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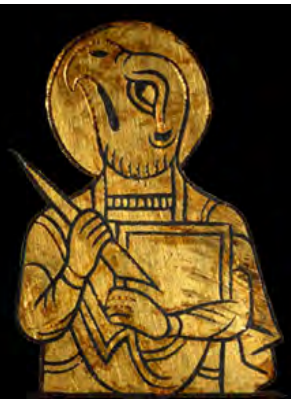

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UNBOUNDED: THE MULTIPLICITY OF BODIES AND BEINGS IN VIKING WORLDS

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***These authors contributed equally to this work.**

Abstract

The Vikings have been characterised as one of the most stereotyped past cultures. This article challenges static representations of Viking bodies by exploring their diverse and referential body-worlds. We propose a more dynamic view where Viking bodies could be fluid, unbounded, and entangled with human and non-human entities. Using a more-than-representational approach and concepts of body-worlding, we move beyond conventional categorisations and dichotomies to reveal the complex network of bodies and beings populating this period. Through three case studies – body modification, portrayals of differently-abled bodies, and multitemporal burial practices – we argue that Viking bodies encompassed unique ontologies that differ profoundly from modern perspectives and invite readers to rethink the Viking past on terms closer to its own.

Keywords: Vikings, body-worldings, more-than-representationalism, body modification, differently-abled bodies, multitemporality
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Banner image: Detail of niello-inlaid engraving of a haloed eagle-headed St. John the Evangelist upon gold plaque from Brandon, Suffolk. (©The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0] licence)

UNBOUNDED: THE MULTIPLICITY OF BODIES AND BEINGS IN VIKING WORLDS

Brad Marshall, Emma L. Thompson, Alexander Wilson* and Marianne Hem Eriksen, University of Leicester

Introduction

The Viking Age (*c.*750–1050 CE), one of the most enduringly popular periods of the past (Birkett 2019; Larrington 2023; Price and Raffield 2023, pp. 1–2), is enjoying renewed public and scholarly interest. The conventional view of Viking Age Scandinavia centres emergent kingdoms focused on raiding and control over trade and driven by competitive individualism, which is rooted in an androcentric preoccupation with warfare and other spheres and activities coded as masculine. In such frameworks, the warrior-chief is often envisioned as the hegemonic ideal and (sole) agent of historical change as well as a bounded individual and the primary active subject. Consequently, scholarship still features a rather familiar cast of fixed identities – warriors, merchants, shield-maidens, sorceresses, housewives, and gods – to some extent perpetuating longstanding stereotypes.

Within this comfortable but limiting paradigm, the capacity to explore the complexities of personhood, identities, and body-worlds (see below) is stymied, with potential epistemological, ontological, and political consequences. Douglass Bailey (2008, p. 11) notes the damaging pitfalls of such stereotypes, which 'reduce complexity down to artificial categories and make different individuals interchangeable'. This article aims to disrupt modern stereotypes of the 'Viking Body' and to surmount the desire to map 'known' identities or assumed stereotypes onto material remains. It thus aligns itself with an emerging wave of scholarship that challenges and enriches our view of bodies and beings in Viking worlds (e.g. Hedeager, 2011; Price et al., 2019; Ratican, 2024).

We intend to reveal the diversity of Viking Age bodies by emphasising how they were *unbounded*. The unboundedness of Viking bodies materialises in two ways: first, how they exceed their physiological boundaries; second, how they resist fixed identities in their ontological fluidity and capacity for change across time and space. They not only incorporated complex multiplicities in themselves, but also emerged through relationalities extending beyond bounded human subjects into more-than-human, multispecies, and *multitemporal* networks. By approaching Viking bodies in this way, we expand the range of bodies, persons, and subjectivities we are willing to see in the past.

This article adopts more-than-representational approaches (see below) to reconfigure the Viking past as one not inhabited by androcentric stereotypes. It applies frameworks of body-worlding (Eriksen, 2022; cf. Haraway, 1997; Robb and Harris, 2013) to explore the ontological openness and diversity of bodies in the Viking Age and its radically different body norms. Recognising the unboundedness of bodies is pertinent not only in Viking contexts, but also to the body ontologies and practices of other periods and regions (see Wallis in this volume), including contemporary societies (Battersby, 1993). But we choose to centre this specific historical context to demonstrate that body conceptions and worldings are fundamentally historically situated and emerge through contextual relationalities.

Our focus is on archaeological material culture, especially its visual aspects. Where appropriate, we contextualise our analysis with contemporary and later textual sources, such as travel accounts and Old Norse mythology and saga literature. To consider how bodies were conceptualised and materialised in the body-worlds of Viking Scandinavia and the diaspora, we focus on three case studies: first, practices of body modification among the Vikings; second, the situation of differently abled bodies; and third, how bodies and burials can be multitemporal. Ultimately, we argue that Viking bodies were much stranger and more interesting than conventional approaches convey.

Body-worldings of the Viking Age

In recent decades, the body has become a major source of critical focus in archaeology (e.g. Joyce, 2005; Rebay-Salisbury et al., 2010; Robb and Harris, 2013). Much of this work aims to overcome a longstanding dichotomy in modern Western thought between naturalistic and social constructionist views of the body. Naturalistic approaches ahistorically centre the body as a pre-cultural biological organism, with the 'real' body seen as existing prior to culture. Conversely, social constructionist thought regards the body as a product

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of culture but reduces it to a veneer of the social world by de-emphasising its corporeal aspects (Borić and Robb, 2008, pp.1–2). The humanist idea of the individual or bounded subject is founded on this nature/culture divide, whether the body is seen to be bounded as a distinct physical-biological entity or as a fungible tool for discursive practice.

But bodies are always changing, always unfinished, their boundaries neither fixed nor essential. Both naturalist and social constructionist approaches are overly deterministic in treating the body as a physical or cultural subject that can be definitively delineated. Conceptualising bodies in this way robs them of their particularity, the intimate connection to their specific histories. Projecting Enlightenment body-concepts is unlikely to capture either how people in the past thought about bodies or how bodies *actually* work. To understand bodies in the past, we need to move away from body-concepts that seek to divide the natural from the cultural. In addition, while modern Western body-concepts frequently assume an anthropic adult, typically envisaged as white, male, heterosexual, and 'able-bodied', as a default body (e.g. Frost, 2016), it is crucial to recognise that there is not, and never has been, a singular, 'real', transcendental body onto which culture can be secondarily projected. Each body must be situated within its own world.

