

Thor's Hammer – Symbol of Christianization and Political Delusion

BY JÖRN STAECKER

Abstract

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The article deals with the famous pagan symbol of the Viking Age, Thor's hammer. The use of the hammer during the Viking Age, its disappearance during medieval times and its renaissance in modern times are discussed here. It is argued that Thor's hammer during the 8th–11th centuries expressed much more than the first contact with Christianity and the course of the mission than a pagan reaction, as was believed in earlier research. In the Middle Ages the heritage of the pagan belief was transformed into a Christian iconography. It was only during the 18th century that the heathen symbol was rediscovered and became part of a romantic view of history. In the last few decades Thor's hammer has had another revival, this time also being misused by neo-Nazis. But it is not taken into account that the hammer never expressed a violent conflict.

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We can see from the example of this Thor's hammer what elaborate works existed in Sweden during the period when Christianity and heathendom were struggling for mastery over the souls of our ancestors. (Hildebrand 1872, p. 55)

Since the late 19th century Thor's hammer has fascinated archaeologists as a symbol of the lost pagan religion of the Vikings. The hammer was regarded as the symbol of resistance, permanently combating its direct opponent, the cross. Instead of looking at Thor's hammer as a part of the Christianization process, the myth of battle and war has been kept alive. This myth has even made it possible for young neo-Nazis to identify themselves and their ideology with the pagan symbol.

The aim of this article is to investigate the role of Thor's hammer during the mission in Scandinavia, the question of a tradition during

the Middle Ages, and the re-use of the amulet in modern times.

Thor's hammer in mythology and history of research

Before one tries to understand the importance of Thor's hammer it is necessary to take a brief look at Norse mythology. Here the world is created by the gods, together with the home of the gods, Asgard (*Ásgarðr*), and at its centre Odin's famous hall Valhalla (*Valhöll*). On the edge of the world lies the ocean with the Midgard Serpent, and on the farthest coast the mountain world of *Jötunheimr* is situated, where giants (*jötnar*) have their castle Utgard (*Útgarðr*). Somewhere in between lies Midgard (*Miðgarðr*), where the human beings live. Gods and powers were present in the cosmos, in heaven and on earth, in the ocean and the underworld. Human be-

ings were confronted with helping and preserving powers on one side, and hostile and dangerous powers on the other. While the gods tried to keep the world in order, their opponents, the giants, tried to destroy this order. But at the same time there was a kind of interaction between the gods and the giants. The giants possessed objects and wisdom which the gods needed. One special feature of Norse mythology is the drama of the total collapse, Ragnarök (the fate of the gods). After three continuous terrible and icy winters (the Fimbul winter), there will be a last battle between the gods and the giants when they annihilate one another, which leads to the total destruction of the world. But there is hope after the collapse. A new world will rise from the ocean, new gods will appear and people will live in peace and harmony (Steinsland 1993, 148).

In Norse mythology one of the mightiest gods besides Odin was Thor. He was mainly worshipped by the peasants because he ensured a good harvest. Thor is the protector of the universe and is, therefore, also permanently fighting the giants. On the other hand, Thor has to find a balance in these fights. When Thor succeeds in fishing the Midgard Serpent from the ocean, he is also threatening the world because the snake is twisting around the world in order to keep it together. Thor's weapon is his hammer *Mjöllnir*. According to *Hallfreðar saga* (chap. 6), the hammer could be worn around the neck or on the clothing. From *Hákonar saga* we know that Thor could give protection to both the living and the dead and that the hammer was used as a symbol of fertility during the wedding (Bø 1974, pp. 502 f.)

Hammer-shaped amulets were identified quite late as Thor's hammers. In the early 19th century, Chr. Thomsen (1836, p. 45) interpreted hammer-shaped amulets made of amber as part of a pagan religion, but not the Thor's hammers as they were discovered later on. By 1869, the hammer was not connected with the pagan god and instead interpreted as an "anchor-shaped pendant" (Montelius 1869, p. 59). The connection with Thor's hammer *Mjöllnir*,

which according to the *Edda* had a relatively short shaft, was first made by H. Hildebrand (1872) and shortly afterwards accepted by O. Montelius (1873, p. 107). Unfortunately Hildebrand (1872; 1875) did not explain to his readers how he identified the object. A comparison with the mythological motif on the runic stone from Altuna, Uppland (U 1161), which illustrates Thor and his hammer, could not be made because this stone was discovered only in 1918.

Montelius regarded the hammer as a pagan symbol and immediately recognized its counterpart in the cross-pendant. The question of whether this hammer could be seen as a reaction to the process of Christianization dominated research in the subsequent decades. While Hildebrand (1872, p. 55), Müller (1898, p. 281) and Lindqvist (1917–24, p. 121) supported Montelius' idea, it was pointed out by Grieg (1929, p. 305) that the hammer has an older tradition in Norse pagan religion. The discussion continued in the 1960s with J. Werner (1964, p. 182) who published two 6th-century Thor's hammers from Gilton, England. Ström (1974, p. 505; 1984, p. 140) on the other hand pointed out that there are different types of hammers which belong to different periods. A more intermediate position is adopted by A.-S. Gräslund (1983–84) when explaining the cross-shaped punch-marks on some Thor's hammers. She thinks that the combination of hammer and cross expresses the syncretism of the pagan and Christian religions. Finally E. Wamers (1997) has tried to change the interpretation completely. He suggests that the hammer is a *praefiguratio* of the cross, since the missionaries succeeded in changing the role of Thor fighting against the Midgard Serpent into Christ defeating the snake. Thor is now becoming a *praefiguratio* of Christ. The idea that Thor's hammer could be regarded as a pagan reaction was further dismantled by M. Koktvedgaard Zeiten (1997, pp. 25 ff.). In her opinion only the Thor's hammers from the period around AD 1000 can be regarded in some way as a pagan "renaissance".

