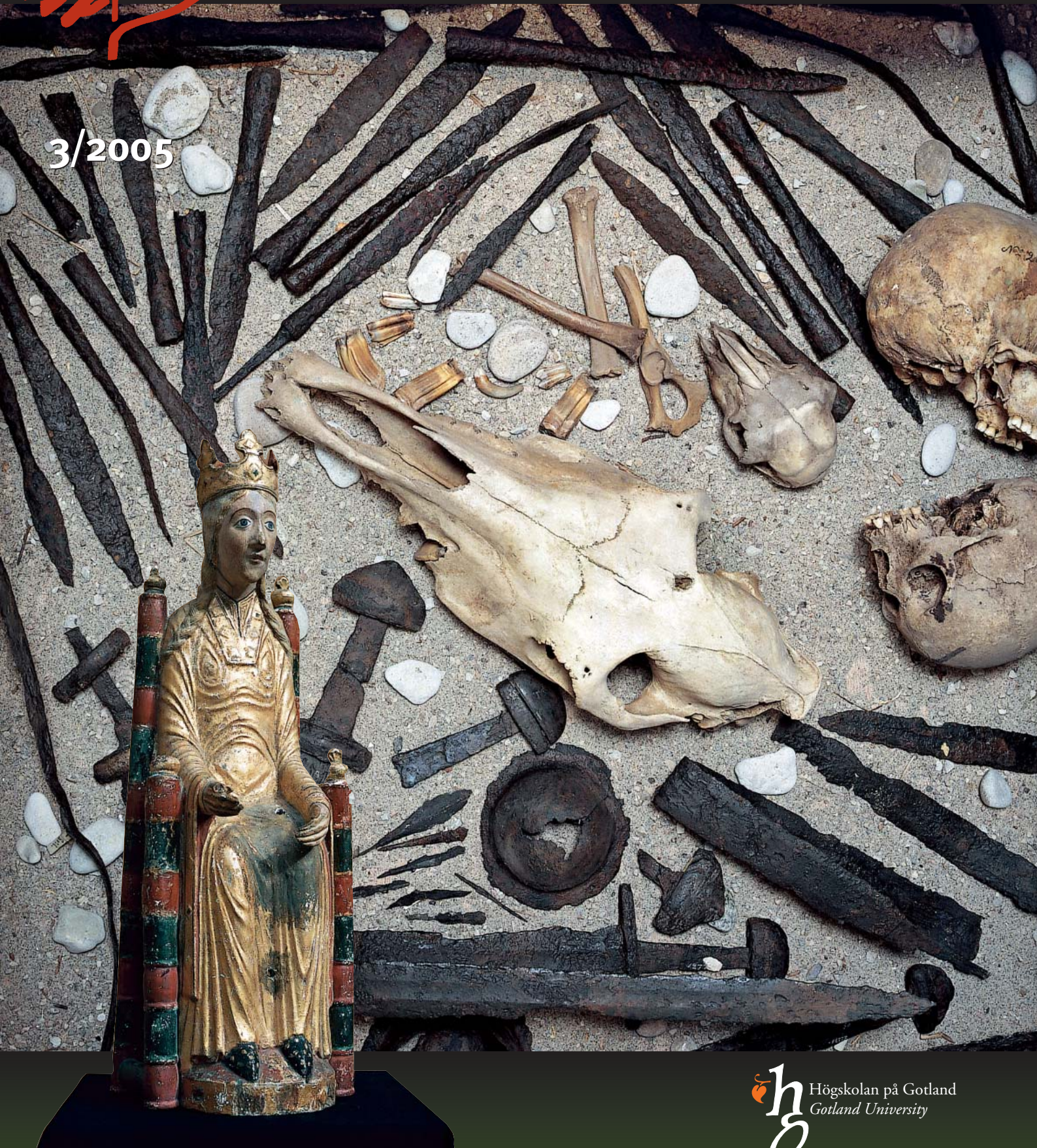


# Viking Heritage

magazine

3/2005





# Editorial

**THE CHANGE OF RELIGION** in the Viking Age – illustrated on the front page – is the subject of the two opening articles in this autumn issue. When the Viking Age began around 750 AD, most of Europe had already been converted to Christianity. In Scandinavia this process of transformation went on for several hundred years and the first churches were not built until around 1100.

In the article *Choosing heaven* Gun Westholm tells about the Viking-age Norse Aesir cult – that, in turn, replaced an older fertility religion – and about its origin and myths that might very well be depicted on Gotlandic picture stones.

But how was the change from the old pagan faith into Christianity brought about? You will find some answers in the article *The cross and the sword* where Alexandra Sanmark discusses the strategies of conversion in different places in medieval Europe.

