between the gripping beast (fig. 2a:III) and the flat *Midgarðsormr* and *Fenrir* (fig. 2a:I, II; with Migration Period ancestry) can be best perceived (Karlsson 1983:35ff, 104, 112ff; Neiß 2004:18, 20f). Considering the gripping beast's postures, one can suspect a dependency on three-dimensional models such as carvings in jade (unfortunately with uncertain dating, Brøgger 1917), comparable to Mammen, as one of the last plastic gripping beasts (fig. 3:I).

With the establishment of Borre-Jelling Style, the gen-

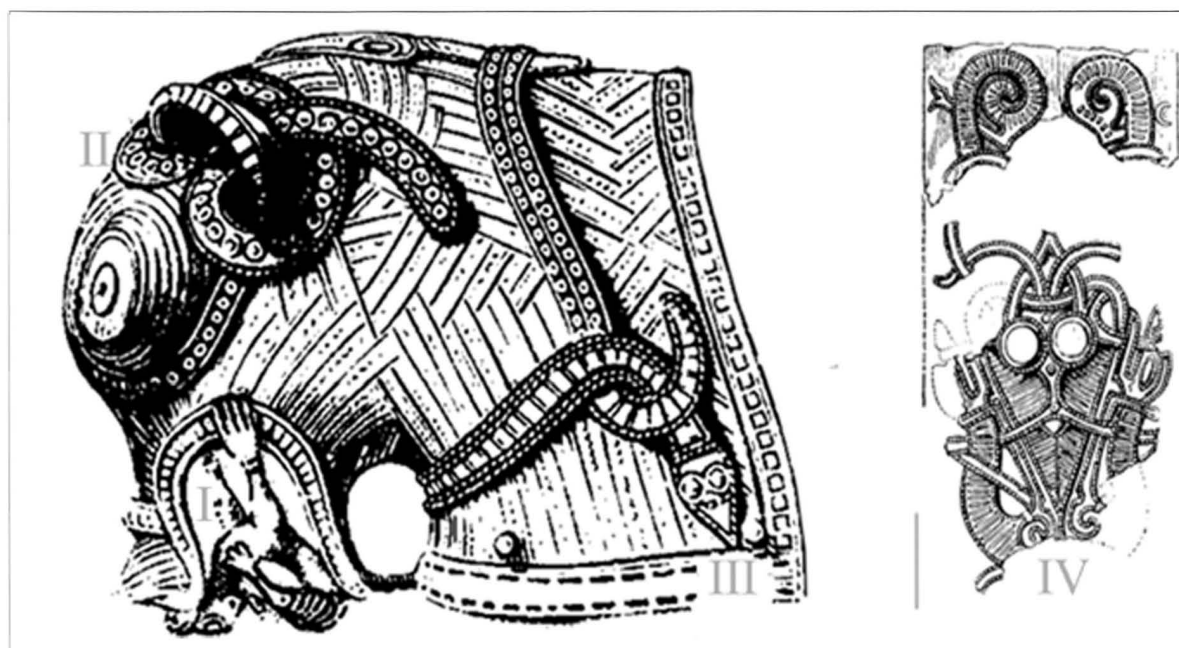


Fig. 3. A three-dimensional swallowing scene: I – gripping beast; II – great beast; III – strangling snakes; IV – masked man. Horse collar, Bjerringhøj, Mammen parish in Jutland, Denmark (drawings: H. Petersen 1872).