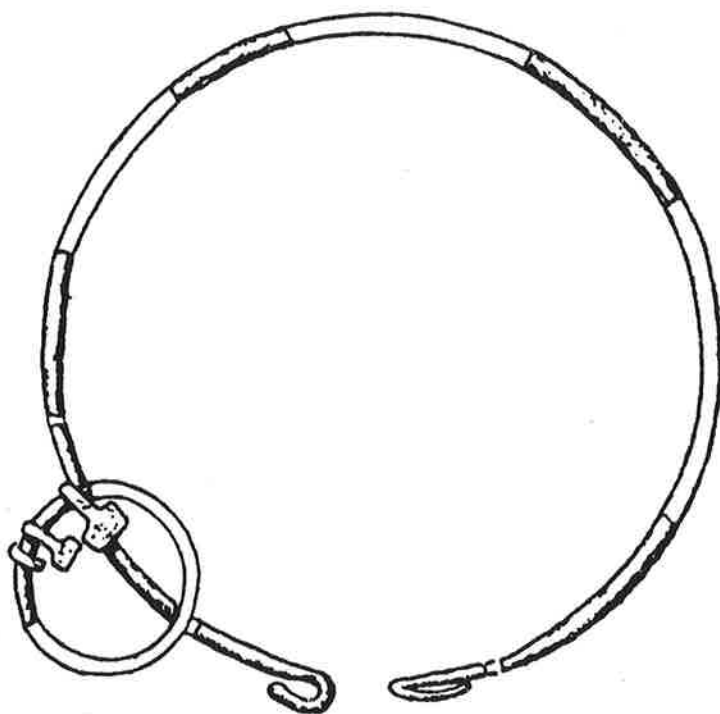


Fig. 1. Iron Thor's hammer ring from Birka, Sweden, grave 854 (after Arbman 1943, fig. 275, 3). Scale 1:2.

Typology and chronology

Thor's hammer is known from different objects. There are objects in the shape of a hammer, engravings on runic stones (Paulsen 1939; figs. 106–108; Moltke 1976, fig. 222), on vessels and pottery (Johansen 1912, fig. 4; Steuer 1974, pp. 120 f.) as well as on coins (Linder Welin 1956; Hammarberg & Rispling 1985; Wiechmann 1996). Especially in the case of hammers on pottery and coins, it is difficult to judge whether the symbol was supposed to be visible. But then, only a small proportion of the Viking Age coins in Scandinavia has been studied for graffiti. That is why only hammer-shaped objects and runic stones will be discussed here.

Two different types of Thor's hammers made of metal are known. One is the so-called Thor's hammer ring, an iron ring with several items in iron which can have a T/L or lozenge shape (Fig. 1). These rings appear as early as the late 8th century, but they predominate during the 9th century before they seem to disappear during

the 10th. The rings are an important part of the death ritual, and in many cases they are from burials; of these, 95% are cremations and 5% inhumations (Ström 1970, p. 20). In the cremation graves the rings are quite often placed upon or in the urns. In a few cases, rings have also been discovered at settlement sites (*ibid.* p. 26 f.). There are no rings from hoards, which might be explained by the material. Their distribution is concentrated in Sweden and the islands of Åland, while a few finds have also been located in Russia. There are no iron rings known from medieval Denmark or Norway (Ström 1984).

The second type is the Thor's hammer as a single pendant. A great deal of research has been done on their typology and chronology (Petersen 1876; Mackeprang 1938; Müller-Wille 1976; Sandberg 1984; Staecker 1999, pp. 213 ff.; Kocktvedgaard Zeiten 1997). These pendants are made of iron, amber, lead, bronze, silver or even gold. The hammer can be plain or decorated with punchmarks or niello inlay (Fig. 2). With the exception of two 6th-century pen-

