

## The Archaeology of Seiðr: Circumpolar Traditions in Viking Pre-Christian Religion<sup>1</sup>

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### Resumo

O artigo apresenta novas conclusões sobre o Seiðr, uma prática mágica existente na Escandinávia da Era Viking, principalmente através de fontes arqueológicas. As relações entre magia e agressão, poder e identidade são apontadas como aspectos essenciais para se entender o Seiðr.

Palavras-chave: Religião e magia; arqueologia; sociedade Viking.

### Resumé

Cet étude présent nouvelles conclusiones sur le Seiðr, une pratique magique quei existe dans l'Escandinavie d'Âge Viking, principalement a travers de fontaines archéologiques. Ces relations entre magie et agression, pouvir et identité sont observée comme aspects essentiels pour comprendre le Seiðr.

Mots-clé: Religion et magie; archéologie; société Viking.

## Introduction

For more than 120 years historians of religion, together with philologists and occasionally anthropologists, have been studying the possibility that some aspects of pre-Christian Scandinavian religion may have contained elements of shamanism. Much of this work has focused on the cult of Óðinn (Odin) - the highest god, most often associated with war, poetry and the mind - but within this field research has especially concentrated on a specific complex of rituals collectively termed *seiðr* in the Old Norse textual sources. Altogether more than 300 published works have appeared on this subject, representing the work of some 150 scholars from the disciplines mentioned above (this corpus of scholarship is fully discussed in Price 2002, but key contributions may be found in the work of Strömbäck 1935, 1970, 1975; Ohlmarks 1939a & b; Buchholz 1968, 1971; Grambo 1984, 1989, 1991; Dillmann 1986, 1993, 1994).

The long time-frame of these studies is important for two reasons. Firstly, such a focus serves to dispell the idea that the study of a possible Viking shamanism results from, or is in any way connected with, the increasing popular interest in alternative religions. Medieval descriptions of Viking Age rituals have provided inspiration for modern, neo-shamanic groups who also use the word *seiðr* to describe what they do (cf. Blain 2002), but I want to emphasise that my own research, and this paper, is exclusively concerned with the beliefs and practices of the Viking Age, with *seiðr* in its original sense. Secondly, I refer to the long history of research in this field because it is also important to stress that I am here very much following in the footsteps of others.

Interestingly, archaeologists have come relatively late to the discussion. Karl Hauck's shamanic interpretations of the Migration Period gold bracteates - a type of circular pendant perhaps worn as a mark of rank or status - first appeared in the early 1970s (e.g. 1972, 1976, 1983, 1985-89 amongst many others). However, for the Viking Age proper it is not until Bente Magnus' ground-breaking publications (1988, 1992) that we begin to see the idea of shamanism in Old Norse religion take root in archaeological circles. The present paper will primarily be concerned with these archaeological responses, but we may begin by quickly reviewing our sources for *seiðr*, and the way they have been interpreted.

## *Seiðr* and Óðinnic magic

The most explicit descriptions all come from medieval Icelandic texts, especially the family sagas (stories) and the poetry that they sometimes contain. The most comprehensive of these is Snorri's *Ynglingasaga*, with especially detailed depictions from *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*; these two works are those most often cited, but among the sagas of Icelanders there are in fact a great number of additional, brief mentions of *seiðr*. From the older Scandinavian sources such as the so-called *Poetic Edda*, a medieval collection of poems with mythological and heroic themes, there are several oblique references, especially in the poems *Lokasenna*, *Hyndlulóð* and *Völuspá*. In addition, there are other descriptions of events or practices which, although not explicitly connected with *seiðr*, also formed part of a wider complex that we might call 'Óðinnic magic' and have often been interpreted in a similar context. These especially occur in parts of *Hávamál* and *Grímnismál*, alongside many other poems and sagas (the collected sources are summarised in Dag Strömbäck's classic work on *seiðr* from 1935, newly republished in an expanded edition from 2000).

Taken together, these sources contain many descriptions of practices with parallels in shamanic cultures all across the circumpolar region. In the Old Norse texts most of these relate to the abilities and adventures of Óðinn, and include apparent initiation rites in which the god acquires sacred knowledge and the secret wisdom known only to the dead by fasting, exposure and hanging; there are descriptions of spirit journeys, states of trance and ecstasy, and shape-shifting - as for example when Óðinn sends out his soul in animal form, his body lying 'as if asleep' while he travels to other worlds for his own purposes or on behalf of others. Animal helping spirits, such as ravens and wolves, also seem to be present. On his travels between the worlds, Óðinn sometimes rides his supernatural steed, the eight-legged horse called Sleipnir (meaning approximately 'the sliding one') whose teeth are etched with runes; the god has control over the weather and the elements; he can divine the future, heal the sick and seek out the hidden.

