

A Matter of Standards

Iconography as a Quality Indicator for Viking Age Brooches

BY MICHAEL NEIß

Abstract

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In the oral culture of the mid Viking Age, it would have been utterly wasteful not to make use of the iconographic potential of pictures. Therefore, one should be allowed to propose that animal art on costly objects had a deeper meaning. Yet, how does one single out these high-quality objects? With help of two “baroque shaped” brooches from the Swedish Jämjö hoard, I intend to problematize archaeology’s concept of quality. In connection with this, the “iconographic relevance” of an object will be introduced into quality analysis. Having argued that an aristocrat had commissioned a Gotlandic craftsman to produce the younger Jämjö brooch, the focus of this paper shifts to the meaning of animal art. In accordance with an evergreen hypothesis, animal art and skaldic art are but two expressions of the same deep structure underlying Old Norse culture. Furthermore, the Jämjö brooch shows five analogies to a typical Skaldic poem. For this reason, I will make a rather speculative attempt to interpret the puzzle pictures of Jämjö by using skaldic metaphors for the god Óðinn.

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Viking Age jewellers have endowed posterity with a great variety of artefacts. In general, unique objects made of exclusive materials tend to score higher on a quality scale than mass products. With reference to the evolution of Late Iron Age artefacts, one of the frontal figures of Swedish archaeology, Sune Lindqvist, expressed himself as following:

“This is easy to explain. The increase is caused by the show-off’s constant ambition to outshine his neighbour, even if this tendency is otherwise often contradicted by simpler creations, which maintain modest dimensions or shrink thereto. Considering that good handicraft was held in high esteem in the North at

the end of heathendom, it is natural that the grandest of works also demanded the richest of adornment guaranteeing the finest craftsmanship.”¹

By the standards of 1927, this conclusion would appear both sensible and well-founded. However in the last few decades alone, our collection of Viking Age artefacts has increased dramatically. Therefore, it seems about time to re-evaluate the suggestions made by Sune Lindqvist.

The notion that buyers from different classes place different demands on product quality seems almost self-evident. Nevertheless, in archaeology surprisingly little has been



Fig. 1. Circular "baroque shaped" brooch of gilded silver, Södermanland, Värby in Huddinge parish (SHM 4516).

done to define quality classes. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to discuss different quality aspects of Viking Age brooches. To start with an example, one cannot always be sure that two graves reflect equal social status simply because they contain the same sets of artefacts (cf. Hedeager 1990, pp. 102 ff.). In some cases, calculation methods benefit from taking the material quality of each artefact into account (Andersson 1995, pp. 15 ff.). But also the result of this improvement may be far from perfect. An artefact can be appreciated for more than just its material value. In the eyes of the possessor, an heirloom brooch will outvalue any bit of hack silver, even though both have the same material value. Consequently, we must also consider the affectional and functional value of an object, as well as its craftsmanship, in order to draw a more balanced picture of quality. In many cases, reliable expertise is to be obtained from a connoisseur. But how does one translate the empirical know-how of individual connoisseurs into deducible terms? It is beyond my abilities to solve these problems in one little paper. In order to develop a comprehensive



Fig. 2. Circular "baroque shaped" brooches, Öland, Jämjö in Gårdslösa parish (SHM 13534), a. Jämjö A of gilded silver, b. Jämjö B of gilded silver with niello.

concept of quality, large-scale studies of different artefact types and workshop connections are indispensable. Even then, *objectivity* will, to a certain extent, remain a utopia. But that doesn't free scholars from their duty to minimize their own subjectivity in quality assessments. One way of keeping one's personal subjectivity in check is to integrate the *emic* perspective of the very culture that produced a certain object. Which quality aspects mat-



Fig. 3. Jämjö A. An animal shaped boss with bores and a central rivet.

tered during the circulation period of a certain object?

In the following quality study, Viking Age brooches will be analysed from established quality aspects, such as affection value, craftsmanship, functional and material value. In addition to that, I will introduce *iconographic relevance* as an entirely new quality aspect for ornamented objects. Finally, I will make a somewhat daring attempt to interpret Viking Age puzzle pictures iconographically.

The Jämjö hoard

In 1908, a crew of railway workers discovered a silver hoard at Jämjö in the parish of Gärdslösa. Weighing 2007.7 g, it turned out to be the biggest Viking Age hoard in the record for the island province of Öland. In accordance with Swedish law, the crew was compensated with 500 crowns (impressive by the standards of 1908; *SHM:s inventarium, bilaga till SHM 13534*). Among other things, the Jämjö hoard contained two gilded silver

brooches. They appear almost overloaded with ornament and have therefore been nicknamed *baroque-shaped brooches* and *baroque brooches*. Baroque-shaped brooches appear to be an East Scandinavian phenomenon. The closest parallel to Jämjö was discovered at Vårby in Huddinge parish, which happens to be the biggest Viking Age hoard in the mainland province of Södermanland (Fig. 1). Among roughly 20 known silver-made baroque-shaped brooches (Neiß in preparation), we do not know a single grave find. Nevertheless, it is a fair guess that they were intended for female cloaks or shawls (due to bronze parallels, 1962, p. 106, Aagård 1984, pp. 96 ff., Jansson 1984, pp. 75 ff; cf. Neiß 2006, figs. 3–4). Furthermore, many baroque-shaped brooches have been repaired recurrently, which hints at an extended circulation period. Therefore baroque-shaped brooches can be suspected to have functioned more likely as family property than individual property (Neiß 2005, pp. 87 f., 2006, p. 33).