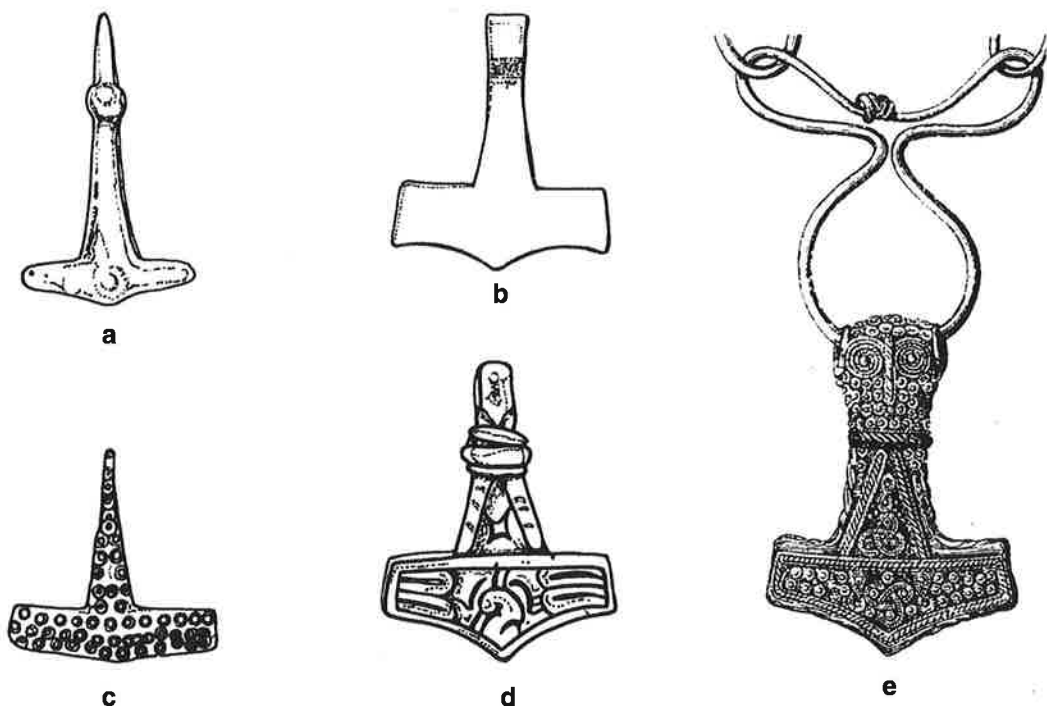


Fig. 2. Different types of single Thor's hammer pendants. Scale 1:1. a. Hedeby, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany (after Schwarz-Mackensen 1978, fig. 1, 1). b. Stens prästgård, Västra Stenby parish, Sweden (after Montelius 1905, fig. 29). c. Tågemosen, Spjellerup parish, Denmark (after Det Arkæologiske Nævn 1988, fig. 208). d. Mickels, När parish, Sweden (after Stenberger 1947, fig. 221). e. Bredsättra, Sweden (after Hildebrand 1872, fig. 28).

dants from Gilton, England, the type is first known from the late 9th century. It disappears in the 11th century. Pendants appear in cremation and inhumation graves, in hoards, settlements and as single finds. The distribution is limited to Scandinavia, but there are examples known from the Viking colonies of Iceland, England, Ireland and Russia. There are also pendants known from Western Slav areas, that is, present-day northern Germany and Poland. These Slavs had close trading contacts with the Vikings, and the investigation of Slav settlements has shown that the Vikings even settled in the coastal region of the Slavs (Herrmann 1985, p. 139; Jöns *et al.* 1997). In spite of their wide distribution, no pendants of this type have been discovered in Finland or Greenland.¹

The distribution indicates a clear pattern in space and in time. Thor's hammer expresses

both religion and ethnicity. The pendant must be connected with the Vikings and their religion; it is not part of the Slav, Finnish or Frankish religions. Even the aspect of time fits very well with the historically documented mission to Scandinavia. There are no items known from medieval times; the last Thor's hammer was produced at the end of the 11th century.

Iron Thor's hammer rings

Before analysing the single Thor's hammer, the question of the occurrence of the iron Thor's hammer rings needs to be discussed. What are the reasons for the appearance of the pagan symbol already during the late 8th century in Sweden? Why did a pagan society, existing without any imminent threats from other religions, manifest its belief in this way?

Leaving aside the typology, distribution and dating – which have been analysed by Ström (1984) – we have to state that these rings existed before the first recorded mission in Sweden. There are two ways of explaining this phenomenon. One is that the development of a pagan religion was part of the emerging structure of Iron Age society. In this case the rings reflect a deeper consciousness of this society and its religion. The rings are the materialization of a narrative structure which was needed to establish a tradition. A similar phenomenon can be observed on the island of Gotland, where picture-stones with narrative stories of the pagan religion were raised during the 8th/9th century.

The other explanation would be that our knowledge of the first missionary activities in 8th-century Scandinavia is too limited. There are almost no written records (Dehio 1877; Seegrün 1967), and that is the reason for the critical attitude of most archaeologists who explain Christian items from this period as objects of trade and robbery (Wamers 1985). But features such as bishop's croziers, shrines, liturgical vessels etc. might indicate that this explanation is far too simplistic (Hellström 1996, p. 128; Staecker 1997, pp. 420 ff.). While there was certainly no coordinated mission in Scandinavia – the European rulers were preoccupied with their own empires – there could have been an active individual mission, such as that of Irish monks who travelled around different parts of Europe. The visit of Willibrord to the court of the Danish king Ongendus around 700, and the discussion in 789 between Alcuin and the bishop of Bremen, Willehad, on the question of converting the Danes, suggest that there was missionary activity as early as the 8th century. Even if the 8th-century missions never reached Sweden, they could have affected pagan religion. A direct mission can be noted for the first half of the 9th century when Ansgar travelled to Birka at the request of the Swedes and their king (*Vita Anskarii* 9). Several Thor's hammer rings are known from this period from the island and its vicinity, and we may speculate about a manifes-

tation of pagan religion when the Vikings were confronted with the new belief.

The single Thor's hammer – a sign of pagan reaction?

The appearance of single Thor's hammers was vigorously discussed in early 20th-century research. It was Lindqvist (1917–24, p. 121) who distinguished four phases. In the first phase in the pagan period, it was not customary to wear religious symbols. With the start of the mission, the second phase, the cross started to appear as a symbol of belief. In the third phase, Thor's hammers developed as a reaction to the cross. Finally, in the fourth phase, crosses and Thor's hammers existed side by side and were used in public. Arup (1925, p. 113) added to this model that the bearers of the Thor's hammer attempted to equip themselves with an amulet as strong as the cross. According to Arup, the Thor's hammers were copies of the cross, especially articulated in the appearance of the single pendants. Lindqvist's and Arup's ideas were strongly opposed by the Norwegian archaeologist S. Grieg (1929, p. 305). He suggested that the Thor's hammer as an amulet and symbol is much older than the cross and that it cannot be a sign of reaction. The chronological difference in Viking Age hoards with Thor's hammers in the 10th century hoards and cross-pendants in the 11th century hoards was interpreted by Grieg as a sign of the use of Thor's hammer as an amulet and not as an expression of religious conflict. Grieg suggested that the pagan amulet could be a part of the peasant bridewealth. He drew the comparison with ethnographic evidence from Norway, where the bride received cross-shaped reliquaries and jewellery with the *Agnus Dei* motif, intended to sanctify the bride and bridegroom and give them supernatural protection against evil powers. Grieg believed that this custom had its roots in pagan religion and Thor's hammer.

