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Coming to Grips with the Beast : a reply to Carrie Roy

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Debatt

Coming to Grips with the Beast – a Reply to Carrie Roy

At the 14th Saga Conference, Carrie Roy (2009a) presented a paper on the meaning of the gripping-beast motif in Viking Period culture (summarized in Roy 2009b). Roy levels serious criticism against her peers, including the co-authors of this note, declaring them victims of their own subjectivity. The three of us have contributed equally to the following reply.

Previous Work

Roy's paper aims at a new interpretation of the symbolic meaning of Scandinavian gripping-beast art. She begins by describing what she considers the two most common points of departure in earlier research. The first is to view animal art as meaningless decoration. As a representative of this school, Roy quotes Signe Horn Fuglesang (1992, p. 176), who argued that Scandinavians did not interpret decoration symbolically before the 12th century. But Horn Fuglesang is hardly the only one who has discussed the possibility of symbolic meanings behind the animal art. Also in 1992, Anna Tomasdotter Jakobsson chose quite the opposite position. According to her, Early Iron Age art, like modern art, served as a medium for communication. Thus, formal variations would have emerged through manipulation by individuals and groups with concrete agendas. Furthermore Tomasdotter Jakobsson (1992, p. 43 ff) stressed that we should perceive decoration as an integral part of each individual object, and not as arbitrary decoration. Of course, she was not the first to ascribe animal art a meaning beyond the decorative (cf. Shetelig 1947 [1927]; Nissen Meyer 1935; Kuhn 1959). And since the early 1990s, the ranks of scholars pondering the symbolic meanings of animal art – the gripping beast included – have swelled steadily. Thus it can hardly be claimed that the perception of animal art as pure decoration is a very common stance. On the contrary.

According to Roy (2009a, p. 823 f), the other common approach among researchers in the field is to associate animal art motifs with Old Norse deities, most prominently Óðinn. Even though this observation might be correct as a tendency, Roy on occasion lays her accusations at the wrong doorstep. For instance, present co-author Maria Domeij Lundborg has, like Roy, argued against overly simple analogies between animal art and deities. In fact, she is specifically suspicious towards the idea of animal art as a direct expression of pre-Christian religion. As an alternative, she advocates seeing animal art in the broader context of Skaldic poetry and Early Medieval ideology of honour and warfare (Domeij 2004; 2006; Domeij Lundborg 2006; 2009). Furthermore, Roy's claim that the mythological trend (especially regarding Óðinn) would be most prominent in recent research is not accurate. Since the interest in Scandinavian animal art began to increase in the early 1990s, we have seen a long list of scholars make this association (e.g. Hedeager 1993; 1997; 2003; Domeij 1994; Magnus 2001; Hed Jakobsson 2003; Neiß 2004; 2006; 2007; 2009a-b; 2010a; Hedenstierna Jonson 2006). Furthermore, the possible connection between animal art and mythology was also discussed in earlier research, although to a more limited extent.

Roy states that research into the meanings of animal art is "plagued by subjectivity" (2009a, p. 825). According to her, this applies to the choice of discourse decorated objects as well as to their function and decoration in Iron Age society. This criticism may be apt, and it certainly applies to Roy herself. To overcome subjectivity, Roy prescribes what she calls a "Material Culture Perspective" (2009a, p. 825). According to her, such a perspective embraces the first-hand sensory experience as the only direct, uncompromised parameter we have in common with the people of the past. Other aspects might be subject to flux –

“worldview, the meanings of words, and beliefs – all change over time” (Roy 2009a, p. 826). One can, however, have serious doubts that sensory perceptions might be less subjective than other criteria. To give but a simple example from everyday life, traditional European cuisine only distinguishes between four basic tastes – sweet, sour, salty and bitter – while East Asian tongues have cultivated *umami* as a fifth basic taste. Furthermore it remains unclear why sensory parameters should have any relevance at all for our understanding of animal art in Viking Period society. But despite labelling her point of departure “Material Culture Studies”, Roy fails to explain what exactly makes her supposedly objective approach better than other archaeological theories. This is especially problematic since Roy's brief description makes her Material Culture Studies look like nothing but yet another variant of phenomenological archaeology (e.g. Tilley 1994). Within phenomenology proper, though, subjectivity is perceived as inevitable.

