

## TRANSMUTED: RECONCILING THE MEDIEVAL SCANDINAVIAN MARKING OF THE PIRAEUS LION

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**Abstract:** Outside of the Arsenal in Venice rests an astonishingly emotive sculpture: an over-life-size marble lion, seated on a pedestal, the face of which models an intensely aggrieved expression. Belonging to antiquity, the creature—which once resided in the Athenian harbor of Piraeus—dates to approximately 360 BCE. Over time, its flesh has been pocked with bullet holes and eroded by weathering. Among these forms of wear, however, are the unexpected remains of Scandinavian runes and ornament. Finding that they are eleventh-century additions, scholars have committed formidable labor to verifying their ages and translations, though complete textual readings cannot be derived from their remnants. What, then, is left to interpret? Moving beyond the inscriptions to consider the object in its entirety, this article argues that medieval Scandinavian beholders changed the Piraeus Lion’s implicit function by binding it to their own associative network. Situating the sculpture’s impressive features in conversation with other material trends from the Viking Age, this article links the object with commemorative runestones, the Great Beast motif, and a cultural emphasis on cathartic acts of making to characterize its manipulation as an example of transmutation.

**Keywords:** Viking art, Old Norse society, medieval art and visual culture, Greek influences on medieval art, medieval rites and ceremonies, image and response theory, medieval reuse, affect, medieval emotions, materiality, grief, mourning.

A collection of stone lion sculptures resides at the main gate of the Arsenal in Venice, Italy (built ca. 1460; fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> Facing south, three of them lounge to the right of the entrance, while another—the winged lion of St. Mark—perches above it. To the left of the gate, however, is a fifth lion that curiously departs from its peer sculptures (fig. 2). It sits, upright, on muscular, marble haunches, reaching just over three meters in height from toe to crown. It is elevated further still by a weighty pedestal, which compels the beholder to tilt their head upward—a juncture at which their eyes meet with the lion’s expressive, phrenic gaze (fig. 3). A slightly agape jaw and furrowed brows frame two deeply carved eyes, each of which has been carefully modeled into a beaming globe. Accentuated with tear ducts, these rest beneath fleshy, pensive lids. Dramatic curls envelop the lion’s head in tiers, and its dignified posture auspiciously evokes the

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<sup>1</sup> Although the building of the structure began in the early twelfth century, the main gate—or *porta magna*—is a product of the Venetian Renaissance. It was modeled after the Arch of Sergii in Pula, Istria County, Croatia, and may have been built by Antonio Gambello or Jacopo Bellini. See Wolfgang Wolters and Norbert Huse, *The Art of Renaissance Venice: Architecture, Sculpture, and Painting, 1460–1590* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 13.

upright comportment of the human body. Creating a remarkably anthropoid effect, the theatrical treatment of the lion’s form borders on awkward when compared with its enterprising surroundings. Referred to as the Piraeus Lion, it is a captivating creature, indeed.



FIG. 1. Porta Magna of the Venice Arsenal. Venice, Italy, ca. 1460 CE. Photo: Wikimedia Commons, by Abxbay.

Absorbed by the creature’s demeanor, one attends to its visage, which reveals that the sculpture is not the product of local, or even contemporaneous, craftsmanship. Its harmonious anatomical features and posture are whimsical compared to its stately environment, radiating with the “fleeting, lived, existence in time” qualities of late classical Greek sculpture.<sup>2</sup> The upright lion is a stranger among more schematized animal forms—an anomaly that erupts from the Arsenal’s backdrop of brick architecture, iron gates, and cast bronzes.

<sup>2</sup> This period of Greek sculpture is known for detached, serene expressions with congruous uses of figures and form. The lion has been described as having a “regal Western character that can be associated with the Late Classical period of Greek sculpture.” Susan Stewart, *The Ruins Lesson: Meaning and Material in Western Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 33; and John Boardman, *Greek Sculpture: The Late Classical Period and Sculpture in Colonies and Overseas* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995).



FIG. 2 (L). The Piraeus Lion. White marble. Greek, ca. 360 BCE, with inscriptions from the eleventh century CE. Photo: Dimitris Kamaras.

FIG. 3 (R). Frontal photograph of the Piraeus Lion. Photo: Wikimedia Commons, by Asatruar.

More complexities emerge as beholders walk around the marble creature, further disorienting the art historian's ability to affix the creature to a distinct moment in time. Among them are the remains of three inscriptions that, despite obfuscation by pockmarks and other forms of scarification wrought by modernity, appear to have been carefully incised into the robust musculature of its legs, shoulders, and dorsal (figs. 4, 5, 6). Of neither classical nor early modern provenance, the inscriptions' characters do not produce a message in Greek, Latin, or Italian; rather, the inscriptions are comprised of Scandinavian runes. Their remnants have depreciated to such a degree that they may only be coarsely translated.



FIG. 4 (L). Photograph of the Piraeus Lion from the right (viewer's left) side.  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons, by Asatruar.



FIG. 5 (R). Photograph of the Piraeus Lion from the left (viewer's right) side.  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons, by Marieke Kuijjer.



FIG. 6. Close-up of inscriptions on right (viewer's left) side of the Piraeus Lion, with  
contrast adjusted to increase visibility of inscriptions.  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons, by G. Dallorto.

Carved along the sculpture's left shoulder (viewer's right) and across the dorsal:

... hiaggu(?) þæiR helfnings/helmings mænn ... en ī hafn þessi þæiR mænn hiaggu(?)  
rūnaR at Hau[r]sa bōnda ... –hvatan(?) [Rē]ðu(?) Svīar þetta ā leiun/lei(o)nu (alt: rēðu  
Svīar þetta leionu). F[iall] / f[urs](?) āðr giald vann gærva.

[They cut the runes, half of the troops men ... and in this harbor, these men cut runes  
after Hors(e?) farmer ... Swedes made this happen on the lion. He died before he could  
receive a debt (payment).]<sup>3</sup>

Frontally, carved along the sculpture's right shoulder (viewer's left) and extending down the dorsal:

Āsmundr risti ... (rūn)ar þessaR þaiR Æskæll/Āskæll(?) ... Þörlæifr(?) ok ...

[Āsmund carved ... these runes ... Askel ... Torlev(?) And ...]<sup>4</sup>

And scratched along the rear left (viewer's right) thigh:

drængiaR/drængir rist(u) rūniR/rūnir.

[Warriors/young men carved the runes.]<sup>5</sup>

Added by Scandinavians traveling through the area throughout the eleventh century, these characters are positioned within elaborate, serpentine forms.<sup>6</sup> Their textual content has been a subject of scholarly conjecture for some time, but their distressed condition diminishes their readability. What, then, is left to interpret such markings?

In her own assessment of the Piraeus Lion, Thorgunn Snædal sought to precisely date the inscriptions through philological methods and by comparing the

<sup>3</sup> For original translation (from Old East Norse to modern Swedish), see Thorgunn Snædal, *Runinskrifterna på Pireuslejonet i Venedig* (Stockholm: National Heritage Board, 2014), 24. The present translation—from Thorgunn Snædal's modern Swedish to English—is my own.

<sup>4</sup> Thorgunn Snædal, *Runinskrifterna på Pireuslejonet*, 32.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>6</sup> Thorgunn Snædal has made thorough efforts to locate the exact dating of each inscription. She posited that the carvings on the left side and leg are likely the oldest but may very well have been the youngest because Scandinavian servitude to the Byzantine Empire continued throughout the twelfth century. The carvings on the right side were determined to be from the late eleventh century. Thorgunn Snædal, *Runinskrifterna på Pireuslejonet*, 33–35.

coils of serpentine ornament with the work of runemasters—exceptional craftsmen of runestones—such as Öpr and Ragnvald i Ed.<sup>7</sup> Fruitful for discerning provenance, her research is of insurmountable importance to this study; however, I will press evaluations of the sculpture’s manipulation further by concentrating on its specific visual aspects and, in turn, attending to how these elicited responses from Scandinavian beholders. The marble creature clearly stirred something within these viewers, and to such a degree that they found themselves obliged to change its surface into something new. What about its countenance impressed upon them, and what ends were reached in redefining the sculpture’s surface? By exploring these questions, I intend to frame the Piraeus Lion as an experiential site: a locus at which the sculpture was collapsed into the Norsemen’s memorial customs, visual vocabularies, and emotional lives.

