

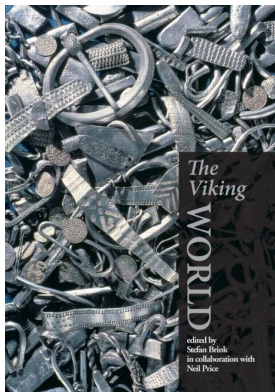
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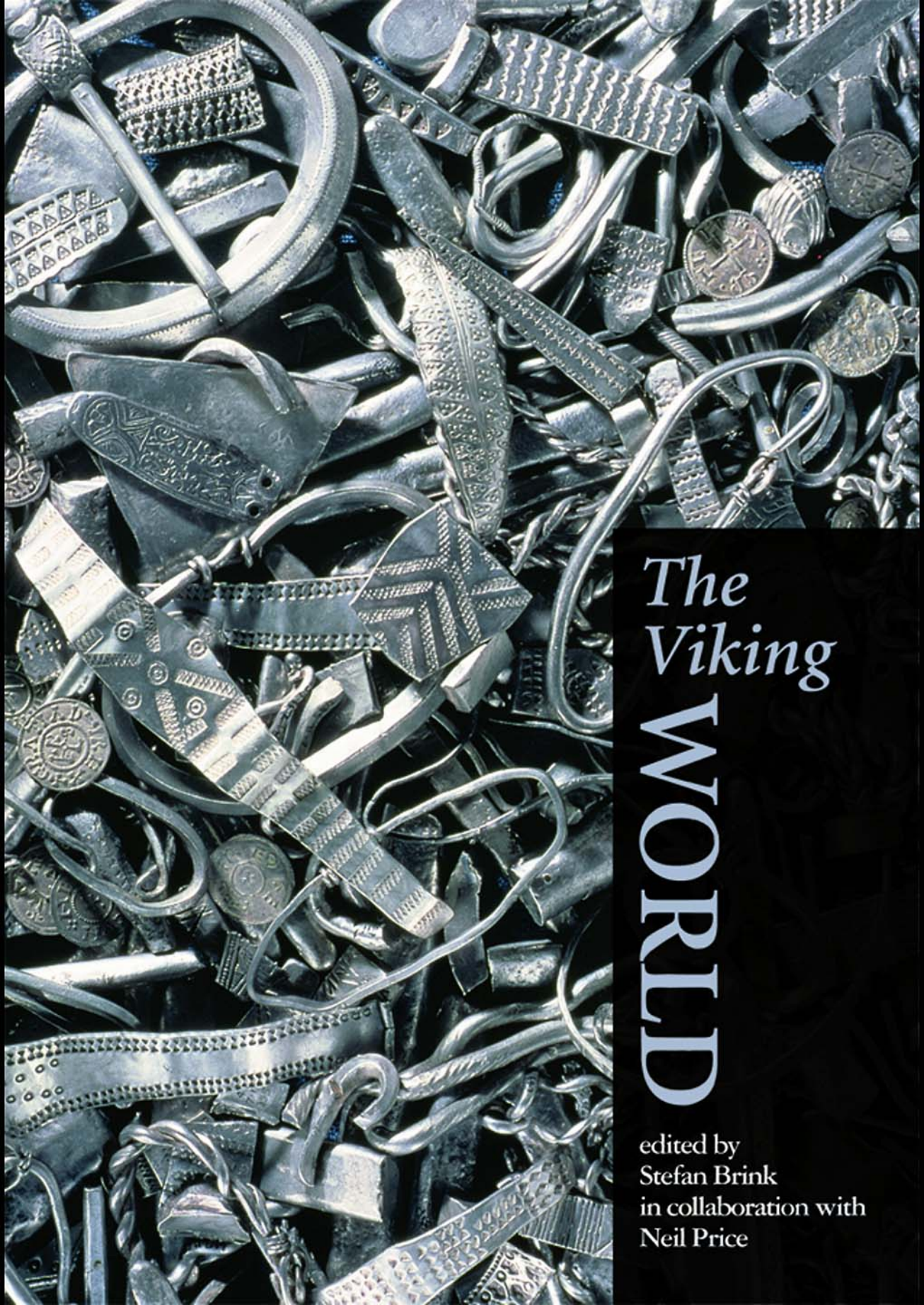
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*The  
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WORLD

edited by  
Stefan Brink  
in collaboration with  
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CHAPTER ONE