In summary, Roy's plan to interpret Viking Period gripping-beast decoration from a material culture perspective will be interesting to follow, if she implements it in future works. In her conference paper, however, Roy silently abandons this newly proclaimed perspective in favour of a more traditional method, which is Panofskian iconography in all but name. Roy's first step is actually a pre-iconographic analysis. What follows is an iconographic and iconological interpretation based on an analogy from another source-material. Roy selects her analogy from Old Norse literature, like so many other scholars have done before her. In her analysis (corresponding to the pre-iconographic stage in a traditional study), Roy reinvents the definition of the gripping beast by declaring the mouth and the chest to be its most prominent features. She also emphasises the bloated, swollen body as a main characteristic. But unfortunately, Roy's re-definition of gripping beast morphology is poorly founded. As a general rule, the beasts are in fact chubby, pop-eyed creatures with the gripping paws that originated the art style's name. The hips are usually emphasised and the rest of the body often disappears (Wilson 2010, p. 324 ff). A swollen chest and self-strangulation are rare fea-

tures, and accordingly, Roy fails to present any example of a marked chest. In fact, the feature she sees as the chest more likely represent the beast's hips (Helmbrecht 2005a, p. 250, fig. 4).

Beliefs Behind the Art

Despite these obvious discrepancies, Roy enters the analogy jungle in search of parallels to match the physical properties of the gripping beast she discerns. To begin with, Roy dismisses research linking the motif to Norse deities and their attributes. She finds such views narrow-minded, considering the possibility of pre-Christian religion holding a diversity of beliefs and entities. According to Roy, archaeological source material and place names suggest regional cults of Óðinn (as with other deities). Gripping-beast decoration, on the other hand, is spread all over Norse settlement (Helmbrecht 2005a, p. 269, Karte 1). Therefore, any connection between the motif and individual deities appears impossible to prove.

We agree with Roy that any limitation of the pre-Christian religion to a few deities with a few attributes each would indeed be narrow-minded. Nevertheless, we need more cogent argumentation to safely rule out any connection between the gripping beast and the Old Norse pantheon. Because how can Roy know that her material does not conform to social and cultural expectations with regard to Old Norse deities? How, indeed, would a Viking Period artist depict Óðinn or Freya's mythological transformations? On which grounds exactly does Roy rule out that Viking Period mass products, though widespread, were distributed from a few religious centres? And why should the buyers have been incapable of ascribing new iconographic or symbolic content to the art that differed from the designers' original intention? Roy hopefully realizes – but like most of us, is not up to the idea's consequences – that both image and text are polysemic and allow for multiple layers of interpretation. In fact, it is rather doubtful if modern scholars possess all the knowledge (or for that matter all necessary awareness of the source material) to find every relevant association.

The next problem with Roy's interpretation is that without further argument and on fairly shaky

foundations, she first declares a couple of decorated objects to be amulets and then links all other gripping beasts to a religious discourse. According to Roy, the apotropaic function is proven by the fact that these presumed amulets were worn hidden from view. However, she cites only a single example of such a presumed gripping-beast amulet, which, according to Haakon Shetelig (1944, p. 12), *might* have been worn in a leather purse. Though founded on only one highly uncertain context, Roy then applies her hypothesis to the entire corpus of gripping-beast art. In addition she claims that animal art was directed exclusively to the carrier of each decorated object. Roy bases this idea on the fact that all the objects in question are not only sculpted in the round, but also rather small. This would make any reading from a distance difficult. Taken to its extreme, this argument would disqualify books as carriers of information as well.