From Orkney we have received an interesting contribution to the debate about whether the Vikings integrated with the indigenous Pictish people on the island or slaughtered them, when they took over the islands. Perhaps recent excavations can lead to new approaches to this debate.

But who actually were the Vikings? To find the answer to this question you must read the article, *The Worlds of the Vikings*, by Malin Lindquist!

And as usual, you will find plenty of good reading for the dark autumn nights in this issue, so curl up and enjoy it!

**Marita E Ekman**

Editor

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HERITAGE NEWS

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Drawing by Lou Harrison, [thunderheartstudios@yahoo.dk](mailto:thunderheartstudios@yahoo.dk)

## Words of Wisdom

*The ignorant booby had best be silent  
 when he moves among other men,  
 No one will know what a nit-wit he is  
 until he begins to talk;  
 No one knows less what a nit-wit he is,  
 than the man who talks too much.*

From Hávámál  
 (Words from “The High One”)

### About the front page

*The religion of the Vikings. Human sacrifices and weapon offerings from Lillmyr in Barlingbo parish and Möllegårds in Hörsne parish, Gotland, Sweden. In front: The Madonna from Viklau church (copy) is dated to the end of the 12th century. These objects are exhibited in the County Museum of Gotland, Sweden. Photo Raymond Hejdström.*

BY GUN WESTHOLM

When the Viking Age began in about 750 AD, Scandinavia was among the last of the heathen outposts in Europe along with the Baltic, Russian and Slavic areas east of the Elbe.

# Choosing Heaven

## The Religion of the Vikings



*Fig 1. The spread of Christianity and Islam at the beginning of the Viking Age, around 750 AD.*

*White: Pagan region  
Grey: Christian region  
Black: Islamic region*

*Map by Maria Westholm.*

Christianity had slowly spread from the Middle East, Egypt, the Roman Empire and the Byzantium area (4<sup>th</sup> century), to the realm of the Franks and, during the 6<sup>th</sup> century, further to England and Ireland. Parts of the Germanic area were Christianised during 7<sup>th</sup> century, and in the middle of 8<sup>th</sup> century the large Carolingian kingdom was created forming a cohesive Christian area from Italy in the South to the Slavonian region in North (fig. 1).

### Before the Aesir Gods

In Scandinavia belief in the Aesir gods was the prevailing religion before the Christian message slowly won territory

during 11<sup>th</sup> century. Many believe that the religion of the Vikings arose as a unique phenomenon in northern Europe.

But the Aesir cult was a warrior religion that had several equivalents in both Europe and Asia, religions that had replaced other much earlier, peaceful beliefs with clear ties to agriculture and fertility. In these very old forms of religion, the chief god was often of the female sex – Mother Earth – and a good yearly crop and high yields from the livestock were the main purpose for worship.

Female goddesses dominated Europe's and Asia's religious beliefs until approximately 5000 BC, then a slow

change seems to have begun. The fertile areas of the plains people were taken over by warlike nomads and cattle herders from the mountain regions. These tribes had male chief gods who honoured warring activities and warriors who had fallen in battle. Later on some of the war gods came to be called Zeus, Jahve and Odin.

Outside Scandinavia, Odin was called Wodan/Wotan among the Germanic tribes, Godan among the Langobardi and Woden in England. Both Woden and Donar – Thor – are mentioned as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century on the continent. Odin and Zeus have many common qualities, as do their respective wives Frigg and Hera.

There are also resemblances between other Aesir gods and the Greek gods of Antiquity.

The story of creation in our Nordic mythology has many parallels in the ancient myths of India and Iran. According to the poetic Edda, a human-like giant is created – *Ymer* – from the vapour from the huge cold abyss *Ginnungagap* and the heat of its opposite *Muspelhem*. At the same time the first cow *Audhumbla* is created.

The equivalent to Ymer in the old Indian Veda manuscripts is called *Yama*, and *Yima* in the ancient Persian legends but it is still the same story! In India the cow is referred to as the source and mother of life. In the Indian epic *Mahabharata* portrays two heirs – the blind *Dhritarashtra* and the honest *Vihura* bearing close similarities to Odin's sons, the blind *Höder* and the honest *Balder*. In the Nordic story, the blind Höder is persuaded to shoot an arrow of mistletoe at his brother, while the Indian equivalent tells about a dice game that ended with catastrophic consequences. In both cases the situation leads to the disintegration of the whole world order.

After the end of the world – *Ragnarök* – a new world is born. The same cyclic view of time exists in Iran and Greece as well as in India. One can also see linguistic resemblances between Greek, ancient Indian languages and the Germanic languages.

