6

Viking culture

ELSE ROESDAHL AND PREBEN MEULENGRACHT SØRENSEN

Almost everything we know about the culture (and technology) of the Viking Age derives from archaeological and textual evidence. The archaeological evidence, constantly growing and with a range of important finds now precisely dated by dendrochronology, is contemporary with the period. The textual evidence, on the other hand, was – apart from runic inscriptions – usually written down long after the Viking Age; therefore the reliability of much of it is still a matter of debate. However, new attitudes and new questions have provided new perspectives on and insights into the textual evidence.

The culture of the Viking Age was strong, independent, rich in tradition and vibrant. It was good at copying, adapting, developing and creating – and foreign ideas could be incorporated or rejected. The many points of contact meant that well-informed and well-travelled Scandinavians were familiar with a variety of nationalities, environments and cultures. Their tolerance of other cultures was presumably an important factor in the Scandinavians' astonishing ability to establish themselves as traders, conquerors or colonists in new countries.

Regions and communications

The lands of Viking Age Scandinavia,[1] apart from Finland and the Sami areas in their northern and central parts, shared a substantially common culture. This arose from their situation furthest north in Europe and the fact that this sparsely populated territory was almost completely surrounded by water, so that its regions could be linked by seaborne traffic. The varied natural resources of Scandinavia encouraged shipping and trade; almost all necessities could be found somewhere in the region: cattle, grain, fish, wool, iron, timber,

This chapter has been translated by Judith Jesch.

1 E. Roesdahl, *The Vikings* (London, 1992, 2nd rev. edn 1998), pp. 25–9, 78–93; E. Roesdahl and D. M. Wilson (eds.), *From Viking to Crusader: Scandinavia and Europe 800–1200* (Copenhagen and New York, 1992), pp. 24–51; J. Graham-Campbell (ed.), *Cultural Atlas of the Viking World* (London, 1994), pp. 12–21, 73–7.

furs, etc. Much of this could also be exported. Thus, the ship was a decisive factor not only in the growth of Viking Age trade but also in the more general expansion and common culture of the period (Plate 3). Along the routes served by ships Scandinavian culture influenced, for example, the coastal areas of south-western Finland, the gateway to Russia. There were, however, also important inland routes along roads and across fords, with some bridges in the late Viking Age. Other communication routes, using sledges (Plate 5), skis, snowshoes or skates, developed where there was a stable snow and ice cover for several months of the year, as in the mountains, or in the lake areas of central Sweden.

The great distances and the geographical diversity of Scandinavia also meant that economic activity, settlement patterns and opportunities for contact could vary dramatically from one district to another, and that cultural conditions could therefore also vary. Thus, the individual gods were not equally revered everywhere, and not all personal names were used throughout the region. Another factor in cultural variation was Scandinavia's threefold outward orientation. For maritime traffic, Denmark is a natural gateway between western Europe and the Baltic. Like south-west Sweden, it faces south and west: towards the Slavonic areas south of the Baltic, towards Germany and the coasts of western Europe, and towards England. Present-day Norway and Sweden lie back-to-back, separated by large areas of forest and wilderness. Most of Norway faces west and south: towards the North Atlantic islands, the British Isles and the coasts of western Europe, although Trøndelag and northern Norway also had good overland connections to the east. Large parts of Sweden face directly east: towards the Baltic, Finland and Russia. Viking expeditions, trading voyages and emigration from Denmark, Norway and Sweden went mainly in these respective directions. The geographical survey prefacing the Old English translation of *Orosius*, commissioned by King Alfred (c. 890), tells of the Norwegian chieftain Ohthere (Ottar), who lived and farmed 'northernmost of all Northmen' (Norwegians), probably somewhere in south Troms, but who also received significant payments from the Sami and went on expeditions to the White Sea in search of valuable walrus tusks and walrus hide ropes, making contact with the population there. He later went on a trading voyage to Hedeby in southern Denmark as well as to England, where he was the guest of King Alfred.[2]

In the archaeological material, the various regions' individual areas of contact can be seen clearly in their imported goods. There are many continental

2 N. Lund (ed.), *Two Voyagers at the Court of King Alfred: The Ventures of Ohthere and Wulfstan* (York, 1984).

objects in Denmark, many ornamental metal mounts from the British Isles in west Norwegian graves, a number of Finnish objects particularly in eastern Sweden, and many clothes displaying eastern inspiration (most likely the principality of Kiev) in the graves of Birka.[3] But along with these various points of contact came influences which, in adapted form, became a part of either the regional or common Scandinavian culture. Thus, western Scandinavia and the Scandinavian parts of the British Isles saw the development of a fashion for ostentatious penannular brooches, their shape inspired by large Irish and Scottish clothes-fasteners, used by men to fasten their cloaks and as status symbols. Their shape and size could be almost grotesque, like the brooch from Newbiggin in Cumbria which weighs about 0.75 kg and has a sharp pin over 0.5 m long: sensible people wore these with the pin pointing upwards (Plate 1). The common Scandinavian culture included another new fashion of trefoil brooches used by women to fasten their shawls and cloaks (Plate 2). These were inspired by trefoil Frankish sword-belt mounts and became a fashion in the early Viking Age.[4]