Regarding the Iron and Viking Ages, an emerging wave of scholarship suggests a high degree of ontological fluidity in how bodies worked (e.g. Eriksen, 2017; Eriksen and Kay, 2022; Eriksen et al. 2025a; Hedeager, 2011; Kristoffersen, 2010; Lund, 2013; Ratican, 2024). Modern body-concepts often assume a sharp divide between human and non-human bodies, but both archaeological and material evidence show this boundary was much less clear in Viking ontologies. The co-mingling of human and non-human bodies occurs across numerous burial contexts; human bodies were routinely buried in assemblages of horses, dogs, sheep, piglets, and more, while bones of non-human species are in some cases seemingly incorporated into 'human' bodies (Eriksen and Ratican, forthcoming). Human-animal blurredness occurs in other forms of material culture, including Germanic animal styles depicting fluid bodies that encompass both human and non-human features (e.g. Hedeager, 2004; Fig. 2.1). Depictions and materialisations of ritual enactments of shapeshifting, such as the human-wolf hybrid figure portrayed on one of the Torslunda plates, further reveal ontologies of bodily fluidity exceeding the bounds of the human (e.g. Hedeager, 2011, pp.81–99; Fig. 2.2).

A further presumption is that the human body's

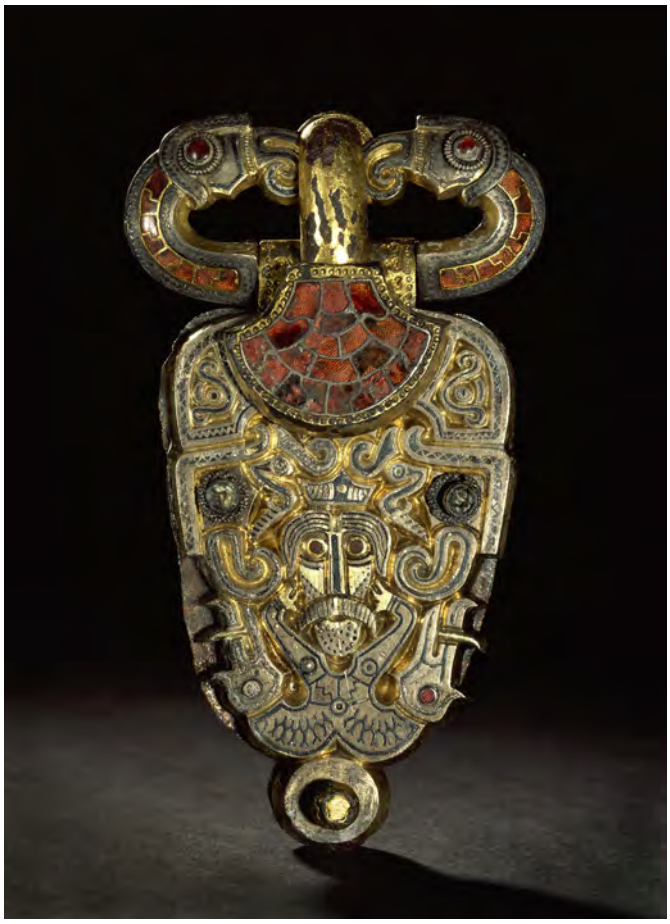


Figure 2.1: An early example of an animal style (II) belt buckle, 6th century, Åker, Norway. The buckle shows animals intermingled with human bodies. (Kulturhistorisk museum, Oslo / Photo: © Eirik Irgens Johnsen, UiO/CC BY-SA 4.0)

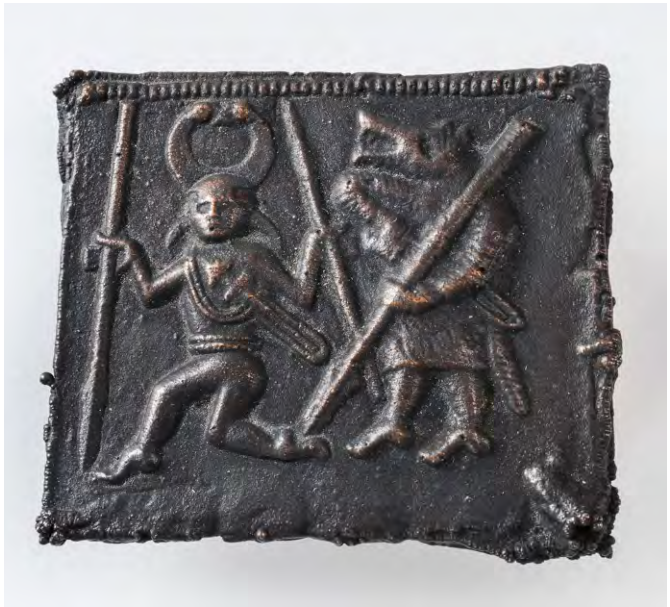


Figure 2.2: A cast bronze die from Torslunda. The figure on the right combines human and animal features, most prominently in its wolf-like head. (Historiska museet, Stockholm / CC BY-SA 2.0)

perceived integrity should be upheld in how it is treated. Yet extensive evidence for postmortem body modification in the Viking Age highlights the partibility and malleability of certain bodies in death, which could be manufactured and curated as what Eriksen (2020) has termed 'body-objects'. For example, a human cranial fragment from Ribe (Fig. 2.3), perforated and inscribed with runes, speaks to the partibility and transformative potential of the body after death. It has been typically analysed as a bearer for the runic inscription, rather than with regard to its materiality as a treated body-part. Yet this cranial element is not a singular outlier: dead human bodies could be cremated, inhumed, dismembered, stacked, and manipulated in various ways. The ongoing *Body-Politics* project, from which this paper springs, is examining hundreds of examples from settlements across the long Scandinavian Iron Age of bodies broken apart and deposited in practices that foreground anything but bodily integrity. These bodily practices challenge taken-for-granted boundaries between 'subjects' and 'objects', 'persons' and 'things' (e.g. Eriksen, 2017). Even the famous furnished Viking burials confront easy categorisations of bodies and persons through the intermingling of multispecies beings, as in the above discussion of human-non-human fluidity. Conversely, objects could be considered persons with biographies and *actual* (not symbolic) bodies, which could be ritually killed (Alberti and Marshall, 2009; Aannestad, 2018; Ratican, 2024). Together, these practices show the capacity Viking bodies had to be actively transformed over time.

Figure 2.3: Cranial fragment from 8th century Ribe, inscribed with runes and perforated. (Museums of Southwest Jutland, Ribe / Photo: © Emma Tollefsen)

Even when a body appears as we might expect – e.g. intact and delimited as an individual in its burial context – there is a tendency in scholarship to impose fixed categories onto it. But this can obfuscate the complexity of Viking bodies. A famous burial from Birka, Sweden, was previously thought to be a male warrior based on the funerary objects, but provoked controversy when the human remains were genetically sexed as female (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al, 2017; Price et al, 2019). This raises several important questions, as the ambiguous burial no longer conforms to the simplistic diagnostic features expected from a 'male', 'female', or 'warrior' grave, but troubles the assumed categories of conventional scholarship. Recent work stresses the need to move away from these stereotypes and assumptions (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al., 2017; Moen, 2019; Slotten, 2020). Burials are contextually dependent and variable, and they reference their fluid and diverse worlds of origin.

