MOTYW GŁOWY W DAWNÝCH KULTURACH
THE HEAD MOTIF IN PAST SOCIETIES.

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**Viking Age Animal Art as a Material Anchor?**  
**A New Theory Based on a Head Motif**

What are the mechanisms behind picture perception? This question seems to be of particular relevance, both for the insider perspective of the Viking Age people and the outsider perspective of modern archaeologists. Clinical research, psychology and cultural anthropology offer overwhelming evidence that our individual ability to perceive and decipher pictures derives from learning processes that differ from culture to culture. Primarily, picture perception is based on the viewer’s inclination to accept certain objects as a ‘canvas’ for pictorial signs (Neiß 2012a: 33-39 with references; cf. 2012b for the following). Within research history, there have been repeated attempts to establish a connection between the figurative language of skaldic poetry and the pictorial language of animal art (e.g. Lie 1952). Yet archaeologists have long remained unenthusiastic, for various reasons. Firstly, the structure of animal art does not meet our expectations of what meaningful art should look like. Secondly, Scandinavian research has traditionally been reluctant to embrace iconographic interpretations (since Müller 1880).

The starting point for my reflections is a special kind of female dress adornment, characterized by a very dramatic design ([Fig. 1: a–b](#)). Therefore, archaeologists sometimes referred to such adornments – rather anachronistically – as *baroque shaped brooches*. These Viking Age brooches were, on occasion, made of silver and often cluttered with *puzzle pictures* (Neiß 2009; 2010). A puzzle picture is an ambiguous composition containing two or more motifs, entangled into each other. Due to the limitations of our visual system, we cannot perceive all motifs at once. Instead, our vision oscillates between alternative readings (Kristoffersen & Lindstrøm 2001; Neiß 2012a). Due to their three-dimensional character, baroque shaped brooches are best likened to interactive sculptures that change shape as the viewer changes perspective. During the course of this motion, certain motifs are fading in slowly, while others pop up quickly. A hallmark of the animal art of baroque shaped brooches is the constant change between opposites: people transform into animals, and small motifs build up to form larger ones, before – once more – dissolving into smaller entities.
Here, it should be mentioned that animal art prefers abstraction to naturalism, i.e. an aesthetic ideal, which promotes grotesque motif blends.

**Mnemonic objects?**

When discussing the dress-code of the Viking Age lady, archaeologists usually differentiate between dress adornments with different functions. Most essential were two oval brooches, that held the main garment together. In addition, we sometimes find a third brooch that might be either circular, trefoil-shaped or equal-armed. To judge from grave finds, this third brooch served to pin together some kind of outer garment (perhaps in the form of a shawl or a cloak; cf. Jansson 1984: 75). Therefore, it should have been relatively easy for the bearer to take off her third brooch and to pass it around for closer inspection. Interestingly enough, it is mainly the third brooches that tend to develop puzzle pictures, while oval brooches do not seem to undergo the same type of ‘baroquisation’ (except for some subtypes to the oval brooch type P 51; cf. Jansson 1985: 70; fig. 54-55). Furthermore, specimens of silver remain an absolute exception (e.g. Eilbracht 1999: Katalog 313-314, Tafel 18). The reason might be that oval brooches were essential for pinning together the main garment and, therefore, less suited as a pawn in the social game.

This Viking Age phenomenon had an interesting forerunner in the increasing dimensions of Vendel Age disc-on-bow brooches, resulting in completely unmanageable sizes. Baroquisation can, thus, be taken as an indicator of a shift of function, from the mundane into the sphere of feast and cult (cf. Arrhenius 1962: 93, 96). The transboundary nature of the baroque shaped brooches manifests itself not least in the fact that circular baroque shaped brooches, on occasion, integrate features from equal-armed and trefoil brooches (e.g. Fig. 1: b).