SCANDINAVIA BEFORE  
THE VIKING AGE

—♦—  
*Lotte Hedeager*

What is known as the Middle Ages in Scandinavia begins around AD 1000, half a millennium later than the rest of western and central Europe. Only from this date onwards did Scandinavia consist of unified kingdoms and Christianity was established as a serious force in pagan Scandinavia. It is consequently only from this date onwards that Scandinavia has its own written history. This does not, however, mean that the people of Scandinavia were without history, or without any knowledge of ancient events. Quite the opposite, in fact, although their historical tradition was oral, transmitted from generation to generation within the constraints of rulers and traditions of composition and performance.

The archaeological research tradition in the Scandinavian late Iron Age, that is, from the migration period onwards (i.e. from the fifth century), has since the 1990s been juxtaposed with the Old Norse sources from the twelfth to the fourteenth century. This is due to the new approach in archaeology, which focuses on cognitive structures, mentality, cosmology and systems of belief. However, the use of Old Norse sources as an explanatory framework for the late Iron Age causes obvious methodological problems and has been a matter of serious debate in the wake of this new research tradition. Although written down in a Christian context, and although the fact that they may exaggerate and fabricate at some points, these sources contain valuable information on the mentality and cognition of the pre-Christian past. The reason is that structures of collective representations in any society are highly stable and change very slowly. Using the terminology of Fernand Braudel and the Annales school this is 'la longue durée' – and following Pierre Bourdieu we are faced with the concept of 'habitus'. Both of them furnish archaeologists with a general theoretical framework of long-time perspective, enabling them to get beyond the archaeological and textual evidence.

Lacking a modern separation of economic, political and religious institutions, pre-Christian Scandinavia can so far be compared to traditional non-western, pre-industrial communities; in both cases the world-view of a given society tends to fuse these separate domains into a coherent whole. A number of new excavations have contributed to a keener interest in 'central places' and 'cult sites', while major new finds of manorial settlements, gold hoards etc. have encouraged interpretations using terms such as 'kings', 'aristocracy', and the like, providing a concrete counterpart to Old Norse

literature, new directions in research into the history of religion, and place-name studies. Among the most important sites in this respect are *Gudme/Lundeborg* on Fyn (Nielsen *et al.* 1994; Hedeager 2001), *Sorte Muld* on Bornholm (Watt 1999), *Uppåkra* in the province of Skåne (Larsson and Hårdh 1998; Hårdh 2003) and *Borg* in Lofoten (Munch *et al.* 2003).

A new, interdisciplinary research movement has developed around these issues where religious, judicial and political conditions are seen as closely interwoven and where an alternative understanding of the connection between political authority, myths and memory, cult activity, skilled craft production and exercise of power in the late Iron Age has emerged (Myhre 2003 and Hedeager 2005 as the latest outlines). The interdisciplinary approach has been developed through the five-year research project *Vägar till Midgård* at the University of Lund (Jennbert *et al.* 2002; Andrén *et al.* 2004; Berggren *et al.* 2004). A similar approach is to be found in some other research projects (Melheim *et al.* 2004, and to a certain degree in Jesch 2002). Earlier studies have been based primarily on the economic character, involving such aspects as agriculture and settlement, economy and society, trade and urbanisation. Combined with burial evidence these topics have usually been the starting point for models of the social and political organisation.

## MYTH, MEMORY AND ART

Although without a written history of its own, Scandinavia in the sixth and seventh centuries was nevertheless known to have held quite a special position in the minds of the migration-period Germanic peoples in Europe as the place from which many of them, or at least the royal families, claimed their origin (Hedeager 1997, 2000). This Scandinavian origin myth, repeated by several of the early medieval narrators and maintained by the Germanic peoples of early medieval Europe, was more than just a series of authors copying one another. Myths played a vital role in the creation of a political mentality among the new Germanic warlords and kings in Europe (Hedeager 1997, 1998, 2000; Geary 2003; Hill 2003). Naturally, the factual element within these early European migration myths is much disputed (see Hedeager 2000 and 2005 for references). What is crucial, however, is not to what extent these people once emigrated in small groups from Scandinavia, but that their identity was linked to Scandinavia and that their kings were divine because they descended from *Gautr* or *Óðinn/Wotan*, with this figure's clear association with the Germanic pagan religion and, maybe, the Scandinavian pantheon.

