
“I am Eagle” – Depictions of raptors and their meaning in the art of Late Iron Age and Viking Age Scandinavia (c. AD 400–1100)

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Abstract: This paper is restricted to some of the most frequent and most relevant raptor motifs in the iconography of Late Iron Age and Viking Scandinavia, focussing on some of the most prominent materials. Raptors are an important motif in Scandinavian, Anglo-Saxon and Continental Germanic art, carrying very different meanings. In the Migration Period, the raptor-fish motif seems to be connected with ideas of regeneration – probably influenced by ancient and Christian traditions. It occurs on precious artefacts like the Golden Horns from Gallehus and a gold bracteate (pendant) from the British Museum. In the iconography of the gold bracteates, birds of prey are a common motif and are closely linked to the chief god, Odin. During the Vendel/Merovingian and Viking Periods, on decorated helmets and picture stones in particular, the eagle was associated with fighting, war and death, as in Old Norse skaldic poetry. In Late Viking art, especially on rune stones, the topic of falconry was gaining in importance. Hunting with raptors seems also to be reflected in the use of raptor motifs in Viking heraldry (Rurikid dynasty), which refer to falconry as a particularly noble form of hunting and an explicitly aristocratic pastime.

INTRODUCTION

Birds of prey have been omnipresent in the art of Late Iron Age and Viking Scandinavia since the Migration Period, when Germanic styles and iconography – mainly inspired by Late Roman art – became increasingly independent and started to establish themselves in large parts of central and northern Europe. It is impossible to include all motifs and interpretations which may be of interest here in a short paper. Therefore, I must restrict my article to some of the most frequent and most relevant figurative raptor motifs, and focus on some of the most prominent iconographic materials, in order to give just a brief overview and impression. Actually, the material is vast enough to fill a whole volume – which is indeed one of my envisaged future projects. The present paper should be considered as an initial step in this direction.

THE “EAGLE AND FISH” MOTIF

The first objects to be discussed here are the two famous Golden Horns from Gallehus in Denmark (Jutland), from around AD 400 (Fig. 1) (OXENSTIERNA 1956; AXBOE et al. 1998). These extraordinarily

precious pieces of art could have been used as signal horns as well as drinking horns, probably in a ritual context. They were buried in the earth, probably as a sacrificial offering, and were discovered in 1639 and 1734. In 1802, regrettably, they were stolen and melted down. As a result, only drawings from the 17th and 18th centuries remain today. Judging by these early documentations (OXENSTIERNA 1956, Abb. 1–7, 19), the shorter horn was decorated with a runic inscription on its top ring, naming the person who made the masterpieces (**Hlewagastir**). In addition, both horns were covered with a wealth of figurative depictions on horizontal, frieze-like rings. Most of these were soldered onto the horns' surface, others were chased into the background fields. Among these figures, certain motifs that are well known from later periods of Scandinavian art occur here for the first time: a woman with a drinking horn together with an armed horseman (HELMBRECHT 2011, 65–71; NEY 2012; HEIZMANN 2015), a horned warrior (HELMBRECHT 2011, 140–146; OEHL 2017), and a warrior with a wolf's head (SPEIDEL 2004, 11ff., 24–33, 57ff.; HELMBRECHT 2011, 172–175; SAMSON 2011, 288–328). Apart from these, depictions can be observed that clearly indicate a Mediterranean influence – like the centaurs placed on the third (from top) decorated ring of each horn. Of particular interest in the present context are three depictions of a bird, apparently a raptor, catching and eating a big fish (OXENSTIERNA 1956, 70–72, 147, Abb. 152). Two of these occur in a sequence of soldered figures, appearing like pictographic writing on the top ring of the long (non-runic) horn, a third one is chased into the background of the second decorated ring of the small (runic) horn (Fig. 2).

As a matter of fact, this motif is chronologically and geographically widespread, from the earliest ancient art up to the Middle Ages (OXENSTIERNA 1956, 235–245). In northern Europe, it can be observed at the very beginning of Germanic iconography (VON CARNAP-BORNHEIM/SCHWEITZER 1999/2000; 2001), which was strongly influenced by, and dependant on, Roman models. A gold-plated sheet from the war booty sacrificial site of Thorsberg (“Thorsberger Moor”) near Schleswig in northern Germany (Süderbrarup, Schleswig-Holstein) from the first half of the 3rd century AD – probably a necklace, a diadem, a bucket mount or, less convincingly, a shoulder clasp – shows a stamped animal frieze, including a bird with a slightly bent beak and two fishes at its feet (Fig. 3) (BLANKENFELDT 2008; 2015, 25–26). A bird of prey striking a fish is undoubtedly depicted on a small disc-shaped “Pressblech” mount (stamped sheet) from Häven, Langen Jarchow, in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, northeastern Germany (SCHACH-DÖRGES 1970, 65–66, 144, 204–206, Taf. 85; VOSS 1999), discovered in a Germanic elite burial dating to the second half of the 3rd century AD (Fig. 4). The bird is standing on the back of a huge fish, pecking with its beak at its victim's head – exactly the same action as is depicted on the Gallehus Horns.

The eagle striking or carrying a fish or another aquatic animal is a well-known motif in the iconography of the ancient Near East as well as in the Black Sea regions – in Thracian, Scythian/Sarmatian, and Phrygian art (ROES 1945–1948; OXENSTIERNA 1956, 237–241; THOMAS 1963, 70–74; KULL 1997, 311–314).¹ It also appears on Greek coinage issued in Sicily in the late 5th century BC – these eagle and fish/dolphin coin series were still in issue by cities on the Black Sea as late as the first century BC (PICK 1899, Taf. II–III, IX, XI; BERNHARD 1934; DITTRICH 1959, Taf. 20; HIND 1976; D'ARRIGO 2012). Occasionally, the eagle-dolphin-motif is also depicted on Roman coins, such as that on a *denarius* of Pompeius Magnus (CRAWFORD 1974, No. 447/1a) from 49 BC. Apart from this, in late Roman iconography, which was the main stimulus for the development of early Germanic art, this motif is quite rare. As an example, a Roman tombstone, raised for an equestrian in Vindobona (today's Vienna) between AD 69 and 114 can be mentioned (HOFMANN 1905, 43).² The lost stone can

1 Whether the motif was brought to Scandinavia from this region (e.g. SCHACH-DÖRGES 1970, 144) or if there are any other (Mediterranean?) models, is disputed.

2 Another notable example is a Roman finger-ring from Trier, Rheinland-Pfalz, Germany (HENKEL 1913, 157 No. 1743, Taf. LXXVIII.378).

only be studied on the basis of drawings (Fig. 5). The inscription (CIL III Nr. 4575) is placed in the lowest part of the *aedicula*-shaped monument. In the middle part, between the framing columns, a warrior with a horse and – placed in a dominant position above them – the raptor grasping or standing on a giant fish are depicted. The bird-and-fish motif is placed inside a huge wreath of leaves. The roof-shaped top of the tombstone bears an image of the sun. In Roman tradition, the eagle was an important and prominent symbol, as Imperial insignia, as a companion of the supreme god Jupiter, and as a psychopomp who carries the soul of the deceased emperor up to heaven (SCHNEIDER/STEMPLINGER 1950). According to Pliny’s *Naturalis Historia* (liber X.3.17; edition: KÖNIG 1986) and Isidore’s *Etymologiae* (liber XII.vii.10; PL 82, 460) the eagle’s eyesight is so remarkably keen that the raptor in the sky is able to spot a fish in the water. Similar meanings and observations could be the basis for the Scandinavian depictions of the eagle-and-fish motif.

