Viking art, Snorri Sturluson and some recent metal detector finds

By Peter Pentz


This paper seeks to contribute to a recent debate on the use of private metal detecting and its value within archaeology. Specifically it explores – by presenting some recently found Viking Period artefacts from Denmark – how private metal detecting can contribute to our understanding of Viking minds. By bringing together the myths as related by Snorri Sturluson in the early 13th century with the artefacts, I argue that thanks to private metal detecting through the last decades, our ability to recognise Viking art as narrative art has improved substantially.

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Over 60 years ago, Thorkild Ramskou (1953) described Viking art as almost exclusively decorative, only functioning as a covering for plain surfaces. In the rare cases where it was representative, quality was poor. Viking artists, he stated, preferred to portray scenes from myths of the gods and heroic legends. Such scenes functioned as mnemonics; for the viewer they would recall well-known myths and tales. Despite this, Ramskou attempted to trace and identify elements from one of the more well-known cycles of Viking belief, the *ragnarökk*, the Twilight of the gods and the end of the world.

Today it is acknowledged that the motifs on a wide variety of highly decorated precious objects from the Late Iron Age – bracteates, relief brooches etc. – have been selected with a great deal of care. But tracing Norse mythology in Viking art is still a challenge.

Our understanding of for instance the events of Ragnarökkr owes much to Snorri Sturluson, who in the 13th century transmitted his knowledge of old Norse myth, preserved through generations of oral tradition, into writing. One of the main problems in understanding Viking art is the scarcity of reference materials. We largely know Norse mythology and its narratives through Medieval Christian authors, in particular Snorri. Hence, the myths have come down to us biased, reinterpreted and even now and then propagandised. Furthermore, what survived is only a selection. Much is unknown to us today; many tales and myths have been lost. An example of such a lost myth is probably that of the “meeting of the two valkyries,” a scene depicted on several small charms, pendants or fittings (fig. 1), and now found in increasing numbers thanks to amateur metal detectorists. We have no reference in any known myth to such a meeting, and whether the two female figures actually are representations of valkyries, or if they rather depict *diser, norns*, shield maidsens or other beings is not clear at all (Price 2002; Pentz 2017a, p. 24).

The saddle cloth or caparison suspended under the horse is almost always divided into nine rectangles. That this fabric has a special meaning and symbolism is reinforced by some other detector finds, small pendants depicting this deco-
Fig. 1. The meeting of two valkyries: a scene from a probable myth not recorded by Snorri, on a fitting found at Sønder Tranders near Ålborg in 2014. This is one of many finds with the same scene found by detectorists. All known examples are from South Scandinavia and England. It is uncertain whether this distribution pattern reflects Viking Period reality or modern differences in metal detector legislation. Inv. no. C42888. Photo: Roberto Fortuna, National Museum of Denmark (NMD).

Fig. 2. Amulet with nine rectilinear shapes. A number of such amulets have been found by metal detecting within the last years. This one was found in 2011 near Havsmarken, Ærø. Inv. no. C39155. Photo: Søren Greve, NMD.

rated cloth on its own (fig. 2). While the number nine appears frequently in Norse mythology (Price 2013; Holst et al. 2017, p. 53; Pentz 2017a), the connection to the two valkyries remains obscure. One suggestion, however, is that the cloth might represent the textile woven from the causalities of war known from Darrað’s song, Dárðarljóð, also called The Valkyrie’s Song, from the Njál’s Saga. This cloth, incorporating skulls and men’s intestines, was woven by twelve women on a loom built of weapons, prophesying a bloody battle in Ireland, possibly the Battle of Clontarf in 1014 (Pentz 2017a). The riding valkyrie with her sword drawn and the cloth without saddle (?) might, then, correspond to the last words of the poem: “start we swiftly with steeds unsaddled—hence to battle with brandished swords!” For the weaving of destiny in Norse myth, see Bek-Pedersen 2011. For recent discussions of the poem and its relation to Clontarf, see Quinn 2017.

The relationship between Norse mythology and archaeology and iconography has been intensely explored by Anders Andrén in his 2014 book Tracing Old Norse Mythology (which is a fitting follow-up to his earlier 1997 book). Andrén argues convincingly that Old Norse beliefs should be studied in a dialogue between archaeology and the narrative tradition of the sagas.

Sadly, the quest to find precise archaeologically contextualised evidence linked to the colourful tales of e.g. Snorri, has been more or less unrewarding. There are, though, a few notable exceptions, such as Michaela Helmbrecht’s 2012 identification of a gilded bronze fitting from Uppåkra as illustrating the Völundarkviða, showing Wayland the smith ascending eagle-like after his gruesome murder of the young princes and the rape of their sister. Studies in Viking art in a wider context, though, linking it to broader social and conceptual dimensions, have proven much more successful (e.g. Hedeager 1997; Domeij 2006; 2009; Helmbrecht 2011; Neiss 2004).

