

# FABULOUS ANIMALS

*– from the Iron Age to the Vikings*





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Ingunn M. Røstad, Hanne L. Aannestad,  
Katherine Elliott and Anja Mansrud (eds)

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**Brooch**  
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C10695

## FOREWORD

*Ingunn M. Røstad, Hanne L. Aannestad, Katherine Elliott and Anja Mansrud*

*Imagine a world in which humans do not rule over all other creatures but instead view them with awe and admiration, a world where animals play an important role in religion and storytelling and are present in the things people make, wear and use. It is a world where both humans and gods can turn themselves into animals and where animals can have human qualities. The Animal art of the Iron Age lets us glimpse what the world was like before Christianity came to Scandinavia – a time when the Old Norse religion still reigned.*

### **Animal art in the Iron Age**

Animal art is an art form that was used to decorate weapons, jewellery, clothing and tools in the Iron Age c. 400-1100 in Northern Europe and Scandinavia. In this style, animals and humans are intermixed and woven together. Animalised humans and humanised animals reflect a world of ideas that seems alien to us today. Animal art emerged in the 400s, a time when the great Roman Empire was on the verge of dissolving and Europe was undergoing change. Accomplished jewellery smiths from the Roman border towns migrated northward and brought their tools, traditions and skills with them. In the North's chieftain society, a distinctly Scandinavian style emerged – animal art – a form of decoration and imagery that reflected people's beliefs and ideas about the world. Animal art quickly spread throughout Europe and remained popular for several centuries. Its last stronghold, however, was Scandinavia. Here it was in use for almost 800 years – until it was gradually displaced in the 1100s by vegetal ornamentation and Christian symbols.

The meaning of this enigmatic Animal art has been the subject of scholarly curiosity since the 1800s. In the earliest research, the development of the ornamentation was in focus; scholars mapped which animals were dominant in the various phases of the Iron Age and defined the combinations of specific elements in the decoration. In the last 20–25 years, research has shifted towards exploring and revealing the religious ideas and beliefs underlying this art form.

### **Animal art on display**

The exhibition 'Fabulous Animals' takes the visitor back in time to this fascinating Old Norse world of ideas. Based on recent research that lets us glimpse a reality completely different from our own, we present a selection of intriguing objects decorated with Animal art made in the Norwegian Iron Age, sometime between ca. 400–1100 AD. In this catalogue, we expand on several of the themes explored in the exhibition: We

meet warriors with animal strength, powerful women who wore animal-shaped jewelry, and people and animals who not only live alongside each other but also end up in the same cremation fire. We also encounter strange animal-like beings with human features and discover animals hiding in different ways in the decoration. Finally, we see how animals gradually lose their status by being out-manoeuvred by a new Christian worldview that sees animals and humans as essentially different from each other and puts humans at the top of a hierarchy of created beings.

### Fabulous animals and beastly humans

In the Iron Age we encounter a reality in which animals and humans are seen as two sides of the same thing: the distinction between animals and humans is blurred. Gods and powerful people could take on the guise (*ham*) of animals and transform themselves into animals. The myths tell of Odin, the most powerful of all the gods, who could change into a snake, a fish and a bird. Humans could also acquire the qualities of animals. Five ‘fabulous’ animals in particular gave power and knowledge. The *bird of prey* could give sharp eyes and the ability to see at great distances, the *wolf* taught the warrior to thirst for blood, the *wild boar* made him fearless. The *bear* gave strength and power, and the *serpent* held the world together. Humans could have their own special ‘soul animal’ – called a *fylgje* – that gave power and identity and could be called upon in times of need. When this happened, the person would receive the soul animal’s power and special abilities. A *berserkr* was a warrior who became a bear – big, strong and invincible.

### Animals today

Christianity’s arrival in Scandinavia brought about great changes. In the Judeo-Christian story of creation, humans are instructed by God to rule over the earth and the animals. The human soul is understood as immortal and spiritual. This way of thinking culminates in René Descartes’ (1596–1650) theory that animals do not have souls, a philosophical standpoint that has been part of the basis for the human exploitation of animals even up to the present day. Charles Darwin (1809–1882), in his theory of evolution, argued that animals and humans have a common origin, and this theory, to a great extent, dissolved the existential distinction between humans and animals. Darwin faced much resistance in his own lifetime, but the principle of evolution is now accepted by most people. Today we have a contradictory relationship with animals; we dress pets in designer clothing and celebrate their birthdays at the same time as we eat industrially farmed chickens kept in cramped cages, under conditions we can hardly imagine.

The cognitive and emotional capacities of animals comprise a large and partly controversial theme within both natural science and philosophy. Some scholars claim that animals’ experiences of the world are not all that different from those of humans. This has resulted in greater pressure for animal-welfare legislation and policies, one example being the ban on fur production in Norway that will be implemented in 2025. In this way, we can perhaps say that the natural-scientific view of the world is leading us towards a renewed recognition of animals as fellow beings, not unlike us humans.

### Shadows of another reality<sup>1</sup>

We have few surviving sources that shed light on life in the Iron Age. Animal art represents only fleeting shadows of this reality. But by looking at the animal-humans and human-animals, the snakes, wolves, birds and bears, we can glimpse the contours of a society in which human and animal lives were interwoven and interdependent, where the power and special qualities of animals were acknowledged as fundamentally important, enabling people to live and survive in nature.

We hope the public will join us in exploring these shadows of another reality, and we hope this book and the exhibition will trigger curiosity about the past, as well as contribute to increased reflection on the many-faceted relationship between humans and animals in the past and the present.

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<sup>1</sup> This sub-title (in translation) is borrowed from Lotte Hedeager (1997), *Skygger af en anden virkelighed. Oldnordiske myter*. Samleren, København.

**Sword scabbard mount (detail)**  
Veien, Norderhov, Ringerike,  
Buskerud, Norway.  
C337





**Bridle bit with animal heads, possibly cats.**  
Tingelstad Øvre, Gran, Oppland, Norway.  
C6220

## INTRODUCTION

### The image of the Nordic Iron Age

*Lotte Hedeager*

*What is an image?* A flower, a dog or a landscape can be rendered as a picture of something we can see with our own eyes. But what about *an image of a period in time?* This is impossible to see because it exists only as an abstraction. Yet it is still concrete enough for us to understand that the image of the Iron Age was very different from that of our own age. The Iron Age had its own framework for what it meant to be human; one does not choose the image of one's own time, one lives in it.

Each and every time period, each and every historical epoch, is rooted in a specific *worldview*. Our own worldview is rooted in Christianity and the Judeo-Christian doctrine that humans are created in the image of God and superior to all other living things, whether plant or animal. Even today, we perceive animals as ranking lower than ourselves and subject to our domination; we categorise them as existing to serve our interests, as food or as a source of labour, but also as endangered species, pets, pests and so on. This order of things has come under pressure in recent decades; today our right to exploit nature has such obvious consequences that our survival is ultimately threatened. In just a few years, our grandchildren may ask how in the world we could have eaten beef, and we will answer that this was simply how it was. To eat beef for dinner was part of everyday life; *it was not something we reflected over.*

#### **Fabulous beasts**

There are, nevertheless, some animals we do not eat, even though these are among the most common of our domestic animals. We often see horses grazing in fields, but rarely cows and never pigs. The opposite is the case at the dinner table, even though horsemeat is edible and the horse is one of the largest meat animals. It is even more unthinkable for us to eat dogs, which are a valued ingredient in traditional Chinese cookery. On the other hand, we Scandinavians eat large amounts of pork, which is taboo in both the Jewish and the Muslim world. In short, what we eat and what we do not eat are conditioned by culture, tradition and religion. Some things we do, other things we do not do, without reflecting why.

Our taboos about eating horse meat are deeply rooted in the Nordic soul and date back more than a thousand years. It was then that the Old Norse religion of the Viking Age was confronted with medieval Christian teaching. The Catholic Church had problems getting people to submit to the true faith and correct religious practices.

The Church therefore outlawed *blot* – the sacrifice of animals and humans, and the eating of horse meat. Eating horse meat was considered so serious a crime that the Norwegian law *Gulatingsloven*, from the early Middle Ages, condemned those who did so to life-long exile and the loss of their farms and land – the same penalty as for killing infants. What was it about the horse that made it such a threat to the Church in Scandinavia? Why was eating horse meat so tainted that it had to be fought with the harshest of punishments? The answer, of course, is that the horse played a central role in the pre-Christian religion and was perceived as a threat to the Church's power. But how could 'a mere animal' be seen as a threat to God's own son?

**The horse's** central role in Nordic pre-history is clearly evident: We see the horse in the imagery of the time, we find physical traces of it in graves and sacrificial sites, and we hear of its role in sagas and stories. The horse lived in close contact with humans, as a friend, traveling companion, work mate and war machine. In Old Norse sagas and stories, horses had their own names and personalities. They lived in large, half-wild herds in the forests and hinterland, on the edge of the world of humans. The horse belonged both inside and outside the human world; it crossed boundaries. The horse is an animal of the steppes, the endless plains are its domain, perfectly adapted for speed. The horse can move 'as fast as lightening', and thanks to the placement of its eyes, it can see the whole horizon and senses danger from a great distance. The horse has a magical ability to read the landscape and can always find its way home. Both in reality and as a symbol, the horse represents travel, in this world and in the next. In nature, the horse crosses the boundary between tame and wild, and in myth, it can find the way and cross into the Realm of the Dead. The many graves from pre-Christian times containing equipment for riding and wagons probably reflect the wish to ensure the passage to the afterlife.

Even long before the Viking Age, in the first century after Christ, the Roman historian Tacitus wrote about how the people of the North considered the horse sacred and in possession of magical powers – the horse was 'the confidant of the gods'. The gods blessed the horse with secret knowledge that humans did not possess. By interpreting its behaviour, humans could pick up warnings and gain insights into the gods' plans. The horse was the messenger, the medium through which gods and humans communicated. Through the *blot* (sacrifice and eating of the horse), people tried to tap into these powers in order to gain contact with external forces. To 'become a horse' can be seen as parallel to the Catholic communion (Eucharist), in which the individual is united with Christ by eating his body and drinking his blood. The horse, in other words, was Christ's competitor; both had control over life and death, and both ensured access to the afterlife. The horse was thus not 'just an animal', in the same way that Christ was

not just a man; they were divine mediators with qualities that people – through *blot* and communion – wished to take part in.

With Christianity came the law against placing horses and other animals in graves, regardless of whether they were whole or in pieces, tame or wild. Animals were completely excluded from Christian rituals, while Christ himself was presented as the weakest and most vulnerable of all animals – the sacrificial lamb. What was it about these animals the Church was so opposed to? In the year 747, St Boniface went on a missionary trip to what is today Northern Germany. From there, he wrote a letter to the archbishop of Canterbury to warn him that the priests of the recently Christianised Saxons wore garments that had edgings with snake-shaped motifs. These, writes Boniface, were of the Antichrist, 'introduced by his guile and through his ministers in the monasteries to induce lechery, depravation, shameful deeds, and disgust for study and prayer'.

St Boniface lived at a time when the Church fought to establish correct doctrine. One of Christianity's basic tenets was – and is – the belief that we humans have a unique status because we are created in God's image, while animals are fundamentally different and categorically subordinate to us. Despite the modern DNA-revolution, which shows that human genetic material is closely related to that of mammals, our Western cultural understanding, solidly rooted in the Judeo-Christian dogma, remains unchanged. Animals are still 'just animals', and their only real function – ultimately – is to be our food. In the pre-Christian Nordic world, however, people perceived themselves as having equal status with animals, even in some cases as subordinate to them. During Boniface's lifetime, animals in Northern Europe were still thoroughly integrated into the patterns of belief and the ideas that the Church fought against. Absolutely central to this worldview was the belief that animals kept the world from falling apart. Without the power of animals, neither the gods nor humans could exist. In other words, *dyr* (animals) were 'dear' in the senses of precious and beloved.

The Saxons, new to Christianity, still thought of animals as beings with status equal to themselves, and with individual power and significance; specific animals possessed specific qualities. Through *blot*, *hamskifte* (shape shifting) and *metamorphosis*, humans could acquire the animals' qualities – they could literally *become* these animals. This understanding, which the Saxons and Scandinavians shared, differs drastically from our rational mode of thinking, in which animals, humans and objects are never anything other than what our eyes actually register; we *trust* what we see. Underlying the Old Norse rationality, however, was the belief that animals and humans could, *in reality*, be something completely different than they appeared. The human 'soul' or 'spirit' could

appear in the guise of an animal. *Hamskifte* meant that a person could change into a specific animal. The person became this animal and could cross the boundary to the Other World. The human body thus remained visible to the eyes; it looked as though the person was asleep or dead. The person did not regain consciousness and return to this world until the soul returned to his or her body.

Traditionally, shape shifting and soul journeys are associated with shamanism, and in Old Norse mythology, both these abilities are attributed to the greatest of all the gods, Odin. *Hugr*, *hamr* and *fylgja* are Old Norse terms associated with shape-shifting and soul journeys. *Hugr*, which can be translated as spirit or thought, can leave the body as either a human or an animal, and shows itself only when the person is in a special mental state, completely beyond human control. *Fylgja* is a kind of alter-ego animal, while *hamr*, which means skin or outer appearance, is a temporary state, always in animal form, which the person's *hugr* can put on through shape shifting. In animal guise, *hugr*, just as *fylgja*, reveals 'the sender's' intention and moral quality, for example, through becoming a powerful bear, an aggressive wolf or a majestic bird of prey.

The free soul or spirit usually appeared in the guise of a bird, but it could also appear as other animals, for instance as a bear or wolf. This animal soul mate – or alter ego – travelled great distances in other worlds in order to gain knowledge about the past and the future, and while on its journey, had to fight hostile spirits. The stronger the animal, the greater the likelihood that the soul would be able to return to the person's body.

When the human soul took on animal guise, the animal also became be-souled; the human became animal and the animal became human. This dual nature came into being through shape shifting, in which humans – and gods – appeared in an alternative shape. A shape could also be a hybrid made up of several qualities and strengths that could extend beyond the individual.

