



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Distorted, Dismembered, Diffused: Rethinking the Body in Old Norse Material Culture

Andrea C. Snow

Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft, Volume 16, Number 3, Winter 2021, pp. 335-366  
(Article)



Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mrw.2021.0044>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/850625>

# DISTORTED, DISMEMBERED, DIFFUSED: RETHINKING THE BODY IN OLD NORSE MATERIAL CULTURE

ANDREA C. SNOW

*University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

In book four of *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (c. 1073–1076), Adam of Bremen describes a set of ‘idols’ in his recollection of the “superstitions of the Swedes”:

That folk has a very famous temple called Uppsala, situated not far from the city of Sigtuna and Björkö. In this temple, entirely decked out in gold, the people worship the statues of three gods in such wise that the mightiest of them, Thor, occupies a throne in the middle of the chamber; Wotan and Frikko have places on either side . . . The third is Frikko, who bestows peace and pleasure on mortals. His likeness, too, they fashion with an immense phallus. But Wotan they chisel armed, as our people are wont to represent Mars. Thor with his scepter apparently resembles Jove.<sup>1</sup>

Adam’s descriptions of the objects within the temple are curious; they indicate some familiarity with the material culture of the region but limit its

---

I am indebted to Brittany Forniotis and Devon Murphy, who each provided attentive readership and support during the early writing stages of this article, and to Chris Halsted, who suggested *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* to me some time ago. The argument was strengthened immensely by bibliographic suggestions from two anonymous reviewers, as well as critical suggestions from the journal’s editorial board. Eduardo Douglas graciously provided guidance for locating resources on Olmec transformation figures. A Sarah and Thomas Watkins Summer Research Fellowship partially funded this study.

1. Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, trans. Francis J. Tschan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 207.

MAGIC, RITUAL, AND WITCHCRAFT (WINTER 2021)

COPYRIGHT © 2021 UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA PRESS. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

devotional valence.<sup>2</sup> Objects are described in brief and cosmetic detail, and of the few elements provided, none differentiate the objects' facial features, emotional expressions, hair lengths, ages, or any materials that would diversify them to his readers (beyond gold).<sup>3</sup> Although Thor and Wotan are afforded the inclusion of personal attributes, the descriptions of the objects are anatomically ambiguous and seem irrelevant to the chronicler's agenda—with the exception of Frikko's "immense phallus."

Genitalia aside, Adam makes so few determinations about the objects' features that, to familiarize them to his readers, he resorts to drawing parallels between them and Roman deities.<sup>4</sup> In the absence of attention to the configurations before him, he makes their forms present in the reader's mind by invoking the likenesses of Mars and Jove. Drawing such comparisons may have settled the spiritual insecurities of readers who could thereby place the unfamiliar customs of the people of the far North into a known (and discredited) category; but these were false analogues, made only to bring an otherwise mysterious community into the light of censure. As Christopher S. Wood argues, "Adam depreciates the Swedish gods as mere imitations of the Mediterranean gods, in fact no more than translations or substitutes."<sup>5</sup> In compensating for their stylistic unfamiliarity, Adam discounted the cultural

---

2. It is difficult to determine how much of Adam's account is truth and how much is fiction. Archaeological excavations have uncovered the remains of a structure at Uppsala, but these cannot securely be linked to Adam's description. Still, it is not devoid of knowledge of pre-Christian Scandinavia. Adam's naming of deities and the attention he pays to their arrangement is noteworthy. Particularly, the hierarchical order in the placement of the icons on thrones is similar to the three seated beings who appear in *Gylfaginning*: "High One," "Just-as-High," and "Third." Conversely, on the fictive aspects of Adam's *Gesta Hammaburgensis*, see Henrik Janson, "Adam of Bremen and the Conversion of Scandinavia," in *Christianizing Peoples and Converting Individuals*, ed. Guyda Armstrong and Ian N. Wood (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 83–88.

3. Elsewhere, Adam had provided more detailed material observations about other 'idols' he saw—e.g., the idol of Radigast at the temple at Rethra is described as "of gold, his bower bedecked in purple." See Adam of Bremen, 66.

4. Roman deities would be familiar to Adam of Bremen's Christian audiences, in part due to the practice of collecting objects from the ancient past and incorporating their fragments into new works. See Adam S. Cohen, "Monastic Art and Architecture, c. 700–1100: Material and Immaterial Worlds," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Monasticism in the Latin West*, ed. Alison I. Beach and Isabelle Cochelin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 519–41; Herbert L. Kessler, *Experiencing Medieval Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 4–10.

5. Christopher S. Wood, *A History of Art History* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019), 47–49.

significations encoded in these representations of the body.<sup>6</sup> But the distortion, dismemberment, and diffusion of the body in Old Norse art and material culture that he neglected, I contend, signals a definition of corporeality that was impossible to represent in a static, material form.

To the Norse people of medieval Scandinavia, the body was conceptualized as a transformative and multi-dimensional thing. This was a body unbound to a static physical form; a body that unfurled to include psychical dimensions.<sup>7</sup> It was not a restricted and closed circuit, but a supernatural set of relations. Its malleable qualities have been considered by archaeologists and anthropologists alike, and in particular, the selective manipulation, splintering, and combining of bodies—both animal and human—in burials and cremations have been identified as ways of producing meaning even in death.<sup>8</sup> Working in tandem with these studies, art historians and other interdisciplinary scholars have focused on the iconographic permutations of the body in material culture, including depictions of disjointed human parts, animal-human hybrids, and gendered figures.<sup>9</sup> Exhaustive typological assessments

---

6. For a discussion of bodies as mimetic representations through which societies encode numerous vocabularies of signification, see especially Ernst Gombrich's foundational *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

7. Ing-Marie Back Danielsson, "Bodies and Identities in the Scandinavian Late Iron Age," in *Prehistoric Europe: Theory and Practice*, ed. Andrew Jones (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 312–29.

8. The unusual, and infinitely diverse positioning of corpses may have echoed the deceased's social status, disclosed their personal identity, or signaled the beliefs to which they subscribed, and there is evidence that some burials were revisited for additional inhumations. Additionally, cremations have been observed as examples of animal and human bodies intermingling and dissolving into one another, literally and perhaps symbolically. See Neil Price, "Mythic Acts: Material Narratives of the Dead in Viking Age Scandinavia," in *More than Mythology: Narratives, Ritual Practices and Regional Distribution in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religions*, ed. Catharina Raudvere and Jens Peder Schjødt (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2012), 13–46, esp. 16–20; Neil Price, "Dying and the Dead: Viking Age Mortuary Behavior," in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2008), 259–60.

9. Recent archaeological finds suggest that the human figure was far more prevalent in art of the Viking Age than previously thought, leading to renewed reason for evaluating how its distortion fit into the Norse worldview. See, for example, Torsten Capelle, *Die verborgenen Menschen in der Germanischen Ornamentkunst des frühen Mittelalters* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksel, 2003); Ing-Marie Back Danielsson, "(Un)Masking Gender — Gold Foil (Dis)Embodiments in Late Iron Age Scandinavia," in *Thinking Through the Body: Archaeologies of Corporeality*, ed. Yannis Hamilakis, Mark Pluciennik,

have been generated to sort between them.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, the relegation of the objects on which these bodies appear to the “minor arts” has inhibited their art-historical understanding.<sup>11</sup> While their historical predecessors from the Migration Period have not been neglected, further interpretive work must be done to understand how this mode of representing the body was read by the Norse beholder of the late-eighth through early-twelfth centuries.<sup>12</sup> The present essay employs an art-historical skillset to further fortify the bridge across disciplines to position the ambiguous qualities of bodies on Old Norse objects as referents to a broad, flexible, and supernatural corporeality that transgressed the divisions between divine, human, and animal in Latin Western art and thought.

---

and Sarah Tarlow (New York: Klewer Academic, 2002), 171–91; Michaela Helmbrecht, “Wirkmächtige Kommunikationsmedien: Menschenbilder der Vendel- und Wikingerzeit und ihre Kontexte” (Ph.D. diss., Lund University, 2011); Alexandra Pesch, “Facing Faces: The Head Motif in Migration-Period Archaeology,” *Medieval Archaeology* 61, no. 1 (2017): 51–62. For a thorough review of literature and probing inquiries for the future of scholarship surrounding the figure (human or otherwise) in Norse art, see Nancy L. Wicker, “Humans and Animals: The Changing Corpus of Danish Art,” in *Viking Encounters: Proceedings of the 18th Viking Congress, Denmark, August 6–12, 2017*, ed. Anne Pedersen and Søren Sindbæk (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2020), 413–25.