The much later Old English poem *Beowulf* may draw on traditions that have roots in the sixth and seventh centuries. Here there are possible ties between the ruling families of the *Wylfingas*, etymologically identical to the *Wuffingas*, the East Anglian royal family, and the *Wulfings* who were thought to live in what is now south-western Sweden and south-eastern Norway during the late fifth and sixth centuries. Furthermore, there are archaeological indications of kindred relations between the royal families of East Anglia and Scandinavia in the sixth and seventh centuries (Newton 1993: 117), not least the connection revealed between the Sutton Hoo ship burial and the ship burials from Vendel and Valsgårde in the mid-Swedish Mälars area (Bruce-Mitford 1979; Lamm and Nordström 1983).

From the sparse written but rich archaeological material it is evident that close

contacts existed between the noble families of southern Scandinavia and those of western Europe during these centuries. The Scandinavian origin myth among the Germanic royal families/peoples, expressed in contemporaneous written sources, is supported by the archaeological evidence, notably weapons, jewellery, and, not least, art and iconography (Hedeager 1998). From about the beginning of the fifth century up until the seventh, the Nordic figurative world was used as a symbolically significant style among the migrating Germanic peoples. It was imitated and elaborated, becoming an impressive elite art style (Salin 1904; Karlsson 1983; Haseloff 1981; Roth 1979; Speake 1980; Näsman 1984: map 10; Hines 1984; Lund Hansen 1992; Høilund Nielsen 1997), until the point when Catholic Christianity put down firm roots during the first half of the eighth century (Roth 1979: 86). In Scandinavia, on the other hand, where a pagan warrior elite persisted during the Viking Age, the Nordic animal style ceased to develop from around AD 1100.

It did not survive the meeting with a new belief system and the political and social implications that this entailed. This can of course be explained through the idea that the people – especially the elite – had acquired different tastes and therefore preferred a new style around 1200 under the influence of the Church. More convincingly, however, it can be argued that the lack of potential for survival and renewal of the animal style in a Christian context had to do with its anchoring in a quite different system of belief (Hedeager 2003). The obvious role of animal style as an inseparable part of the pre-Christian material culture indicates that the animals also may have had an indisputable significant position in the pre-Christian perception of the world (Kristoffersen 1995, 2000b; Hedeager 1997, 1998, 2003, 2004; Jakobsson 2003; Gaimster 1998; Andrén 2000; Glosecki 1989; Magnus 2001; Lindstrøm and Kristoffersen 2001).

The Nordic animal ornamentation does not only incorporate animals, it *is* animals, that is to say, it is entirely a paraphrasing of a many faceted complex of animal motifs which suggests that these styles, structurally speaking, incorporate an overriding abstract principle, reflecting social order and – perhaps subconsciously – also reflecting the physical order of the universe (Roe 1995: 58). As a recurrent theme in the Old Norse texts we find a dualist relationship between man and animal. It is expressed in the words *hugr*, *fylgja* and *hamr*. It consists of protective spirits which attach themselves to individuals, often at birth, and remain with them right through to death, when they transfer their powers to another member of the family. *Fylgja* often appears as an animal and is usually visible only at times of crisis, either in waking or in dreams. It is an externalised ‘soul’ but also an embodiment of personal luck and destiny, and the concept has much in common with the less attested *hamr* (Orchard 2002; Raudvere 2001: 102 f., 2003: 71).

Acknowledging that contact with the Other World passed through the animals and that the *fylgja* was the embodiment of personal destiny, also helps us understand how animal ornamentation could sustain an organising role in the Scandinavian – and Germanic – society up until the introduction/consolidation of Christianity. It also explains how the animal style was involved in the creation and maintenance of the socio-cosmological order and as such participates in the legitimisation of power (Kristoffersen 1995, 2000a, b; Lindstrøm and Kristoffersen 2001; Hedeager 2003, 2004, 2005).