It is obvious that the Aesir cult derived its main features from many religions in Southern Europe and Asia. It is uncertain where the cumulative faith originated, but we can be very sure that it is a religion that immigrated to Scandinavia!

But there was a religion in Scandinavia even *before* the Aesir cult. We know about this religion only through sacrificial finds, graves and from illustrations on the Gotlandic picture stones. Written sources are lacking, with one exception. The Roman historian Tacitus described the northern Germanic tribes' relationships and religion in his work, *Germania* in 98 AC. He mentions two goddesses among the Germans: Isis and Nerthus. Isis seems to be strongly influenced by her Egyptian namesake – a maritime goddess, with temples in the mouths of rivers and a ship

as symbol. She has been assumed to be the model for the goddesses Frigg and Freyja in the North. According to mythology, Freyja was the daughter of Njord of the Vanir race, and a sister to Frey, who owned the remarkable ship *Skidbladne*.

*"Nerthus, who is the same as Mother Earth, believes that she intervenes in people's lives and travels in procession among the people."*

worship Nerthus. It has been possible to locate only one of the names with any certainty – the Angles. They lived in the northern part of Germany, on the border to Denmark on a peninsula that was called Angeln. Two of the other names bear similarities to those in Schleswig – Holstein.

Tacitus tells about how Nerthus' annual journey ends:

*"Then the wagon and cloth are cleaned, and if you can believe it, the goddess' picture in a distant sea. The slaves that do this are then swallowed up by that sea. From this grows a secret dread and a pious uncertainty about what that is, that only the to the dead are allowed to see."*

This cult of the northern Germanic tribes can be linked to the peat corpses that have been found within Danish and North German territory in silted-up lakes.

Nerthus – Njard (the Aesir Njord) seems to be a Nordic fertility goddess and the first ancestress of the Vanir.

### Picture stones as sources of knowledge

The oldest Gotlandic picture stones from the period approximately 400–600 AD have symbols that can be linked to an old agricultural cult rather than a warrior religion. These feature sun discs with swirling wheels that seem to stand for movement, pairs of animals

that symbolise rites unknown to us, possibly illustrated to promote a plentiful crop or show ritual animal baiting.

Another motif on the picture stones from this period is fine-looking boats with high stem-or sternposts and rudders. Above the ships' middle section there is a superstructure with circles on it. The sun that fills nature with new life every spring probably became a symbol of resurrection even for the dead people, perhaps the struggles of the animal pairs is meant to be a struggle between life and death or between summer and winter and the ships with their crew can depict a journey for the souls of the dead to the country of the sun or the realm of death. The circles perhaps indicate a tribute to the dead – wreaths of honour.

It is not surprising that the inhabitants of Gotland, located in the middle of the sea, long cherished an ancient agriculture

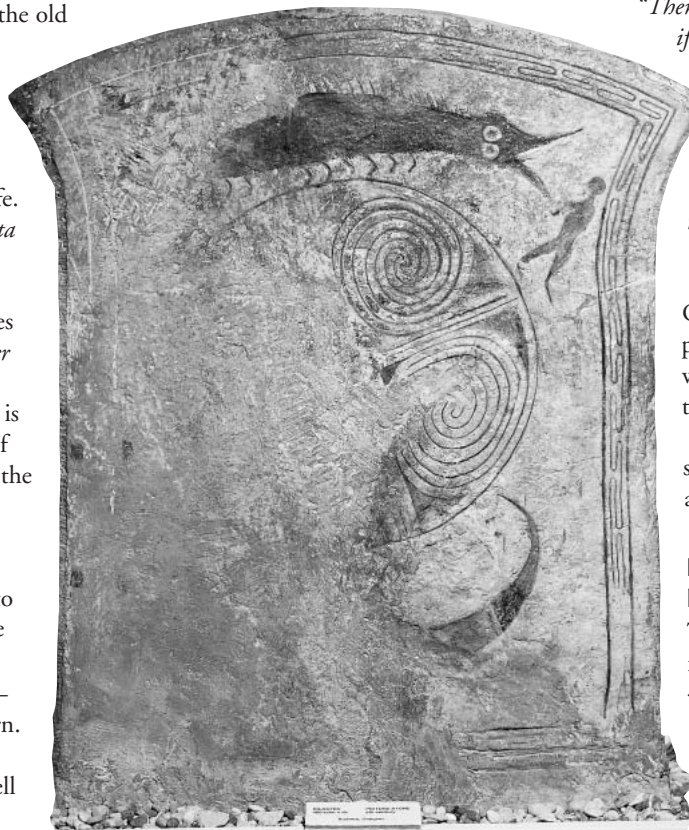


Fig 2. The partly reconstructed picture stone from Austers in Hangvar parish, at the bottom a ship's stem, a sun wheel and on the top a man in front of the gaping mouth of a beast. Photo Raymond Hejdström.