It is also crucial to consider the diversity of bodily practices and understandings across Viking worlds. Commonalities can be observed across sources, but there was no homogeneous Viking world in which burial practices or material culture were entirely uniform. Mortuary treatment varied considerably, with co-existing practices of inhumation; cremation; burials in mounds, cairns, boats, wagons, ships, urns; and lack of burial in an archaeologically recognisable way. As Neil Price (2008, p.257) observes, 'after more than a century of excavations there can be no doubt whatever that we cannot speak of a standard orthodoxy of burial practice common to the whole Norse world'.

Having set the stage as to how Viking bodies were rendered in art, treated in death, and the geographical diversity of body-concepts, we turn now to introduce some key conceptual tools drawn upon in this article. A useful way out of the bind of dichotomic body-concepts is to apply more-than-representational approaches (Anderson and Harrison, 2010; Harris, 2018). Representationalism posits a distinction between what is 'really real' and what is represented, where the latter is superimposed on the real. Both naturalistic and social constructionist approaches treat the natural as actually real, but the former focus primarily on the natural as the object of study, while the latter treat it only as a canvas for the construction of represented 'reality' through language and signs. By contrast, more-than-representational thinking challenges the relationalist distinction between matter and meaning. It does not reject the symbolic qualities of bodies or objects, but centres how both the material-physical and semiotic-symbolic aspects of artefacts and phenomena emerge together and are entwined. As Eriksen (2022, p.70) argues, 'the body is not a biological

fact, a neutral canvas that we "dress" in culture. Rather, bodies emerge as products of specific histories: our bodies hold entire worlds in how we run, sleep, have sex, interact'. The body is not simply a producer or medium of culture; it is itself always already cultural, and its material and representational aspects cannot be understood as separate or in isolation.

Consequently, this article uses the concept of 'body-worlding', emphasising the importance of situating bodies in their own worlds, rather than assuming they are interchangeable across a broader 'Viking world'. Body-worlds encompass not only the physical form of the body, but also 'the totality of bodily experiences, practices and representations in a specific space and time' (Robb and Harris, 2013, p.3). Situating bodies in such a way is vital because, as argued by Donna Haraway, 'nothing comes without its world' – that is, nothing exists in a vacuum of isolation, and everything is enmeshed in a multitude of relationalities (Haraway, 1997, p.37). Eriksen (2022) develops the work of John Robb, Oliver J.T. Harris, and Haraway to suggest bodies cannot be explored without also seeking to know the worlds in which they exist and emerge. As Ben Anderson and Paul Harrison (2010, p.8) observe, these worlds are not 'an extant thing but rather … a mobile but more or less stable ensemble of practices, involvements, relations, capacities, tendencies and affordances'. Emphasising the connection of the body to its world helps us understand bodies not as isolated from their material and cultural contexts, but as being entangled in wider networks of bodies and beings. By focusing on the *worldings* of particular bodies, we can situate difference and distinct practices in localised contexts, without erasing common aspects of Viking Age ontologies.

A final consideration is that it may be necessary for us to reappraise our conceptions of what constituted bodily norms and transgressions in a Viking Age context. Assumptions about how and which bodily practices transgress implicitly or explicitly understood norms are culturally and historically specific. Modern Eurocentric notions of the body as an integral, choate, and non-partible person affect cultural practices of how bodies are maintained as a 'whole' in life and death, and the treatment of those who might be defined as 'lacking' in some bodily aspect. But the prevalence of fragmented body parts in Iron and Viking Age mortuary practices, as discussed above, suggests a different body-concept, in which the body is seen as partible in certain contexts, and notions of integrity or boundedness are by no means inviolable (Eriksen, 2020). If we assume such treatments of the body were *a priori* transgressive – for instance, that they result from atypical violence enacted on those perceived as deviant or outsiders – we close off the possibility that they constituted some kind of norm (Toplak, 2018). These bodies may be deviant only in that they diverge from what we in the modern West expect bodies to be capable of, and how we think they could and should appear in a specific context.

Rather than imposing modern Eurocentric understandings of the body onto a strikingly different past, we want to be open to seeing strangeness in the Viking Age. We should be cautious of assuming comfortable parallels between modern Western cultures and those in the distant past. What we consider normative or transgressive is unlikely to map exactly onto how the Vikings felt about their bodies, and it is crucial that we confront our false 'cultural intimacy' with the Vikings, which limits our capacity to recognise its alterity, as has been suggested for the classical world (Mol, 2023; see also Herzfeld, 2005, pp.1–35). Instead, we have to make the Vikings strange again. This strangeness must not be equated to an inferiority emergent from foreignness, backwardness, or anachronistic ideas of 'barbarity'. Recognising the strangeness of the Viking Age means accepting its difference and heterogeneity, including the different ontologies of its body-worlds. It means thinking critically about our preconceptions and desires, about how we think about the Viking past and what we want it to be.

To demonstrate this approach, we present three case studies drawing on diverse evidence. First, we explore practices of modifying the physical body and the implications these have for understanding the body as a form of material culture in itself. Second, we examine an anthropomorphic 'art' object – the so-called Odin from Lejre – and the insights this figurine generates for Viking concepts of bodily ability. The final case study presents a famous Viking woman's burial and shows that even in death, a buried body is not a static entity to be 'read', but forms part of a multitemporal assemblage drawing together past, present, and future.

Body modification

The first aspect of the unboundedness of bodies we demonstrate here is that the body itself is a form of material culture. Bodies can be both objects and subjects, and are never static, but are always in a process of transformation. Cells die and regenerate, the heart pumps blood through the veins, the digestive system breaks down and transforms other bodies – animals and plants – to nutrients, energy, and waste (cf. Eriksen and Costello, 2025; Mol, 2021). The transformational and malleable capacity of the body can

also be manipulated. Bodies are mouldable through a myriad of different technologies, including scarification, tattooing, piercings, hair alterations, amputation, foot binding, and many others. We argue that the Vikings also treated the body as a material substance that could, and in some cases should, be transformed. Among the body modification practices we have evidence for within Viking Age body-worlds are teeth filing and other potential dental modifications, hair technologies, and the use of make-up and tattooing.

Dental modification of various kinds is widespread across time and place, and can take the form of filing, drilling, chiselling, notching, or chipping, polishing, inlaying, or staining the facial surface, as well as tooth extraction (Burnett and Irish, 2017; Power et al, 2022, pp.128–9). Teeth can be altered or separated from the rest of the body without posing any danger to life. They are sometimes also thought to contain some of the essence of the person. Teeth filing is a permanent and, to a modern audience, exceptionally striking form of body manipulation evidenced in the Viking Age. The phenomenon is attested in more than 130 individuals, exclusively osteologically sexed as male, mostly from modern-day Sweden, with a few instances in Denmark and England (Arcini, 2018). The practice is executed by carving crescent-shaped grooved lines on the outward-facing surface of teeth from the anterior dentition (Fig. 2.4). This particular practice has been argued to indicate either an aesthetic ideal associated with specific social groups, e.g. traders or warriors, or as an identity marker of subaltern or unfree persons (Kjellström, 2014). We argue that this form of body modification can also be a strategy to alter the aesthetic capacities of some, exclusively male, bodies, and their affective impact as well as their lived experience. It is a striking intervention that provides an unfamiliar glimpse of the Vikings' ideas about what a body can and should be (cf. Tollefsen and Eriksen, in prep).