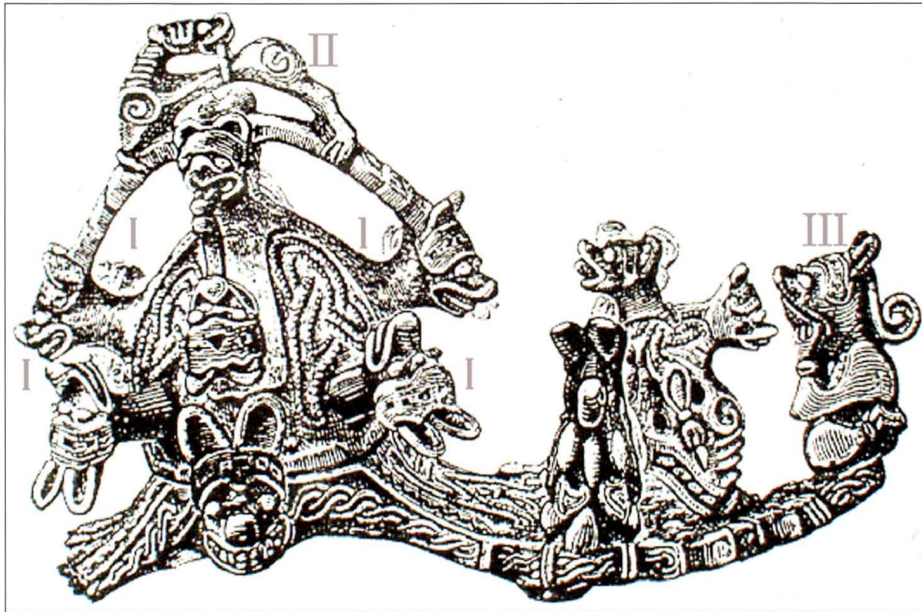


Fig. 4. A parallel to circular brooches: I – gripping beast protomes; II – great beast; III – masked acrobat. Equal armed brooch, Yelets in Voronezh, Russia (drawing: T.J. Arne 1914).

eral perspective of the two-dimensional gripping beast changes dramatically from *en face* (fig. 2a:III) to 'bird's eye' (fig. 8a:1a, comp. fig. 3:I; Petersen 1931:133; Klæsø 1999:117ff). Interestingly, the postures nevertheless remain the same, albeit viewed from a different angle.

The four-legged beast is another three-dimensional motif in Viking Art. Scholars have tended to seek its origin in the lion motifs of Europe (Karlsson 1983:111f). A two-dimensional adaptation of the Great Beast of Torsta was excavated at Borre (fig. 1b). In the days of Borre Style such surface adaptations of the four-legged beast appear less often than their plastic models, and when making entrance into the second dimension their number of legs is, by rule, reduced to 'two legs' (as fig. 1b). Within surface ornamentation, 'four-legged' counterparts are, on the other hand, hardly ever found until late styles like Mammen and Ringerike (Neið 2002:8–15). In the course of the following part it will become clear that a revision of the traditional concept of Borre Style is necessary.

### Deconstructing borre style

It is rather surprising how frequently the gripping beast motif of early Viking-age Borre style is combined with indicators 'conventional' for other styles. As Karlsson pointed out, not even the eponymous finds at Borre hosted only gripping beasts (as the historical style criterion), but there were also different style phenomena, making the traditional name of 'Borre' Style a poor choice (1983:103ff). Furthermore, one could suggest that the gripping beast is a motif in itself rather than a style-indicator. Like most Viking-age standard products, *eponym* artefacts such as the mountings at Borre, the cup at Jelling and the axe from Mammen also consist of single motifs rather than fancy motif-combinations (comp. Klindt-Jensen & Wilson 1965: fig. 43, Table 27, 52). Consequently, the division between Borre and Jelling Styles could be just a misperception within research history, promoted by a lack of artefacts in earlier days.

In order to make a concrete example of the problems involved with style assignments on complex motif combinations, a glimpse at the circular brooch from Torsta in Tuna parish in Hälsingland/Sweden will help. On the brooch's ground-surface, a two-dimensional gripping beast is placed (fig. 1a:II). The combination of a semi plastic head on an entrelac body may appear as a typical example of Borre Style. On the other hand the motif-combination of the brooch also involves a plastic, four-legged beast (fig. 1a:IV), reminding the observer of the Viking-age vanes crowned by a beast (e.g. Söderala church in Hälsingland/Sweden; comp. Klindt-Jensen & Wilson 1965: Table 58b). Traditionally, four legged 'Great beasts' with big eyes and leg scrolls are expected to indicate Ringerike Style. As far as I have understood, no one ever paid attention to the fact that we already find a two-dimensional adaptation of the same beast with neck scroll and rippled body among the Borre site materials (Vestfold, Norway, fig. 1b) (comp. Capelle 1968:60f; Karlsson, 1983:104). Thus, that little excursion of ours once again casts a shadow of doubt on all attempts to define a certain style from the presence or absence of a particular motif.

Employing the Danish dendro-dates, Ingmar Jansson demonstrated that both the 'eponymous' grave finds at Jelling church and Bjerringhøj in Mammen parish (in Jutland) are almost contemporaneous to Borre Style artefacts at Fyrkat (nearby Hobro in Jutland) and Trelleborg (nearby Slagelse, Zealand; Jansson 1991:271f). Despite evidence of a somewhat earlier start (A.D. 895) for the Borre Style at the Norwegian Gokstad burial (in Sandar, Vestfold; Klæsø 1999:126), the modern archaeologist can hardly point to any significant chronological, geographical or social criterion to motivate an archaeological distinction. Of course, almost none of the earlier style criteria are absolutely wrong. To future scholars, Jansson therefore suggested defining style individually, taking the specific purposes of the investigation into account (1991:276).