In addition to Óðinn himself, there are also a great many human figures who are mentioned in the sources as performing *seiðr*, of whom the best known are the *völur* (sing. *völva*), women skilled in clairvoyance and the prediction of future events. The *völur* embody one of the most important elements of *seiðr*, namely the complex network of social and sexual taboos with which it was encoded. These are described at length in the written sources, but in brief they limited its 'proper' performance to women, and to a small group of men seen as different from the morally acceptable norm, either sexually or in some way we do not yet understand. This involved highly complex concepts of dishonour and a special state of being called *ergi*, and there is a suggestion of other genders, constructed in connection with this across and between the boundaries of the sexes through an induction into the mysteries of *seiðr* (see Meulengracht Sørensen 1980, 1983, and Almqvist 1965 for discussions of *ergi* and its related concept of *níð*; cf. Solli 1998). It would seem to be the apparent contradiction of Óðinn's role as both a male god and the master of *seiðr* - these rituals that were primarily the province of women - that gives him such extensive power over the minds and movements of others, and particularly over the events of the battlefield. I will return to some of these features shortly, but first I want to examine the ways in which archaeologists have approached the *seiðr* complex, its meaning and cultural context.

### **The archaeology of *seiðr***

Since the late 1980s a number of archaeologists have worked with aspects of *seiðr* (e.g. Hjørungdal 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992; Ingstad 1992, 1995; Herschend 1997; Adolfsson and Lundström 1997; Solli 1998; Price 1998, 2000a & b; these and other examples are treated fully in Price 2002), joining the comprehensive group of researchers from other disciplines mentioned above. However, only one archaeological scholar has proposed a fully-developed model for shamanic thought in Scandinavia, and this is primarily limited to a discussion of the pre-Viking period (Hedeager 1997a & b).

The publications mentioned above are of high quality, but it has to be said that some of those working in this field, especially in the Viking Age itself, have not been so thorough. It would be invidious to mention names, but one can almost suggest that as what we might call the 'shamanic lobby' in Viking archaeology goes from strength to strength, the quality of the work produced seems to decline in equal measure. There would seem to be three major problems which partly develop from each other:

- firstly, there are very few, if any, of the scholars now working in this field who have tried to familiarise themselves in detail with the truly vast corpus of research on shamanism from around the world, especially concerning the cultures of the circumpolar arctic and subarctic region; these include in particular the Sámi people with whom the Vikings shared the Scandinavian peninsula
- secondly, the interpretations of *seiðr* that have been put forward almost always stop at the same point, namely the relatively unsophisticated (and further undefined) suggestion that this and other forms of Óðinnic magic may have been 'shamanistic' in nature
- thirdly, this work needs to be combined with a comprehensive understanding of the Old Norse written sources, which in philological terms involve extremely complex elements; expert guidance is needed here, as such skills are not always easy for an archaeologist to acquire

The study of shamanism itself is a vast field, in which definition and context are of paramount importance. I will attempt no summary of this subject here (general introductions can be found in Vitebsky 1995; Lewis 1989; Larsson 2000; Price 2001) but in an archaeological context it must be emphasised that it is not sufficient to read a classic - and controversial - text such as Eliade's *Shamanism* (latest edition 1989) and to then interpret every possible sort of artefact as 'shamanic'. Regretably, this is now occurring with some frequency.

In particular, no Viking specialist has yet ventured far into the intricacies of the Sámi belief system and its links to this wider sphere of circumpolar ritual practices. Uncritical ethnographic analogy is a constant danger in shamanic research, but I strongly believe that any meaningful study of *seiðr* must look seriously to the work being done not just in the Sámi homelands but also in Siberia, Alaska, Canada, the northern continental United States, and Greenland.

This introduces the core of my argument in the present paper, namely the necessity to go beyond the simplicities of a shamanic conclusion for *seiðr* if we are to understand what it may once have meant in the Viking Age. As a generalisation, I would suggest that archaeologists have largely failed to develop the idea that some form of shamanism was operating in late Iron Age Scandinavia, in that they have not gone on to ask the really vital questions about its function, social context and implications for the Viking world-view as a whole. The latter is crucial here, because in essence shamanism *is* a view of the world, a particular conception of the nature of reality - far more fundamentally so than many other more formalised religions - and as such has a huge influence on the actions and perceptions of those who subscribe to this kind of belief system. What that means is that if we are to take seriously the idea of Viking Age 'shamanism' then we have to accept the interpretive challenge that comes with that suggestion.

### ***Seiðr and noai'd vuottâ***

So, how may we approach such an undertaking? As archaeologists we can start with the material culture, and before looking at finds from Nordic contexts it can be instructive to first examine the evidence from the Sámi territories.

