

# Figures with Horned Headgear

A Case Study of Context Analysis and Social Significance of Pictures in Vendel and Viking Age Scandinavia

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## Abstract

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This article deals with depictions of humans during the Vendel and Viking Age in Scandinavia. While the iconographic approach has been predominant in earlier research, the point of departure here is the functions pictures may have had in oral societies. As a new approach, the method of context analysis is presented. The main question is how depictions have been used differently by different social groups.

In the following part, a case study is presented. Pictures of a man or woman with horned headgear, the image-bearing objects and their find contexts are analysed. The motif group can be divided into chronologically and spatially different subgroups. In the Vendel Period, the pictures are linked to a male elite-warrior sphere. In the Viking Age, the motif was also used by women. Furthermore, figurines with the motif played a role at certain central places.

This indicates a change in the ritual practice of religion. On this basis, it is suggested that the motif may have had varying meanings, depending on the situational context.

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## Late Iron Age Depictions in Archaeological Research

Today there is a vast body of literature about the “art” of the later part of the Scandinavian Iron Age. Many studies have dealt with the animal styles,<sup>1</sup> others have considered depictions of humans. Most of the latter have focused on special motif or object groups, approaching an iconographic interpretation by analysing motif details, such as attributes or gestures, and comparing them to the literary sources. Some object groups – such as the Gotlandic picture stones, the Migration Period gold bracteates or the *guldgubber* (gold-foil figures) – have been treated quite thoroughly, usually

in a catalogue corpus with detailed descriptions, along with additional considerations (Lindqvist 1941–42; Nylén & Lamm 2003; Hauck [ed.] 1985–1989; Gaimster 1998; Lamm 2004). Recent studies have also dealt with figurines (Andersson *et al.* 2004) and the pictures on the Late Viking Age Swedish rune stones (Oehrl 2006).

Some famous Vendel and Viking Age depictions show up in scientific and popular literature over and over again. They serve as illustrations to narratives about pre-Christian religion, based on the information given in medieval literary sources, and as a proof for the great age of those myths and heroic tales. A good example is the figurine from Rällinge,

Södermanland, Sweden. It has been almost always thought to represent the fertility god Frey with his erect phallus. Still, other interpretations are also possible (see Price 2006 for discussion). Generally, research on Late Iron Age depictions was dominated by the urge to identify the figures depicted. The connection to written sources was therefore central, although there are no contemporary ones from Scandinavia. To classical writers, such as Tacitus, as well as to the medieval written sources from Scandinavia there is a distance of several hundred years.

For the vast majority of the depictions from the Vendel and Viking Age, there are many possible interpretations (cf. Andrén & Carelli [eds.] 2006). Only very few depictions can be interpreted iconographically with any certainty, by linking them to the written sources (see Pesch 2005). These are depictions of mythology or heroic tales, e.g. Thor catching the Midgard Serpent (Meulengracht Sørensen 1986), or scenes from the narratives about Sigurd Fafnisbani (Düwel 1986; Staecker 2004), because those pictures show many important elements and details that are also stressed in the texts.

In contrast, human figural depictions that cannot immediately be identified have not received much attention. Heads or faces, for example, can be found on many objects. On Viking Age brooches, a common motif is a head with human features, but with a complex wound-up animal body. Depictions with human and animal elements are common, but are usually called “animals”. A couple of depictions show humans with heads, arms and legs rendered in “animal” style (Capelle 2003) – an odd term when it comes to human representations. Many human figures are highly stylized and simplified. During the Vendel and Viking Periods, there are furthermore some “puzzle pictures”. They have a double meaning, depending on the viewer’s perspective and ability to decipher the complicated

picture (Jacobsen 1990; Neiß 2005).

Some motifs were used for only a short period of time, whilst others were common during long time spans. Certain depictions show a find concentration in certain areas, others were in use in large areas. This irregular distribution reflects different modes of the use of pictures, a variety pattern which is to be expected in an oral society where there is no standardized canon of motifs.

## Pictures in an oral society

The culture of the Vendel and Viking Age in Scandinavia was largely based on oral tradition. As we know from social anthropology, the organization of knowledge and structures of thought in oral cultures is fundamentally different from those in literate societies (Ong 1977; 1982). It may therefore be concluded that in oral cultures, pictures had other functions than in literate societies. In particular, they could fulfil purposes otherwise fulfilled by written texts.<sup>2</sup> They were used as durable material archives, saving and helping to remember narratives and memories that otherwise could have been modified and forgotten quickly, according to the circumstances. As mnemotechnical tools, they point to the central aspects of the narratives. Furthermore, some of them were possibly ascribed magic capacities. It has been testified in literalizing societies that writing was said to have the power to influence and change the outcome of actions (Ong 1982, pp. 88 ff.). Analogically, depictions were probably not passive illustrations only referring to something other than and distinct from themselves. Images were seen as inhabited by supernatural power. Magic acts could have been performed with the help of pictures (Wolf 2003; Eschweiler 1994). In ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, during complicated and lengthy rituals performed for the induction of cult statues, the

god was thought to take possession of his or her man-made statue (Assmann 1990, 2003; Lorton 1999; Walker & Dick 1999). Also, in early Christian “art”, depictions of Jesus, Mary or saints were adored by people as their personifications (Belting 1990), while theologians tried to teach the difference between the depiction and the depicted, that is, the difference between the representation and the represented. Many theologians condemned the veneration of religious pictures as “heathen custom”, and the arising conflicts culminated in the early and high medieval iconoclastic movements.

As W. Ong stated (1982, pp. 41 f.), thinking in oral societies is conservative and traditionalistic rather than innovative. Knowledge must be activated and repeated in words, in order not to be forgotten. In narratives, bizarre, somewhat “unusual” figures have a noetic function, and they are often transformed into stereotypes (Ong 1982, pp. 69 ff.). Perhaps this can be transferred to the pictures, and helps explain their uniformity and long-lasting formal conventions. This in turn has the result that certain motifs may have been formally stable, but the meaning that was attributed to them may have varied depending on the immediate context. A good example of such a process is the *adventus* motif: a horse-rider is being welcomed by a woman with a drinking vessel (Vierck 1981; Staecker 2004; Lundin 2006). This has an important methodological implication that has been neglected by many researchers: formal likeness does not necessarily mean likeness in content and meaning. There were certainly regional and chronological differences, as has been pointed out by Anders Andrén (2004). These can only be traced when analysing the use and context of the pictures. In the case study I will come back to this when dealing with the iconography.

To sum up, pictorial representations in oral societies are a special form of tradition, which

should not be considered as a passive corpus of illustrations referring to knowledge and ideas already fixed in written form. They have a different, active function. Thus the term “art” in its modern sense is not appropriate, as the art historian H. Belting (1990) pointed out: taking the above-mentioned Christian icons as an example, he showed how the early Christian depictions – including those from the Middle Ages – were primarily objects of religious veneration – it was the “Era of the Picture”. The “Era of Art” in its proper sense began only with the Renaissance, when the individual artist’s expression became more important.

### The context of the pictures

Let us turn back to the Late Iron Age of Scandinavia. At first sight, the combination of a certain motif and the object chosen to apply it to does not seem to be arbitrary, as some motifs only occur on certain types of objects. If we assume that pictures were used as signs and as a means of communication, we can find out more about their use by analysing on which objects and in which contexts they appear. We can even discern different social groups by their different *use* of the pictures, as will be shown below.

By “context analysis”, I mean that the immediate, situational context of every single depiction is scrutinized. What kind of object is it that bears the image, and how was it used? Is it a part of a weapon, a brooch, a means of payment? How was it deposited – in a grave, lost in a settlement, or is it a stray find? Can the objects be linked to a certain social group? Also important is the exact dating of the objects, that will mostly not be possible from the object itself, but only through the analysis of e.g. other finds in the same grave. Finally, the spatial distribution of the objects sheds light on long-distance contacts and communication.

The aim of this method is therefore not to trace distinct motif groups or motif details through time and space, but to look at the objects themselves and their archaeological context first. An iconographic interpretation may follow *after* the context analysis.<sup>3</sup>

## A case study: figures with horned headdresses

The approach of analysing the find context of a certain motif group will now be applied in a case study: men and women wearing a horned headdress. The horns – or rather flat bows, the cross-section seems to be flat-rectangular – mostly terminate in bird or animal heads.

Only pictures from the Vendel and Viking Age, mainly from Scandinavia, will be analysed, though I will refer to some earlier examples. The formal origins of the motif – which can be found in Mediterranean antiquity (cf. Hauck 1981), possibly on the shield signs of the Late Roman troops called Cornuti, as recorded in a *Notitia dignitatum* (cf. Alföldi 1935) – will not be treated here.