One may therefore wonder whether baroque shaped brooches were produced primarily to serve practical purposes, or whether the production was motivated by other causes. For this reason, it may be interesting to examine how baroque shaped brooches were treated after the pre-Christian dress had gone out of style. Did people handle them as a last link to a bygone era, or did baroque shaped brooches work as mnemonic objects which kept the ‘good old days’ alive?
Peeping behind the curtain

Unlike their Migration Age forerunners (e.g. Kristoffersen 1995; Magnus 2001), Viking Age puzzle pictures have not yet been subjected to thorough studies. The partial blindness of archaeology in this respect is probably due to the fact that animal art has traditionally been perceived as a decor without meaning (e.g. Müller 1880), and that animal art is difficult to interpret. To cut corners, archaeologists may feel tempted to use well established style definitions as a sort of reader’s guide. This kind of analysis usually stops as soon as one has established a reading that answers archaeology’s traditional questions on dating, provenance or social context. Having established that, I do not presume to question our desire to exploit animal art for any of these purposes. In fact, archaeological research offers many problem conscious approaches that lead to sustainable results (e.g. Høilund Nielsen 2002). Meanwhile, we also need to remain aware of the pitfalls which any unreflective use of the style concept entails.

Viking Age puzzle pictures should not be compared to random shapes. Instead, one needs to acknowledge the intellectual labour put in by their manufacturers. Therefore, ignoring the phenomenon is not part of the solution. To grab the bull by the horns, humanistic research offers different methods, such as iconography (Panofsky 1975), semiotics (e.g. Sonesson 1994) and cognitive theory (e.g. Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Fauconnier & Turner 2002). The interesting thing about these three points of departure is that they do not take us in opposite directions. Instead, we end up on different epistemological levels – while iconography asks for the literal meaning of any picture, semiotics seeks to examine the conditions of human sign production. But in practice, visual semiotics often gets stuck in mapping sign systems and rules. To resort to a parable inspired by The Wizard of Oz, it seems all too easy to fall under the wizard’s spell when trying to make sense of his pictorial illusions. Meanwhile, lifting the curtain and inspecting the man behind the levers might do the trick! This is where cognitive research comes into play, as it helps us understand the mechanisms behind picture perception.
Fig. 1: a-b. 1:a – Circular baroque shaped brooch from Vestervang, Kirke Hyllinge sogn, Sjælland, Denmark (Roskilde Museum NM 2010-015766-C38040). Illustration by Michael Neiß. 1:b – Suggested reconstruction. The circular brooch mimics a trefoil brooch. Illustration by Michael Neiß.
Iconographic perspectives

The first, iconographic perspective opens up as we try to analyse the production conditions and the primary context of baroque shaped brooches. Upper class animal art exhibits parallels to the contemporary art of poetry – like the court skald, the silver caster is in need of a patron to support the creation of a masterpiece. In both arts, the true virtuoso is expected to weave a number of motifs (= kennings / puzzle pictures) into a narrow frame (= metre / object structure) without overstepping its boundaries. Like the skald, the silver caster knows the art of borrowing motifs from various sources and bringing them together in a new composition. Like the poet’s audience, beholders of animal art also must train their senses to solve the riddle. The intellectual challenge is to continually deduce new motifs, step by step and on an increasing level of abstraction. Additionally, a well-known theme in Medieval literature is the Viking Age skald who got inspired by a picture (cf. Laxdæla saga about the conception of the poem Húsdrápa by Úlfr Uggason). Given this, it is tempting to conclude that a Viking Age baroque shaped brooch could give rise to similar situations. One can, thus, imagine how a baroque shaped brooch, featuring puzzle pictures, served both as a source of inspiration and as a memory aid during the performance of poetry. When analysing baroque shaped brooches from an iconographic perspective, it is therefore tempting to interpret the pictorial language of the caster through the figurative language of the skald, i.e. through kennings and heiti (cf. Neiß 2009; 2010). In our modern sense, a kenning is a roundabout expression in the form of a compound word or phrase, whereas a heiti is a simple word synonym. Yet, according to Snorri Sturluson’s understanding, the word ‘heiti’ could denote a kenning, as well (cf. Faulkes 1998: xxxiv).