*"There is a holy grove on an island in the ocean and on this a blessed wagon, covered with cloth,"*

Tacitus writes and further on in the text he says:

*"that the wagon is pulled by cows. Wherever she goes there are festivities and no more wars, and weapons are set aside... peace and quiet then prevail."*

Tacitus counts seven different tribes who



and fertility religion that also included ships.

Even on picture stones dated to as early as 400–500 AD, there are pictures that lead thoughts towards the mythology of the Vikings. The stone from Austers in Hangvar has a sun wheel and probably the stem of a ship, fig. 2. Above the sun drawing there is a man facing the open mouth of a great beast that closely resembles a centipede. Several have wanted to interpret the picture as an early depiction of Sigurd facing the dragon Fafne. Another interpretation is Thor struggling with the snake from Midgård.

An almost identical stone was found while restoring Martebo church in 1971. On the Martebo stone the whole ship is preserved while the dragon's/snake's upper body has been chopped away, but otherwise it is the same motif. The saga about Sigurd Fafnesbane is recorded on Iceland and was spread widely in Scandinavia and Germany during the Viking era and later.

Is the Auster stone's motif a sign of the onset of the Aesir cult's war and warrior worship? There are other examples on stones from same era that show armed men: on a stone from Vallstenarum in Vallstena they carry spears and shields, and on a picture stone with early runes from Martebo church there are riders with spears and shields next to the sun wheel.

Fig 3. Picture stone with snake motif from Martebo church. Photo Raymond Hejdström.



### Snake cult?

On several of the old type of stones three filled circles occur: Martebo church, Bro church and on the big Sanda stone. That all three circles should be symbols for the sun and resurrection seems unlikely.

On the stone from Martebo a snake winds around the left lower circle, fig. 3, and on the Sanda stone snakes entwine themselves around the both lower circles that lack rays. Is it earth that is meant under the sun wheel – one to two worlds

– Midgård – entwined by the Midgård snake, one of Loke's evil sons?

Moreover, later the Sanda stone has been “scribbled on”; a tree with clear roots stands on a line with a dragon – possibly the world tree *Yggdrasil* and with a dragon-like character that can possibly be interpreted as the snake *Nidhögg*, gnawing on the tree's roots.

During the 6<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> c. the circles disappear from the picture stones and are replaced by illustrations of sailing ships, birds and snakes. Pure “snake stones” now appear. The most well known is the stone from Smiss in När, fig. 4, where a sitting woman with an artistic hairstyle

holds a snake in each hand under a so-called *triskele* with three snakes.

On the stone from Sandegårda in Sanda a snake-like character with two distinct snakes on either side can be seen, fig. 5. Snakes are clearly important in the prehistoric religious world on Gotland.

Besides *Midgårdssormen* (the *Midgård snake*), Eddan also mentions the snakes *Goin*, *Moin*, *Gråbak* and *Grafvöllund*, except *Nidhögg*, down in *Nifelheim* under *Yggdrasil*:

“More snakes lie under the ash tree called *Yggdrasil* than what each silly monkey believes”, according to Eddan.

Both the snake-stones above are dated to the period 500–700 AD and we are now approaching the beginning of the Viking era. On at least two of the Viking-age stones both the woman with snakes and the cluster of snakes exist:

On the Hunninge stone from Klinte a snake woman stands watching a battle scene. In the next picture a man lies among a number of snakes in a hole or on a yard. A woman stands at the entrance to the yard, fig. 6.

On the stone from Smiss in Stenkyrka a woman with a snake in her hand is walking in front of a row of soldiers. In the badly damaged frieze above this a snake pit with a man in it can be discerned, fig. 7.

Snakes have been found in the Gotlandic mythology for many hundred years! Snake pits occur in the Icelandic sagas – Ragnar Lodbrok and Gunnar Gjukeson both met their destiny in a snake pit in the saga of Ragnar Lodbrok –