### Beastly humans

Strength and power were basic conditions for survival in the pre-Christian world of the Iron Age. Without the help of animals, a person was doomed to fail. Animals possessed qualities that humans were not born with, but which could be acquired through their animal helpers; the stronger the animal, the stronger the human – best of all was of course a combination. Written sources as well as the Old Norse imagery make



**Figure 1.** Belt buckle, Sutton Hoo, England. The eagle (on side, below) and snake (in the middle) are easily recognised. Two other beasts, one with its mouth closed, the other with an open mouth (marked in white), are harder to identify.

it clear that the most desirable animal helpers were those that had several special yet different qualities (Fig. 1).

**The snake**, by its very nature, leads a dual existence; it is the ultimate shape shifter. The snake swallows other animals whole – it is a *hybrid* – a double animal. The snake also has other qualities that make it special. It exists in several elements: underground, in water, it can climb, and it can pass through small openings. It is cold-blooded, thus completely dependent on the sun for survival. It hibernates in winter and returns to life in spring in the same way as a shaman in a trance appears dead, while his soul travels great distances, later to return to this life, reborn.

When the adder gives birth, its young are even more venomous than the parents. The snake moves quietly and attacks quickly. In Old Norse mythology, it is closely associated with the cult of Odin. The king of the gods was himself a great shaman and shape shifter, who regularly changed into animal or human guise. The snake as a powerful symbol continued in Christian times, but now with a very different meaning. Through the creation myth from the book of Genesis, the snake came to be associated with Satan, the epitome of paganism. The snake motifs that decorated the borders of the Saxons' clerical robes, in other words, symbolised the pagan worldview, the principle of equality between animals and humans, the belief in shape shifting, and, ultimately, also in Odin – everything the Church fought so hard to eradicate.

In Old Norse mythology, *Midgardsormen* (the World Serpent) encircled the world and held it together. It was a popular motif in Iron Age art, decorating all sorts of objects people used and surrounded themselves with: jewellery, weapons, textiles, horse gear, woodwork, doorways and so on. The characteristic serpent of Nordic animal art slithers and wiggles, like a paraphrase of the snake in hybrid existence.

**The eagle**, described as the lord of the skies, is the most majestic of all birds of prey. The largest ones can have a wing span of up to two metres, be almost one metre tall and weigh about six kilos. The eagle sees and hears everything and is powerful and dangerous when it attacks. Hares and foxes are its most common prey, but the eagle also attacks larger animals. Its claws and sharp beak even make it dangerous to humans. In many traditional societies, the eagle is the archetypical image of the shaman – the religious specialist who, in the guise of an eagle, can travel to other worlds. Despite the eagle's undoubtable symbolic association to soul journeys and despite it being a recurring motif in Old Norse animal art, it is not, as one might expect, associated with the shamanistic god Odin. No, Odin is 'the raven god'.





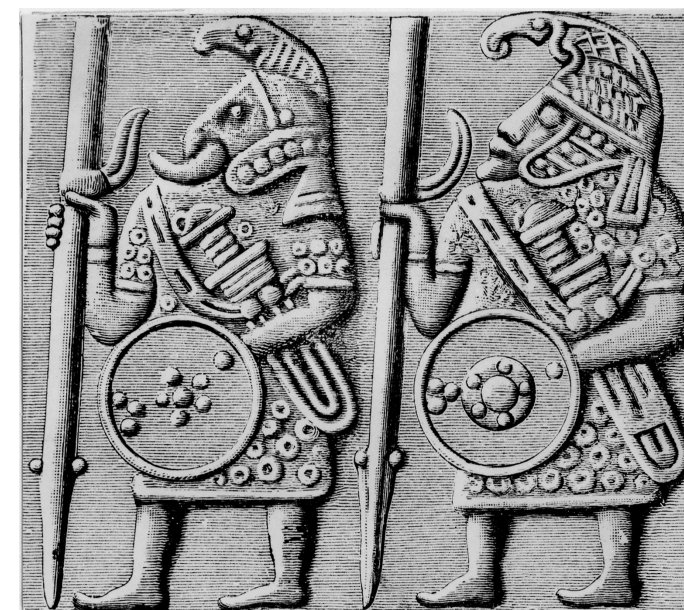
**Figure 2.**  
Men in wolf guise,  
from a helmet plate.  
Torslunda, Sweden.

**The raven** was, and is, one of the largest and most impressive birds in Northern Europe. Its wingspan is almost one and a half metres and it weighs more than a kilo. Neither its appearance nor its behaviour resembles that of other large birds; in many respects, the raven lives a liminal existence. Besides eating all kinds of plants, small mammals, reptiles and worms, it has also developed a special technique for attacking animals that are larger than itself. A lamb risks being attacked at the moment of birth, when its mother is unable to defend it. Ravens can also act as a coordinated group when attacking larger animals, for instance cows. First, they attack the mother and then the calf – always by pecking the eyes and blinding the beast. The raven is also a carrion bird, feeding on dead animals and humans alike – it was known as the bird of the battlefield. The large coal-black birds with big beaks, staring yellow eyes and piercing cries flocked around the bodies of fallen warriors to peck out their eyes. In the Old Norse world, these warriors belonged to Odin, the feared one-eyed god.

Ravens live in life-long monogamous relationships. They are expert flyers and fly high in the sky. If one sees two black dots high overhead, they are sure to be ravens. Odin had two ravens, Hugin and Munin, meaning Thought and Memory. Every morning they flew to other worlds and every evening returned to Odin with news and knowledge about the past and the future. Thought and Memory were inseparable – they were a pair that heard and saw everything. They were the very basis of Odin's power and part of his ability to transcend boundaries. It is, in other words, completely logical that the raven, not the eagle, was Odin's main animal companion.

**The wolf**, like the eagle and the raven, travels great distances and is also associated with the shaman's spirit journeys. Wolves live and hunt in packs, but a lone wolf can roam over large distances in order to establish new territory. While the wolf is robust and has stamina, it is also bloodthirsty – it can attack for no other reason than to kill. In Old Norse literature, we hear of the *Ulfhednar*, warriors in wolf-skins or in the guise of wolves (Fig. 2). Odin had two wolves, Freki and Geri, as spirit animals. Their names mean 'The Greedy Ones'.

**The wild boar**, with its dangerous tusks, was the most aggressive and hardy wild animal in Iron Age Europe. Hunting a wild boar is dangerous, but the animal only attacks in self-defence. The wild boar is the ultimate symbol of the fatalistic warrior philosophy: one should fight to the death, even against all odds (Fig. 3).



**Figure 3.**  
Warrior in the guise of a wild  
boar (left); both warriors wear  
eagle helmets. Helmet-plate  
from Vendel, Sweden.

The snake, eagle/raven, bear, wild boar and wolf form a constellation of powerful animals in the Scandinavian wilderness; together, they represent speed, venomousness, voraciousness, endurance and the will to do battle. It is no coincidence that these are the spirit animals of warriors, represented on their weapons, helmets, shields and personal possessions. Such imagery signals to the surrounding world that the warrior possesses some of these animals' characteristics and powers: the greater the combination of animals, the greater the warrior's powers (Fig. 4). There is, however, one powerful animal that is strikingly absent from the Old Norse pictorial universe – the bear (see the article by Lotte Hedeager and Anja Mansrud).



**Figure 4.**  
Wolf, wild boar and eagle.  
Buckle from Zealand,  
Denmark.

With the exception of the horse, all the animals in Old Norse imagery and sagas are wild. The animals that lived in close proximity to people on farms also had important qualities, but they were not powerful animals in the transcendental sense. The horse, however, had dual status as a boundary crosser and messenger between the wild and the tame, between outside and inside. This accounts for its unique position as the trusted messenger between gods and humans, and as the ultimate sacrificial animal.

### The image of the Iron Age

The impressive belt buckle from the warrior grave at Åker in Hedmark (Fig. 5) can be read as a picture of the place of humans in the Old Norse worldview: the man – or king – wearing a crown is in the guise of a wild boar. The heads with the powerful tusks are the man's legs, and to the side of each 'leg', we see two eagles with powerful hooked beaks and prominent claws. Two snakes with eagle heads form the actual buckle. In the world that Scandinavians of the first millennium called their own, animals were a self-evident and integral part of existence. The king possessed the maximum of animal power. Life, in fact, was unthinkable without the help of animals, and thus something people simply did not reflect over. It was this pre-Christian worldview that was captured, condensed and conveyed in Old Norse animal art. The rich visual language of animal ornamentation is the image of the Nordic Iron Age.



**Figure 5.**  
Half man, half wild boar.  
Eagles are present on both  
sides of the man's head, and  
two eagle heads form the belt  
buckle itself. From Åker in  
Hedmark, Norway.  
C4901



# ANIMAL ART FOR DUMMIES

Hanne Lovise Aannestad

Animal art is ornamentation or patterns with animals as motifs. Animal motifs were important in the decoration of weapons, jewellery, clothing and other functional objects from the late 300s AD to the time when Christianity spread throughout Scandinavia in the 1100s. Animal motifs dominated Scandinavia's visual imagery, design and decoration for almost 800 years, and they are a special source of knowledge about the society, religion, culture and worldview of Iron Age Europe.

## Animal art in time and space

We find objects with Animal art throughout much of Northern Europe and Scandinavia, in what is called the Germanic area in the Iron Age (ca. 400–1050 AD) (Fig. 1). Animal art probably originated somewhere in Southern Scandinavia in the late 300s AD and spread south to Western Europe and across the entire Germanic area north of the Roman Empire. At the same time, the early Animal art is strongly influenced by Roman art and design styles (see Elna Siv Kristoffersen's article). This means that already during the 300s and 400s, people were moving across large geographical areas

**Figure 1.**  
Map of the Germanic area  
at the time of the collapse  
of the Roman Empire,  
ca. 400 AD.



**Figure 2.**  
Bird-shaped brooch from  
the Merovingian Period,  
found at Norheim, Larvik,  
in Vestfold, Norway.  
Even though the pattern is  
abstract, the brooch is clearly  
intended to depict a bird,  
with a beak, outlined eyes  
and wings pressed against  
its body.C23175

and influencing each other's culture and taste. During the nearly 800 years Animal art was in use, there were great upheavals in Europe. Mass migrations, wars, epidemics, volcanic eruptions and changes in technology caused society to change. In continental Western Europe, Animal art disappeared after the expansion of Christianity in the 600s, but the animals lived on in Scandinavia. When Scandinavia was Christianised in the 1000s, the animals gradually disappeared and were replaced by stylised plant ornamentation influenced by Byzantine, and later, Romanesque art. Such ornamentation was already popular in Christian art further south in Europe (see Margrete Syrstad Andås's article).

We know that many different peoples lived in what we call the Germanic area during the Iron Age. These groups probably spoke different languages and possibly also believed in different gods. Even so, they used the same patterns to decorate their possessions. This indicates that in spite of the regional differences, Iron Age people of Northern Europe shared a belief system built on shared values, stories and perceived common origins.



**Figure 3.** Brooch with a snake-like animal from the Merovingian Period. The brooch is made of a copper alloy and gilded with gold. It was originally fastened to a harness or belt. Later, a pin was mounted on the back and it was used as a brooch, probably on a woman's dress. C29928

### Animal art and the animals

How the animals looked and which animals were depicted changed a lot during this long period of time. Sometimes the animals are depicted in what we call a naturalistic style, which makes it easy to recognise the different animal species (Fig. 2). In other cases, the animals are abstract, with heads, bodies, beaks, legs and tails placed in a non-naturalistic way (Fig. 3). These abstract animal figures are difficult to interpret,

**Figure 4.** Gold pendant (bracteate). A well-known scene from Norse mythology showing the wolf Fenrir biting off the hand of the warrior god Týr. This bracteate was found in Trollhättan, Sweden and is dated to the 400s. SHM 1164



**Figure 5.** Gold pendant (bracteate) from the Migration Period. The bracteate pictures a horse and rider. In front of the man's head is a bird in profile. The rider's headgear indicates that he has high status in Germanic society; he could be a chieftain or perhaps Odin himself, king of the Norse gods. The motif of the horse, rider and bird is found on many bracteates from this period. C11220



and researchers spend a lot of time studying the designs to find out what is hiding in the patterns.

Animal art was not merely decoration. Some objects depict scenes we recognise from Norse mythology. The story of the warrior god Týr, whose hand was bitten off by the wolf Fenrir, is pictured on a gold medallion, called a bracteate, from the Migration Period (Fig. 4). Many bracteates depict a male figure on horseback with a bird on his shoulder (Fig. 5). This is thought to represent Odin, king of the Norse gods, riding on his horse Sleipnir. In this interpretation, one of his ravens, Hugin (Thought) or Munin (Memory), is by his side. Other scenes are not as easy to interpret. On a mount for a sword scabbard from Hamar, there is an image of a man standing between two horses (Fig. 6). The horses stand on their hind legs, and it seems like the man is struggling to control them. Surrounding the man and the horses is a swarm of snakes with open mouths. Perhaps this is a scene from a story that Iron Age people knew well. Depictions like these could have been ways of telling and remembering stories through art.

Some motifs seem to tell a story, others may have other meanings, but no matter what the case, Animal art is always about animals *and* humans, naturalistic or abstract, together or on their own (Figs. 7 and 8).