Among the most fundamental items of equipment in the shamanic repertoire - particularly in the popular imagination - are drums. They are found in most parts of the circumpolar region, especially in Siberia, though they are by no means universal even there. In the Sámi shamanic belief system, the operative part of which was known as *noai'd vuottâ*, there is no doubt that the drum was vital (for an overview of Sámi religion, see Bäckman and Hultkrantz 1978, 1985; Ahlbäck 1987). Used by the *noai'de*, the Sámi term that most closely corresponds to our understanding of a shaman, there were once many hundreds, if not thousands, of these drums. Today less than eighty examples from the post-medieval period survive, scattered throughout Scandinavia and the anthropological collections of the world. Catalogued and described by Ernst Manker (1938, 1950; see also Ahlbäck and Bergman 1991, Westman and Utsi 1999), the drums occur in several different forms with discrete distributions, the compositional variation in the images on their surfaces hinting at changing traditions and functions within Sámi ritual practice. Alongside the drums we also have several finds of the decorated antler and bone hammers used to beat them, and of the small pointers which were placed on the drum-skin during the shamanic performance (the pointer's sequential movement across the pictures on the vibrating drum-skin formed the basis for the *noai'de's* interpretation of his visions). However, behind this corpus of material lies a far more complex picture.

A large proportion of my current research focuses on the religion of the Sámi (see Price 2002), and some brief conclusions can be presented here. In outline, we can make three main observations from a survey of Sámi shamanism which can be of relevance to its possible counterpart among the Germanic population of Scandinavia:

- firstly, *noadi'devuottâ* was not a static, orthodox entity, but in fact exhibited considerable regional variation in the form of its expression, which even in the same areas also changed over time
- secondly, the notion of the 'Sámi shaman' in fact conceals a large number of specialised types of ritual practitioner, each with their own functions and skills, including workers of specifically 'good' and 'evil' kind; there is evidence for these *noai'de* being 'ranked' in order of skill, and for them occasionally working magic in groups. Some of the functions these people performed can be summarised as follows:
  - finding game and performing hunting-related rituals
  - foretelling the future (divination)
  - uncovering secrets
  - healing
  - bestowing good or bad fortune
  - working illusions
  - manipulating the weather
  - causing injury to people, animals or property
  - instilling fear or confusion in an enemy
  - killing people
  - providing protection from a hostile *noai'de*
  - fighting / killing a hostile *noai'de*
  - communicating / mediating with the dead
  - communicating / mediating with the spirits of nature

- communicating / mediating with the unseen world(s)
  - communicating / mediating with the gods
- thirdly, both sexes seem to have played an important role in *noadi'devuottâ*, again with specific and precise differences in the social functions and abilities of men and women. There may also have been a blurring of gender boundaries.

This is obviously a simplification of something very complex, and all this information is also tentative: it is very hard to gain a reliable impression of *noadi'devuottâ* when most of our data comes from the writings of the people who were trying to destroy it, namely the Christian missionaries. However, there are also linguistic sources which can support these suggestions, centring around a series of words recorded in different regions and dialects of Sápmi from the 'post-shamanistic period' of the early 18th to early 20th centuries. These terms have been collated and interpreted by the comparative theologian Håkan Rydving (1987), who I should stress is not responsible for my interpretation of them and the conclusions drawn here.

Terms for male Sámi 'sorcerers' (selective list, not including alternatives and variants):

|  |  |
|--|--|
| - <i>noai'de</i>                         | 1. 'one who knows'<br>2. 'shaman, diviner, magician' |
| - <i>borånoai'de</i>                     | 'eater- <i>noai'de</i> '                             |
| - <i>piedje-nâi'te</i>                   | 'sender- <i>noai'de</i> '                            |
| - <i>savve-nâi'te</i>                    | 'wisher- <i>noai'de</i> '                            |
| - <i>kir'di noai'di</i>                  | 'flyer- <i>noai'de</i> '                             |
| - <i>frimurar-nâi'te</i>                 | one who is committed to devils?                      |
| - <i>guwlar</i>                          | one who harms and cures by sorcery?                  |
| - <i>goanstâsæg'gje</i>                  | one who harms by sorcery?                            |
| - <i>tivvo-nâi'te</i>                    | ' <i>noai'de</i> who puts right'                     |
| - <i>juovsâhæg'gje</i>                   | one who diverts the evil of a <i>noai'de</i> ?       |
| - <i>oinoâlma</i>                        | 'one who dreams'                                     |
| - <i>tsulidijje</i>                      | 'one who whispers'                                   |
| - <i>tsjal'bme keäi'du</i>               | 'one who creates illusions'                          |
| - <i>noai'dohæg'gje</i>                  | 'one who causes enchantment'                         |
| - <i>skäddar</i>                         | 'one who bewitches people's sight'                   |
| - <i>gæi'do</i>                          | 'one who bewitches people's sight'                   |
| - <i>diet'te</i>                         | 'one versed in magic'                                |
| - <i>siei'de</i>                         | 'sorcerer'   |
| - <i>mânidæd'd'i</i>                     | 'sorcerer who drives away disease'                   |
| - <i>sahple-lijjen-jotti</i><br>a mouse' | 'sorcerer that sends out his spirit in the form of   |
| - <i>judakas</i> or <i>juraak</i>        | 'sorcerer who never chanted'                         |
| - <i>kiemdesniei'te</i>                  | 'drum-sorcerer'                                      |
| - <i>kairve</i>                          | 'sorcerer' connected to a god?                       |