Hence, to my understanding, early Viking-age Borre

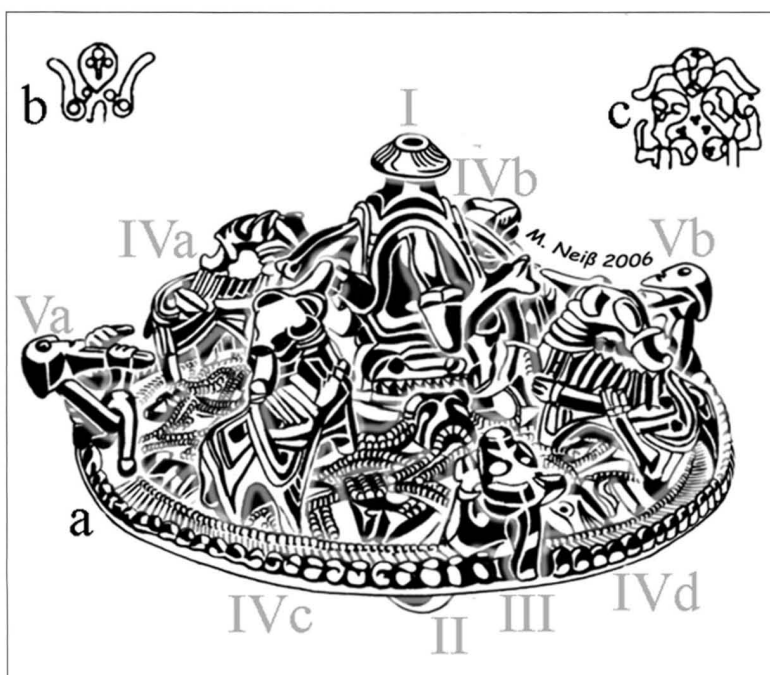


Fig. 5. Three-dimensional motifs and two-dimensional parallels: I–III – gripping beasts; IV – great beast; V – masked acrobat. a) Circular brooch, Swedish provenience? British Museum/Inv. 1901, 7–18. b) H-bracteate, Hulte, Hemse parish on Gotland/Sweden. c) H-bracteate, Enbjenne, Hogrån parish on Gotland, Sweden (drawings: M. Neið).



Style is nothing but a surface adaptation of a three-dimensional motif, following the aesthetic rules of the surface style contemporaneously *en vogue* (that is Jelling Style). However, earlier researchers tended to consequently misinterpret any emergence of the gripping beast motif as a *style* in its own right.

### The iconography of early Viking-age motif structures

The following plastic and semi-plastic motif-structures refer, like their two-dimensional adaptations, to *Oðinn's* triumph over *Fenrir*. During the middle Viking-age, two-legged and four-legged beasts became, in form and content, a successor to Vendel Style *Fenrir*.

### Plastic motif structures on silver brooches

Unlike simple standard products, the following artefacts are not only of a superior quality, but they also show complex motif-structures. Circular brooches with all-plastic motifs, which made a 'baroque' impression on Ingmar Jansson (1984:79, fig. 81), appear to be an East Scandinavian phenomenon (Capelle 1962:fig. 5), with counterparts on equal-armed brooches, among them a Russian one from Yelets (fig. 4). Like on box-shaped brooches, the motifs are arranged around a central knob, but in contrast to their Gotlandic cousins, the feature of plasticity always dominates on circular brooches. Here, we can differentiate between three species: the *Fenrir*, some gripping beasts and a mysterious man.

Residing on the middle crown, a three-dimensional cousin to the *Fenrir* of the Klinte brooch (fig. 2b:II) is found on the equal-armed brooch from Yelets (fig. 4:II). According to the iconographical concept of the surface tradition, his leg has a foot-cuff and his head points backwards while his tongue is bound. In addition, the motif-structure on the brooch from Yelets gives shelter to gripping beast protomes and a masked acrobat with his legs pointing upwards (fig. 4:III), placing his hands in the corners of his mouth, as if he were shouting. On a circular silver brooch at the British Museum, *Fenrir* (fig. 5a:IV) associates with two-dimensional gripping beasts, both a flat one in the brooch's ground relief (fig. 5a:II) and a plastic one, holding its paws in a 'shouter's gesture' (fig. 5a:III). Nevertheless, some of those peripheral gripping beasts are replaced by men (fig. 5a:V), who are pulling their own goat-beards and lifting their legs upwards in an acrobatic manner.