Table 1 lists all objects with this motif that are known to me.<sup>4</sup> Among the detector finds, which have increased enormously in the past years, there might be some more unpublished ones.

I have chosen these depictions because they form a clearly demarcated motif group, unlike most other motif groups from the Vendel and Viking Age. There are furthermore enough pieces to make substantial conclusions.

Considering motif details, chronology and find-contexts, there are six recognizable subgroups. They will be presented in the following.

*Subgroup 1* (nos. 1–8, Fig. 1) comprises the so-called “weapon dancers” from the Vendel Period. The pictures are mostly scenes with several persons. Their knees are bent, and they seem to be running or dancing. There

are well discernible bird heads on the ends of the horns. This subgroup only occurs in flat relief, cast or as pressed metal sheets; there is also one die for the production of such sheets, and one belt buckle. The sheets were attached to panel-decorated helmets or other parts of male weapon gear. The objects were found in men’s graves, mainly in eastern Scandinavia. The motif was obviously also quite common in Anglo-Saxon England during the “Age of Sutton Hoo”. One object was found in Germany (no. 6), showing the close contacts between the Alamannic, Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian regions.

The comparatively small *subgroup 2* (nos. 9–10, Fig. 2), closely linked to subgroup 1, is made up of the small “helping figures” in scenes with a mounted rider and other small figures. They stand – or rather, run or dance – behind the rider on the horse’s croup. As in subgroup 1, the bird heads on the headgear are very clearly rendered. The objects are metal sheet panels from two helmets, which were found in richly equipped men’s graves from the Vendel Period in Uppland, Sweden. Similar rider scenes, but without figures with horned headdresses, are known from Uppland (helmet from Vendel I) and Anglo-Saxon England (Sutton Hoo helmet; see Arwidsson 1977, pp. 117 ff.; Hauck 1981, pp. 203 ff.).<sup>5</sup>

Warriors from the Viking Age (*subgroup 3*, no. 11–19, Fig. 3) may occur as single figures or as part of scenes. There is also one female warrior (Oseberg, textile fragment 16, no. 16). In contrast to the Vendel Period pictures, their legs are only slightly bent or straight, and the bird heads on the ends of the horns are unclear knobs or do not exist at all. As attributes, they may carry a staff or a pair of staffs, which do not occur on the Vendel Period pictures either. This subgroup, which was only found in Scandinavia, but not in England or on the Continent, comprises cast pendants, textiles and coins. The objects were found either as single finds or in women’s graves.

*Subgroup 4* (nos. 20–23, Fig. 4) consists of single, three-dimensionally cast figurines, obviously thought to represent standing (not moving) male persons. The horns on the headgear are round and wide, sometimes broken, but they never show an animal head. Their shafts suggest that they have been fixed to another artefact, but their actual use is unknown. The figurine from Uppåkra was holding something in his hands. The recently found example from Vestermarie Parish on Bornholm has holes in the short arms and was intended to hold something, too. His body is

just indicated, while his head with the enormous headgear is very clearly depicted. He has a moustache, a big nose and eyebrows, and pretzel-like ears. The eyes are not clear. The figure can be dated to the Viking Age by its stylistic features. The other figurines of this group have also been dated to the Viking Age. Those objects are stray finds, but several of them come from sites considered to be “central” with supra-regional importance. Their distribution pattern shows a very clear concentration in Southern Scandinavia.

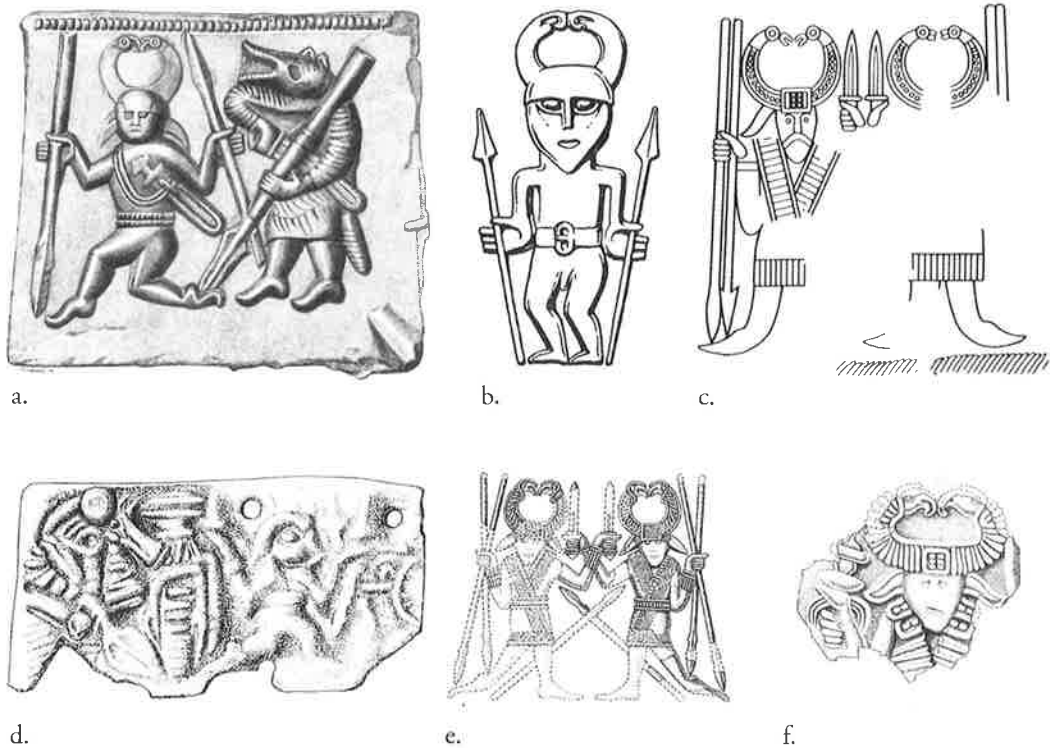


Fig. 1. Subgroup 1 (examples).

a. Die, Torslunda, Öland (Arbman 1980, p. 25).

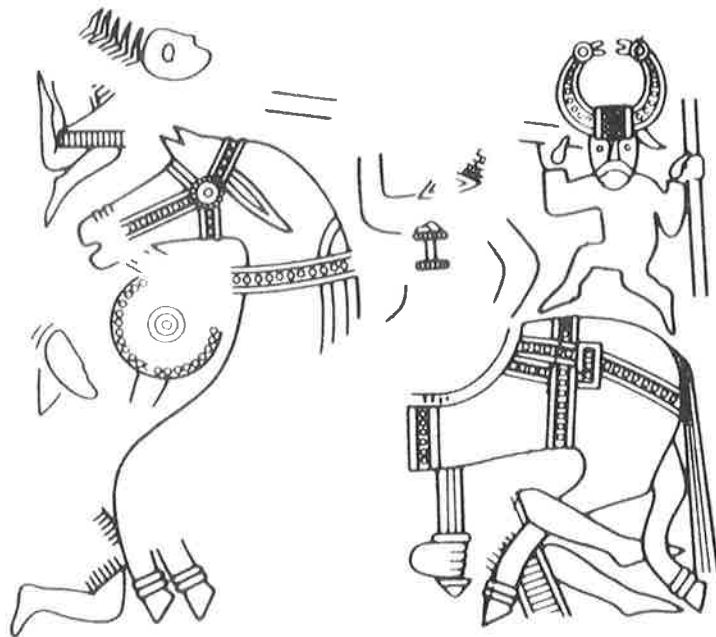
b. Belt buckle, Finglesham (Chadwick Hawkes, Ellis Davidson, Hawkes 1965, fig. 1, drawing M. Cox, © Institute of Archaeology, Oxford).

c. Pressed metal sheets on helmet, Valsgårde 7 (Arwidsson 1977, fig. 138).