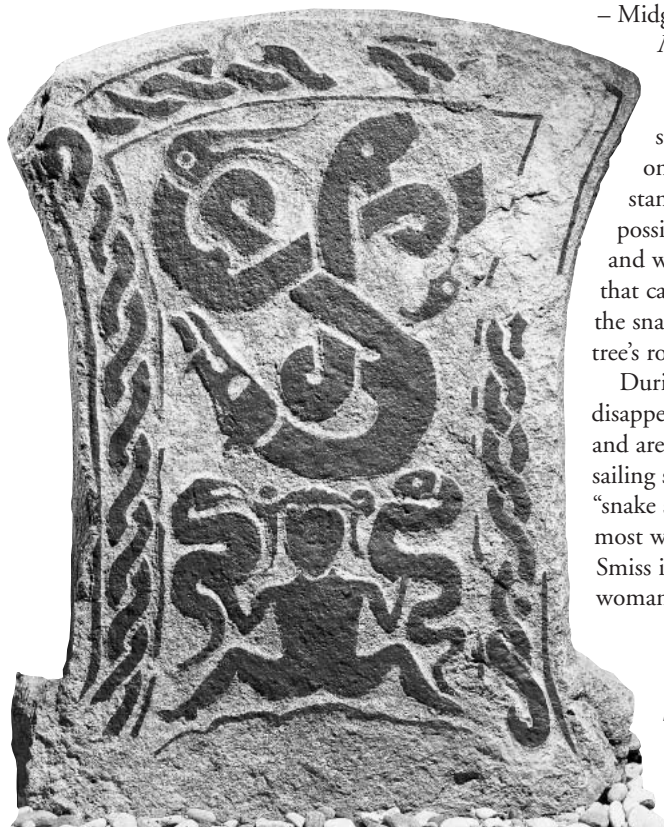


Fig 4. Picture stone with snake motif from Smiss in När parish. Photo Raymond Hejdström.



a Nordic sequel to the saga of Sigurd Fafnesbane.

If dragon- and the snake-stones are early signs of Aesir religion, this means that the transition from the old fertility – and agricultural cult to the Aesir cult was a process that took several hundred years! When the Aesir religion is described in Eddan at the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> c, the author – Snorre Sturlasson had access to stories that depicted the final phase of Aesir religion before it was officially crowded out by Christianity. Then it had probably undergone a long, slow transition.

### The Nordic Aesir gods

The Viking-age gods stemmed from two races – Aesir and Vanir.

The word Aesir comes from an old word for “god”. According to Eddan the Aesir include most of the gods: Odin, Thor, Tyr and others, twelve gods in total. They are mostly war gods to be appeased by weapon sacrifices among other things. According to Snorre’s Edda, fourteen of the goddesses are called *Asynjor*, (Aesir goddesses) for instance Frigg and Freyja.

The names of the Vanir are considered to be related to the Roman goddess of love Venus (the Greeks’ Afrodite) and the ancient Indian word *vanah* = desire and they constitute their own race of gods. They were the gods of reproduction and they ruled over weather, fishing, shipping, seeding and harvest. They seem to be the remains of an ancient agricultural mother-earth cult. This also includes Njord (see above) Frigg, Frey and Freyja. Among the Vanir are also those versed in magic, who can grant success in battle and who devote themselves to love magic.

The Aesir and Vanir fought against each other but gradually tired of battle, held a peace meeting and sealed the peace by both sides going up to a vat and spitting in it, according to Eddan. The Aesir god Odin married the Vanir goddess Frigg and they had two sons, Balder and Höder, amongst other children.

Odin is the highest and eldest of the Aesir. He rules over everything and the other gods may be powerful, but they all obey him as children obey their father... Odin is called universal father because he is father to all the gods, according to the Edda.