Hair technology is another strategy to alter and modify bodily expression, using the detachable and growing parts of the body as social instruments. Like teeth, hair is both a part of the body and potentially separate from it. Hair and teeth are in-between, material resources that are intimate or *not*, depending on context. Like other material culture related to the body, hair is part biology, part social performance, part extension of personhood, part display, part concealment, and can enhance or conceal gender and sexuality. Hair can also be an intense space of politics and policing (e.g. Caldwell, 1991; Ngandu-Kalenga Greensword, 2022).

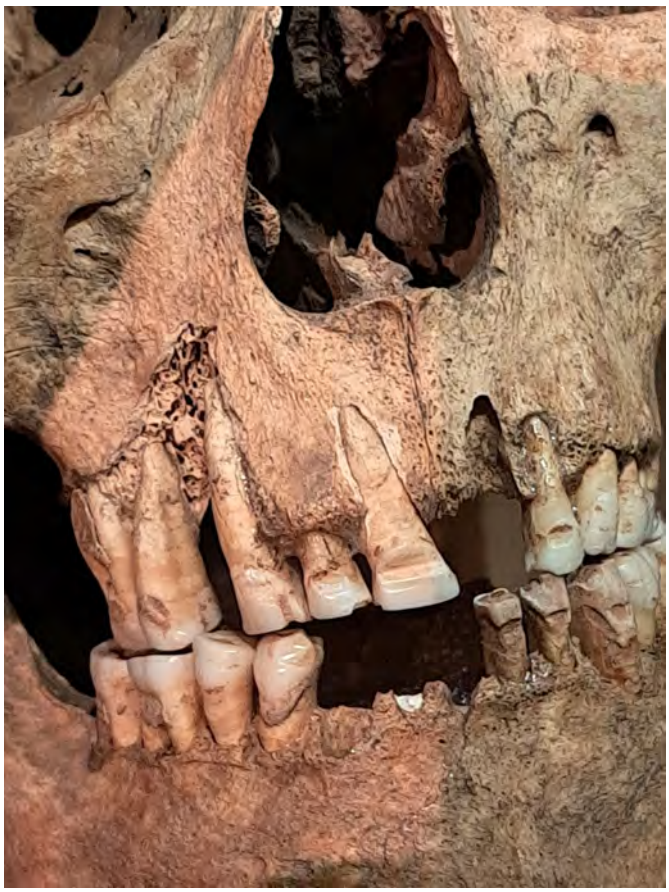


Figure 2.4: Individual with filed teeth from Kopparsvik (Gotland), Sweden. (Historiska museet, Stockholm / Photo: © Brad Marshall)

Iron- and Viking-period material culture and imagery indicate that hair was of importance throughout the first millennium in Scandinavia (Ashby, 2014; Arwill-Nordbladh, 2016). Combs were a standard part of (traditionally considered) male equipment and are a central part of burial assemblages in multiple periods (e.g. Illerup Ådal). Hair was also often accentuated in imagery, and in complex ways signalled social identities in terms of gender, warriorhood, and standing (e.g. Ashby, 2014, pp.175–6). In multiple Germanic societies, hair was frequently interwoven with political power. The Merovingian kings famously could not rule if they cut their hair, while the Norwegian King Harald Fairhair was thus named because he vowed to cut his hair only once he had united all of Norway into one kingdom. Hair technologies were key social instruments, demonstrating how the malleability of the body transcends the individual person.

Finally, people in the Viking Age may also have manipulated the appearance of the face and skin in different ways to alter bodily capacities. The traveler Ibn Ya'qūb, from al-Andalus (Andalucia) in Spain, went to the Viking town of Hedeby (formerly in Denmark, now in Germany) in the tenth century $_{CE}$. He noted that 'both men and women use a kind of indelible cosmetic

to enhance the beauty of their eyes' (Ibn Ya'qūb, 2011, p.163). Archaeological evidence supports that the Vikings may have used cosmetic substances smeared on the skin to alter their appearance. A burial from Fyrkat in Denmark, discussed in more detail below, was found to contain a box brooch. Among other grave goods were seeds of henbane (a psychoactive plant), owl pellets, and bird bones. Inside the box brooch, traces of white lead paint were discovered (Pentz et al., 2009). The particular characteristics of this burial have led to the body being interpreted as a ritual specialist – a magic-worker or Old Norse *völva* – who may have used paint to prepare their body and alter their looks to perform specific kinds of ritual (see also below). Whether people also transformed the appearance of their skin in more permanent ways, such as through tattooing, is unknown. Another traveller, Ibn Fadlān, described the 'Rus', likely Viking travellers from Sweden, as being 'tattooed in dark green with designs' (Ibn Fadlān, 2011, p.46). No bodies with preserved skin exist from the Viking world, but previous examples from prehistoric Europe – such as the famous body of Ötzi – demonstrate that it is certainly possible that such body modification practices occurred.

Crucially, what these examples demonstrate is that Viking bodies are far more complex than the recognisable stereotypes and comfortable categories have led us to believe. Bodies are simultaneously partible and persistent objects. The body is not fixed once and for all: a sword, a piece of jewellery, a hair pin, or a form of make-up can extend what the body is and what it can do. Conversely, a body can transform in powerful ways not only by adding material things to the bodily assemblage, but also by modifying the substance of the body itself. Such modifications and interventions could produce certain kinds of persons, and be repeated or revised through life, while living with the durable marks of the person one used to be.

Bodily capacity and difference

As well as revealing novel reinterpretations of unboundedness, difference, and fluidity through body modification as a form of material culture, we can also radically reframe our understanding of Viking bodies by reconsidering ontologies of bodily capacities and alterity. Underpinning ideas of boundedness is the persistence of modern conceptions of the body as 'machine' – that is, composed of repeated, standardised, and functional parts that co-act or can break down from an idealised operational model (Robb and Harris, 2013, pp.175–6). This includes pervasive ideas of the medicalised standard body, one that is biologically presupposed and has a normative and transcendental archetype. This brings with it an implicit and restrictive conceptualisation of what a body should look like, possess, and be able to do – and what it could (or should) not do. Such ideas implicitly imbue us with the understanding that when a body transgresses, deviates, or breaks down from the 'perfect' healthy and choate bodily norm, it is effectively diminished, restricted, or negatively altered.

Yet in Viking Age Scandinavia and the diaspora, there existed different understandings of how bodily difference and the concomitant relationalities beyond a bounded self could emerge and be embodied, even when something is ostensibly changed or lost, or when something non- or more-than-human is added. To explore ontologies of two aspects of Viking bodies and body-worlds – that of different bodily sensory and transformational capacities – and how these diverge from the modern norms of bounded, choate bodies, we can turn to an enigmatic Viking Age figurine from Lejre (Fig. 2.5).