This brief summary highlights the main research problem which still exists today (see

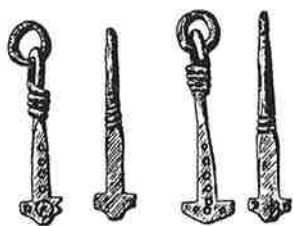


Fig. 3. Thor's hammer from Gilton, England (after Werner 1964, fig. 8, 1–2). Scale 1:1.

Koktvedgaard Zeiten 1997). There are almost no cross-pendants known from 9th-century contexts, and this makes it difficult to accept the model of Thor's hammer as a sign of reaction. But the early missionary activities of the 8th century, and the general exchange of trade objects and even ideas with central and southern Europe is not taken into account when interpreting Thor's hammer. It is difficult to believe that the hammer symbol – first in the shape of a ring and later as a single pendant – reflects a genuine pagan tradition in spite of the fact that it correlates with the mission in Europe and later the mission to Scandinavia. To regard Thor's hammer as part of a heathen “renaissance when people needed magic amulets”, as recently argued by Koktvedgaard Zeiten (1997, p. 27), does not explain the distribution in time and space. This argument is supported by the 6th-century Thor's hammers from Gilton, England (Fig. 3). These pendants are used in research as one of the strongest arguments against the thesis of a pagan reaction. But it must be taken into account that the Thor's hammers occur during a period of religious change in Anglo-Saxon society. This indicates that they were used in a

Table I. The find contexts of Thor's hammers by countries.²

context	DK	S	N	IS	GB	IRL	RUS	PL
grave	16	10	2	1	1	–	1	–
hoard	20	11	3	–	2	–	–	3
settlement	22	7	–	–	1	1	–	3
single find	12	2	2	–	–	–	–	1
total	70	30	7	1	4	1	1	7

similar way as a reaction against the cross.

There are 121 Thor's hammers known from 86 sites in northern Europe (Table I). The proportions of graves, hoards, settlements and single finds vary considerably and can for the most part be explained as an effect of chronology.

The largest number of Thor's hammers is found in early medieval Denmark, followed by Sweden with half the Danish amount, and Norway with an insignificant number. The numbers of Thor's hammers in other countries are almost negligible. The differences in distribution by countries and find contexts cannot be coincidental (Fig. 4). It seems as if the distribution of Thor's hammers is directly connected with the mission process. If we compare, for example, the 9th–10th-century graves with Thor's hammers to those with cross-pendants in early medieval Denmark, we note that there is only one grave from the same period with a cross-pendant (Staecker 1999, p. 239). On the other hand, Sweden has twice as many graves with cross-pendants (20 from 12 sites) as with Thor's hammers from the 10th–11th centuries. The Danish Thor's hammers, which do not appear before the late 9th century and date mainly to the 10th century, suggest a reaction against the missionary activity in southern Scandinavia,

Table II. Graves with Thor's hammers (numbers of cremation graves in the first two columns italicized).

	Male	Female	Sex unknown	Inhumation	Cremation	Grave type unknown
Denmark	–	11+1	–	11	1	–
Sweden	2	4+2	2	4	6	–
Norway	1	1	–	1	1	–
Iceland	–	1	–	1	–	–
England	1	–	–	1	–	–
Russia	–	–	1	–	–	1

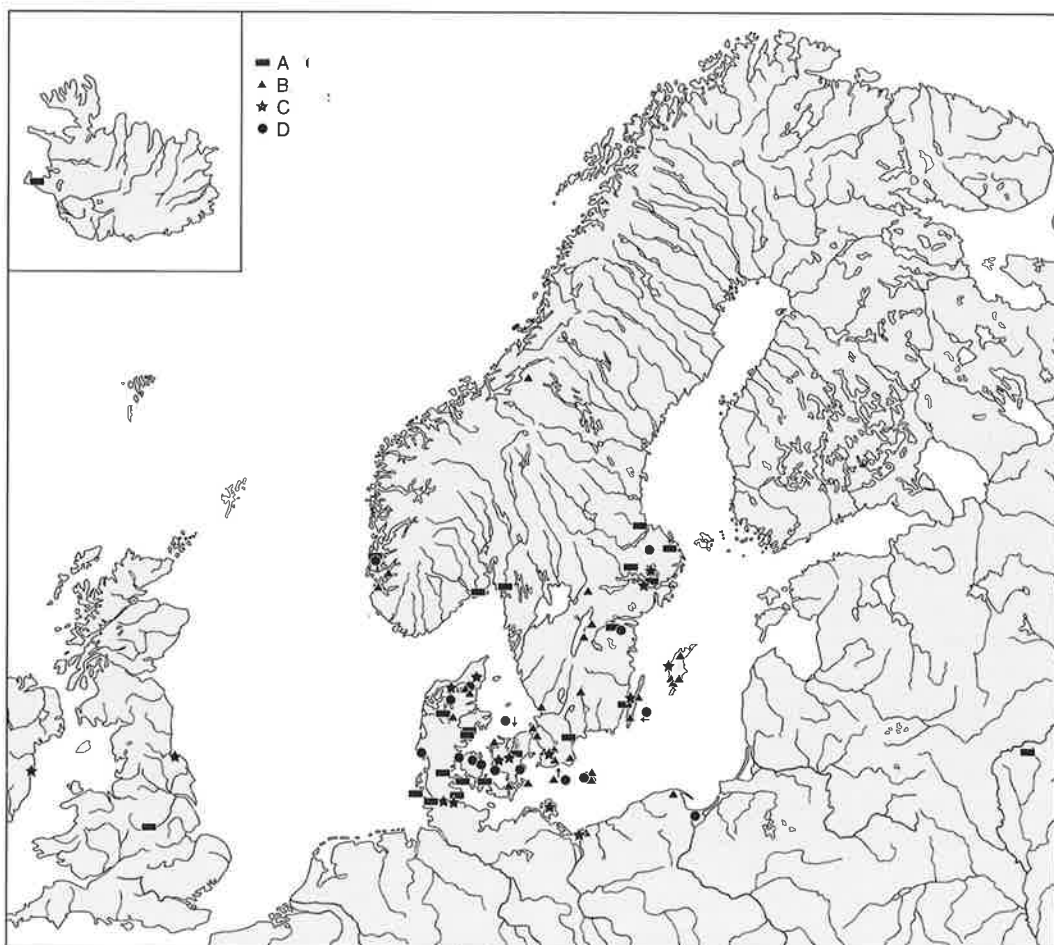


Fig. 4. Distribution of single Thor's hammers: A. grave find, B. hoard find, C. settlement find, D. single find.