In the centuries following the Gallehus Horns, the motif can occasionally be observed in Anglo-Saxon art (ADAMS 2015, 40–41), for instance as a sheet gold plaque (probably a decoration on a warrior’s shield dating to the 6th or 7th centuries AD) from the famous Staffordshire Hoard (West Midlands) (Fig. 6) (LEAHY/BLAND 2009, 40–41). This piece depicts an antithetic pair of stylised raptors grasping a fish that is placed between them. The motif can also be observed on 8th/9th century Insular Celtic (Pictish) carved stones from St. Vigean (Angus) and Latheron (Highland) (FRASER 2008, 58 no. 67.1, 76 no. 100, with references) (Fig. 7).³ Concerning the continent, a group of helmets (“Spangenhelme”), discovered in the burials of Germanic chieftains of the 6th century, are particularly worth mentioning (BÖHNER 1994, Nr. 1, 13, 20, 21; Abb. 1.3, 21.3–8, 29.4, 31.4).⁴ On the Montepagano helmet, Abruzzo, Italy (BIERBRAUER 1975, 288–292), for instance, a raptor grasping a fish from above is depicted on two decorated gilded plates (Fig. 8). In this case, a Christian context of the eagle-and-fish motif is beyond doubt, as the sign of the cross and eucharistical symbols are depicted next to it (BÖHNER 1994, 518–520).

In Early Christian and medieval iconography, the eagle is a frequent motif, mostly regarded as a symbol for Christ himself and his ascension to heaven, which is based on passages in the Old Testament, works of the Church Fathers and texts like the *Physiologus*. The eagle with the fish most plausibly refers to Christ as carrier/Saviour of souls, as the 9th century Frankish monk, Rabanus Maurus, points out explicitly in *Commentaria in cantica quaedam quae ad matutinas laudes dicuntur* (PL 1138–39) and *Enarratio super Deuteronomium* (liber IV; PL 108, 974C–D), where he states that, based on sources like Pliny, Isidore, and patristic texts (in particular 4th century “Pseudo-Ambrosius”, *Sermo XLVI, De Salome*, PL 17, 695, 718), Christ in the highest is able to see every human being on earth and is ready to take them and bring them to heaven, as the eagle spots and catches the fish and carries it up to his nest (GUTBERLET 1935, 245 fn. 636; KALLENBACH 1937; SCHNEIDER/STEMPLINGER 1950; HAUCK 1967, 17–19; WEHRHAHN-STAUCH 1968; SCHEIBELREITER 1976, 87–89; MÜTHERICH 1986, 317–321; BÖHNER 1994, 518–521). On the other hand, the eagle-fish motif occasionally represents the symbol of John the Evangelist as clearly depicted in the 9th century illuminated *Book of Armagh* (Fig. 9); in many cases, however, as part of canon tables and ornamental letters in particular, the motif seems to be just a decorative element (MÜTHERICH 1986, 321–340).

3 The bird standing on a big fish on the stone from Easterton of Roseisle (Moray) apparently represents an aquatic bird, not a raptor (FRASER 2008, 108 no. 155).

4 Stylised combinations of raptor and fish features, which could refer to the motif in question, however, without depicting the bird as attacking or carrying the fish explicitly, can be found on the Ostrogothic gold and garnet cloisonné mounts from Domagnano in San Marino from c. AD 500 (BIERBRAUER 1973; BÖHNER 1994, 547–549; VON CARNAP-BORNHEIM/SCHWEITZER 1999/2000; 2001 – the latter suggest that the eagle-fish motif was brought to northern Italy from Scandinavia) and, for instance, on a group of Merovingian bird brooches (QUAST 1990/1991, 497–499; HAIMERL 1998/1999). Both probably have Christian contexts.

However, what could have been the meaning of the eagle with the fish in pre-Christian Scandinavia? This question cannot be answered with certainty. Nevertheless, there is a unique depiction on a Migration Period gold bracteate (IK 33), kept in the British Museum, which provides additional information to be considered (Fig. 10). The c. 1090 currently known Migration Period gold bracteates are disk-shaped, coin-sized pendants, made of thin sheets of gold, decorated with stamped images and inscriptions (main edition of the material: HAUCK et al. 1985–1989; current state of research: AXBOE/HEIZMANN 2011).⁵ The majority of these amulets, dating to between AD 450 and 550, was discovered in southern Scandinavia – rarely in graves but mostly as deposits. The models for these fascinating Scandinavian pendants were Roman coins and medallions like, for instance, a silver medallion of Constantine the Great, minted at Ticinum (modern Pavia) AD 315 (Fig. 11). The central human figure dealing with an ill-looking horse depicted on the piece from the British Museum, which traces back to images of the emperor, represents the main motif of a large type of bracteates called “C-bracteates”. A unique feature, however, is the raptor turning towards a fish beneath the imitation of the Roman sovereign.

As a matter of fact, the Scandinavian artists did not only copy their Mediterranean models but they modified the Roman depictions according to their own world view, transforming the imperial imagery into an elaborate but enigmatic iconography of the north. Surprisingly, some motifs on the Scandinavian amulets can more or less convincingly be interpreted on the basis of Old Norse literature – skaldic and eddic poetry – although these texts were written down about 500 years after the period of the bracteates by Christian writers in medieval Iceland. Two prominent examples should be mentioned: The pendant from Trollhättan in Sweden (Västergötland, IK 190) depicts a human figure with long hair putting his hand into the jaws of a dog-like quadruped (Fig. 12). In Old Norse mythology (most elaborately in Snorri’s *Gylfaginning* 34 from about AD 1220, edited and translated by FAULKES 1987; 2005), the god Týr had to put his hand into the mouth of the demonic wolf, Fenrir, while the other gods bound the beast to a rock. When Fenrir noticed that he could not get free from the chains, he became furious and bit off Tyr’s hand (HAUCK 2011, 29–30; cf. HEIZMANN 1999a, 244 fn. 93; BEHR 2011, 184–185). On the bracteate from Lyngby in Denmark (Jutland, IK 297), a curling serpent can be seen with its own tail in its mouth (Fig. 13). According to Old Norse literature (most elaborately in *Gylfaginning* 34), another apocalyptic demon and sibling of the wolf Fenrir, the Midgardserpent, is lying in the ocean, encircling the world and growing so large that it bites its own tail (ELLMERS 1970, 222–223; HAUCK 1983, 551; 2001, 89; HEIZMANN 1999b, 428; OEHRL 2013a, esp. 458–459).

Against this background, the raptor on the gold bracteate from the British Museum was associated with Old Norse mythology as well; the pike-like fish interpreted as an opponent of the gods, and the raptor as a representation of a shape-shifting deity, defeating the demon (DICKINSON 2011, esp. 644–650; cf. HAUCK 1972, 52–53, 56–58, 64–65; 1982, 322 fn. 13; 1986a, 294–296; 1986b, 493), which remains quite vague. In my opinion, it could be reasonable to connect the eagle-and-fish motif with a stanza from the late 10th century eddic poem, *Völuspá* (cf. ELLMERS 1970, 276–277 fn. 165). In *Völuspá* (“Prophecy of the Seeress”), a kind of Norse sibyl re-tells the primordial creation of the world and foresees its decline and final destruction. After the end of the world, however, a new earth is coming up from the ocean and new life begins (stanza 59; edition by NECKEL/KUHN 1983, 14; translation after LARRINGTON 1999, 11–12):

5 German historian K. Hauck studied the iconography of these amulets intensively for almost half a century, connecting the images with Old Norse religion, publishing more than 60 articles. A bibliography is accessible online (<http://www.fruehmittelalter.uni-muenster.de/goldbrakteaten>). Even though Hauck’s interpretations are not without controversy, they represent the by far most profound and, in the main, the most conclusive approach to date.

She [the seeress] sees, coming up a second time,
Earth from the ocean, eternally green;
The waterfall plunges, an eagle soars over it,
Hunting for fish on the mountain.

Thus, in *Völuspá*, the eagle hunting for fish is a powerful symbol, an indicator and the epitome of new life. This could well be the meaning of the motif in the iconography of the Migration Period gold bracteates – a symbol of regeneration and prosperity, placed on an amulet, which certainly makes sense. Ultimately, this is not so different from the meaning of the eagle motif in Christian art, where it is regarded as a symbol of resurrection and salvation. As a matter of fact, the Christianisation-period poem, *Völuspá* (GUNNELL/LASSEN 2013), as well as the Migration Period gold bracteates (VON PADBERG 2011) are influenced by Christian traditions. Thus, even the pagan raptor-fish motif might have been inspired by Christian ideas.