But in fact, gripping-beast decorated objects could – then as now – be held in the hand, twisted and turned. Nor need it have been any matter of secrecy when it came to reading the pictorial messages. On the contrary, we have some indications that richly decorated objects were meant to be seen, e.g. the Mammen horse collar (Näsman 1991). More than 85% of the material featuring gripping beasts are brooches (Helmbrecht 2005a, pp. 286 f). In chapter 17 of Egils saga it is told that Thorolf owned a large ship suitable for open-water sailing, and in chapter 36, Thorolf and Björn sail a smaller ship. For both ships, it is explicitly mentioned that they were abundantly decorated (Helmbrecht 2011, p. 339), probably referring to animal art, maybe even gripping-beast decoration as on the Oseberg ship (Helmbrecht 2005a, cat. no 80–82). These magnificent vessels were used for the negotiation of social status through gift-giving: Thorolf gives his large ship to the king's son, hoping to improve his relationship with the king himself (Helmbrecht 2011, p. 339). Furthermore, if the objects also had an apotropaic function, as implied by Roy (2009a, p. 829, without reference to Hedenstierna-Jonson 2006), the pictorial message would have been directed to non-human powers. And we cannot assume that these entities were believed to have the same limited visual powers as humans.

When it comes to the gripping beasts' spatial distribution, Roy attempts to prove a connection between the motif and pre-Christian beliefs. According to her, the motif avoids Christian regions. This might be questioned from at least two perspectives. Firstly, gripping-beast metalwork was produced up to the year 1000. Thus the motif coincides with a long infiltration phase which culminated in the general acceptance of Christianity as a state religion all over Scandinavia. Secondly, we actually do find the motif outside Scandinavia in Christian contexts, for example on the Lindau gospel cover (Helmbrecht 2005b). It has even been argued on such a basis that the gripping beast has a Continental-Christian origin and arrived in Scandinavia with early missionaries (Wamers 1999; cf. Helmbrecht 2005a, pp. 281–283).

After placing all objects with gripping beasts in a religious discourse, Roy searches Norse literature for suitable analogies. Her re-definition of the motif (with the chest, mouth and self-strangulation as the most prominent features) leads her to associate it with the concept of *anda* and thus to some well-known liminal entities – such as the Old Norse *fylgia*. Roy characterizes the gripping beast as a familiar entity, yet not of this world: “... floating, self-strangulating, and possessing a form that no scholar has been able to convincingly label as a specific species” (2009a, p. 828). Though we agree on the species issue, a reference to Heiko Steuer's 1994 paper where he suggested that the motif represents a cat would have been appropriate (cf. Wamers 1999, p. 195 f; Helmbrecht 2005a, p. 282). Although she stresses that her findings do not support any specific identification of the gripping beast, Roy points to Old Norse protective spirits as the most likely candidates.

Scholarly Shortcomings

Roy has published her paper as a nine page article, including references and quotations, which might induce many readers to expect a solid scientific work. However, when scrutinising Roy's paper, one finds discrepancies between her presentation and the cited literature. And although many previous works contain arguments similar to Roy's, she repeatedly fails to offer references.

Co-author Domeij Lundborg is portrayed as connecting animal art to the cult of Óðinn (Roy 2009a, p. 825), when she has in fact argued against naïve associations with the Norse pantheon (Domeij 2004, pp. 147, 153; Domeij Lundborg 2006, p. 43).

Co-author Michaela Helmbrecht's paper (2005a) on the Early Gripping Beast style is misquoted. In fact, one has to wonder whether Roy has read the paper itself in German, or just the English summary. She actually misses a fact alluded to already in the paper's title, viz that it deals only with the motif's earliest phase, not with all gripping beasts. Roy also claims that Helmbrecht found no traits that allow a subdivision of the Early Gripping Beast style. But the paper in fact identifies five stylistic sub-groups with chronological and spatial relevance. These groups are also found to correlate with the object categories bearing the pictures. Thus, in Helmbrecht's view, gripping beasts on jewellery are different from those on weaponry. In other words, the object bearing a picture had considerable influence on choices regarding the design of the animal art. Roy's criticism culminates with an assessment of Helmbrecht's study as superficial and limited. Co-authors Domeij Lundborg and Michael Neiß are also criticised along the same lines. Some more thorough reading would however have shown that their work goes back to extensive pre-studies, fully accessible to scholars thanks to the openness principle mandatory at Swedish universities (the *offentlighetsprincip*; thus Neiß 2007 refers back to Neiß 2000; 2002; 2003).