Terms for female Sámi ‘sorcerers’ (selective list, not including alternatives and variants):

|                          |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| - <i>guaps</i>           | ‘woman who could chant and divine’                            |
| - <i>kwepkas</i>         | ‘woman versed in witchcraft’                                  |
| - <i>gapishjaedne</i>    | ‘witch, sorceress’  |
| - <i>noåjdiesaaakkaa</i> | ‘witch, sorceress’  |
| - <i>shjarak</i>         | female assistant to a male <i>noai’de</i> ?                   |
| - <i>rudok</i>           | ‘spokeswoman’ for the female supernatural being <i>Årja</i> ? |

All these words describe Sámi ‘sorcerers’ or ‘magic-workers’, for want of better words. Most of the terms are gender-specific and they all seem to describe people who performed a specific function, a certain kind of magic and ritual. We do not know how many of these people were actually *noai’de* - ‘shamans’ - nor do we know exactly what they all did, or exactly how all these different types of sorcerer worked together in the wider context of society. Most importantly, we do not know exactly how old these concepts are, though on linguistic grounds some of them are clearly of very great antiquity. Again, we are dealing with regional variation and change over time. I discuss these terms more fully elsewhere (Price 2002), but for the purposes of the present paper the detail of the practices that they represent is less important than the simple fact of their existence in such variety, emphasising the diversity and complexity of what must have actually lain behind what we conceive of today as ‘the Sámi shaman’.

### The material culture of *seiðr*

I would here ask the reader to keep this in mind as we now turn back to the Nordic cultural sphere, and back to *seiðr*. In connection with the performance of *seiðr* there are written references to several activities or pieces of equipment with circumpolar parallels, including an elaborate costume for the performer, the assistance of singers who chant songs to attract the spirits with whom the *seiðr*-performer will communicate, a ritual platform or high-seat on which the performer sits, and a special ‘*seiðr*-staff’ of unknown function but referred to in several texts as a major component of the ritual (see the sources summarised in Strömbäck 1935, and especially the famous passage from *Eiríks saga rauða* describing a *völva* on Greenland).

From the archaeological sources, we can begin with these staffs, the most striking - and relatively little known - Viking artefact type which I would argue can be reasonably linked to the practice of *seiðr*. Surprisingly, quite a large number of objects of this kind have been found in Viking Age graves. In Sweden, three examples are known from the cemeteries of Birka (fig. 1; graves Bj.760, 834, 845, in Arbman 1940-41: 277-78, 304-8, 319-20, pl. 125), together with a particularly large staff found at Klinta on the island of Öland (Sjöberg 1987: 55-62, 102-13; Petersson 1958), and another example, though simpler in form, from a mound at Aska i Hagebyhöga in Östergötland (Arne 1932). There are more than 20 of these staffs known from Norway (Petersen 1951), and at least one from Denmark, at the Fyrkat circular enclosure (grave 4, in Roesdahl 1977: 83-104). All the examples that have been dated, throughout the Scandinavian countries, belong to the 10th century.

Many of the excavated staffs resemble the Birka pieces, being about 70cm long and made of sections of twisted iron rod, spaced at intervals with polyhedral bronze knobs decorated with dot and ring patterns, and with a handle-like feature of unidentified function at one end (we do not know which is the 'top' or 'bottom' of the object) made of several finer rods joined above and below by one of the polyhedral studs and threaded through a perforated bronze disk. Some staffs have a simpler shaft of solid iron, while others have a more complex terminal ending in an iron ring - in some cases of considerable size - on which may be threaded further iron objects, resembling amulets or pendant rattles of various kinds. The staff from Klinta on Öland is unique in that the 'handle' (of the Birka type) is surmounted by a small model house cast in bronze and resting on a flat platform, while the open iron strands of the 'handle' are clasped at both ends by animal heads, perhaps of bears or wolves; all these details are, of course, of unknown purpose. In addition to the staffs described above, there are also several earlier objects from Norwegian graves which may be wooden versions of the same thing, including one in the Oseberg ship burial (Ingstad 1992, 1995) and another from Os, near Bergen (Hjørungdal 1990). Another wooden staff of uncertain function, though almost certainly with sorcerous associations, has been found in a Danish bog at Hemdrup (Back Danielson 2001).