There are numerous birds to be observed on the gold bracteates, which are frequently interpreted as ravens, although many of them have large hooked beaks indicating raptors. In most cases, the birds closely accompany the central human figure, which should be regarded as an indigenous deity, probably the chief god, Wodan/Odin (Old Norse Óðinn). The birds' heads are intimately turned to the god's face, as if they would communicate with each other (HAUCK 1977; HEIZMANN 2007, 19–32; PESCH 2018, 435–436) (Figs. 14–15). Frequently, the god's imperial headgear turns into a bird of prey (Fig. 16). Occasionally, it seems as if the entire human figure merges into a bird (HAUCK 1972) (Fig. 17) while some bracteates only depict the raptor, without any human features (Fig. 18). Occasionally, it is attacking a strange reptile-like monster (IK 413 Bohuslän-D). Actually, according to the medieval written sources, Odin is able to turn into an eagle, and some of the god's numerous names refer to his affinity with the raptor – Odin is called *Arnhöfði* (“the eagle-headed”) or just *Orn* (“eagle”) (FALK 1924, 41; ELLMERS 1970, 264–271, 275–277; HAUCK 1972; 1980, 245–246, 267, 281, 283–285; 1982, 321–323; 1986a, 278–280; 1988, 34–36; DICKINSON 2011, 648–647). Against this background, the runic inscription on a bracteate from Revsgård in Denmark (Jutland, IK 145) is of particular interest (Fig. 19). A short sequence **ara** (Old Norse *ari*), meaning “eagle”, is clear and legible. Unfortunately, the runic sequence on the opposite side of the god's head remains less clear. However, it possibly contains the word **haitika**, a present tense first-person singular form of a verb that means “to be called”. As a result, the inscription could be understood as: *Ara haitika* = “Eagle I am called” or just “I am Eagle” – a self-predication of the runic writer or rather of the supreme god Odin himself (DÜWEL 2015 [1984], 163–164)?

THE “BEASTS OF BATTLE” MOTIF

Let us move forward to the 6th and 7th centuries, entering the period called the Merovingian Age on the Continent but the Vendel Period in Swedish archaeology. During this period, in the central Swedish province of Uppland, local chieftains or warlords were buried in richly furnished inhumation graves, with weaponry, jewelry, luxury goods from afar, horses, hounds – and even raptors –, often lying in their boats, covered with a burial mound. Many of these elite warrior burials, in particular those from the prominent cemeteries at Vendel and Valsgärde, include magnificent helmets (“Kalottenhelme”/“Kammhelme”; BÖHNER 1994) richly decorated with images of wild animals, like the raptor-shaped nose-guard on the Vendel grave 14 helmet (Fig. 20), but in particular the stamped bronze sheets depicting human warriors (BECK 1964; 1968; HAUCK 1981; BÖHNER 1991; HELMBRECHT 2011, 317–324). Many of the depicted equestrians and infantrymen wear helmets with a raptor's head

on top, as do the warriors from Valsgärde 7 (Fig. 21),⁶ who are accompanied by two serpents and what seems to be an emblematic bird of prey placed in front of them. The armed horsemen on the helmet from Vendel grave I (Figs. 22–23) are accompanied by real raptors – two or even three birds of prey are surrounding the mounted hero, following him into battle or flying ahead. This imagery seems to correlate with a literary *topos* that is very popular and widespread in Old Norse poetry, the “beasts of battle” motif (BECK 1964, 25–31).

In numerous accounts of battles in Old Norse (as well as Anglo-Saxon) poetry the wolf, the raven, and the eagle are mentioned⁷ – they feast on the slain, eating the corpses on the battlefield and drinking the blood of fallen warriors in the aftermath of battle (BECK 1970, 55–67; HONEGGER 1998; JESCH 2002; ALBERT 2014, 129–195; HONEGGER 2017). Old Norse poets, the skalds, loved to use figurative paraphrases/metaphors, called *kenningar* (MEISSNER 1921, esp. 116–119, 203–204, 207–208). A very common *kenning* for “fighting” and “killing enemies in battle” is “to feed the eagle” (*orno seðia*) or “to invite eagle and raven to dinner”.⁸ “War” and “battle” are called “banquet meal” or “feast of wolf and eagle”. Warriors and heroes are called “friend/feeder of eagles, wolves and ravens”. However, the carrion-eating animals are also present *before* a fight starts, expressing their joy and anticipation, as harbingers of impending death. According to one eddic poem, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrri*, stanza 1–6 (11th or 12th century) (NECKEL/KUHN 1983, 131–132), for instance, at the birth of the hero, Helgi, eagles are screaming with joy, and two hungry ravens are talking to each other: “He [the newborn child] is a friend of wolves – we should be cheerful.”

In *Haraldskvæði*, a skaldic praise poem, stanza 4 (FINNUR JÓNSSON 1912–1915: AI, 25; BI, 22), dating to around AD 900, a raven tells us about the fallen hero, Harold: “We have followed Harold ever since we came out of the egg”. This is very reminiscent of the Vendel motif that depicts an armed horseman followed by a group of birds.

I also want to quote the last words spoken by the two brothers, Hamðir and Sqrli, according to the eddic poem, *Hamðismál*, stanza 30 (NECKEL/KUHN 1983, 273–274), composed during the 9th or 10th century. Hamðir and Sqrli are fighting bravely against a superiority of Gothic warriors but finally have to face their own deaths. The dying hero, Hamðir, says: “[...] Well have we fought, on fallen Goths we stand [...], like eagles on branches” – according to this paraphrase, the fighting warriors become man-eating eagles *themselves*.

Occasionally, “birds of battle” can be seen *in action*, as in the case of the unique bronze brooch from Lisbjerg in Jutland, Denmark, from the 6th/7th century AD (Fig. 24). It depicts a bird of prey gripping a man’s legs with its claws and biting into his neck (ØRSNES 1966, no. 159a; KJÆRUM/OLSEN 1990, 162 no. 63). Similar scenes are depicted on the famous Vendel and Viking Period carved stones from the Swedish isle of Gotland in the Baltic Sea. Gotland’s picture stones (LINDQVIST 1941–1942; ALTHAUS 1993; LAMM/NYLÉN 2003; HERLIN KARNELL 2012) were raised as memorials, on cemeteries, near to burial mounds and ancient roads, commemorating the dead. The stone slabs are decorated with an abundance of figurative depictions and narrative scenes, referring to heroic legend, pre-

6 Helmets crowned by entire bird-figures are actually known from the archaeological material – from the Celts (Ciucești, Romania, c. 400 BC; RUSU 1969) and in particular from the Roman army (GARBSCH 1978, 55–56; Taf. 10). As Roman military helmets are to be regarded as the Vendel helmets’ models, the raptor heads on the stamped sheets may be a Roman influence as well (ARWIDSSON 1977, 31–33; critical view: BÖHNER 1994, 541).

7 Besides war-related topics and the Óðinn-myths, there are many other eagle-motifs and eagle-*topoi* in Old Norse literature, which cannot be discussed here. For an overview see BECK 1973. Concerning raptors (eagle, falcon, hawk) in Germanic personal names see MÜLLER 1970, 35–52 and NEDOMA 2018).

8 This phrase is also preserved epigraphically – on the famous 11th century rune stone from Gripsholm (Södermanland, Sweden; Sö 87), which says: “Tóla had this stone raised in memory of her son Haraldr, Ingvarr’s brother. They travelled valiantly far for gold, and in the East [they] gave [food] to the eagle. [They] died in the South in Serkland [literally meaning *silk-land*].” See NAUMANN 2018, 210–211 with references.