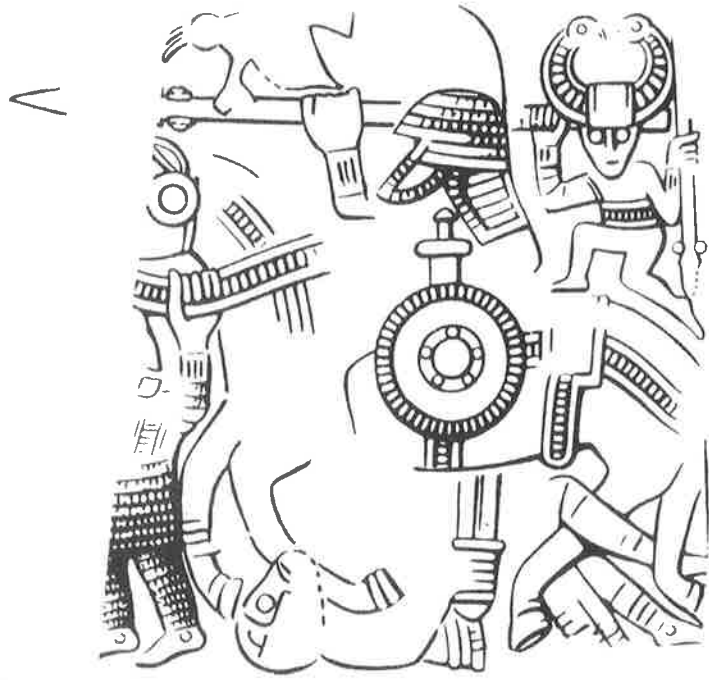
d. Pressed metal sheet, Obrigheim, Germany (Böhner 1991, p. 717, fig. 29).

e. Pressed metal sheet on helmet, Sutton Hoo (Bruce-Mitford 1978, p. 149, fig. 110a, Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum).

f. Pressed sheet metal (from helmet?), Caenby, Lincolnshire (Bruce-Mitford 1978, p. 206, fig. 153).



a.



b.

Fig. 2. Subgroup 2.

a. Pressed metal sheets on helmet, Valsgärde 7 (Arwidsson 1977, fig. 133).

b. Pressed metal sheets on helmet, Valsgärde 8 (Hauck 1981, p. 218, fig. 27).

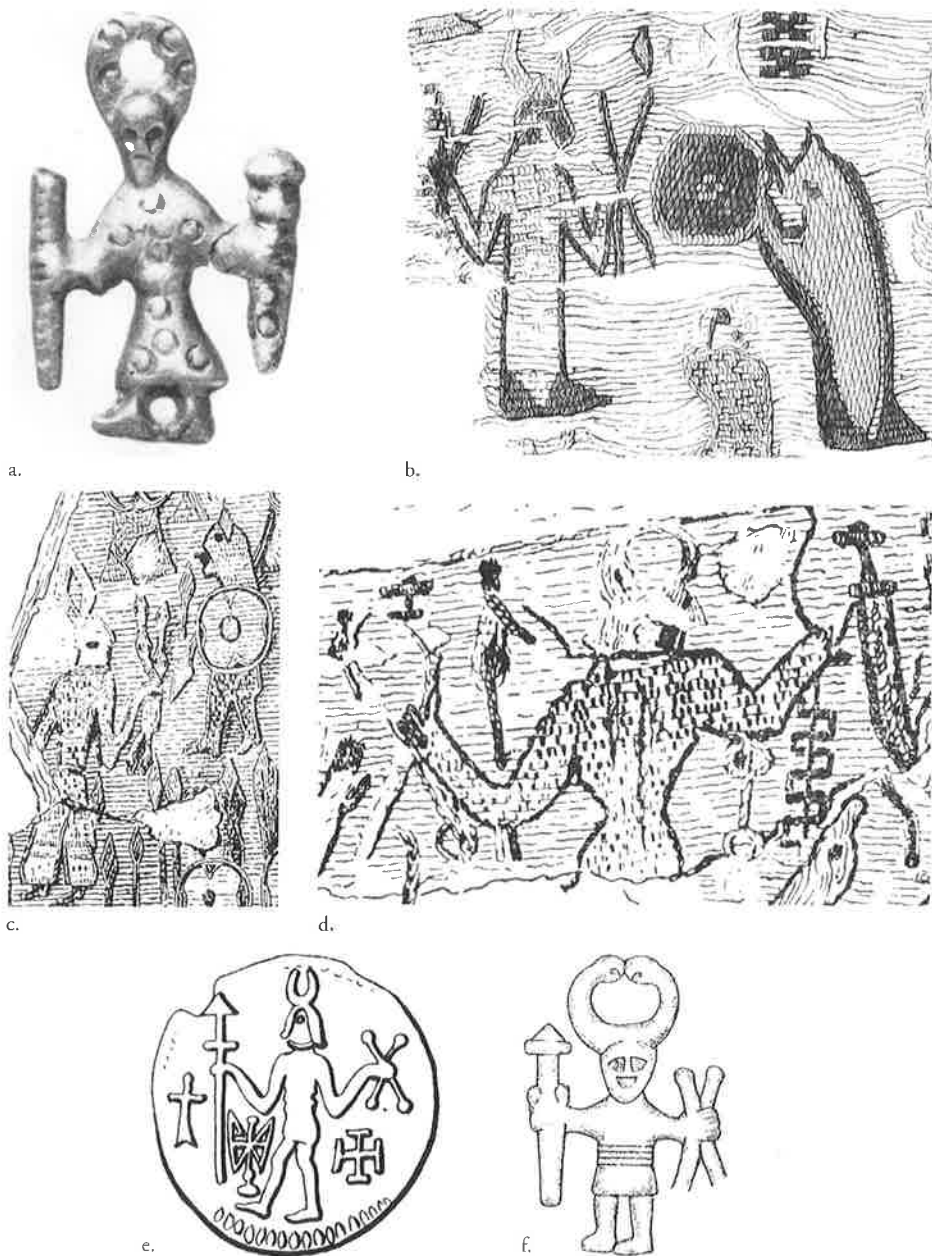


Fig. 3. Subgroup 3.

a. Pendant, Birka gr. 571 (Arbman 1940, pl. 92.9).

b. Oseberg: part of textile fragment 16 (Osebergfunnet IV, 2006, p. 36, fig. 26, drawing M. Storm 1939).

c. Oseberg: part of textile fragment 3 (Krafft 1956, p. 32).

d. Oseberg: part of textile fragment 1 (Krafft 1956, p. 30).

e. Coin, find-spot unknown (Malmer 1966, pl. 1.1).

f. Pendant, Ekhammar (Ringqvist 1969, fig. 1).

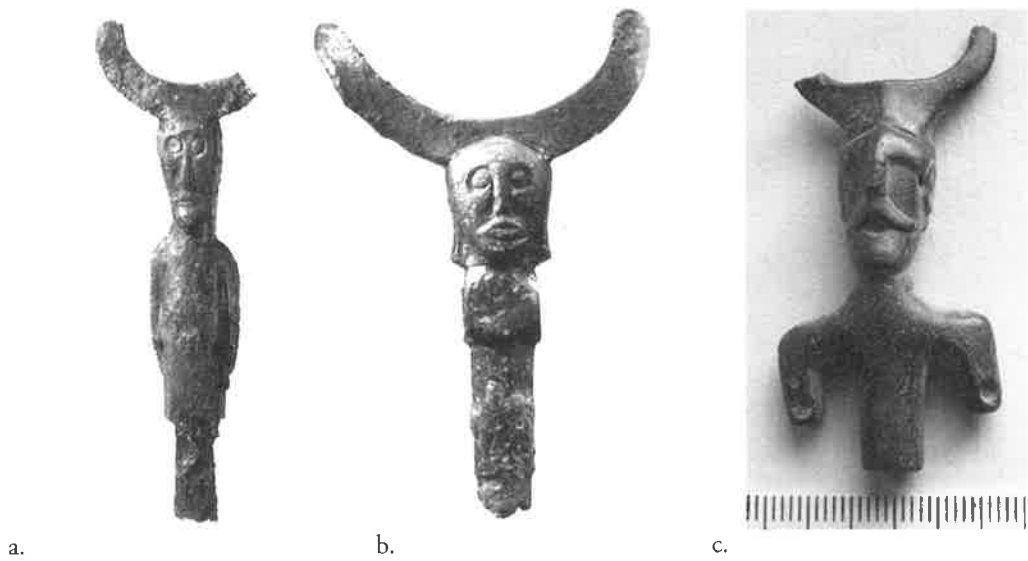


Fig. 4. Subgroup 4 (examples).

- a. Figurine, Uppåkra (Bergqvist 1999, p. 120, fig. 7, © LUHM)
- b. Ring-headed pin or figurine, Tissø (Bergqvist 1999, p. 120, fig. 8, © NMK)
- c. Figurine, Hakonsgård, Bornholm (Photo: R. Laursen).