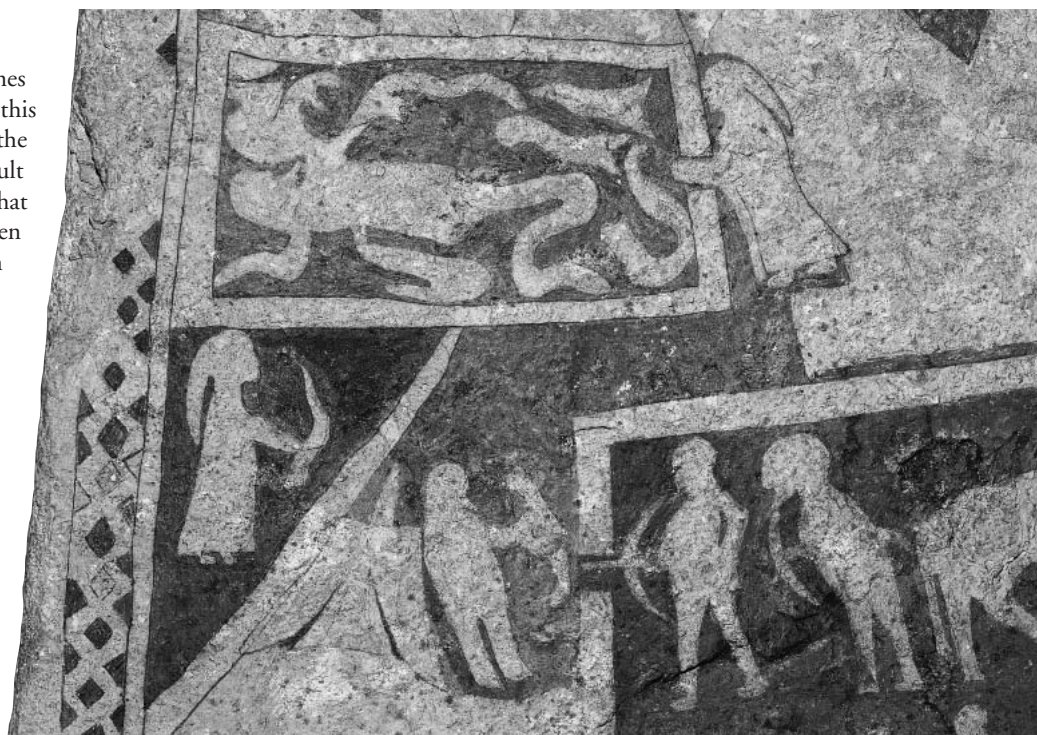


Fig 6. Picture stone with snake motif from Hunninge in Klinte parish.  
Photo Raymond Hejdström.

### Sacrificial finds

The Gotlandic Viking-age picture stones are difficult to interpret but probably give us pictures of sacrifices, gods and goddesses, valkyries and Valhalla. Among the sacrificial scenes the Hammar stone from Lärbro is the one most often portrayed – with a human sacrifice on an altar-like arrangement with man carrying a spear in front of Odin, fig. 8.

In Gutasagan is written:

*“They sacrificed their sons and daughters and livestock as well as food and drink. They did this because of their false belief. The whole country (Gotland) had the greatest human sacrifice. Normally each of the three regions held their own sacrifice.”*

Archaeological finds also imply that people were sacrificed during the Viking Age on Gotland. In Lillmyr in Barlingbo, just next to the Gotlandic Allting’s meeting place in Roma, parts of humans have been found, along with remains of horses and lambs. In the same marsh,

weapon sacrifices were also found – some ten bent-up swords lay in a heap and beside them were ten-odd shield bosses stacked on top of each other, see photo on the front page. In another marsh land, at Möllegårds in Hörsne, there were thirty-

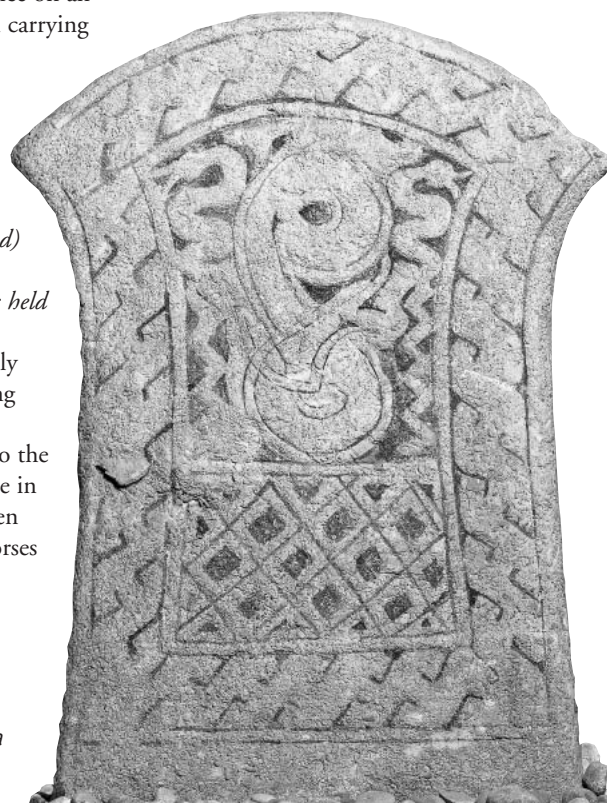


Fig 5. Picture stone with snake motif from Sandegårda in Sanda parish.  
Photo Raymond Hejdström.



odd spearheads and at Gane in Bäl, a Vendel-age bracteate and ten Viking-age spears were found. These weapon sacrifices are connected with the Odin cult (see front page).

But the largest site of Viking-age weapon-finds on Gotland is Gudingsåkrarna, northwest from Vallstena church. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> c. over 500 weapons have been dug up from the drained marshland here – mostly spearheads, but even swords and forging equipment such as raw iron and forging tongs. On other occasions silver has been found here along with spearheads and scythes. At an excavation during the 1930s, 8 spearheads appeared stuck into a circle approximately 1,5-meter radius and with a horsehead-shaped stone in the middle.