Christian religion and the deceased's journey to the realm of the dead. On the head field of one picture stone, Lärbro Tängelgårda I, from the 9th/10th century (LINDQVIST 1941–1942, vol. 1: fig. 86–88; vol. 2: 92–93, fig. 448, 450) a battle scene is shown, including three birds of prey with hooked beaks (Fig. 25). One of them is standing on a fallen warrior, tearing off flesh from its victim's body with its beak – a similar scene, a raptor (or a raven?),⁹ standing on a fallen man's head and picking at his face, is depicted on a Viking stone cross from Kirk Michael on the Isle of Man (KERMODE 1994, 191) (Fig. 26). The Tängelgårda monument (head field) as well as the picture stone Lärbro Stora Hammars I (LINDQVIST 1941–1942, vol. 1: fig. 81–82; vol. 2: 86–87, fig. 434, 436–440) (Fig. 27, fifth field from top) from the same period depict an obviously badly hurt warrior who has fallen off his horse, lying on the ground. A carrion-eating bird with a hooked beak is standing on the horse's back, already looking forward to having a meal.

THE “BLOOD EAGLE” EXECUTION RITUAL

Two more raptors are involved in another scene depicted on Lärbro Stora Hammars I – on the left side of the third (from top) picture field, a warrior with a round shield is apparently hanging in a tree (Fig. 27). In front of him, a small human figure is lying prone on a kind of scaffold-like table. Two male figures are turning their attention to the prone figure, one of them holding a spear. This scene is regarded as a depiction of a human sacrifice – one man executed on the gallows and a second one killed on the altar (LINDQVIST 1941–1942, vol. 1: 104–105; vol. 2: 86; CAPELLE 1980, 97; HAUCK 1984, 306–307; ALTHAUS 1993, 194–196; LAMM/NYLÉN 2003, 62). A bird is approaching the scene from above. It is interpreted as an eagle or a raven that has been attracted by the blood of the dying, or as the god Odin in the shape of an eagle, accepting the sacrifice. From the right, a group of warriors is turning to the scene, presenting or handing over a bird of prey, possibly an animal sacrifice. There is good reason to believe that this depiction is related to a certain execution ritual, referred to in several Old Norse texts, called “cutting the blood eagle” (*at rista blóð orn*) (EBENBAUER 1978; FRANK 1984). In the “blood eagle” execution ritual the victim is placed prone and a picture of an eagle is cut into his back. Then, according to the written sources, the victim's ribs are broken off the spine and finally his lungs are pulled out, looking like an eagle's wings. Old Norse philologists have discussed these records in great detail and questioned whether this bloody ritual did actually exist and, if so, what it really looked like. As a matter of fact, pulling out the wing-shaped lungs seems unrealistic, as the lung collapses when the human body is opened. A more plausible explanation is that only the victim's skin was pulled off and turned outward, like huge wings. Anyway, the image on the Stora Hammars picture stone might depict the initial moment, when the sign of the eagle is cut into the skin on the victim's back.¹⁰

9 It is often hard to differentiate between eagle and raven in Scandinavian art. Both species seem to merge into one another, iconographically and semantically (PESCH 2015, 382–388).

10 Another huge raptor figure is depicted on the picture stone Lärbro Stora Hammars III next to a woman with a drinking horn and an armed man. The bird seems to have some human features, in particular a man's head. For this reason, the scene is often interpreted as the god Odin in the shape of an eagle, stealing the mead of poetry (LINDQVIST 1941–1942, vol. 1: 95; LINDQVIST 1948, 24–25; LINDQVIST 1970, 22; HAUCK 1957, 370–371; NYLÉN/LAMM 2003, 50–52). However, the present condition of the stone is disastrous, and the bird's human features remain very uncertain (OEHL 2017, 103–105). Human-raptor hybrids or at least human-bird hybrids can be found elsewhere in Viking art, for instance on the famous tapestry found in the 9th century eastern Norwegian ship burial from Oseberg (HELMBRECHT 2011, no. 423, fig. 45c, see also page 175–178, fig. 46a–e).

Another important topic when it comes to raptors in Viking art is falconry. According to the Barbarian Law Codes, the *leges barbarorum*, hunting with raptors was well established among the Continental tribes from the 5th or 6th century onwards (LINDNER 1973; GRIMM/OEHRL 2017; DUSIL 2018). Bones of birds of prey in richly furnished graves of the 6th to 10th centuries appear to prove that falconry was also already practised in east middle Sweden from an early age (VRETEMARK 2018). Written allusions to falconry in Old Norse literature come to the fore in the 10th or 11th century at the earliest (HOFMANN 1953; 1957/1958; CARSTENS 2018). In addition, pictorial depictions are to be considered as an important source material, indicating a certain knowledge of this form of hunting among the early Scandinavians (the following depictions and many more possible images of falconry in Late Iron Age and Viking Age northern Europe are presented in ÅKERSTRÖM-HOUGEN 1981; OEHRL 2012; 2013b; 2014; 2018; GRIMM/OEHRL 2017).

Bird brooches and raptor-shaped fittings from the Vendel Period (ATTERMAN 1934) are occasionally regarded as evidence for early Scandinavian falconry (e.g. JENNBERT 2007). Actually, some of these items represent raptors holding and devouring their prey, like the gilded saddle fittings from a horseman's grave at Vallstena in Gotland (NERMAN 1969–1975, no. 1260–1263) and the gold and garnet cloisonné mounts of the purse lid from the Anglo-Saxon princely ship burial at Sutton Hoo (Suffolk, East Anglia), depicting a raptor striking a duck (HICKS 1986, 162–165; ADAMS 2015, 43–48; cf. Fig. 28). However, images like this – without clearly assignable human participants, horses and hunting dogs – cannot with certainty be regarded as depictions of falconry. As some of them were used as shield decorations or saddle fittings, it could be reasonable to interpret them as warrior emblems, probably in the context of the “beasts of battle” tradition, like the above-mentioned bird brooch from Lisbjerg,¹¹ or just as symbols of power.

The earliest known Scandinavian monument that clearly depicts a falconry scene is the memorial stone at Klintebys in Gotland from the 9th/10th century (LINDQVIST 1941–1942, vol. 1: fig. 134; vol. 2: 81–82; cf. Fig. 29). On its upper part it depicts a horseman who is welcomed by a lady with a drinking horn. This scene belongs to the most frequent motifs in the iconography of the Gotlandic picture stones; against the background of 10th century skaldic poetry, it is interpreted as the arrival of a fallen warrior in Valhall, who is welcomed by a Valkyrie. Uniquely, the horseman on the Klintebys stone is accompanied by a dog and has a bird sitting on his hand. Apart from this, early images of falconry can also be observed on carved stones on the British Isles – on the prominent 8th century Anglo-Saxon stone cross from Bewcastle in Cumberland (BAILEY/CRAMP 1988, 69–70; cf. Fig. 30), on 8th/9th century Pictish carved stones from Scotland (Fig. 31)¹², as well as on the Viking or “Anglo-Scandinavian” stone cross from Sockburn in Durham, dating to the first half of the 10th century (CRAMP 1984, 136; cf. Fig. 32).

- 11 Frequently to be read is also the view that the Migration Period “eagle fibulae” (*Adlerfibeln*) from the Continent refer to falconry, and that their geographical distribution mirrors the importing of this form of hunting by the Ostrogoths and their spreading from east to west. However, this interpretation is not tenable anymore: on the one hand, the eagle fibulae could be interpreted in a number of ways – in particular as signs of rulership, influenced by imperial iconography, and as Christian symbols; on the other hand, the Ostrogoth origin of the eagle fibulae is not certain (THEUNE 2006, 550–552). The much smaller Merovingian bird brooches from the 6th century were also associated with falconry, which is also unconvincing. They were developed in the Roman-Germanic contact zone of Gaul and are likely to be Christian symbols (HAIMERL 1998; THEUNE 2006, 548–552).
- 12 These are the stones from Elgin (Moray) and Fowls Wester (Perth and Kinross) as well as the Saint Andrews Cathedral (Fife) sarcophagus (RITCHIE 1989, 40; CARRINGTON 1996; ALCOCK 2003, 417–419, fig. 182–183; HENDERSON/HENDERSON 2004, 125–129, figs. 183–184, 188).