While the quantity of written sources must be regarded as fixed, the archaeological material seems to be an inexhaustible source. Thus, archaeology is our best opportunity to study the myths of pre-Christian Scandinavia. As John Hines puts it,
Archaeology … is the sole basis for writing prehistory, and is thus the best point of reference for locating the earliest detectable forms of these myths within a concrete culture-historical framework (2000, p. 166).

…archaeology is not only an accessible and a substantial source, but also an essential basis for understanding what both the factual history and the myths of the Viking Period and the Middle Ages meant in practice.

(p. 174)

Most new finds of Viking art acquired by the National Museum of Denmark originates from non-professional metal detecting. Opinions, regulations and legislation on the use of metal detectors vary between the Scandinavian countries, with Finland and Denmark having the most liberal approaches (Rundkvist 2008; Wessman et al. 2016). While the professional view in Denmark is now at the point where most archaeologists recognise the potential of amateur metal detecting as a valuable contribution to archaeological research, the case appears more complex in Norway, Iceland and Sweden. There some archaeologists still seem to consider almost all non-professional metal detecting with scepticism (Rundkvist 2008; Henriksen 2011; Dobat & Jensen 2016). Here I aim to show how archaeological research has benefited from private metal detecting, and more specifically, how Viking age finds found by detectorists can enlighten and contribute to our understanding of Old Norse thinking and myth relating to impairment and disability.

Sif’s hair… or Freyja’s?

In Snorri’s Skáldskaparmál he tells the tale of the theft of Þórr’s wife Sif’s beautiful hair. Loki once cut all her hair off. The furious husband threatened kill Loki, but Loki managed to avoid this destiny. He promised to have the dwarves make Sif’s hair of pure gold, which would grow like regular hair. Loki persuaded the dwarf Sindr to make the golden hair, and it grew on Sif’s head. Despite the destructive nature of this action, orchestrated by the trickster Loki, the theft ultimately led to the making of the most treasured possessions and weapons of the gods in Ásgarðr (Skáldskaparmál, ch. 35). In addition to the replacement hair, made of pure gold, the dwarf master smiths also crafted the spear Gungnir for Öðinn and the ship Skíðblaðnir for Frey (fig. 3).

As Elisabeth Arwill-Nordbladh has shown (2016), the theft of Sif’s hair was much more than a harmless joke. In Viking society hair was a significant and highly esteemed part of the body, a sign of social status. Stealing Sif’s hair was not only damage to her body, it also questioned and challenged her status. It was an offence, and by gaining access her hair, it was implied that Loki gained access to her body as well. Such an implication corresponds well to the contents of Loka-senna, in which Loki accuses the gods of immorality and sexual misconduct.

Among the many detector finds are a few, apparently female, figurines are seen en face tearing their braided hair (fig. 4). The most expressive of them is a 4.6 cm tall gilded silver figure (Holst et al. 2017, pp. 62, 160 f) found at Tisso on north-western Zealand. This particular example has a cat-like face. These figurines are usually interpreted as Freyja, goddess of love and war. The curious gesture, the woman tearing out her...

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Fig. 4. Woman tearing out her hair, often identified as Freya. Found at Tisso on north-west Zealand, but in the 1990s. Inv. no. C34248/FG3589. Photo: Roberto Fortuna & Kira Ursem, NMD.

Fig. 5. Privately owned figurine, perhaps depicting Freya and her cats? Provenience and authenticity unknown. Photo: Timeline Auctions. Jfr. fig. 4 i Roger Wikell et al:s artikel, s. 13 i detta häfte.

own hair, is similar to the posture of the love goddess Venus in some Roman representations (Holst et al. 2017, 62 f).

In Snorri’s Skáldskaparmál, one of the ken-nings for Freyja is “possessor of tomcats” (Edda 2012, p. 148 f). Unlike all other animals in the service of the gods, the two cats have no names (Price 2002, p. 56). In Snorri’s Gylfaginning, the cat-drawn carriage of Freya is mentioned twice (Edda 2012, pp. 42 f, 76 f). It is, however, not obvious why Freya herself should develop a cat-like face, just because of her ownership of male cats and her cat-drawn carriage. Other gods had no such animal-like appearance – Óðinn is never depicted as a horse, Freyr as a boar, Þórr as a goat, and so on.

It could be argued that the figurines’ cat-like countenance should be understood as a reference to Freya’s magical skills, since the cat seems to play a magical role in sagas and mythology. It is, however, a somewhat far-fetched argument. In a wider sense, gods and humans were capable of shape-shifting, and depictions of hybrids, animal-human/animal-God, are seen in Late Iron Age art, often interpreted as berserkers. For an interpretation of the figures as humans in shamanistic transformation, see Kastholm 2014.