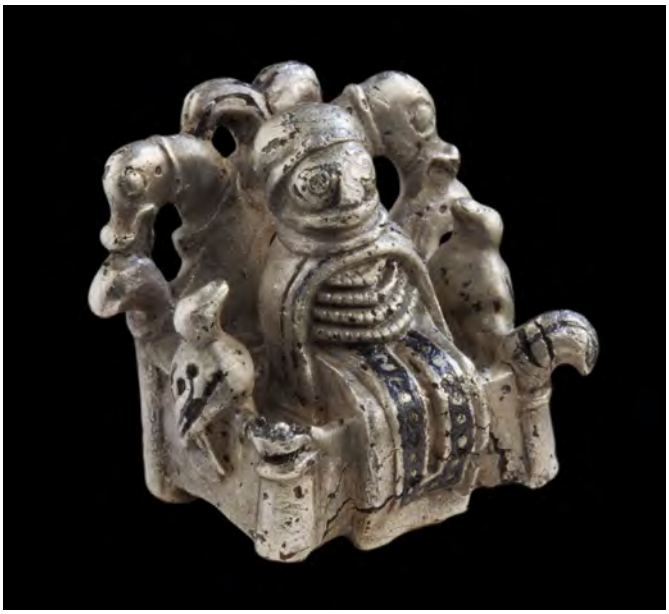


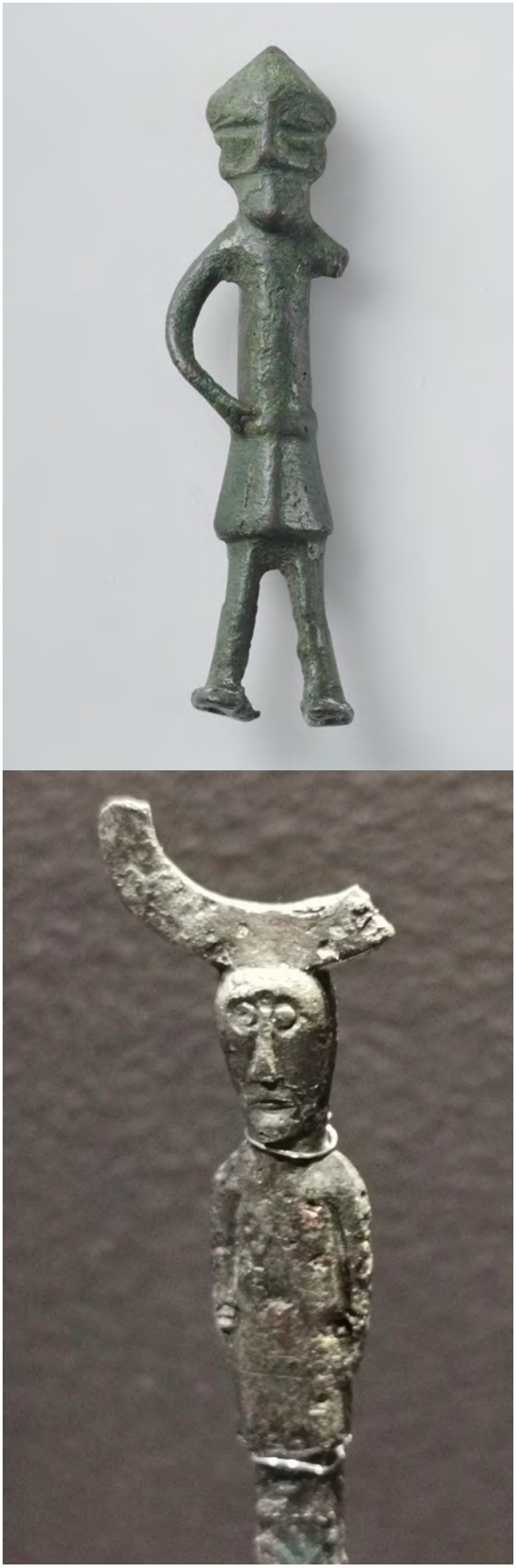
Figure 2.5: Odin fra Lejre (Odin from Lejre). Silver figurine with niello inlay, 1.75 cm tall and 1.98 cm wide, 9 grams. (Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen / Photo: © Ole Malling, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The figurine was excavated in 2009 from Gammel Lejre, Zealand, Denmark, a significant Late Iron Age hall complex. The object has been stylistically dated to *c.*950 CE. It is made of silver with niello inlay and is remarkably small, little bigger than a fingernail. But it is strikingly detailed, with three major elements: a chair with zoomorphic features, possibly carved wolf or dog heads; a seated anthropomorphic figure; and two birds perched on the chair's armrests (Christensen, 2013). The object's diminutive size raises questions about its tactility, including how other bodies may have handled,

engaged with, and understood it in everyday life (Eriksen, 2022).

Following conventional approaches to anthropomorphic 'art' from this period, the Lejre figurine has been subject to intense debate about the identity of the figure depicted. But this discourse has always essentially sought to ascribe a fixed identity. It has been broadly assumed that the seated figure represents Odin; indeed, this is the interpretation presented on the Lejre Museum's website (https://lejremuseum.dk). In part, this was inferred from readings of the chair element as Odin's seat Hlidskialf, the zoomorphic carved animals being his wolves Geri and Freki, and the perched birds being the ravens Hugin and Munin (Christensen, 2013, pp.65–68). However, as argued by Elisabeth Arwill-Nordbladh (2013), the seated human-like figure is ambiguous, with its clothing and physical features uneasily gendered. Consequently, some have suggested the seated figure may represent a female figure, such as a deity like Freyja, another mythological figure, or a human *völva*, i.e. a prophetic magic-practitioner (Arwill-Nordbladh, 2013; Christensen, 2013). But this does not rule out interpreting the figure as Odin, who in one thirteenth-century mythological text is accused of having practiced magic in the same way as a *völva*, perhaps a reference to subverting gender conventions (Larrington, 2014, p.85). In any case, we argue that *identifying* the figure is not a satisfying end in itself (cf. Eriksen, 2022; Eriksen et al, 2025b). Rather, the challenge in a more-than-representational framework is to understand how the figurine itself, and the human decisions that shaped it, resonated consequentially within a world of metal and fleshy bodies, stories, and body-concepts.

A prominent feature, forming part of the first identification of the figure with Odin, is its differently styled eyes. The right has a clear pupil, while the left eye is more diffuse. This feature could be an indication of different sightedness in each of the Lejre figure's eyes. It has been suggested the differently styled eyes of the Lejre figurine may be a deliberate result of its manufacture (Arwill-Nordbladh, 2012; 2013) or of abrasion or later damage (Christensen, 2013). Intriguingly, several other Late Iron and Viking Age objects have distinctive eye features. These features have similarly been posited to result from unintentional or deliberate damage, abrasion, or manual wearing away of the features over time. This includes several other figures associated with Odin with differently styled eyes made from precious metals and found in high-status contexts (Arwill-Nordbladh, 2013; Price and Mortimer, 2014) (Fig. 2.6a & b).