Both Jämjö brooches look fairly alike. They weigh 218.95 and 200.4 g respectively. The diameter is between 8.2 and 8.5 cm (*SHM:s inventarium, bilaga till SHM 13534*). The front is subdivided into four quadrants in accordance with double symmetry. In the middle, we find four animal masks, which are opposed to four anthropomorphic masks in the periphery. In order to discriminate both brooches, I will nickname the plainly gilded brooch *Jämjö A* (Fig. 2a) and the elaborately gilded brooch with niello² inlays *Jämjö B* (Fig. 2b). The latter was described in 1931 by Sune Lindqvist as follows:

“[...] a splendid silver brooch with niello inlays, shaped rather in Borre style [...], which has been discovered at Jämjö in Gärdslösa parish on Öland, together with an inferior replica [= Jämjö A], a chain and a couple of twisted rings.”³

Lindqvist's statement corresponds perfectly to the scientific standards of his own time. Back in the 1930s, art studies were still dominated by the idea of cultural evolution. According to a biological metaphor, art styles were bound to develop like flowers, starting unnoticed like rosebuds, blooming and decaying in order to give way to yet another rose (cf. Kubler 1962, p. 9). Since Jämjö B gives proof of a greater craftsmanship than Jämjö A, it was natural for Lindqvist to identify Jämjö B as the prototype of Jämjö A. The craftsman of Jämjö B succeeded in the difficult task of varying some motifs on a micro scale, while maintaining absolute symmetry on a macro scale. Gilding has been used economically in the sense that it has been applied on visible parts only. Furthermore, no moulding flaw has been left unretouched. Finally, the whole brooch has been polished to perfection.

In contrast to Jämjö B, Jämjö A harbours many clues towards a craftsman who was either uninterested or incompetent. The standard of double symmetry is broken, and the brooch has turned out rather oval in shape. Invisible spots have been gilded, which is a sign of wastefulness. At the same time, the craftsman didn't bother to retouch the surface from moulding flaws, holes and cracks before gilding. To give another example, the riveting device for one of the animal-shaped bosses had been lost during the casting process (Fig. 3). In order to compensate for this miss, the craftsman started to perforate the boss randomly. In the end, the craftsman settled for placing the rivet – very unbecoming – right in the middle of the boss, which happens to be the animal's most prominent spot! All told, to a connoisseur of the old school, Jämjö A might therefore very well incarnate the idea of a degenerated replica. Nevertheless, a modern approach based on wear traces and technology can turn this picture upside-down.

In the first place, Jämjö A has been more in use than Jämjö B. This can be deduced from

cracks, dwindling and abrasion so hard that parts of the relief have become incomprehensible. The abrasion from underneath resulted in a hole, which was covered up later on with a strip of silver (Fig. 4). In the second place, Jämjö B stands out as technologically advanced compared to other baroque-shaped brooches (e.g. Vårby, Neiß 2006, pp. 143–51). Jämjö A, on the other hand, appears more like an experimental stage in want of improvement. The entire brooch is a patchwork, joined together by a considerable number of rivets. The upper shell consists of a frame with four male faces and a (loose?) central boss adorned with four beast heads. The frame has been riveted onto the under shell, while the central boss seems to be kept in place only by the frame. The upper shell also frames four beast-shaped bosses which have been riveted onto the under shell with lateral tips.

In contrast to this, the elaborate technology of Jämjö B indicates that something has been learned from previous mistakes: The number of rivets is reduced considerably. The four



Fig. 4. Jämjö A. A silver strip to cover up a hole in the lower shell.

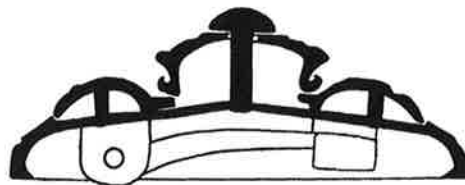


Fig. 5. Jämjö B. cross-section. Drawing by Anonymous (*SHM:s inventarium, bilaga till SHM 13534*).

beast-shaped bosses are now umbrella-shaped and kept in place by an invisible central rivet underneath (Fig. 5). Also, the middle boss has been attached by means of a discreet rivet. A common problem amongst baroque-shaped brooches was the abrasion from underneath, which consumes the buck-heads of the rivets. In the long run, the rivets get loose and fall off. The producer of Jämjö B managed this problem by re-designing the brooch into a single shell. Thus, it became possible to raise

the back side of the brooch above the grind level. In spite of the fact that Jämjö B is a single-shelled brooch, the illusion of a double-shelled brooch is maintained through the umbrella-shaped bosses which cover vast interiors. As yet another tribute to the effect of abrasion, exposed relief surfaces were made smooth from the very beginning and adorned with niello (cf. Figs. 2a-b to 6a-b).

All told, it seems very likely that the producer of Jämjö B avoided repeating earlier mistakes by studying the signs of wear on Jämjö A. And yet, despite its faults, Jämjö A wasn't melted down. In fact, it was held in such high esteem by its owners that they invested another 200g of silver rather than see their old-timer destroyed. This speaks volumes about the affection value of Jämjö A.

A Gotlandic brooch with iconographic potential

Representing an experimental stage, it seems doubtful whether we can find any prototype of Jämjö A in the full sense of the word. As regards ornament, it only contains motifs common for 10th-century Scandinavia, including loose male faces, loose beast heads, ribbon-shaped beasts typical of the Jelling style and whole beasts compounded of limbs typical of the Borre style (exhaustively Neiß 2006, pp. 151 ff.). It appears highly unlikely that Jämjö A and B derive from the same workshop tradition.

Despite quoting the general appearance of older brooches, Jämjö B remains a newcomer in essence. Not even the ornament of the prototypes has been copied slavishly but is treated with great creativity. To give an example, the producer decided to rotate the central boss – as seen on Jämjö A – by 45 degrees. Thus, the loose beast masks on the central boss finally get connected to a body of their own. Yet,



6a



6b

Fig. 6. Wear out analysis: Grey = faded relief, light grey = faded gilding, dark grey = intact surface, a. Jämjö A, b. Jämjö B.

the number of motifs is far from reduced. In fact, the producer made most of the brooch's iconographic potential by re-grouping the ornament into puzzle pictures. A puzzle picture is an ambiguous picture which can be read as two or more motifs. A classical example is the well known Rubin vase (Fig. 7). Due to the limits of our perception, one cannot catch sight of both motifs simultaneously but has to shift perspective (Nordensvan 1923, p. 86). Puzzle pictures are slippery paths in the sense that they invite interpreters to detect more than intended. In order to reduce the risk of over-interpretation, I will only acknowledge motifs which are paralleled elsewhere in contemporary Viking Art. Hence, we can discern nine motifs: a little anthropomorphic full-length figure (A; Fig. 8), a bird (B; Fig. 9b, cf. Fig. 10), a gripping beast (G; Fig. 11c), a face with hanging jaw (H; Fig. 12b), a face with a broad moustache (M; Fig. 11b), a doglike beast of prey (P, Fig. 11d), a reptile head (R, Fig. 12c, cf. Figs. 13–14), a male face under a slouch hat (M+S, Fig. 15b, cf. Fig. 16) and a male full-length figure with zoomorphic elements (M+Z, Fig. 8).