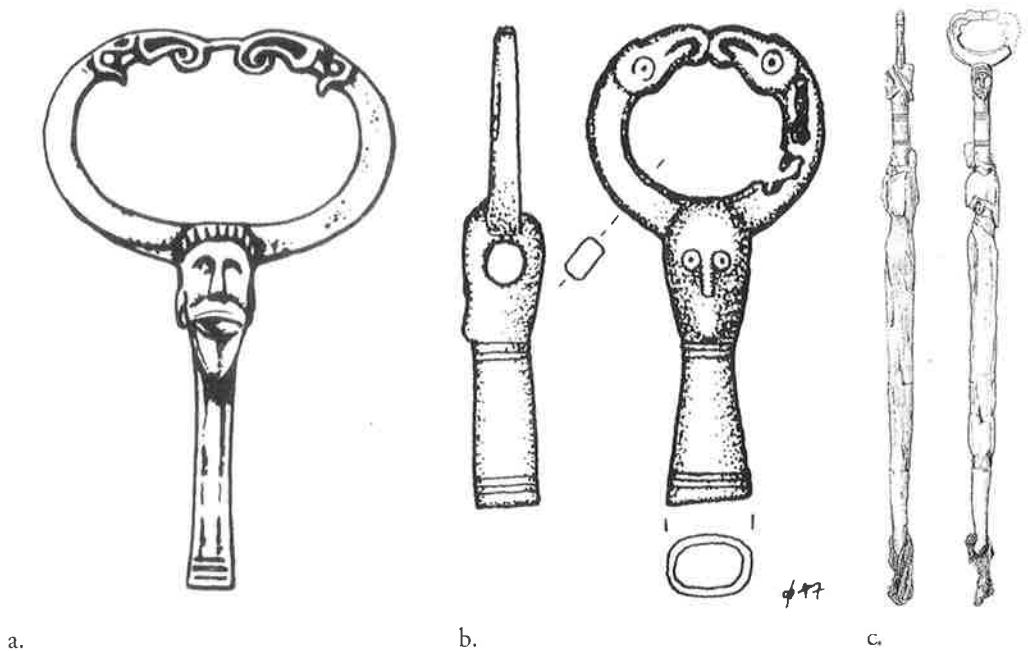


Fig. 5. Subgroup 5 (examples).

- a. Staraja Ladoga (Davidan 1982, p. 175, fig. 3).
- b. Gåtebo (ÖJG I, 1987, p. 244).
- c. Needle (?), Dover (Evison 1965, p. 215, fig. 1).



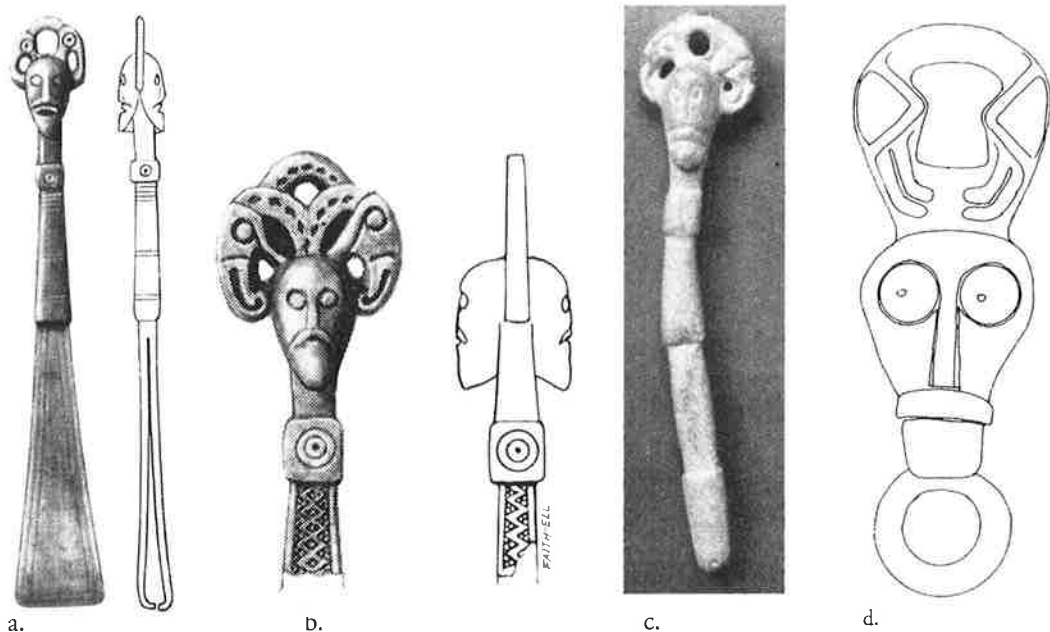


Fig. 6. Subgroup 6 (Examples).

a. Tweezers, find spot unknown, Gotland (Nerman 1969, pl. 123.1100).

b. Fragment of tweezers, Ihre, Gotland (Nerman 1969, pl. 123.1099).

c. Key (?), Gamla Uppsala (Olsén 1949–51, p. 117, fig. 1).

d. Mould, Ribe (Frandsen & Jensen 1987, p. 180, fig. 8).

*Subgroup 5* (nos. 24–28, Fig. 5) also comprises objects that were fixed to another object. Their exact use is unknown; maybe they were tool-grips. Their slender horns have clear bird heads that touch each other, so that the headdress is formed like a ring. Their find contexts vary; chronologically, they can be placed in the 7th to 9th century. The map shows their wide distribution in England, Scandinavia and Russia.

Heads with bird-heads bent downwards (*subgroup 6*, nos. 29–33, Fig. 6) were found on different tool-grips, e.g. tweezers (see Nerman 1969, pl. 123), mainly in eastern Scandinavia. Two of them come from graves, one of which is a woman's grave, two are single finds. The stylistic analysis of the bird's heads suggests a dating to the Vendel Period; the settlement layer in Ribe where the mould was

found was dated to the 8th century. It is disputable whether this subgroup should be included here, or if they rather should be seen in connection with the common motif "head with two flanking animals". With their double faces, they also show similarities to the multiple-headed figures known mainly from Slavic areas, but also found in Scandinavia (Lamm 1987).

After this brief overview, clear differences emerge: in the motifs themselves, their production modes, their situational context of use, their chronology and spatial distribution.

During the **Vendel Period**, the horned-headgear motif was known in large areas of Europe: Scandinavia, England and in the Alamannic area on the Continent (see Fig. 7). There are many variations: Horned head-

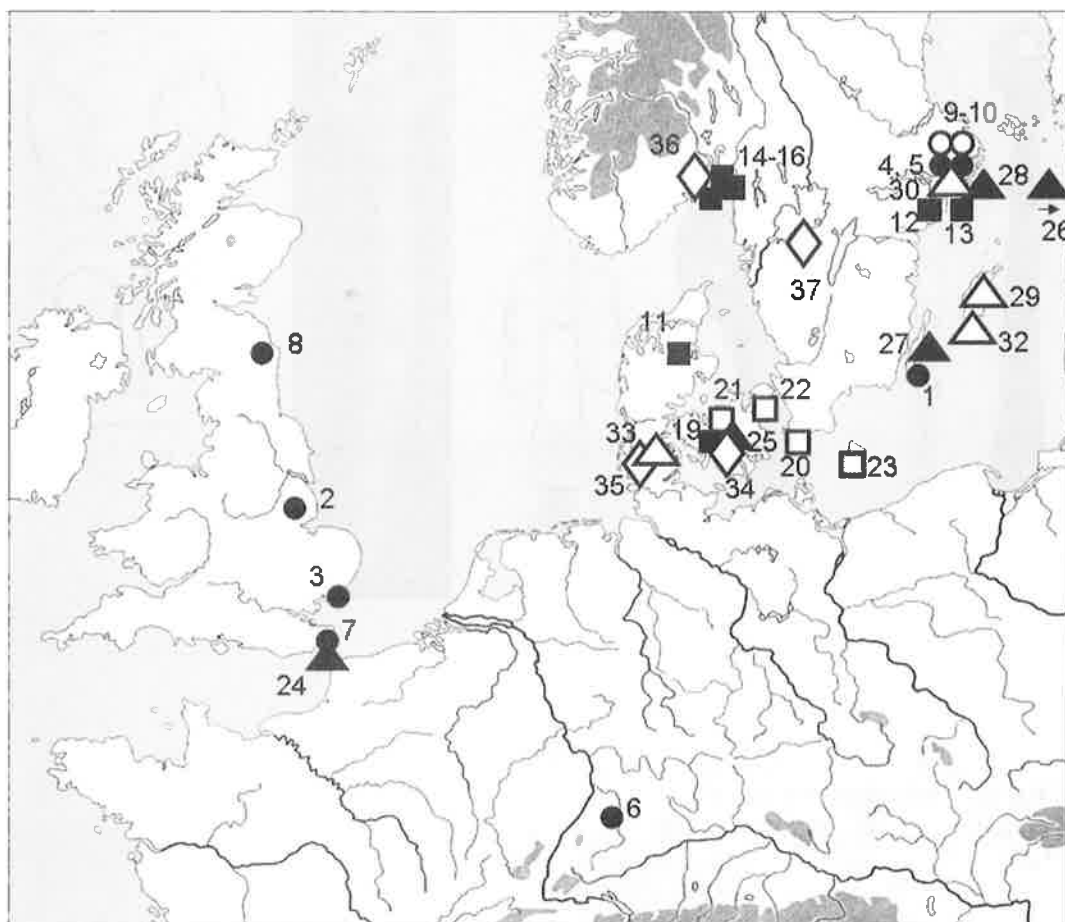


Fig. 7.