10. Viking Age art has been categorized into six main styles, each named for the geographic sites at which they were first uncovered: Oseberg (c. 775/800–875 CE), Borre (c. 850–975 CE), Jellinge (c. 900–975 CE), Mammen (c. 960s–1000/1025 CE), Ringerike (c. 990–1050 CE), and Urnes (c. 1050–1125 CE). Each is characterized by permutations in the formal representation of animal figures, especially the “ribbon-animal” and “gripping beast” that were popularized prior to the Viking period, as well as the “Great Beast” motif that begins to appear in the Mammen period.

11. Morphological categorization can impede cross-object and cross-disciplinary interpretations, both of which have become increasingly more useful for scholars aiming to arrive closer to the social and cognitive machinations of medieval cultures. For a theoretical framework that encourages cross-object and cross-disciplinary practices, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Dissimilar Similitudes: Devotional Objects in Late Medieval Europe* (Brooklyn: Zone, 2020), esp. 183–220. For a critical examination of the barriers that inhibit the study of art of the Viking Age, see Nancy L. Wicker, “Would There Have Been Gothic Art Without the Vikings? The Contribution of Scandinavian Medieval Art,” *Medieval Encounters* 17 (2011): 198–229.

12. For example, Siv Kristoffersen suggests that the development of representations of dynamic bodies in the region—particularly, bodies that hybridize animal and human parts—was a process that played out across small metal objects in the preceding Migration Period. See Siv Kristoffersen, “Half Beast-Half Man: Hybrid Figures in Animal Art,” *World Archaeology* 42, no. 2 (2010): 268; similarly, see Pesch, 51–62.

## DEMARCATING BELIEFS

Not unlike the descriptions of objects in Adam of Bremen's account, Norse mythic narrative identified specific characters through minimal iconographic distinctions. Emotional expression via the face is relatively subdued, and bodies can bend and break without apparent suffering; the intermixing of human and animal forms is commonplace, and the environments that they occupy may be saturated with ornament. Figures emerge from the rends of wood, are shaped through curls of metal wire, remain relieved into stone monuments, and have been found carved into segments of animal bone, though complete human forms rendered in-the-round are small in scale and the dimensionality of a scene may be flattened into two dimensions (or low-relief carving).<sup>13</sup> Particular mythic characters are represented, but they are not distinctly personalized beyond a few attributes that would have allowed the beholder to recall the focal points of their corresponding narratives.<sup>14</sup> The hero Sigurd, for example, is portrayed with a conical helmet throughout the carvings on the façade of the Hylestad Stave Church (Figure 1), and on the Altuna stone, Thor is identified by his hammer, fishing boat, and proximity to a representation of the world-serpent Jörmungandr (Figure 2).<sup>15</sup> Thor and his accessories are formed by contour lines, giving the beholder extremely minimal cues to recognize him, while Sigurd's facial expression remains relatively static throughout the events of the portal despite that the manipulable qualities of wood can enable a carver to achieve great formal definition. Rather than emphasizing the face as the defining index of a person, a few personal attributes are depicted to locate the characters within a cultural lexicon.

---

13. Tapestries such as those from the Oseberg ship burial also feature human figures. There is potential for this study's finds to be applied to them, but because of their poor condition, they will not be discussed here.

14. According to Pesch, "If no inscription conveys the name and/or message of an image, the pictorial representations of a particular person or idea must always be identified through clear and consistent attributes or characteristics. Such attributes are, for instance, unambiguous objects, dress accessories, additional signs or beings, as well as specific physiognomic features. Often bundles of criteria can distinguish portrayals of different personas or characters" (Pesch, 51). Here, the term "specific physiognomic features" refers to a very general way of representing the body, e.g., through shapes chosen to create the contour of the head.

15. For a thorough discussion of the iconography of Sigurd, as well as his iconographic conflation with Weyland, see Lilla Kopár, *Gods and Settlers: The Iconography of Norse Mythology in Anglo-Scandinavian Sculpture* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 3–56.



**Figure 1** Detail from the remnants of the portal of the Hylestad Stave Church, twelfth-thirteenth century. Regin (left) holds his sword as Sigurd (right) sucks the blood of the dragon Fafnir from his thumb. Characters are identified by specific attributes and differentiated slightly by hair style, but their likenesses are otherwise near mirrors of one another and there is no apparent hierarchy in their placement in the composition. Historisk Museum, Oslo, Norway. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hylestad\\_-\\_Sigurd\\_Sucking\\_Thumb.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hylestad_-_Sigurd_Sucking_Thumb.jpg)

Christian conventions for representing figures, in contrast, would find ways to visibly assert the emotional expressivity of the face and body, configuring them to emphasize the tone of a narrative. This is exemplified in works such as the *Last Judgment* of Saint-Lazare at Autun (Figure 3), wherein multiple high-relief figures create a population that gives order, context, and an internal audience to the events of the composition's narrative. Their

**Figure 2** Altuna stone, eleventh century.

The humanoid form carries a hammer, is seated in a fishing boat (the bottom of which the individual's foot has broken through), and appears in close proximity to a serpentine tangle. These elements provided enough visual cues for the beholder to link the narrative to the tale of Thor's fishing trip. Altuna, Uppland, Sweden. Photograph: Gunner Creutz, Wikimedia Commons. April 2010. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:U1161\\_Altunastenen\\_Tors\\_fiskafänge\\_2.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:U1161_Altunastenen_Tors_fiskafänge_2.jpg)



postures, faces, and bodily comportment attempt to mirror that of a living person by stooping, frowning, praying, or looking inward with adoration at an oversized Christ, seated within a mandorla, in the center of the scene. Although the figure's facial expression appears almost clinical and his posture dignified, the expressions of surrounding figures demonstrate that variations in facial appearances and deportment were important for the viewer to interpret the sculpture correctly. The aims of these anatomical configurations—both bodily and facial—were to circumscribe the emotional (and spiritual) forms of expression that beholders expected, encouraged, tolerated, and disapproved of.<sup>16</sup>

16. For more on emotional expression among Christian communities in the early Middle Ages, see Barbara H. Rosenwein, "Worrying About Emotions in History," *American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (2002): 821–45, esp. 842; on the complexities of





**Figure 3** Sculpture of the *Last Judgment*, west façade, central portal, tympanum of Saint-Lazare, early twelfth century. Human figures are rendered with facial features that evoke moral character and arranged to represent a moral order. To Jesus' right are the Apostles, angels, Mary, and a heavenly Jerusalem; to his left is St. Michael, weighing the souls of the risen. The bottom register presents the damned, who stand, cower, and sit in line. Giselbertus. Autun, France. © SCALA, Florence / ART RESOURCE, N.Y. (via ARTstor).

The figures represented in Norse art do not appear to convey behavioral codes through their anatomical configurations, or at least not in the somatic sense that Christian imagery adopted. Some alluded to popular stories that were recited from memory, which is not entirely unlike the role that Christian imagery played: Christian images were comprehensible only through recognition from scriptural stories, as Norse images were comprehensible only through familiarity with the oral traditions that upheld their communal histories.<sup>17</sup> But the differences between them are the cultural factors that contributed to how they were read: the contents of each society's memory

---

emotional expression and facial representations in (later) medieval Christian art, see Elina Gertsman, "The Facial Gesture: (Mis)Reading Emotion in Gothic Art," *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 36, no. 1 (2010): 28–46.

17. Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 9–11.

and imagination were antithetical, and what images of the body evoked in Norse thought was inaccessible to a Latin Western viewer.