It must be noted that the last of the Piraeus Lion’s three inscriptions—located on the creature’s rear left thigh—will be considered only in passing, as it was added to the sculpture through a scratching technique similar to those of medieval plaster inscriptions.<sup>8</sup> This, as well as its limited (and solely declarative) content, render it closer to runic graffiti than to other comparanda discussed. Such inscriptions, according to Karen Langsholt Holmqvist, are dependent on the situated cognition of the self, and especially interests of the self in relation to its surroundings (which can determine how the self is perceived).<sup>9</sup> While this theme is adjacent to those explored herein, it is more engrossed in the negotiation of an identity that contends with an external environment than it is in the affective impressions of the visual realm.

#### AN EMPTY INTELLECTUAL CHASM

The literal reading content of the sculpture’s inscriptions has been the primary subject of scholarly interest surrounding the Piraeus Lion. Understandably so: the corpus of runic inscriptions is wide, and they are valuable resources for the study of Viking Age customs.<sup>10</sup> For two centuries, the discourse has fixated on

<sup>7</sup> Many runic inscriptions were carved by nonspecialists. Runemasters, by contrast, were skilled in both runic literacy and stonemasonry. Thorgunn Snædal, *Runinskrifterna på Pireuslejonet*, 33–35; Anne-Sofie Gräslund, “Religion, Art and Runes,” in *Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga*, ed. William W. Fitzhugh and Elisabeth Ward (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2000), 55–69.

<sup>8</sup> Thorgunn Snædal, *Runinskrifterna på Pireuslejonet*, 24.

<sup>9</sup> See Karen Langsholt Holmqvist, “The Creation of Selves as a Social Practice and Cognitive Process: A Study of the Construction of Selves in Medieval Graffiti,” in *Approaches to the Medieval Self: Representations and Conceptualizations of the Self in the Textual and Material Culture of Western Scandinavia, c. 800–1500*, ed. Stefka G. Eriksen, Karen Langsholt Holmqvist, and Bjørn Bandlien (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 301–23.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Birgit Sawyer, *The Viking Age Rune-Stones: Custom and Commemoration in Early Medieval Scandinavia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Nancy L. Wicker

the identification and translation of those on the lion, beginning with Swedish linguist and diplomat Johan David Åkerblad at the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>11</sup> He could not extend his efforts to translate them, but did produce a technical drawing of the statue and its inscriptions, which were published in Swedish and French (along with his comments). Subsequently, a small dispute was ignited between Åkerblad and another antiquarian, Luigi Bossi.<sup>12</sup> The two argued primarily over the national origin of the statue itself, with Bossi declaring that it was Etruscan, rather than Greek, and that the inscriptions were pre-Latin “Pelasgic” characters, rather than runes.<sup>13</sup> Bossi was, expectedly, incorrect—while the characters in Pelasgic and runic alphabets share visual similarities, the inscriptions diverge from Pelasgic texts in syntax and in their peculiar situating within the parameters of serpentine ornamentation.

Later, anthropologist Wilhelm Grimm discussed the Piraeus Lion in his 1821 survey of German runic inscriptions, *Über deutsche Runen*. Backing Åkerblad’s assessment of their origins, Grimm noted “die Schlangenwindungen”—the winding serpents that surrounded the letters—were convincingly similar to those found on runestones of northern Europe.<sup>14</sup> In 1830, just a few years after Grimm’s publication, the inscriptions caught the attention of an unnamed German artist who published his findings in the scientific journal *Tübinger Kunstblatt*—knowledge that was reproduced by archaeologist Finn Magnússon in 1841.<sup>15</sup> As the runes on the lion had deteriorated substantially and drawings of them were consequently inaccurate, few of these were considered successful translations.

Eleven years later, the Danish historian Carl Christian Rafn examined the inscriptions thoroughly and, the following year, published his own conclusions

and Henrik Williams, “Bracteates and Runes,” *Futhark: International Journal of Runic Studies* 3 (2012): 151–213.

<sup>11</sup> Fredrik Thomasson, *The Life of J. D. Åkerblad: Egyptian Decipherment and Orientalism in Revolutionary Times* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 194–99.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. These findings appeared first in a short-lived journal titled *Skandinavisk Museum* and, later, in *Magasin Encyclopédique*. See Johan David Åkerblad, “Notices sur deux inscriptions en caractères runiques trouvées à Venise, et sur les Varanges, par M. Akerblad, avec les Remarques de M. d’Ansse de Villoison,” *Magasin Encyclopédique* 9 (1804): 24–74.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Wilhelm Karl Grimm, *Über deutsche Runen* (Göttingen, 1821), 209–14.

<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, locating this volume of *Tübinger Kunstblatt* has proven to be futile. See Carl Christian Rafn, “En Nordisk Runeindskrift i Piræus, med Forklaring af C. C. Rafn,” *Antiquarisk tidsskrift: Udgivet af det kongelige nordiske oldskrift-selskab, 1855–57* (1857): 9; and Omeljan Pritsak, *The Origin of the Rus’* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 348.

in a book titled *Antiquités de l'Orient: Monuments Runographiques* (with Åkerblad's work juxtaposed alongside his own).<sup>16</sup> Famed archaeologist Ingvald Undset examined the inscriptions, stating that the two could not be contemporaneous, and his, as well as the previous readings, were revised again by Erik Brate in the early twentieth century.<sup>17</sup> Eventually, Sven B. F. Jansson created another interpretation in 1984, but concluded that what remains of the inscriptions should not be over-interpreted; Thorgunn Snædal produced a compromise between the two in 2014.<sup>18</sup> Following the tremendous labor devoted to deciphering the inscriptions, it is her translation that is the most precise and thus employed in this study.

Despite the significance of the labors rehearsed above, little academic work has centered the motivations for marking the Piraeus Lion's herculean flesh with new carvings. In fact, to my knowledge, virtually no scholarly consideration has been given to the nature or purpose of manipulating this specific work of art—only to placing its inscriptions within a historical moment that corresponds with a famous military campaign or figure. The visual aspects of the creature seem to be acknowledged almost trivially, as merely another substrata among many in the surviving corpus of ornamented runic inscriptions. But looking exclusively to the inscriptions and avoiding the intimate relationship that they have with the sculpture's surface flattens a graven thing into a formless arrangement of characters—into text that occupies no real space and elicits no response from the beholder. Neglecting the sculpture's visuality in scholarly assessments, then, leaves an empty intellectual chasm surrounding the marking of the Piraeus Lion. Art-historical analysis can productively fill this void by (carefully) characterizing its manipulation, drawing scholarship ever closer to a more nuanced vision of the Norsemen's approach to the material realm.

#### A NOTE ON DISLOCATION

The sculpture's dislocation must be addressed and its movement between geographic sites clarified. Carved around 360 BCE, it once resided in the eponymous harbor of Piraeus in Athens, Greece.<sup>19</sup> Although certainty evades scholars,

<sup>16</sup> Thorgunn Snædal, *Runinskrifterna på Pireuslejonet*, 10; see also Carl Christian Rafn, *Antiquités de l'Orient: Monuments Runographiques* (Copenhagen, 1856).

<sup>17</sup> Erik Brate, "Pireuslejonets Runinskrift," *Antikvarisk Tidskrift för Sverige* 3 (1920): 25–48; and Ingvald Undset, "Runlejonet i Venedig," *Månadsbladet* 10 (1884): 19–23, at 21.

<sup>18</sup> Jansson, Sven B. F., "Pireuslejonets runor," *Nordisk tidskrift för vetenskap, konst och industri* (1984): 20–32, esp. 29–32; and Thorgunn Snædal, *Runinskrifterna på Pireuslejonet*, 24 and 32.

<sup>19</sup> This dating is according to the work of Cornelius Vermeule. It is possible that the sculpture had another life even before its time in the harbor, perhaps as a fountain (suggested by its hollow

the sculpture is believed to have remained there for several centuries and is not known to have been part of any collection of statues. However, its less visible features—such as a hollow throat and the impression of a pipe running down its back—suggest that it may have previously served as a fountain.<sup>20</sup>

Over time, the creature became a landmark of the harbor, inspiring beholders to generate a new identity for a space of mercantile, military, and otherwise intercultural exchange.<sup>21</sup> Merchants, tradesmen, and other travelers looked to it as a marker of the port, eventually referring to the area not by its given name, but by the epithet of Porto Leone (Port of the Lion).<sup>22</sup> At some point during the Viking Age, viewers from the Scandinavian region encountered and left the markings at the center of this study, and in 1687, during the Great Turkish War, it was relocated during a military upheaval in which Francesco Morosini, the doge of Venice, captured the harbor and seized the sculpture as his own spolia. Subsequently, it was relocated to the Venetian Arsenal, which is where it presently resides.

Positioned within a menagerie that surges forward from an otherwise industrial environment, modern viewers can view the Piraeus Lion as a conspicuous curiosity. When peering up into its eyes, bewilderment and concern motivate one to look further—to ambulate around the creature, where its manipulation is

throat and the vestiges of a pipe that run down its spine). Cornelius Vermeule, “Greek Funerary Animals, 450–300 B. C.,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 76 (1972): 49–53, at 53.