## GOLD AND GIFT-GIVING

The written sources, whether Old Norse or from early medieval Europe, give the impression of gift-giving as the decisive instrument in creating and upholding these political alliances, between lord and warrior-follower and among the warrior elite itself. Items of gold and silver, often lavishly ornamented, played an important role for ritual and ceremonial use in the social reproduction of the late Iron Age. Although the idea of gift-giving was embedded in the cosmological world and as such was highly ritualised all the way through (see Bazelmans 1999, 2000), it is only in the migration period (as in the Viking Age) that the amount of hoards signal an outstanding intense competitive display. During these centuries immense numbers of gold hoards were deposited all over Scandinavia. They consisted of a wide variety of precious objects – bracteates, rings, sword attachments, relief brooches etc. – and they were often highly decorated with animal ornamentation. On this premise, it may be presumed that not only objects but also elements of style – not least the iconographic ones – have been selected with a great deal of care. By means of animal ornamentation these objects were imbedded with special qualities and through time they got their own biography and therefore communicated specific messages.

Broadly speaking, the hoards have been explained in two different ways: as treasures, that is, ‘economic’ depositions meant to go back into circulation – or as tactical gifts, that is, ritual sacrifices, meant for the supernatural world and a way of creating alliances with the gods. In the past decade the latter explanation has been the dominant approach (for discussion see in particular Geisslinger 1967; Herschend 1979; Fønnesbech-Sandberg 1985; Hines 1989; Hedeager 1991, 1992, 1999; Fabeck 1994a; Wiker 1999). Although a great deal of the gold hoards are found in areas which, from a modern and rational economic point of view, are marginal, in an overall perspective they are connected to fertile agricultural areas. This is particularly clear in Sweden where a majority of the gold finds come from the most fertile Swedish provinces of Skåne and Västergötland (approx. 22 kg, i.e. more than half of the gold from mainland Sweden in this period) (Hedeager 1999: 246). The amount of gold in Denmark is about 50 kg, in Norway it is much less (estimated one-third or less) (Hedeager 1999). The hoards have obviously been deposited in deliberately chosen localities in the landscape (see also Johansen 1996: 97). They have been found in central settlement areas, in – or very close to – houses, and they have been found in marginal areas where they are in particular linked to bogs, streams, coasts etc., that means the transitional zone between land and water, and this is where a majority of sacral place names, that is, names with Óðinn, Týr, Freyr and God, are located too (Brink 1996; Andersen 1998: 26; Jakobsson 1997: 91). This transitional zone appears to uphold a special position in the perception of the cultural landscape as places for negotiation with the Other World and the depositions must reflect some kind of past ritual practice. Once deposited, for generations the hoards may have shaped the landscape by creating a sacred topography in people’s minds. They may have represented the link between past and present, between this world and the Other World, and as such they gave legitimacy to the land by becoming part of the discursive knowledge of the people who lived in these areas. Although hidden, these hoards remained ‘visible’ for generations, continuing to play an active role in people’s negotiation with the past (Hedeager 1999).

The gold hoards were deposited in a period of great social stress, and gold played a special role as mediator in resource-consuming political alliances and long-distance networks. The hoards may have served as an instrument in organising – or reorganising – the cultural landscape according to the cosmological world in a slightly more hierarchical political structure all over fertile Scandinavia in the migration period.

### CENTRAL PLACES FOR ACQUISITION AND TRANSFORMATION

For the Nordic realm before 800, where there is no textual evidence of any specific locations of religious or political power, the archaeological sources and the toponymic evidence provide the only basis for analysing the hierarchical structure in this settlement structure. The concept of ‘central places’ has been developed in Scandinavian archaeology during the past decades to classify specific rich settlement sites from these centuries, often with great quantities of metal finds indicating extended casting and trade activities (Larsson and Hårdh 1998; Hårdh and Larsson 2002; Hedeager 2001; Jørgensen 2003).

To understand the role of central places in southern Scandinavia it is important to take into consideration the possible symbolic structure underlying the production and acquisition of valuable goods, because the association of the elite with crafts and long-distance trade can not merely be understood as a materialistic and economic phenomenon, but also in terms of qualities and values prevailing within a cosmological frame (Helms 1993; DeMarrais *et al.* 1996; Earle 1990, 2004). It is highly unlikely that any prehistoric society ever saw activities and objects associated with remote distances in a neutral light. The elite was involved in a process by which resources from outside were brought into their society, where they were subsequently transformed, both materially and symbolically, in order to meet local ideological needs. As a result of this, the central places in the late Iron Age were localities where precious metals from the outside were transformed into prestigious objects essential for local ritual purposes. Metal production and craftsmanship are usually regarded as a neutral or even secondary affair, but metallurgy and skilled craftsmanship were in fact closely connected to what these societies conceived of as the quality of power. The role of the metalworkers – especially blacksmiths and jewellers – deserves special attention. Weavers, for example, have been skilled artisans as well, but their activities are more difficult to trace (Holand 2001: 104 ff.). The technicalities of metallurgy and metalwork included a symbolic and ritual element, which gave the practitioners a special status (Herbert 1984, 1993; Hedeager 2001; Jakobsson 2003; Haaland 2004; Gansum 2004).