The ideas discussed hereafter diverge from the dominant conversations concerning the medieval body and medieval thought—discussions which lean toward Abrahamic traditions like Christianity—while still having been formed in a region conventionally included in “the West.”<sup>18</sup> Scholarship does situate the Old Norse religion and Christianity as having interoperable features that were conducive to the conversion of Scandinavia, but it must be made clear that, despite these shared points of contact, the two religions were radically different from one another.<sup>19</sup> They did, however, exist contemporaneously and in the same geographic regions, rendering them apt for a comparison that will bring an extra dimension to the established discourse.<sup>20</sup> To shed light on my assertions, I will continue to juxtapose select examples from each belief system to make distinctions between the two. Through this approach, their dissimilitude may be drawn out, the idiosyncrasies of the Old Norse ontologies may be made clear, and assumptions or misconceptions about the Norse worldview can be clarified to enable a more nuanced understanding of its materializations.

#### THE BODY PERCEIVED

A tenth-century disc plaque carved from bone features a man (Figure 4). Or, rather, it features elements that can be calculated to produce a man. Inside of the plaque’s rounded form—the function of which remains questionable to scholars today—are body parts: a set of shoulders incised with gently curving marks that produce the contours of shoulder pads and flow

---

18. Scandinavia was considered peripheral to the West for much of the early Middle Ages. Political conversion to Christianity would bring many changes, including an eventual acceptance of the far North as part of Europe and of the Latin West, but it was not imagined as part of the Latin West before this.

19. These interoperable features would meld as the Norse people became more familiar with and converted to Christianity. As a result, there are many examples of later Viking Age art that include elements from Christian and pre-Christian beliefs. See Ildar Garipzanov, “Introduction: Networks of Conversion, Cultural Osmosis, and Identities in the Viking Age,” *Conversion and Identity in the Viking Age*, ed. Ildar Garipzanov and Rosalind Bonté (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 1–20; Wicker, 207–8.

20. Much scholarship has focused on the presence of Christianity in Scandinavia, the religious conversion of its population, and the introduction of a European-style monarchy. See Anders Winroth, *The Conversion of Scandinavia: Vikings, Merchants, and Missionaries in the Remaking of Northern Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014) and Sverre Bagge, *Cross and Scepter: The Rise of the Scandinavian Kingdoms from the Vikings to the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).



**Figure 4** A Mammen-style disc plaque found at the River Thames, late-tenth century. Bone, 6 cm diameter. The British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum, available via Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0). <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/1040439001>

into a set of arms, ending with thin segments from which five elongated fingers wave. Juxtaposed with these arms are feet and legs that, strikingly, are oriented upward, and at the center of the amalgamation is an abdomen that narrows at the waist and flares outward at the chest and hip.<sup>21</sup> A set of

21. Attention has been drawn to two other objects that offer a similar treatment of forms: a snake-bound man on the head of a “thistle-brooch” from the Skaill hoard and a carved and painted wooden figure found in the north mound at Jelling. See James Graham-Campbell, “The Viking-Age Silver and Gold Hoards of Scandinavian Character from Scotland,” in *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 107 (Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 1976), 114–35; David M. Wilson and Ole Klindt-Jensen, *Viking Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), i-ii. Although evocative of chain mail, the scale-like pelleting across much of the form likely represents woven

serpents weaves across the figure, furling its limbs and waist.<sup>22</sup> At one time, a head projected outward from the circular plaque, but it has since broken off and what remains of this figure is initially puzzling to the modern viewer. We must devote a moment to making sense of what is represented and are compelled to ask: why is this body ordered in such a bizarre fashion?

It can easily be said that a set of representational—and creative—interests that differ from those of the Latin West are at play here, though expounding upon them necessitates an attentive eye. The absence of the figure's head is revealing: at one time, there had been more material for the craftsman to manipulate, meaning that this strange arrangement of the body was not compensation for a lack of bone with which to work. Human anatomy, here, contorts to the round shape of the plaque, its limbs directed by material boundaries. Yet, it was fully possible to have rendered a body that mirrored the structure of a living person, or to have scaled the body down to fit within the plaque's confines. The defiance of any sort of anatomical reality appears to have been a deliberate effort. Through this mode of visualizing, a flexible corporeality could be transposed into (or recalled from) the viewer's mind.

What these enigmatic and decentralized forms lead to is peculiar. Contorting bodies and distorted anatomies may suggest bodily violation, but these depictions appear in visual contexts that offer little narrative or iconographic indication that they were broken by violent blows. Furthermore, the functions of many of the objects they appear on—personal adornments and costume accessories, for example—have no apparent associations with acts of bodily violence. Without the necessary context to indicate assault or bloodshed, their detachment and disorder should not be considered depictions of empirically studied, medical bodies that have been literally dismembered, as this can easily feed the problematic constructions of Old Norse society.<sup>23</sup>

---

textiles. Chain mail was heavy, expensive, and difficult to produce, making it accessible only to the wealthiest of elites. Moreover, it would be unlikely to extend over the shins, as the pelleting on the disc plaque does. See Anne Pedersen, "Viking Weaponry," in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2008), 204–11.

22. At first glance, these serpents may look to be substitutions for rope that binds the body in captivity, and the body's attire would support a military dimension to the narrative being presented. However, comparable uses of serpents appear on other objects. For example, the Great Beast motif is often paired with a serpent that winds around its legs, neck, and/or abdomen (such as those on the Heggan weathervane).

23. Violent, volatile, and ultimately limited constructions of the pre-Christian Norsemen have been long in the making. In the nineteenth century, the Scandinavian

Instead, recognizing the absence of narratives of bodily violation can expand the interpretive possibilities to include broader significations that relied, at least in part, on bodily distortion.

Often, the body is imagined as a mediator of the senses and their affects.<sup>24</sup> Negotiating between the external world and our inner characters, it is a vessel that moves the self through space and allows it to experience reality in tactile ways. When a person is described by others, their body's visceral details (such as height, weight, and the shapes that compose the face) take precedence, only for their personality traits to be identified afterward, as though physical forms are more consistent than a person's spiritual and ethical qualities. These internal, psychological processes are imagined as unstable and abstract, while bodily characteristics are believed to be indisputable truths because they are perceived in a physically sensible form. Thus, modern bodies are envisioned as concrete objects with volatile psychical contents driving them from within. This is the Cartesian duality of the body that permeates modern Western thought: the mind is thought of as the active "pilot," while the body is its compliant, more-or-less stable, container.

Such an attenuate understanding of the body—as a closed circuit that can serve as a delegate for the "self"—stands in strongest possible contrast to the Old Norse body, which was far less nuclear in composition. It was not understood as a fixed or stable thing in duality with the mind, but as an ongoing, active presence that worked in concert with the mind and other psychic extensions.<sup>25</sup> Ing-Marie Back Danielsson has discussed this pre-Cartesian approach to the body as conceptually closer to the Melanesian person, who

---

states embraced and mobilized romanticized narratives of the past to increase nationalist sentiments, and similar media was enthusiastically consumed in Britain. The problems of these media constructions continue today, with far-right extremists claiming Old Norse and Norse-inspired aesthetics, iconography, and spiritual practices as symbols of (and justifications for) violence. For more on the foundations of this phenomenon, see Fredrik Svanberg, *Decolonizing the Viking Age* (London: Coronet, 2003) and Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002). For its recent manifestations, see Paul D. Sturtevant, *The Middle Ages in Popular Imagination: Memory, Film and Medievalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), esp. 26, 31, 67, 104, 190, 197.

24. A discussion of this as it occurred after the Middle Ages can be found in Alan Salter, "Early Modern Empiricism and the Discourse of the Senses," in *The Body as Object and Instrument of Knowledge: Embodied Empiricism in Early Modern Science*, ed. Charles T. Wolfe and Ofer Gal (New York: Springer, 2010), 59–74.

25. See Danielsson, "Bodies and Identities in the Scandinavian Late Iron Age," 312–29, esp. 315.

is not restricted to corporeal boundaries but is instead perceived as a composite of their social relations.<sup>26</sup> Neither the Melanesian nor the Old Norse body is limited to a physical unit, and each extend a person's agency outside of anatomical confines. The Norse body, then, cannot be effectively reduced to the active/passive duality; the Old Norse person is better considered as an *entity* with a corporeal feature, rather than as an individual outlined by their anatomical shape.