<sup>20</sup> Seventeenth-century descriptions of the statue note that cisterns were positioned at its feet, further solidifying this argument. See Henry Ellis, *The British Museum: Elgin and Phigaleian Marbles* (London, 1833), 36; and Gunnar Jarring, “Evlia Çelebi och marmorlejonet från Pireus,” *Fornvännen* 85 (1978): 1–4.

<sup>21</sup> The sparse historical evidence from medieval Piraeus creates problems in measuring the scale at which intercultural exchange took place. According to Federica Carugati, “Unlike in Hellenistic and early Roman times, when the center of gravity of Mediterranean commerce shifted away from the Aegean (first toward the east, with Alexander’s conquests, and then toward the west, with Rome), in the period from the fourth century to the nineteenth century CE Greece was again the epicenter of great empires. Athens and Piraeus, however, literally disappear from the evidence.” The harbor’s location (within the triangle of the Ionian, Aegean, and Cretan Seas), as well as the presence of Norse Varangians in it, indicates that this was a space in which individuals from diverse communities could engage with one another, but the specific complexities of such engagement are difficult to pinpoint. See Federica Carugati, *Creating a Constitution: Law, Democracy, and Growth in Ancient Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 202–3.

<sup>22</sup> This epithet—Porto Leone—manifested in conversation and, interestingly, in maps. A Turkish account suggests that some viewers interpreted the creature as dragon-like and thus referred to the space as “Dragon Harbor,” though this is seldom discussed in scholarship. Similarly, “Porto Dracos” (trans. “Port of the Beast”) was referenced in an account written by a Greek individual named Tzàn Polàt Moustafà, but the time and dating of the account has been lost. See T. R. B. Dicks, “Piraeus: The Port of Athens,” *Town Planning Review* 39 (1968): 140–48, at 147; Hans Rupprecht Goette, *Athens, Attica and the Megarid: An Archaeological Guide* (London: Routledge, 2001), 141; Jarring, “Evlia Celebi”; and Thorgunn Snædal, *Ruinskrifterna på Pireuslejonet*, 8.

more obtrusive. At each dorsal, the markings on the lion's body read emphatically. One might slowly scan their eyes over each in hopes of making sense of their remains, in strained attempts to imagine the stages of the lion's past life, but little can be located within what remains of the runes themselves. Yet, the inscriptions do not guilelessly scar the sculpture's surface—their sensitivity denotes that involved designations played out here. What aspect of this creature was so special to medieval Scandinavian viewers that they were urged to change it?

#### DEFACED OR DISTINGUISHED?

Carved and embedded into the Piraeus Lion's flesh, the inscriptions might be encountered by an unobservant reader as hindrances to its marble body—perhaps a materially grounded protest or unpermitted proclamation. The viewer may glance toward the worn runes and ornament, unwittingly classify them as bygone instances of property damage, and move forward with their thoughts; but, in stepping past the complexities of their configurations, the questions of who the originators were or what such mark-making satisfied within them go unchallenged. Such valuable connotations have long rested dormant, and there is great opportunity to revitalize them through perceptive examination.

In a recent study, Susan Stewart has attended to the sentiments that are assigned to damage inflicted upon artistic forms, arguing that while they may be ruined by erosion, collapse, and defacement, they may also “be marked with positive significance through inscription and more ephemeral signs of allusion that in turn are subject to wear and decay.”<sup>23</sup> She offers that the physical subversion of objects with written language and other visual elements can invigorate their forms with appreciable characteristics, rather than exclusively weakening their reading to viewers. In turn, the cultural valence that such marked objects carry is amplified as they endure through the ravages of time.<sup>24</sup> Reflecting on this point, we might uncover more by evaluating the Piraeus Lion's manipulated surface as a demonstration of thoughtful human presence, and the elaboration of its markings as suggestions of a manifold human investment in the sculpture.

Here, I must cautiously eliminate any suppositions that might cloud a reader's assumptions about the conditions under which these inscriptions were applied

<sup>23</sup> Stewart, *The Ruins Lesson*, 53.

<sup>24</sup> Notably, Stewart is cognizant of the factors that might disrupt her claim: she points to the gradual erosion of inscriptions, as well as the deliberate erasure of them (such as in instances of *damnatio memoriae*), as negations of the positive significations she identifies. She then clarifies that the vestiges of ruined inscriptions can also carry socio-historically charged meanings that can further the value of the objects they remain upon. *Ibid.*, 54–57.

to the sculpture, as well as the identities of their carvers, who may have been multiple in number for one—or all—of the inscriptions, as runic literacy was a rather exclusive discipline and stone working was a distinctly different art form.<sup>25</sup> The Norsemen in question are believed to have entered Piraeus not as Viking raiders but as members of the Varangian Guard.<sup>26</sup> A group of elite military men, the Varangians were typically Scandinavian warriors hired by the Byzantine imperial military to serve in the army, navy, or as bodyguards for elites.<sup>27</sup> Generally, they served outside of Constantinople; however, Vladimir I of Kiev, ruler of the Kievan Rus', sent a large group of them from Gårdaríke to Bulgaria to assist Emperor Basil II in a longstanding conflict during the Byzantine-Bulgarian wars.<sup>28</sup> The emperor found success in the Battle of Dyrrhachium (1018 CE), and, to celebrate his victory, he traveled to Athens with his Scandinavian warriors in tow.<sup>29</sup> Although previous scholarship has contested the claim, newer arguments reassert this event as the point at which the sculpture was initially

<sup>25</sup> Thorgunn Snædal suggests that the quality of these carvings indicates that the individuals who added them were unfamiliar with stoneworking. However, it is thought that some ornamented inscriptions—such as the runestone on the royal site of Hovgården on the island of Adelsö—are the result of collaboration between artists and runographers. Additionally, although commemorative inscriptions have been analyzed as evidence of changes in memorization practices and increases in literacy, the spread of such literacy was limited. See Thorgunn Snædal, *Runinskrifterna på Pireuslejonet*, 20; Elena Melnikova, “Runic Inscriptions as a Memorization Tool: Between Orality and Literacy,” *Studia Historyczne* 3 (2013): 311–25; Kristel Zilmer, “Viking Age Rune Stones in Scandinavia: The Interplay Between Oral Monumentality and Commemorative Literacy,” in *Along the Oral-Written Continuum: Types of Texts*, ed. Leidulf Melve, Else Mundal, and S. Rankovic (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 135–62; Laila Kitzler Åhfeldt, *Work and Worship: Laser Scanner Analysis of Viking Age Rune Stones* (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2002), 46–48; and Laila Kitzler Åhfeldt, “Provenancing Rune Carvers on Bornholm through 3D-Scanning and Multivariate Statistics of the Carving Technique,” *European Journal of Archaeology* 23 (2020): 82–104.

<sup>26</sup> For more on the demographics of Varangian Guardsmen, see T. D. Kendrick, *A History of the Vikings* (Mineola: Courier-Dover, 1930; repr. 2004), 176. The link between the Varangian Guard and these inscriptions can be found in Hilda R. E. Davidson, *The Viking Road to Byzantium* (Letchworth: George Allen and Unwin, 1976), 220 and 239; and Thorgunn Snædal, *Runinskrifterna på Pireuslejonet*, passim.

<sup>27</sup> Scandinavian warriors were especially attracted to, and populous within, sects of the Byzantine military called the Hetairia. For more on the Varangian Guard and power dynamics of being employed by the Byzantine Empire, see Alexandra Airinei, “The Varangian Guard and Its Contribution to the Manifestation of Imperial Power in Byzantium,” *Revista Română de Studii Baltice și Nordice* 2 (2015): 7–26; John H. Lind, “Darkness in the East? Scandinavian Scholars on the Question of Eastern Influence in Scandinavia during the Viking Age and Early Middle Ages,” in *From Goths to Varangians: Communication and Cultural Exchange Between the Baltic and the Black Sea*, ed. Line Bjerg, John Lind, and Søren Sindbæk (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2012), 353–54.

<sup>28</sup> Sigfús Blöndal, *The Varangians of Byzantium. An Aspect of Byzantine Military History*, trans. Benedict S. Benedikz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 45–47.