Readers versed in animal art may also raise an eyebrow when Roy presents herself (2009a, p. 825) as original when she questions the abuse of the gripping-beast motif as a style indicator. This point has already been made repeatedly by others (e.g. Neiß 2007, s. 84 f w. refs). Similarly Roy stresses that scholars "continue to repeat the interpretation of gripping beasts as 'contrasts' to their ribbon-shaped predecessors" (Roy 2009a, p. 828; cf. Neiß 2004, p. 19; 2007). Using only older references, she fails to recognise that Domeij Lundborg (2006, p. 42) has suggested that "the 'gripping animal style' could be understood as merely a variant of other, bound, animal ornamentation".

The fine line to plagiarism is finally crossed when Roy claims to *introduce* an innovative interpretation of the gripping beast as a kind of *fylgia*. Study of Roy's own bibliography will show that Neiß (2007) has published a similar conclusion, albeit arrived at on other grounds. Thus, he suggested that the gripping beast represents Óðinn's *fylgia*. But Roy (2009a, p. 824) conveniently abbreviates Neiß's discussion to "a shamanic vessel for Odin's soul". In the same paper, Neiß also suggested that the gripping beast's unlikely morphology, featuring traits from different species was meant to indicate a mythological entity (Neiß 2007, p. 87). Roy copies this idea as well, only replacing the word "mythological" with "liminal", which means about the same. To mention another scholar, Anna Hed Jakobsson (2003, pp. 125–142) has suggested that all animal art was an expression of liminality.

Conclusion and Future Perspectives

We have responded to Carrie Roy's criticism and pointed out some weaknesses in her conference paper. The matter appeared especially urgent because her contribution contains errors of fact, leaps of thought and misquotations. But be that as it may; we wish to stress the importance of open and pluralistic dialogue. Iron Age art must remain an interdisciplinary field that offers room for different voices. As for the animal art, we currently see three areas of great research potential: 1. the role of the individual craftsman in design development (cf. Neiß 2006; 2009b; 2011), 2. the context-dependency of pictorial interpretations, and 3. the relationship between animal art and religion. But to participate in the discussion, a scholar needs to play by the rules. We should all aspire to updated theory, stringent methodology and solid academic craftsmanship. Sadly, these are three requirements that Roy's recent work does not live up to.

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Åländska kyrkor och lokalnationalism

År 1990 påbörjades projektet *Ålands Kyrkor*, vars ändamål var att publicera en volym om varje åländsk sockenkyrka och dess eventuella kapellkyrka. Skriftserien skulle fungera parallellt med *Suomen Kirkot–Finlands Kyrkor* (SK–FK), som hade utkommit sedan 1959 men sedan avslutades på 1990-talet. Förslaget, som hade framförts av Åsa Ringbom vid Åbo Akademis konstvetenskapliga institution, fick ett positivt mottagande.

Ringbom presenterade projektets program på svenska i serien *Historiallinen Arkisto* (Historiskt Arkiv) 1991. Tanken var att alla Ålands kyrkor skulle publiceras i åtta volymer fram till 1997

och att dessa skulle följas av en sammanfattande nionde volym, där väsentliga uppgifter, iakttagelser och olika forskares tolkningar av materialet skulle presenteras – en helhetssyn baserad på de publicerade verken. Denna optimism var inte befogad, vilket bland annat Tove Riska med mer än 30 års erfarenhet inom SK–FK-verksamheten kunde konstatera. Det tar tid att förbereda en bok om en kyrka vare sig denna är medeltida eller från senare tid. Så blev det också med Ålands Kyrkor: nu har det gått över 20 år sedan starten och endast fem av de 17 kyrkorna har publicerats (*Ålands Kyrkor* I–III, 1995, 2000 och 2005).