Such an ambiguously defined body, however, is fundamentally incompatible with the beliefs of the Norse people's medieval (and pre-Cartesian) Christian neighbors, who harbored an underlying fear of the loss of self through the loss of the physical body.<sup>27</sup> In great contrast, the Norse regarded the human body in ways that would be unknown to and impossible in Latin Western thought (and challenging to its general social constructs). Elizabeth Arwill-Nordbladh, among others, has situated the disabled body as a socially and culturally constructed corporeality that was conceivably part of the Old Norse norm, and connected to unique, supernatural abilities, for example.<sup>28</sup> While Christians attached psychological losses to bodily change, fears of permanent dissociation from one's identity were not at the front of the Old Norse mind. Modifications to the body could elevate or intensify the self, and shapeshifting was accepted as a natural event.

---

26. Ibid. See also Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1988), esp. 13.

27. For more on this matter, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (Brooklyn: Zone, 1995), esp. 117–225 and 318–43.

28. Elizabeth Arwill-Nordbladh has explored this idea, identifying several metal human figurines that appear to have intentionally faint, worn down, and even missing eyes. She links these to connections between sight, wisdom, and knowledge found in Eddic poems, noting that “reduced visual capacity could be compensated for in real life situations through a highly developed sense of hearing, touch or smell, which could in turn give the impression of wisdom and prophetic ability. These conditions could be interpreted and explained through the myth about Odin, who by giving one of his eyes as a token received the desired all-embracing wisdom. A manifest and real reduction in one corporeal ability would, via the idea of sacrifice and exchange, be compensated by heightened ability on the metaphorical level.” See Elizabeth Arwill-Nordbladh, “Ability and Disability: On Bodily Variations and Bodily Possibilities in Viking Age Myth and Image,” in *To Tender Gender: The Pasts and Futures of Gender Research in Archaeology*, ed. Ing-Marie Back Danielsson and Susanne Thedéen (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2012), 33–60, esp. 43, 45–46, 52.

With flexible boundaries that were not anchored to a state of permanence, neither the corporeal self nor the senses were fully reliable representations of one's being.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, three interconnected elements protracted beyond the physical self as supernatural faculties: the *hamr*, the *fylgja*, and the *hamingja*.

The *hamr*—meaning shape, form, skin, or slough—was an approximation of corporeality. A metamorphic device, it was fully capable of restructuring itself independently of magical interventions like spell casting or amulet-wearing.<sup>30</sup> Unlike the Christian body, it was not a focal point of spiritual devotion, but a tool through which supernatural acts could be performed and metaphysical achievements completed.<sup>31</sup> The *hamr*'s ability to shapeshift was foremost among its qualities, and its capacity to do so was always viable.<sup>32</sup> It was, however, only a fragment of a much larger conception of bodily wholeness.

The other bodily components that were attached to the *hamr* projected beyond it as psychological dimensions.<sup>33</sup> These were not quite souls—the Christian soul (*sál*) was a singular entity that was in conflict with the body and sought divine connections in order to achieve salvation. But such souls and their salvation were not imparted on Norse thought until after Christianity

---

29. Deities, too, were characterized with metamorphic bodies, although their capacity to perform supernatural feats was more intensified and had fewer limitations. See Declan Taggart, "Do Thor and Odin Have Bodies? Superperception and Divine Intervention Among the Old Norse Gods," *Religions* 10, no. 8 (2019): 468–89.

30. Neil Price, *The Viking Way: Magic and Mind in Late Iron Age Scandinavia* (Oxford and Philadelphia: Oxbow, 2019): 30 and 301; Catharina Raudvere, "Now You See Her, Now You Don't: Some Notes on the Conception of Female Shape-Shifters in Scandinavian Traditions," *The Concept of The Goddess*, ed. Sandra Billington and Miranda Green (London: Routledge, 1996), 41–55.

31. Prior to Thomas Aquinas's reformulation of the body-soul relationship in the thirteenth century, the Christian body was considered social property that belonged to, and was on loan from, God. Its death and resurrection were subjects of continuous philosophical and theological consideration. See Assaf Pinkus, *Visual Aggression: Images of Martyrdom in Late Medieval Germany* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2021), 31, and *passim*; Bynum, *Fragmentation of the Body*, 13–14, 45, 47, 206, 210–11, and *passim*.

32. Hilda R. E. Davidson, "Shape-Changing in The Old Norse Sagas," in *Animals in Folklore*, ed. J. R. Porter and W. H. S. Russell (Ipswich: Folklore Society, 1978), 126–42. For more on the continuity of the *hamr* in Old Norse Sagas, see Régis Boyer, *Le Monde du Double: La Magie chez les Anciens Scandinaves* (Oxford: Berg International Publishers, 1986).

33. Price, *Viking Way*, 30–31.

permeated society.<sup>34</sup> However, somewhat like the Christian soul, the *fylgja* and *hamingja* can be understood as qualities of one's lived experience that were bonded with the aforementioned approximation of the anatomical body and affected by its physical condition.<sup>35</sup> The *fylgja*, a "follower" who was always identified as female and appeared in dreams or premonitions, and the *hamingja*, a personification of an individual's luck, were pliable entities that held overlapping purposes.<sup>36</sup> A *hamr* was always attached to at least one *fylgja* and could often have more that were acquired through inheritance from a deceased family member (particularly if they were a chieftain or other powerful member of a community).<sup>37</sup> *Fylgjur* were also understood as having autonomous decision-making skills, rejecting individuals whom they did not favor. In essence, they were forms of supernatural counsel conjoined with the physical self. They could take human shape, assuming a *doppelgänger* manifestation to reflect a person's character or social status, or the shape of an animal to represent the person's future.<sup>38</sup> *Fylgjur* appeared in times of crisis to assist in decision-making, protect people from harm, or grieve those who

---

34. Even with the introduction of the soul to Norse religious communities, the traditional ways of thinking about the body and its spiritual components that preceded Christianity would take centuries to change.

35. Price, *Viking Way*, 30–31; Catharina Raudvere, "Trolldóm in Early Medieval Scandinavia," in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe, Volume 3: The Middle Ages*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 101–2.

36. To some extent, these may have been referenced by the *hugr*, which was an aura that combined "personhood, thought, wish, and desire." Others could feel the *hugr* intuitively, and it is possible that it could be represented through a particular emotional or narrative tone in a work of art. See Price, *Viking Way*, at 30–31; Raudvere, "Trolldóm in Early Medieval Scandinavia," 102.

37. Associated with generational preservation and continuity, these nurturing embodiments represented the ancestral mothers that Old Norse religion honored and glorified. For example, in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, the main character, Gisli, is visited by two women. The tale is rife with struggle, as Gisli must navigate social, political, and familial tensions throughout it. One woman attempts to offer him routes to good fortune, while the other suggests that he behave violently. Each advises him in some capacity, although their intentions are contrasting. See Price, *Viking Way*, 30; Lotte Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality: An Archaeology of Scandinavia AD 400–100* (New York and London, Routledge, 2011), 82–83.

38. Seeing one's own *doppelgänger* was a portent of death. See Catharina Raudvere, "Popular Religion in the Viking Age," in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2008), 239; Else Mundal, *Fylgjemotiva i Norrøn Litteratur* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1974); G. Turville-Petre, "Liggja fylgjur þínar til Íslands," *Saga-Book* 12 (1937): 119.



were close to death; in doing so, they were grounded to the physical realm by means of the *hamr*'s corporeal integrity.

The *hamingja* was an embodiment of good fortune. Similar to the *fylgja* in that it was an inherited dimension of the body, and yet different in that it could manifest or disperse situationally and be transferred outside of a familial system, the *hamingja* produced effects on the *hamr*'s physical wellness relative to its absence or presence. As Neil Price notes, recurring instances of the *hamingja* abandoning and returning to people—often before or while they were subjected to a catastrophic or deathly situation—appear in the *Sagas*, imputing it in the circumstances that brought good or ill to a person.<sup>39</sup>

Although they have been identified and discussed as distinctive components of the body here, these elements were the ingredients of a holistic framework of a living person.<sup>40</sup> Combined, they produced a self that included physical flesh as well as ancestral and psychic faculties. This body, in totality, was a locus for the natural and supernatural. With these physical and psychical complexities, the Old Norse conception of the body was not only an anatomical impossibility in Western thought—it was also a representational impossibility in crafted matter.