<sup>29</sup> Thorgunn Snædal, *Runinskrifterna på Pireuslejonet*, 34–35.

manipulated by Scandinavian viewers (with additional carvings added throughout the eleventh and possibly into the early twelfth centuries).<sup>30</sup> The presence of such viewership remained consistent in the area throughout the eleventh century and is centrally charted through military affiliations, though it is also possible that tradesmen and other noncombatants were there (albeit challenging to confirm).<sup>31</sup>

Due to the relationship that Byzantine rulers maintained with their public audiences—a decorous performance that aimed to fully conceal their private lives in order to uphold a clinical conception of imperial power—it is difficult to envision the public comportment of the Varangian Guard as informal or unrestrained.<sup>32</sup> Engaging in socially inflammatory acts (at least, without justifiable motivation) would have garnered unwanted attention and likely incited an adverse reaction from their Byzantine employer, as well as affected members of the local community. Framing these carvings as products of debauchery, then, would be a faulty endeavor. Similarly, it is tenuous to assume that the marking of the sculpture was a hostile act performed in response to, or as a symptom of, economic or cultural crisis: were the creators Varangians, substantial financial resources would be available, as they were among the highest paid members of the Byzantine military.<sup>33</sup> What, then, must be taken into account to deftly explain the impulses behind these carvings?

<sup>30</sup> Although there have been attempts at placing the inscriptions within the context of Harald Sigurdson's (Harald the Ruthless) capture of a "town in the south," which posited that such a place could be the city of Athens, there is no evidence to associate them with Harald. The inscriptions on the left side are not old enough to coincide with his life and appear to be Swedish (Harald was Norwegian, and the "town in the south" was in either Asia Minor or Sicily). Davidson, *Viking Road to Byzantium*, 220 and 239; Thorgunn Snædal, *Ruininskrifterna på Pireuslejonet*, 35–39; and Blöndal, *Varangians of Byzantium*, 96, 48–50.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> A letter from Vladimir I to Basil II might suggest otherwise. The Kievan king advised his soon-to-be in-law not to keep the Norsemen in the city for long in order to avoid chaos. It must be noted, however, that Vladimir had refused to pay his Scandinavian mercenaries their wages, and that in response, they protested energetically. Under these circumstances, any employee would react riotously. Airinei, "Varangian Guard," 7–26; Thorgunn Snædal, *Ruininskrifterna på Pireuslejonet*, 35; and *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, ed. and trans. Samuel Hazzard Cross and Olgerd P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 1953), 92–93. For more on the physical comportment of Byzantine rulers, see Henry Maguire, "Images of the Court," in *The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of The Middle Byzantine Era 843–1261*, ed. Helen C. Evans and William D. Wixom (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997), 184–85; Paroma Chatterjee, "The Gifts of the Gorgon: A Close Look at a Byzantine Inkpot," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 65/66 (2014/2015): 212–22, at 212–13; and Paroma Chatterjee, "Sculpted Eloquence and Nicetas Choniates's *De Signis*," *Word & Image* 27 (2012): 397–99.

<sup>33</sup> The Great Hetairia and Small Hetairia (and the short-lived Middle Hetairia) were compensated well compared to other members of the military, and the captain—the Great Hetairiarch—was directly responsible for the safety of the monarch. Naval employees were paid less but could acquire substantial spoils from battle. Airinei, "Varangian Guard," 14–17; and Lind, "Darkness in the East?," 353–54.

Sensitive visual analysis indicates a positive engagement between viewer and object. The markings do nothing to render the sculpture indistinguishable from what it once was—they produce no delay in reading the lion’s form. When charted by the eye, the carvings unveil intentions that fully retreat from destruction. Flowing almost as if in concert with the lion’s musculature, the inscriptions and ornament acquiesce to its anatomy: the winding pathways in which the text is arranged, the serpentine ornament that surrounds each message, and the apposite rhythm with which they follow the creature’s physique indicate deliberation. On the left side, a serpentine head appears at the rise of the lion’s humerus, with a neck and torso swooping downward and looping back to unfurl and refurl down its ribs (a painted reproduction of which is housed at the Swedish History Museum, fig. 7). We find a similar treatment of the lion’s form paralleled in the later carvings added to the right, which fall along its foreleg as well as the deltoid and dorsi muscles (see opposing side of reproduction, fig. 8). Rather, the inscriptions at its shoulders, front leg, and sides are highly sensitive to the lion’s facture, preserving the swelling and subsiding of its physique. There is no defilement, no ruination—the lion’s body is not disfigured but *distinct*.

These deliberate choices in mark-making both manipulate the sculpture’s surface and sincerely preserve its form, pointing to conscious causativeness in their making. Were the aims of those who carved its surface to disrupt the sculpture’s readability, its striking and sensuous details would have been substantially changed or reduced to formlessness. But, with the exception of weathering due to exposure to the elements and pockmarks amassed by gunfire after its relocation, the sculpture remains identifiable and intact to this day.<sup>34</sup>



<sup>34</sup> Marks left by gunfire were likely incurred sometime during the Morean War (1684–99).

FIG. 7. Painted reconstruction of the right (viewer's left) side of the Piraeus Lion with inscriptions. Photo: Swedish History Museum, by Oskar Kullander.



FIG. 8. Painted reconstruction of the left (viewer's right) side of the Piraeus Lion with inscriptions. Photo: Flickr, by AncientDigitalMaps.

#### FAMILIARIZING THE UNFAMILIAR

A substantial increase in the importation of foreign objects, many of which were subjected to modification and reuse, marks the material impression of the Viking Age.<sup>35</sup> The acquisition and recontextualization of such goods—which were largely portables like jewelry and coinage—stratified the intersections between the material and the human, leaving evidence of intercultural exchange that entices the minds of scholars who seek to unveil the ontological underpinnings of medieval Scandinavian communities. Accordingly, recent archaeological studies have explored the intentional appropriation of foreign items for practical and

<sup>35</sup> Antedate finds indicate that such activity also took place before the Viking Age, though it increased substantially from the late eighth century forward. Hanne Lovise Aannestad, “The Allure of the Foreign: The Social and Cultural Dimension of Imports in Scandinavia in the Viking Age,” *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 14 (2018): 1–19, esp. 2–3; Kristian Kristiansen and Thomas B. Larsson, *The Rise of Bronze Age Society: Travels, Transmissions, and Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Hans P. Hahn and Hadas Weiss, *Mobility, Meaning, and the Transformation of Things* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2013); and Fredrik Ekengren, *Ritualization – Hybridization – Fragmentation: The Mutability of Roman Vessels in Germania Magna AD 1–400* (Bonn: Rudolf Habelt, 2009). For examples of imports from the Migration Period, see Nancy L. Wicker, “Roman Medallions in Scandinavia: Shifting Contexts of Space, Time, and Meaning,” in *Beyond Boundaries: Connecting Visual Cultures in the Roman Provinces*, ed. Susan Alcock, Mariana Egri, and James F. D. Frakes (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2016), 232–47.

personal uses as a mode of embedding them within new frames of reference, endowing them with revised (and sometimes composite) meanings, and inculcating them with value and enigmatic power that reflected beliefs in an animated universe.<sup>36</sup> Hanne Lovise Aannestad, for example, has centered mountings and coins that were imported from the Insular region and repurposed as bodily adornments across Norway during the eighth and ninth centuries, framing their fragmentation (as well as their reconfiguration into new wholes) as indications that “artistic or aesthetic value was not the only motivation behind the transformation of the object.”<sup>37</sup> Pointing to the formulation of cultural identity and the constitutional role that intercultural exchange and interaction play in this process, she notes that there is a “relational discourse of self and other” that emanated between the Norsemen and the items ferried to them from afar.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, connections to peripheral communities elevated an individual’s social status, and such recontextualized objects carried prestigious associations in Old Norse society.<sup>39</sup> However, frameworks of this nature emphasize the ostensible facets of social relations—the performative externalizations of identity.

Although some studies have introduced sociologist Max Weber’s conception of “charisma” to the material realm in efforts to approach an object’s ability to inspire awe within a beholder, there is an interiority to be mined from manipulated foreign objects that scholarship has only lightly appertained.<sup>40</sup> Art historians and other specialists in visual matters can contribute further nuance to the spectrum of scholarship that interprets Viking Age objects: the methods of Alfred Gell and Ian Bogost, for example, operate not only on the premise that objects can be perceived as actors, but that they can carry cultural gravities that fold into one another, gripping beholders in provocative ways.<sup>41</sup> Whereas ar-

<sup>36</sup> Marianne Vedeler, “The Charismatic Power of Objects,” in *Charismatic Objects: From Roman Times to the Middle Ages*, ed. Zanette T. Glørstad et al. (Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk, 2018), 9–30; Zanette Tsigoridas Glørstad, “Tracing Charisma: An Anglo-Saxon Workbox from an Early Viking Age Burial in Norway, Its Scandinavian Counterparts and European Context,” in Glørstad et al., *Charismatic Objects*, 103–24.