Distribution of all depictions with a horned headgear (for numbers, see Table 1).

- Subgroup 1
- Subgroup 2
- Subgroup 3
- Subgroup 4
- ▲ Subgroup 5
- △ Subgroup 6
- ◇ Others

dresses could have been worn by little “helping figures” behind a rider, by pairs of weapon dancers and by single figures. The details are always exactly rendered, and the bird heads on the ends of the horns are clearly visible.

The pictures are commonly fixed on important objects of the male weapon gear, mostly the magnificent helmets. They were certainly

intended to be seen. The find contexts of the objects from Vendel Period Scandinavia are almost exclusively richly furnished men’s graves. The ones from Valsgärde and Sutton Hoo are boat graves and included a splendid warrior’s equipment with swords, spears, shields, horse gear and animals (Arwidsson 1954; 1977; Bruce-Mitford 1975–1983). The buried war-

riors belonged to a very high social level. By using the picture panels on the helmets, the individuals showed that they were part of a community with a common sign-code, and thus showed and constructed their identity as elite warriors. Hence, the pictures belong to the symbolic and physical expression of the ideology of the “ideal warrior”, also manifested through the excessive grave equipment with the complete sets of weapons.

During the Vendel Period, there were close contacts between the Alamannic, Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian regions, since very similar depictions (Quast 2002) and also the same types of objects were found in these regions (Müller-Wille 1999; Koch 1999). There must have been a network of elite warriors covering large parts of Northern Europe.

In the **Viking Age** (subgroup 3) things seem to have changed. The figures do not run or dance, but seem to be standing or walking. The animal heads on the ends of the horns are unclear or missing. Once, there is even a woman wearing a horned headdress (Oseberg).

The objects are now used in a completely different context. The motif is found on coins, pendants, and textiles. The coins were struck by (supposedly male) rulers, and are isolated finds, while the pendants and textiles come from women's graves. At least the textiles were not only used by women, but also produced by them.<sup>6</sup>

The pendants from Birka and Ekhammar are commonly interpreted as amulets (Zeiten 1997). Generally, grave finds with amulets are relatively rare among the totality of Viking Age graves; but in turn, they often contain several amulets. In Birka, burials with amulets are in most cases chamber graves and are richly furnished (Gräslund 2005). The best example of such a grave is the one from Ekhammar. It contained a little figure of a dog, a pendant in the shape of a human being with an animal head holding a snake, a bronze pen-

dant in openwork, several rings of silver and bronze, more than 100 beads, a comb, potsherds and more (Ringqvist 1969). Some of those graves with several amulets – especially those which also contained a staff – have already been interpreted as graves of seeresses or sorceresses (Price 2002, pp. 127 ff.; Gräslund 2005, p. 390). So there are clear indications that women who wore the pendants with horned helmets played a special role in cult and religion.

This special status of amulet-wearing women is also indicated by the Oseberg grave. Apart from a complete household equipment, the furnishing comprises a carriage that might have been used for cultic purposes, several animal-head posts whose function remains unknown, and 15 horses (Christensen *et al.* 1993). The grave-mound lay in an unusual place, in a wet valley, in a landscape with many sacral place-names. Two women were buried in the grave; at least one of them was from the highest social level, and the equipment shows many religious affiliations (Pesch 1999). She was probably a ruler with religious tasks.

Again, the motif is closely linked to the social elite: The Oseberg grave is the richest Viking Age grave from Norway; the coins were struck by rulers. But the Vendel Period network of contacts between areas in Alamannia, Scandinavia and Anglo-Saxon England had now vanished. The Viking Age finds come from Scandinavia and Rus' (Fig. 7). This clearly shows how the international contacts of the Scandinavian elite had changed since the Carolingians and especially since Charlemagne came to power on the Continent. The Upplandic dynasties whose prominent feature was the use of depictions on their weapon gear, still buried their dead at cemeteries at Vendel and Valsgårde in the Viking Age, but it was no longer necessary to show such pictorial signs of identity – neither on the weapon gear nor in the graves.

As mentioned above, the horns in the Vi-

king Age depictions do not terminate in clear bird heads any more, but are formed as unclear knobs. The pictures seem to have an old-fashioned, traditional character. From a lively sign of a warrior elite, they have changed to a sign of a common identity, as part of the cultural memory, rooted in tradition, but active in a different context: women who kept the memories of the past alive.

Other objects from the Viking Age show no direct gender relation, but seem to be connected to important south Scandinavian central places with ritual activities (subgroup 4). At Tissø as well as at Uppåkra, unusual houses were excavated and labelled as “cult houses” (Jørgensen 2005; Larsson 2005). We do not know what function the figurines had in these places. Again, there is a strong connection to the social elite and ritual acts.

The shift from the male to the female sphere is not a single phenomenon restricted to the motif of figures with horned headgear, but has been demonstrated for other objects and motifs as well. Trefoil brooches – originally a part of the Carolingian male weapon gear – quickly developed in Scandinavia into one of the most common female brooch types of the Viking Age (Maixner 2005). Animal ornamentation was mostly used on male weapon-gear during the Vendel Period, but was gradually abandoned by men during the 8th century. In the Viking Age, then, it was mainly the women’s metal dress parts that were decorated with animal ornamentation (Callmer 2006). A similar process could be shown by the analysis of the Early Gipping Beast Style (Helmbrecht 2007). There is probably not one overall interpretation covering all these processes, as they did not happen at the same time. But it seems that women were more inclined to adopt certain types of objects and ornamentation from men, than vice versa.

## Different iconographies

After analysing the situational context and function of the objects with a depiction of a horned headdress, their iconography must be touched upon, albeit briefly. I will not treat in great detail the different interpretations that can be found in literature, nor the origins of the motif in antiquity (see Hauck 1981; Alfoldi 1935). Rather, I would like to suggest that these interpretations need not necessarily exclude each other. It was suggested above that the meaning of prehistoric pictures – as produced in oral societies – may vary in different contexts, and may shift in time, though their shape may have been fixed by conventions. Similar motifs may therefore have had varying meanings, according to the context. Can we find indications for this assumption?

The motif seems to have been commonly known, as the wide distribution shows (Fig. 7). Moulds found in Ribe suggest that such objects were produced not only in small numbers (Fig. 8). The depictions on the Gallehus horns (c. 400 AD, Fig. 9) show that the motif of horned headdresses has a long tradition already in the Vendel Period. The “horns” are bent outwards, and the figures seem to be moving or dancing, and they carry weapons.<sup>7</sup>

For many researchers, the connection to Odin and his ravens Hugin and Munin was obvious (e.g. Jensen 1990; Böhner 1991; Hauck 1981). The corresponding text from medieval sources is e.g. the *Gylfaginning*, a part of Snorri’s *Edda* (ch. 38):

“Two ravens sit on his shoulders and speak into his ear all the news they see or hear. Their names are Hugin and Munin. He sends them out at dawn to fly over all the world and they return at dinner-time. As a result he gets to find out about many events. From this he gets the name raven-god” (Faulkes 1987, 33).