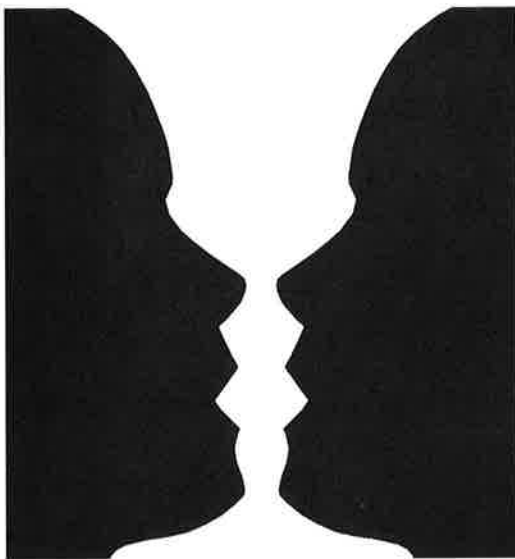


Fig. 7. Rubin vase.

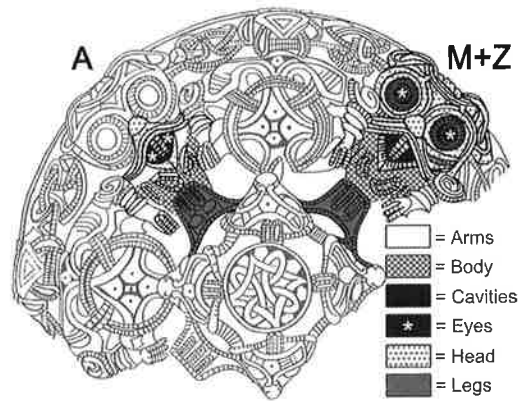


Fig. 8. Jämjö B from an angle of 90 degrees. Anthropomorphic full-length figure (A). Male full-length figure with zoomorphic elements (M+Z).

Whence came the inspiration for such pictorial fireworks? The first important clue is given away by the brim of the brooch (Figs. 11a, 12a). Here, we find a rope-cord pattern, with ropes conjoined in a knot. It is a pattern typical of Viking Age products from the island of Gotland. We find it on prominent artefacts such as the disc-on-bow brooch from Klinta, the pennanular brooch from “Austris”⁴ and the box-shaped brooch from Ljugarn (Fig. 17a–c). We also find it on less prominent artefacts of Gotlandic type such as animal-head-shaped brooches, tongue-shaped pendants and fish-head-shaped pendants (e.g. Thunmark-Nylén 1998, Plates 8.2, 168.1, 163.6). In Gotland, the custom of decorating castings with niello starts relatively late. The niello then gradually advances at the expense of the relief. It seems plausible that the Gotlandic products mentioned above emanate from the same workshop circle (cf. Thunmark-Nylén 2006, pp. 393, 419). Should this hypothesis prove correct, one might speculate whether Jämjö B belongs amongst the later products of this circle; the niello technique craves much practice and great professional experience, regardless of whether it is used in massive silver objects or in plating (kind remark by the silversmith and conservator Hubert Hydman of Åkersberga).



9a



11a



B

9b



M

11b

Fig. 9a. Jämjö B from an angle of 135 degrees, b. Bird (B).



G

11c



Fig. 10. Bird shaped figure at an oval brooch, Uppland, Björkö in Adelsö parish (SHM 34000, Bj 946).



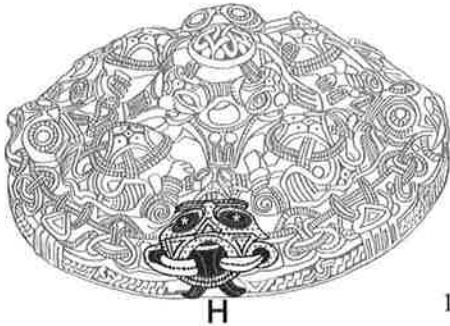
P

11d

Fig. 11a. Jämjö B from an angle of 45 degrees, b. Moustached Mask (M), c. Gripping beast (G), d. Beast of prey (P).



12a



H

12b



R

12c

Fig. 12a. Jämjö B from an angle of 45 degrees, b. Hang-jaw (H), c. Reptile head with split tongue (R).



Fig. 13. Snake shaped bangle, Ångermanland, Undrom in Boteå parish (SHM 1318). After Montelius 1873.



Fig. 14. Ribbon shaped beast with split tongue, at a tomb monument, Gotland, Ardre church (SHM 11118). Photo by Anonymous, SHM.



15a



M+S

15b

Fig. 15a. Jämjö B from an angle of 135 degrees, b. Moustached mask under a slouch hat (M+S).

Therefore one should not exclude the possibility that the advancement of the niello reflects on the advancing skills of a single workshop. In this case, the abundance of niello could indicate that the typological position of Jämjö B is rather late.

A second clue towards Gotland is the gripping beast. Although the idea of making a



Fig. 16. A "baroque shaped" brooch from an angle of 135 degrees. Moustached mask under a slouch hat. Helms-Museum (HM 1890.191).

gripping beast rodent-like (G) never was universally embraced by Gotlandic producers (cf. Thunmark-Nylén 1995, 1998, 2006, pp. 397, 400), we do find at least one almost identical beast on a circular brooch from Havor in Hablingbo parish (Fig. 18), with both rodent features and a symmetrical body. Thirdly, Jämjö B also features a gripping beast variant typical of Gotland, which happens to be an anthropomorphic full-length figure crowned by a "Napoleon hat" (A; Fig. 8, cf. Fig. 19). Fourthly, the idea of placing a gripping beast at the nose of a larger beast head (G+P, Fig. 11c–d) is not alien to Gotland either, as proven by a chain holder featuring a Gotlandic instead of a mainland gripping beast (Fig. 20). As a fifth clue, Jämjö B was found on the island of Öland, which happens to be the nearest land to Gotland. All told, it seems a fair suggestion that Jämjö B was a commission given to a Gotlandic craftsman.

The middle of the central boss is decorated with a Terslev motif (named after a site in Denmark; Figs. 2b, 8). It seems likely that this very motif was mediated through either brooches and pendants (regardless of whether it was in the shape of filigree work or cast imitations). This also applies to the various loops in the peripheral areas of the brooch (Figs.