<sup>37</sup> Aannestad, “Allure of the Foreign,” 8.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>39</sup> Aannestad on this matter: “Due to the great cost and the fact that most people lack both means and opportunity to acquire foreign objects, the [imported] objects themselves are perceived as costly and as tokens of status and prestige.” Aannestad, “Allure of the Foreign,” 9–10, and *passim*.

<sup>40</sup> See Max Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Vedeler, “Charismatic Power,” 9–30; and Glørstad, “Tracing Charisma,” 105.

<sup>41</sup> Bogost is particularly interested in a phenomenology of things that positions all forms of matter, living and nonliving, in lateral relationships with one another (as opposed to humans being central to reality and consciousness). See Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*

chaeological frameworks might position objects as subjects to human instrumentality, the accessions of visually centered disciplines place objects as central agents in the human experience—that is to say, they readily consider the instrumentality of the object and its affective powers over the beholder.

We may find an example of this species of exchange by turning to an Arabic ring found in a ninth-century burial at the trade city of Birka in Sweden (fig. 9).<sup>42</sup> The inclusion of such an object in the deposition is believed to (further) corroborate medieval stories of direct contact between Norsemen and Islamic people—in particular, the trade of material objects, ideas, and other facets of culture between these distinctive communities.<sup>43</sup> Its gleaming, reflective silver alloy shank is apexed by a refractive colored glass head that, as a prestige material during the period, would heighten the pecuniary preciousness of the object.<sup>44</sup> But, moreover, it should be emphasized that an imported good was valued to such a degree that it accompanied the deceased individual even in death—carrying meaning into the existentially important realms of the afterlife.

(Oxford: Clarendon, 1998); and Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or, What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

<sup>42</sup> Sebastian K. T. S. Wärmländer et al., “Analysis and Interpretation of a Unique Arabic Finger Ring from the Viking Age Town of Birka, Sweden,” *Scanning* 37 (2015): 131–37.

<sup>43</sup> Wärmländer et al. suggest that the markings on the surface of the ring are Kufic script that reads “Allah.” I am grateful to Nancy L. Wicker for pointing out that this has been debated, with strong arguments against such a claim. In 2017, Marijn van Putten effectively argued that the ring does not feature Kufic script on Twitter, garnering attention from scholars interested in intercultural exchange between Scandinavian and Islamic communities. However, he later indicated that the markings could be a seal ring with Arabic script, though it does not read “Allah, and deleted his initial tweet. Wärmländer et al., “Analysis,” 136; Marijn van Putten (@PhDniX), “This is the tracing of the inscription. It doesn’t look Arabic,” Twitter, October 18, 2017, <https://twitter.com/PhDniX/status/920584824099885056>; “So ... I’m going to have to admit that I’ve been very wrong,” Twitter, December 14, 2021, <https://twitter.com/PhDniX/status/1470707474755952640>.

<sup>44</sup> Wärmländer et al., “Analysis,” 135.



FIG. 9. Arabic ring from grave Bj 515 in Birka, Sweden. Circa 850 CE.  
Photo: Swedish History Museum, by Ola Myrin.

Mounts and rings, in their delicately intimate sizes, are at the mercy of any hand that can carry them—they may be replaced, broken down, and compounded with other objects in acts of appropriation. But, at least during the period at hand, the Piraeus Lion was affixed to particular spatial and social conditions. There is no indication of a medieval attempt to transport the creature.<sup>45</sup> Its seemingly quiescent material—the sheer weight and volume of which rendered it immobile—would exact a tangible, material primacy over beholders as they scanned its brawny, Pentelic flesh.

#### PROVOCATION AND REMEMBRANCE

Given the Piraeus Lion's resistance to the frameworks of relocation that have been foregrounded by archaeologists, we might recognize the manipulation of the sculpture more completely by taking to mind how it served as an agent in the Norsemen's cognitive experiences. Alfred Gell posed that the power of an object does not reside fully in its ability to be personally acquired, but in the symbolic processes that it provokes within the beholder—its unique characteristics that may evade an individual's knowledge in a technical sense, but appeal to their desire to possess (or relate to) the thing intellectually.<sup>46</sup> This approach estimates that there is a reciprocal relationship between the material thing and

<sup>45</sup> Some wear across the sculpture's front legs and carvings have been attributed to ropes that may have been used to transport it when Morosini relocated it. Thorgunn Snædal, *Runinskrifterna på Pireuslejonet*, 13.

<sup>46</sup> Alfred Gell, "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology," in *Anthropology, Art, and Aesthetics*, ed. Jeremy Coote (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 40–63, at 46–49.

the beholder's cognitive operations: an associative network founded in at least two points, one of which is the beholder and the other of which is the object. The object, in itself, may comprise numerous other qualities that the beholder may pursue an understanding of by linking them to their own knowledge base—thus serving as additional points of association. Following Gell, I would like to scrutinize the cultural elements that constituted the associative network in which these Scandinavian beholders situated the Piraeus Lion, as well as what responses the sculpture's countenance pressured from them.

The stone from which the lion's body is carved is of particular significance: its permanence—the (supposedly) undecaying perpetuity of its musculature—is so starkly different from corpulent human flesh, from metal that dulls and tarnishes over time, from wood that rots and burns, that it inflects a compulsion to endure. Relative to this inflection is the incredible importance of memory and communal longevity in Old Norse society. The drives to remember and persist were nourished substantially by material things, which could be assigned commemorative purposes to formulate and uphold history.<sup>47</sup> While the events of the present are ever fleeting, vanishing quickly as each moment assimilates into the past, literal matter remains relatively immutable unless acted upon by an insistent and conscious force; it allows whatever is assigned to it to remain in place or be relocated, to travel or be revisited. In this object-driven historiography, the formation and provision of the past are empowered through a resolute emphasis on the conditions in which objects are present, the mental faculties that comprehend them, and the very characteristics of the objects themselves. Vicariously, the Piraeus Lion's perceived agelessness activates a drive to remember: while human bodies are subject to change and eventual disintegration, the creature remains in time and space, rendering it promising for historicization.

With this in mind, we may consider the Piraeus Lion's capacity to evoke the object traditions that were embedded in the landscapes of Old Norse memory. Prominently visible, seemingly immune to the impairments wrought by the passage of time, and intrinsically humanoid in its upright formatting, the sculpture

<sup>47</sup> Lotte Hedeager argues that the process through which objects acquired a communal history functioned similarly to the acquisition of an individual's personal history, and that if an object existed prior to the life of an individual beholder, it was attributed a historical power that upheld a sense of communal history. Obviously, this is in addition to the spoken word. See Lotte Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality: An Archaeology of Scandinavia AD 400–1000* (London: Routledge, 2011), 137–38.

is rich in parallels to the Scandinavian practice of carving and raising commemorative runestones to honor the deceased.<sup>48</sup> As the term indicates, these monuments were carved from pieces of stone (typically granite or local bedrock, rather than marble) and ranged from small to large in size, with some larger stones echoing the comportment and frontality of the standing human body.<sup>49</sup> The refinement of their surfaces entailed the carving of runes, which could be arranged within vertical bands, in a rectilinear format, or encompassed by reticulating, serpentine ornament that could also be paired with mythic iconography; they emerged from their environments to serve as visible—even interactive—fixtures.<sup>50</sup> Affixing the memory of deceased persons (or political actions) into physical space, these monuments were history-in-situ: they rendered the intangibility of the absent person tangible, allowing beholders a point of contact to a communal past.<sup>51</sup>

Numerous individual runestones can substantiate a comparison between the monuments and the Piraeus Lion, but, due to their contemporaneity with its marking, the Ingvar runestones are perhaps the most appropriate. These stones commemorated members of the Varangian Guard who died during Ingvar the Far-Traveller's expedition to the Caspian Sea during the early eleventh century. Twenty-six survive in various states of fragmentation and wholeness. Many are carefully—even delicately—inscribed with messages identifying the names of surviving family members, who were engaging in a habitude conducive to mitigating the effects of very deep and personal loss.<sup>52</sup> Runestone Sö 254 (fig. 10) in Vansta, for example, was raised by two sons in memory of their father, as well as two other individuals with whom the sons are presumed to have had social ties:

<sup>48</sup> This custom was especially popular in Sweden, where it continued even as other regions abandoned it. Sawyer, *Viking-Age Rune-Stones*, 7; see also Mats Malm, "Runology," in *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, and Stephen A. Mitchell (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 217–29.

<sup>49</sup> Andrea C. Snow, "Dialogues with *Ginnungagap*: Norse Runestones in a Culture of Magic," *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 51 (2020): 1–27, at 7–10.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, passim.