There is also another association with Odin. Eddic texts tell that Odin pawned one eye in Mímir’s well to receive knowledge and

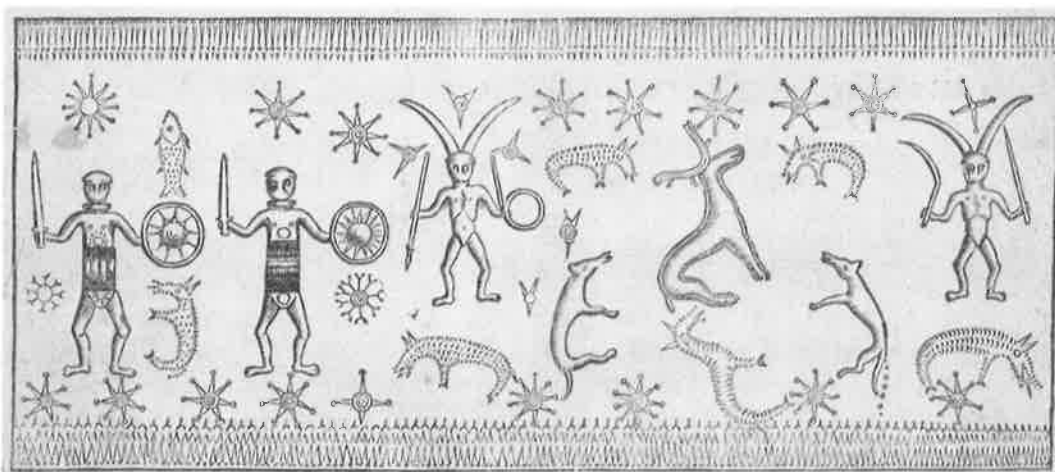


Fig. 8. Mould, Ribe (*Oldtidens Ansigt* 1990, 179).



Fig. 9. One of the Gallehus horns (*Oldtidens Ansigt* 1990, 155).

wisdom (*Snorra Edda* ch. 15; *Völuspá* v. 22–23). Some figures (finds from Björnhovda/Torslunda, no. 1 [Arrhenius & Freij 1992; my autopsy], Staraja Ladoga, no. 26 [Price 2002, 388], Ribe, no. 33 [Price 2002, pp. 386 f.] and Uppåkra, no. 20 [my autopsy]) are depicted with only one eye. Perhaps this was also the case with the rider from Gedehaven (no. 34), but here it might also be a cast flaw.

But it need not necessarily always be Odin who is depicted with a horned headdress. Let us have a look at the motif contexts. Several of the weapon dancers with horned headgear are shown together with figures with human legs and animal heads (nos. 1, 6, 15, 16). In Ekhammar, the same grave contained a pendant with such a figure. It is tempting to identify these figures with the *ulfheðnar* (wolf-skins) of the written sources (Høilund Nielsen 2001, pp. 477 ff.), i.e. warriors who have reached a state of trance or rage (Price 2002, p. 372 with further references). They wear an animal skin, but are otherwise naked. In the written sources, the *ulfheðnar* are mentioned along with the *berserkir*; in Þórbjörn hornklofi's *Haraldskvæði* they are even said to be identical (stanza 8,5 ff.; stanza 20 ff.). *Haraldskvæði* is generally dated to the end of the 9th cen-

# List of objects with depictions of horned headgear, and their find context.

|   | No. | Find spot                                      | Object  | Iconographic description   | Dating                  | Find context                              | Publications (selected)   |
|---|-----|--|---|--|-------------------------|---|---|
| Subgroup 1: "Weapon dancers" from the Vendel Period | 1   | Björnhovda, Torslunda, Öland, Sweden (Fig. 1a) | Cast die for the production of pressed sheet metals; relief | Naked, dancing, with sword and pair of spears. Clear bird heads. One-eyed. Scene with warrior in animal skin (wolf). | 7th century?            | Hoard or isolated find (near settlement?) | Arbman 1980, 25; OJG II, 1991, 257                                |
|   | 2   | Caenby, England (Fig. 1 f)                     | Pressed sheet metal (from helmet?)                          | Fragment; carries sword; clear bird heads.   | Vendel Period           | Grave?                                    | Bruce-Mitford 1978, 206 fig. 153                                  |
|   | 3   | Sutton Hoo, England (Fig. 1 e)                 | Pressed sheet metal on helmet                               | Scene with two weapon dancers; pair of spears and swords; clear bird heads.  | 1st half of 7th century | Grave (man)                               | Bruce-Mitford 1978, 149, fig. 110a                                |
|   | 4   | Valsgärde 7, Uppland, Sweden (Fig. 1c)         | Pressed sheet metal on helmet                               | Scene with two weapon dancers; pairs of spears and swords; clear animal (bird) heads.                                | Vendel Period           | Grave (man)                               | Arwidsson 1977, fig. 28, 125–138; Hauck 1981, 208, fig. 19        |
|   | 5   | Gamla Uppsala, Uppland, Sweden                 | Pressed sheet metal (from helmet?)                          | Fragment; weapon dancers; pair of spears.  | Vendel Period           | Grave (man)                               | Arwidsson 1977, fig. 31; Arrhenius, Freij 1992                    |
|   | 6   | Obrigheim, Pfalz, Germany (Fig. 1d)            | Pressed sheet metal, scabbard mount?                        | Fragment; naked with belt; pair of spears, sword. Animal heads unclear. Scene with warrior in animal skin (wolf).    |                         | Unknown, grave?                           | Sjöberg 1905, 324, fig. 4; Böhner 1991, 717, fig. 29              |
|   | 7   | Finglesham, Kent, England (Fig. 1b)            | Cast belt buckle, flat relief                               | Weapon dancers, naked with belt; pair of spears, clear bird heads  | 6th–7th century         | Grave (man)                               | Chadwick Hawkes, Ellis Davidson, Hawkes 1965, fig. 1              |
|   | 8   | Ayton, Berwickshire, Scottish Borders          | Cast plate from belt buckle, secondarily used as pendant?   | Weapon dancer with pair of spears  | Vendel Period?          | Stray find (detector)                     | Blackwell 2007, 166, figs. 1–2                                    |
| Subgroup 2: Small "helping figure" by a rider       | 9   | Valsgärde 7D, Uppland, Sweden (Fig. 2a)        | Pressed sheet metal on helmet                               | Scene: Weapon dancer with spear; clear animal (bird?) heads  | Vendel Period           | Grave (man)                               | Arwidsson 1977, fig. 122–134; Hauck 1981, 226, fig. 33            |
|   | 10  | Valsgärde 8, Uppland, Sweden (Fig. 2b)         | Pressed sheet metal on helmet                               | Scene: Weapon dancer with spear; clear animal (bird?) heads  | Vendel Period           | Grave (man)                               | Arwidsson 1954, pl. 2–5; Hauck 1981, 217 ff., figs. 26–28         |
| Subgroup 3: Viking Age warriors                     | 11  | Nørholm, Denmark                               | Fragment of a rectangular brooch? Cast, flat relief         | Carries weapons; animal heads very unclear   | Viking Age?             | Stray find                                | unpubl.; København NM C 35487                                     |
|   | 12  | Birka gr. 571, Uppland, Sweden (Fig. 3a)       | Pendant, cast, flat relief                                  | Carries weapons (staff and sword), animal heads very unclear   | c. 900                  | Grave (woman)                             | Arbman 1940, pl. 92.9   |
|   | 13  | Ekhammar, Uppland, Sweden (Fig. 3f)            | Pendant, cast, flat relief                                  | Carries weapons (pair of staffs, sword), animal heads very unclear   | 800–900                 | Grave (probably woman)                    | Ringqvist 1969, fig. 1  |
|   | 14  | Oseberg, Vestfold, Norway (Fig. 3d)            | Textile fragment no. 1 (2)                                  | Carries sword and other objects; part of a scene. Without animal heads?  | before 834              | Grave (woman)                             | Krafft 1956, 30 No. 1; Osebergfunnet IV, 2006, 17 ff., figs. 1–21 |
|   | 15  | Oseberg, Vestfold, Norway (Fig. 3c)            | Textile fragment no. 3 (13B2)                               | Carries weapons (pair of spears), part of a scene with warrior in animal skin. Without animal heads?                 | before 834              | Grave (woman)                             | Krafft 1956, 32 No. 3; Osebergfunnet IV, 2006, 39, fig. 28        |