When interpreting the identity of the Tisso figurine, a gilded silver fitting or pendant showing an almost three-dimensional seated figure, apparently female, must be taken into consideration (fig. 5). This remarkable piece was sold at auction in London in February 2017. Like the Tisso figurine, she also tears at her hair. A shawl or a cape is shown as two crossed ribbons on her chest, but where the Tisso woman wears a floor-length robe, this figurine clearly wears trousers. Women wearing trousers are mentioned in the Icelandic sagas, though with some disapproval. As seen on the valkyrie figurines, women wore trousers for practical reasons, such as when riding. The most extraordinary features of the Lon-
don fitting or pendant are the two cats with curling tails flanking the woman.

While there is no reason to suspect that the item was illegally acquired, information on its provenience is inadequate. Provenience (unlike provenance) indicates a thorough history of an artefact back to its find-spot. However, most antiques market professionals provide only an incomplete history, and even when they do, there are few possibilities of verification. After sale, the artefacts disappear from view and further investigation is usually impossible. In the case of the Freya amulet, information on its origins was limited to a short catalogue description: “Property of a German gentleman; acquired on the European art market in the 1990s.” Such scanty data leave room for much speculation – cf. Gustafsson 2017a; 2017b.

In the debate on the use of metal detectors by non-professionals, this particular artefact can be used as an argument both for and against. It could well be a detector find, and those who favour a restrictive approach would claim that the appearance of such an important object on the market is the consequence of too liberal a legislation. Those preferring a moderate and controlled approach would claim that this could be a find from areas in which metal detecting is banned. Hence, this find would have to live a hidden life in disguise from the public eye, and the finder wouldn’t present it to a museum or another authority. If the finder does not want to keep his finds, he will sell them, but then accompanied by inadequate or even false provenience information.

Whatever the case is with the Freya amulet, any discussion is weakened by the inadequate information. With a full record this piece would have been crucial when interpreting the hair-tearing woman motif, but as it is, the explanatory power of the piece is weakened. As it stands, the identification of the figure as Sif with her golden hair is as probable as Freya.

Ole Thirup Kastholm (2014) has suggested that the hair tearing figurine should not necessarily be interpreted as a goddess, but rather as a woman performing shamanism. A number of equal-armed brooches also show a person tearing out or pulling her hair, e.g. from Birka (Arbman 1940, Taf. 81). On some of these, the person is bearded (Helmbrecht 2013, p. 20 ff).

A main point of Snorri’s narrative is that Sif lost her hair, but in the end the result turned out to be an improvement. The golden hair made by the dwarves was ranked amongst the finest of the gods’ treasures, so although Loki inflicted harm on her, it ended up as an asset for her and for the gods.

**The hammer Mjölnir**

Loki, not being satisfied with this outcome of his crime, wagered his own head in a bet with the dwarf Brokkr, on whether Brokkr’s brother Eitri was capable of crafting three more equally fine treasures. Despite more tricky interference by Loki, Eitri actually succeeded in producing three such treasures: the ring Draupnir, the boar Gullinbursti, and the ultimate lethal weapon Mjölnir, the hammer. Despite its defective short handle, caused by Loki’s teasing of Eitri during his work, the gods judged the hammer as “the foremost of all the treasures,” and consequently the dwarf had won the wager against Loki.

The hammer, controlled and used by the gods’ most famous elite soldier, Þórr, was the most effective tool of violence in the hands of the gods in their perpetual fight to maintain a balanced cosmos. Thanks to the hammer and its owner, the end of the world was delayed.

Being the foremost treasure of the gods, the hammer is, not very surprisingly, the most common Viking Age amuletic pendant. The inscription on a runic amulet from Kvinneby on Öland indicates its protective nature: “…may Þórr guard him with the hammer…” (The text is interpreted differently by runologists, but all seem to agree on these specific words; Louis-Jensen 2005.) Many hammer pendants are little simple T-shaped charms, made of metal or other materials, such as amber. It has been argued that these hammers should rather be considered as charms of no further significance than other charms modelled in the shape of implements, such as sticks, strike-a-lights, etc. (Sonne 2013). This may theoretically be true for many of the small and simple iron hammers, often long-handled and suspended together with other amulets from a ring. However, it is difficult to perceive the more elaborated and
Fig. 6. Hammer pendant, found in 2014 near Købelev on Lolland. A runic inscription reads: hamr x is – “This is the hammer”. Inv. no. C40632. Photo: Arnold Mikkelsen, NMD.

richly decorated hammer pendants made of silver, amber or even gold as anonymous hammers.