On the brooch from Torsta, the backwards looking *Fenrir* has been replaced by a Great Beast (fig. 1a:IV). Besides this four-legged fellow on the Torsta brooch, we also find the plastic protome of a gripping beast in the motif-structure's periphery (fig. 1a:III). However, the bearded acrobat seems to have vanished mysteriously. On the other hand a new plastic beast with six extremities, an extraordinary number within Viking Art, (fig. 1a:V) has made its entrance on the brooch. According to my minimal-pair-method (Neið 2004:10ff), its six legs must indicate a deliberate divergence from the typical gripping beast (fig. 1a:II–III). Like the masked acrobat on the Yelets brooch (fig. 4:III), the extra arms imitate a 'shouter's gesture'. Remembering the acrobat on British Museum brooch (fig. 5a:V), I would like to interpret those two 'extra legs' on the Torsta piece as a conscious hint of a disguised person, hiding behind a four-legged animal-skin and a mask. Accordingly, the 'shouter' on the Yelets brooch reminds us rather of a masked man than a real gripping beast.

One oddity, however, remains to be explained. Sharing the same postures and gestures, it is no easy task to distinguish the gripping beast from our masked man. Merging together, as shown on a two dimensional puzzle pic-

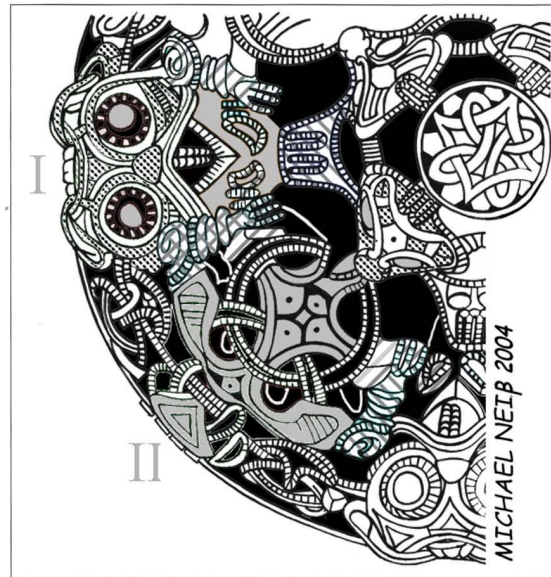


Fig. 6. Puzzle picture with shared extremities: I – masked man; II – gripping beast. Circular brooch Jämjö, Gärdslösa parish on Öland, Sweden (drawing: M. Neið).



Fig. 7. Puzzle Picture: I – masked man; II – beast head; III – theriomorphic mask. Pendant, Vår Frue church, Odense on Fyn, Denmark (drawing: M. Neið).

**Errata:** p. 85. III – zoomorphic mask.

ture on a unique round silver brooch from Jämjö (hosting not less than nine puzzle pictures, Neið:2006), the beard pulling, masked man (fig. 6:I) and the gripping beast (fig. 6:II) appear to complete, rather than differ from each other. As usual, the minimal-pair-method will be used for a final determination of their relationship. For that purpose one must look to motif-structures beyond those on silver brooches.

### Semi-plastic and plastic motif structures on pendants, ringed pins and horse-collars

To start with a semi-plastic version we will focus on a pendant from Odense. The minimal pair consists of masked man, equipped with a two-horned helmet (*en face* view fig. 7:I), and of some beast-heads ('birds-eye' view; fig. 7:II), distinguished by a zoologically less ambiguous state than the man. The latter, on the other hand, is part of a puzzle picture: turning the pendant upside down, the person's gloomy face transforms into an even grimmer mask (fig. 7:III), using the former moustache as eyebrows and the upper beast head as a mouth. In addition, both lower and upper mask have a goat-beard.