Another Viking depiction of falconry can be seen on the rune stone from Alstad in Oppland, Norway, from between AD 1000 and 1030 (N 61–62; CHRISTIANSEN 1997; cf. Fig. 33). This memorial stone has two runic inscriptions. The first tells about a Viking lady who raised the stone in memory of her husband, the second inscription was made by a father mourning for his son who died in Russia. A horseman with a bird of prey on his fist, together with two hounds, and a second big raptor on the top of the stone can be seen. A strange, long object in the hand of a second horseman at the bottom, which is club-like and broadens towards its top, could be regarded as a perch for the raptor. A T-shaped perch is depicted on a bronze Viking ship's weathervane from Grimsta near Stockholm, Sweden, from the 11th century (BIÖRNSTAD 1958; cf. Fig. 34). The depicted horseman holds his bird on his left fist and the perch in his right hand.

There is a group of 11th century Swedish rune stones that are worth mentioning. About 2,500 Swedish rune stones from the Late Viking Age are known today, half of which were raised in the province of Uppland (SAWYER 2000). Only c. 200 of these have carved figures in addition to the runic inscription (OEHL 2006; 2011). Almost all rune stones have commemorative inscriptions. The sign of the cross appears frequently on these monuments and Christian memorial formulas were also used. The stone from Vidbo kyrka (Uppland, U 375) depicts a horseman above whom a stylised bird seems to be flying (Fig. 35). On the rune stone from Hanunda (Uppland, U 599), a horseman lifts up his hand and above him a big raptor is situated on the runic border (Fig. 36). Possibly, this rider is a falconer who is calling his bird back to his fist.

A matter of particular interest is the rune stone from Böksta/Balingsta (Uppland, U 855) (Fig. 37). According to its inscription, the stone was erected for a deceased person named Eistr by his parents and siblings. On the carved surface, a mounted hunter with a spear is depicted, pursuing a red deer stag with his hounds. A stylised raptor is standing on the stag's antlers attacking its head with its beak. This depiction might represent a special kind of falconry, which was and still is widespread in the Arab world, but was almost unknown in medieval Europe (OEHL 2013b; 2014). Arabic falconers train their young birds, mostly saker falcons, by feeding them on a dead gazelle's head. The bird will never be able to kill a gazelle but by this means it is taught to hold the gazelle's head with its claws during the hunt, pick it with its beak and cover the victim's eyes with its wings until the hounds and the falconer arrive, which is perfectly illustrated in Richard Francis BURTON's *Falconry in the Valley of the Indus* from 1852 (Figs. 38–39). The first written record of this kind of hunt can be found in the Arabian book about falconry, *Kitab Dawari at-tayr*, from the 8th century AD (MÖLLER 1988, 74, 93, 96; cf. MÖLLER/VIRÉ 2002). In addition, there are many figurative depictions in Arabic figurative art of the 10th–11th and later centuries, which seem to refer to this kind of falconry.¹³ To name just some examples, an 11th century glazed ceramic bowl from the citadel of the Castle of Mértola in Portugal (probably originating from Kairouan, Tunisia) shows a gazelle that is being chased by a hound while a raptor holds onto its head (GÓMEZ MARTÍNEZ 1994; 2001; 2003; cf. Fig. 40); and on an 11th or 12th century carved ivory fitting from Egypt (Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin; see DAIBER in this volume), mounted falconers with hounds hunting for gazelles and smaller animals can be seen while two raptors are standing on the back of a gazelle, one of them biting into its victim's neck (Fig. 41).

Although a gazelle is much smaller, it seems imaginable that this hunting method could also have been applied for hunting red deer. If this is true, it might be possible that the Böksta rune stone preserves a special kind of falconry, a case of an Arabian falconry practice that could have been directly adopted by Swedish Vikings in the East. However, it could also be considered that Viking artists were only influenced by Arabic art, without adopting actual hunting methods. In this case,

13 In addition, raptors attacking gazelles without any depictions of human hunters and hunting dogs occur frequently in Islamic art during the relevant period. They seem also to refer to gazelle hunting with raptors. For more examples see contributions by V. DAIBER and M. VALOR in this volume.

a 10th century silver bowl from the Volga Bulgar region could be regarded as a kind of missing link – apparently, it depicts the same kind of hunting, with a hunter on foot and a raptor attacking a deer-like animal with its claws (MARSCHAK 1986, 100, fig. 124; cf. Fig. 42). Vikings from Sweden were actually present in the Volga Bulgar region during the 10th century, as the famous travel report by the Arab diplomat, Ahmad Ibn Faḍlān, impressively illustrates (TOGAN 1966).

There are many more rune stones from Sweden and plenty of other Viking artefacts with depictions of raptors, which of course cannot all be presented here (OEHL 2006, 65–69; 2011, 31–32). Some of these images might also have been associated with falconry, or they were regarded as symbols of political and military power, or as religious representations. I would just like to briefly mention two more motifs: a raptor fighting a predator- or dragon-like quadruped – as depicted, for instance, on some Late Viking Swedish rune stones (esp. U 1161 Altuna; WEBER 1972) and, probably, on the bone plaques of the late 10th century Cammin casket (MUHL 1988; cf. Fig. 43), and the bird of prey struggling against a serpent. The latter can be seen on the 11th century rune stone fragment from Estuna church (Uppland, U 574; cf. Fig. 44). This is a Christian motif, widespread in medieval iconography, symbolising Christ defeating the devil, which originates, however, from Classical tradition and Roman Imperial iconography (KALLENBACH 1937; WITTKOWER 1939; SCHNEIDER/STEMPLINGER 1950; WEHRHAHN-STAUCH 1968; KÜNZL 2008; ADAMS 2015, 36–39; cf. Figs. 45–46).

VIKING HERALDRY

I close my paper with Viking Age heraldry: According to the 12th century *Primary Chronicle*, written by Nestor, a monk in Kiev, Rurik, the 9th century Swedish Viking chieftain, was the founder of the ruling dynasty of the Kievan Rus’ – the medieval forerunner of modern Russia and Ukraine. During the 10th and 11th centuries, Rurik’s successors, the rulers of the Rurikid dynasty, used a certain trident-like emblem on their coinage (Fig. 47a–c). The interpretation of this symbol is debated and there are different suggestions circulating (PAULSEN 1953, 166–174; LINDBERGER 2001, 55–82; DUCZKO 2004, 228–238). However, many scholars agree that this is a stylised depiction of a diving or descending falcon (Fig. 48), probably originating from Viking imagery. As a matter of fact, similar stylisations are well known from 10th century Swedish find spots and Viking settlements in Eastern Europe (PAULSEN 1953, figs. 12–14, 18–22 and passim; KULAKOW 1985, fig. 6; AMBROSIANI 2001, fig. 1.1–8; LINDBERGER 2001, fig. 2.15; DUCZKO 2004, fig. 69; cf. Fig. 47d). In 1917/1918, and again in 1992, modern Ukraine chose the Rurikid emblem as their national coat of arms (Fig. 49). As a result, the only nation in the world bearing an “authentic Viking” symbol – probably a raptor symbol – as their official coat of arms, is not Sweden, Denmark or Norway, but – Ukraine.

SUMMARY

In summary, it can be said that birds of prey are an important motif in Scandinavian (as well as Anglo-Saxon and Continental Germanic) art during the Late Iron and Viking Age and carry very different meanings. During the Migration Period, the raptor-fish motif seems to be connected with ideas of regeneration – probably influenced by ancient and Christian traditions. In the iconography of the Migration Period gold bracteates, birds of prey are closely linked to the chief god, Odin. By Vendel Period and Viking artists, the eagle was associated with fighting, war and death, as in Old Norse skaldic poetry. In the Late Viking Period, the topic of falconry was gaining in importance. Hunting with raptors seems also to be reflected in the use of raptor motifs in Viking heraldry, referring to falconry as a particularly noble form of hunting and an explicitly aristocratic pastime.

After the manuscript was finished, a new contribution about the blood eagle ritual was published and has to be mentioned here: K. Wikström af Edholm, Att rista blodörn. Blodörnsriten sedd som offer och ritualiserad våldspraktik i samband med maktskiften i fornnordisk tradition. *Scripta Islandica* 69, 2018, 5–40.