Figures 2.6a & b:
Odin from Lindby. Cast bronze figure with differentiated eyes. (Historiska museet, Stockholm / Photo: © Ola Myrin, CC BY-SA 4.0)
Odin from Uppåkra. Bronze figure with differentiated eyes. (Photo: © HecquetK, CC BY-SA 4.0)

These finds attest to a tradition of depicting

different-sightedness across Viking worlds that differs from modern conceptions of the medicalised, machine-like body, where the loss of vision is understood as a form of disability. There were no doubt people living in Viking Age Scandinavia and the diaspora who experienced what today might be referred to as visual impairments and blindness, although it is impossible to quantify the occurrence and pathology of such conditions from the archaeological record. Old Norse textual sources feature multiple beings whose eyesight is restricted, manipulated, or otherwise differentiated. But rather than being a loss of capacity, these changes often brought with them enhanced or special abilities (e.g. Lassen, 2003). Odin is the most notable such figure; the *Prose Edda* states he sacrificed an eye to gain secret knowledge and the magical ability of prophecy (Sturluson, [13th c.] 1995, p.17).

But even if we accept that the Lejre figure was meant to represent Odin, we need not see this as *all* that this metal body did. Depictions of figures assumed to be Odin are diverse across the Late Iron and Viking Ages. For example, some Odinic figures, such as stone sculptures from the Isle of Man (Bourns, 2014, pp.23–4; Fig. 2.7), do not have differently styled eye features. In addition, the Lejre figurine looks different from the aforementioned depictions of figures with differently styled eyes. It is thus crucial that we give attention to the specific features of the Lejre figure to articulate what kind of body-world it portrays. When approaching this object, we can do much more than simply identifying it as Odin. There is a particular materiality to the bodies that emerge from and are entangled within the figure that speaks to a body-concept quite different from our own.

As suggested by Arwill-Nordbladh (2012; 2013), the Lejre figure contributes to a distinct body-concept in which altered visual capacity may have been not only positive, but even desirable. Not only do the differently styled eyes resonate with the story of Odin sacrificing his eye to attain wisdom, but other aspects of the object speak to expanded bodily capacity through more-than-human entanglements. The birds may be Odin's ravens Hugin (Thought) and Munin (Memory), who are associated with extended cognition and increased knowledge through their names and the idea that they bring Odin special knowledge from across the Norse cosmos (Sturluson, 1995, p.33). The chair may represent Hlidskialf, Odin's seat in Asgard, which is said to give those who sit in it the ability to see the activities of all things across all nine worlds (p.13). Elsewhere in Norse literature, raised platforms are associated with the capacity to see into other realms through practices of sight-enhancing sorcery,

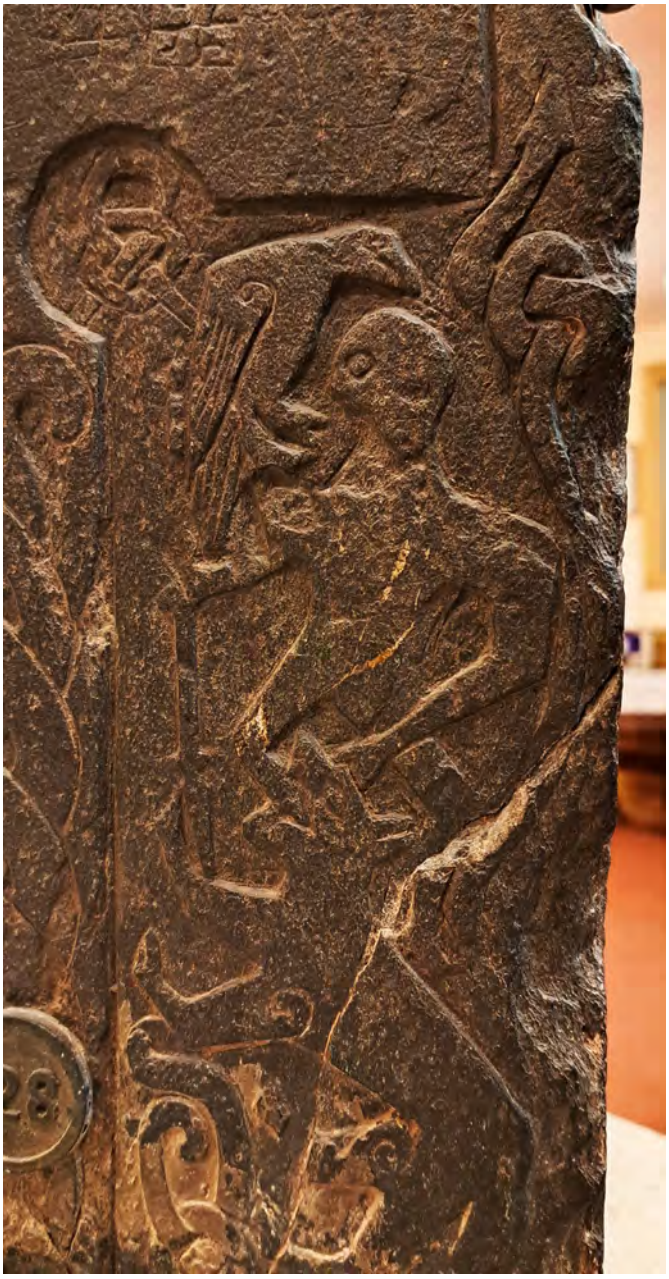


Figure 2.7: Thorwald's Cross carved stone from Andreas Church, Isle of Man. Interpreted to depict Odin with a bird at his shoulder being consumed by the wolf Fenrir during Ragnarok. (Photo: © Brad Marshall)

as portrayed in *The Saga of Erik the Red*, and chair-pendants have been found in burials thought to be associated with magic-practitioners (Drescher and Hauck, 1982; Price, 2019, pp.120–5). The Lejre figurine is thus a constellation of bodies and things associated with the extension of sensory capacities beyond the boundaries of the physical body, and specifically with the expansion of sight beyond the realm of the ocular.

The Lejre figurine can be usefully interpreted in light of its Odinic associations, but these are by no means final, comprehensive, or all-encompassing. More to the point, they do not supersede the particular materiality of the object. The representational work of crafting the figurine happened and acted within a broader world

of transformable, extendable bodies that, we argue, went far beyond depictional choice. It centres the relationality between different (human and non-human) beings and objects as part of an emergent entity that goes beyond the physical limitations of any of their forms. The figurine instantiates a body-world that, at its heart, is characterised by its ontological fluidity, which we may speculate would have extended beyond the diminutive object itself to the bodies that produced and interacted with it.

In this body-concept, where the boundaries between bodies and things are diffuse, the different-sightedness embodied in the figurine need not be conceptualised as a detrimental deficit. Rather, it speaks to an understanding of the potential of differently abled bodies. Here, different-sightedness becomes part of a mechanism by which new, augmenting capacities can be achieved beyond the body's physical boundaries, affording different forms of knowledge, insight, and power. Ultimately, the Lejre figurine should be understood as *an* Odin, with a particular body-world that foregrounds the potency of different bodily capacities, situating them in a network of beings and things that extend and enhance them.