Of the metal staffs, all the Swedish and Danish examples, and 13 of the Norwegian ones, are either from female graves or from the 'female section' of a double burial containing both sexes; one is from a male grave and the others are either unsexed or from non-burial contexts. Many of the graves are very richly furnished and often include exotic imports or other unusual items, which archaeologists would normally interpret as signals of high status. The burials from Klinta and Aska i Hagebyhöga in Sweden, and at Fyrkat in Denmark, were particularly spectacular in that they contained a great many objects that were at the least out of the ordinary and in some cases unique (some of these are discussed further below). In the case of the Fyrkat grave, the woman interred there was accorded the richest burial in the entire cemetery; we should remember here that the Fyrkat enclosure was almost certainly established at the personal command of King Haraldr Gormsson, and thus it is not unreasonable to suggest that the status of this woman may have been very considerable indeed. This suggestion of wealth and status runs as a constant in the staff graves, culminating in the Oseberg ship which has been claimed as the burial of a queen (see, amongst others, Ingstad 1992, 1995).

The staffs themselves have sometimes been interpreted as meat spits, used for roasting joints over a fire. This argument has been summarised in the only catalogue of these objects, entitled *Vendel- och vikingatida stekspett* ('Vendel- and Viking-Period Roasting Spits') which in fact contains an undifferentiated mixture of genuine roasting implements and the more problematic objects that may be *seiðr*-staffs (Bøgh-Andersen 1999). Unfortunately, and despite a nominal reference to symbolism in a general sense - the catalogue's subtitle translates as 'Not just for the kitchen: a tool with roots in Homer's time' - the author has virtually no discussion of the *seiðr*-staff interpretation, or the alternative explanations of the objects as measuring rods and processional poles. At one level, there is no doubt that the staffs described above cannot be for roasting meat. Firstly, their form is such as to make such a function impossible - joints of beef, pork, chicken etc could not be forced past the polyhedral knobs without virtually destroying the meat. Secondly, several staffs have been found together with spits that undoubtedly *are* for roasting; the Fyrkat grave is the most unequivocal example of the latter, although only the spit is listed in Bøgh-Andersen's catalogue. However, both the genuine meat spits and the possible *seiðr*-staffs share a great many characteristics, or



rather combinations of them, as no two staff/spits are exactly alike. Especially close similarities are found in the 'handle' feature, which occurs both on staffs with knobbed and plain shafts, the latter being perfectly serviceable as spits. Furthermore, these 'handles' are almost identical to the grips of some types of keys found in Viking contexts, while the polyhedral knobs are similarly comparable with bronze weights.

The relationships between these different kinds of objects are difficult to understand, though the symbolic dimensions of apparently everyday activities such as cooking should not be under-estimated (see Price 2002 for a more detailed discussion of this problem). Although many of these pieces fall into the grey area between staffs and spits, those described above can be fitted with confidence into a category of their own, and a good case can certainly be made for interpreting them as *seiðr*-staffs. We have already seen the interestingly high status of their finds contexts, something not reflective of meat spits in general, and their almost complete limitation to female graves, both of which match the textual descriptions of the *völur*. The most persuasive argument, however, must be the clear similarity between the excavated objects and the written descriptions of the *seiðstafr*, which specifically mention a staff ornamented with a metal knob.

There is also one further aspect of the staff graves which deserves attention, even though evidence of this kind should be treated with extreme caution (especially in a popular context). In at least two instances, burials containing staffs also include remains of herbs with mind-altering properties, with obvious implications for their possible use in a ritual context. In the Oseberg ship burial, a small number of cannabis seeds had been placed with deliberate care among a pile of feathers and down (Holmboe 1927: 32-5); this is a particularly interesting context given the detailed description of the special feather stuffing of the *völva*'s cushion in *Eiríks saga rauða*. Similarly, the spectacular female grave at Fyrkat mentioned above contained several hundred seeds of henbane, another herb with narcotic properties (Helbaek 1977: 36; Roesdahl 1977: 104). The seeds were found grouped together near the woman's waist in a manner which suggests that they had originally been gathered in some kind of belt-pouch made of organic material that had since decayed. A similar pouch is described in *Eiríks saga rauða*. In a box at the foot of the grave were found bones of birds and small animals, which could also be interpreted as charms of some kind. Both cannabis and henbane are otherwise almost completely unknown in finds from the Viking Age, and even if we cannot be sure about their use in ritual it does seem certain that these plants were seen as special in some way that merited their inclusion in the grave assemblage.

Staffs of this kind may be what is depicted in the hands of the famous "weapon dancers", images found in a variety of media in the Migration and Vendel periods, but in the Viking Age most often in the form of small silver pendants. Like the staffs, these pendants are largely confined to female graves, and have often been interpreted as images of Óðinn. Clearly there is a risk for circular argument here, but an identification of this object as a *seiðr*-staff would not be inappropriate in this context. The pendant found in grave Bj.571 at Birka (fig. 2; Arbman 1940-41: 185-6; pl. 92) has a particularly clearly defined staff, with notches that perhaps equate with the knobs found along the length of the excavated examples found in the female burials.