### Animal art and archaeologists

The study of Animal art has always been an important part of the archaeology and research on the Iron Age in Northern Europe and Scandinavia. In the 1800s and 1900s, archaeologists were mostly concerned with identifying the art and studying the development of various patterns. Variations in the motifs over time were defined as



**Figure 6.** Mount from a sword scabbard, found at Domkirkeodden, Hamar, Hedmark. The piece is dated to the Merovingian Period. It shows a man with his arms raised and his face in profile. On each side of him is a rearing horse with its head turned towards the man. Snakes with gaping mouths surround the horses and the man. C54135

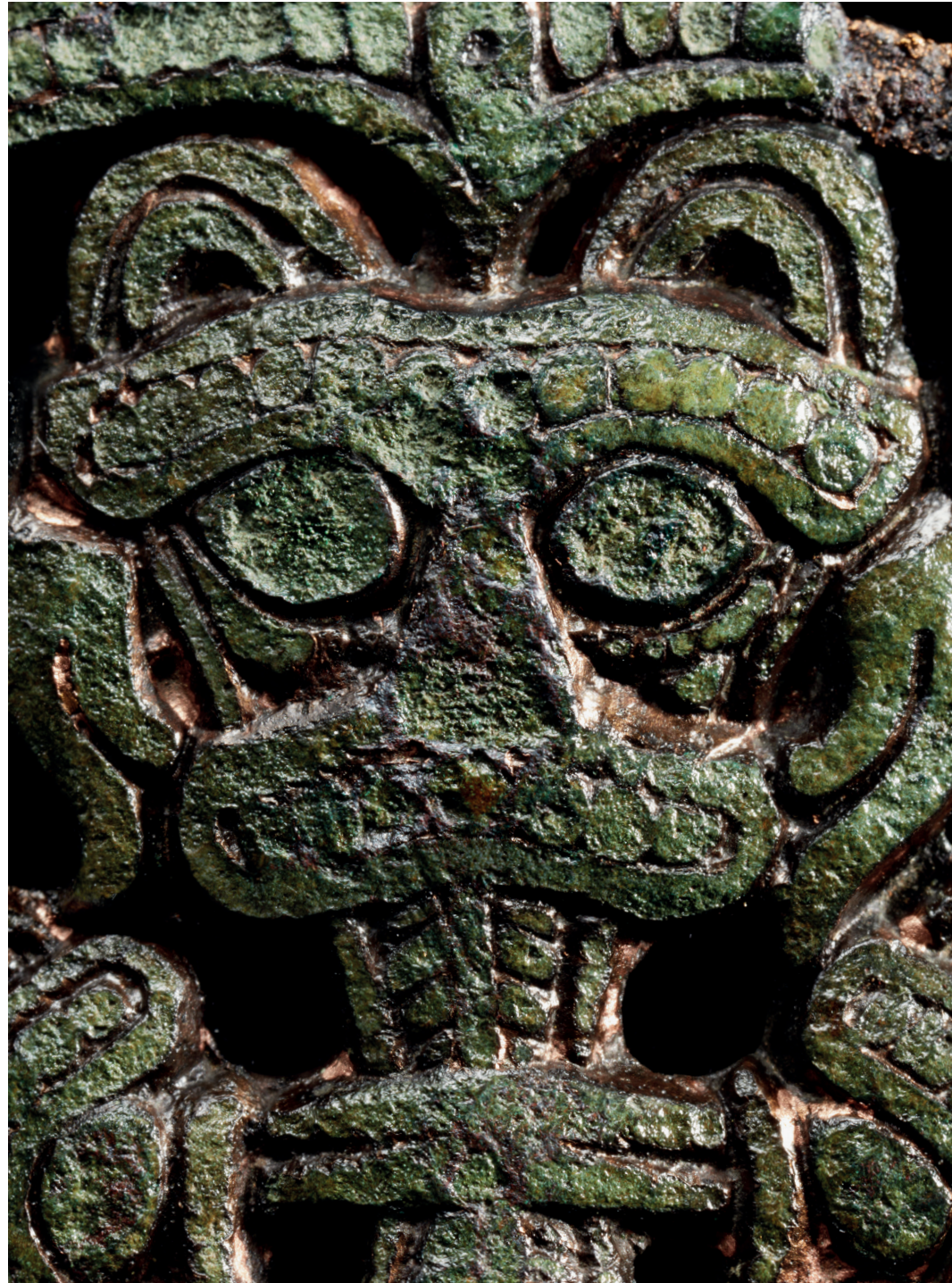
different stylistic traditions. Many of the styles were given names and became known as the Nydam Style, Salins Styles I–III, Vendel Style, Oseberg Style, Mammen Style, Borre Style and Urnes Style (Fig. 9). Most of the styles take their name from the find places of famous objects. The Vendel Style, for instance, is named after a burial site in Vendel in Uppland in Sweden, and the Oseberg Style is named after the famous ship grave from Oseberg in Tønsberg, Norway. Today we can look at suit coats or shoes and place them in the 1980s, '90s or early 2000s. In the same way, archaeologists and art historians who study Animal art can examine the stylistic traits of ornamented objects and date them to the 400s, 500s or 900s AD.

It was not until the 1980s that archaeologists became interested in the meaning behind animal art, what the animal and human figures represented and why they were popular for so many centuries. Today most scholars agree that the study of animal art can give us knowledge about how people in the Iron Age understood the world and about the relationship between animals and humans (see Lotte Hedeager's article).

Animal art is both fine art and culture. Its various styles and traditions overlap and intertwine and represent long lines of development. The changes in animal art over time show that people who lived in different places and at different times had contact with each other. It also demonstrates that the contact was linked to shared cultural and ideological traditions. The animals depicted in the ornaments are the starting points for studies of the relationships between people, creativity in handicrafts, and technological development, as well as for studies of religious beliefs and of how people viewed themselves and the world in the Iron Age. Most people today can recognise the cross as a symbol of Christ's suffering, death and resurrection. Animal art could have functioned in a similar way, as symbols and metaphors for commonly shared stories about how the world worked.

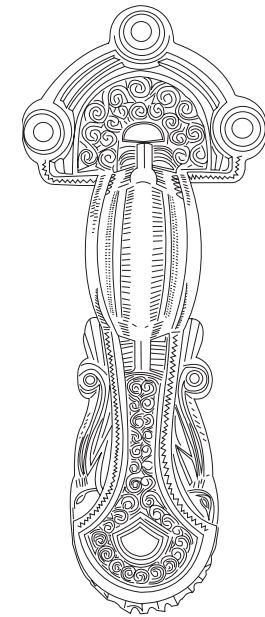
**Figure 7.** The famous Oseberg ship has a serpent at its prow, and along the side boards are animal figures gripping each other with their arms and legs (see Unn Pedersen's article). Organic materials such as wood and textiles tend to rot and disappear relatively quickly, so most of the objects with animal art that survive are made of metal. The Oseberg ship's carvings, however, remind us that animal art could come in many sizes, shapes and materials.



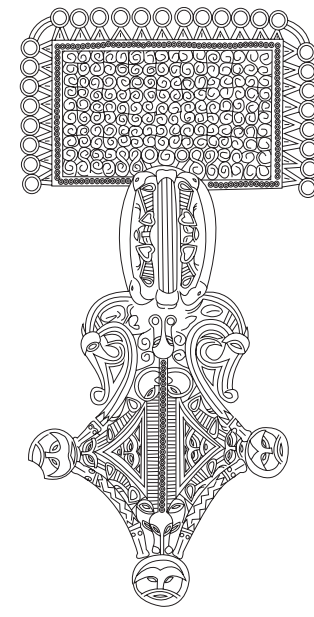


**Figure 8.** Head of a small gripping beast with its characteristic pointed ears, eyebrows, eyes and pointed chin. A detail from a dress pin found at Bjølstad, Vågå, Oppland, Norway. Many of the animal types used in Animal art are easy to identify, such as birds of prey, wild boars, horses and bears. Other creatures are harder to determine. Is it a cat, or is it a fox?  
C23005

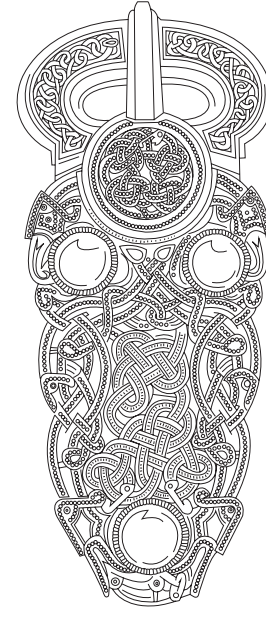
**Figure 9.** Overview of the different styles of Animal art.



**Nydam style**  
c 400–450  
Square headed brooch  
from Amundrød, Larvik,  
Vestfold, Norway. C29300a



**Salins style I**  
c 450–550  
Square headed brooch from  
Tveitene, Larvik, Vestfold,  
Norway. C11220



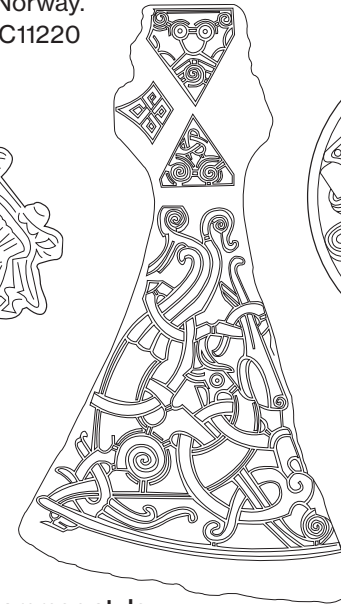
**Salins style II**  
c 550–700  
Belt buckle from  
Sutton Hoo, England.



**Salins style III**  
c 700–800  
Brooch from  
Gotland, Sweden



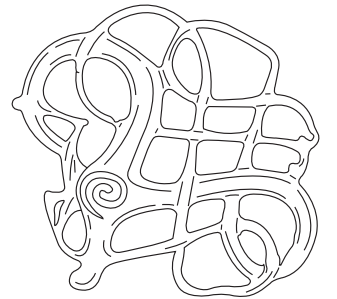
**Oseberg style**  
c 800–850  
Brooch with horse motive  
from Kaupang, Larvik,  
Vestfold, Norway.  
C27220n



**Mammen style**  
c 950–1025  
Axe from Bjerringshøj, Mammen Sogn, Denmark.  
The National Museum of Denmark.



**Borre style**  
c 850–950  
Brooch from Bjølstad,  
Sel, Oppland, Norway.  
C23005



**Urnes style**  
c 1060–1150  
Brooch from Bø-Nordigård,  
Lesja, Oppland., Norway.  
C27288



**Figure 1.**  
Warrior in the guise  
of a bear? Textile  
fragment found in the  
Oseberg ship burial  
in Vestfold, Norway.

## THE BEAR: KING OF THE BEASTS – THE KING’S BEAST

*Lotte Hedeager and Anja Mansrud*

*The bear is the largest, strongest and most dangerous of all animals in the Northern Hemisphere. It has more similarities with humans than any other animal. It can walk on two legs, leave footprints and swing its arms as it walks. The shape of its head is round, just like ours, it can sit with its back against a tree while nursing its young, and it can make sounds that resemble the cry of a human child. The bear has a many-faceted language and well-developed emotional behaviour. Like us, it eats both meat and plants, it hunts and fishes and it loves berries and honey. In many cultures the bear is revered as sacred and thought of as a relative and ancestor.*

### Feared and respected

In pre-Christian society, humans were masters of the cultivated landscape while bears were masters of wild nature. They hunted in each other’s territory. Humans and bears were similar, and they were competitors; their relationship was characterised by mutual fear and respect. The perception of this relationship between equals was so firmly rooted in the human psyche that it endured into historical time. Bear hunting has at all times been enveloped in taboos and rules.

The historian and churchman Olaus Magnus, who in 1555 published a book about the ‘Northern Peoples’, *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*, discusses mixed marriages between bears and humans. From the Saga of *Hrólfur Kraki*, we learn of the hero Bjarki, whose name means ‘Little Bear’. He is the son of Bea (She-Bear) and Bear (He-Bear). Bjarki is thus a *berserkr* (a bear son and a bear warrior), a direct analogy to Beowulf, the great hero in the Old English epic poem with the same name. The name ‘Beo-wulf’ is a combination of bear and wolf, indicating a warrior who has the combined strength of both animals, as a *berserkr* and an *úlfheðinn* (wolf warrior). Other great kings and heroes mentioned in Old Norse and Old English literature also have names relating to bears. This reveals the ritual and magical power that was associated with this animal. In the pre-Christian Nordic world, only bears were kings and heroes – and only kings and heroes were bears!

### Animal warriors

The most obvious human bear is found in the word *berserkr*. Ber means bear and serkr means skin – a warrior who fights in the guise of a bear. The bear warrior, the wolf warrior and the wild-boar warrior represent three forms of doing battle, each symbolised by the characteristics of these animals. The bear is the solitary, independent and

majestic figure with enormous strength and noble demeanor, yet who, when enraged, can destroy everything and everyone around him. The wolf, by contrast, always does battle as a member of a highly cohesive pack. It is cunning and bloodthirsty by nature. *Berserkr* and *úlfheðinn* represent two distinctly different ways of fighting. The *berserkr* has the reputation of being a lone warrior, courageous in battle and an expert at handling weapons. It is beneath his dignity to attack an unarmed or weak opponent. This stands in stark contrast to the wolf warrior who attacks as part of a group in order to kill and plunder. In sum, whereas the bear is the noble enemy, the wolf is brutal and cunning. The wild boar, an animal with great strength, is also associated with battle. The warrior in the guise of a wild boar and the warrior who is half human, half wild boar, were also part of the pre-Christian Nordic worldview. In nature, the wild boar only attacks in self-defence and is therefore associated with defence. In the Nordic area, wild boars were often depicted wearing warrior helmets. In battle, the bear, wolf and wild boar warriors were terrifying, for their opponents knew which sort of special powers they possessed (see Lotte Hedeager's article, Figs. 3 and 5).

### The shaman's animal

More than any other animal, the bear has been associated with *shamanism*, a religious practice based on the idea that nature is animated and that humans can communicate with a world beyond the present. Like a shaman, the bear travels between worlds when it goes into hibernation in the winter and returns to active life in the spring. And like the shaman, the bear has a dramatic awakening after its long sleep. The large he-bear is a shaman in full strength. The bear is thus also known as the traditional companion animal of the most powerful shamans among indigenous peoples throughout the North. In the Old Norse world, the bear was often mentioned as a symbol of Odin – the god who controlled shape-shifting.

### Bear claws in graves

The bear was fylgja, that is, a companion animal (rather like an alter ego) for the greatest heroes, and berserker were Odin's own warriors. A figure resembling a bear-human shapeshifter is discernible in the Oseberg tapestry (Fig. 1). With the exception of this, and two small bear figures made of amber and jet (Unn Pedersen's article, Figs. 3 and 4), there are few actual representations of bears in Nordic animal art that are available to us today. But it is unthinkable that the bear was perceived as an insignificant animal in the Nordic world. The lack of images seems rather to suggest that the bear was so feared and respected that it was taboo even to depict it. Even though images are rare, we often find the bear itself in pre-Christian graves.