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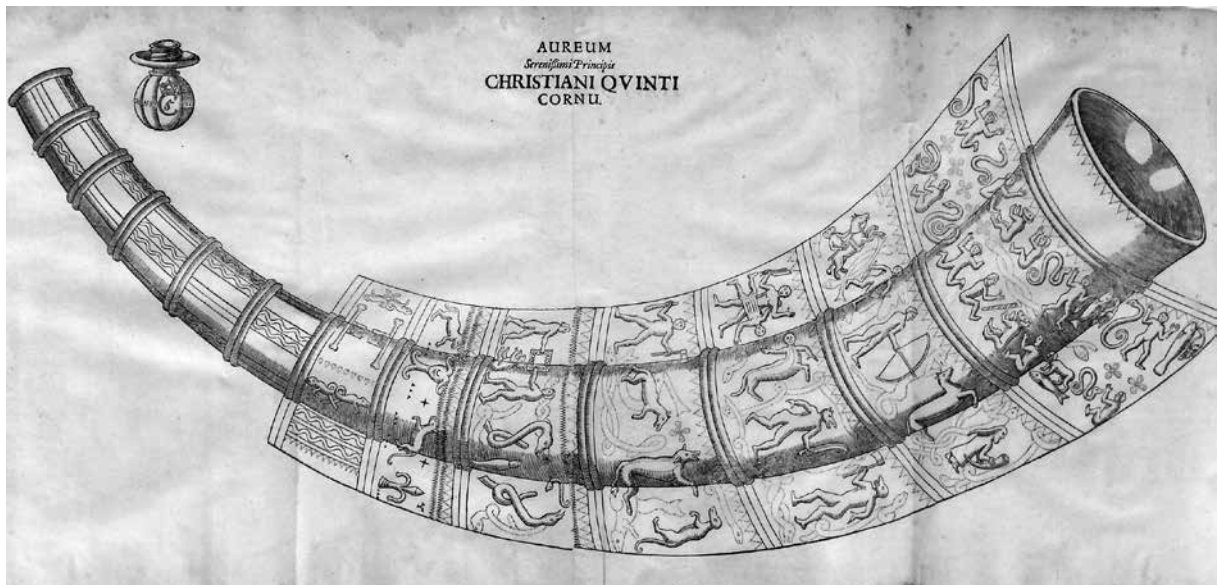


Fig. 1. The long (non-runic) Gallehus Horn, Jutland, Denmark, c. AD 400 (drawing O. Worm, 1641; after HEIZMANN 2015, Abb. 1).



Fig. 2. The raptor-fish motif, soldered onto the top ring of the long (non-runic) and chased into the second ring of the short (runic) Gallehus Horn (after OXENSTIERNA 1956, Abb. 152).

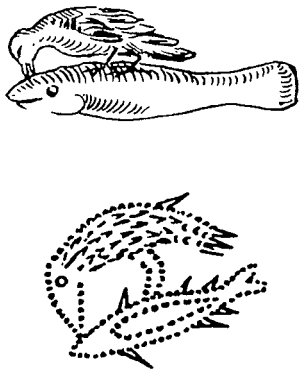


Fig. 3. Animal frieze on the gold-plated sheet from the war booty site of Thorsberger Moor, Schleswig-Flensburg, Germany, c. AD 200–250 (by courtesy of Archäologisches Landesmuseum Schleswig-Holstein, Schloss Gottorf, Schleswig).



Fig. 4. The raptor-fish motif on a "Pressblech" (pressed metal sheet) mount from Langen Jarchow (Häven), Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Germany, c. AD 250–300 (after SCHACHDÖRGES 1970, Taf. 85.9).



Fig. 5. The raptor-fish motif on the lost Roman Tombstone for an equestrian of Ala I Flavia Augusta Britannica Vin-dobona (Vienna, Austria), c. AD 69–114 (16th century drawing by Bartholomaeus Jupp and Wolfgang Lazius; after DÖLGER 1927, Taf. 165).

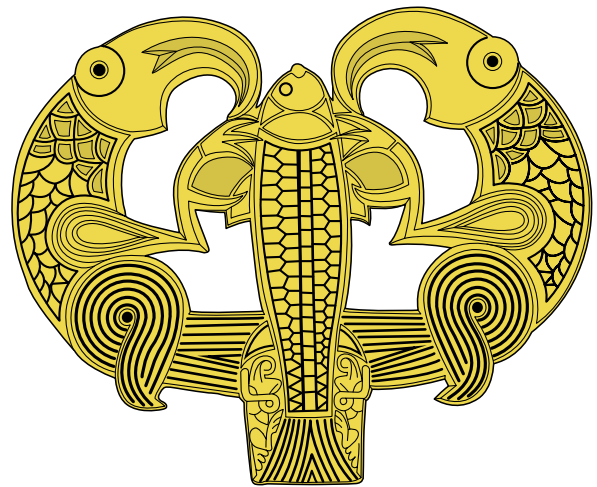


Fig. 6. The raptor-fish motif on a sheet gold plaque from the Staffordshire Hoard (West Midlands, England), probably decoration on a shield, 6th/7th centuries AD (redrawing L. F. Thomsen, after www.staffordshirehoard.org.uk/conservation-documentation-for-the-staffordshire-hoard).



Fig. 7. The raptor-fish motif on a Pictish sculptured stone (“Drosten stone”) from St. Vigean, near Arbroath, Angus, in Scotland, 9th century AD (Historical Environment Scotland SC 936638).

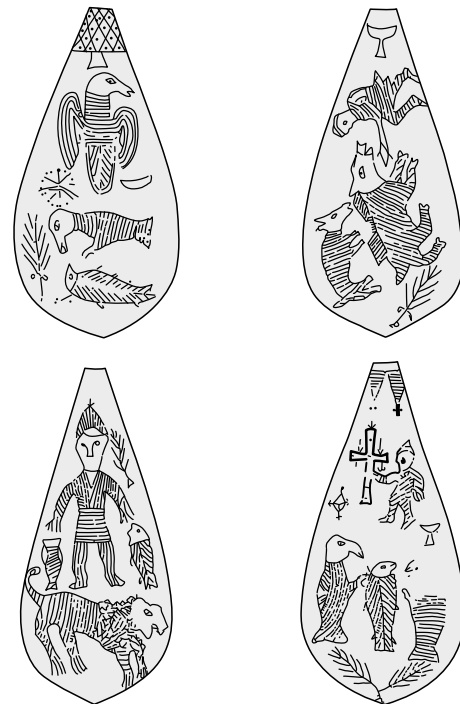


Fig. 8. The raptor-fish motif on the decorated gilded plates of the helmet (“Spangenhelm”) from Montepagano in Abruzzo, Italy, 6th century AD (redrawing L. F. Thomsen, after BÖHNER 1994, Abb. 21.5–8).



Fig. 9. The raptor-fish motif in the Book of Armagh, 9th century AD (Trinity College Library Dublin, Ms. 52, fol. 32v).



Fig. 10. The raptor-fish motif on a Migration period gold bracteate from an unknown find spot, British Museum-C (IK 33).



Fig. 11. Emperor with horse on a silver medallion of Constantine the Great, minted at Ticinum AD 315 (after HEIZMANN 2012, Abb. 3b).



Fig. 12. Týr and the Fenriswolf on the Migration period gold bracteate from Trollhättan-B, Sweden (edited by S. Oehrl; IK 190).



Fig. 13. The Uroboros motif on the Migration period gold bracteate from Lyngby-A, Denmark (edited by S. Oehrl; IK 297).



Fig. 14. God with horse and raptor on the Migration period gold bracteate from Skonager (III)-C, Denmark (IK 163).



Fig. 15. God with raptors or ravens on the Migration period gold bracteate from Söderby-B, Sweden (edited by S. Oehrl; IK 176.1).



Fig. 16. God with horse, raptor, and raptor-like headgear on the Migration period gold bracteate from Kitnæs I-C, Denmark (IK 92).



Fig. 17. Male bust merging into a bird on the Migration period gold bracteate from Tunalund-M, Sweden (IK 193).