Given the importance of forging and jewellery associated with any central settlement and big farm from the fifth century until the late Viking Age in Scandinavia, such activities must have served a purpose. This problem may of course be approached from a functional perspective: all big farms needed tools and weapons, and forging must have been an essential part of day-to-day work in all non-urban, pre-industrial societies. Obviously weapons and iron tools were primarily manufactured to meet practical demands, but this is not true of items of gold and silver, which met social requirements. Keeping this in mind it is not surprising that forging and the manufacture of jewellery hold a significant place in the mythological world of pre-Christian Scandinavia (Hedeager 2001; Jakobsson 2003).



Indeed, the Old Norse literature also throws some light on certain essential components of ‘powerful’ places. For example, the hall assumes great importance in the ideological universe represented in these texts (Herschend 1993, 1997a, 1999: 414; Enright 1996; Brink 1996). Apparently ON *salr* means the kings’ and earls’ assembly hall, cult hall or moot hall: the place in which the functions of ‘theatre, court and church’ were united (see the comprehensive account in Herschend 1998). The hall was at the centre of a group of principal farmsteads; it was the heart of the central places from the later part of the Iron Age (a possible ranking of these places can be found in Näsman 1999: 1; Jørgensen 2003), which existed all over Scandinavia, as is now increasingly recognised. Places such as *Gudme/Lundeborg*, *Sorte Muld*, *Lejre*, *Tissø*, *Tofttegård*, *Boeslunde*, *Jørlunde*, *Kalmargård*, *Nørre Snede*, *Stentinget*, *Drengsted* and *Ribe* in Denmark; *Trondheim*, *Kaupang*, *Hamar* and *Borg* in Norway; *Slöinge*, *Helgö*, *Birka*, *Uppåkra*, *Vä*, (*Gamla*) *Uppsala*, *Högom*, *Vendel* and *Valsgärde* in Sweden (Munch *et al.* 2003; Duczko 1993; Jørgensen 2003; Brink 1996; Callmer 1997; Larsson and Hårdh 1998; Lundqvist *et al.* 1996; Hedeager 2001; Hårdh and Larsson 2002; Skre and Stylegar 2004). Characteristically, many of these sites are located a few kilometres inland, relying on one or more landing places or ports situated on the coast (Fabech 1999). Although this is still a matter of debate, such central places may have served as a basis for some form of political or religious control exercised over a larger area; the radius of their influence went well beyond the site itself. Furthermore, on several of these places a special building seems to have served cultic functions as a pagan *vi*, for example in *Uppåkra* in Skåne (Larsson 2002) and *Tissø* on Zealand, which actually means ‘Týr’s Lake’ (Jørgensen 2003; Týr being the war god among the *æsir*).

In addition to their ‘official’ function as trading and market sites, and as centres where laws were made and cults were established, these central places were also associated with special functions such as the skilled craft of jewellery, weapons, clothing and, furthermore, with special cultic activities performed by religious specialists. These places were also the residence of particularly privileged warriors or housecarls (Brink 1996; Fabech 1998; Hedeager 2001; Jakobsson 2003). Some of the central places go back to the fourth century (e.g. *Gudme/Lundeborg* and *Uppåkra*), but the majority do not come into being until after AD 400. Many of these sites remained centres of power and of economic activity far into the Middle Ages (for an overview of settlements in Scandinavia, see Magnus 2002; Skre 2001).