**Figure 2.**  
There are strikingly few images of bears in Nordic animal art, but the bear itself is sometimes present in cremation graves from the Early Iron Age.

Five bear claws, representing a complete paw, from an early Iron Age burial at Hunn, Østfold Norway. C28986



Bear claws are common in Iron Age graves throughout all of Scandinavia, especially in richly furnished graves from the Roman Iron Age (0–400 AD) and the Migration Period (400–550/600 AD). From the latter period, there are graves with rich finds of weapons, for instance at Snartemo in Vest-Agder and Enebø in Nordfjord. These graves also have remains of fur that indicate that the claws were still attached to the bearskins when they were wrapped around the deceased. The distribution of bear claws in graves, however, cannot be linked to a specific gender or social class. Bear claws are also found in the graves of women, for instance in one at Krosshaug in Rogaland.

We also find bear claws in simply-furnished cremation graves (Fig. 2). Such graves rarely contain all 20 claws, the number corresponding to the paws from a complete skin. Most graves contain one to five claws. Bear claws and bear teeth with a drilled hole for mounting are known from graves in Northern Scandinavia and the European continent. This could mean that bear claws were also used as amulets. Animal teeth have served as amulets to bring luck and/or as protection also in historical time. In the Old Norse language, there was no word for what we today conceive of as the soul. The words that come closest mean 'life' or 'life-force'. The life-force was particularly strong in certain parts of animals, particularly in teeth and bones. Thus, bear claws in graves may have been thought to have great power, with the ability to act and affect the world.

In the Early Iron Age, the bear was unique among the Nordic 'power animals' in that it was the only one to accompany humans to the afterlife. The deceased did not take the whole animal along; the body was wrapped in the fur or buried with one or more paws or claws. The rest of the bear was most certainly eaten. The remaining bones were treated with great respect and given back to nature, to the bear's own kingdom, where the bear would eventually be reborn, thus returning to where it originally belonged.





## THE LARGE, GILDED BROOCH FROM TVEITANE IN VESTFOLD – THE WOMAN WHO WORE IT AND THE ARTISANS WHO MADE IT

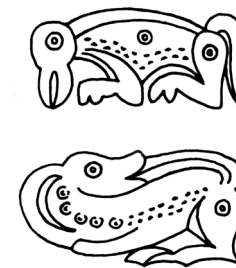
*Elna Siv Kristoffersen*

*In 406 AD, Roman forces withdrew from the empire's northern border. Up to this time, craftsmen in the territory that today comprises Belgium and France had made sword-belt mounts and other equipment for the soldiers. Their workshops were now dissolved. Shortly afterwards, the first cast-relief brooches begin to appear along the coast of Southern Norway.*

Relief brooches are large, gilded and highly decorated. They are made using a complex casting technique that originated in the workshops that served the Roman army. The influence of late Roman metal art is also apparent in the choice of motifs and in the rendering of animal figures in the earliest brooches from the beginning of the 400s. The relief brooch from Nordheim near Hedrum Vicarage in Vestfold is a good example (Fig. 1). Its animal figures resemble those found on sword belt mounts made in the Roman workshops. Eventually the smiths in Vestfold developed their own style, and the

animal figures took on a more abstract form and a genuinely Nordic expression.

Relief brooches are relatively rare objects, although two were found at Tveitane Farm in Brunlanes. Both were made later than the Nordheim brooch and can be dated to the latter half of the 400s. The largest of the brooches has exquisite ornamentation, with animal and human figures in the typical Nordic style called Salins Stil I (Fig. 2). There are, however, also similarities between this brooch and the older Nordheim brooch. This indicates that even early in the Migration Period (ca. 400–550 AD), there was a group of artisans in Vestfold who mastered complicated casting techniques and had a good understanding of the Animal art style. The similarities between the Nordheim and Tveitane brooches, despite the difference in time, show that there was a well-established tradition in jewellery art that continued through much of the 400s. We



**Figure 1.**  
Relief brooch from  
Nordheim near Hedrum  
Vicarage in Vestfold, Norway.  
C19858



**Figure 2.**  
The large relief brooch  
from Tveitane in Brunlanes,  
Larvik, Vestfold, Norway.  
C11221

have seen that the master smiths from this milieu made two brooches for the women at Tveitane, and it is probably no coincidence that the smiths from this area were among the ones who first picked up the technology and stylistic impulses from continental Europe.

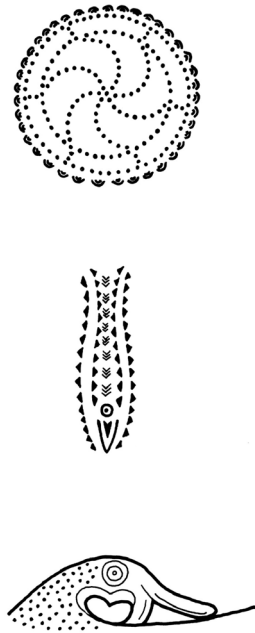
### In richly-furnished women's graves on large farms

Relief brooches are usually found on large farms in central areas. The burial sites at Tveitane are in the former municipality of Brunlanes, a fertile peninsula facing the ocean and the world beyond. The area distinguishes itself with many rich archaeological finds from the time of the Roman Period (ca. 0–400 AD) and the Migration Period. Among these finds are imported objects that bear witness to the area's position in international networks. Several fine brooches also have their origins here. In addition to the two brooches from Tveitane, a silver-sheet brooch – the precursor to the relief brooches – was found on Eidsten Farm (Fig. 3).

The relief brooches usually belong to a special set of grave gifts found in well-appointed women's graves. The Tveitane brooch, as we shall see, fits into this pattern (Fig. 4). It was found in a sunken burial cist oriented north-south, built from stones and covered with flagstones. The grave was covered by a burial mound. Only the teeth of the deceased are preserved, but they show that the woman lay with her head facing north. The large brooch lay by her teeth, along with a gold bracteate. *Bracteates* are round amulets made of gold. They are often decorated with a horse and a human figure, interpreted as the Old Norse god Odin. Three other pieces of jewellery, so-called cruciform brooches, also adorned the deceased woman's dress: Two matching brooches forming a pair, and a third somewhat larger brooch, all made from copper alloy. These were reported to have been found 'here and there', but the paired brooches were most certainly fastened either on or

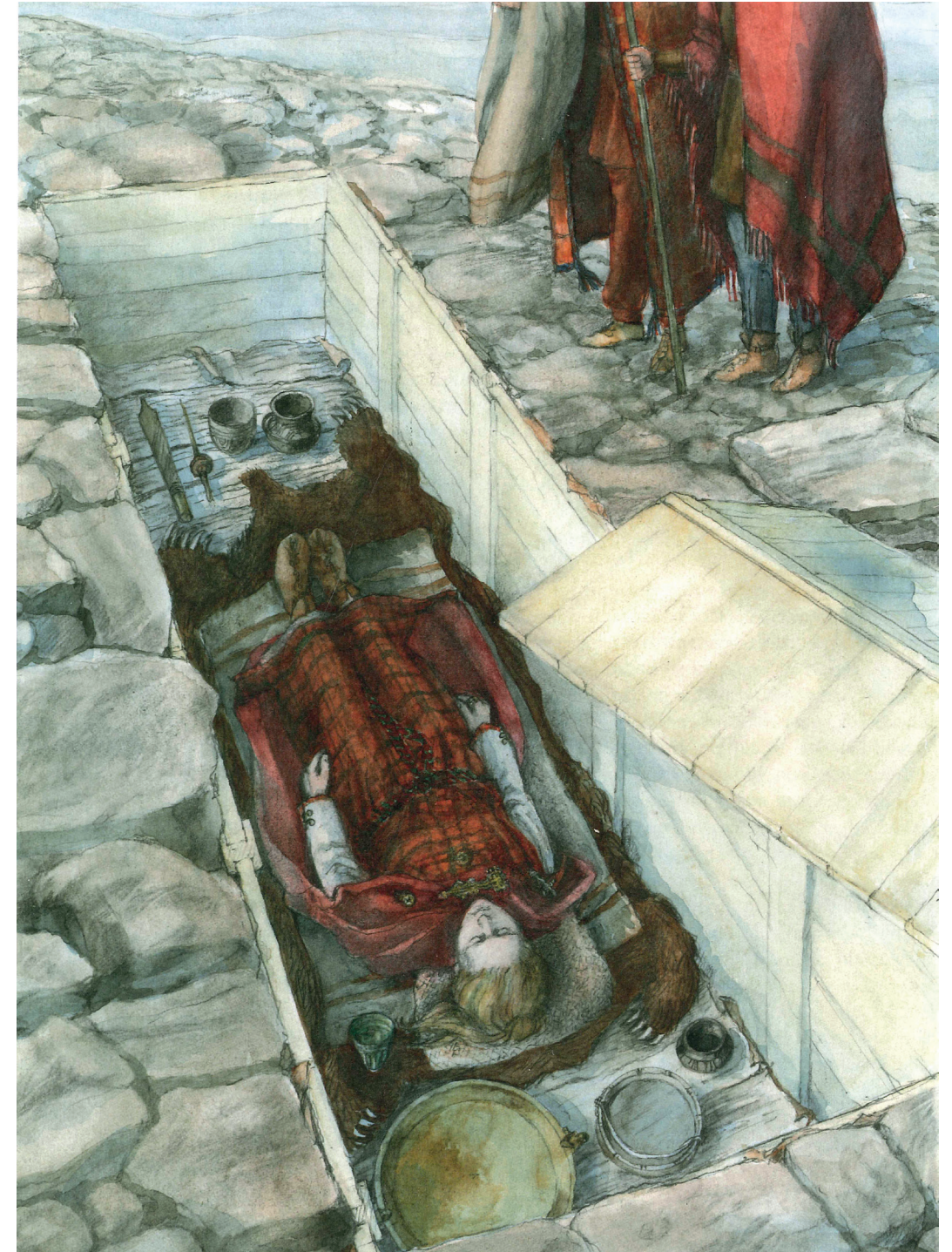


**Figure 3.**  
Silver-sheet brooch from Eidsten in Brunlanes, Larvik, Vestfold, Norway. C19235



**Figure 4.**

This is how the burial at Krosshaug in Klepp, Rogaland, Norway, may have looked. The woman was buried around the same time as the Tveitane woman and took similar jewellery and equipment with her to the grave.



just below her shoulders, and the third and larger brooch would have been fastened between the other two, presumably to the woman's undergarment (tunica). Her jewellery included two wrist-clasps with flat gilded-silver buttons that would have been fastened to the cuffs of her tunica, plus two (unmatching) jewellery pins. She also had a belt ring made of copper alloy. Keys were often hung from rings like these, being found especially in graves with relief brooches, but no keys were found in this particular grave. Two beads were also found, one made of amber and a smaller one of white glass. Next to the deceased's head was a so-called weaving sword made of iron. The function of this object is uncertain, but it may have been used to beat down the weft after it was passed through the warp sheds. The weaving sword was found lying with its handle of wood and bronze pointing towards the edge of the cist to the west. This is a rare type of object, but when it is found, it is often together with relief brooches. It is striking that four weaving swords were found at Tveitane, two from the Roman Period and two from the Migration Period. Next to the weaving sword were two spindle whorls made of sandstone. These were used as weights to increase the rotation of a spindle. Pairs of spindle whorls such as these are often found together with relief brooches. The spindle whorls and the weaving sword were laid in the grave as part of the burial ritual, showing that the textile craft played an important role in the Tveitane woman's life. It was believed that her tools would accompany her in death and into the next life with her ancestors. As usual, there were several containers made of wood and ceramic material. These may have contained food and beverages that were to accompany the woman to the afterlife.

But let us return to the Tveitane relief brooch that was found near the woman's teeth. It is 15.5 cm long and was probably pinned to a garment worn over a dress – for instance a cape. The brooch is made of gilded silver. Its size and gilding are important elements in the way it was meant to be perceived. When it was worn and in motion, the golden relief would have reflected light, making its surface seem alive.