Fig. 17. A Gotlandic rope-cord pattern conjoined in a knot, a. Disc-on-bow brooch, Valla in Klinta parish, b. Penannular brooch, presumed to originate from "Austris" but actually found at Västris in Tingstäde parish. After Hildebrans 1886, c. Box shaped brooch, Ljungarn in Lye parish (SHM 8941+9394, 8211, 2829). After Montelius 1873.



Fig. 18. Mainland type gripping beast, at a circular brooch, Gotland, Havor i Hablingbo (SHM 7582:22A).



Fig. 19. Gotlandic gripping beast under a "Napoleon hat", on a Disc-on-bow brooch Valla in Klinta parish (SHM 8941+9394).

11a, 12a). Even though the centre of filigree work with Terslev motifs is 10th century Denmark, Gotland also has many hoards containing Terslev pieces (Kleingärtner 2004, pp. 329 ff.). Hence, the incorporation of a Terslev motif doesn't contradict a Gotlandic provenance for Jämjö B. By the way, Terslev motifs can be subdivided into two variants, depending on whether they hold a cross or not. It has been suggested that the former is a symbol with a Christian connotation. In that case, one must ask oneself whether the cross would have been left out intentionally, because it contradicted the message conveyed by the other motifs (Kleingärtner 2004, pp. 301 f.).



Fig. 20. Gotlandic gripping beast placed at the nose of a Great beast, at a chainholder, Sanda parish (GF 6187). Photo by Thunmark-Nylen 1998.

On the meaning of animal art

As a reaction to Sophus Müller's (1880) harsh, but in many respects justified, criticism of his contemporaries, scholars avoided interpretations of the content of animal art. Instead, research was long dominated by an endeavour to establish stylistic groups as indicators

of chronological and chorological differences. Nevertheless, many researchers tended to rely on singular motifs in order to define a style rather than on real style indicators such as animal details and curvature. In the following decades, new objects were discovered, uniting different motifs formerly supposed to be style indicators in their own right – and

thus disproving this style concept. However, scholars missed the opportunity to bring the archaeological style concept up to date, leaving us with “a hundred” style concepts full of contradictions (cf. Karlsson, 1983, pp. 103 ff.). Processual archaeologists then, tried to shift the focus to style as means of communication and thus to its social meaning (e.g. Johansen 1979; cf. Bernbeck, 1997, pp. 241 ff.). But the real breakthrough in the quest for the meaning of animal art was accomplished by yet another iconographic school led by the recently departed Karl Hauck (for literature see Krüger & von Padberg 1994; otherwise Karlsson 1983; Høilund Nielsen & Kristoffersen 2002; Neiß 2004, pp. 9 f.). During recent years, many researchers have tried new strategies in order to fit the material fragments of a lost culture into an overall semiotic puzzle (e.g. Herschend 1997, p. 3; Johansen 1997; Tilley 1999; Zachrisson 1998; Hed Jakobsson 2003, pp. 285 f., 93). In this intellectual climate, the spirit of openness towards mythology and symbolism has been resurrected.

Viking Age society wasn't as inundated in pictures as we are today. In an oral culture, it would have been wasteful not to use the pictorial medium efficiently, especially when the costs of production were as high as in the case of Jämjö B. Hence, it must be permitted to suggest that these pictures have a deeper meaning. It is far beyond my grasp to present a full-blown model of the mechanisms behind representation. It is a topic of interdisciplinary discourse. Therefore, I shall confine myself to calling attention to semiotics: semioticians have not only asked how perception works (cf. Nöth 2000, pp. 439, 442 f., 474 f., 477 with references) but also identified many existing or presumed analogies between different cultural expressions (Nöth 2000, pp. 346, 393). As an example can be mentioned the notion that Iron Age visual art and Iron Age poetry are two sides of the same coin. The notion has been presented on different occasions

in the past and has recently found new adepts (e.g. Andrén 2000, pp. 11, 26 with reference to e.g. Söderberg 1905, Salin 1922, Lie 1952 and Bugge 1953; Domeij 2004, p. 148 with reference to amongst others Leyerle 1967 and Andrén 2000; Pesch 2005, p. 381 with reference to Panzer 1921; Neiß 2005, 2006, p. 156 with reference to Nylén 1962, p. 24). Since the mutual relationship between poetry and visual arts perpetually recurs, we may just as well acquaint ourselves with the background of these two cultural expressions.

On the background of animal art

Viking Age pictures seldom appear as self-sufficient monuments (e.g. like the picture stones of Gotland, Lindqvist 1941; the Hunnestad stone from the late Viking Age, Neiß 2004, fig. 37). More often, they survived as ornament on utility goods. The role of the mid Viking Age caster gives important clues which help us to understand the conditions of ornamental production. It is a generally acknowledged hypothesis that pre-Viking Age animal art was produced in few locations under the supervision of the ruling classes (Callmer 2003, pp. 357 ff.; cf. on the Continent, Høilund Nielsen 1998). With the Viking Age, the conditions of production and distribution are about to change. At the same time as decorated objects become easier to access for a broader population, the quality spectrum begins to broaden as well (Jansson 1981, p. 1). According to estimates of Viking Age consumption (Carlsson 1983, p. 84; Thunmark-Nylén 1983, pp. 120 ff.), we have to assume that a limited number of workshops must have supplied a broad spectrum of artefacts. Furthermore, we cannot rule out the possibility that craftspersons were becoming increasingly emancipated (in comparison to e.g. Roman Iron Age society, Andersson 1995, pp. 116 f.). Hence, mobile

as well as stationary workshops can be taken into account. Perhaps the production system shifted from sporadic production visits to different manors, to a seasonal or permanent presence at an emporium (Callmer 2003, pp. 355 ff.). It cannot be ruled out that at least some brooches were cast before departure and sold off as soon as an opportunity presented itself (cf. Thunmark-Nylén on combs, 2006, p. 661, notes 79–80). In this connection we can remind ourselves about the occurrence of semi-finished brooches of mainland type in hoards in the island of Gotland, which made Ingmar Jansson consider a Gotlandic production aimed entirely at exports to the Scandinavian mainland (1981, p. 7; 1984, p. 79; 1995, pp. 83 f.).