While it can be suspected that the weapon sacrifices were offered to Odin and possibly also to Thor, probably the sacrificed scythes are meant to appease the god Frey. Frey was the god of love who gave peace, pleasure and good crops. Adam of Bremen writes at the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> c.:

*"If an epidemic or famine threatens, you should make sacrifices to Thor's statue, if a war is imminent, to Odin, if a wedding is to be celebrate, to Frey."*

Besides Gudingsåkrarna, scythes have been found in ways that can be interpreted as sacrifice: four scythes bound together with two chisels and a cutting instrument have been found at Findarve in Rone and eight scythes, two raw irons, three forks and a key at Bringes in Norrlanda. Small miniature scythes have been dug up at Stenbys in Lokrume.

One more group of finds of a sacrificial character must be mentioned – iron rings that were found in stone mounds and bogs. The largest find comes from Dune in Dalhem, where approximately 1400 rings of different sizes lay neatly in different layers with earth in between. We cannot link the ring finds to any specific god, they are assumed to be a very ancient relic with roots in a Bronze-age cult.

The god Thor with power over thunder is portrayed on a picture stone from Alskog church and possibly even on a stone chest from Sanda cemetery with his weapon, the hammer Mjölner. Fragments of a similar picture stone from Hemse seem to have same motif. On the both the later stones, the hammer is more like a club. Mjölner can also be portrayed as an axe.

While miniature Thor's hammers are a repeated find from graves on the

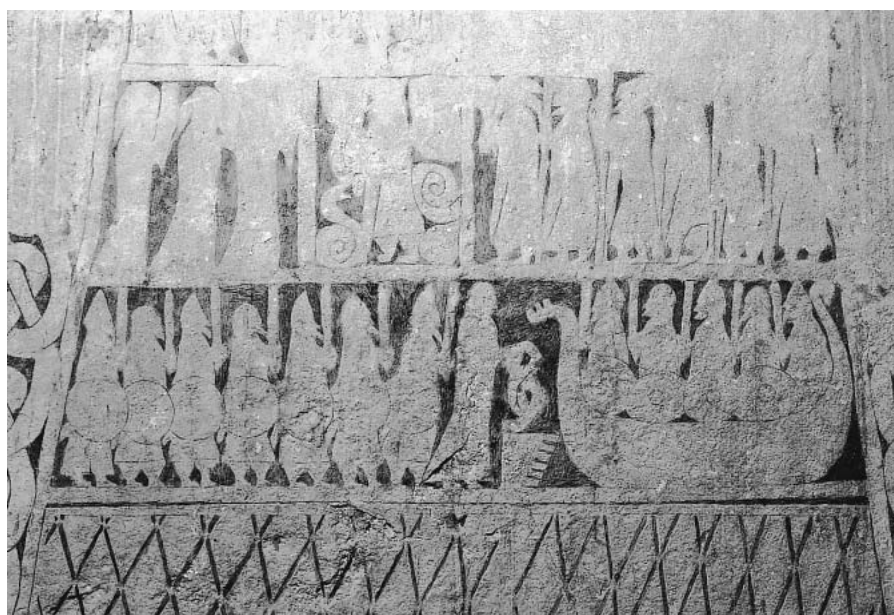


Fig 7. Picture stone with snake motif from Smiss in Stenkyrka parish.  
Photo Raymond Hejdström.

continent, they are very rare in Gotlandic graves. On the other hand there are four silver Thor's hammers in Gotlandic silver treasures from the late Viking Age (Alveskogs in Eke, Mickels in När, Gerete in Fardhem and Kvie in Othem).

In the Gotlandic graves, amber amulets were sometimes placed at the feet of the dead or on their breasts. In male graves, they were shaped like a little axe and in female graves they have a conical shape with a groove. Small block stools of silver and amber have also found. The axes as well as the block stool can be linked to Thor's cult. Thor is portrayed sitting on such a stool on a find from Lund. The small amber amulets have their equivalents in Latvia.

A few amulet rings of iron and bronze with small miniature objects on each have been found on the island – from Riddare in Hemse comes a ring with horse, spear and sword and from Sandegårda in Sanda another with some rings, a block stool (?) and an animal.

### Silver Hoards

Burying sacrificial finds meant to appease the gods seems, therefore, to have been a common phenomenon on Gotland. It was even more common to place silver hoards under the floors of the buildings. Up until the present no less than about 750 Viking-age silver hoards have come to light on Gotland!

Many explanations as to why these treasures have been left buried until our time have been searched for: they were hidden away; those who knew about the

places died and took their secret with them to the grave; they were payment for a future bride purchase that was never used or that the silver was intended as blood money to get someone out of a difficult situation.

But the burying of silver can also be connected with the Aesir cult! If there was silver lying under the floors in at least every other farm on Gotland, this could not have been unknown to the other inhabitants of Gotland. Every abandoned house would have been searched by relatives or others!