To name but one, yet frequent, example within animal art (e.g. Neiß 2007), the anthropomorphic motif in Fig. 1: c–d features a head that might be perceived as a bird in its own right. Does this puzzle picture allude to Óðinn’s heiti arnhöfði (= "eagle head")? If it does, this and other puzzle pictures might be understood as pictograms for the figurative language of skaldic poetry. With a baroque shaped brooch in one’s hand, its pictures changing at every turn, a skald should have been able to recite old poems as well as to improvise new ones (Neiß 2009; 2010).
Fig. 1: c-d Puzzle pictures in the form of an anthropomorphic motif and a bird. Illustration by Michael Neiß.
Cognitive perspectives

However, many questions remain. Is it appropriate to resort to Medieval sources from Western Scandinavia to interpret Viking Age puzzle pictures from Eastern Scandinavia? Is it really probable that baroque shaped brooches reflect the very same motifs, which happened to survive in skaldic poetry? Or does a literalistic interpretation mean that we fall into a trap set by the iconographic method? An alternative way of looking at animal art is offered by the semiotic-cognitive perspective. Thus, one can choose to perceive visual arts and poetry as two parallel branches which are sprung from the same root (cf. Horn Fuglesang 2007: 216). But in order to develop this idea, I need to elaborate on the function of the kenning in relation to the metaphor. Since antiquity, the metaphor has been perceived primarily as a means of paraphrasing – one word is replaced by another. However, modern cognitive science has shown that metaphors function on a level beyond the linguistic domain (cf. Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Lakoff & Johnson 1980). Thus, metaphors are handy interpretation keys that help people grasp unknown phenomena by resorting to better-known concepts (cf. Blending Theory, Fauconnier & Turner 2002). Thus, every culture has a set of nonverbal conceptual metaphors that give rise to novel metaphors which may be verbal or nonverbal. To give an example from our post-industrial culture, the verbal expression "he's got a screw loose" (= he’s eccentric) is a novel metaphor formed by the conceptual metaphor "the mind is a machine". What is interesting with conceptual metaphors is that they not only reflect our view of the world, but that they also determine how we interact with it (i.e. Western medicine’s way of approaching disease). In literature, the art of the kenning is often described as a poetic paraphrasing technique. With this definition, however, we come dangerously close to the obsolete idea of the metaphor as a simple means of paraphrasing. But a kenning is certainly more than that! It often combines different tropes, e.g. a metaphor with a metonym – that is, paraphrasing a word by using the name of something intimately associated (e.g. vegr flausa = "road of the ships" for the sea; vegr being the metaphor and flausa the metonym; cf. Schulte 2012 with references; Schulte in press). With their mythological riddles (e.g. Fróða meldr = "Frode’s flour" for gold), kennings also require a high level of mythological knowledge, which make them a given subject for scholars of religion.
In search of a long lost kenning model

Within Old Norse studies, there has been an interesting discussion on kenning models known through skaldic poetry. The question was, whether these kenning models used to fill the same function within Viking Age culture as conceptual metaphors do in our days. This gives rise to certain problems. Thus, the goal of the conceptual metaphor, which is to make abstract concepts tangible, does not sit well with the goal of the kenning, which is to be as enigmatic as possible (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2007: 257). Meanwhile, the hypothesis offers new keys to old archaeological mysteries. It is well known that oral cultures tend to develop specific mnemonic strategies (Ong 1982). For instance, skalds ensured the handing down of traditional poetry by blending motifs from opposite domains (e.g. land/sea), inflicting tension by means of contrast. In this way, they conceived grotesque mental pictures (e.g. fill öldu = "elephant of the waves" for boat) that proved very memorable. It has been suggested that "contrast-tension" should be regarded as a governing principle within the pre-Christian culture, i.e. both within skaldic poetry and beyond. Nykrat (= "made monstrous") was a kind of kenning that took conceptual contradictions to the extreme, creating bizarre but durable blends. Though Viking Age skalds made good use of the device, Snorri deemed it highly undesirable, in line with the Christian standards of his own time (Bergsveinn Birgisson 2007, 77-105; cf. Faulkes 2007, xxviii f.). Nonetheless, many archaeological remains display a similar way of blending opposite domains. One example would be the Iron Age boat grave that was furnished like a chieftain’s hall and the hall building that assumed the shape of a boat (cf. Herschend 1997). It is not entirely unreasonable to assume that these material expressions by their very existence had a stabilizing effect on Viking Age conceptual blends (cf. arinkjóli = "hearth ship" for house). A Medieval parallel would be the cathedral building, that – once created in the image of the cosmos – came to define to future generations what the cosmos would look like. Due to its stabilizing effect on conceptual blends, these phenomena are termed material anchors (Hutchins 2005; Dengsø Jessen 2010). The question is whether Viking Age animal art filled similar functions. When a puzzle picture shows a man’s head, which is also a bird (Fig. 1: c-d) and when Snorri Sturluson describes Óðinn’s thoughts and memory as two ravens, which either sit on his shoulders or fly across the world (Gylfaginning 38), we might suspect this to be two manifestations of one and the same kenning model, which not only seems to integrate opposite domains (human/animal, earth/air), but also three conceptual metaphors
("people are animals", "rational is up", "action is motion"), that are well known within modern culture. Moreover, there seems to be another potential link between the perception of puzzle pictures and kennings – thus, the human mind seems incapable of retaining the mental picture, caused by each motif, for more than a few seconds (Blake, Logothetis 2002: 1; Birgisson 2008: 96).