In addition to the staffs there are also several other excavated artefacts that may also be interpreted in the context of *seiðr*. The most dramatic perhaps are small silver models of chairs, cast in silver and most often with an attached loop for suspension as a pendant. Again found exclusively in women's graves, these miniature chairs have been interpreted as representing the 'high seat' in Valhöll from which Óðinn surveys the worlds, or from which the *völur* performed *seiðr*, the *seiðhjallr* platform mentioned in

saga sources. A miniature chair of this kind was found in grave 4 at Fyrkat, with the staff and pouch of bones and seeds (Roesdahl 1977: 83-104), and three are known from Birka (fig. 3; graves Bj.632, 844, 968 in Arbman 1940-41: 210-13, 317-19, 394-6, pl. 92).

In one of these Birka graves with the miniature chairs (Bj.968) was found yet another artefact that may link to *seiðr*, a silver pendant figure of a woman (Arbman 1940-41: 394-6, pl. 92). This is one of a number of such images found in female graves throughout Scandinavia, and as isolated finds elsewhere in the Viking world as far afield as Russia. They are often interpreted as representing valkyries - another connection with Óðinn - but they may equally depict *völur* or any of a number of female supernatural beings.

These same female figures reoccur in another medium, in direct association with the only unequivocally shamanic image found in Viking material culture: depictions of the eight-legged horse. Such animals appear in several media, but without doubt the most prominent is its occurrence as the main motif on a few examples of the so-called picture stones, set up continually since the early Iron Age as carved memorials to the dead on the Baltic island of Gotland (all the picture-stones have been catalogued by Lindqvist 1941-42, updated in Nylén & Lamm 1987). The Viking Age stones usually stand between two and three metres high, and most often bear an image of a rigged sailing ship on the lower half of the surface. The upper half is either divided into several lateral panels or contains a complex jumble of images, and it is among the latter that in four, perhaps five, instances we find the eight-legged horse (fig. 4; the stones in question come from Alskog Tjängvide I, Ardre I and VIII, and Lärbro Tängelgårda I and II; Lindqvist 1941: 95-6, 99-101, figs. 86, 89, 137-40, 166; Lindqvist 1942: 15-25, 92-6).

These images on the picture stones are usually interpreted as representing Sleipnir, Óðinn's eight-legged horse mentioned above. However, this apparently obvious identification is brought into serious question by other examples of similar creatures depicted on two of the five Viking Age wall-hangings from Överhogdal in the Swedish province of Härjedalen (fig. 5; Horneij 1991; Frantzén & Nockert 1992). Like the tapestry from the Oseberg ship burial, the images on the Överhogdal weaves do not appear to be arranged in narrative sequences (as, for example, on the Bayeux Tapestry) but instead in a mass of pictures presumably combining to create a single, perhaps multi-faceted, image. In this context it is therefore striking to see that on weaves 1a & b (two portions of the same original hanging) there are no less than four eight-legged horses, depicted alongside three more with six legs and one with seven. In addition the weave shows one six-legged elk and six six-legged reindeer; a further six-legged creature may be either a horse or an elk, the tell-tale head being lost where the weave has frayed. In most cases the horses are unmounted, though in a single instance a rider is shown; one of the eight-legged horses and one of the reindeer are also shown with what appears to be a prominent phallus. In addition to these, weave II contains a single image of the eight-legged horse, this time bearing two riders. It would seem difficult to interpret *all* the Överhogdal horses as representations of Sleipnir, and in fact the notion of more than one such creature accords well with ethnographic records of more recent shamanic communities. These animals are recorded as the mounts of shamans all across Siberia, for example among the Buryat, and even as far afield as Japan and India, leading some historians of religion to call this the shamanic horse *par excellence* (Elwin 1947: 150; Eliade 1989: 380; Price 2000a & b). The other creatures on the Överhogdal weaves also have Siberian parallels, for example among the Khanty (Pentikäinen 1998: 68-70), and it may be that all these multi-legged animals represent different components

in the shamanic complexes of the Viking Age Scandinavians and Sámi. The variety of animals depicted fits well with the more nuanced view of these belief systems advocated above.

In the written sources there are also philologically difficult references to what may be the use of masks and drums, especially in the Eddic poems *Grímnismál* and *Lokasenna* respectively. There are no recorded finds of drums from Nordic archaeological contexts, but images of masked faces are relatively common in Viking metalwork and on other media such as runestones. Even more striking are two animal-head masks made of felt, found in a Viking shipwreck in Hedeby harbour in Denmark (fig. 6; Hägg 1984: 69-72). These are intriguing objects - quite unlike the more familiar carnival masks of medieval times, and perhaps in some way associated with the idea of shape-changing, which as mentioned earlier occurs frequently in the descriptions of Óðinnic magic and shamanism. This aspect of Viking spirituality focuses particularly on the relationship between humans and animals. Due to spatial constraints it is unfortunately impossible to go very deeply into this in the present paper, but here we may almost move towards a totemistic interpretation, thinking of such figures as the *berserkir* and *úlfheðnar*, the bear- and wolf-skin warriors who served Óðinn in animal form (see Price 1998; this argument is developed at length in Price 2002). In addition to the Hedeby masks we find other images of men with the heads of wolves, such as one of the runestones from Källbyås in Västergötland (Jungner 1940: pl.45; Svärdström 1958: 79-82) and the metal figurine found - significantly perhaps - in a woman's grave at Ekhammar (Ringquist 1969), both in Sweden. The latter grave also contained one of the weapon dancer figures, in an association with wolf-warriors which again goes back to pre-Viking times. This is seen, for example, on the helmet plaques and casting dies found at sites such as Vendel, Valsgärde and Torslunda (see Sandwall 1980); we should note that at least some of the dancers on these plaques can now be definitely identified as one-eyed (Arrhenius & Freij 1992), and thus almost certainly represent Óðinn himself.