With their stunted and “mutilated” shafts, they make clear reference to the narrative in Snorri’s Skaldskaparmál – En þat var lýi á, ar forskfítt var heldr skammt (Codex Regius), En litit var forskeptit (Codex Upsaliensis). In the Gesta Danorum (book 3, II, 66), Saxo offers another explanation for the hammer’s short handle. In a fight between gods and men, the hero Høtherus chopped off the end of the hammer’s (literally the “club’s”) handle: … proinde victoria ad superos concessit, ni Høtherus, interclinata suorum acie, celerius advolans clavam præciso manubrio inutilem reddidisset.

One such short-handled hammer pendant was found by a detectorist in 2014 at Købelev on the island of Lolland, south of Zealand (fig. 6). In itself, the hammer amulet is rather simple: a silver-plated iron hammer with only a few decorative lines in the plating. But, although more lavishly decorated hammer pendants of this kind are known, this one is distinguished by a runic inscription saying **hamr x is** meaning “this is the hammer” (Rasmussen et al. 2014).

When the hammer received the name Mjöll-
heads clearly lack an eye, or one of the eyes has secondarily been recarved as missing. Masks and heads are numerous throughout the Iron Age, and one-eyed or “eye-scratched” heads occur centuries before the Viking Period (Price & Mortimer 2014, p. 531).

A very convincing but unfortunately rather fragmentary mask with such a scratched and blinded eye was found at Gammeltoft in Djursland (fig. 7). The left eye of the mask or helmeted head is clearly deficient. Another, much better preserved example, also found by a detectorist, is an oblong representation of a warrior found near Tissø on Zealand (fig. 8; Holst et al. 2017, p. 58). Made of silver with traces of gilding, the mask shows an elongated face, bearded and with open mouth. The figure has large round eyes, the right-hand one without any pupil (fig. 9). Holst et al. (2017) suggest that the open mouth refers to poetic and mantic speech. This open mouth seems to be more or less ubiquitous on the mask pendants.

The question is whether the mutilated or missing eye means that these heads depict Óðinn. Some have clearly been reworked in order to
blind one of the eyes, but this does not mean that the mask was produced as an Ódinn figure – actually rather the opposite, since the injury was added secondarily. The mixing in Germanic leadership of human and divine, rulers identifying themselves as incarnations of the gods, leave room for a broader perspective (Price & Mortimer 2014). Rather than directly referring to Ódinn, these figures, injured by “self-inflicted” blinding of one eye, might illustrate the willingness of the owner or bearer of the blinded mask to accept divine rights of power – and above all, to sacrifice a part of themselves. Leszek Gardela (2014, pp. 81–83) has identified a one-eyed female head from the Viking trading place of Truso, Poland, as an example of the mutilation of an eye. Whether this head is related to Scandinavian one-eyed symbolism or not is unclear. But it is worth considering the changeable gender identity of Ódinn (cf. the discussion of the figure on the Lejre throne, summarized in Mitchell, forthcoming).

One common mask type found in large numbers by metal detectorists is the so-called “turn-around” mask (Hardt & Michaelsen 1991). These masks owe their name to the intriguing trick that if the head or mask is turned 180 degrees, another face appears, relatively clearly. It is unknown, however, at which angle these masks were originally intended to be viewed, or if this notion is a modern construct. Generally, the masks are pendants, but not always.

One has attracted particular attention. A fragment of a mask or head was found by a detectorist in 2016 at Øster Lindet in south-west Jutland (fig. 10; Grundvad 2017). The central part of the pendant exhibits the usual circular eyes, but the area around the mouth shows more noteworthy features. Three distinct lines cross the lips, bringing to mind a soapstone hearth-stone from Snaptun in east Jutland, which depicts a mask with identical lines across the lips (Madsen 1990). The Øster Lindet and Snaptun masks have been interpreted as portrayals of Loki with his sewnup lips (Madsen 1990; Grundvad 2017). Snorri’s myth about Sif’s hair, and the wager between Loki and the dwarves that put Loki’s head at stake, is followed by the account of the sewing-up of Loki’s lips. Since the dwarves had won the wager by producing further treasures, they claimed Loki’s head. However, although Loki admitted that his head...
had been at stake and now belonged to Brokkr, he claimed that his neck was his own and thus not included in the wager. And his head could not be removed without violating his neck. The gods broke their promise, as usual, and Loki saved his head. However, they allowed Brokkr to seal Loki’s foul mouth.

That it was specifically Loki’s mouth that the gods allowed to be mutilated is hardly a coincidence. Mouth, tongue and words were Loki’s venomous weapons. With them he caused a lot of trouble among the gods and triggered the decisive disaster, the death of Baldr. By sewing up his mouth, Brokkr intended to silence Loki.