Searching through Viking Art, one is rather surprised to find a comparable puzzle picture on the well-known ringed pin from Birka. As seen in the illustration, the entrelac, the two animal head profiles and a pair of eyes form a mask *en face*, also employing the smaller function-



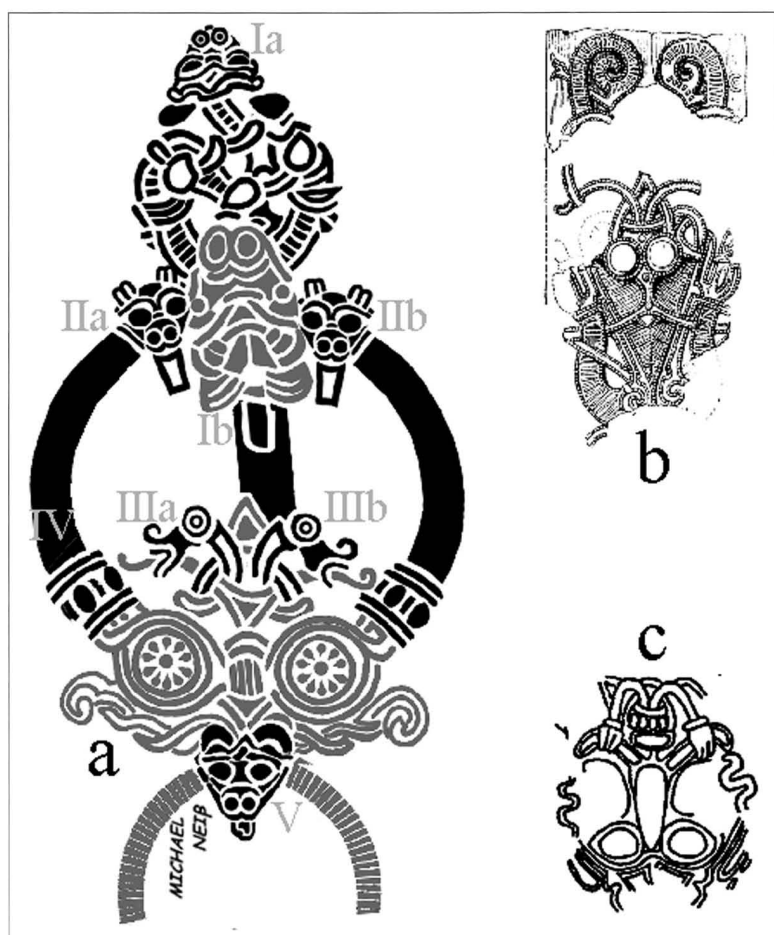


Fig. 8. A Puzzle picture employing different motif-structures: I – great beast swallowing a gripping beast; II – great beast heads; III – snake heads; IV – masked man; V – gripping beast head. a) Ringed pin, Björkö-Birka grave 561, Adelsö parish in Uppland, Sweden (drawing: M. Neiß). b) Horse collar, Bjerringhøj, Mammen parish in Jutland, Denmark (drawing: H. Petersen 1872). c) Horse collar Kongsgård, Søllested parish on Fyn, Denmark, note: the motif is here upside down (drawing: M. Neiß).

al ring as a mouth and the larger functional ring as the helmet's horns (fig. 8a:III & IV & V). Here, the lower gripping beast head (fig. 8a:V) takes the same position as on the pendant from Odense (fig. 7:II), suggesting a common prototype. When the composition is rotated by 180 degrees, the former moustache turns into eyebrows and the animal head profiles (fig. 8a:III) become hands, (comp. fig. 8c). As a second motif-structure on top of the ringed pin, we detect a larger animal head (fig. 8a:Ib) swallowing a gripping beast (fig. 8a:Ia, bird's eye view).

The mysterious masked man with his two-horned helmet and his snake-shaped hands (*en face*) and the Great Beast swallowing a gripping beast, are both to be found on a horse collar from Mammen (fig. 3:I, II, IV and 8b; stylistically even closer is a mask on Søllested, fig. 8c). In addition to the two dimensional motif, we find a three-dimensional version of the swallowing scene, which leaves no doubt about the hostility between the Great Beast and the gripping beast, already implied on the ringed pin from Birka (fig. 8a:Ia–Ib). The gripping beast's acrobatic postures (fig. 3:I) are of particular interest, providing valuable information about its two-dimensional cousin. Despite that, the snakes strangling the Great Beast (3:II & III) remind us of the typical antagonist of the Vendel Style *Fenrir*-Wolf (as mentioned above). Even though it is always risky to make zoological interpretations based on Animal Art motifs, this interpretation could be confirmed by another three-dimensional but naturalistic wolf-like beast swallowing a gripping beast, from Uppåkra in Scania (Hårdh 2003:198, fig. 5–8).