### **Roman motifs and Nordic animal figures**

As we have seen, the maker of the large Tveitane brooch kept abreast of the times and made motifs in the Nordic 'Style I'. This style is found on the bow and on the foot plate, where all the mouldings of the frame have heads at both ends – animal heads or human-like masks (Fig. 5). The maker still mastered classical motifs, for we find these on the brooch's head plate: there are spiral patterns on the central panel and triangles with circles around the border. The maker – he or she – must have seen Roman works, or perhaps met craftsmen from the dissolved workshops. Whatever the case, the two styles of ornamentation on the brooch reflect that it was made at a time of transition between the late antique/Roman and Nordic cultures. It could, however, be that these

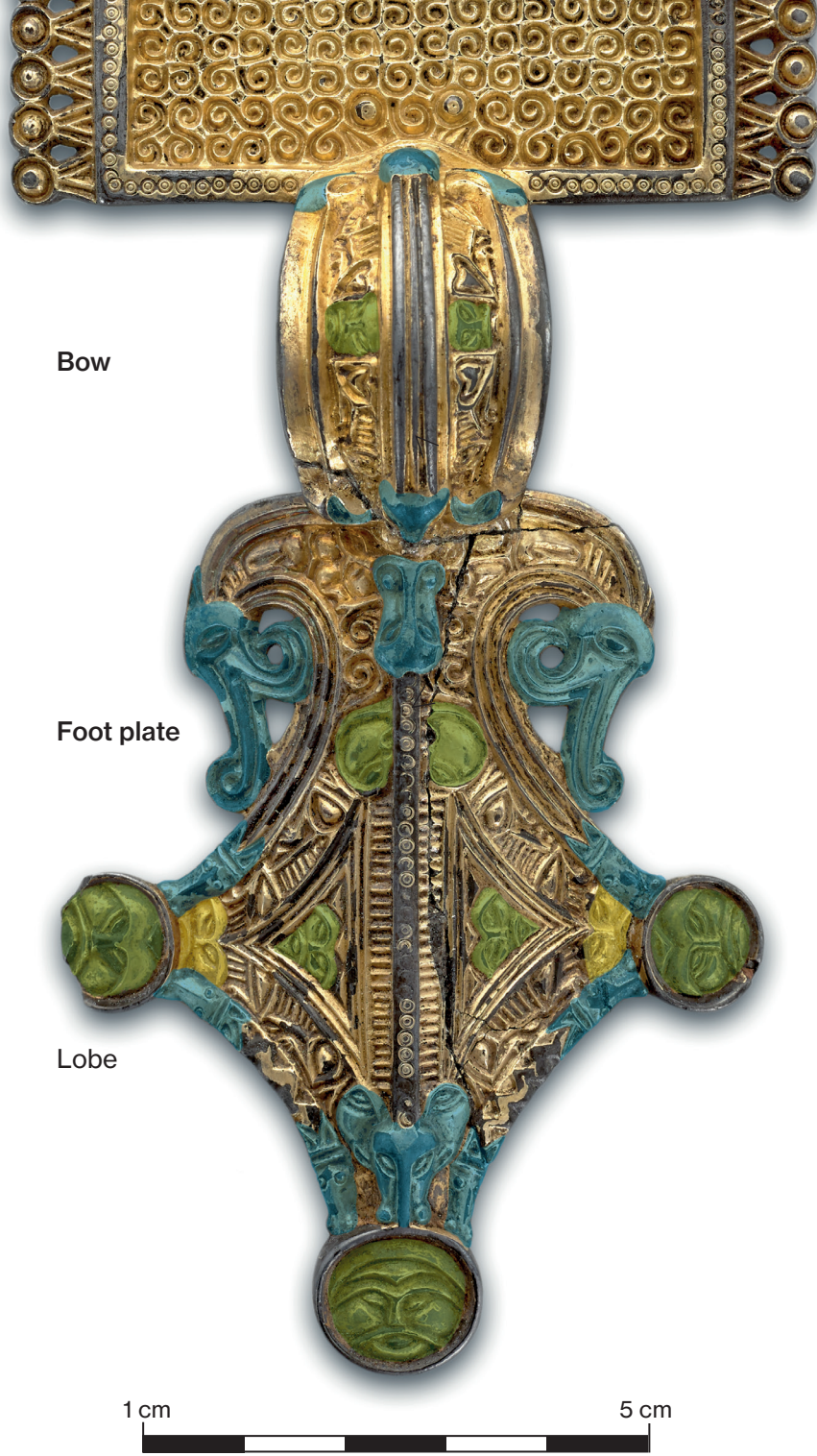
are the 'signature styles' of two craftsmen. It is not unlikely that several people had a hand in crafting such jewellery. On the back of the brooch, we find a third style made with a third technique: incised decoration (see the article by Ingunn M. Røstad and Elna Siv Kristoffersen). This could be the work of the original craftsman, or it could have been added later by someone else.

The decoration on the brooch's bow and head plate gives us a glimpse of a creative smith who went his or her own way and who was in full swing developing the Nordic animal style. We will also see that he or she mastered the complicated motifs that could be both animal and human – motifs that would become the 'trademark' of the best smiths in the period to come.

### **Animal heads and human masks**

On the bow and the foot plate, there are altogether 31 heads/masks: 22 are animal heads and nine are human-like masks (Fig. 5). Eight of the animal heads are part of one whole animal figure with a main body and front and hind legs. Two of the masks are made up of two animals in profile that together create one human mask and are connected to an animal body, so that the figure appears to be a hybrid; a mixture of human and animal parts. The remaining elements are isolated masks. The animal heads are oriented vertically on the brooch and face upwards or downwards, with the exception of the two large profile-heads that spring out from the bow's lower end. The masks are oriented horizontally and turn to the side. This is most clearly seen in the six masks in the middle of the foot plate. The mask at the end of the terminal lobe is necessarily oriented vertically. At the end of the frames, several heads and masks meet, just as in the lower lobe and on the end of the bow, where five heads run together. The points where the bow is connected to the head plate and foot plate are weak parts on the brooch. These are strengthened by the animal figures – in a practical sense, because the metal is thicker just there, as well as in a symbolic sense.

The animal heads are designed as if seen from above or in profile. Most human-like masks are seen *en face*. Such variation may have had significance, as is also the case in the art from Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Humans depicted *en face* were often associated with the sacred. The frontal perspective causes the masks to face the viewer, while the animal figures face the one who wears the brooch. All the masks have moustaches and are most certainly meant to represent men. Some of them have open mouths. The masks on the side lobes have an angry look, expressed by the diagonal slant of the eyes and the V shape above the nose.



**Figure 5.**

The foot plate and bow of the Tveitane brooch with the heads and masks differentiated by colour. Blue: animal heads. Green: human-like heads. Yellow: animal-human hybrid heads

**The bow:**

In each of the bow's two decorated panels, there are human-like masks positioned between two animals. The animals are fashioned in an early Style I, with striped bodies surrounded by contours. The motif, which has a provincial Roman origin, distinguishes itself inasmuch as the animals' back parts turn towards the masks, and not their heads. The animal heads are at both ends of the bow and are difficult to see. They are not drawn in the illustration. The frames on each side of the bow end in bird heads with curved beaks (birds of prey?). The wide, three-part central bar, which divides the bow, ends in animal heads at the bow's upper and lower end. The lower head lies snout-to-snout with a larger animal head in the upper part of the central foot plate bar.

**Foot plate:**

The bar that divides the foot plate in two is decorated with double circles and horizontally-striped fields on either side. Closest to the bar are two triangular panels with masks. These are surrounded by frames with heads at the end of each acute angle. The heads simultaneously link up with animal bodies in the narrow outer-lying panels. The heads in the upper panels have round, human-like heads seen in profile, with nose and open mouth facing the central bar. The heads facing the side lobes can most certainly be read as animal heads that together form a human-like mask. Running between the masks at the outermost tip of the side lobes and the terminal lobe, there are frames with zig-zag patterns and animal heads with pointed ears and long snouts (horses?) at each end. From the side lobes, three-ribbed frames extend upwards towards the large profile-heads that spring out from the lower end of the bow.

Many of the motifs on the brooch are very small. They have been difficult to make and are difficult to see – without glasses and a microscope (see also Røstad and Kristoffersen's article).

**Relief brooches, knowledge and responsibility**

The Tveitane grave fits into a pattern in which animal ornamentation appears on relief brooches discovered in richly equipped female graves. While the graves represent important clans, they also represent women who had knowledge of, and responsibility for, rituals and duties on the farms that constituted the centres of society at the time. When the woman from Tveitane wore her large gilded brooch, people recognised her and knew which family or clan she represented. Her status would have been further emphasised by the gold bracteates that, as we have seen, are sometimes found in graves, often in combination with relief brooches (see also Ingunn M. Røstad's article). This is also the case with weaving swords made of iron. Textile production reached high levels of quality in the Migration Period, and this skill presupposes knowledge that the women who were buried with these tools may have had.

The small motifs in the ornamentation, on the other hand, could only be seen by a few people. The animal and human figures were turned towards those closest to the brooch and to the brooch itself. They imbued the brooch with powers that enabled it to function in the contexts in which it was worn, for instance when the woman from Tveitane performed her duties on important occasions at the farm. The brooch was most certainly worn on a cape and could have signalled a special responsibility for passing on knowledge and traditions to the next generation. It has been suggested that weaving swords like the one from Tveitane were used to ensure a standard measurement for the woven cloth that was one of the goods traded in the North Sea region. Is it perhaps here that we find the Tveitane woman's network?

Detail from the relief brooch from Tveitane in Brunlanes, Larvik, Vestfold, Norway. C11221





**Figure 1.**  
Horse figure in miniature  
on a relief brooch from  
Sande, Farsund,  
Vest-Agder, Norway.  
C55731

## THE HIDDEN ANIMALS

*Ingunn M. Røstad and Elna Siv Kristoffersen*

*On a brooch from the Migration Period (ca. 400–550 AD), found at Sande in Vest-Agder, there are some small but interesting details. If you look carefully, you will see that there are small animal figures hidden on each corner of the rectangular headplate. Looking at one in profile, it is impossible to tell what kind of animal it is. It has a kind of beak and could make you think of a bird. If looking at the animal from above – we had to use a microscope! – a long head emerges, with nostrils and pointed ears, a long neck and back – and a horse's tail (Fig. 1). It is in fact a horse!*

### Animals hiding in jewellery

The horses on the brooch are tiny and therefore difficult to discover at first glance. In the Iron Age, not all decoration was created with the intention of being seen. In fact, one could ask whether this is decoration in the ordinary sense of the term. The animals can hide in different ways. On weapons and jewellery, we find animal figures in places that are difficult to lay eyes on. Besides being very small, they can be hidden in ornamentation that completely covers the front of a brooch, and they can have shapes that are difficult to recognise (Fig. 2). This is the case on what we call relief brooches. In the cast decoration on the front side, we see ambiguous and distorted imaginary animals weaving their limbs into each other. In some places, human-like faces or masks are joined together with animal bodies. The tiny animal figures and the strange and imaginary 'patchwork' animals on the front of the brooches were part of them and their cast ornamentation from the very start. Even though they are incomprehensible and partly hidden from us, the craftsman who made them did so according to a specific idea, and he assigned these animals a very special meaning.

**Figure 2.**  
Animal figures cast into  
the decoration on the front  
of a relief brooch from  
Sande, Farsund,  
Vest-Agder, Norway.  
C55731



### The animals on the back

The front side of the jewellery is not the only place where the hidden animals are found. On some jewellery pieces, animal style decoration is also on the back. Several of what are called disc-on-bow brooches from the Merovingian Period (ca. 550–800 AD), such as the ones from Nes in Fauske and Vikestad in Bindal in Nordland, have a back side that is completely covered with interweaving animals. The ornamentation is cast and usually also gilded. On the brooch from Nes, the head of the pin is shaped like an animal head with clearly marked eyes (Fig. 3). Also in several other cases, the same type of animal-style decoration covers the back side of the large round disc at the apex of the bow in the middle of the brooch. What is more, the decoration also fills the front side of the bow, even though it is partly covered by the disc. Much specialised knowledge and skill were required in the casting of the animals and the gilding processes. At the same time, the placement of decoration on the back side and underneath parts of the brooch means the decoration was not always visible when the brooches were worn.



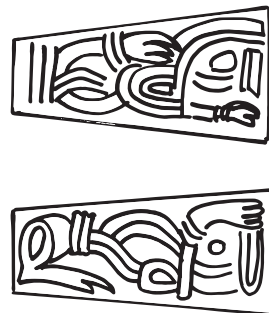
**Figure 3.** The back side of a headplate on a disc-on-bow brooch, with gilded animal-style decoration and the fastening pinhead shaped like an animal head. From Fauske in Nordland, Norway. B6721

### Animals hidden in weapons

Animals can also be deliberately hidden in other ways and are found on other types of objects than jewellery. On the famous Migration Period sword from Snartemo in Vest-Agder, the goldsmith has made figures underneath the top cross-guard of the hilt – and thus in a hidden position (Fig. 4). The decoration consists of figures with human heads and animal bodies, with one hand lifted up towards the forehead. Much work has thus been invested in creating decoration that has been placed where only a few people would be able to see it. The motif consisting of both animal and human parts also implies that the placement is not accidental, but has meant something special to the person who used the sword (see Lotte Hedeager's article).



**Figure 4.** Sword with animal figures hidden underneath the top cross-guard. From Snartemo in Hægebostad, Vest-Agder, Norway. C26001



**Figure 5.**

Mounts shaped like the heads of birds of prey. The mounts have been fastened to the back side of a shield. From Åker, Hedmark, Norway. C4903 og C38000 / C14786



We also see the same phenomenon in the richly-furnished warrior grave from Åker in Hedmark. This is one of the richest and most famous finds from the Norwegian Iron Age. It consists of parts of weapons and military gear that belonged to a chieftain or petty king. He was buried on Åker Farm in the late 500s or around 600 AD. A shield that accompanied the chieftain to his grave is decorated with mounts shaped like birds of prey (Fig. 5). They are made of bronze embellished with gold and tin, and their eyes are garnets inlaid in thin, patterned gold foil. Today, only two whole bird heads and the beak of a third are preserved, but the shield was originally equipped with four mounts of this type. Only a few select people in the top level of society owned swords and shields decorated with such animal figures. These weapons circulated as precious gifts within this part of society. The birds of prey on the shield may be interpreted as eagles and associated with worship of the god Odin. According to Norse mythology, Odin could transform himself into an eagle. Odin in the guise of an eagle gave these predatory bird figures divine power, so the shield's protective power was strengthened further. This 'supernatural' protection was transferred to the warrior who carried the

shield. The magnificent bird heads, however, did not decorate the Åker shield's front side, as one might suppose. They were mounted on the back, to the right and left of the grip/handle. With such a placement, they were only visible to the one who owned and used the shield. Even so, much labour, time and raw materials were invested in making them. This says something about how important these motifs were.

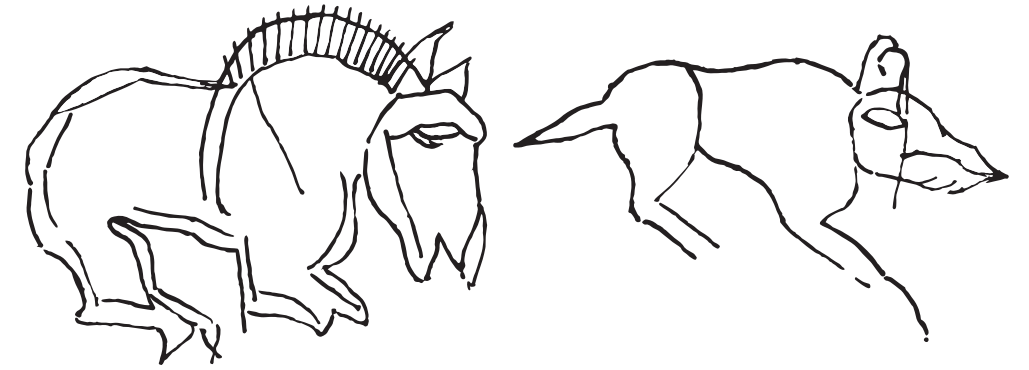
### Animals on the inside of clothing

Decoration with hidden animals is also found on textiles, even though preserved examples are far rarer than those on metal objects such as swords and jewellery. The figures appear on tablet-woven bands or edgings, often with horsehair woven into the patterns. On a tunic from a rich chieftain's grave from the Migration Period, from Högom in Sundsvall in Sweden, we find tablet-woven edgings with animal and human figures. These are of high quality, and experimentation with modern replicas has shown that they are very time consuming to make. It takes on average one hour to weave only one millimetre. To make woven edgings for a whole garment would be one person's full-time job for a whole year, judging by today's standards. Garments with decorative edgings of this type belong to the richest of the Migration Period's grave finds, among others, those from chieftain graves at Enebø in Gloppen and Snartemo in Lyngdal. The ribbon on the Högom overtunic, however, was sewn on the inside of the garment's lower edge. This means it faced the body of the wearer (see also Lotte Hedeager's article). Once again, we see the same practice as with jewellery and weapons – someone used a phenomenal amount of time to make decoration that only a select few would ever have been able to see.