Whether the turnaround masks really are portraits of Loki or of Óðinn is unclear. Loki is definitely the prankster among the gods, and the turnaround masks is to some extent comparable to Medieval manuscript drôleries. However, the sewn-up mouth is a little awkward when the mask is seen upside down (fig. 11). Another possibility is that this mask type is a stricter and more regular version of the interlaced mask, known e.g. from rune stones and casket fittings. This type is usually interpreted as apotropaic, intended to scare people off from removing or destroying the rune stones or to discourage theft from the caskets. In that sense, the type can be said to represent a part of Óðinn’s personality, linked to one of his most powerful accomplishments, seiðr magic, which allows him to bring about people’s death and misfortune (Pentz 2017b). A very fine example of a mask of this type was found in 2016 at Vejlby in Djursland, eastern Jutland (fig. 12).

Another possible identification when attempting to interpret the heads or masks is that they represent Mímir’s head. Neil Price (2002, p. 158) has suggested that a man’s head pendant from Aska in Östergötland, found in a woman’s grave, could represent Mímir. In the Ægishjálmur, Snorri re-

Fig. 11. Mask with lips marked by vertical lines, found in 2011 near Ulstrup in Eastern Jutland. Such masks are frequently found by detectorists, and they may have been intended as turn-around figures. Inv. no. C38635. Photo: Søren Greve, NMD.

Fig. 12. Mask fitting for a casket, found in 2016 near Vejlby on Djursland. Photo: Roberto Fortuna, NMD.
counts how the gods sent Mímir as a hostage to the Vanir, with whom they were at war. But the Vanir beheaded Mímir and returned the head to Ásgarðr. Óðinn then preserved Mímir’s head with herbs and spells, turning it into a kind of oracle, divulging information from other worlds.

There is no indication in the Eddas that the sewing-up of Loki’s mouth had any consequences. Throughout the myths, he constantly causes unease and quarrels through his malicious tongue and mouth, by lies and slanders. Likewise, after Óðinn lost his eye he gained a sight far beyond usual physical capability, he also gained intuition and knowledge beyond the ordinary. And he could see all over the world from his throne Hliðskjálf, with the help of his ravens (Mitchell forthcoming). A small silver figurine, found in 2009 by a detectorist at Gammel Lejre on Zealand, might be an illustration of this. For Mímir, the loss of his whole body was substituted by wisdom and spiritual insight, and the ability to travel between the worlds. The pairing of disability and enhanced ability is obvious in both instances.

In general, it is difficult to be certain about the precise identities of the heads and masks found. Blinded or scratched eyes, sewn or scarred lips may indicate something, but perhaps something less clear-cut than individual named divinities. Rather than arguing that the masks and heads are depictions of the gods, we may suggest that they operated as metonyms for divine powers, skills and properties.

The Hand of Týr
One of the most captivating detector find with a figural representation from Norse mythology is the discovery of a small bronze fitting showing a dog or a wolf with what appears to be a hand or a glove in its mouth (fig. 13). This remarkable piece was found in 2016 on west Zealand at a site which has produced many artefacts from the Viking Period.

The fitting is cast in silver, but appears to have been gilded all over. The absence of gilding in the empty and hollow eye sockets, contrary to the interior of the beast’s ears, indicates that there was inlay here, possibly niello, which has been lost. The animal has a long, thin neck, the skin or fur patterned with close parallel lines. It has small plump ears, and behind them is a triangular field with niello insertions, ending in a small knot. The snout is long and slender, with a marked...
nasal bridge and forward-facing nostrils. The mouth is closed, but with everted and suspended lips around a human hand. Three fingers are marked on one side of the wolf’s jaws, while there are four on the other. There is a deep irregular depression where the neck meets the head. The animal’s neck ends at a short socket with irregular fractures, suggesting that the fitting was originally a pin terminal.

This figure immediately recalls the myth of the binding of the wolf in Snorri’s Gylfaginning. This myth relates the story about Loki’s three children, Jǫrmungandr, that is the Miðgarðr serpent, Hel and Fenrir. Óðinn threw Jǫrmungandr into the sea, and then threw Hel into Niflheimr and gave her authority over the nine worlds. However, the gods had severe forebodings concerning the third of the children, the wolf, son of Loki and the giantess Angrboða.

The gods raised the wolf in Ásgarðr, but only Týr had the courage to approach and feed him. Fenrir grew rapidly, and since prophecies foretold that he was destined to cause them harm, the gods made first the chain Lǿdingr for the beast and then the chain Drómi, both of which Fenrir broke.