<sup>51</sup> Ing-Marie Back Danielsson, "Walking Down Memory Lane: Rune-Stones as Mnemonic Agents in the Landscapes of Late Viking-Age Scandinavia," in *Early Medieval Stone Monuments: Materiality, Biography, Landscape*, ed. Howard Williams, Joanne Kirton, and Meggen Gondek (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2015), 62–86, at 63.

<sup>52</sup> This is the most widely referenced event mentioned on Swedish runestones. While some of Ingvar's fleet are thought to have died during the Battle of Sasireti, many more are believed to have died of disease. The inscriptions made by family members vary in tone, sometimes featuring Christian concepts and motifs (such as the soul and crosses) in tandem with pagan names and iconography (such as the serpent). See Omeljan Pritsak, *Origin of the Rus'*, 424.

Svæinn ok Stæinn ræistu stæin at Tosta, faður sinn, es varð dauðr i liði Ingvars, ok at Þorstæin ok at Øystæin, Alfildar s[un].

[Sveinn and Steinn raised the stone in memory of Tosti, their father, who died in Ingvarr's retinue, and in memory of Þorsteinn, and in memory of Eysteinn, Alfildr's son.]<sup>53</sup>

Similar to the markings on the Piraeus Lion, the inscription appears inside of a looping serpentine form.<sup>54</sup> As the runes are neither crowded nor asunder, it is clear that the snakelike path was thoughtfully preplanned to include them. Such deliberate markings bring the past into the present experience—they gesture back and forth between beholders and events, or people, who have otherwise been fused into a time that is not the *now*, but the *then*.<sup>55</sup> Resolutely cerebral, the stone is a point at which an absent person, as well as the personal connections that they held in life, are materially, textually, and visually embodied.



FIG. 10. Runestone Sö 254. Vansta, Sweden, eleventh century CE.  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons, by Berig.

<sup>53</sup> Translation via the Scandinavian Runic-Text Database, Department of Scandinavian Languages, Uppsala University, <https://www.nordiska.uu.se/forskn/samnord.htm>; and Jim Gritton, “Yngvars Saga Viðförla and the Ingvar Runestones: A Question of Evidence,” *Aparjón: Journal for Scandinavian Studies* 1 (2020): 54–86.

<sup>54</sup> This motif has been linked to metaphysical entities and a potentially trance-inducing, spiritually activating reading process. Snow, “Dialogues with *Ginnungagap*,” 22–26.

<sup>55</sup> There is an added complication to this setting that goes beyond the scope of this study: it is unlikely that the non-(Germanic) Scandinavian participants had advanced knowledge of the runic alphabet, limiting access to their messages to a culturally exclusive viewership. Moreover, the extent of runic literacy among Scandinavian communities is difficult to discern.

By virtue of format and elaboration, such upright, commemorative runestones evoke a sense of familiarity between the object, the beholder, and a unique construction of memory. Their associative points are echoed by the Piraeus Lion: it is humanlike in format and posture, standing erect to confront the beholder; it, too, emerged from its environment (and impressed upon beholders to such a degree that the port was given a designation in its honor); and marble—the very substance that constitutes its flesh—is undying much in the same way that the granite of a runestone is incessant. Such characteristics exude a morphological presence that, within the minds of eleventh-century Scandinavian beholders, would correlate with runestones and thus elicit an affected response—one that compelled the Norsemen to manipulate the sculpture’s surface. Under these circumstances, it is not simply that the carvings on the Piraeus Lion’s surface are like those found on runestones, but that the sculpture’s repetition of their qualities was envisioned as a schema—as an expectant underlying structure—that was inclined toward, and conjoined with, an affected revision. The initial marking of the creature’s surface came through the recognition of its implicit qualities as they were understood within the beholder’s customs and pushed it to become another entity; thereupon the addition of the second inscription amplified its role as a locus of affected revision—a site at which Norsemen were cognitively activated through the invocation of memory.

#### COMPLETING THE GREAT BEAST

And yet, there is also a peculiar departure from frontality taking place on the Piraeus Lion. The Norsemen were compelled to engage with the sculpture further, to venture beyond the frontal obverse. Spanning across the geography of the creature’s body, the markings are dilatant. Those on its right side briefly creep over the top of its shoulder (see cast reconstruction, fig. 7), while those on its left side extend down the front shoulder and appendage, eventually curling upward again (see cast reconstruction, fig. 8). This is not a complete abandonment of the runestone format—some do, indeed, feature carvings on multiple sides.<sup>56</sup> However, there are continued reverberations between the visuality of the Piraeus Lion and the Norsemen’s visual vocabulary: the sculpture’s luxurious mane, open mouth, and clawed limbs find parallels in the Great Beast motif—a

<sup>56</sup> As an intensified example of this treatment, we may turn to the Rök runestone, which is carved on all sides. This created a “forever ongoing interaction about something that is relevant to the site of the erected stone.” See Per Holmberg, “Rök Runestone Riddles Revisited,” *Mal og minne* 112, no. 2 (2021): 37–55, at 19.

figure of iconographic uncertainty that has been linked to a (potentially meta-physical) power of some sort.<sup>57</sup>

The Great Beast's body, which fuses the anatomies of other creatures, is mercurial: it may have claws or paws, two legs or four, ears or horns (or antlers), an open mouth with or without a protruding tongue, with or without lappets along its neck, and, often, a spiral at the hip or shoulder joints. Splendidly enigmatic, the variations of the Great Beast's complicated anatomy likely shifted to suit the contexts in which it was represented; and, always, it is shown in profile.<sup>58</sup> Intricate in its own right, the Piraeus Lion's form echoes such a wonder, though there is another channel between the two. Not unlike the commingling of serpentine markings and the geography of the Piraeus Lion's body, an intentional interplay between animal bodies manifests in select depictions of the Great Beast. The Söderala weathervane and the younger runestone at Jelling (figs. 11, 12), for instance, feature serpents that wind across the amalgamated bodies of Great Beasts, furling over their limbs.<sup>59</sup> These objects appear in declarative contexts: at the front of a sailing ship, where it would hotly reflect sunlight and announce the presence of an elite (as well as their seafaring company); and as the central monument of a settlement, announcing the political successes of Harald Bluetooth, respectively. In each instance, curling, binding, interlacing serpents are present—potentially emphasizing the presence of cosmic forces and thus elevating the Great Beast motif to a supernal status that, too, would be appropriate for the remembrance of esteemed colleagues referenced in the inscriptions on the Piraeus Lion's surface.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup> See David M. Wilson and Ole Klindt-Jensen, *Viking Art* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966), 136–38; James Graham-Campbell, *Viking Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2021), 119; and Andrea C. Snow, “A Language of Snakes: Supernatural Objects in Viking Age Scandinavia” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2022), 64–103.

<sup>58</sup> For more on fluctuations in Viking Age motifs, see Maria Domeij Lundborg, “Bound Animal Bodies: Ornamentation and Skaldic Poetry in the Process of Christianization,” in *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions*, ed. Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert, and Catharina Raudvere (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), 39–44, at 42.

<sup>59</sup> Anders Bugge had identified the creature on the weathervane as a dragon, but more recent scholarship from David M. Wilson and James Graham-Campbell has positioned it as either an ambiguous animal or a Great Beast motif. Similarly, the identification of the creature on the greater stone at Jelling has been cautiously considered, with identifications varying between gryphon, lion, and Great Beast. The similarities that it shares with other examples of the Great Beast motif suggest that it is, indeed, one that has simply been rendered in a Mammen style and, perhaps, influenced by heraldic imagery. See Wilson and Klindt-Jensen, *Viking Art*, 136–38; James Graham-Campbell, *Viking Art*, 119; and E. Warmers, “Ok Dani gærði Kristna: Der grosse Jellingstein im Spiegel ottonischer Kunst,” *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 34 (2001): 132–58.

<sup>60</sup> Snow, “A Language of Snakes,” 64–103; for serpents as cosmic or otherwise supernatural motifs in Viking Age art, see Snow, “Dialogues with *Gimungagap*,” 13–25.



FIG. 11. Gilt bronze vane from Söderala, Söderhamn, Sweden. Circa 1000–1075 CE. Swedish History Museum, 106752. Photo: Wikimedia Commons, by Historiska Museet.