It must be emphasised that the material presented here - the staffs, miniature chairs, eight-legged horses, female figurines, weapon dancers, masks and shape-changers - is only a small fraction of the total corpus. Many examples of these objects have been omitted for reasons of space, and several further categories of material have not been treated at all here. A full discussion will be found elsewhere (Price 2002), but even the present small sample can be combined to form a material cultural complex that may be quite convincingly be linked to *seiðr* and similar rituals. As we have done for the Sámi material, we can here too move from the archaeology to broader issues.

### ***Seiðr* in context**

The network of gender restrictions with which the performance of *seiðr* was encoded has been mentioned above. The emphasis on women practitioners would seem to be reflected in the archaeological record, with the overwhelming predominance of objects from female graves. However, remembering the numerous written descriptions of men performing *seiðr*, the situation may not have been so simple. This problem can be essentially reduced to a similar series of factors as we earlier saw in Sámi belief - questions of function, specific skill, variation and change. If we turn back to the Old Norse sources we find several terms for sorcerers or magic-workers, all of whom seem to use *seiðr* and the other kinds of Óðinnic magic, but in different ways. Like the Sámi

terms, these are also gender-specific words, and include a range of different terms for men and women (a complete list of terms and sources is presented in Price 2002).

Terms for different types of male sorcerers recorded in the Elder Edda and other sources from the 13th century and later (note that the word *maðr* is of indeterminate gender, but the specific examples in this context always refer to men):

|                      |                           |
|----------------------|---------------------------|
| - <i>seiðmaðr</i>    | ‘ <i>seiðr</i> -man’      |
| - <i>seiðskratti</i> | ‘evil <i>seiðr</i> -man’  |
| - <i>seiðberendr</i> | ‘ <i>seiðr</i> -carrier’? |
| - <i>vitki</i>       | wizard?, sorcerer?        |
| - <i>spámaðr</i>     | ‘man who prophecies’      |
| - <i>vísendamaðr</i> | ‘man who knows’           |
| - <i>galdramaðr</i>  | ‘spell-man’               |
| - <i>galdrasmiðr</i> | ‘spell-smith’             |
| - <i>galdraraumr</i> | ‘great sorcerer’          |
| - <i>kunáttumaðr</i> | ‘man who knows magic’     |

Terms for different types of female sorcerers recorded in the Elder Edda and other sources from the 13th century and later:

|                      |                                     |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------|
| - <i>völva</i>       | seeress, sibyl?                     |
| - <i>seiðkona</i>    | ‘ <i>seiðr</i> -woman’              |
| - <i>spákona</i>     | ‘prophecy-woman’                    |
| - <i>galdrakona</i>  | witch, sorceress                    |
| - <i>heiðr</i>       | witch?                              |
| - <i>vitka*</i>      | sorceress?                          |
| - <i>kveldriða</i>   | ‘evening-rider’                     |
| - <i>trollriða</i>   | ‘rider of witchcraft’               |
| - <i>myrkriða</i>    | ‘darkness-rider’ or ‘night-rider’   |
| - <i>túnriða</i>     | ‘fence-rider’ or ‘roof-rider’       |
| - <i>galdrakind</i>  | evil witch?                         |
| - <i>fordæða</i>     | evil witch?                         |
| - <i>flagð(kona)</i> | evil witch?                         |
| - <i>fála</i>        | witch? (with negative connotations) |
| - <i>hála</i>        | witch? (with negative connotations) |
| - <i>skass</i>       | witch? (with negative connotations) |

The male terms do not tell us much, other than that these people used *seiðr*, for divination amongst other purposes. The female terms are more detailed, with a group of words also referring to diviners, and an interesting quartet of terms mentioning ‘Riders’ of various kinds. This ‘riding’ would seem to refer to the soul journey in some way, and there is a verse from the Eddic poem *Hávamál* (the ‘Sayings of the High One’, i.e. Óðinn) which mentions the god ‘seeing’ such people up in the sky - presumably their spirit forms astride a shamanic steed.