|   |    |   |   |   |                         |   |  |
|---|----|---|---|---|-------------------------|---|--|
|   | 16 | Oseberg, Vestfold, Norway (Fig. 3b)                     | Textile fragment no. 16                       | Woman carrying two pairs of spears; part of a scene with female warrior in animal skin. Without animal heads? | before 834              | Grave (woman)   | Osebergfunnet IV, 2006, 36, fig. 26    |
|   | 17 | unknown find spot (Fig. 3e)                             | coin  | Weapon dancers; without animal heads  | early 9th century       | Unknown   | Malmer 1966, pl. 1.1                   |
|   | 18 | unknown find spot                                       | coin  | Weapon dancers; without animal heads  | early 9th century       | Unknown   | Osebergfunnet IV, 2006, 93, fig. 109   |
|   | 19 | Tissø, Denmark  | coin  | Weapon dancers; without animal heads  | early 9th century       | Settlement, central place                                   | Skalk no. 6, 1995, 10                  |
| Subgroup 4: Standing figurines                          | 20 | Uppåkra, Skåne, Sweden (Fig. 4a)                        | cast figurine with shaft                      | Standing man; horns rounded/broken; one-eyed  | Vendel or Viking Period | Stray find on settlement site, central place                | Bergqvist 1999, 120, fig. 7            |
|   | 21 | Tissø, Denmark (Fig. 4b)                                | Ring-headed pin or figurine? with shaft; cast | Man's bust; horns rounded   | Vendel or Viking Period | Settlement, central place                                   | Bergqvist 1999, 120, fig. 8            |
|   | 22 | Sigerslevøster, Denmark                                 | Ring-headed pin or figurine? cast             | Man's bust; horns broken  | Vendel or Viking Period | Stray find  | Arkæol. udgr. Danm. 1997, 105, fig. 32 |
|   | 23 | Hakongård, Vestermarie sn., Bornholm, Denmark (Fig. 4c) | Cast figurine                                 | Detailed figurine without legs, horns rounded/ broken   | Viking Age              | Detector find on settlement site                            | unpubl., found in autumn 2006          |
| Subgroup 5: Heads with slender, ring-like horned helmet | 24 | Dover, England (Fig. 5c)                                | Staff or pin? cast in the round               | Head with slender, ring-like horns; clear bird heads  | c. 700                  | Grave (woman)   | Evison 1965, 215, fig. 1               |
|   | 25 | Tissø, Denmark  | head, cast                                    | Head with slender, ring-like horns; clear bird heads  | Vendel or Viking Period | Settlement, central place                                   | Jørgensen 2005, 139, fig. 83           |
|   | 26 | Staraja Ladoga, Russia (Fig. 5a)                        | head, cast                                    | Head with slender, ring-like horns; clear bird heads; one-eyed  | c. 750–825              | Settlement layer, assemblage of smithing tools              | Davidan 1982, 175, fig. 3              |
|   | 27 | Gålebo, Öland, Sweden (Fig. 5b)                         | Ring-headed pin? Head, cast                   | Head with slender, ring-like horns; clear bird heads  | Vendel or Viking Period | Grave   | ÖJG I, 1987, 244                       |
|   | 28 | Hjulsta, Uppland, Sweden                                | head, cast                                    | Head; clear animal heads  | Viking Age              | Grave   | Callmer 1983–84, 80, fig. 6            |
| Subgroup 6: Heads with bird heads bent downwards        | 29 | Ihre, Gotland, Sweden (Fig. 6b)                         | tool grip? cast                               | double head, clear bird heads   | Vendel Period           | Grave (woman)   | Nerman 1969, pl. 123.1099              |
|   | 30 | Gamla Uppsala, Uppland, Sweden (Fig. 6 c)               | key, cast                                     | double head, clear bird heads   | Vendel Period           | Isolated find   | Olsén 1949–51, 117, fig. 1             |
|   | 31 | "Gotland", Sweden (Fig. 6 a)                            | tweezers, cast                                | double head, clear bird heads   | Vendel Period?          | Isolated find   | Nerman 1969, pl. 123.1100              |
|   | 32 | Vallstenarum, Gotland, Sweden                           | tweezers, cast                                | unclear head, bird heads  | Vendel Period           | Grave   | Nerman 1969, pl. 123.1101              |
|   | 33 | Ribe, Denmark (Fig. 6 d)                                | mould   | head, clear bird heads  | 8th century             | Settlement (town), probably workshop                        | Frandsen & Jensen 1987, 180, fig. 8    |
| Other finds   | 34 | Gedehaven, Denmark                                      | Pin (?) with rider; cast in the round         | Possibly one-eyed (casting flaw?); helmet with ring, without animal heads                                     | Vendel or Viking Period | Stray find  | Arkæol. udgr. Danm. 1991, 212          |
|   | 35 | Ribe, Denmark (Fig. 8)                                  | casting model, head, cast                     | Head; without animal heads; one-eyed  | Viking Age              | Settlement (town); production; 11 fitting moulds were found | Oldtidens Ansigt 1990, 179             |
|   | 36 | "Romerike", Norway                                      | Brooch or pendant; cast, relief               | Head; clear animal heads, more animals in the ring  | Viking Age              | Grave   | Petersen 1928, 184, fig. 226           |

tury, and is thus roughly contemporary with the Viking Age depictions. The warriors described in this poem are a kind of elite warrior troops or bodyguards of King Harald Fairhair. According to Snorri's *Ynglinga saga* (ch. 6), they seem to have had a special connection to Odin. Can the figures with the horned headgears be the *berserkir*, as Peter Vang Petersen suggested (2005, pp. 82 f.)? For both, ecstasy – which would explain the dancing posture – and a connection to the social elite, even the king, is given.

The written sources, though, are not undisputed. The etymology of *berserkir* is not clear and has been derived from either “bear-skin” or “bare-of-clothing”, i.e. naked. Klaus von See (1961) even argued that the word *berserkir* was created by Þórbjörn hornklofi himself and has no historical tradition. According to von See, there were no elite troops called *berserkir*, though ecstatic warriors – but not with that “brand-name” – may have existed. But if the term is derived from “bear”, it must have been very old, since it is derived from *\*bernu*, a otherwise lost term which forms part of old names (like Bera, Berfjall), but which was later replaced by the more common *bjrn*.

Anyway: the depictions show two kinds of warriors, one in an animal skin, the other with horned headgear. If we assume that the hypothesis is correct, that the animal-warriors are depictions of the *ulfhednar*, then their partners or counterparts should be human warriors as well, and not gods (cf. Hedeager 2003, 134). Whether they are to be identified with the *berserkir* cannot be said with certainty. If it were Odin who is shown here, it seems likely that the birds Hugin and Munin would have been depicted in another way instead of this standardized “masquerade” (Arwidsson 1977, p. 122).

Many of the depictions show the warriors dancing, and naked. Generally, dancing, nakedness and the wearing of masks are considered important elements of the liminal phase

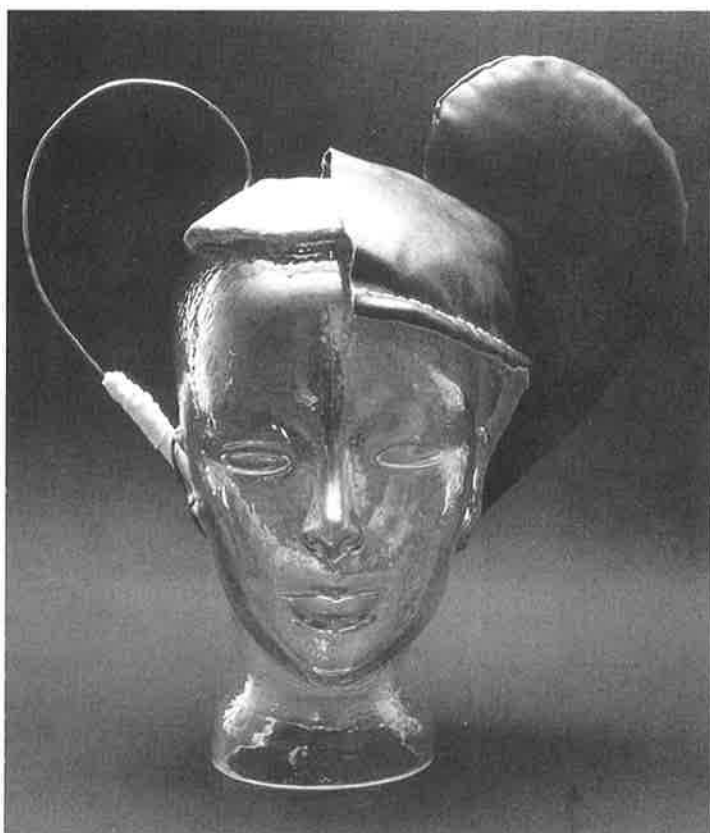
in initiation rituals, especially in the stage in the life of young men when they undergo the transformation from childhood to adulthood (cf. Back Danielsson 2007, pp. 104-152 on the use of masks in this context in Iron Age Scandinavia). Sometimes, they receive special training to be elite-warriors during this time (Meier 2001, with further references). It might be suggested that our depictions represent an important stage in a transition ritual. The Vendel Period depictions could show scenes of such dancing initiates. During the rituals, they would wear horned headgear with bird heads to establish the connection to Odin and his ravens.<sup>8</sup> Were the men who were buried in the graves at Valsgarde, Sutton Hoo and Vendel such elite warriors who had undergone this initiation ritual at the end of their childhood? Would they show their being part of this special social group, which had close contacts between Anglo-Saxon England, the Alamannia and Scandinavia, through the visible use of the picture – be it on panels on splendid helmets, on belt buckles or other parts of the weapon gear?