Temporality and body-worldings

Our final case study expands on body-worldings by exploring the temporal complexities of Viking graves. The allure of burials as snapshots of specific people or contexts is undeniable. We are tantalised by the prospect of a crystallised moment in time, revealing the secrets of the past. Although there can be elements of truth to this, the reality is far more complex. As famously touted, the dead cannot bury themselves (Parker-Pearson, 1999), and we may not be looking at the deceased's identity as it was in life, or even a single identity at all. The deceased is at least partially separated from the living world and staged according to the beliefs and wishes of the mourners. However, it is also critical to abandon the assumption that burials are static in time. As we will demonstrate, Viking bodies straddled multiple temporalities and were enmeshed in networks that extended beyond the immediate moment of death, drawing together past, present, and future.

This case study focuses on the aforementioned Fyrkat 4 grave from northern Jutland in Denmark, part of a larger late tenth-century cemetery at the fortress. This is one of the best-known and most discussed burials from Viking Age Denmark (e.g. Gardeła et al., 2023; Roesdahl, 1977; Fig. 2.8). The deceased is frequently interpreted as a *völva* – a magic practitioner – based on the accompanying 'grave goods' (Price, 2019, pp.105–13). These include multiple unique objects and materials, most notably a 'spit' or staff believed to be part of a magical toolkit, as well as henbane seeds, which could facilitate the ecstatic trances supposedly conducted by such practitioners. There is no skeletal material in the grave for sex estimation, but the deceased is almost exclusively referred to as a woman due to the associated finds (Roesdahl, 2023, p.293). However, we have already highlighted the precarity of using objects to diagnose sex and gender in the Viking Age. The Fyrkat 4 burial similarly demonstrates the power of stereotypes and the ease with which we can fall into neat, 'cohesive' interpretations that suit our modern biases.

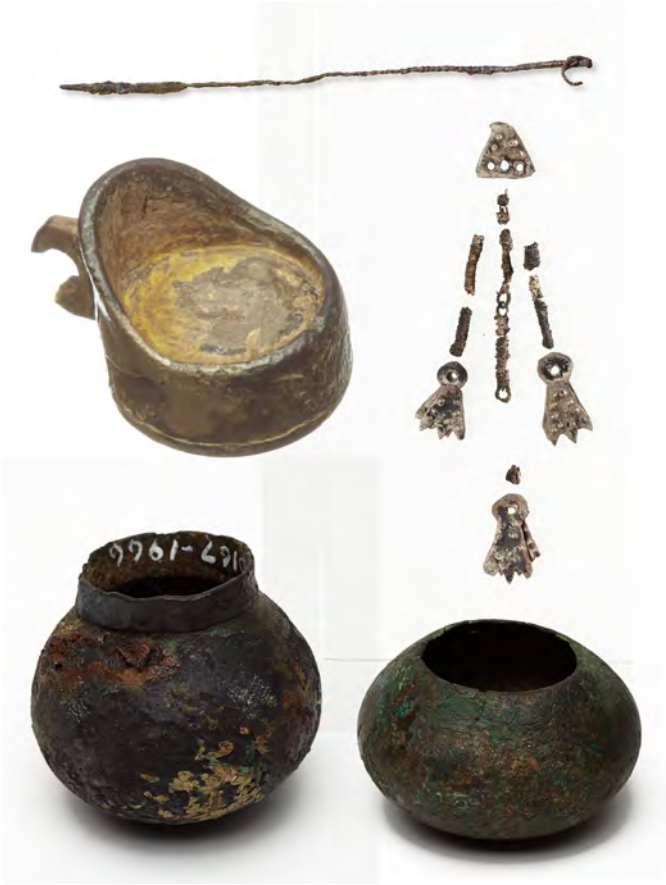


Figure 2.8: Selection of items found within the Fyrkat 4 grave, including (from top to bottom, left to right): a slightly-bent iron cooking spit, or staff, with bronze fittings; a silver chair pendant; a silver "duck's foot" pendant; a bronze cup, potentially originating from Central Asia; and a bronze bowl which had a grass cover and contained a "fatty substance", also potentially originating from Central Asia. (Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen / Photos: © Arnold Mikkelsen, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The interpretation of a 'pagan' magic-worker is interesting when framed against the specific context within which this person operated. We can date this burial with more certainty than most in Denmark, as Fyrkat is a Trelleborg-style fortress with a limited period of use. These were constructed *c.*975–80 CE during the reign of Harald Bluetooth, and seem to have been in use for perhaps only ten to fifteen years (Roesdahl, 2023, p.296). Subsequently, the Fyrkat 4 burial subverts the traditionally proposed 'Christian burial' paradigm where no grave goods are present (e.g. Zori, 2023). This is despite the burial's presence in a context where we might expect to see attempts at following Christian norms in response to Bluetooth's adoption of these beliefs *c.*965 CE. The burial therefore offers an excellent avenue to explore three key themes: the power of heirloomage and connections to past materials; the potential for burials to be 'out-of-time'; and the capacity for body-worlds to exist beyond their presents.

The Fyrkat 4 grave contains various objects beyond the immediate context of the grave and its cemetery. Two notable examples are the Gotlandic box brooch and the shoes the deceased may have worn. The box brooch, containing lead-based makeup, dates to the early years of the tenth century (Thunmark-Nylén, 2006, pp.76, 86; Fig. 2.9), meaning the brooch is at least one or two generations older than the burial. This is also not a style seen in Denmark, instead originating from Sweden (Pentz, 2023, p.310). This already expands the temporal network of the grave, as it not only relates to its present, but also to a connective past. In addition, gold threads were found at the bottom of the grave, which may be evidence that shoes of a much earlier fashion were once included in the burial. Mannering and Rimstad (2023) liken these to examples from the sixth and seventh centuries elsewhere in Europe, stretching these links even further through time. Many of the objects, materials, and styles within the grave originated from outside Denmark, further capturing various scales of time as these all have journeys and histories of their own. The grave and the body-world of the person(s) therein are not isolated, but instead geo-temporally referential and relational. The idea of citational grave settings, which reference times and places beyond their immediate contexts, is an important concept to think with, because it requires a more holistic and wider consideration of the burial. These graves speak not only to the identities of a single human, but also across multiple strands of time, space, and entities, with various motivations, constructions, and mediators to contend with.