### Not just graffiti

Some relief brooches have *incised* ornamentation on the back. These motifs were not part of the maker's original idea or design. They may have been made at a later point in time, perhaps by someone other than the original metalsmith, and be the result of other ideas and aims. On the relief brooches from Falkum and Søtvet in Telemark, we see heads of an indeterminate type of animal on the back side, and the pin-catch on the Falkum brooch ends in an incised snake head. A brooch from Nordheim in Vestfold has two figures on the back of the headplate: one relatively naturalistic horse – a Fjord horse? – and a fierce-looking dog or wolf (Fig. 6). Next to the pin-catch on the back of a relief brooch from Hauge in Klepp in Rogaland, there is an engraving of an imaginary animal or human-like. It has four legs and is formed in such a way that we see it from above, with front and back legs 'spread out' to each side. All these incised animals reflect a completely different style than the cast animals on the front of the brooches, for they are simpler and more naturalistic. Some researchers think these figures are just graffiti,

**Figure 6.**  
Animal figures incised on  
the back of a relief brooch.  
From Nordheim,  
Vestfold, Norway.  
C19858



made for sake of amusement or to pass the time, and that they are on the back side because that was the only place where there was room for them. But the incised decorations on the back sides show other motifs and animals than those on the front. This suggests that the incised back-side animals must have meant something special and were more than merely a way of 'killing time'.

### Animals that give power

What, then, does this type of 'hidden' decoration mean? Why are the animal figures hidden away or put in places where they are not open to view? And why use time and resources to make decoration that few people can see? With our modern Western mindset, we think of ornamentation as something on a surface and functioning as a beautifier, as 'merely decoration'. In other types of societies, people think differently. In what has been called 'primitive art', motifs such as animal figures can 'push through' the surface, enter the object and become one with it, if made according to specific rules. These figures give the object the qualities of the depicted animals – qualities that make the object effective in the contexts in which it is used. These qualities can also be transferred to the person who carries the object. A similar idea could have existed in the Iron Age, namely, that jewellery, weapons and clothing with this type of decoration received or took possession of the animals' power. The animal figures gave a sword strength and speed. A garment, brooch or shield received protective qualities. The animals are not made to be seen; they do not turn towards external observers. They turn and face the wearer. This means that physical, tactile contact with the animal figures was thought to be important for gaining the protection and strength the animals could give.



**Figure 1.**  
Relief brooch with  
animal decoration  
from Dalem in Sparbu,  
Trøndelag, Norway.  
C4816

## JEWELLERY FILLED WITH POWER AND LIFE

*Ingunn M. Røstad*

*Around the mid-500s AD, a woman was buried at the farm Dalem in the rich agricultural community of Sparbu in Trøndelag. Her family made an impressive grave monument for her; she was laid in a large cist made of stone slabs. Outside, they made ready to raise a large burial mound to cover the chamber once the funeral was over. The woman was dressed in her finest clothes, and her beautiful gold jewellery glittered as she was laid in the grave. She wore a cape over her shoulders that was fastened in front with a large gilded brooch. The sleeve linings of her blouse were fastened with gilded sleeve clasps, her dress was adorned with four smaller decorative brooches, and on her chest were three round gold medallions. The beautiful jewellery clearly signalled the woman's high status and that she belonged to an important family. The brooch on her cape and the gold medallions were decorated with mysterious images and figures. Sometimes, when rays of sunlight reflected off the brooch, one could glimpse something resembling human faces or animals, but only a few select people who attended the funeral could fully understand what they saw. Still, no one doubted that the woman was protected by powerful beings who would accompany her to the world beyond, for as everyone knew, the animal figures in the jewellery were alive and possessed powers that few beings could resist.*

### The beautiful jewellery

Large brooches like the one the woman from Dalem was buried with appear to have had a special meaning for people who lived in what archaeologists call the Migration Period (ca. 400–550 AD) and the Merovingian Period (ca. 550–800 AD). These types of brooches, known as bow brooches, are richly decorated and expensively embellished with gold and animal motifs (Fig. 1). They fall into two types, based on the way in which the ornamentation developed: brooches from the Migration Period are called relief brooches, while brooches from the Merovingian Period are called disc-on-bow brooches. In the present context, however, I will refer to both types as 'ornate brooches'. Common to both periods is the use of ornamentation with animals' bodies, heads and limbs interwoven and forming intricate patterns on the brooch's front side. Also often found are figures that have both human and animal features (see also Elna Siv Kristoffersen's article). In addition, many brooches have inlaid glass or semi precious stones, usually garnets, as decorative elements. The garnets are deep red and have a warm lustre. Over time (on the disc-on-bow brooches), the garnet decoration becomes more dominant, forming beautiful patterns on the head plates, while Animal art covers the bow and the edges of the brooches (Fig. 2). These ornate brooches are found in some





**Figure 2.**  
Disc-on-bow brooch  
with garnets and animal  
decoration.  
From Melhus in Overhalla,  
Trøndelag, Norway.  
T6574

of the most richly-furnished Iron Age graves belonging to the aristocracy. They were pinned to the clothing of buried women, as the find from Dalem shows. The brooches were used to hold together a cape or shawl, but most of them are far too large, heavy and impractical to have been used on ordinary days. Several are between 20 to 30 cm long, and it is clear that they were only worn on special occasions. What is more, some brooches have been found outside graves, hidden away, buried in bogs and cairns, or near outcrops of rock. This indicates that they were given as votive offerings to gods or supernatural forces, and sometimes they were offered along with gold medallions, gold rings or other gold objects. It is particularly the gold medallions – called *bracteates* – that are decorated with animal-style decoration and/or motifs such as those in the Dalem find, which are often discovered together with brooches in graves and in votive offerings (Fig. 3).

These brooches are not only found in the most richly furnished graves of the period, but their manufacture is also associated with the elite in society. The way in which they are made presupposes advanced technical knowledge, and this in turn indicates that they must have been made by highly-specialised craftsmen (read more about this in Kristoffersen's article). The brooches are, moreover, made with costly

**Figure 3.**  
Pendants (gold bracteates).  
Found together with  
the ornate brooch  
from Dalem in Sparbu,  
Trøndelag, Norway.  
C4565-C4567



raw materials such as precious metals and semi precious gems. Not just anyone could afford to commission the making of such costly objects. The goldsmiths who made the brooches were probably employed by local chieftains or petty kings.

#### **Family treasures with a life history**

Even though the ornate brooches were only used on special occasions, many of them show signs of wear and tear. Some were repaired in prehistoric times, and several grave finds show that the ornate brooches are older than the other jewellery and objects they were buried with. This indicates that the brooches have been heirlooms and were probably passed down through several generations before they ended up as offerings or in the grave of their final owner. They were thus perceived as especially valuable, worth passing on to the next generation, and important to keep within the family. As valuable family jewels, they accrued a kind of personal biography or life history because they came to be associated with several owners – perhaps significant persons in the aristocratic families that owned them. This would have given the brooches greater value the longer they were preserved.

#### **Magic jewellery with power and life**

The brooches were gilded, that is to say, they looked as though they were made of gold. Gold was a form of payment and a sign of power, but it was also perceived as a magical material. Underlying the animal-style decoration that covers the front of the brooches was the idea that the jewellery could transfer the animals' power and thus protect the owner. The same type of decoration is found on the gold bracteates, which perhaps explains why these are so often found together with the brooches, as is the case with the Dalem find. The way the brooches are made probably also contributed to the perception that they were almost alive. The animals are depicted in relief, so they are three-dimensional. This creates a special effect when light reflects off the gold surface, making the shiny animals appear to move (see Kristoffersen's article). The red garnets also glow when light hits them, making the brooches gleam and come to life. In addition, the very shape of some of the brooches reminds us of animals, or at least imaginary ones (Fig. 4). Even though the brooches have many similarities, each one is individually made and thus a unique object. And this was probably exactly how the brooches were perceived: as unique and living things or beings – magical jewellery that only a few select individuals were privileged to own and adorn themselves with.

#### **Powerful women with knowledge**

Who were the women who, like the Dalem woman, had the right to wear these ornate brooches, and in what contexts did they wear them? One thing is certain: these women must have belonged to the Iron Age elite – the aristocracy. In this period there was no



**Figure 4.**  
A 'beastly' relief brooch  
from Dalem in Sparbu,  
Trøndelag, Norway.  
C4816

sharp distinction between secular and religious leadership, and aristocratic women played an important role in leading both secular ceremonies and religious rituals and rites. There is much to suggest that the women who owned the ornate brooches were priestesses of Freyja, and that the jewellery was used in important religious and possibly also more down-to-earth or practical contexts. In Norse mythology, Freyja is the most important and greatest goddess, and it is she who possesses knowledge about origins and lineage, that is, the record of ruling families' ancestors. This type of knowledge was important in Iron Age society, for it might enable a family to trace their origins back to the gods. Being of divine origin was part of the basis of power for the ruling elites. The women who inherited and wore the ornate brooches therefore may have inherited more than just the brooches. By virtue of being priestesses of Freyja and representing the goddess, they may also have inherited the stories of the lineage of the powerful aristocratic families to which they belonged. So maybe

an ornate brooch functioned like a USB 'memory stick' that held and preserved the myths spun around the origins of the aristocracy, the stories of heroes and heroines, and perhaps even of gods and goddesses among the ancestors.

We can imagine the woman from Dalem wearing the large brooch and the gold medallions during great feasts in the longhouse on the farm and during processions and ceremonies at the burial ground where she herself was eventually buried. This is one of the largest Iron Age cemeteries in Trøndelag. Perhaps she stood by the graves of her ancestors, surrounded by a host of listeners, and recited lists of forefathers and told stories about important people in the Dalem family that must not be forgotten. When she was out at night under a starry sky, the moon or a torch might have illuminated her jewellery and the animals in the decoration, and when she was inside the longhouse serving mead to the warriors according to their rank, we can imagine the jewellery glittering in the light reflecting from cod-liver oil lamps or torches.

#### **Treasures for the gods**

The belief that the brooches were almost like living beings may have led to them being perceived as dangerous or difficult to control by those who lacked sufficient power to handle them. If an owner died and there was no rightful heir, her brooch had either to be buried with her, as is probably the case with the Dalem find, or it could be disposed of in another way so as not to cause harm. One way of ritually disposing of or neutralising the uncontrollable brooches was to give them to gods as votive offerings. Special situations may also have arisen which resulted in a need to give the gods something one would otherwise never give away. There is evidence to suggest that many offerings of ornate brooches, gold bracteates and other gold objects could have been related to a massive natural catastrophe in 536 AD. At this time, the dust and ash from several volcanic eruptions floated up to the stratosphere and blocked the sunlight for a whole year, triggering a long period of bad harvests and famine over much of the globe. This may have led to a great need to give votive offerings to the gods and other supernatural forces, to evoke their help or placate their anger. By giving an ornate brooch, one offered up the most precious object one owned.

**Relief brooch**  
from Bratsberg, Skien,  
Telemark, Norway.  
C26566





# THE BONES OF DOMESTIC ANIMALS IN PRE-CHRISTIAN GRAVES

Anja Mansrud

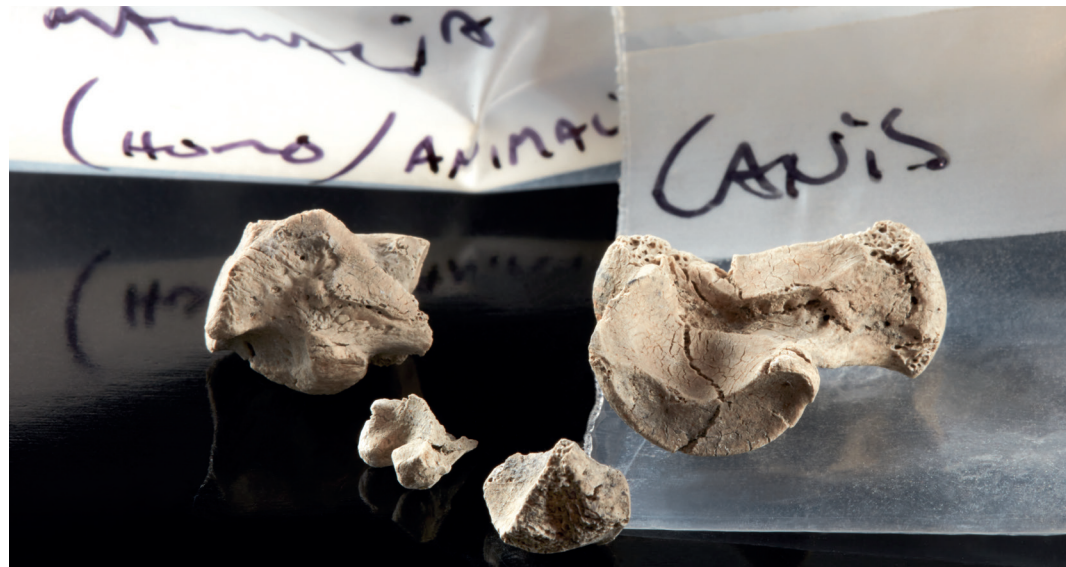
Then they brought a dog, cut it in two and threw the pieces in the ship. After that they brought all his weapons and laid them by his side. Then they took two horses and made them run until they were foaming with sweat. After this they cut them up with swords and threw their meat in the ship. They did the same with two cows: these also were chopped up and thrown into the ship. Then they brought a cock and a hen, killed them and threw them in the ship (Ibn Fadlan, translated by Frye 2005).