This could help explain the pictures on the early 9th-century coins, probably struck at Hedeby, showing a walking man wearing a horned headdress and carrying weapons (nos. 17–19). In research, they attracted little attention (Malmer 1966, pp. 182 ff.; Varenius 1994, pp. 185 f.). The early coinage of Scandinavia has been analysed with regard to how Christian religion and power are symbolically expressed (Malmer 2004). Royal power and its base and legitimation in Christian faith seem to have been the central message conveyed on Viking Age and medieval coins. So, does this small group of 9th-century coins depict the issuing ruler, carrying symbols of power and sacral legitimation, based on the faith in Odin? In any case, the issuer chose deliberately not to imitate continental or Anglo-Saxon Christian pictures, as was common, but to display his roots in Scandinavian





a.



b.

Fig. 10.

a. Life-size statue of a Celtic ruler, Glauberg, Hessen, Germany (Herrmann 2005, p. 22, fig. 8).

b. Partial reconstruction of the headdress found in the Glauberg grave (Herrmann 2005, p. 24, fig. 10).

pre-Christian traditions.

The Vendel Period depictions are so clearly rendered that they are almost unthinkable without really existing models. Animal masks such as those found in Hedeby (Hägg 1984, pp. 69 ff.) and other mask depictions (Lemm 2007) show that masking was not unusual in Iron Age Scandinavia. So far, though, no contemporary objects have been found which could unequivocally be interpreted as horned headdresses.<sup>9</sup> But thoughts go immediately to the well-known Vendel Age finds of horns with metal fittings that are formed as styl-

ized bird-heads (Arwidsson 1977, pl. 29, nos. 655, 682). Their similarity to the depictions is striking but they are usually interpreted as drinking horns. It seems rather improbable that they were used as attachments to helmets, though sometimes they were found in pairs.

Of course, the horned helmets could have been worked entirely from organic materials. A case where unusual headgear known from pictures could be proved to exist was the famous grave of the Celtic ruler from Glauberg, Hessen, Germany. In the vicinity of the grave, several statues were found, depicting an

armoured warrior with a headdress made of leaves (“Blattkrone”). The other equipment of the statue corresponded well with the contents of the grave. Only the “Blattkrone” had been interpreted by some scholars as a godly symbol that did not exist in reality. But when the grave was analysed again, remains of such a headdress, mainly made of wood, leather, textiles and iron wire, were found (Herrmann 2005, pp. 22 f.; Fig. 10).<sup>10</sup> The interesting parallel to the Vendel and Viking Age depictions is not only the headgear itself, but that it was part of the equipment that was considered appropriate for an “ideal” warrior of the highest social level, who possibly also had an important function in the cult. So, perhaps there are horned headdresses to be found in Vendel Period graves, if we just start to look for them?

This interpretation seems to be valid primarily for the weapon dancers with horned headgear. Other depictions of horned headgear seem to have a different background. Some of the one-eyed figures had their eye struck out with a chisel or similar implement after the piece was finished (Arrhenius & Freij 1992; Price 2002, pp. 385 ff.). In what kind of setting was this action carried out? It was probably a ritual act that alluded to how Odin gained wisdom and knowledge. The objects thus played a very important and active role in the ritual, when they lost their eyes. Is this the act when Odin is thought to take possession of his man-made image, e.g. at Uppåkra (no. 20)? As mentioned above, Mesopotamian and Egyptian statues underwent a complicated ritual for the god to inhabit his image after it had been made from dead material by human hands. Are the missing eyes traces of such inhabitation, or consecration rituals?

Another interpretation could be that the act of striking out the eye on a picture symbolized how the young warriors gained wisdom and knowledge during their initiation, in order to become good and capable members

of the leading elite. Maybe it was just women – the ones buried in the graves at Birka (gr. 571), Ekhammar, and Oseberg – who came to play an important role in this ritual in the Viking Age?

But women, too, could take over the social role and legal status of men in special cases, which included the right to inherit, but also the right to speak on *things* and to carry weapons (Klos 2007). Such “ring-ladies” (the *Grágás* law-book, see Klos 2007, pp. 70 f.) might be depicted on the Oseberg tapestries.

These last thoughts are, of course, speculative ideas rather than well-founded argumentation. But a little detail shows that it was in any case “unusual” men who were depicted with horned headgear. The men can wear clothes or can be naked – but the belt is always clearly rendered (if the middle part of the body is visible). This is not the case with all anthropomorphic depictions. The belt may have had many functions. It is not only worn for practical reasons. Weapons, other utility objects or amulets could also be carried on it. The belt was also assumed to have magic power. It gave strength and was a sign of power and rule (Runde 1999; Marzinzik 2003, pp. 4 ff.). Thor’s belt brought him double strength in battle, as told in *Gylfaginning* (20) and *Skáldskaparmál* (18). The belt can therefore be considered a significant attribute.

## Conclusion

The motif group “figure with horned headgear” is a good example showing how one motif could have been used at different times and by different social groups. During the Vendel Period, the pictures were part of a sign code of the male elite warriors who had close links to Odin, and who established a network of contacts covering Scandinavia, especially Uppland, Anglo-Saxon England and some parts of the Continent. The depictions prob-

ably do not show Odin himself, but warriors performing a ritual connected to Odin.

In the Viking Age, the Scandinavian elite warriors had shifted their long-distance contacts from the continent to the east. At the beginning of the 9th century, the motif was not used any more on weapon gear of individuals, but on coins issued by rulers. From the 9th century onwards, objects with depictions of a horned headdress were also used and even produced by women, and there is even one woman wearing a horned headdress. The women buried with pictures of a horned headdress belonged to the social elite, and there are clear indications that they performed ritual activities.

At some south Scandinavian central places, cast figurines may have been used as pictures of Odin himself, perhaps in connection with rituals of the leading class.

It has become obvious that one single interpretation of a motif group is not adequate, even if it is clearly demarcated from other motif groups. The dynamics in the use of the picture show that there are several possibilities of iconographical interpretation, depending on the context. This can be seen as characteristic of the oral societies of the Vendel and Viking Periods.

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## Notes

- 1 See e.g. *Nordeuropæisk dyrestil 400–1100 e. Kr.*, *Hikuin* 29 (2002); the whole volume contains articles on the animal styles and their history of research.
- 2 Some of the following aspects cf. Fredell 2003, pp. 67 ff., pp. 209 ff.
- 3 Thus, the context analysis presented here is different from Karl Hauck's "Kontext-Ikonographie". Hauck's method aims primarily at the iconographic interpretation of prehistoric pictures. He uses a comparative method, seeking iconographical parallels in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, see Hauck 1975; 1976, pp. 362 ff.
- 4 A. Blackwell (2007, pp. 168 f.) names some more depictions of figures with horned helmets from Merovingian England: one more piece from Finglesham; one mount from Rempstone (Nottinghamshire), from near Blakeney (Norfolk), from the Letheringsett with Glandford area (Norfolk), and from Attleborough (Norfolk); and a figurine from Ipswich (Suffolk). As this manuscript was finished in summer 2006, and only minor additions could be made, it was not possible to include them in my analysis.
- 5 The Viking Age strike-a-lights with two riders with a ring on their heads (Vang Petersen 2005, pp. 83 f.) may allude to this Vendel Period motif.
- 6 Weaving was considered a female activity, see Eshleman 2000.
- 7 The recently found Migration Age belt buckle from Ösmo, Södermanland, possibly also shows a face with a horned headdress. See Franzén 2007.
- 8 These indications are not necessarily to be seen in connection with the so-called "Männerbünde", whose existence is doubtful and controversially disputed (see Meier 2001, p. 106).
- 9 If the headdresses were mainly used in ritual contexts, they would probably have belonged to the community rather than to a single warrior. This might be one reason why they were not used as grave goods.

10 Herrmann 2005, p. 22: "Damit ist sicher, dass diese frühkeltischen Fürsten, in welcher Funktion auch immer – wobei wir durchaus auch an sakrale Funktionen denken – mit einer solchen Blattkrone wirklich aufgetreten sind und die Darstellungen von Blattkronen nicht nur als Symbole anzusehen sind."

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