Another explanation can also exist, that has to do with the life after this. In Snorre Sturlasson's *Ynglingasaga* there is a chapter about the laws Odin made for the people: Odin made in his country the same laws that had applied among the Aesir. He ordained that all dead men should be burnt and their properties to be carried onto the funeral pyre with them. He decreed that each and everyone should come to Valhalla with the wealth that he had on the pyre; *he should also enjoy that which he had dug down in the ground.* (author's italics).

Here we get another explanation for the hoards – they were intended for life in Valhalla!

We can imagine that the farmer, when he knew the end was near, took away as much of the family's fortune that he believed he would need in his next life and placed this under the floor. Perhaps this took place in ceremonies with families present – the contents in the urn or the box showing of course the position which

Fig 8. A sacrificial scene.  
Detail from the picture  
stone from Hammars in  
Lärbro parish.  
Photo Erik Nylén.



he had achieved during his life. Perhaps, his son, in turn, placed silver in the same urn when he approached old age. The important thing is that nobody could take up the silver, even if they knew that the silver lay there! Then, the dead ancestors would get into trouble and incur the terrible revenge of the dead and Aesir gods!

### Aesir and Christianity

Snorre's Edda was written down during Christian time and there are many parallels with biblical texts in the stories. But there are also many similarities with ancient Persian and ancient Indian mythology and we can assume that the Aesir religion was a mixture of old beliefs with Euro-Asian origins and new Christian elements.

Information from archaeological sources on Gotland shows that Christian objects existed on the island as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Gutasagan describes that Christian areas existed within Gotland's trading areas throughout the whole Viking era:

*"Even though the Gutes were heathens, they still sailed with merchant products to all countries, Christian and heathen. Then the merchants witnessed Christian customs in Christian countries. Then some of them allowed themselves to be baptized and brought Christian priests to Gotland."*

Nothing would indicate dramatic events in connection with the conversion to Christianity. Many things imply, on the other hand, that heathens and Christian lived peaceful side by side for a long time.

During the 11<sup>th</sup> c. Christian crosses and rune texts with Christian messages became more and more common. The oldest churches on Gotland are dated to about 1100 AD. Gutasagan formulates the formal Christianising of Gotland – the law begins with:

*"This is the first in our law, that we should say no to paganism and say yes to the Christian faith and all believe in a God Almighty..."*

But all expressions of the old religion did not disappear immediately. The faith in – and the dread of – the old Aesir gods lived on in folklore and customs for a long time. Thor is the Aesir, whose name and characteristics seem to have survived the longest in folk religion and well into

historical time he has been invoked in order to protect houses and people during thunderstorms.

With the introduction of Christianity even the goddesses disappeared. God was now naturally male. Maria is admittedly Jesus' mother, but no goddess! But in everyday religion, the Blessed Mary got to bear Freyja's role as a symbol of fertility, see the front page. She was also worshipped as a kind of mother goddess and alleviated at childbirth pains, thereby also replacing Frigg. In many places she also got to take over the power over the weather, crops, fishing and livestock from the ancient gods and goddesses.

*This article was first published in Swedish by the County Museum of Gotland in their annual book, Gotländskt Arkiv 2004, this year called Gotland Vikingaön (Gotland Viking Island).*

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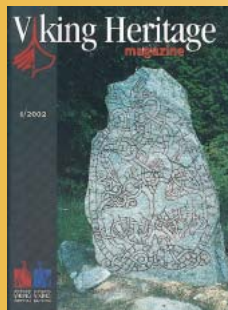
### About the author

Gun Westholm is the Senior Curator and responsible for the exhibitions at the County Museum of Gotland. She is an archaeologist and the author of numerous articles dealing with the Viking and Medieval history of Gotland. Her thesis dissertation on Viking-age Visby was published in 1989.



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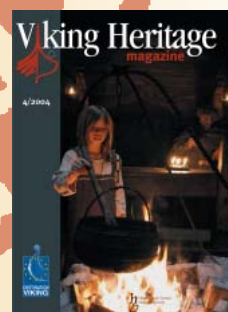
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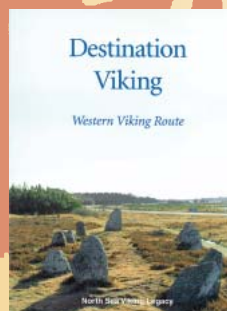
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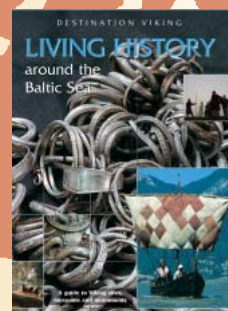
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