This dramatic story is told by Ahmad Ibn Fadlan, an Arab diplomat for the caliph of Baghdad, who in 922 AD witnessed a Viking chieftain's funeral near the Volga River in Russia. Archaeological finds largely confirm his story. Early in the 800s a similar event took place in Slagendalen in Vestfold. The two women who were laid in the Oseberg Viking ship were buried along with 15 horses, four dogs and two cows (Fig. 1). The horses were killed with a blow to the forehead.

**Figure 1.**  
Photo from the excavation of the Oseberg ship in 1904. The picture shows one of the cows buried in the grave.



From the excavation of the Oseberg ship in 1904.



**Figure 2.**  
Burnt human and dog bones  
from a cremation grave  
dated 760–900 AD.  
Årnes, Akershus, Norway.  
C60102

Human and animal cremation was also widespread in Scandinavia. Bones of domestic animals are found in graves dating from much of the Iron Age. This funerary practice arose in the Migration Period, about 450 AD, and fell out of use around 1050 AD, at the same as Christianity spread throughout the region. The cremation graves most often contain burned bones of dogs, horses, cattle, sheep, goats and pigs. A typical example is a Viking-Age cremation grave from Drognesjordet at Årnes in Akershus (Fig. 2), which contained burned human, cattle, pig, dog, horse and squirrel bones. The bones were found mixed together in a soapstone bowl buried in a shallow pit. Over this a mound was built. In Sweden, graves of this type, dated to the Migration Period, have been found to contain the remains of up to 50 kinds of animals. In addition to domestic animals, archaeologists have found fish and birds, including hunting falcons. In this article, I will look more closely at what finds like these can tell us about how people in Scandinavia viewed animals in the pre-Christian era.

### Sacrifices, grave gifts or animal burials?

Animal sacrifice – *blot*, as it was called – played an important role in pre-Christian religious and funerary practices. Some archaeological finds show, just as Ibn Fadlan described, that a sacrifice could be brutal and dramatic. It was followed by a large communal feast. The burned animal bones in the Rickeby burial at Vallentuna north of Stockholm show that domesticated animals such as pigs, cattle, goats and sheep were cut in pieces before being cremated. The meaty parts, that is, the remains of the meal, were laid as food offerings in the grave. Other species, including dogs, horses and predatory birds, were not cut up but placed whole in the grave.

In most cases a grave contains both animal and human bones, but sometimes we only find animal bones. One example is a Viking Age grave from Flølo in Hordaland. This grave had two chambers. The one contained the skeleton of a horse and the other contained several objects. No traces of human remains were found in the grave. At the Viking grave site Bikjholberget at Kaupang in Vestfold, another horse skeleton was found in a depression within the grave. The horse had been cut in pieces and laid in the grave along with a bridle, a harness mount and an axe. A richly furnished and well-preserved ship grave from Ladby in Denmark contained no less than 11 horses and four dogs, but no human remains were found.

In the 1960s archaeologists excavated a large cemetery at Kaupang next to the Viking town. In the grave of a young man, they found an animal skull, first thought to be a bear, and it was suggested that the deceased could have been a bear hunter (see Anja Mansrud and Lotte Hedeager's article on bears). When the animal bones were analysed by experts many years later, it was revealed that the skull was from a dog. The dog had been decapitated – this was clear from one of the cervical vertebrae that was chopped in two. Headless dogs are found in several graves, among others, in a richly furnished grave at Gile in Toten in Oppland, which is dated to the time of the Roman Period.

To the Iron Age people of Scandinavia, domestic animals were far more than economic resources. Animals were seen as individuals with a soul, with a will of their own, and the power to act on that will, just like humans. In the Old Norse sources, horses were often referred to as individuals with a name and a personality. The *Poetic Edda* mentions 32 horses by name. The god Freyr's horse was Bloðughófi, 'Bloody Hoof'. *Rigstula*, one of the Eddic poems, offers insight into the social status of animals. The poem tells about the social classes *trell* (slave), *karl* (farmer), *jarl* (earl) and *konge* (king). Slaves raise pigs and herd goats while farmers tame oxen and serve veal steak. Horses and dogs are associated with the king and the elites in society. In light of this, it is not all that unlikely that important animals could be given a funeral on par with important persons.

### Domestic animals in everyday life and mythology

As we have seen, animals could be put to death in brutal ways. But everyday life was also marked by much closer relationships between animals and humans than is the case today. The type of building called a langhus (longhouse) was common in Scandinavia throughout the Iron Age. Inside longhouses, people and animals lived under the same roof – people in one part and animals in the other. The remains of animals who were burned to death at a Danish Iron-Age farm show that cattle, pigs and sheep lived in stalls inside buildings. Milk, manure, meat and the ability to pull heavy

loads meant that cattle were particularly important, and a precondition for being able to farm effectively. Sharing the longhouse with animals was also practical because it helped heat the house. Caring for, feeding and milking animals inside the longhouse helped to create close bonds between domestic animals and their people.

Animals were also important in the symbolic world, with the horse enjoying highest status. Horses were the steeds of gods and heroes, and they could cross the boundary between the realms of the living and the dead. In Norse mythology, a burial could also be understood as a journey between two worlds. The realm of the dead was called Hel (this is not Hell in a Christian understanding) and the journey to Hel was spoken of as *'å gå helveien'* (to 'take the road to Hel'). In the myths, it is Sleipnir, Odin's eight-legged horse, who carries the deceased to the Realm of the Dead. The characteristics of animals were a precondition for *hamskifte* (shape shifting, see chapter 1). Humans could become animals and vice versa. The animals in graves could thus function as media for shape shifting and – quite literally – help the deceased get to the afterlife.

The cow's special significance is also emphasised in the Old Norse story of creation. Here we meet Audhumbla, who gave milk to the giant Ymir and indirectly helped create the world's first humans. Other domesticated animals are rarely mentioned in written sources, but when they are, the focus is on their magical ability to recreate themselves. Odin's great hall, Valhalla, was reserved for men who died in battle. Here the pig Sæhrímnir was slaughtered and eaten every night, only to be resurrected whole the next day. It always provided enough meat for Odin's berserks (bear-warriors). The goat Heidrun was also on hand, and its teats never ran dry of mead.

The god Thor's billy goats, Tanngrisnir (Teeth Snarler) and Tanngrjóstr (Teeth Grinder), could be slaughtered at night, resurrected the next day, and they would be as good as new as long as their bones were unbroken and gathered into their skin after the meal. Once there was a mishap. In the story of Thor's journey to Utgarda-Loki, the boy Tjave breaks a bone in order to suck out the marrow. The next day the billy goat has a lame leg. Thor is furious and punishes the boy by pressing him and his sister Roskva into perpetual slavery. The idea that the life force, thus also the ability to resurrect, is directly connected to bones, and that the life force is released from the body through cremation – is found in myths and religions many places in the world. In pre-Christian Northern Europe, burning animals and humans on a cremation fire could have been a means to ensure that the souls of the dead were set free so that they could come to life again and live on together in the afterlife (Fig. 3).

**Figure 3.**  
Perhaps people believed that the souls of animals and humans were liberated during cremation? The ox head was made using burnt animal bones from a cremation burial.



### The life force in bones

Cremation could also have been a technique for 'extracting life' from bones and using them in other contexts. Some archaeologists think burned bones from both humans and animals may have been used in the process of forging weapons. Burning at a high temperature changes the form and quality of bones, increasing their durability and extending their life. When bones are burned without a supply of oxygen, they are transformed into bone coal, which contains ten percent pure carbon. The bone coal can then be heated together with iron, and the carbon transforms the soft iron into hardened steel. On a symbolic level, animals, humans and iron were smelted together, and the life force in the bones was transferred to the tools or weapons. Like the fabulous animals on the surface decoration, this technique gave objects extra 'animal' power. The Norse sagas speak of swords with magical power. They had names such as Tyrfing, Kvernbit, Skrep and Gram.

The introductory quote from Ibn Fadlan, in which he describes the funeral of a Viking chieftain, does not give a complete picture of the diverse funerary customs in the pre-Christian era. The idea that a grave must have been made for a person springs from a human-centred perspective of the relationship between animals and humans. The Old Norse sources give a glimpse into a different reality where animals and humans were tightly linked in both life and death.



**Figure 1.**  
The wide-eyed gripping beasts on the Oseberg ship form a group.

## THE GRIPPING BEAST – A CURIOUS LITTLE CRITTER

*Unn Pedersen*

*Animals are such an important element of Iron Age visual expression that the period's ornamentation is called Animal art. At the start of the Viking Age a new little creature emerged, one known today as the gripping beast. This name emphasises a key characteristic: the animal uses its paws to hold around its own limbs, those of its neighbours, or the frame of the ornamentation where it is found. The gripping beast has fascinated many scholars, not least because it appeared as a new feature, clearly different from earlier animal styles. Perhaps we also allow ourselves to be especially fascinated by a creature who looks us straight in the eyes. The gripping beast stares at us with eyes wide open (Fig. 1).*

The gripping beast's body is relatively naturalistic, at least when compared with Animal art from earlier centuries. It is often easy to identify two front legs with a pronounced shoulder area and two hind legs with powerful hips, in both cases with clearly gripping paws. The gripping beast is supple; among other things, it can do the splits and use its front paws to stretch its back limbs (Fig. 1). The beast is a popular feature in ornamentation in Scandinavia for about 150 years, but it changes somewhat over time.

### From community to individuality

Some of the oldest gripping beasts are carved as decoration on the Oseberg Viking ship. Here there are several different, almost human-like creatures gripping each other.

They therefore appear to form a group or community (Fig. 1). Later on, it becomes more common to see individual gripping beasts. There are, for example, many almost identical pendants with a large gripping beast as the main motif (Fig. 2). In this version, the animal often has characteristic Teddy bear-like ears, a pronounced snout and a symmetrical body with two well-marked hips.

We also have figures with clear similarities to gripping beasts. A small amber figure resembles a bear that has rolled itself into a ball by gripping its hind legs

**Figure 2.**  
Gilded pendant with a gripping beast in the Borre Style. C3923b





**Figure 3.**  
This small bear-like gripping beast is carved in amber. The hole suggests that it was worn as a pendant. Was it perhaps an amulet that protected the owner?  
C4033

with its front paws (Fig. 3). In this way, a natural hole forms in the middle of the figure, so the animal may have been worn as a pendant. A similar pendant is made of jet, a blackish material derived from coal and found in the British Isles, among other places. In this example, two small bear-like figures clutch each other, front part to back part, to form a circle (Fig. 4).

### A gripping beast

Over the years, archaeologists have come up with many suggestions as to what kind of animal the gripping beast could be. Some suggest a bear, others favour a dog or lion. Gripping beasts can also be perceived as 'ornament-animals' who inhabit ornamentation, with no direct connection to animals in nature. The amber and jet figures, how-

**Figure 4.**  
Two bear-like gripping beasts carved out of jet, a black or brownish material derived from coal. It has many of the same qualities as amber. It is easy to carve and can give an electric charge when rubbed.  
B290



ever, may indicate that people in the Viking Age saw a more direct connection to natural animals than we see today. That Donald is a duck and Mickey is a mouse are obvious to those of us who grew up with the Disney universe, even though these characters differ in many ways from actual ducks and mice. The full names 'Donald Duck' and 'Mickey Mouse' help, of course, to lead our thoughts in the right direction. A similar situation could also have existed in the Viking Age. The gripping beasts could have had names that emphasised their character.

Like cartoon characters, the gripping beasts could also have belonged to a universe well known to people at the time. We are left with only a small fraction of the material remains of this universe, and we will never know what has been lost. Were the gripping beasts painted on buildings, drawn in sand and tattooed on bodies? These creatures may have also come to life through oral storytelling. In Viking Age society, writing was less important than oral communication. The art of storytelling was highly valued, and people may have shared 'gripping' stories about this little critter.



## Expertly made

Some oral stories from the Viking Age were written down in the Middle Ages, chiefly by Snorri Sturluson and other Icelandic historians. There is good reason to believe that these stories could have changed a great deal before they were written down, but when comparing Viking Age pictorial images with the written texts, we sometimes find that they correspond remarkably well.

The gripping beasts that survive today were made by Viking Age craftspeople. They are carved in wood, jet and amber, cast in silver and various types of copper alloy, and fashioned out of gold wire. They appear on ships, swords and many types of jewellery. The artisans therefore had great influence on their appearance. Some archaeologists have suggested that the gripping beast motif came about in conjunction with an improved casting technique. It is also highly likely that the makers formed their figures according to reigning ideas about what the animal with gripping paws was and which qualities it had. As with other elements of the animal style, the gripping beast came into being in an intellectual and interdisciplinary tradition in which telling stories with words and telling stories with pictures were closely interwoven.

The gripping beast soon became popular, and it was not long before cheaper copies of high-quality objects were mass-produced.

## Wide spread in the world

From where did the gripping beast come? Many researchers have asked this question, and not all have come to the same conclusion. Some point out that similar figures occur in Carolingian ornamentation, while others emphasise that the gripping beast has close Anglo-Saxon relatives. Yet others argue that the gripping beast must be a Scandinavian innovation. It has even been suggested that gripping beasts on non-Scandinavian objects must have been made by itinerant Scandinavian craftspeople.

It is, however, beyond all doubt that the gripping beast got ‘out and about’ when it became part of the Scandinavian style. The gripping beast is found throughout Scandinavia and in many parts of the ‘Viking world’, among other places, in Novgorod and Gnezdovo in Russia, in the British Isles and on Iceland.

## Friends or foes?

Gripping beasts are lively creatures and are found in scenes that at first glance appear to be associated with fun and games (Fig. 4). Or are we in fact witnessing a battle between life and death? They easily spark our imagination, and researchers have also emphasised that imagination must have played a role in their creation.