These considerations are valid for bronze objects only. The conditions of silver objects were quite different, for one cannot assume that craftspersons were able to provide silver by their own efforts. Even if the Viking world had been a safe enough place to wander around unprotected, it is rather unlikely that a caster really owned large quantities of silver. It seems far more likely that a caster would have been in need of a patron. Such a patron would have sponsored not only shelter but also a portion of silver, carefully weighed in order to prevent embezzlement (cf. Thunmark-Nylén 2006, p. 422). This would at least explain why both Jämjö brooches contain about one mark of silver each. Yet, it is important to remember that the patron could have been as mobile as the caster. Therefore, it remains an open question who took the first step towards a commission: a caster passing by or a patron visiting a workshop? The notion that every luxurious commission depended on a patron is, by the way, backed by Saxo Grammaticus in the tale of the god Óðinn, who turned himself into a smith called *Rofterus* (comparable to Óðinn's name *Hroptir*, preserved through the Poetic Edda and skaldic verse; Ellis Davidson, 1996, p. 57). By

producing a number of bronze objects, Óðinn – alias *Rofterus* – gained the position of purveyor to a royal court in Russia. The gold for the commissions then came directly from his majesty, the king (*Gesta Danorum* liber 3, cap. 4.2; cf. Andersson, 1995, p. 117). This information is crucial in two different respects: Primarily, a potential target group for luxury objects is pointed out. Secondly, we learn that bronze objects were a vital part in the product line of a workshop.

Thus, the necessity of a broad product line could be one of the main prerequisites for the transfer of ornaments between mass and luxury objects (Neiß in preparation). With regard to the copying process, we have to acknowledge some fundamental differences from the artistic standards of our time. First if all, multiplying a motif was not considered a bad thing. The appreciation of an original as an expression of genuine artistry did not emerge until later, from Renaissance humanism (cf. Boekhoff 1970, p. 144). Before that time, the multiplying of an original idea was seen rather as a way of expanding its field of influence, thus confirming its significance. Secondly, the multiplying did not necessarily mean a slavish reproduction of the original motif. Artistry among copyists manifested itself in their ability to vary the form, while leaving the idea behind the motif uncorrupted (Pesch 2005, pp. 380 f.). In this context, it is of great importance that differently shaped objects provide different conditions for the fitting and arranging of motifs (cf. Alenstam 1949, pp. 211 f.). On the other hand, a competent craftsperson may be able to fit a motif even into the narrowest of spots, where others have failed. One kind of motif combinations, which requires a carefully planned composition, are puzzle pictures. Likewise, puzzle pictures can easily be corrupted when copied by an ignorant or uninterested craftsperson. Consequently, we may exploit puzzle pictures as a quality indicator. Based on this newfound *quality aspect*,

an object's iconographic relevance is defined as the information content of the object's combination of elements or motifs. In terms of iconography, Jämjö B with nine motifs seems to be much more *relevant* than Jämjö A with only four motifs.

On the background of skaldic poetry

The Viking Age has left us two types of poetry: Eddic and skaldic verse. Because of many overlaps, the demarcation line between these genres cannot always be drawn in a satisfactory manner (Simek 1993, p. 287, Poole 2005b, p. 563). Nevertheless, scholars have agreed on the following basic differences: Eddic poetry is anonymous and deals with distant, mythical times. The poems are linguistically and metrically simple (the main verse meters being *fornyrðislag* and *ljóðaháttir*; Schier 1986, pp. 370 f.). A skaldic poem, on the other hand, is regarded as a manifestation of individual artistry. Therefore, the names of many of the skalds have survived. The artistry of the skald lay in mastering the prerequisite of a challenging verse meter, *dróttkvætt*. This led to very free wording. It is also characterized by the technique of paraphrasing words through certain metaphors (*kenningar*) that could be very far-fetched. A simple example is the "horse of the waves" as metaphor for a ship. A more erudite kenning would be "Óðinn's mead" (*Óðins mjöð*), paraphrasing nothing less than the craft of the skalds. In order to interpret "Óðinn's mead" the audience must be initiated into the mythological background of skaldic art itself. According to Snorri Sturluson, *Óðinn* swindled a giant called Suttungr out of his mead, which rendered the ability to make verse (*Skáldskaparmál* chapter 6). It has been suggested that skaldic art became the

centre-point of an intellectual competition between the skald and his erudite audience. The challenge was to anticipate which motif the skald was modelling stepwise during his recitation, starting from conventional metaphors. Through the use of puzzling kennings, a good poet managed the trick of building up tension and then thrilling the audience with a new bizarre motif (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2008; see further Marold 1983, p. 20, Poole 2005b, p. 563). Kennings occur also in Eddic poetry, albeit less frequently and with a tendency to be less complex (Poole 2005b, p. 562). As an important difference to Eddic poems, skaldic poems were occasional. They were preferably dedicated to a patron from the leading classes (Marold 2005). Because of their mythological allusions, skaldic kennings have been subjected to studies in the history of religions. The mythological allusions restrict themselves not only to material known to us from surviving Eddic poems, but seem also to refer to themes that have sunk into oblivion (Simek 1993, p. 287). The skalds must therefore have been transmitters of Eddic traditions. However, it remains an open question whether the skalds performed Eddic poems (Poole 2005a, p. 557).

An important question concerns the mnemonics of an oral culture: how were poems memorized before medieval literacy? In spite of the fact that our sources for Old Norse religion are dominated by poetic works, no one has been able to demonstrate that the ancient transmitters of tradition tried to attain a faithful reproduction of the poems. Comparative studies of modern oral cultures seem to indicate that the main interest of the reciter was to preserve of the content of the poem, not its exact wording (Nordberg 2003, p. 61; Petzold 2003, p. 144). If so, the skalds would have restricted themselves to memorizing the event structure and improvising the poem, embedding known set pieces such as kennings in a poetic language.