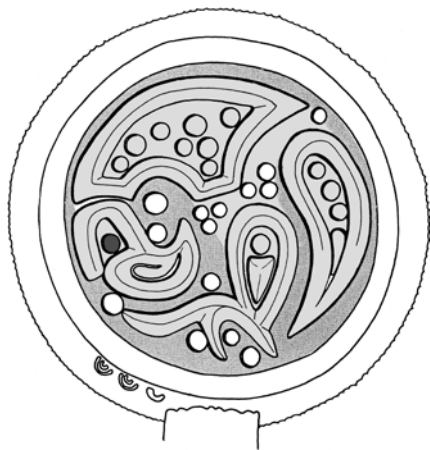


Fig. 18. Raptor on the Migration period gold bracteate from Stenholt-D, Denmark (edited by S. Oehrl; IK 527).



Fig. 19. Imitation of the Roman Emperor and runic inscription on the Migration period gold bracteate from Revsgård-A/Allerslev, Denmark (IK 145).



Fig. 20. Depictions of warriors and a raptor-shaped nose guard on the helmet from Vendel (grave XIV), Sweden, c. AD 600 (reconstruction) (after ARNE/STOLPE 1912, Taf. XLI,1).

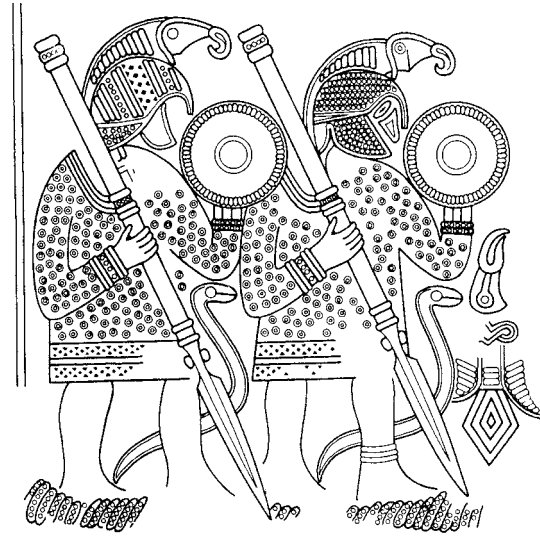


Fig. 21. Warriors with serpents and raptor on a stamped bronze sheet ("Pressblech") from the Valsgärde 7 helmet, c. AD 600-650 (after ARWIDSSON 1977, Abb. 115).



Fig. 22. Armed horseman with birds (raptor and raven?) and serpent on a stamped bronze sheet ("Pressblech") from the Vendel I helmet, c. AD 650-700 (after ARNE/STOLPE 1912, Taf. 6.1).



Fig. 23. Armed horseman with raptors and servant on a stamped bronze sheet ("Pressblech") from the Vendel I helmet, c. AD 650-700 (after HAUCK 1981, Fig. 24).



Fig. 24. Huge raptor attacking a man – bronze bird brooch from Lisbjerg in Jutland, Denmark, 6th/7th centuries AD (photo by Courtesy of National Museum of Denmark).



Fig. 25. Depiction of a battlefield with raptors eating the slain on the top part of the picture stone Lärbro Tängelgårda No. I, Gotland, Sweden, 8th–10th centuries AD (by courtesy of Antikvarisk-topografiska arkivet [ATA], Riksantikvarieämbetet, Stockholm, Sweden).



Fig. 26. Raptor attacking a man on the top part of the stone cross from Kirk Andreas, Isle of Man, 10th century (after KERMODE 1994, Pl. LI.101A).

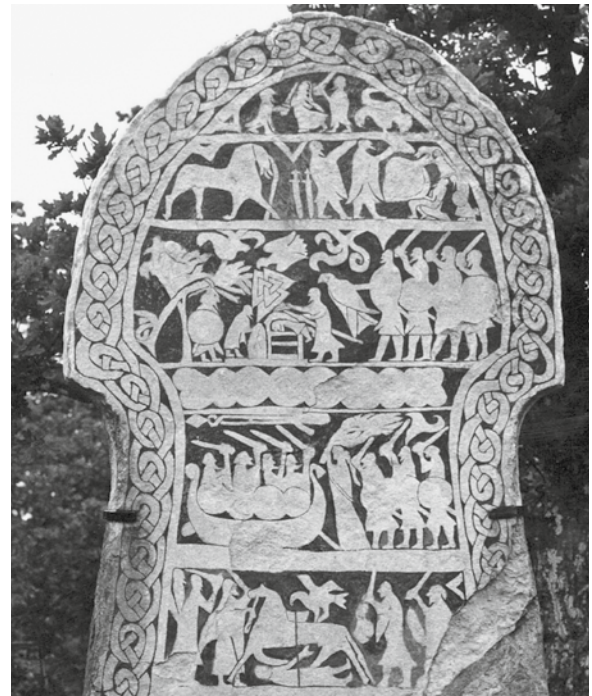


Fig. 27. Human sacrifice and battle scene with raptors on the top part of the picture stone, Lärbro Stora Hammars No. I, Gotland, Sweden, 8th–10th centuries AD (by courtesy of Antikvarisk-topografiska arkivet [ATA], Riksantikvarieämbetet, Stockholm, Sweden).

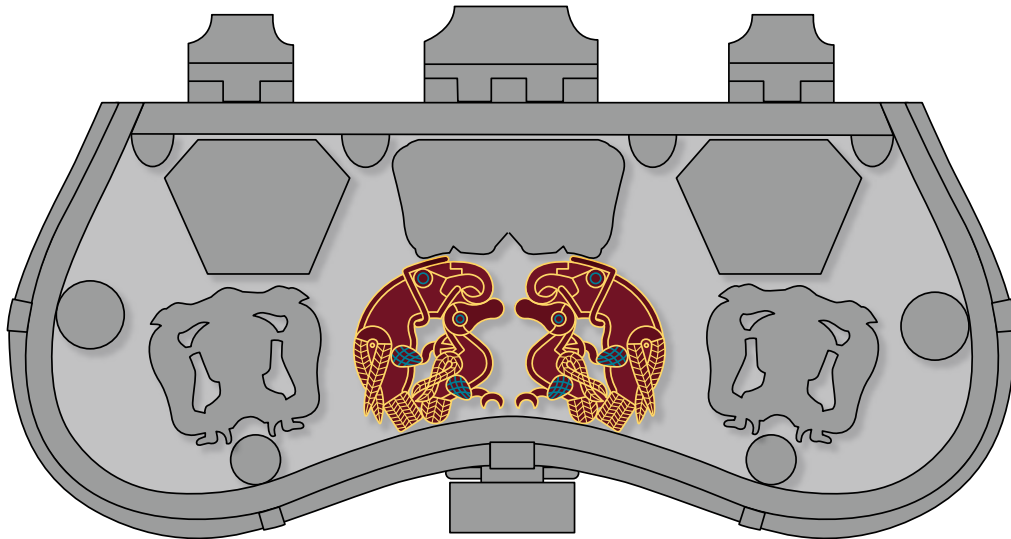


Fig. 28. Raptor striking a duck – gold and garnet cloisonné mounts on the purse lid from Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, East Anglia, early 7th century AD (redrawing L. F. Thomsen, after BRUCE-MITFORD 1975, fig. 128f.).



Fig. 29. Falconer on horseback on the top part of the picture stone from Klintebys near Klintehamn, Gotland, Sweden, 8th–10th centuries AD (by courtesy of Antikvarisk-topografiska arkivet [ATA], Riksantikvarieämbetet, Stockholm, Sweden).



Fig. 30. Falconer on the lower part of the stone cross from the churchyard of Bewcastle (Bewcastle 1A) in Cumberland, England, 8th century AD (by courtesy of "The Visionary Cross Project" [visionarycross.org]).



Fig. 31. Falconer on horseback with hounds on a Pictish sculptured stone from Elgin Cathedral in Moray, Scotland, 9th century AD (after ALLEN 1903, fig. 137).



Fig. 32. Falconer on horseback on an Anglo-Scandinavian stone cross fragment from Sockburn (Sockburn 3A) in Durham, England, 10th century AD (photo T. Middlemass, by courtesy of "Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture").