**Concluding reflections**

Were the pictorial language of the baroque shaped brooches and the figurative language of skaldic poetry interdependent? And did skaldic ekfrasis play any part in the mediation process? Or should we rather consider two parallel developments? And did Viking Age animal art continue to act as a material anchor after Scandinavia had been Christianised? Could there, thus, be some missing link between puzzle pictures and the grotesque kenning type that Snorri Sturluson called nykrat (cf. Kristoffersen 2010)? Before approaching all these questions, one needs to identify the conceptual metaphors that lurk behind the puzzle pictures within Viking Age animal art, and to distinguish them from the individual novel metaphors that different casters created. A fundamental problem in this context is our lacking knowledge of the Viking Age lifeworld. Unlike modern artwork that can be analyzed from a living context (e.g. Lundmark 2005), here the challenge lies in reconstructing the brooches original contexts in a satisfactory manner. This will not be an easy task, as baroque shaped brooches might have passed different contexts during their lifetime. Therefore, an interdisciplinary approach is an absolute necessity.
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Biographical note / Nota biograficzna

Michael Neiß is a Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Archaeology at Uppsala University, with funding from The Berit Wallenberg Foundation. He received his training at seven universities in three different countries (including Scandinavian Studies and Classical Archaeology) and holds an M.A. in archaeology and in the history of religions. His profound interest in crafts led him into an artefact-oriented line of research, including analytical drawing, 3D laser scanning and experimental archaeology. In line with this, Michael’s doctoral thesis deals with Viking Age women’s brooches, with a focus on production patterns and typology, as well as the cognitive and religious meaning of the ornament covering these brooches. Michael participates in various projects (i.a. "Die Wikingerzeit Gotlands") and is publishing preliminary results on a regular basis (circa 30 papers at present).

Michael Neiß jest doktorantem w Departamencie Archeologii na Uniwersytecie w Uppsali, finansowanym przez The Berit Wallenberg Foundation. Odbył studia (m.in. z zakresu skandynawistyki oraz archeologii klasycznej) na siedmiu uniwersytetach w trzech różnych krajach. Uzyskał stopnie magistra w zakresie archeologii i religioznawstwa. Jego szczególne zainteresowanie twórczością rzemieślniczą sprawiły, że skoncentrował swoją uwagę na badaniach artefaktów, z wykorzystaniem analitycznej dokumentacji rysunkowej, skanerów 3D, a także archeologii eksperymentalnej. W związku z tymi zainteresowaniami, jego przygotowywana praca doktorska dotyczy broszy kobiecych z epoki wikingów, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem technik produkcji i typologii, a także kognitywnego i religijnego znaczenia ich ornamentyki. Michael Neiß uczestniczy w rozmaitych projektach (m.in. "Die Wikingerzeit Gotlands") i aktywnie publikuje wstępne wyniki swoich badań (wydał obecnie około 30 artykułów).