One can rightly ask whether there were

further memory aids available to a transmitter of mythological tradition. Interestingly for us, in his *Skáldskaparmál* Snorri Sturluson quotes some stanzas from the skaldic poem *Húsdrápa*, which he attributes to the Icelandic skald Úlfr Uggason. *Húsdrápa* alludes to three Old Norse myths. If we are to believe a later record in *Laxdæla saga* (chapter 29), Úlfr got inspiration for his poem directly from some images in the hall (*eldhús*) of the chieftain Ólafr Höskuldsson, depicting the funeral pyre of Baldr, Þór's encounter with the Miðgarðsormr during his fishing expedition, as well as the struggle between Loki and Heimdallr for the jewel called Brisingamen (Marold 2003, pp. 290 f). To use another word for Úlfr's image-describing poem, he created three *ekphrases* (cf. Clunies Ross 2007). *Laxdæla saga* dates the creation of *Húsdrápa* to the period 980–85 (Simek 1993, p. 176), i.e. the heydays of oral literature. Further examples of skaldic *ekphrases* are Bragi Boddason's *Ragnarsdrápa* and Þjóðólfr ór Hvini's *Haustlög* (Bailey 2003, p. 17). These *ekphrases* raise the question whether there was a symbiotic relationship between Old Norse poetry and the visual arts: If an image could inspire a poem, could a poem featuring verbal motifs like kennings be "written down" in images?

A Viking Age rebus?

In the previous discussion, a number of interesting parallels between Old Norse poetic and visual art have arisen:

- 1 The production process behind puzzle pictures shows structural parallels with skaldic poetry. In both arts, a true master is supposed to weave a number of motifs (= kennings/puzzle pictures) into a narrow frame (= metre/the baroque-shaped brooch) without overstepping its boundaries.
- 2 Like the skald, a silver caster knew the art of borrowing motifs from elsewhere within contemporary art and bringing these together in a new composition.
- 3 Like the audience of the skald, the beholders of puzzle pictures had to sharpen their senses in order to solve the rebuses. The intellectual challenge is to continually deduce new motifs, step by step and on an increasing level of abstraction.
- 4 The interaction between poetic and visual art within the oral culture of the Viking Age is indicated by the skalds mentioned above, who let themselves be inspired by pictures.
- 5 The terms of production of poetic and visual art are similar in the sense that real masterpieces can be commissioned by the leading classes of society.

To summarize the above, the producer of the younger Jämjö brooch might also be regarded as a *silver-skald*, casting praises to a patron in silver instead of verse. However, one may question the artistic liberty of this silver-skald. The images could either have emerged from the imagination of the silver-skald or they could have been prescribed by the patron. However, possessing the ultimate ability to judge one's own abilities, it would of course have been up to the silver-skald to decide which designs were feasible and which weren't.

Seen with modern eyes, the puzzle pictures of Jämjö B might appear like a lightweight entertainment with a humoristic undertone. Nevertheless, we have to look beyond the surface in order to fully appreciate these pictorial transformations. Viking Age society wasn't as inundated in pictures as we are today. In an oral culture, it would have been wasteful not to use the pictorial medium efficiently, especially when the costs of production were as high as in the case of Jämjö B. This brooch appears rather innovative, both artistically and technologically. It outshines Jämjö A in three

measurable quality aspects: craftsmanship, functional value and iconographic relevance. Furthermore, Jämjö B emanates from another workshop tradition which breathes a distinct Gotlandic air. In fact, Jämjö B appears like the masterpiece of a Viking Age “Renaissance person”, who was gifted with great artistic and technological ingenuity! One can easily imagine the first time this brooch was presented to its target audience, and how these noble and erudite persons tried to solve the rebus created by the silver-skald. In fact, we have reason to believe that a settled understanding of smithing was regarded as one amongst nine refinements of polished society. To name but one witness, Rögnvaldr, Earl of Orkney, stated:

“I’m eager to play Hnefatafl,
I know nine sports,
Rarely forget I the runes,
Devote time to books and smithing,
I can glide on skis,
I shoot and row, well enough;
I mind both:
Harp-playing and poetry.”⁵

One should therefore really consider the possibility that the Jämjö brooch conceals a rebus, waiting to be solved...

An iconographic interpretation approach

The central theme of Jämjö B appears to be the perpetual transformation of nine different motifs. Yet, none of these motifs is entirely new. In fact, every one of them appears on other mid Viking Age objects. But unlike many others, the producer managed to fill a limited space with a great number of contemporary motifs, linking them into puzzle pictures. Considering the high production costs,

it is not very likely that these motifs were selected randomly.

The origin of skaldic art is wrapped in mystery, as is the origin of the kennings. The frequent use of mythological themes might indicate that kennings were, in fact, used in a religious context, maybe in order to paraphrase taboo words (cf. Meulengracht-Sørensen 1982, p. 289; cf. Marold 1983, p. 21 with literature). In this context, attention is focused on the different cult names of Óðinn, because they are often created according to the same principles as kennings (Marold 2000, p. 433). The perception that these *Óðinsheiti* go back to a long tradition is preferable to the idea that they might be incidental fiction (kind remark by Ulf Drobin, Stockholm University, Department of Comparative Religion). In earlier times, skaldic art was supposed to be a divine gift from Óðinn. The fact that this god was worshipped in the halls of the chieftains is no coincidence as his character combined many of the properties of the ideal prince (Nordberg, 2003, pp. 85 ff., 208 ff.). Many a chieftain’s hall served as a centre of a cult community (cf. Brink 1996, pp. 235 ff.). In order to find the answer to the riddle, one must put all the pieces together (following the interpretation model in accordance with Neiß 2005, p. 95, 2006, pp. 158 ff.).

Provided that puzzle pictures are skaldic poetry in silver, one has to search for parallels among the echoes of Old Norse religion. Despite the fact that those myths have been orally transmitted (and perhaps also transformed) until they were preserved on Christian parchment, their roots seem to reach back into the days of baroque-shaped brooches, if not even further. From pre-Christian times, there are descriptions in prose, verse and kennings which conform fairly well with the central pictorial message of the brooches. To mention a parallel to the headdress on the facial mask (M+S), Snorri Sturluson knew, for example, that the skalds sometimes called Óðinn “slouch hat”

(actually “hang-hat”; *stðhötr*: *Gylfaginning* chapter 11, stanza 28; also *Óðins nöfn*, 48; this and all subsequent kennings according to Falk 1924), when he strolled the world in the disguise of a wanderer. In *Lokasenna* (stanza 24), Loki puts Óðinn’s guise as stray magician in direct connection with his *seið*-related activities.