When the body is not disrupted, but represented obscurely or in fragmented parts, it becomes a signal for something that is more expansive and, in turn, more effectively communicated through associations than through direct address. Dismembered and enigmatic bodies become traces of a larger whole that, as David Summers has succinctly put, “cannot yield the equivalent of a resemblant image.”<sup>41</sup> The cues that body parts authorize in the beholder's mind refer to a larger structure of ideas in which the corporeal is a participant, but not the conclusive end. Following this line of thought, objects depicting bodily forms compromised between representing the body as it appeared before the eye and as it manifested psychically.

---

39. Price, *Viking Way*, 30.

40. Catharina Raudvere has argued that there is no clear distinction between *hamr* and *fylgja*, and that the *fylgja* is an immutable symbolic expression of the person's moral qualities (and is thus in some ways analogous to, though perhaps less detachable from the body than, the Christian soul). While fluidity between concepts is characteristic of the Old Norse worldview, it is difficult to effectively discuss these embodiments when dwelling solely on their interchangeable qualities in short form. Instead, I have untangled the *hamr*, *fylgja*, and *hamingja* and presented them digestibly. For more on their similarities, see Catharina Raudvere, *Kunskap och Insikt I Norrön Tradition: Mytologi, Ritualer och Trolldomsanklagelser* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2003), 71.

41. David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London and New York: Phaidon, 2011), 256.

With such a pliable, multi-dimensional idea of the body, Norse artists would have found the rendering of specific features through traditions like portraiture an inadequate means of figuration.<sup>42</sup> This is not to say that the rendering of distorted bodily features is exclusive to Old Norse art. The Latin West lacked a comprehensive semiology of the human face and its different movements until the later Middle Ages, and Christian thought fixated on the moral dimensions of facial expression and the prioritization of orderly facial features (which represented the discipline of one's character) over nuanced, personalized expressions (which were often perceived as suspicious and indicative of sin).<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, the Norse emphasis on distorted bodies stands in contrast to contemporaneous (and later) Christian approaches in that it directs the viewer to a *conception of bodiliness*, rather than to an individual represented by a bodily unit.

Here, I am not suggesting that the depiction of personal likeness was exclusively the product of the institutionalized monotheism that Christianity would bring. Instead, Norse forms were on the margins of what bodies were or could be, and morality and immorality were not of central concern in portraying them. In the absence of thorough or typified distinctions, the set of supernatural relations that comprised the body could be attached to enigmatic figures. Accordingly, the disjointed or even dismembered body parts like the upward-turning legs that connect to spiral hips on the disc plaque are significations of a malleable bodiliness. Their contortion and breakage figure a supernatural structure, multiplying the meanings that images of bodies could carry.<sup>44</sup>

---

42. Direct representations of specific characters likely represented a single dimension of how bodies or mythic figures were conceived, rather than the body as it was wholly imagined. See Andrea C. Snow, "Dialogues with *Ginnungagap*: Norse Runestones in a Culture of Magic," *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 51 (2020): 8.

43. Emotions were still expressed through facial features, but there are no known examples of portraiture in the Latin West—at least, not in the sense that the physical likeness of an individual was represented to the best of the artist's ability—from c. 800 to c. 1321. Their absence has been attributed to the loss of ancient philosophical texts that emphasize the effect of emotions on the human body (especially the face), and the resurfacing of emotions and passions in narrative images in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is thought to be linked to the rise of religious theater. See Wilibald Sauerländer, "The Fate of the Face in Medieval Art," in *Set in Stone: The Face in Medieval Sculpture*, ed. Charles T. Little (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006), 2–17.

44. This should not be aligned with the fragmentation of the Christian body, which could produce spiritual meanings that were associated with a heavenly whole. For

## THE BODY TRANSFORMED

Eight figures are arranged around the plate of a silver disc-brooch that was cast in Gotland some time during the ninth or tenth centuries (Figure 5).<sup>45</sup> Made for wear on the person as an adornment (and a potential indicator of social status), the object is of exceptional quality both in design and craftsmanship.<sup>46</sup> Two of the figures that project outward from its front plate are humans who grasp protrusions extending from their chins (which may be schematizations of facial hair); four are quadrupedal beasts with elaborately embellished bodies comprised of knots and rings, which twist their heads backwards, tongues grazing their backs; and two more are figures whose forms appear to be deliberately simplistic (if not dull), which divide the composition in half. At the center of the object is a knob from which eight disembodied animal heads project, curving downward to gaze at the diagonally hatched, beaded bands that cover the plate's ground. At just under eight centimeters in diameter and four centimeters in height, the brooch is bustling with lively details. What, exactly, their presences indicate is a question that has been unanswered.

There are obvious morphological differences between the beings on the brooch's surface. The humans and quadrupeds are more technically distinguished than their blunt, animal-headed colleagues, whose forms lack open-work, eye recessions, or bodily ornamentation (Figure 6). Pallid creatures,

---

example, body parts that were venerated as relics, as well as the reliquaries that contained them, referred to the body of the martyr, their *vita*, and their status as intercessor for God; and Christ's footprints, left on the Mount of Olives, substantiated both his physical presence and his departure to Heaven. Advanced discussions of this subject can be found in Bynum, *Dissimilar Similitudes*, esp. 221–50, and Cynthia Hahn, *Strange Beauty: Issues in the Making and Meaning of Reliquaries, 400—circa 1204* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2013).

45. The brooch, now in the British Museum's collection, was found at the River Thames, which was a central route for Viking and other Norse travel during the period.

46. The production and wear of personal jewelry throughout the Vendel and Viking periods is an important subject in archaeological scholarship. Much work has aimed to produce thorough typologies to accurately encompass the objects found in depositions by considering how they were used in rituals, exchanges of social and religious power, and in contexts of re-use. The motility and charisma of jewelry have been of particular interest in recent scholarship, particularly as it relates to gender. See, for example, Zanette T. Glørstad and Ingunn M. Røstad, "Echoes of the Past: Women, Memories, and Disc-on-Bow Brooches in Vendel- and Viking- Period Scandinavia," *European Journal of Archaeology* 24, no. 1 (2021): 89–107; Nancy L. Wicker, "Mapping Gold in Motion: Women and Jewelry from Early Medieval Scandinavia," in *Moving Women Moving Objects (400–1500)* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 13–32.



**Figure 5** A disc-brooch from Gotland, Sweden, late tenth–early eleventh century. Silver, 8 cm diameter. The British Museum, London, England. © The Trustees of the British Museum, available via Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

they are instead composed of heads with protruding, rounded ears and softly incised eye contours in the shapes of almonds. Their arms would be indistinguishable from their bodies if they were not segmented at the wrist (similar to the segments at the wrist on the bone disc plaque) or for the recession beneath their jawlines. A glance at these figures might result in the quick resignation of their differences to matters of mass-production, but the attention paid to their associates indicates that this discrepancy is a matter of intent.

These imprecise forms are informed—even contextualized—by the precise bodies accompanying them. Human figures are active: tugging at their beard-like protrusions, their broad stances and open mouths indicate ritualized motions that demand full anatomical participation. Full of potential, their poses are comparable to the movements described in ritual-based dances, suggesting that they are in a state of initiation.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, the quadrupeds

47. For more on ritual dances, see Price, *Viking Way*, 247, 316–17.



**Figure 6** Detail of the disc-brooch from Gotland, Sweden, Late-ninth or tenth century. The forms of the human at the top of this photo and the quadrupedal animals flanking him have been elaborated more thoroughly than those of the creatures at the bottom. Silver, 8 cm diameter. The British Museum, London, England. © The Trustees of the British Museum, available via Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

have operative bodies, twisting their heads backward to lick their flanks. Their helicoid anatomies, differing from the neighboring human and non-human figures, are composed of ribbed bands. Comparatively, the complex forms and contorting poses of these creatures display bodily achievement. And, concurrently, the vaguely configured animal forms separate the humans and quadrupeds into rhythmic sets. One human and two quadrupeds are balanced on either side of the brooch, with a set of indefinite hybrid creatures creating a dividing line between them. Here, there is an order—a structural organization for the arrangement of bodies.