Tiny details can suggest that the lively critters were not particularly jolly. Many gripping beasts have a sour expression with the corners of their mouth pulled downward. They certainly are not smiling. It is therefore difficult to confirm whether they are friends or foes.

## Fading from history

On the Oseberg ship, we find gripping beasts together with a ribbon-like animal that also resembles a bird seen in profile. This animal is characteristic for a style from previous centuries. But certain aspects of the execution indicate that the different animals were carved by the same artisan. There are also smaller ribbon-like animals on many of the pendant jewellery pieces dominated by a large gripping beast. The gripping beast is thus not as lonely as it may at first seem. Although the gripping beast in many ways represents something new, it is nevertheless still embedded in the traditional style. So is the gripping beast actually a new character that came on the scene?

The earliest phase with the gripping beast is referred to by some scholars as the Oseberg style. In the mid-800s the Borre Style was introduced, and the gripping beast also played an important role here. When the Borre Style went out of use around 950, the gripping beast faded from history. But thanks to the many craftspersons who fashioned it from so many different materials, it is still with us today.



## THE LAST ANIMAL – THE URNES STYLE IN THE TRANSITION BETWEEN PAGAN AND CHRISTIAN FAITH

*Margrete Syrstad Andås*

### *Images in a time of religious transition*

*With the conversion to Christianity in Scandinavia, the symbolism of animal imagery changed. Before Christianity, representations of animals tended to emphasise the special powers and qualities that were associated with the various animals. With the transition to Christianity, a more concrete and quite different attitude came into play. Many of the new ideas came directly from the Gospels and the Psalms, and they were made known to people in the North through missionaries and the books they brought with them. No longer were the animals and their powers important in themselves; the important aspect was what they symbolised in terms of good or evil. Certain animals, for instance the lamb, symbolised Christ, while the serpent and the dragon were expressions of the Devil.*

### **The Urnes Style in Scandinavia**

A church portal stands as the most famous image of the Urnes style, the final phase of Viking Age artistic expression (Fig. 1). It is this portal from the Urnes Stave Church in Sogn that has given the style its name. Since wood can be dated with the help of tree rings, we know that the portal was carved around 1070. Urnes, however, is not the only church with imagery of this kind; from the period between 1070 and 1130, there are remains of church buildings in the Urnes Style not only from other places in Norway, but also from Sweden and Denmark. Furthermore, the Urnes Style is the style from the Viking Age that was most widespread. It adorned everything from sacred art made of metal such as reliquaries, altars and crucifixes, to more personal and functional objects such as brooches, spoons and wooden chests. Between 1030 and 1150 the style spread across a wide area, from Gotland in the Baltic Sea to Ireland in the North Sea. Some scholars have suggested that the style originated in Swedish areas, based on the extensive production of rune stones in the Urnes Style from the Uppland region, while others think it was originally Danish because of the many finds of Urnes-Style brooches in Denmark. In Norway, approximately 30 brooches in the Urnes Style are preserved. Most of the Norwegian brooches are from around 1050, while a few are from the 1100s.

**Figure 1.**  
The portal of Urnes  
Stave Church in Sogn,  
Norway.

On the Urnes portal, snakes and snake-like animals writhe and coil around the portal opening and frame it in elegant figure-eight loops; they dive down over the door opening and attack a large animal that stands proudly on the portal's left jamb. With

rearing head and flowing mane, the large quadruped bites one of its attackers. Original colours on the Urnes portal no longer survive, but art from the late Viking Age was often painted in bright and contrasting colours; mustard, yellow, red, orange, green and grey-blue were common on the art of the elite. But even though the assumed splendid colours are long gone, the motif is clear enough. The animal's lips are curled back and its eyes are long, narrow and almond-shaped. The animal has been interpreted as a horse, but its sharp fangs indicate that it is a beast of prey – all things considered, a lion. .

### The meaning of the Urnes portal

The lion is mentioned many places in the Bible, and its meaning can seem ambiguous. The apostle Peter writes that the devil 'prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour' (I. Peter 5:8). We therefore find images from the Middle Ages (ca.1100–1500) showing a lion with a hapless individual caught between its jaws. No examples of this motif, however, are known to date from the Conversion Period in Norway (ca. 900–1100). During this period the lion is a symbol of Christ, as are most references to lions in the Bible. The lion and the serpent (or snake) came to Scandinavia as a complementary pair in the late 900s. We see them first on the famous Jelling Stone that was erected by King Harald Bluetooth of Denmark, to commemorate his parents, the unification of Denmark and the introduction of Christianity. The lion is here a symbol of kingship and power. This stone should probably be seen in light of the biblical story about the dream of Jacob. Resting his head on a stone, Jacob dreamt that God gave him and his descendants the land on which he lay and that God blessed them. When Jacob awoke, he raised the stone as a monument. It was in this highly symbolic context of kingship, religion and entitlement to land that the lion and the serpent entered Scandinavian art. On the Jelling Stone, we see the large animal with open jaws and a serpent coiling around it. The lion-and-serpent motif is also present on a number of Swedish rune stones with pictures, and on a weathervane from the same period, from Källunge in Gotland. This is a metal flag that was carried into battle, as a chieftain's standard. It could also be mounted on the top of a ship's mast. The victorious lion was a powerful ally in battle or on a raid, and there is every reason to believe that the motif was used by powerful elites in society.

At Urnes Stave Church we find the motif on the portal; here, right by the door, is the battle between the lion and the serpent, between good and evil. This placement is no coincidence. To limit or deter the power of evil was important in Christianity. The idea was that evil was everywhere at all times, and that it was up to each individual to fight against it. When a church building was consecrated, it was cleansed and small crosses were drawn on the walls and anointed with holy *chrism*, a consecrated ointment or oil.

The portal was also anointed. In the Bible, kings were anointed when they took the reins of power, and 'Christ' means 'the anointed one'. When the portal was anointed, it therefore became *like* Christ, the King of kings. In the Middle Ages, the period following the Viking Age, we often find inscriptions on consecrated objects such as baptismal fonts, church buildings and church bells. These often use the first person pronoun 'I' when referring to the object, thus showing how it was awarded a kind of embodied independence, just as was the portal. The portal was also like Christ because it opened the way to the sacred. In the Bible, Christ says 'I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved [...]' (John 10: 9). When a church was consecrated, the most dramatic part of the ceremony was the reading of Psalm 24. The bishop would walk around the church and knock on the door three times; after the third round the door was finally opened to the words 'Who is this King of Glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, your gates; lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in!' (Psalm 24: 8–9). Not until Christ was acknowledged as king was the path to God opened for the congregation. It was also right here, by the door, that Christ's status as king was acknowledged through the Psalms sung throughout the year. When we know which passages were read and sung, and at the same time see how the image of the lion was used, we can see that the lion was the symbol for both the king and Christ. The appeal of the lion motif during the phase of Conversion and political instability is therefore not difficult to understand: the use of the lion on the Urnes portal must be seen in light of this 'ruler ideology'. It was not the humble servant but the powerful, potent, triumphant warrior-king that people followed.

Scholars have pointed out that 'struggle' as a motif first appears in Viking ornamentation in the Conversion Period, and they argue that the earlier gripping beast, a type of imaginary animal with emphasised gripping paws, is more playful than belligerent (see Unn Pedersen's article). The serpent in the Urnes Style, however, is difficult to see as anything other than an expression of evil. In the Bible the serpent is first mentioned immediately after the story of Creation. No sooner were Adam and Eve set up in Paradise and given one command, than the serpent appeared and led them away from God with his tempting words. In the late Viking Age and during the Conversion Period, the serpent is most often depicted as a lindworm and a ribbon-like animal, but from around 1100 it appears increasingly in the form of a basilisk, that is, a two-legged dragon with wings. On the Urnes portal we also notice that the serpents often end in lily tails and that they are in a state of transformation; they are in the process of becoming lilies. In Christian iconography, vegetation and vines are associated with salvation. The good, then, at Urnes, is victorious.



**Figure 2.**  
The Urnes brooch from  
Sør-Fron Vicarage.  
C58123

A stone relief of Christ in the shape of a man, trampling evil beasts is preserved from the entryway to the church at Jevington in England. This was made at exactly the same time as the Urnes portal. From the 700s and leading up to 1100, images of Christ trampling on serpents and wild beasts were not uncommon in pictorial art. The motif alludes to Psalm 91: 13–14. Here one reads that ‘you will tread on the lion and the adder; the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot. Because he hoped in me, I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name.’ In the Jevington sculpture, the two animals that Christ tramples upon are rather ambiguous, and their legs dissolve into loopwork of intertwined serpentine slings in the Urnes Style.

### **The Urnes brooches and their meaning**

Loopwork consisting of serpentine slings is also commonly found on Urnes brooches from Scandinavia and the British Isles. Urnes brooches can have a bird or a dragon-like animal as the main motif (Fig. 2), but the most common ones have animals that may seem ambiguous. They resemble the animal in the gable of Urnes Stave Church: a large four-footed beast seen in profile, surrounded by serpentine loopwork (Fig. 3). This large animal, in contrast to ‘the lion’, has neither a mane nor fangs, and its head bends downwards. One could claim that it represents a stylised lamb, which in a Christian context would be the apocalyptic lamb as the symbol of Christ. Furthermore, the motif prompts us to ask what the serpentine loopwork means. These snake-like animals bite each other as well as the large four-footed animal, so they may express forces of chaos. Perhaps we are witnessing the battle the soul is engaged in at all times, or the last battle and final judgment. Psalm 91, with its reference to trampling on snakes and beasts, assures believers that they will be delivered from evil. This Bible passage may therefore be as important a reference for the Urnes brooches as it is for the portal.

It may also be that the brooches were meant to be prophylactic, that is, intended to ward off evil. An Icelandic book of magic from the 1600s states that the Christianising king Olav Haraldsson always carried a knot of some sort on his person in order to withstand temptation. We know of different types of knotwork from that same period that were meant to ward against evil. This may have been a widespread tradition dating far back in time, since the missionary Boniface, from the 700s, writes that women in Rome wore bracelets on their arms and ankles with knots to keep evil at bay. There is of course a great distance in time and space between what Boniface tells about, and the use of knotwork in folk art in Northern Europe in the 1600s. Still, we cannot wholly exclude the possibility that brooches picturing intertwining loopwork were thought to protect against evil forces, and that they may possibly reflect some sort of continuous tradition.



**Figure 3.**  
The Urnes brooch with  
an indeterminate animal.  
From Langangen  
in Telemark, Norway.  
C28696

The Urnes brooch that was found at Sør-Fron Vicarage (Fig. 2) lacks the loopwork, but it presents us with a similar problem of interpretation. The head on the Sør-Fron brooch resembles the biting ribbon animals on the Urnes portal, but it also has a pair of legs and a tale in addition to a beautifully shaped wing. It is a dragon, more specifically, a basilisk. The use of a symbol that, in the Christian understanding, is not at all ambiguous but decidedly evil, is difficult for us today to understand. Why would anyone pin an image of a basilisk on his or her chest? In some cultures, there is the tradition of thinking that 'evil wards off evil'. This idea is not usually found in Christian sources from the Middle Ages, but it does occur in connection with snakes and toads, and probably also dragons. The sources for this are from the 1200s and 1300s; King Magnus Erlingsson owned a stone taken from the head of a toad, and it was claimed to sweat whenever it was near poison, while King Magnus Håkonsson gave Bishop Arne of Iceland two snake tongues as gifts because they could ward against magic and illness. A snake tongue is also found in the royal inventory of the treasure housed in Bohuslen Castle in 1340. The basis for these ideas as they appear in a Christian context probably does not stem from 'the old religion', but rather from the biblical story of Moses where 'evil wards off evil'. (Numbers 21: 6–9). We lack written sources from the time around 1050–1100, when the Sør-Fron brooch was made, but we cannot exclude the possibility that it reflects such ideas.

We know that in later periods, people living in Christian areas used symbols of 'good' to ward against evil. In the Middle Ages, the Virgin Mary and St Olav could be depicted on brooches and pins. It is therefore reasonable to assume that people at the time thought these symbolic images could protect them from evil. While these 'good' motifs were uncommon during the period of Conversion, some brooches dating from the 1000s and found in Scandinavia show the motif called agnus dei, the Lamb of God, carrying a banner emblazoned with a cross. These so-called Lamb of God brooches are closely related to the Urnes brooches and are often considered variants of them. The motif points to Christ offering himself as a sacrifice, but also to victory and the 'Harrowing of Hell'. In contrast to many of the more common Urnes brooches, the Lamb of God brooches do not dissolve in knots of animal limbs. That some workshops produced brooches with the lamb as the symbol of Christ is not surprising; these were probably a sign that the wearer was a Christian, as well as a means for warding off evil. The lion, meanwhile, never appears on brooches from the period. The lion was of course a symbol of Christ, but it was also a symbol for a ruler or chieftain. Was it that only certain people could fasten the symbol of a lion on their chest? In an intensely hierarchical culture, some symbols were more suited for production and sale at markets than were others.

There is one important aspect about Urnes brooches that we have not mentioned: their beauty. It is possible that the religious symbolism and ability to ward off evil were not the only aspects that made these brooches desirable. They may also have been prized for their aesthetic value. Furthermore, we can imagine that the style in itself pointed back to animal styles and Scandinavian traditions from earlier periods (see Hanne L. Aannestad's article). Tradition and identity walk hand-in-hand, also in art. Even though many of the motifs were Christian, the style was still clearly rooted in Viking culture. Over a period of several hundred years, brooches with animal motifs and interlacing patterns were made and worn by people in the North and their descendants in the British Isles and Ireland. It is always difficult, if not impossible, to know where the boundary between meaning and convention lies; when a motif is used because it is decorative and beautiful, and when a brooch is cast because it is imbued with symbolic value. At a time when one religion was superseding another and when human life was marked by upheaval and change, it is probable that not only religion, tradition and identity played important roles, but also beauty.



**Brooch (detail)**  
Viking Age  
Hovinsholm,  
Ringsaker, Hedmark  
Norway.  
C172

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