#### Two-dimensional and three-dimensional motif tradition in fusion

One hallmark of Medieval Art is that two motif-structures can be combined and yet work autonomously. This means that the artist doesn't intend to create a new iconographic

message by combining some individual motifs, but to explain the message of motif-structure no. 1 by combining it to motif-structure no. 2 (comp. Elbern 1993:1437). Apparently the same principle was applied on a ringed pin from Romerike, where a modern, two-dimensional adaptation of a three-dimensional motif-structure (*Fenrir* swallowing a gripping beast, fig. 9a:I) is embedded in an older two-dimensional structure (fig. 9a:II & III). The framing structure is a human head, equipped with an animal helmet *en face* (fig. 9a:II & III), which is a more naturalistic version of the masked man of Birka with his two-horned helmet (fig. 8a:III & IV & V). The ringed pin's bows serve as offshoots from the helmet, ending in two animal head profiles (fig. 9a:II). These represent *Fenrir*, as suggested through comparison with the brooch from Klinte (comp. fig. 9a:II to 9b). At the same time the Romerike-head is a homage to older helmet conventions, e.g. as found on the Torslunda-plates (fig. 9c). Just as the modern scholar makes these associations, one can be almost certain that the contemporary observer also was able to make these observations, remembering how close a Viking-age person was to images from Vendel-age. However, when ancient motifs are copied, the artist does not necessarily intend to repeat the ancient message completely. Here, the ancient motif only serves as a indicator of the general context (comp. Arrhenius 1986:141f). A comparable plastic version, a one-eyed helmet-bearer, is known from Russian Staraja Ladoga (Meinander 1985: fig. 2).

Assuming that the helmet-bearer represents *Odinn* (as Hauck 1994:220), the Romerike combination of helmet-man and *Fenrir*-protome (fig. 9a:II & III) could be understood as an iconographical compression of a more complex motif-structure within surface ornamentation, such as on the Klinte brooch (see above). Contrary to Klinte, on Romerike that very image is reduced to its essential message. Due to that, *Fenrir*'s function as an attribute to *Odinn* is re-established, implying that *Odinn*'s presence (9a:III) causes the lockjaw of *Fenrir* (knotted tongue, fig. 9a:II). Simultaneously, this two dimensional motif-structure serves as a signpost to the message of Romerike's second embedded structure, which had been adapted from three-dimensional art. There, a new alternative to the older variant of *Fenrir*'s lockjaw (as seen at fig. 2a:II, 2b:II) is introduced: due to the resistance of our little gripping beast, *Fenrir* becomes unable to move his jaws (fig. 9a:I, comp. fig. 3:I–II, 8a:I). One problem remains, however. The animal head profiles of structure no. 1 (connected to our man *en face*) and the 'swallowing beast' of structure no. 2 cannot be a minimal pair, because they both represent *Fenrir*. Thus, they are explaining each other rather than interacting. Obviously, my minimal pair-method (Neiß 2004:10ff) cannot always be applied without modifications when two different motif-structures are combined like on the ringed pin of Romerike.

#### Shamanic representations in Viking-age ornamentation

According to the motif structure of the Mammen horse collar, gripping beast and animal-man are interacting (fig. 3:I and 3:IV are the same artefact). Their alliance and common goal is, nevertheless, more obvious on the silver brooches (fig. 1a, 4, 5a). Having recognized the masked man in several places, his identikit can be sketched as following: his gestures (shouting, hair/beard pulling; fig. 4:III, 5a:V, 6:I) are meant to indicate his involvement in magical activity, while his acrobatics must be seen in the light of shamanic ecstasy (as above; fig. 4:III, 5a:V; Hauck 1994:261f). His costume (fig. 1a:V, 4:III, 6:I) refers to the symbolism of the gripping beast. In the light of these facts, I would suggest that the masked man is *Odinn* in disguise.

Surprisingly, all the features mentioned above correspond rather well to some theories discussed since the 1930s by scholars in Nordic paganism: employing medieval descriptions of *Óðinn* as a master of *seið*, his magic was expected to build on an older concept of shamanism. A final consensus as to the demarcation line between *seið* and shamanism, solely relying on textual evidence with a late dating, has never been achieved within the discipline (Solli 2000:with references). Earlier attempts to connect Iron Age iconography to shamanism via the textual evidence were received with harsh criticism, however, with the focus on the shortcomings of the textual sources. Despite my own reservations towards such circular trains of thought (as when a number of observations from *modern* Siberia are cited in order to disprove an *ancient* phenomenon as truly 'shamanic'), the observations made during our iconological research nevertheless indicate further parallels to Siberian shamanism (comp. Polomé 1992:404–417). E.g. as implied by the puzzle pictures, *Óðinn* can transform into a gripping beast. The gripping beast probably serves as a vessel for its master's soul while travelling throughout the Otherworld. The purpose of the shaman's journey is to fight an evil demon, threatening the cosmic balance, in short: the *Fenrir* (fig. 1a:IV, 3:II, 4:II, 5a:IV, 8: Ib, 9a:I & II)