In his foundational theory, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” Jeffrey Jerome Cohen frames the hybrid creature as a monster that is “externally incoherent.”<sup>48</sup> The hybrid monster, according to Cohen, resisted hierarchical and taxonomic classifications, undermining the epistemologies of Western

48. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in *Classic Readings on Monster Theory Demonstrare, Volume One*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Marcus Hensel (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2018), 43–54, esp. 45 and 46.

intellectuals such as Pliny the Elder, Augustine of Hippo, and Isidore of Seville.<sup>49</sup> Defying categorization, its body was dangerously problematic for binary thinking and thus a site of cultural alterity, or, as Cohen puts it, “difference made flesh.”<sup>50</sup> But this category-induced anxiety was not quite present, or at least not in the same way, in Norse thought.<sup>51</sup> There, animals occupied and acted in the same world that humans and deities did, unhindered by the discrepancies that populated Western intellectualism.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, as Siv Kristoffersen has noted, animals, humans, and objects were assigned the potential to metamorphose: “[I]n the world-view of this society every indication points to a prevailing perception of the human-animal relation as a dynamic unity open to changes and transformation.”<sup>53</sup> The metamorphic and hybrid body, then, was not inherently threatening or disruptive to the structure of Old Norse society.

In material culture, these fluid relations between animals and humans are articulated iconographically. According to Lotte Hedeager’s observations, the constitutive elements of bodies could be assembled from non-human animal parts to “alter the definition of a person,” while clearly detailed human parts such as hands or hair were retained to signify the human body.<sup>54</sup> Examining evidence of this in jewelry, weaponry, textiles, wood carving, and (most attentively) in gold foil figures, Hedeager noted that the reverse also occurs: human parts may be fused into depictions of animals, such as faces integrated into the legs of birds. These images, she adds, fundamentally defy the Christian hierarchy of beings, which positions humans as distinctly different from animals in that the former are created in “God’s image.”<sup>55</sup> To their intended viewers, however, these representations were admissible and produced no known apprehensions about hybridity.

When looking to the ambiguous figures on the Gotlandic disc-brooch, perhaps we should consider the division that they create as a calculated

---

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid.

51. Recent scholarship from Rebecca Merkelbach uses Cohen’s theory to reconsider the monstrousness of humans in medieval Icelandic literature by examining human characters who, because of their actions committed against society, appear or become inhuman. Merkelbach, *Monsters in Society: Alterity, Transgression, and the Use of the Past in Medieval Iceland* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2019).

52. Lotte Hedeager, “Split Bodies in Late Iron Age/Viking Age Scandinavia,” in *Body Parts and Bodies Whole — Changing Relations and Meaning*, ed. Marie Louise Stig Sørensen, Katharina Rebay-Salisbury, and Jessica Hughes (Oxford: Oxbow, 2010), 117.

53. Kristoffersen, “Half Beast-Half Man,” 265.

54. Hedeager, “Split Bodies,” 111–18, esp. 113.

55. Ibid.

adumbration—a conscious effort to represent a moment of liminality between beings. With ears protruding from the tops of their heads like animals and jaws resting on sets of humanlike wrists, these figures are in a state of flux wherein the definition of “body” is not static but represented in the moment of anatomical conversion. Hybridity, here, is not the endpoint. The formal obscurity of bodies marks the extraordinary, pointing to a transitional stage between human and animal. They, as well as the being between them, are each visible on what appears to be a wheel of metamorphosis. Similarly, the disc plaque, in being made of bone—likely from a non-human animal—presents a reflexivity between the materiality of the object and the representation of the body, and between the image of the human and the substance of the animal.

Clarification should be offered here. The “dynamic unity” described above by Kristofferson may inspire associations with the transformative animal-warriors of Old Norse literature. Although Leo Diaconus’s *Historia libri decem* and John Skylitzes’s *Synopsis of Byzantine History* likened the behavior of Norse warriors on the battlefield to that of animals, thus producing an easy route for interpreting the brooch’s figures as the *berserkir* and *úlfhédnar* warriors who became bears and wolves by means of trance, I would like to push the analysis of this object beyond the scope of combat.<sup>56</sup> Transformation should not be considered singular in tone or meaning, especially when bodily metamorphosis could take place outside of the battlefield. The mythic dragon Fáfñir, for example, began not as a creature but as a man, and it has been proposed that his metamorphosis was the result of his fierce and possessive behavior.<sup>57</sup>

---

56. In these accounts, warriors appear to be engaging in a type of metempsychosis rather than metamorphosis. There is little indication that their bodies were understood to physically change. Instead, it is their behavior—producing animal-like sounds and moving with great speed and voracity—that the authors remark upon. See Leo Diaconus, *Historia libri decem: et liber de Velitatione bellica Nicephori Augusti*, ed. Charles Benoit Hase (Bonnae: Weber, 1828); John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History, 811–1057*, trans. John Wortley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Price, *Viking Way*, 306–7.

57. The creatures of Norse myth and folklore may have represented diverse social and religious concepts, but they were not always impersonations of distinct species. These fantastical animals are better understood as amalgamations of the seen world and the unseen world that land between the real and the imaginary. See Santiago Barreiro, “The Hoard Makes the Dragon: Fáfñir as a Shapeshifter,” in *Shapeshifters in Medieval North Atlantic Literature*, ed. Santiago Barreiro and Luciana Cordo Russo (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 53–81; Kristina Jennbert, *Animals and Humans: Recurrent Symbiosis in Archaeology and Old Norse Religion* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2011), 189.

Less permanent was the transformation of his brother, Otr, who could become an otter to amplify his fishing skills and revert back again (presumably at will).<sup>58</sup> Transformation, in these instances, could be initiated for practical endeavors and, if enacted through poor moral integrity, could result in irreversible bodily changes.<sup>59</sup> So, while transformation certainly could occur on the battlefield, it was not confined to warfare or conflict.<sup>60</sup>

When considering the disc-brooch, we can note that, like the disc plaque, it lacks iconographic details that would link it to military conflict. The quadrupeds that lick their backs appear more equine than canine or ursid, clarifying that the final stage of transformation was neither *berserkir* nor *úlfhéðnar*, and it is also made of silver, which is physically soft and thus practically unsuitable for the battlefield. As it is quite intimate in size, the brooch's details are arranged too closely to one another to be easily visible from even a short distance. They are fusions of the seen world and the unseen world that land between the real and the imaginary, the palpable and the figmental. So, it is also unlikely that these strange bodies would be legible indicators of social status. Perhaps, then, the object was more personal than professional, to be worn as an indicator of the wearer's relationship with the otherworldly, rather than their authority among humans.

To draw my own cross-cultural comparison, I would like to consider a set of three "transformation figures" from the Olmec culture of Mesoamerica. The first, which is housed at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, kneels on one leg, their body filled with potentiality (Figure 7). Their posture leans slightly forward, arms bent at the elbow with hands pressed against each knee. From their upward-turning head the (slightly muted) Olmec markers of a jaguar emerge: a cleft head, flared upper lip, and a downturned open mouth with toothless gums. The second figure, now located in the Dumbar-ton Oaks Museum collection, stands upright in a combative pose as feline features become more pronounced (Figure 8). Brows are now bulky,

---

58. Barreiro, "The Hoard Makes the Dragon," 53–81.

59. Through Merkelbach's lens, Fáfnir's (eventually permanent) transformation from human into dragon may be categorized as monstrous because it is the result of antisocial behavior. Like the *draugr*—human revenants who, in multiple narratives, refuse to abandon the property they owned in life—of her study, Fáfnir gambles with the fundamental structures of societal reproduction by hoarding wealth. Nevertheless, any inherent monstrousness associated with his transformation is fully countered by Otr, who presents little threat to society and retains his ability to revert back into a human form. See Merkelbach, *Monsters in Society*, 194–96.

60. It is of note that the *Æsir*, and especially Loki and Odin, transform throughout the sagas and *Eddas*, further indicating that transformation was a widespread skill.