As in the case of Mjöllnir and Sif’s hair, the gods now had to turn to the dwarves, who made a magical restraint for them named Gleipnir. Magnus Källström (2016, p. 270) has suggested that the beasts seen on some rune stones are depictions of Fenrir, and that on the Vang stone in Oppland (early 11th c.) he is shown with Gleipnir. This restraint was soft and smooth but stronger than an iron chain. Surely, said the gods to Fenrir, he could snap so slight a silk ribbon since he had broken great iron chain before. But if the wolf failed to break the restraint, the gods promised to free him. Fenrir agreed but demanded that one of the gods place a hand in his mouth. Only Týr had the necessary courage. Fenrir, of course, failed to free himself and consequently Týr lost his hand.

A Viking Period date for the Fenrir fitting can easily be determined by stylistic/typological comparison. The wolf shares many traits with the wooden animal heads from Oseberg, such as the snout and the huge round eyes. A 9th century date seems likely, preceding and following centuries not being entirely excluded.

Týr is usually believed to have lost importance in the Viking Period (Andrén 2014). He is rarely mentioned in the Poetic Edda, and his contributions to the word-feud Lokasenna, in which several of the gods appear, are modest. His only appearance in the star role is in the case of the binding of Fenrir. Still, Snorri calls him one of the most important gods.

Note though that the fitting is not a depiction of Týr himself, but of the monstrous creature Fenrir. This is unlike how the binding of the wolf was depicted centuries before on a bracteate from Trollhättan (Hedeager 1997; Hauck 2001; Axboe 2005; Axboe & Källström 2013). Here Týr is seen in his entirety, occupying the bracteate at almost full height, in contrast to the much smaller wolf. Likewise, if the identification of Týr on the pre-Viking picture stone from Hangvar Asters I, Gotland is correct (Ney 2017, p. 242), the god is also seen in full figure here. The focus of the motif on the fitting is not Týr himself, but his hand between the wolf’s jaws. The god is also depicted on the tapestries from Överhogdal in Härjedalen, Sweden (Ney 2017, p. 193). These have radiocarbon dates in the Late Viking or Early Medieval Period (Nockert & Possnert 2002).

Týr’s chief characteristic is his courage. “There is a saying that a man is týr-valiant who surpasses others,” records Snorri (Edda, p. 45). Actually, etymologically the word týr/týr means either “glory, fame” or “god”. Courage qualified a man for an extended life in the Hall of Fame, Valhöll. The importance of fame and courage and their relationship to death is described in the famous stanza 77 from Hávamál:

Cattle die, kinsmen die,
The self must also die;
I know one thing which never dies,
The reputation of each dead man.

(Hávamál, 1996, p. 24)

The focal point of these poetic lines is the commemoration of the dead. To die well for a warrior in Norse literature meant to leave as one’s legacy a heroic story. The word translated as “reputation” in the poem is orðstírr, incorporating the...
words *ord* and *þýr* literally meaning "word-glory", i.e. fame. *Þýr* is of course echoed in the name of the war god Týr (Taylor 2011, p. 125).

Nothing suggests that Týr’s loss had any consequences for his reputation as a warrior. In Lokasenna, Loki taunts him by saying that Týr could never bring peace between men because his right hand is missing. What exactly is meant by that is debated, but probably Loki hints at the fact that Týr is lacking the hand which was used when taking an oath. The right hand is also linked a demonstration of friendship, literally to shake hands (cf. Sigurðsson 2007, pp. 154, 156 f).

Another probable terminal for a ring pin has been found by a detectorist at Hårby on Funen and depicts a female warrior, perhaps a valkyrie (fig. 14). Those who wore such pins may consciously have chosen precisely these figures, and this may have advertised an affiliation, such as suggested by Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson (2002; 2009) for a group of sword chapes. Both the valkyrie and the Fenrir/Týr figures certainly relate to warrior culture. In Snorri’s *Edda*, the poem *Sigrdrífumál* has an initiation-like ritual with an invocation apparently for initiating swords. In this spell, Týr’s name appears twice. Apart from emphasising his role as a warrior god, the ritual suggests that the sword was Týr’s weapon, thus linking him to the warrior elite.

Týr is described both as an *einhendr áss*, a one-handed god, and *viga guð*, battle god, in Snorri’s *Skáldskaparmál*. In the biography of a warrior, the physical consequences of battle and single combat – dismemberment – were acknowledged and remembered. It was a hallmark, a part of his *ór-stýr*, his “word-glory” – his memorial. In Early Medieval and Viking warfare, the extremities, in particular hands, feet and legs, were exposed to injury during combat. The sagas mention many individuals, including women (Eyler 2016, p. 152 offers a list), who lost extremities in combat, and were subsequently named – and thus remembered – for their impaired bodies. From the late Viking Period we know that such combat-inflicted physical losses were celebrated. In Canute the Great’s legislation, a section is devoted to such losses and the compensation which should be given (Bertelsen & Carpener 1960, p. 391). We may assume that this was an acknowledgement of the problems following upon such injuries, and that such losses were sustained to benefit the whole group. In this law, compensation for the loss of various body parts is calibrated; for instance, the thumb is held in high esteem, a testimony to this finger’s importance in Viking life and particularly in warfare. (Cnut’s legislation on bodily impairment was probably based on Anglo-Saxon and Frankish law; Bertelsen & Carpener 1960.)