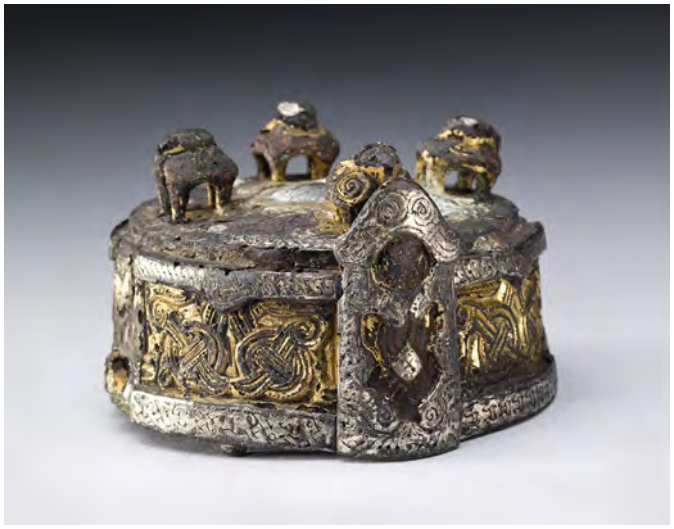


Figure 2.9: Gotlandic box brooch, found in the Fyrkat 4 grave. (Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen / Photo: © Arnold Mikkelsen, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The grave is perceived to be unusual – both more generally (as it is one of the most elaborate burials from Viking Age Denmark), but also specifically to its context. It appears to be a 'pagan' burial within a 'Christianised' king's fortress. This can be interpreted in various ways. It may be that the grave constitutes an act of resistance against a new set of incoming and imposed beliefs. The burial consequently becomes a time capsule of sorts for communal and ancestral identity. Else Roesdahl (2023) poses that trusted traditions are needed in a time of change, and we can use this to interrogate various levels of the burial's identity: person, grave, and community. Was the person a cultic specialist needed to mediate a period of change, and their death spelled the end of an era? Does the burial thus act as a commemoration both of the deceased and of a changed community?

An alternative explanation may be that this grave is so strongly 'pagan' because the associated objects were placed in the grave due to being outside of what was now appropriate for the time, and needed to be removed from circulation (Roesdahl, 2023, p.298). Are these objects 'grave goods', as traditionally proposed, or is this instead a form of human and object co-burial? Sara Ann Knutson (2023) questions at what point an object hoard becomes a grave good inventory (or if such a binary even existed), and this categorical ambiguity is important to keep in mind. Such questions disrupt the more typical interpretation that exceptional burials indicate exceptional individuals and refocuses the discussion around the relational composites captured within the grave. The burial then becomes something more: not just the deposition of a high-status or elite body, but a communal

construction citing various elements of change, (re) negotiation, and renewal. Is this grave indicative of an *intrinsically* atypical person, or does it operate within a multitudinous network of relationships, brought together in a seemingly isolated vignette? Do our modern Western ideas of reflectional individuality limit our understanding of what this grave is doing?

We argue that graves, including the bodies and objects interred therein, exist beyond themselves, not simply as immutable and bounded entities, but as 'materialised narratives' (Price, 2010, p.147) that are revisited, retold, and reinterpreted. It is important to consider how people of the Viking Age interacted with these narratives. Several examples exist of graves having been reopened or reused (e.g. Klevnäs, 2016). There are many motives for this, such as retrieving objects imbued with personhood to reconstruct living persons or creating connections across time. What would a burial like Fyrkat 4 have meant to a society that we know re-engaged with their immediate or ancestral dead? Was the burial constructed with the knowledge, and perhaps even the expectation, that it may be reopened? We are once again at risk of being self-bounded by modern limiters: what we believe are appropriate approaches to death and burial today may have no parallel in the past. The body-worlds of the deceased do not cease simply because they are buried. Instead, these bodies have pasts, presents, and futures, including their subsequent interpretations. We must ultimately avoid freezing body-worlds into monolithic entities which are static at a single point in time, never to be revisited. We should instead recognise that these body-worlds were fluid and unbounded, spanning multiple scales of existence.

Discussion and concluding remarks

This article has sought to highlight the unboundedness of Viking Age bodies in order to reveal their radical bodily alterities and multiplicities. Viking bodies were more complex and diverse than is suggested by modern stereotypes, which are typically delimited to 'known', comfortable, and recognisable identities. The imposition of fixed taxonomies onto Viking bodies is often implicitly underpinned by ahistorical and dichotomic nature-culture frameworks that are held to contain transcendental truths about 'the real body'. Consequently, they render damaging and limiting ontological conceptions of bodies that do not give attention to their fundamental, situated, and embodied ways of being.

By applying more-than-representational approaches, which dissolve distinctions between matter and meaning and reveal how bodies emerge from and contain whole worlds, we can break free of these delimiting fetters. Worlding these bodies then enables us to incorporate the enmeshing of bodies in the multitude of relationalities that constitute their body-worlds. We have used these critical tools in the preceding analysis to show how the unboundedness of Viking bodies materialised through their ontological fluidity, heterogeneity across time and space, and different bodily norms. As a result, Viking Age body-worlds had fundamentally different bodily ontologies than those prescribed by modern Western conceptions emerging out of capitalist and post-Enlightenment thought.

As our case studies have shown, Viking bodies were not defined solely by biology, but were also material culture transformable through body modification. Material objects and modifications did not just accessorise the body, but altered its physical and social reality by expanding its potential and capacities. There are limitations to imposing fixed identities or gender assumptions on bodies, and the different abledness of Viking bodies was not equivalent to modern concepts of *dis*-ability, but resonated with concepts of augmenting and enhancing bodily capacities. Finally, Viking bodies did not simply exist in *a present*, but carried multitemporal layers that entangle past, present, and future. Interpretations shifted as bodies became part of new cultural contexts or were reimagined by later generations, ensuring that these bodies were active agents within cultural memory and transformation. Together, these case studies highlight how Viking bodily ontologies differ from modern Western perspectives by embodying complex relationships extending beyond a bounded individual. Viking bodies did not possess intrinsic identities that were expressed in bodily form, representational art, and burial tableaux. Rather, the specifics of what bodies could do were established by intertwining bodily traits, objects, animals – and these were all subject to active change.

The above is not an exhaustive exploration of the multiplicities of Viking bodies. But we hope it will be the starting point for an expanded discourse that is more open to seeing the full range of bodies and persons in the Viking Age, to making them visible and making them *matter*. The Vikings were not just us in the past. It would be wrong to assume that by making the Vikings familiar, we can gain a fuller understanding of their bodies, worlds, lives, and deaths by drawing connections with our own. Paradoxically, it is only when we detach Viking body-worlds from our false cultural intimacies that we can begin to approach them on their own terms.

Making the past strange again helps us recognise that

our own bodies are not bounded either. We routinely modify our bodies for medical and aesthetic purposes; we all embody difference in our abilities and capacities; and our body-worlds are not static, monolithic entities, but instead incorporate continuous and persistent change over time. Confronting the past confronts our own strange bodies in the present, which enables us to recognise alterity and difference across time and space, and which raises significant ontological and political ramifications and commitments. By opening ourselves up to seeing the full spectrum of bodies in the Viking Age, we expand our understanding of what our own bodies are capable of and the embodied ways of being that are possible in our historical moment.

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CRediT author statement

BM: Conceptualisation, writing; ET: Conceptualisation, writing; AW: Conceptualisation, writing; MHE: Conceptualisation, writing, funding acquisition

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