which was very lively during the 10th century. Here, the Thor's hammer is perhaps a manifestation of the old political and religious structure, and it may signal at the same time the independence of the Danish state against the claims to hegemony by the Germans. The picture is not the same in Sweden, and the reason could be that Sweden was not threatened by Germany in the same way and that the Thor's hammers no longer had the same importance in the 11th century as they had in the 10th century. Also, the Swedish cross-pendants express a kind of syncretism which is missing in Denmark. But it is obvious that even if the mission process in Sweden extended over a much longer period from the 10th until the early 12th century, it is

not expressed in the same way as in Denmark. Were the Swedes more willing to compromise in the expression of Christianity in their graves? The relationship between the total number of pagan symbols and the mission process is almost inverted between Denmark and Sweden; this means that a short mission results in a great many pagan symbols while a long mission results in a small amount of pagan symbols. But if we look at the other countries, especially England, it is quite obvious that the Viking settlers in the Danelaw converted to Christianity after a short time, which is reflected in the small number of Thor's hammers. And how do we explain the small quantity in Norway, is it a short or long mission process?

Table III. The condition of different pendant-types in the Danish and Swedish hoards.

Cross-pendant		Thor's hammer		Hiddensee pendant	
29 complete	7 fragments	31 complete	1 fragments	7 complete	23 fragments
80.6%	19.4%	96.9%	3.1%	23.3%	76.7%

The preponderance of Thor's hammers in female graves is quite surprising. Male graves represent only one-sixth of the total number (Table II). If we compare this picture with that of cross-pendants, we find that in Denmark and Sweden male graves do not account for more than a seventh of the total amount (Staecker 1999, pp. 32 ff.). This may suggest that Thor's hammers and crosses in graves had a function as symbols and jewellery, but it does not suggest by whom the pendants were worn in daily life.

Another interesting aspect is the presence of Thor's hammers in hoards (Table III). The general opinion is that these objects had lost their symbolism and were reduced to their material value. But it is surprising that neither Thor's hammers nor cross-pendants were destroyed or used as hacksilver: in most cases, only the suspension loop was damaged. This picture becomes even more obvious in comparison with

another type of pendant. In contrast to the Christian and pagan pendants, over 76% of the cross-shaped Hiddensee pendants are fragmented. This demonstrates that not every pendant, even if it was cross-shaped, was effective in protecting the hoard.

It was already noted by Petersen (1876, p. 80) that the existence of complete Thor's hammers in hoards could not be explained by chance. Petersen suggested that the pendant protected the hoard from thieves, having a kind of apotropaic function. P. Paulsen (1939, p. 182) even interpreted the existence of Thor's hammers in hoards by the fact that the hoard was dedicated to the god Thor. M. Stenberger (1958, p. 170) opposed this view, arguing that this would mean that even the crosses in the hoards were a kind of offering. He argued that an iron Thor's hammer should have fulfilled the function of a "signum". On the other hand, even

Table IV. The chronological relationship between Thor's hammers and cross-pendants in Viking Age Denmark.

Thor's hammer site (context)	date (AD)	Cross- or crucifix-pendant site (context)	date (AD)
Pålstorp (hoard)	922/23		
Bräcke (hoard)	924/25		
Gravlev (hoard)	952		
Sejrby (hoard)	953		
Klostermark (hoard)	970		
		Skjeppeinge (hoard)	962-73
Sandby (hoard)	985		
Kabbarp (hoard)	991		
Halmstad (hoard)	991		
Vaalse (hoard)	991		
Assartorp (hoard)	1002		
Gärnsnäs (hoard)	1018	Gärnsnäs (hoard)	1018
		Hurva Äspinge (hoard)	1047
		Hågerup (hoard)	1048
		Vallø (hoard)	1053
		Selsø (hoard)	1059
		Bonderup (hoard)	1065-70
		Bjerre Banke (single)	1106
		Johannishus (hoard)	1128

Table V. The chronological relationship between Thor's hammers and cross-pendants in Viking Age Småland, Östergötland and Västergötland, Västmanland, Södermanland and Närke.

Thor's hammer site (context)	date (AD)	Cross- or crucifix-pendant site (context)	date (AD)
Erikstorp (hoard)	956/57		
Eketorp (hoard)	958/59		
		Östjädra (hoard)	991
Värend (hoard)	995		
Sten (hoard)	997		
		Hörningsholm (hoard)	1044
		Norsborgsgård (grave)	1046
		Blacksta (hoard)	1047
		Stommen (hoard)	1056

Stenberger observed the condition of the pendants, which could be explained by the probability that "respect for the old magical sign was sitting so deep that nobody dared to break it into pieces".

Pagan and Christian

But it seems as if the Thor's hammer has been overplayed as a symbol of this religious conflict. When we look at the chronological relationship of coin-dated Thor's hammers and cross-pendants in medieval Denmark and in southern Sweden, we obtain the following picture (Table IV).