As a god, Týr seems to have dwindled in importance through the Late Iron Age. But perhaps this one story about him, the loss of his hand, may have survived through the Viking Period and later. It may thus be that the hand in the mouth of the beast became a symbol of ultimate courage and sacrifice for the group.

The wolf lost its role as the most fearsome of
beasts in the Middle Ages. Biblical wolves are mainly juxtaposed with lambs, but although understood representatively, they never had a such a pronounced position as in Norse myth, and nor would they play any role on Judgment Day. A metal detector find from Vindeby on Lolland and a ringed pin found at Varde in Jutland (fig. 15) display a hand in the jaws of a dragon, the beast of the Bible – an echo of the Pre-Christian myth of Týr and his courage?

**Divine defective bodies**

In Snorri’s writings, the gods are imagined as having essentially human bodies. However, in contrast to humans and giants, the gods never die in the mythology. The notable exception is Baldr, whose role in the pantheon, apart from his tragic death and its implications, is not described in any detail.

Although the gods never die, their divine bodies do suffer injuries and defects. But their enemies, the giants, never derive any advantage from the injuries the gods suffer. They always recover or develop other qualities. In return for the surrender or sacrifice of a part of their bodies, the gods achieve enhanced abilities (Sayers 2016). The abovementioned examples are not the only ones. Heimdallr sacrifices his ear, or his hearing (or his horn?), at the foot of the World Tree (Voluspá 26; Andrén 2014, p. 30). After this loss, Heimdallr develops a new sense, so that he can hear the wool grow on the sheep and the grass grow in the fields (Wanner 2012).

Even Baldr’s slayer, Höðr, whose blindness should have been a severe disadvantage for a warrior, appears as an adequate or even able fighter. Actually, Höðr is the source word of four kennings for “warrior” (Liberman 2004). It might even be that his blindness is in some respect a positive trait, as good warriors can “transport themselves” during battle to become more efficient killers, acting in “blind fury” through “battle blindness” (Bragg 2004, p. 116 f).

These divine impairments are not uncommon. Sif loses her hair, Óðinn an eye, Týr a hand, Heimdallr (perhaps) an ear, and Mímir his entire body from the neck down. The stunted handle of Þórr’s hammer can possibly be conceived of as similar to the injuries suffered by the gods. Scholars have frequently observed that the injuries and losses suffered by the gods – or their dearest belongings, like Þórr’s ever-renewed goats – are defined as disabilities, rather the opposite. Of the thirteen male gods mentioned by Snorri, more than half have some kind of impairment.
From Ásgarðr to Miðgarðr

Life in Miðgarðr was a mirror of life in Ásgarðr, or rather, the design of Ásgarðr and its inhabitants was modelled on the earthly lives of (noble) humans. In Ásgarðr, each of the gods had halls, households and servants. They even had temples, although it is unclear which deities they worshipped. Sagas and poems mention many crippled and injured people. They are often recognisable thanks to a nickname relating to their deviant appearance, such as Þorgils skarði, Skeggi skammhöndung and Halldórr slakkafótr of the Sturlunga Saga. Their impairments – a cleft palate, a withered hand, and a limp – do not seem to have impeded their abilities or status as authoritative and prestigious chieftains and landowners. But the position of the deformed and disfigured in Norse society is to some extent ambiguous in the written sources. Mutilating an opponent, for example by cutting off a hand, buttock or foot in order to cause a permanent, visible injury, was a viable means of dishonouring them (Lawing 2013, p. 133).

In Grettir's saga, the Viking Onund is intentionally maimed in battle by Norwegian Vikings. In order to give him a visible memory of the fight, they cut off one of his legs. Thereafter he is called Onund Woodenleg, Önundur tréfótur. After first having been mocked by other Vikings, his reputation and skill as a brave man is enhanced by his injury, since only few two-legged men can stand up to him (Eyler 2016, p. 156 f; Bragg 2004, p. 244). The wooden leg becomes a sign of distinction, of Onund's abilities as a warrior.

Other deformities were congenital. In the oldest known Old Norse Christian law texts, especially the Norwegian ones (the Borgarþing, Gulaþing and Eiðsivaþing law codes), the problem of congenital deformations is dealt with quite precisely, in order to control the behaviour of society towards such deformations and allow for disability (Lawing 2013). The laws are generally quite generous here except in the severest cases that allowed for infanticide (child exposure, barnautiburð). Whether these regulations can be projected back into the Viking Period is a matter of discussion. However, in a warrior society like that of the Vikings, it would have been necessary to deal with both injuries inflicted in war and, in a wider perspective, disability in general.