Within prehistoric Nordic paganism, the concepts of the cosmos were naturally far from canonical. To simplify, at least two structures of the cosmos are embedded in our literal echoes: a horizontal and a vertical one. According to the horizontal concept, the residence of the *Fenrir* appears to be found outside of *Miðgarðr/Ásgarðr* (like his giant kin, comp. *Gylfaginning*:chapter 33), according to the vertical concept, he should be hidden far down under the world tree *Yggdrasill* (comp. Meletinskij 1973:50; Hastrup 1981; commented by Schjødt 1990). Misunderstanding the gods' motive for sparing *Fenrir* during an earlier act of the cosmic drama, Hendrik Molenaar wished to place the prison of *Fenrir* in *Ásgarðr*, in full disregard of his own structuralist model (1985:73, 185) and the gods' kinship with *Fenrir*. When asked by king Gylfi why they didn't kill *Fenrir* after they managed to bind him, the disguised gods answer 'So greatly did the gods esteem their holy place and sanctuary, that they would not stain it with the Wolf's blood' (*Gylfaginning*:chap 34, my translation). The true metaphorical meaning of 'holy places' as kinship taboos was thus unveiled by Margaret Clunies-Ross (1994:220, note 31). Further evidence renders the breakage of all family ties during the arrival of *Ragnarök*, justifying the battle between the gods and their cousin *Fenrir*, and thus their mutual killing (*Gylfaginning*: chap. 50, citing the *Völuspá*). One of our richest cosmological sources is the *Grímnismál* ('Speech of the masked one'), where *Óðinn* himself describes the cosmos, using a shamanic tree-hierophany (*Yggdrasill*, meaning 'Ygg's/*Óðinn*'s horse'). A squirrel called *Ratatoskr* and its journey up and down this cosmic pillar are reminders of the shaman-journeys of the transformed *Óðinn* (Drobin 1990:113, referring to Holmberg-Harva 1938:49ff). To interpret the gripping beast as *Óðinn*'s animal-shaped helper within the Otherworld is also reconcilable with the pagan conception of the soul. Accordingly, everyone has individual ownership of an animal-shaped *fylgia*, forming an 'alter ego' within the immaterial world (Hastrup 1985:152ff). Perhaps, the soul can also be split and travel to different soul-harbours (like the ravens *Hugin* and *Munin*, *Gylfaginning*: chapter 37). Remembering its role as a mythological animal, however, I find it doubtful that we can determine the gripping beast zoologically (e.g. as cats; Steuer 1994). With regard to its representations in Animal Art, I would rather suggest the gripping beast to be a kind of chimera, which unites the



Fig. 9. A naturalistic parallel to Birka:

I – great beast swallowing gripping beasts;

II – great beast heads;

III – male

with helmet.

a) Ringed pin, Romerike, Akerhus in Østfold, Norway (drawing: J. Petersen 1928).

b) Disc-on-bow brooch Valla, Klinte parish on Gotland, Sweden (drawing: L. Thunmark-Nylén 1998).

c) Punch, Björnhovda, Torslunda parish on Öland, Sweden (drawing: M. Neiß).

characteristics of different animals. One of them would be the ability to constantly climb up and down the cosmic pillar, and 'the warning words of the watchful eagle, he [*Ratatoskr*] bears to *Niðhögg* beneath' (*Grímnismál*: strophe 32).