In this context it is worth noting the existence of some shamanistic features of the extant descriptions of Óðinn (Strömbäck 1935, pp. 17–48, 182). Without deepening the discussion (see e.g. Polomé 1992, pp. 414 f.; Solli 2000; Price 2002, pp. 279–328), it should be briefly mentioned that shamanism is a form of religion which – at least traditionally – is associated with the Finno-Ugric and Ural-Altai peoples in the north Eurasian area. An axiom of shamanism is that the world is full of invisible spirits, ancestors and forces that can affect the living. Often ordinary reality is seen as an illusion, while the parallel world is the place from where everything is controlled. Perhaps one could describe it as a puppet show where the puppets are manipulated by underlying forces. Shamans act as intermediaries with this superhuman world. They may use different techniques to switch to the condition of trance or ecstasy in which the journey to the parallel world is made. Another recurring element is an animal-shaped spirit assisting the shaman, among other things by acting as a vehicle for the shaman’s soul on his journeys through the parallel world. Like a modern shaman, Óðinn’s soul could also

“[...] switch shape: his body would lie as if asleep, or dead; but then he was a bird or a beast, a fish or a snake and went off to distant lands in a twinkling, on his own or other men’s errands.”⁶

The resemblance between the description of *Ynglingasaga* and the transformations on the Jämjö brooch are striking. If the brooch

is turned over, the mask with the slouch hat (M+S) turns into a reptile’s head (R). The absence of a body makes a detailed identification of the zoological status of the animal uncertain. Should this “image-kennings” still refer to Óðinn’s transformation into a snake, it is confirmed by two written parallels with Viking roots: firstly, *Ynglingasaga* (chapter 7) and *Skáldskaparmál* (chapter 6) describe Óðinn’s ability to switch his shape to a snake; secondly he presents himself with the snake names “shutter” and “opener” (*sváfnir*, *öfnir*: *Grímnismál*, stanza 54, cf. *Grímnismál*, stanza 35, *Gylfaginning* 8, stanza 23).

Another transformation on the Jämjö brooch begins with a mask with a moustache (M). Within skaldic art, Óðinn is characterized as “hang-beard” (*stðgrani*: *Alvissmál*, stanza 6; *stðskeggr*: *Grímnismál*, stanza 48, *Gylfaginning* chapter 11, stanza 28; *Óðins nöfn*). If the brooch is turned over, this mask turns into a bird (B). In accordance with this, within skaldic art Óðinn could be characterized as “eagle head” (*arnhöfði*: *Óðins nöfn*), “raven *As*” (*brafn-áss*: Þjóðólfr ór Hvini, *Haustlöng*, stanza 4) and “raven god” (*brafnaguð*: *Gylfaginning* 25). In *Skáldskaparmál* Snorri Sturluson depicts how Óðinn during his escape from the giant Suttungr turns into an eagle (*Skáldskaparmál* chapter 6).

A third metamorphosis on the Jämjö brooch is from the mask with a moustache (M) into a gripping beast (G). In the history of religions, some scholars have argued that the squirrel *Ratatorskr* in the Edda serves as a transportation vehicle for Óðinn’s shaman soul along the cosmic pillar (i.e. the ash tree *Yggdrasill*; *Grímnismál* 33, Drobin 1991, pp. 105 f., 113 f., cf. Holmberg-Harva 1938, pp. 49 ff.). With the support of this, I argued in another context, that the gripping beasts of the visual arts relate to just such a spiritual being (like a *fylgja*, Neiß 2007, p. 87 *in sensu*; plagiarized by Roy 2009). Since we are dealing with the world of mythology, the association

with Ratatorskr does not necessarily exclude that Óðinn's spiritual assistant borrows features from different animal species (cf. Neils 2000, 2007, p. 87, plagiarized by Roy 2009, p. 828). Another *Óðinsheiti* likely to allude to a spiritual being with animal form is e.g. "little bear" (*'bjarki'*: Rögnvaldr jarl Kali Kolsson, *Lausavísur* stanza 14).

A recurrent phenomenon in (modern) shamans is, by the way, a masking, which reflects the main features of the spiritual being. The ornament of Jämjö B conceals a figure with animal ears and whiskers (Z). It is imaginable that these attributes – which by the way often recur in Viking Age animal art – refer to a form of disguise. Parallel to this, the skalds can characterize Óðinn as "the masked one" (*'grímnir'*: *Grímnismál* stanza 47, 49, *Gylfaginning* chapter 11, stanza 28, *Óðins nöfn*). At the same time, the mask of the Jämjö brooch is, in fact, a double mask: if the brooch is turned over, the male face (M+Z) turns into a different mask (H). As a possible parallel to the transformation of this "silver kenning", Óðinn's double nature is depicted with the kenning "the double" (*'tveggi'*: *Óðins nöfn*, Egill Skalla-Grímsson, *Sonatorrek*, stanza 25). A conspicuous feature of the second facial mask is its hanging jaw (H). Provided that this alludes to one of Óðinn's guises, the thought of "hang-jaw" immediately appears (*'hengikjöptr'*: Snorri Sturluson, *Skáldskaparmál* strophe 53; *Óðins nöfn*).

One hallmark of medieval art is that two motif structures can be combined and yet work autonomously. This means that the artist doesn't intend to create a new iconographic message by combining some individual motifs, but to explain the message of motif structure no. 1 by combining it with motif structure no. 2 (cf. Elbern 1993, p. 1437). The motif combinations on the baroque-shaped brooches are mainly of a symbolic nature. In contrast to scenic images following a strict timeline, these motif combinations themselves need

not even refer to the same events. This would explain why Óðinn can occur at various spots within the same motif combination without mutilating the iconographic information the structure.

Results and future issues

As previously mentioned, Sune Lindqvist wanted to see Jämjö A as an "inferior replica" of Jämjö B. After examining the ornamentation and technology of our baroque-shaped brooches, this theory has become untenable. The typological relationship is inverse; Jämjö B firstly shows technological developments, and secondly displays a fireworks of puzzle pictures that could only be achieved by quoting older models. Despite his obvious failure to identify model and pastiche amongst Baroque brooches, Sune Lindqvist is confirmed in other respects. The features of Jämjö A and B seem to some extent to verify the notion that the patrons intended to outshine an older jewel model with a new piece of even greater quality. Nevertheless, artefact development doesn't follow any natural law and therefore cannot be easily predicted. Thus, the presumption that all objects of the same material value must be of the same quality must be considered contradicted, having analysed the baroque-shaped Jämjö brooches regarding their functional value, craftsmanship and iconographic relevance.