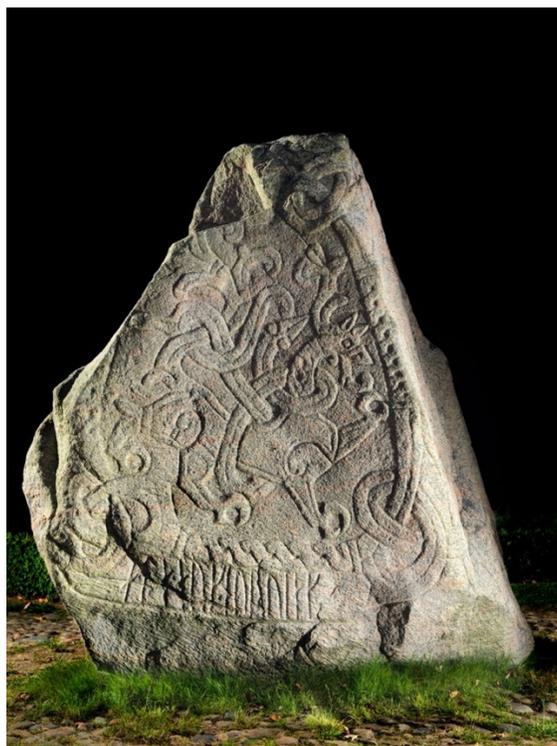


FIG. 12. The Great Beast motif on Harald Bluetooth's runestone. Jelling, Denmark, ca. tenth century CE. Photo: Danish National Museum, by Roberto Fortuna.

Yet, the Great Beast is spatially restricted, as the motif occupies only the arenas of length and width. If it is raised, it is only minimally so; in contrast, the Piraeus Lion is morphologically dissimilar in that it is carved fully and sensuously in the round—it is dimensional in a capacity that diverges from conventional representations of the Great Beast and refined in a capacity that diverges from runestones. But here, the profile of the Piraeus Lion impresses: when standing to the sides of the sculpture, the beholder assumes that there is an entirety—an anatomical completeness—attached to the form beyond the side that they are engaging with. David Summers describes the communicative capacity of presenting and engaging with the profile as such:

Although the presentation of the front of a figure implies an occluded back, front and back are in no case equivalent, or, to put it another way, the body is strongly asymmetrical relative to the plane coincident with the contour of a frontal figure. ... [P]rofile presentation demands not only completion of volumes, it demands completion of defining parts equal to those actually shown. Profile figures imply the equivalence of what of the figure is seen and what is not seen, both of which meet in the plane of the contour.<sup>61</sup>

Similar conclusions are drawn when viewing typical representations of the Great Beast motif—it is rendered in profile but refers to a (conceptual as well as bodily) whole.

To make a multidimensional thing like the Great Beast motif was to give it wholeness—to bring it into new spatial conditions that, while previously only imagined, could now be seen, touched, and experienced in new sensory ways. Carving inscriptions delineated by serpentine ornament into the Piraeus Lion's surface replicated one of the mythic creature's permutations, transmogrifying it into a multidimensional presence. The manipulation of the sculpture, then, does not only codify memory but conglomerates the beholders' visual and material customs in multitudes.

#### AN ATEMPORAL GAZE

Further considering the sorrowful events that governed the raising of many runestones, as well as the pressures—the impressions, as Gell might refer to them—that the Piraeus Lion's qualities may have placed on Scandinavian viewership, a compelling question arises: did emotionally relational links transpire between the two? In gazing upward from my own vantage point, my own eyes landing

<sup>61</sup> In short, Summers is describing the profile's capacity to refer to the entirety of the body. See David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London: Phaidon, 2003), 394.

upon the creature's astonishingly articulate face, I would like to suggest that yes, such a connection was made.

Saturated with cognitive activity, the face is a unique site: it is the core text of the human body, read with an intensity that diverges from all other aspects of anatomy.<sup>62</sup> To misread a face is to misread the complications of an exchange, the consequences of which can vary from uncomfortable to terrible. Interpersonal connections can be initiated through facial gestures, while great anxieties can be projected onto their convolution—in the words of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, faces are opportunities for “revelation or refusal.”<sup>63</sup> And it is in this instance that a face has pressured revelation. While it has been argued elsewhere that the Norsemen's flexible conception of corporeality rendered the detailing of specific bodily features (such as in portraits) an inadequate means of artistic figuration and, as a result, the conventions for representing faces were relatively schematic (see, for example, the humanoid figures on a Gotlandic disc-brooch, fig. 13), a lack of interest in representing facial gestures in the hinterlands did not equate to an inability to read or understand the face and its gestures.<sup>64</sup> Faces that are delicately rendered to convey sensations—such as the fleshy lids that surround the lion's eyes, strained as if to weep, or its mouth, which appears pained and lamenting—still connect with the beholder's emotional knowledge base, regardless of the proclivities in their own customs of representation. Thus, there is potential for the sculpture's face to have been perceived in a sensori-emotional way, which—alongside its format and location—may have advanced the impetus behind its manipulation forward.

The process of interrogating historical emotions is weighted with an abstruse obstacle: feelings are culturally conditioned, and scholars risk merging their own affected tendencies with the evidence at the heart of their studies. Caution in delineating one's own emotional responses from their research is often necessary, dare I say baseline; yet there is some malleability in the endeavor. Following scientific inquiries, Barbara H. Rosenwein has argued that the substantial changes that have occurred in emotional communities throughout time are not in the emotions themselves, but in how they are experienced and identified: their magnitude, what they are called, how they are evaluated and felt, and how

<sup>62</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 98–99.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>64</sup> For more on the ambiguity of the face and body in Viking Age art, see Andrea C. Snow, “Distorted, Dismembered, Diffused: Rethinking the Body in Old Norse Material Culture,” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 16 (2021): 335–66.

they are expressed (or not expressed).<sup>65</sup> So, perhaps the modern scholar is not so irredeemably distant from the medieval beholder in their emotiveness. Further, psychologists and neuropsychologists generally consider human emotions to be universal, with specific facial expressions and bodily reactions being the products of distinct brain systems and chemical processes.<sup>66</sup> Leda Cosmides and John Tooby have claimed that these modes of expression and cerebral schema are also assumed to have been the same in the past, extending as far back as the Stone Age.<sup>67</sup> If the neuroscientific research is correct, my own reading of the Piraeus Lion's face—which is, itself, weighted by an emotional pain intrinsic to witnessing the global loss of human life—is, perhaps, more connected to the Norsemen's reading of the sculpture than it is not, and their reading more connected to that of the viewer from antiquity than it was not.



FIG. 13. Detail of the disc-brooch from Gotland, Sweden. Silver, 8 cm diameter, late ninth or tenth century CE. London, The British Museum, 1901,0718.1. Photo: Trustees of the British Museum.

Alarming humanlike, the creature's gaze is extraordinary: its furrowed brows, mournful eyes, and lips—drawn back as if suffering greatly—deeply

<sup>65</sup> Barbra H. Rosenwein has produced an astounding history of emotion in the medieval and early modern periods that, unfortunately, does not quite touch on pre-Christian Scandinavia. Nonetheless, it is useful for expanding considerations of emotion in historical research. Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling: A History of Emotions, 600–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>66</sup> See Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen, “Constants Across Cultures in the Face and Emotion,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 17 (1971): 124–29; Robert W. Levenson, “Blood, Sweat, and Fears: The Autonomic Architecture of Emotion,” *Annales of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1000 (2003): 348–66; M. C. Carvalho et al., “Participation of NK1 Receptors of the Amygdala on the Processing of Different Types of Fear,” *Neurobiology of Learning and Memory* 102 (2013): 20–27; and Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, “Evolutionary Psychology: A Primer,” (1997), <http://www.cep.ucsb.edu/primer.html>.

<sup>67</sup> Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, “Evolutionary Psychology: A Primer,” updated January 13, 1997, <https://www.cep.ucsb.edu/primer.html>.

contrast its otherwise dignified disposition. The tension between the creature's face and body are discomfiting, with its firm posture suggesting that it is stationed in service to something other than itself, while its face expresses that it forever experiences something that it wishes were not so. It is troubling to look at any creature as it suffers; more so one that suffers indefinitely. Contextualizing the lion's temperament within ancient Greek artistic traditions reveals that this sort of nonverbal communication coincides with one of Aristotle's artistic modes of persuasion explored in his *Rhetoric*, *pathos*.<sup>68</sup> Within this mode is the intention to awaken emotion within beholders, convincing them to make a particular judgment of the work of art and its content.<sup>69</sup> It is from *pathos* that the words *pathētikos* (sensitive) and, ultimately, *pathetic* (arousing pity through vulnerability or sadness) are derived—each a term that poignantly encapsulates the Piraeus Lion's deftly hybridized expression. While the sculpture is, in many senses, nonhuman (quadrupedal; a head with elongated, rectangular frontal and nasal structures; and, of course, its marble flesh), its deeply set eyes are noticeably oversized for its skull and its eyebrows wisps—as if they had been groomed professionally. Together, these elements create a mien of humanity that has been superimposed over the visage of a beast.<sup>70</sup>

Similar sculptures, each dating to roughly the same period as the Piraeus Lion, can be found in situ in Amphipolis and Chaeronea (figs. 14, 15). Each of the two were positioned atop pedestals near the burial sites of elites, where they serve as “tomb guardians”—entities that stand between the thresholds of life and afterlife.<sup>71</sup> Their demeanors reflect that of the Piraeus Lion: postures upright, their mouths agape, their eyes fixated outward as if to address all who might stand beneath them. Taking to mind Aristotle's conception of *pathos*, these sculptures model the preferred emotional response to the death of an esteemed individual. Their most pragmatic purpose is to mark and compel, to incite beholders to feel pain alongside them, and to do so in a very particular space—to recognize and participate in a social act that is enunciated by a hu-

<sup>68</sup> Cornelius Vermeule attributes this choice of idealized, emotive representation to an artist's lack of access to real lions and ready access to real human models, as though the artist is compromising between the forms of two living creatures. While I do agree somewhat, I believe that this compromise is only one dimension of the intentions underlying the artistic production of tomb lions. See Vermeule, “Greek Funerary Animals,” 49.