**Figure 7** Crouching Male Transformation Figurine. Mexico, Olmec. 900–300 BCE. Serpentine stone with traces of cinnabar. 10.8 cm (4 1/4 in.). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California. Public domain. <https://collections.lacma.org/node/253778>



**Figure 8** Transformation Figure. Mexico, Olmec. 900–300 BCE. Serpentine stone with traces of cinnabar. 19 × 8.9 × 7.9 cm (7 1/2 × 3 1/2 × 3 1/8 in.). Dumbarton Oaks Museum, Washington, D.C. <http://museum.doaks.org/objects-1/info/22750>

furrowing above a flat nose and snarling mouth. The final figure continues to stand combatively upright, each hand poised in a humanlike grip, but their facial features have been superseded by those of a jaguar and a tail protrudes from their back (Figure 9). Although it is uncertain if these objects were created by a single artist or displayed as a group, they have been analyzed as representations of the stages of a single ritual act in which the human becomes a supernatural entity that, anatomically, appears as both human and animal.<sup>61</sup> We might read the figures on the Gotlandic disc-brooch as a similar

61. Otherwise referred to as a “werejaguar.” See F. Kent Reilly, III, “The Shaman in Transformation Pose: A Study of the Theme of Rulership in Olmec Art,” *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University* 48, no. 2 (1989): 16.

**Figure 9** Transformation  
Figure in Combat Stance.  
Mexico, Olmec. 900–300  
BCE. Serpentine stone  
with traces of cinnabar.  
7.9 × 4.4 × 2.9 cm  
(3 1/8 × 1 3/4 × 1 1/8 in.).  
Dumbarton Oaks Museum,  
Washington, D.C. [http://  
museum.doaks.org/  
objects-1/info/22764](http://museum.doaks.org/objects-1/info/22764)



sequence of referent figures who depict the stages of a single ritual act, perhaps with the aim of arriving at a particular state of consciousness or being. However, the Olmec figures have been reliably linked with the supernatural power of elites, and were also tied to warfare, as indicated by the contentious stances of the second and third figures, as well as holes drilled into their hands, which would have held weapons.<sup>62</sup> Such a measure cannot be securely made for the beard-tugging, weaponless, and four-legged bodies on the disc-brooch. Nonetheless, they can be observed as a comparable effort to visualize a multi-stage event in which human becomes non-human: figures that are clearly human mark a “beginning” moment, a completed quadrupedal animal marks

62. Ibid.: 4–21; see also Michael D. Coe, “Olmec Jaguars and Olmec Kings,” in *The Cult of the Feline: A Conference in Pre-Columbian Iconography October 31 and November 1 1970*, ed. Elizabeth P. Benson (Dumbarton Oaks: Washington, D.C., 1972), 1–12. It is important to note that, while these specific figures have been tied to Olmec elites, human/jaguar metamorphosis was not exclusive to high-class persons and belief in transformation is commonly held across Central and South America. See e.g. Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), chapters 2–3.

the end, and the phase in which the human body is re-oriented toward animal is expressed by the sublimated anatomies of the figures in between. A passage of time is signified, a story told, and the categories of human and animal are transgressed.

#### THE SPACES BETWEEN

Amidst the figures on the Gotlandic disc-brooch are rows of beading that undulate in graduated diamond patterns. Each tiny orb, planted one after another, builds a visually demanding, entirely unreal arena. With no moment of pause, no area devoid of elaboration, neither an austere landscape nor a domestic setting is configured here. The result is an abstruse location resembling nothing of the seen world. Despite the unrecognizability of this environment, it is still, in some capacity, a space—bodies occupy it and events like transformation transpire within it. The total sum of its details, however, is difficult to identify.

Medieval ornament's capacity to refer has been the subject of many scholarly conversations. The ornamentation on the Gotlandic disc-brooch—and on other Norse objects—is often geometrical or schematic, producing a challenge in discerning what it references or how it might have familiarized objects to the beholder. A clean solution would be to assign such ornamentation to *horror vacui* and move forward; yet the Platonic and Aristotelian intellectualism from which this concept arose did not permeate the creative minds of the Norse, at least not through institutionalized dissemination, until after conversion to Christianity.<sup>63</sup> Hence, correlations between their ideals are dubious and the thorough formations residing in the “between spaces” of these objects cannot be satisfactorily explained by a fear of the absence of the divine. It is, however, clear that they created a form of elaboration that specified, and qualified, a space.<sup>64</sup> With this in mind, consider: if the figures that exist in these arenas were products of a supernatural conception of the body, then so too might the elaboration surrounding them reference an extraordinary natural environment.

63. Some similarities between Old Norse and the Latin West's intellectual cultures do stand, but they should not be understood as direct parallels so much as institutions that would fuse with Latin styles of learning. For a useful discussion on the fusion of the two after conversion, see Gunnar Hardarson, “Old Norse Intellectual Culture: Appropriation and Innovation,” in *Intellectual Culture in Medieval Scandinavia, c. 1100–1350*, ed. Stefka Georgieva Eriksen (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), 35–73.

64. For more on ornament as a spatial qualifier, see Summers, *Real Spaces*, 395–98.

What constituted the surrounding macrocosm, in the Old Norse mind, was an aggregation of supernatural perspectives on the material, ecological, and spiritual. We should carefully avoid anthropocentrism in any scholarly assessment, as humans (and animals) were integrated into this sphere, not raised above it.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, they were not alone. Comprising what Neil Price calls “the invisible population,” supernatural beings of environmental and cosmological purposes were omnipresent.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, these remarkable inhabitants were both among and *within* the physical world, rendering it an inherently vital, *supranatural* environment.<sup>67</sup>

The inception of environmental vitality can be traced to Old Norse cosmogonic myth. Counter to the Christian belief in the creation of the universe *ex nihilo*, in Norse thought there had always been *something*: a proto-space called *Ginnungagap*. Far from a parallel of the “incipient void” of the Aristotelian intellectualism that Christian craftsmen and theologians had adopted, it was an explicitly identified place to which powerful agency was assigned, a site at which miraculous events took place, and a thing to which supernatural entities were bonded.<sup>68</sup> *Ginnungagap* was neither an embodied absence nor a negation of substance, but a supernatural elsewhere from which all matter emerged. As such, it had the power to create, enhance, and sustain life. Its products were all-encompassing. In essence, this proto-space was the source of the very fabric of the universe, and everything that existed was, in some capacity, *of* it.

Fascinatingly, *Ginnungagap* was also a site of bodily events. It was there that the dismembering of the primordial giant Ymir, as well as the subsequent construction of the world from his corpse, took place. From his flesh was the earth made, the ocean from his blood, the mountains from his bones, and the sky from his skull.<sup>69</sup> Ymir’s body, fractioned and diffused, created the world that humans were part of.

---

65. For a thorough ecocritical analysis of Old Norse texts, see Christopher Abram, *Evergreen Ash: Ecology and Catastrophe in Old Norse Myth and Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019).

66. Price, *Viking Way*, 26–31.

67. *Landdisir* and *landvættir*—enigmas that could serve as guardians that inhabited a place—point to this quality in particular. Other members of the invisible population are vast in number and, as such, are beyond the scope of this study. See Price, *Viking Way*, 29–30; Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1957), 185.

68. Price, *Viking Way*, 136; Snow, “Dialogues with *Ginnungagap*,” 22–25.

69. From *Gylfaginning*: “Then Third added: ‘They also took [the giant’s] skull and from it made the sky. They raised it over the earth and under the four corners placed a