The contrast is striking. The only cross-pendant which does not fit into the picture – Skjeppinge – comes from the island of Bornholm and perhaps reflects the special status of the island, which is mentioned in the report of Ottar and Wulfstan's journey. On the other hand, the island is mentioned by Adam of Bremen (IV, 8) as one of the last to be Christianized. This picture given by coin-dated hoards is even confirmed by analysing Thor's hammers and cross-pendants without absolute dating. The relative chronology indicates even here a major distribution of pagan symbols in the 10th century and of Christian symbols in the 11th century (Staecker 1999, pp. 237 ff.). The cross-pendants are rare in the 10th century; most date to the 11th century. The written sources report the start of the successful mission with the visit of Archbishop Unni in the year 936, the baptism

of Harald Bluetooth around 965 and the establishment of the Church under Canute the Great after 1016. In other words: we can observe an astonishing correlation between the pagan symbol and the mission to medieval Denmark. The Thor's hammers do not appear in the hoards before 922/23, the majority of them are dated around the late 10th century, and the latest hammer is known from a hoard with a *terminus post quem* of AD 1018. A similar pattern exists in southern and central Sweden, where official mission started after the baptism of Olaf Skötkonung around 990, culminating around 1050 with the struggle between Emund Slemmae and the German missionaries over the attempt to establish a Swedish parochial organisation. Here, the Thor's hammers do not appear in hoards before 956/57 but disappear again after 997, while the first cross-pendant is dated to 991 and the last to 1056 (Table V). Again the picture is confirmed by non-coin-dated pendants; no Thor's hammers are known from the 11th century.

A similar relationship between pagan and Christian symbols can be observed on the island of Öland. The only two exceptions are Uppland and the island of Gotland. In Uppland, where a 9th-century mission by the German monk Ansgar on the island of Birka is reported, we find several Thor's hammers and cross-pendants dating around the year 900. They seem to express a second mission phase before the official one started. In contrast to the general opinion which

Table VI. The chronological relationship between Thor's hammers and cross-pendants on Gotland (in square brackets the districts of the island: I Norra Tredingen, II Medeltredingen, III Södertredingen).

Thor's hammer site (context)	date (AD)	Cross- or crucifix-pendant site (context)	date (AD)
		Broa (hoard) [II]	991
		Öster Ryftes (hoard) [I]	1027
Kviende (hoard) [I]	1029		
		Tingstäde (hoard) [I]	1035
Alveskogs (hoard) [III]	1047		
		Botarve (hoard) [II]	1059
		Stånga (grave) [III]	1081
		Sandegårda (hoard) [II]	1083
		Domerarve (hoard) [III]	1089
Mickels (hoard) [III]	1092		
Gerete (hoard) [III]	1099		

favours the thesis of a German mission (Gräslund 1980, p. 84; Capelle 1986, p. 59), the cross-pendants might indicate an English mission, unknown from the written sources (Staecker 1999, pp. 384 ff.). On Gotland the picture is quite different. Here we find a cross-pendant in the earliest hoard of the late 10th century, and a Thor's hammer in the latest hoard of the late 11th century (Table VI). There is a clear concentration of pagan symbols in the southern half of the island, which might be explained by differ-

ent phases of mission (Staecker 1996), probably a result of the several pagan traditions on the island, with a more "archaic" tradition in the southern part (Andrén 1993).

Manifestation

Thor's hammers are also known from Scandinavian runic stones. However, a survey of the hammers and the inscriptions naming Thor shows that there are no more than seven such runic stones known from medieval Denmark and four from Sweden (Fig. 5). Interestingly, none of these 11 runic stones show a combination of Thor's hammer with an inscription naming Thor; the object and the text exclude each other. Obviously there was no necessity to repeat the message.³ In comparison with the number of runic stones in Scandinavia with engravings of the cross or an inscription mentioning God, the ratio is 11 to around 1,500. We can say that Thor's hammer or its carving on the runic stones was of absolutely no significance in the change of religion (Williams 1996, pp. 303 f.). In other words, the runic stones are one of the most impressive expressions of the mission process.

The comparison between the crosses and the Thor's hammers supports the interpretation that the latter expressed a pagan reaction against the mission of Scandinavia. It would be wrong to regard the Thor's hammer as a *praefiguratio*



Fig. 5. Distribution of runic stones with a picture (p) of Thor's hammer or an inscription (i) of the name Thor. Medieval Denmark: DK 26 (p); DK 110 (i); DK 120 (p); DK 209 (i); DK 220 (i); DK 331 (p). Sweden: Sö 86 (p); Sö 111 (p); Sö 140 (i); VG 113 (p); VG 150 (i).

Christi, as suggested recently by E. Wamers (1997). The chronological difference between Christian and pagan symbols and the fact that crosses and Thor's hammers almost never appear in the same context (there are only three cases of all Scandinavian pendants where both symbols are represented in the same context), make an interpretation as *praefiguratio* unlikely.

It seems then as if the Thor's hammer was more or less exclusively reserved for the pagan religion. There are only a few cases where we could consider the possibility of a kind of mixture with Christian symbols, in the case the hammers with punchmarks in the shape of a cross. There is a total of five Thor's hammers with a cross known from Scandinavia.⁴ Should we regard these pendants as the "Christianization of the amulet and the god Thor", as Wamers (1993) would have us believe? Or do they symbolize the period of transition, the syncretism of pagan and Christian religions, as suggested by A.-S. Gräslund (1983–84)? The fact that punchmarks in cross shape appear on Viking Age armrings of the 9th/10th century⁵ clearly implies that the adaptation of the Christian symbol is part of a continued process which started in the early Viking Age. Gräslund's view encapsulates the key point: the combination of pagan and Christian symbols is part of this process, it is no "outrageous event", as Wamers (1997, p. 92) believes.