There is an obvious parallel that I would draw with Sámi shamanism: the Viking Age Scandinavians did not just have specialist ritual performers, they seem to have had *different types of them*. As with the Sámi terms that I showed earlier, we do not know

exactly what all these people did, but we do know that they were associated with *seiðr* and related rituals.

Looking further at the written sources, we can draw out a similar range of attributes for these kinds of Nordic magic as for Sami religious practice (see Price 2002):

- firstly, we see the same pattern of regional variation and change over time
- secondly, we can perceive the existence of different types of sorcerer with specific functions and skills, including specifically ‘good’ and ‘evil’ sorcerers. Some of the functions these individuals performed can be traced in the sources:

‘Domestic’ magic

- foretelling the future (divination)
- bestowing good fortune
- bestowing bad fortune (cursing)
- manipulating the weather
- attracting game animals or fish
- causing mild harm to people, animals or property
- communicating / mediating with the dead
- communicating / mediating with the unseen world(s)
- communicating / mediating with the gods?

Battle magic

- instilling fear and confusion in an enemy
- magically hindering an enemy’s movements
- breaking or strengthening weapons and armour
- providing invulnerability in battle
- killing people
- providing protection from enemy sorcerers
- fighting / killing enemy sorcerers

- thirdly, both sexes were involved in sorcery, with evidence for different and precise social roles for men and women, together with the existence of complex sexual, social and gender constructions

The circumpolar parallels are clearly striking in many respects, and in the Nordic culture we see a range of specialists who could perform a similar variety of different rituals according to their individual skill and disposition. This in fact is no more than we should expect, as an equal diversity of both practice and practitioners is found in shamanic belief systems throughout the northern hemisphere. However, the difference in comparison to circumpolar, and especially Sámi, shamanism comes in the context of the functions that Nordic magic of this kind seems to have performed. This is particularly important, because there is a general perception that *seiðr* was overwhelmingly used for divination and clairvoyance, and yet this is not actually borne out by an examination of the sources. *Seiðr* and Óðinnic magic was undoubtedly used for what are above called ‘domestic’ purposes - including divination, but also for affecting the weather to improve the crops, settling grievances and so on, all of which are mentioned in the sources. But in addition to this, we also find a different kind of magic, described in several catalogues of spells preserved in the early poetry, in the names and attributes of Óðinn, and even in the names of his servants like the valkyries, the female

demons who decide the fate of warriors in battle (see Price 2002). This is a specifically violent magic, an offensive and defensive measure for active intervention in battle, for killing and shamanic combat.

In my opinion, this link between magic and aggression is the key aspect that has been neglected in many studies of *seiðr*, and goes far beyond the 'black' and 'white' forms that Strömbäck and others have described (e.g. Strömbäck 1935; Ohlmarks 1939). Again, I would argue that this is in line with the other circumpolar traditions: in Sámi shamanism for example, on the basis of a comprehensive survey of the sources I have estimated that up to 60% of rituals had an aggressive objective (Price 2002). The vital difference between circumpolar shamanism and the pre-Christian religion of the Norse is that none of the nomadic hunting cultures had a concept of organised warfare - a vital context for this aspect of *seiðr*.

But still, we must be cautious in our drawing of such parallels. Above all, we should avoid monolithic interpretations and simple definitions. We must always remember that we do not know exactly what *seiðr* meant to the early medieval Norse. At one level, this kind of belief system essentially revolves around a particular concept of the nature of the soul (human, animal and even what we would call mineral): in Viking studies it may be that we now urgently need a deeper study of Old Norse understandings of both this and the personification of luck, an update of existing work on the peculiar aspects of the self called *fylgjur* and *hamingjur* (e.g. Ellis 1943; Ström 1960; Strömbäck 1975). It should also be clear that the whole question of *seiðr* is ultimately linked to the very fabric of Old Norse society itself - how it was constructed and how the articulation of power and identity functioned within it. This should not surprise us, because - again - the shamanic belief systems of the circumpolar area are also socially embedded in precisely this way.

In one sense, of course, the acknowledgement of *seiðr's* importance in the Old Norse belief system, and the whole shamanic and totemistic debate that comes with it, certainly does not fundamentally change our understanding of the Viking Age. In another sense however, the implications are profound. A close look at *seiðr* and its related rituals changes our perception of the way in which the Vikings may have thought about human beings and other living creatures, about what we would regard as inanimate objects, and even about the nature of reality itself; it changes our view of the role that ritual played in society. Faced then with a much broader field of study that opens up the idea of *seiðr* set in a universal social context for the Viking Age North, archaeology can be seen to be of especial value, with its own particular research agenda focused on an ever-increasing database of *all* forms of material culture (not just that of religion), backed up by an array of theoretical tools that may be larger than those working in other disciplines realise. It may be that the archaeology of *seiðr* and its related rituals can provide one of our best hopes for the future investigation of the intricacies and sophistication of the Viking mind.

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