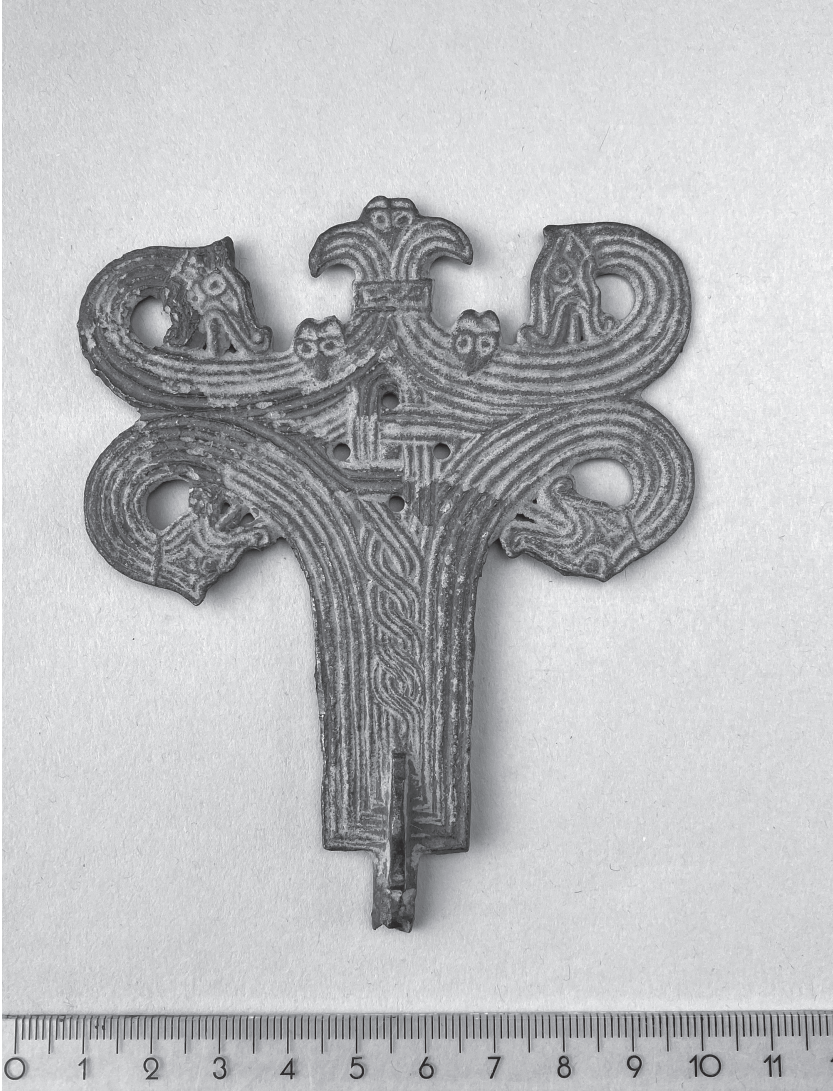
Space itself was bodily in composition and supernatural—even cosmic—in origin. The adequate depiction of the lively fields in which all things existed could not be achieved through directly imitative forms. Again, we encounter the problem of representing an abstract yet intrinsic concept. How did the emphatically invisible participate in the visible domain? How were these spaces between figures concerned with the generative and vital demeanor of the environment they contended with? Their dreamlike aesthetic seems unnatural, invoking no apparent relationship to the seen world. But, conceivably, our modern point of reference for naturalism—which centers the visual as it exists according to natural laws and temporal processes underwritten by empirical science—is too narrow a lens for Old Norse objects in that it equates that which is represented as *realistic* with that which is *naturalistic*.<sup>70</sup>

If the limits of “naturalism” are pushed, then raised beads, ribbing, and other elaborations become evocative of the interrelations between the proto-space *Ginnungagap* and the diffused bodiliness of the cosmos, which were thought of as innate (and thus natural) relationships. For example, the curls of a bronze costume needle head from Gotland terminate with four draconic heads (Figure 10). Similar to the quadrupeds on the aforementioned silver disc-brooch from the same region, tongues protrude from their mouths to connect the limbless fragments to the ribbed channels that flow up and down the object. Segments split away from these channels, intertwining at the object’s center to create a squared knot. Two of them—which extend from the uppermost heads—weave together down the shaft to create a shifting, hypnotic pattern. All of these features produce “connective tissues,” although not in a medical sense. Much as the raised beading on the silver disc-brooch from Gotland, the embellishments on the needle head’s channels link one anatomical component to another, making the spaces between bodies into legible surfaces that correlate all parts into a whole. In much the same way, the supernatural forces of space were always connected to an aggregate, supernatural Other.

---

dwarf. These are called East, West, North, and South.” See Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, trans. Jesse L. Byock (London: Penguin, 2005), 16. See also Miriam Mayburd, “Between a Rock and a Soft Place: The Materiality of Old Norse Dwarves and Paranormal Ecologies in *Fornaldarsögur*,” in *Supernatural Encounters in Old Norse Literature and Tradition*, ed. Daniel Sävborg and Karen Bek-Pedersen (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), 193.

70. For more on the waxing and waning of the definition of naturalism, see David Summers, “Naturalism and Photography,” in *Real Spaces*, 601–4.



**Figure 10** A costume needle head from Gotland, Sweden, ninth–eleventh century. Bronze. The Swedish History Museum, Stockholm, Sweden. Photograph by Antje Wendt, licensed under Creative Commons by 2.5 SE. <https://historiska.se/upptack-historien/object/107220-nal-draktnalshuvud-av-brons/>

Naturalistic ornament, as Jean-Claude Bonne has argued, was a point of orientation that enabled medieval viewers to engage with objects and, through them, form connections to the divine.<sup>71</sup> Thus, ornament had agency in the apprehension of belief.<sup>72</sup> Under a burgeoning definition of the naturalistic, this theoretical thread can unravel something within the busy in-between of Old Norse objects. It is not that what is happening in these “between spaces” does not happen elsewhere, but that the particular structure to which they refer is unique—a nature that is supernature, and a diffused body from which other bodies can emerge.<sup>73</sup>

### SYNTHESIS

Detached from their ambiguity, we may be impelled to look past the bodies on Old Norse objects, much as Adam of Bremen did. And, overwhelmed by the spaces between them, we may be quick to ignore the nuances of the objects. But we should not be. The rushing ornament and energetic anatomies played across these objects are thoughtfully made. A head that erupts from a wagon found in the Oseberg burial mound emerges not from nothing, but from something (Figure 11); the seemingly abridged anatomies of the creatures

---

71. See Jean-Claude Bonne, “Entre l’image et la Matière: la Choséité du Sacré en Occident,” *Bulletin de l’Institut Historique Belge de Rome* 69 (1999): 77–111; see also Ittai Weinryb, “Living Matter: Materiality, Maker, and Ornament in the Middle Ages,” *Gesta* 52, no. 2 (2013): 113–32.

72. Bonne also argued that in the absence of ornament, engagement with belief is thought to have dissipated, which does not translate well into the Old Norse worldview. As I have mentioned, the busy spaces of Norse objects should not be paralleled with the busy spaces of Christian objects, but selective use of Bonne’s interpretive framework is fruitful.

73. Clear representations of naturalistic ornament such as foliates do not begin to appear until the Mammen style became popularized (c. 960–1025), likely due to increased artistic influences from other European traditions after the conversion of Denmark and Norway to Christianity. For example, the weathervane from Söderala, Söderhamn Municipality, Sweden or the portal of the Hedal Stave Church in Hedalen, Sör-Aurdal Municipality, Sweden each feature foliates that appear similar to contemporaneous French ornaments. Scholars have also paid particular attention to the borrowing and altering of iconographic forms that refer to natural phenomena from outside of Scandinavia, especially the sun spirals that are present on the Gotlandic picture stones. Peter Hupfauf, *Tracing Their Tracks: Identification of Nordic Styles from the Early Middle Ages to the End of the Viking Period* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 84–86; Sune Linqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine* (Uppsala: Wahlström & Widstrand, 1945).



**Figure 11** Bearded man, detail on a cart uncovered in the Oseberg burial mound, early ninth century. Wood. The Museum of Cultural History, Bygdøy, Oslo, Norway. Photo: Helen Simonsson. © Museum of Cultural History.

within the interlaced patterns of a woman's box brooch used for storing items close to the body are, in reality, invigorating (Figure 12). Something metaphysical—a unique conception of bodiliness that operates as a fluid set of relations, rather than as a closed unit—is attached to them. Referring to what we, as well as viewers from the Latin West, might consider to be impossible and intangible—the boundaries between the corporeal and the





**Figure 12** A round box brooch, eighth–early tenth century. Four oval compartments feature four beasts with rounded eyes, open jaws, clawed feet, and entwined bodies that echo the ornament surrounding them. Copper, 5.2×2.3×.2 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, USA. Public Domain.

supernatural—they are formulations of an idea far more expansive than can be represented through an imitative, static form. If these objects are interpreted on their own terms, rather than in accordance with the institutional thought structures of the Latin West, more of their referential capacity can be uncovered. The potential outcome is clearer insight into the nature of human interactions with the supernatural in Old Norse society.