If we want to reconstruct the mission to Scandinavia, Thor's hammer is an important tool in understanding the difference between material culture and written sources. Thor's hammer highlights the change of religion much earlier than any Christian symbol; chronologically it correlates with the first phase of missionary work. Thor's hammer – ultimately the symbol of the defeated religion – was not capable of fulfilling the requirements of Scandinavian rulers trying to establish their kingdoms. They were in need of a symbol which united the political and ritual structure – the cross-pendant, with its association with God and his representative on earth, the king.

The Viking heritage

With the establishment of the Church in Scandinavia, Thor's hammer finally disappears, but the myths are kept alive. Adam of Bremen, the German monk who wrote the history of the Church of Hamburg-Bremen around 1076, gives us a description of Thor. He tells us about the temple at the centre of the pagan cult, Uppsala, a place which Adam never visited, and the description of which has many similarities with Thietmar of Merseburg's (I, 17) description of the Danish cult centre Lejre. According to Adam (IV, 26), three gods were venerated there, with Thor in the centre and Odin and Frigg on either side. Thor is said to hold a sceptre; no hammer is mentioned by Adam. This picture of Thor is further developed in the *Gesta Danorum* by Saxo Grammaticus (finished around 1200) where Thor is a strong and invincible god. It says: "There was no armour which could stand up to his blows, nor anyone who could survive them" (book 3). Saxo even tells us about the cult of Thor's hammer in his 13th book where the journey of Magnus, the son of King Nils and Queen Margrete, is mentioned. Magnus is said to discover on a Swedish island "so-called Thor's hammers of an enormous size [...], which according to the old superstition were regarded as part of a sanctuary".

The picture of Thor is kept alive during the following centuries. In his "History of the Nordic Peoples", Olaus Magnus illustrates and describes Thor in the same way as Adam of Bremen had done. Thor is described as ranking above Odin, sitting on a throne, with Frigg to his right and Odin to the left (book 3, chap. 3). Olaus Magnus depicts Thor as the god of thunder, which he creates by striking with his hammer, and this hammer is imitated by the Nordic people in the shape of copper hammers (book 3, chap. 8). More than a hundred years later, in 1685, the same picture was used again by Olaus Rudbeck in his *Atlantica* (chap. 5). As in Olaus Magnus' history, we see Thor sitting on a throne, accompanied by Odin to his right and Frigg to his left.

Thor is dressed like a late medieval ruler, holding the sceptre in the right hand and the thunderbolt in the left. But the 16th- and 17th-century authors have difficulties in imagining the original picture of Thor. In his *Svecia Antiqua et Hodierna*, Erik Dahlberg (1663–64) wrongly interpreted a torso of Jesus in Uppsala Cathedral as a figure of Thor from the famous temple of Uppsala.

No use of Thor's hammer during the period from the 12th to the 17th centuries is verifiable. There are hammer symbols in use during post-medieval times, but these hammers have nothing to do with pagan tradition or belief. We can say that Thor's hammer as a symbol disappeared with the Christianization of the Vikings. From the 15th century, and especially from the 16th and 17th centuries onwards, symbolic pendants of different shapes became popular again in Europe. They reflect the growing interest in alchemy, astronomy, astrology and medicine (Hansmann & Kriss-Rettenbeck 1966, pp. 10 ff.). During the 17th and 18th centuries a new type of pendant appears which looks very similar to Thor's hammer. Hammers and axes of different shapes are now used as pendants or as parts of rosaries. The hammer acquires a close connection with mining. Most hammers are found in south Germany or Austria, and there is also a single find from northern Germany (*ibid.*, figs. 484–490, 758; Harbeck 1966). But these pendants no longer express the faith of the wearer, they reflect the belief in miracles and magic. The hammer is meant to protect the miners and to keep evil spirits away from their dangerous work.

In the 18th century, in the wake of a newly aroused interest in pagan history, Scandinavian artists started to paint and sculpt a new picture based on the Norse sagas. Johannes Wiedewelt (1731–1802) was one of the first to develop a new image of Thor as a warrior, sitting on his chariot pulled by goats (Allzén 1990, fig. 32). Another figure of Thor was developed by the sculptor Bengt Erland Fogelberg (1786–1854). In close connection with the Classical Greek ideal, but now with fierce pagan attributes, he



Fig. 6. The romantic view of Thor (after Dalström 1894).

created a picture of Thor as a mixture of Laocoön and a miner, equipped with an enormous hammer (Allzén 1990, fig. 35). A romantic view of the old pagan religion developed, clearly expressed in Kata Dalström's (1894) summary of Old Norse sagas, where Thor is described thus: "on top of his powerful body was a young head with blond curls and the first signs of a blond beard, with a face which expressed openness and strength of faith" (Fig. 6).

It was probably this romantic view expressed in pictures and statues, in connection with the investigation of runic stones, which gave H. Hildebrand and O. Montelius the inspiration to interpret archaeological finds, discovered from the late 18th century onwards, as Thor's hammers. There is nothing wrong with their interpretations, as the discovery of the Altuna runic stone later on proved; but it gives us a hint about the working method which was led by inspiration.

Political delusion

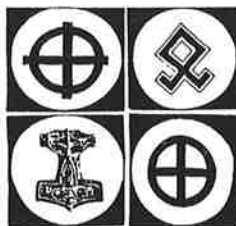
Today the single Thor's hammer pendant has again become a popular object among people in northern Europe. The museum shops are full of replicas of this Viking Age symbol, stressing in their colourful catalogues that the hammer was especially used in "the final period of paganism as a counterpart to the Christian symbol: the cross" (Nationalmuseets smykkekopier). This cannot be said for the Thor's hammer ring which – probably because of its connection with the Viking Age death cult – has never seen a similar renaissance.