Hávamál, in counselling on a proper conduct of life, states that disability should not hinder performance:

The lame man rides a horse,
The handless man drives a herd,
The deaf man fights and succeeds;

(Hávamál 1996, 22)

Just as people’s defects and disabilities could be congenital or acquired over a lifetime, weapons like Mjölnir and possibly also other objects could suffer similar fates. Swords, for instance, could have names and a biography, which had an impact on their functions. An old or “injured” sword could be as good as or even better than a new one. Consider for instance a sword mentioned in the Vatnsdæla saga (ch. 39), the blade of which suffered a cut, leaving a cavity so deep that a finger could be poked into it. It was later reforged and became “the best sword ever” (www.sagadb.org/vatnsdela_saga).

Conclusions
In the examples given above, metal detector finds have been the basis for a discussion of impairment. This is only one of many topics that could be discussed on the basis on the same material, combining Snorri's accounts with new-found artefacts. Another theme, for instance, could be the Viking concepts of allegiance, oath and sacrifice as negotiation. Heimdallr and Óðinn sacrifice parts of themselves in exchange for enhanced hearing and seeing, respectively. Týr sacrifices his hand in exchange for fame.

Even the making of the strong restraint, Gleipnir, is in itself a story of loss and acquisition or sacrifice and compensation. The losses are the six ingredients used by the dwarves in making Gleipnir: the noise a cat makes when it moves, the beard of a woman, the roots of a mountain, the sinews of a bear, the breath of a fish and the spittle of a bird. It is apparent from Snorri’s account that these elements existed before the episode (Mitchell 2000). In the Skáldskaparmál, the absence of the six elements is given as evidence for the truth of the Binding of Fenrir myth. And the gain is the restraint itself, which makes it possible to bind Fenrir and postpone Ragnarökkr. For the
warrior Týr, who loses a part of his body, the reward is a place in the Hall of Fame.

All of the myths involve oath breaking. In the case of Sif’s hair, the gods cheat Brokkr of his compensation, Loki’s head. In the binding of Fenrir, the wolf is the brave one, he who dares and takes risks. But the gods brake their oath, and Fenrir is not released (Enoch 2004). In general, it seems that the gods’ treachery does not diminish their power, rather the opposite. In both instances, solidarity within the group – the gods – is more important than the oaths to Fenrir and Brokkr.

Metal detecting obviously yields finds of metal, much of it jewelry and fittings. Common to these is that the items were meant for display, to signal something. Whatever the ideas behind the choice of motif for a piece of jewellery or a fitting, we can guess that the person who displayed the piece also displayed an affiliation to a group or at least some common concepts.

A quarter century ago John Lindow claimed that Mjöllnir was the only divine attribute to be found archaeologically:

It is a fact that the hammer was the only attribute of the Norse gods to be crafted by human beings. No golden hair of Sif was deposited in a hoard, no miniature Gungnir or Skíðblaðnir was worn by people and buried with them.

(Lindow 1994)

This statement is by no longer unchallenged, thanks to the large number of artefacts found by metal detecting. Miniature spearheads, ship-shaped brooches and female figurines tearing out their hair have all been found. The identification of these pieces as Gungnir, Skíðblaðnir and Sif is of course conjectural and perhaps even debatable, but still worth discussing. In the case of Fenrir and Týr’s hand, at least, the proof of identity should be clear. Whatever the case may be, metal detecting has provided us with new evidence and stimulated discussion, improving our access to Viking thought and beliefs.

Stressing social and regional differences in religious practices, the term “Norse paganism” as a unified thing has been challenged and questioned (Andrén et al. 2006; Nordberg 2012). However, in spite of all precautions that should be taken in handling the Icelandic and Early Medieval texts such as Snorri’s, these sources remain a fundamental basis for our understanding and interpretation of archaeological finds whether found in Iceland, Norway, Denmark or Sweden (Andrén 2006; 2014).

Metal detecting is closely linked to research at a variety of sites. Even though detector finds can be categorised as stray finds with GPS coordinates, they contribute substantially to our knowledge of the Viking mind. Most of the abovementioned examples have been found on sites which can, thanks to metal detecting, be identified as central places or markets – sites that would likely have been unknown today without metal detecting.

I started out from Ramskou’s opinion of Viking art being almost purely decorative. Today, and thanks largely to the numerous finds from metal detecting, we may claim the opposite. Maybe we cannot understand the context of the meeting of the two valkyries, but we can be sure that a tale or a myth about the depicted episode existed. Viking artists almost always intended their work to represent something specific.

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