Fig. 33. Falconer on horseback with hounds on the rune stone from Alstad in Oppland, Norway, from between AD 1000 and 1030 (N 61–62).

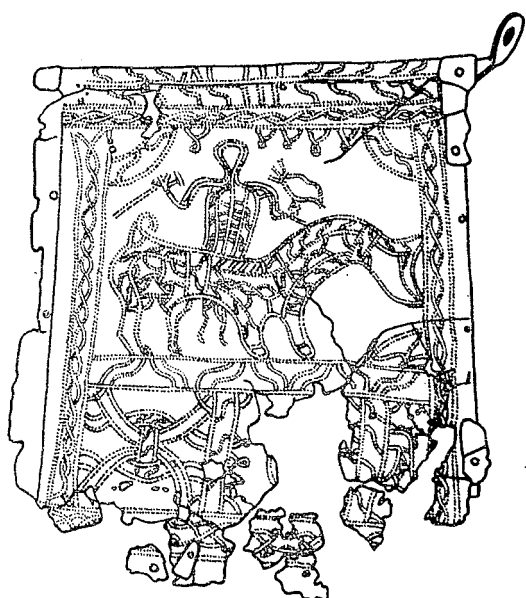


Fig. 34. Falconer on horseback on the bronze weathervane from Grimsta near Stockholm, Sweden, 11th century AD (after ÅKERSTRÖM-HOUGEN 1981, fig. 10).

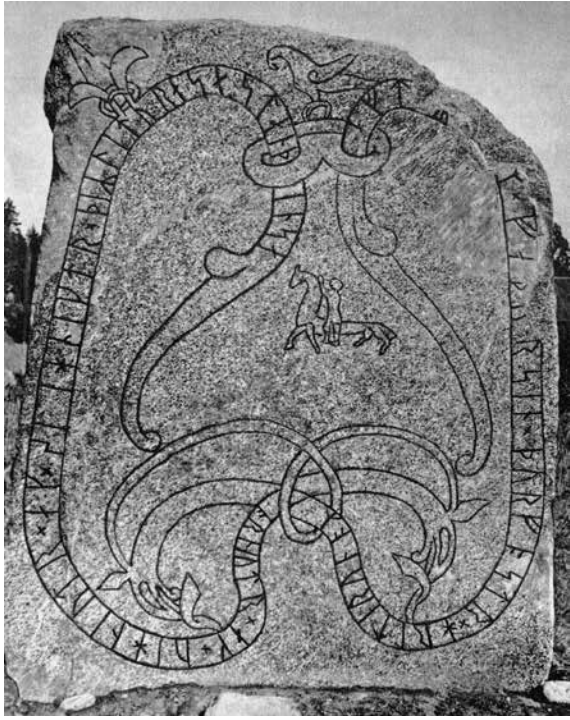


Fig. 36. Falconer on horseback on the rune stone from Hanunda, Hökhuvuds sn. in Uppland, Sweden, 11th century AD (U 599).



Fig. 35. Falconer on horseback on the rune stone from Vidbo church in Uppland, Sweden, 11th century AD (U 375).



Fig. 37. Falconer on horseback with hounds, hunting for red deer on the rune stone from Balingsta church (now Böksta backe) in Uppland, Sweden, 11th century AD (by courtesy of M. Åhlén; drawing of the raptor detail by S. Oehrl).



Fig. 38. Falcon attacking a gazelle (frontispiece [after J. M. Wolf] of BURTON 1852).



Fig. 39. Falcon attacking a gazelle (drawing after B. Waterhouse Hawkins after Lieut. McMullin, after BURTON 1852, between pages 84 and 85).



Fig. 40. Raptor and hound attacking a gazelle on a glazed ceramic bowl from the citadel of the Castle of Mértola in Portugal, probably originating from Kairouan in Tunisia, 11th century AD (by courtesy of Mértola Museum).



Fig. 41. Hunting and falconry depictions on a part of a rectangular, frame-like carved ivory fitting from Egypt, 11th/12th centuries AD (by courtesy of Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin).



Fig. 42. Falconer on foot hunting a gazelle (?) on a silver bowl from Tomsk in Siberia, probably originating from the Volga Bulgar region, 10th century AD (after MARSCHAK 1986 No. 124).



Fig. 43. Raptor struggling with a dragon-like beast on a bone plaque from the lid of the lost southern Scandinavian Mammen style casket from Cammin ("Cordulaschrein") in western Pomerania (now Poland), late 10th century or around AD 1000 (after MUHL 1988, Taf. 54.1).

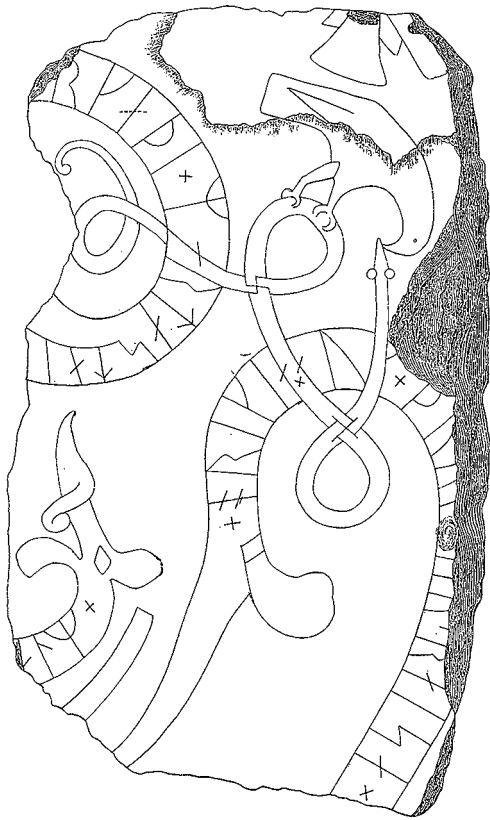


Fig. 44. Raptor attacking a serpent on the rune stone fragment from Estuna church in Uppland, Sweden, 11th century (U 574).



Fig. 45. Raptor defeating a serpent in the Carolingian Book of Gospels, c. AD 845–855 (by courtesy of Bibliothèque Nationale de France, gallica, lat. 9388, fol. 150v).



Fig. 46. Raptor struggling with a serpent – mosaic in the Imperial Palace of Constantinople, Byzantium, 6th century AD (by courtesy of the Great Palace Mosaic Museum, Istanbul, Turkey)

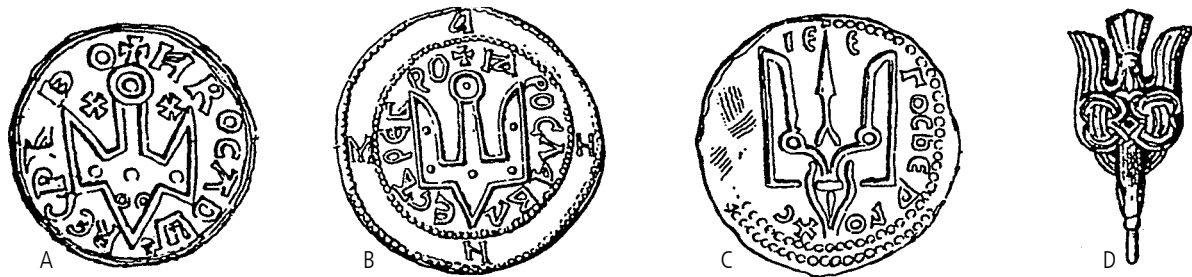


Fig 47a-c. The Rurikid “falcon symbol” on silver coins of Vladimir the Great and Yaroslav the Wise struck in Kiev and Novgorod, 10th and 11th centuries AD (after PAULSEN 1953, Abb. 230–231, 233); d Bronze application/book in the shape of a falcon from the 9th/10th centuries Viking settlement Bol’shoe Timërevo near Yaroslavl in Western Russia (after DUCZKO 2004, fig. 53c).



Fig. 48. Stoop of the peregrine falcon (photo by courtesy of Z. Tunka).



Fig. 49. The lesser coat of arms of Ukraine from 1917/18, officially adopted in 1992 (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lesser_Coat_of_Arms_of_Ukraine.svg).