A lot of people buy the single Thor's hammer, and for various reasons. Some enjoy it without any profound reflection as jewellery, some associate it with the image of the Vikings, some – like the Swedish poet and writer Ulf Lundell – regard it as a symbol of national romanticism, some – especially students of archaeology – think it is necessary to wear the symbol when digging in the field, some are inspired by New Age ideas and wish for the revival of pagan belief (*Ásatrú*, the worship of the *Æsir*), while others use the hammer as an expression of their political beliefs. I want to focus on this last group in the final part of the article and try to explain the misuse of Thor's hammer and to discuss its consequences.

In the last few decades, Thor's hammer has been used as a symbol by neo-Nazis in northern Europe. In Sweden there has been a discussion in the newspapers about this misuse of old symbols and whether they should be worn at all. The discussion started with a provocative article by A. Hagström (1993). In her article "Don't put Santa Claus to shame" in the newspaper *Expressen* she warned people who wished for a Thor's hammer as a Christmas present that "the symbol together with the German iron cross and the Nazi salute signals xenophobia". Two days later F. Persson (1993) strongly reacted to "being accused of being a racist and Nazi with a brushstroke". Instead she suggested "that it is time to reconquer the [Swedish] flag and Thor with his friends". This emotional discussion was

later lifted to a more academic level, where I. Lind (1995) and H. Williams (1995) explained the original meaning of the swastika and the odal runes. But this did not prevent neo-Nazis from using the symbol. One example of neo-Nazi use is in the paper *Segerrunan* ("The Rune of Victory") from 1996, where among several flags with fascist symbols the Thor's hammer is praised as "the prime symbol of *Ásatrú*, a must-have for Thor's storm troops who want to raise the storm banner again" (Fig. 7). Why use the Thor's hammer, which was not, after all, one of the popular symbols of the Third Reich?

One of the reasons why the Thor's hammer was not used by the Nazi regime might have been that it was not associated with victory. On the contrary, the hammer was defeated by the cross, and so was the pagan religion. Influenced by New Age ideas, the neo-Nazis have been inspired to reconsider the negative attitude towards pagan religion. Today, paganism is associated with fascist politics and Christianity with the foreign powers which defeated the Third Reich. Thor's hammer is replacing the swastika for those who are conscious of the coded language. But this is only one aspect. Thor's hammer also symbolizes something else: the Ragnarök which is equated with the final battle (*Endkampff*) or final victory (*Endsiege*). As in the Ragnarök, when the gods and the giants fight to the death and when a new world is rising, it is the naive hope of old and young Nazis to turn back the



Nationella flaggor

(Svart, vit, röda - 110x70cm)

F20: KELTSKORSET Den mest kända moderna nationella symbolen, med tillit i vår svenska krigshistoria

F21: ODALRUNA Odalen ännu som symboliserar ländis och judiska odal. Nationell kampssymbol i Norge och Sverige

F22: TORS HAMMARE Mjölner. Åskguden och himmels- och jordens beskyddare. Till minne för Tors stormtrupper som blev väl lyckade stormare

F24: SÖLKORSET Den äldsta av de från nordiska, särskilt nordvästra varldens svastikan och keltisk kors symboler

F25: KORSENS FANA Ett litet av våra dokumentariska äldsta vikingafanan, som symboliserar Odens två korpar, Uggla och Munin

F27: BLOD & ÄRA (777) Kampfanan bland rederna, vita i Svalstika och symbol för den världensspinnande Vita Mått maskinrieten

Endest 139:- / stl



Fig. 7. Advertisement in *Segerrunan*, Thor's hammer among other fascist symbols such as the Odal rune, the sun cross, the blood-and-honour flag and the Celtic cross.

wheels of time. They want to replay the scenario of the Battle of Berlin with its desperate hope of an *Endsieg*. They believe that Goebbels' words in the Berlin Sportpalast: "Wollt Ihr den totalen Krieg?" must have had a meaning, anticipating a phoenix from the ashes.

But one thought that is not taken into account by the neo-Nazis is that there never was a violent conflict over religion on the scale they imagine. The Scandinavian mission was probably much more peaceful than we believe. The total number of some 150 cross-pendants and 100 Thor's hammers, against the background of the frequency of contemporaneous finds and monuments (such as 1,500 runic stones) does not really give us a picture of violent struggle – on the contrary.

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Notes

1. Some publications even list Thor's hammers from the Netherlands (Boeles 1951, p. 442). According to Elzinga (1975, p. 100) the hammers are forgeries. The so-called Finnish Thor's hammers (see Kivikoski 1973, p. 72) are according to recent research pincers (Salo 1990, pp. 117 ff.).
2. There is no direct connection between inscription and picture, but according to A. Hultgård (1992, 90 ff.) there might be a link given between the Thor's hammer and the word *sirun*, which expresses eternity.
3. Haithabu; Fønskov; Kabbarp; Lugnås; Stens prestgård (Staecker 1999, pp. 230 f.)
4. For example Råbylille, Sjælland, and Aastrup, Fyn.
5. The numbers are based on the publications for Denmark and Sweden (Staecker 1999, pp. 213 ff.; Jørgensen & Pedersen 1999), Norway (Rygh 1885, p. 35; Lorange 1886, pp. 75 f.; Paulsen 1939, p. 173; Skjølsvold 1949–50, p. 38; Blindheim *et al.* 1981, pp. 213 f.; Sandberg 1984, p. 16), Iceland (Magnusson 1966), England (Bjørn & Shetelig 1940, p. 43; Wilson 1957, fig. 18; Biddle & Kjøllye-Biddle 1992, pp. 48 f.), northern Germany and

Poland (La Baume 1940, p. 1322; Zak 1963, pp. 28 ff.). The pendants from Gjulem and Hilde, both in Norway, were discounted as Thor's hammers (Brøgger 1917, pp. 271 f.; Gustafson 1906, fig. 525).

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