<sup>69</sup> Aristotle, *Aristotle on Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, ed. and trans. George Alexander Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 119.

<sup>70</sup> Hybridization such as this may, in turn, have appealed to the Norsemen's lateral conception of human-animal relations. See Siv Kristoffersen, “Half Beast-Half Man: Hybrid Figures in Animal Art,” *World Archaeology* 42 (2010): 261–72; and Snow, “Distorted, Dismembered, Diffused,” 353–60.

<sup>71</sup> It has been intimated that these tomb lions were inculcated in symbolic and religious purposes. For more, see Cornelius Vermeule, “Greek Funerary Animals,” 49–53.

manlike face. With the morphological parallelisms with the Piraeus Lion ineludible, we can infer that the marble creature at the heart of this study, at one point, aimed to incite and compel, to invite beholders to feel; and, if scientific research is correct, the temporal gap between the inception of the Piraeus Lion in antiquity and its subsequent marking in the Middle Ages would be transcended by such cogent features. As marble endures, so too might the stimulus for emotional recognition and aggrieved responses.



FIG. 14 (L). Tomb Lion of Amphipolis. Amphipolis, Macedonia, Greece, ca. fourth century BCE. Photo: Wikimedia Commons, by Kkhonstan.

FIG. 15 (R). Tomb Lion of Chaeronea. Chaeronea, Boetia, Greece, ca. 338 BCE. Photo: Wikimedia Commons, by Philip Pilhofer.

Grief is an exceptionally puissant emotional pain. The severity of its psychological and physiological effects may push beyond social norms and sever the aggrieved from their community. However, cultural conditioning influences the grieving process, and the impacts of loss may also dissolve into social norms.<sup>72</sup> Viking Age communities made use of an endless consortium of ways to grieve, from highly imagistic funerary rites (such as the use of ships as funerary vessels)

<sup>72</sup> See Carolyne Larrington, “The Psychology of Emotion and the Study of the Medieval Period,” *Early Medieval Europe* 10 (2001): 251–56. For gendered parameters surrounding expressions of grief or pain (such as crying) in medieval Scandinavian literature, see Kristen Mills, “Grief, Gender, and Genre: Male Weeping in Snorri’s Account of Baldr’s Death, King’s Sagas, and *Gesta Danorum*,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 113 (2014): 472–96.

to operatic displays of sorrow through lamentation (as described by non-Scandinavian observers who witnessed funerary events that followed warfare); and, in a similar creative current, Erin Michelle Goeres and Joseph Harris have identified trauma, grief, and loss as the most collected subjects in Old Norse poetry and literature.<sup>73</sup> But feelings of grief and a cultural emphasis on object-based memory also incited the aggrieved to turn to, and reshape, material things to process loss. Looking to *Völsunga saga* to expand upon the intersections of emotions, actions, and—at least, incidentally and through intimation—the material realm, Carolyne Larrington has pointed to the reification of the memory of a loved one through the act of weaving to soothe the trauma of bereavement.<sup>74</sup> In the narrative, a woman named Guðrún turns to textiles, embroidering scenes from her deceased husband’s ancestral past into a tapestry. The act is therapeutic, with the shuttling of thread ultimately leading her to consolation for his death.<sup>75</sup> Emotion is felt and processed, and catharsis achieved through the appending of memory into a tangible thing. In turn, an otherwise obscured aspect of a person’s

<sup>73</sup> The structures and etiquette for grieving the dead, as Neil Price has noted, were nearly infinite in variety. This diversity suggests that grieving practices were formable constructions, rather than rigidly engineered principles. Accordingly, it is admissible to consider that the position of the Piræus Lion within a civic space could offer a juncture at which the Norsemen’s practices of publicly mourning their deceased could be magnified, and conveniently without the inevitable cessation of ritual performances that have been described in witness accounts from the period. See Neil Price, “Dying and the Dead: Viking Age Mortuary Behavior,” in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil S. Price (London: Routledge, 2008), 257–73; for accounts of public mourning, see John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History, 811–1057: Translation and Notes*, trans. J. Wortley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 15; as well as Ahmad ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan’s Journey to Russia: A Tenth-Century Traveler from Baghdad to the Volga River*, trans. Richard Frye (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2005), 67; Hilda R. E. Davidson, *The Battle God of the Vikings* (York: University of York, Centre for Medieval Studies, 1972), 2; Erin Michelle Goeres, *The Poetics of Commemoration: Skaldic Verse and Social Memory, c. 890–1070* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Joseph Harris, “Erfikvæði: Myth, Ritual, Elegy,” in *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions*, ed. Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert, and Catharina Raudvere (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), 267–71; and Carolyne Larrington, “Emotions,” in *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Jürg Glauser (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 514–18.

<sup>74</sup> Larrington, “Emotions,” 514–18; Carolyne Larrington, “*Völsunga saga*, *Ragnars saga* and Romance in Old Norse: Revisiting the Relationship,” in *The Legendary Sagas: Origins and Development*, ed. Annette Lassen, Agnete Ney, and Ármann Jakobsson (Reykjavik: Iceland University Press, 2012), 251–70.

<sup>75</sup> Larrington, “Emotions,” 514–18; Larrington, “*Völsunga saga*,” 251–70. Viking Age textile work is an arena in which gender, power, and history—or, more accurately, fate—are studied with noteworthy vigor. See Michèle Hayeur Smith, *The Valkyrie’s Loom: The Archaeology of Cloth Production and Female Power in the North Atlantic* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2020); Karen Bek-Pedersen, “Weaving Swords and Rolling Heads: A Peculiar Space in Old Norse Tradition,” in *Space and Time in Europe: East and West, Past and Present*, ed. M. Mencej (Ljubljana: Univerza v Ljubljani, 2008), 173–87; and Karen Bek-Pedersen, “Fate and Weaving: Justification of a Metaphor,” *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 5 (2009): 23–39.

emotional life—and overall human experience—is revealed through, and made present by, the object.

This aspect of the Norsemen's associative network—which frames unfeeling materials as potentially metamorphic things that can, through human ingenuity, become physical manifestations of the human experience—compounded the affective impressions that the Piraeus Lion made upon Scandinavian beholders. Evocative of human emotions, the pathetic characteristics of its sculpted face gaze out at the beholder to allude to sorrow and grief; in response, beholders transmuted the sculpture into a provocative locus at which their own emotions could be embodied, revisited, and complicated further with additional inscriptions. The removal of the creature's flesh through carving would not simply be a matter of expelling materials to leave a mark, but an act that transferred remorseful or otherwise abstract aspects of their emotional lives into matter.

#### SYNTHESIS

Apropos of the Norsemen's perceptions of its material, format, and pathetic characteristics, the Piraeus Lion's impressions prodded its beholders, who restructured it into a composite of familiar signs. It was not simply marked but transposed across customs and transmuted into a new thing entirely, rendering it an associative locale. Here, the processual modes of grieving and memory were embodied, and future beholders were met with a hybridized face that signaled sorrow—something many materializations of our own grief are soberly devoid of. Remembrances of the body in the present are susceptible to anxious projection, and distressed faces are disquieting to us when they are visible. Seeing emotional injuries pulls us toward interiority—that of the injured and that of ourselves. We do not quite know what to do with our pain. A strand of silver and onyx draped about a neck, a black dress that cloaks the vulnerability of skin, ashes spread across an empty field, a quiet withdrawal into the home—these offer little risk of convolution. But despite the arduous indistinction of feeling in the present, the vestiges of feeling in the past lie in wait for affirmation. This creature still stands, marked and manipulated into a conglomeration of customs as its injured expression, rendered from shimmering, enduring marble, models grief, gazes back at the beholder as if to give them a plaintive sign. It continuously provokes. It is difficult to ignore.

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