Having found an entrance to the question of cosmic balance, the swallowing-scene at Mammen doesn't actually proclaim the gripping beast as victorious over *Fenrir*: as implicated by the contact feet-to-shoulders (fig. 3: I), the gripping beast is mobilizing its last powers (about the blessing powers of the feet, Hauck 1981:227f). Another parameter to indicate *Fenrir*'s superiority is his overwhelming size (fig. 3:II); and presuming that *Fenrir* was not strangled by *Óðinn*'s snakes (fig. 3:III); one could imagine the outcome of the struggle to be different. However, at the Mammen horse collar, the powers of chaos and order are in counterbalance (on *Óðinn*'s role in the creation of the cosmos see Clunies-Ross 1994:152ff; *Völuspá*: strophe 3–6; *Gylfaginning*:chapter 6–8). The iterative essence of that struggle appears very agreeable to the bipolar concepts of the cosmos, as some scholars stated with reference to pagan times (Hastrup 1981:65ff, 1985:145–54, 150; Meulengracht-Sørensen 1986:271ff). Ironically, the text sources most frequently consulted by today's scholars of pagan religion are by no means the products of a living belief system. In pagan times, traditional knowledge was transmitted orally and therefore somewhat changeable (Neiß 2005:93f). The idea of conserving knowledge and memories by writing them down is just one of many radical cultural changes caused by the conversion to Christianity. Thus, the myth-collections of the *Poetic Edda* and



Snorri's *Edda* were born out of an antiquarian interest on 13<sup>th</sup> century Iceland – within a medieval horizon, that is! To the bearers of traditional knowledge, meanwhile, the changes brought by Christianisation should have had a major impact on their worldview. The end of their gods and ancient allies had gradually become a fact. As a result, even eschatology was modified. By diminishing certain elements of balance and reciprocity (e.g. Clunies-Ross 1994:237ff), the forces of order and chaos became increasingly polarized, making a final showdown inevitable. So, in the last act of the cosmic drama, *Ragnarök*, one's old gods and allies were at least allowed to die the heroic death to which they were entitled.

The idea of a final showdown is naturally not to be found in our Viking-age materials, representing an earlier stage of mythology. However, one cannot deny the existence of divergences within the iconography of our artefact groups, comparing the encirclement of *Fenrir* as seen on silver brooches (e.g. fig. 1a) and the swallowing-scene on horse-collars and ringed pins (e.g. fig. 3, 8a:I). It is, of course, difficult to decide whether those formal differences depend on mythological ones. As Ulf Drobin emphasized, in oral cultures explaining a consequence is always the prior goal of a myth. The mythical action itself is, however, of secondary importance, leaving room for variations (Drobin 1990:98). Keeping in mind that the possibilities for re-arranging the elements of our motif-canon are completely different from artefact group to artefact group, I would rather explain the different conventions as two pictorial metaphors, or *kenningar* (as the Vikings themselves would have called them; comp. Nylén 1962:24, Neiß 2005), which were equal in value. The *kenningar* mentioned serve as pictorial summaries of an otherwise orally transmitted myth about *Oðinn*'s efforts to prevent *Fenrir* from swallowing the whole universe.

### Results and Future Perspective

As a result of this study, a sacred picture was extracted from Late Iron Age animal ornamentation. The consequent redefinition of that very motif-structure during every style phase since Style II is explicable with the help of religious specialists who constantly guaranteed obedience to tradition for the ornaments (Neiß 2004). To mention an early parallel, research on place-names proved that many Migration Era gold bracteates were found nearby *Oðinn*-sanctuaries. As pointed out by runologists, however, some bracteates show corrupted runes and can hardly have been authorized by well informed priests (Hauck 1983:580f, 1985:18; criticised by Birkman 1995:70ff). Furthermore, even bracteate-images have been reproduced on artefacts like relief-brooches (Neiß 2001:16ff). The question is whether our Viking-age representations of *Oðinn* are solely to be explained as 'pirate copies' of a sacred picture on profane artefacts. Perhaps, some objects had a religious dimension as well. As one example, the pendant with a puzzle picture of *Oðinn* and his helping spirit (fig. 7) was found at the religious central place of Odense on the Danish Island of Fyn (Kjærum 1990:170f, 202; Sørensen 1992:map). In fact, there is concrete evidence that most of the Viking-age pictures presented in this study could have been 'legal' copies in the sense that we find them on jewellery commissioned by members of the leading class, which includes religious authorities (Neiß 2005:90). One might picture a wandering or stationary goldsmith being commissioned to translate leading class *Oðinn*-propaganda to pictures, in the same way as contemporary court skalds used to cast it in verses and *kenningar* (2005:94; 2006). Thus, the workshops of the finest artefacts in quality and iconography and their relationship to standard products of the Viking Age will be

the focus of my research to come.

Finally, in conclusion, when beholding gripping-beast-like leather and textile masks from Haithabu and Novgorod, one cannot resist imagining our motif-structures to represent a real-life cult practise (Price 2002:172ff., 366ff, with references).

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