## SCANDINAVIA BEFORE THE VIKINGS

In the aftermath of the West Roman Empire, the Merovingians and subsequently the Carolingians gained supremacy over neighbouring kingdoms by military conquest and networks of long-distance alliances and gift-giving. Their form of political and economic organisation, with centrally localised production sites, markets and emporia, is reflected in the petty kingdoms of Scandinavia. Kings and nobles developed a great need for luxury goods to fulfil the social and ritual obligations necessary to keep them in power. The metal items, primarily weapons, jewellery and drinking equipment, are well known in the archaeological records, while carved wood items, prodigal dress and fur, food, alcoholic drinks, and the like are less well preserved and therefore less recognised. The need for exotic raw material was the background for the increasingly intensive exploitation of resources in northern Scandinavia (Myhre 2003: 91) and a closer contact

with the Sámi population, which in turn are manifested through the impact on the Norse religion in the late Iron Age (Price 2002; Solli 2002). The emerging Scandinavian warrior society with its dynamic and changing political configurations based on alliances and military power, demanded extensive agricultural resources for its social institutions as well. The reorganisation of the arable land, intensification in the production process, expansive resource utilisation, a hierarchical settlement structure etc. responded to this need. Manors with high density of buildings and evidence for extensive resource consumption, including highly skilled metalwork and imported luxury goods, developed during these centuries.

Against this background, however, the burial evidence is remarkably sparse. Generally speaking, during the late Iron Age cremation graves dominate and usually the grave goods are therefore so heavily damaged that only small fragments have been preserved. However, they confirm the impression of the rich material culture that existed among the Scandinavian elite. Some impressive grave monuments were constructed during this period, mainly on the Scandinavian peninsula. They are found in the inner part of south-eastern Norway, generally in the best agricultural districts, close to rivers and important land routes, and at strategic places along the coast. A remarkable site is Borre in Vestfold with an impressive burial ground with a number of large mounds; the earliest were built in about AD 600 and the others in the following centuries up to about 900. Borre is mentioned in the skaldic poem *Ynglingatal* as the burial place for the royal dynasty of the *Ynglingar*, whom the poem claims to have reigned in Vestfold during the seventh–ninth centuries (Myhre 1992, 2003). *Ynglingatal* is first mentioned and used by Snorri Sturluson in the 1230s, but ought to be from the ninth century (Myhre 1992: 301). During the same period comparable mounds were erected in Götaland, Svealand and in the province of Medelpad in Sweden. They were also situated in the most fertile areas of the cultural landscape. Close to the old church of (Gamla) Uppsala, three of the largest mounds in Scandinavia are to be found. They were all cremation graves from around AD 500 and the early sixth century and the quality of the fragmented grave goods confirms the status of the deceased. Uppsala, which is known as the religious and political centre of the *Svea* kings in the Viking Age, had probably been so since the migration period. Close to Uppsala two special burial grounds, at Vendel and Valsgårde, are to be found. They contain burial mounds with unburned boat graves and grave goods comparable with those of Sutton Hoo in East Anglia (Lamm and Nordström 1983). The cemeteries are dated from around AD 500 to 800 (Arrhenius 1983: 44).

In Denmark, the rich archaeological material stems from Migration-period hoards and from rich settlements of the sixth, seventh and eighth centuries, while grave finds from this period are sparse. No doubt, cremation burial practice was the norm during these centuries except for Bornholm, where well-equipped humation graves are still in existence (i.e. Jørgensen 1990; Jørgensen and Nørgård Jørgensen 1997). The only impressive burial mound from Denmark is located in *Old Lejre* on Zealand, dated to the sixth century. Old Lejre is mentioned among others in *Beowulf* and in *Gesta Danorum* by Saxo Grammaticus from around 1200 as the royal centre of the *Skjoldungs*, the dynasty of the Danish kings during the migration period. A newly excavated manorial site of extensive size supports Lejre's special position as a royal centre in early Danish history (Christensen 1991; Jørgensen 2003).

Lejre illustrates the kingly organisation of the late Iron Age. The presumed royal seat was established and consolidated during the formative period of the sixth, seventh and

eighth centuries, as were the royal centres at Borre and (Gamla) Uppsala. Whether the written evidence contains a core of historical reality or not, the archaeological evidence points to the establishment of a new political structure all over Scandinavia around AD 500. At the same time origin myths, royal genealogies, mythical tales and legends, together with the symbolic language of animal style, ought to be perceived as the ideological articulation of this new warrior elite, and the prerequisite for the emergence of Germanic royalty. In their own way, they played an organisational role in the establishment of these new kingdoms and served to demonstrate common cultural codes all over Scandinavia.

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