One of the foremost objectives of archaeology is to reconstruct prehistoric ideas and norms – the *emic* perspective. Therefore, it is important to rank prehistoric artefacts according to as many quality standards as possible, thus hoping to find the aspects that were relevant within the prehistoric context of the artefact. A new quality aspect presented in this study is the *iconographic relevance* of an object. Archaeological source material can be divid-

ed into two main categories: remains which “accidentally” carry information, and artefacts purposely designed for communication. Within Old Norse oral culture images played a special role. Unlike other source materials, images are relatively labour-intensive products that can serve as vehicles for information. It should be emphasized that my far-reaching iconographic interpretations presented above aim to awake a discussion. If the motifs of Jämjö B allude to different myths, it would be indeed short-sighted to deal summarily with animal art elsewhere by prejudging every variation as the result of chorology and chronology without further reflection.

In the previous discussion, five interesting parallels between Old Norse poetic and visual art have arisen. I have referred to the interdisciplinary discourse of semiotics which – one day – might help us to track down the mechanisms behind those five analogies. To mention but two examples, semiotics has long since discussed both the interplay between word and image (cf. Nöth 2000, p. 484 to Andrén 2000, pp. 26 ff.) and the notion of a deeply rooted metaphor blooming into different cultural expressions (Nöth 2000, p. 346, 393 with literature). And yet it is important to emphasize that the discipline of semiotics is still young and lacks consensus about its basic theories and methods of proof (Trabant 1996, pp. 11 ff.). In connection with her study of the art of kennings⁷ Marold (1983, p. 53 f.) draws a telling parallel between skaldic poetry and baroque poetry. In analogy with baroque poetry, baroque architecture was also overloaded with ornament. Yet, these ornaments were not in the least meaningless, since they carried many ingenious cross references. Furthermore, the Baroque era’s desire for cross references did not stop at poetry or architecture. It also dominated the natural sciences, and thus resulted in the creation of a complex cosmology. Hence, baroque poetry and baroque architecture appear like two sides of the

same coin. However it remains unanswered till our days which mechanisms caused these actual (or alleged?) analogies between different cultural expressions such as architecture, cosmology, poetry and science. As in the case of baroque culture, it will also remain risky to use the kenning analogy as a sort of universal key to Viking Age culture before we have actually have understood the underlying mechanisms.

It is, however, far beyond my scope to review the semiotic models of other scholars. My intention has been merely to discuss whether animal art is suitable as a memory aid in Old Norse orality. In the following, I will round the picture with my own, still imperfect meditations.

Rounding

If an image in a hall or on a shield could inspire a skald to compose a poem, “Baroque brooches” could have easily done the same. I imagine that puzzle pictures served the poets as a kind of ambiguous *pictogram*. As such, they served both as a source of inspiration and as a memory aid, let it be unsaid whether it was Eddic or skaldic verse. With a “Baroque brooch” in one’s hand – the puzzle pictures changing at each turn – a poet could recite old stuff as well as improvise new poems. Possibly, silver casters should also be seen as poets, though casting the praises to their gods (and therewith to their patrons) in silver instead of verse. During our journey we have met Óðinn in three different professional roles, namely, as the foremost poet, the foremost master of *seið* and perhaps also the foremost caster. If it really is true that members of these three guilds appointed Óðinn as “patron saint”, this would certainly explain why his character dominated in all three areas. On the other hand, it may be appropriate to ask how strictly Viking Age

society distinguished between three different guilds. Interestingly, Snorri Sturluson writes the following about Óðinn's feats:

"All these skills he learned with runes and chants called magic poems; therefore *Æsir* are called poet smiths."⁸

If one is also to believe the Eddic poem *Hávamál* (stanzas 137–145), Óðinn acquired the art of poetry during his self-sacrifice (revealing some shamanistic characteristics; cf. Simek 1993, p. 243). For only through his initiation to *seið* could Óðinn become a *galdrasmíðr*, a true "poet smith"!

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Photos and illustrations

Unless otherwise mentioned, Michael Neiß is the originator.

Abbreviations

HM – Helms-Museum, Hamburg-Harburg.
SHM – Statens historiska museum, Stockholm.

Notes

1 My translation of: "Förklaringen är lätt funnen. Det är de prälsjukas ständiga ävlan att överglänsa sin nästa, som föranlett denna stegring, från vilken tendens f.ö. också de simplare arbetena i större utsträckning

göra undantag genom att bibehållas eller reduceras till måttliga dimensioner. I betraktande av den stora uppskattning som gott konsthandverk under hednatidens slut åtnjöt i Norden, är det dock naturligt att man av de största arbetena också skulle kräva den rikaste och om högsta yrkesskicklighet vittnande utstyrseln" (Lindqvist 1927, p. 331).

2 I.e. engravings filled with a black silver alloy.

3 My translation of: "[...] det präktiga, niellerade silverspänne, snarast i Borrestil [...] vilket jämte en sämre replik [= Jämjö A], en kedja och flera snodda ringar hittats vid Jämjö i Gärdslösa socken, Öland" (Lindqvist 1931).

4 The notion that the brooch was found at "Austris" derives in fact from a misunderstanding. In reality the brooch was found in Västris, Tingstade parish (Thunmark-Nylén 2006, note 162).

5 My translation of:
*Tafl emk örr at efla,
tþróttir kank niu,
týnik trauðla rínum,
tið er bók ok smíðir,
skriða kank á skíðum,
skýtk ok ræk, svát nýtir;
hvártveggja kank hyggja:
harpslótt ok bragþóttu.*

(Rögnvaldr jarl Kali Kolsson, *Lausavísur* stanza 1)

6 My translation of: *Óðinn skipti hömum; lá þá búkrinn sem sofinn eða dauðr, en hann var þá fugl eða dýr, fiskr eða ormr, ok fór á einni svipstund á fjarlæg lönd, at sínum erendum eða annarra manna.* (*Ynglingasaga* chapter 7).

7 Marold, E. 1983. *Kenningkunst*. Berlin.

8 My translation of: *Allar þessar tþróttir kendi hann með rínum ok ljóðum, þeim er galdrar heita; fyrir því eru Æsir kallaðir galdrasmíðir* (*Ynglingasaga* chapter 7, cf. Simek 1993, pp. 97 f. on *galdr*).

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