Ships

Sailing ships are a prerequisite of the Viking Age.[5] It is a matter of some dispute when the sail was first introduced in Scandinavia, but it was probably not until the eighth century that the large Scandinavian rowing vessels of the preceding period were developed to take sail, which had then been known in southern and western Europe for centuries. The 21.4 m long ship from the Oseberg grave near Oslofjord was built around 820 and is the oldest known example of such a combined rowing and sailing vessel, a 'viking ship'. A number of ship finds from both aristocratic graves and the sea-bed enable us to study their construction, and experiments in sailing the many

3 E. Wamers, *Insularer Metallschmuck in wikingerzeitlichen Gräbern Nordeuropas: Untersuchungen zur skandinavischen Westexpansion* (*Offa-Bücher* 56, Neumünster, 1985); I. Hägg, *Die Tracht*, in G. Arwidsson (ed.), *Birka*, II:2 (Stockholm, 1996); Roesdahl and Wilson, *From Viking to Crusader*, cat. nos. 119–35.

4 J. Graham-Campbell, *Viking Artefacts: A Select Catalogue* (London, 1980), cat. nos. 194–8, 327–8; Roesdahl and Wilson, *From Viking to Crusader,* cat. nos. 135–41, 364.

5 A. W. Brøgger and H. Shetelig, *The Viking Ships: Their Ancestry and Evolution* (Oslo, 1951); O. Olsen and O. Crumlin-Pedersen, *Five Viking Ships from Roskilde Fjord* (København, 1978); O. Crumlin-Pedersen, 'Aspects of Viking-Age shipbuilding in the light of the construction and trials of the Skuldelev ship-replicas Saga Siglar and Roar Ege', *Journal of Danish Archaeology*, 5 (1986), pp. 209–28; O. Crumlin-Pedersen, 'Ship types and sizes AD 800–1200', in O. Crumlin-Pedersen (ed.), *Aspects of Maritime Scandinavia AD 200–1200* (Roskilde, 1991), pp. 69–82; O. Crumlin-Pedersen, *Viking Age Ships and Shipbuilding in Hedeby/Haithabu and Schleswig* (Schlewig and Roskilde, 1997).

reconstructions of excavated ships enable us to judge their sailing abilities. The most important finds, apart from that at Oseberg, are the 23.3 m long Gokstad ship (Plate 3), built around 880, from a chieftain's grave not far from Oseberg; the ships from the harbour at Hedeby; and the five very different ships from the first half of the eleventh century which were later deliberately sunk off Skuldelev in Roskilde Fjord in Denmark, to stop enemy access to the town of Roskilde (Figure 1). The Oseberg and the Gokstad ships had room for 30 and 32 oarsmen respectively, but the 64 shields in the latter ship suggest that there might have been twice this number, allowing the oarsmen to row in shifts.

The Scandinavian ship types were developed to a high degree of perfection, with sailing characteristics very advanced for that time, as can also be deduced from both western European written sources and Scandinavian skaldic poems. Although there were regional variations, and a range of sizes and ship types, the Scandinavian ships had in common a clinker-built hull (constructed of overlapping planks), a shallow keel and tapering prow and stern. The lines between prow and stern, and between keel and gunwhale, curve gently. The planked shell of the hull is strengthened inside by a number of symmetrical ribs across its width, resting on the keel, and also by crossbeams. The ship was steered using an oar placed near the stern on the starboard side, and the sail was square. In general, the aim was to build ships which were light, strong and supple all at once. This was achieved by choosing timber of the smallest possible dimensions and using elastic joints; as far as possible, wood was used in which the direction of the fibres corresponded to the shape of the finished piece. Most of the ships reveal outstanding craftsmanship, but there was a great difference in the workmanship and attention to detail between, say, a chieftain's own ship, and a trading ship or fishing boat.

During the Viking Age ships became specialised into two main groups: warships (also for travel) and cargo ships. The first group includes two of the Skuldelev ships (nos. 2 and 5). Such ships were generally built of oak and had oar-holes the length of the ship and a mast that could be lowered. Thus they were designed to be propelled by oars or sail, making them particularly manoeuvrable: they could be used to sail the sea or rivers, could go under bridges and cope with difficult winds and currents. On the outside of the topmost plank a special rail allowed shields to be placed along the gunwhale. These ships were also low and narrow in proportion to their length, as for instance the two Skuldelev ships and an especially attractively made ship from the harbour in Hedeby. One of the Skuldelev ships (no. 2) was a seagoing warship, about 30 m long and with room for 40–50 oarsmen; dendrochronological analysis of the timber

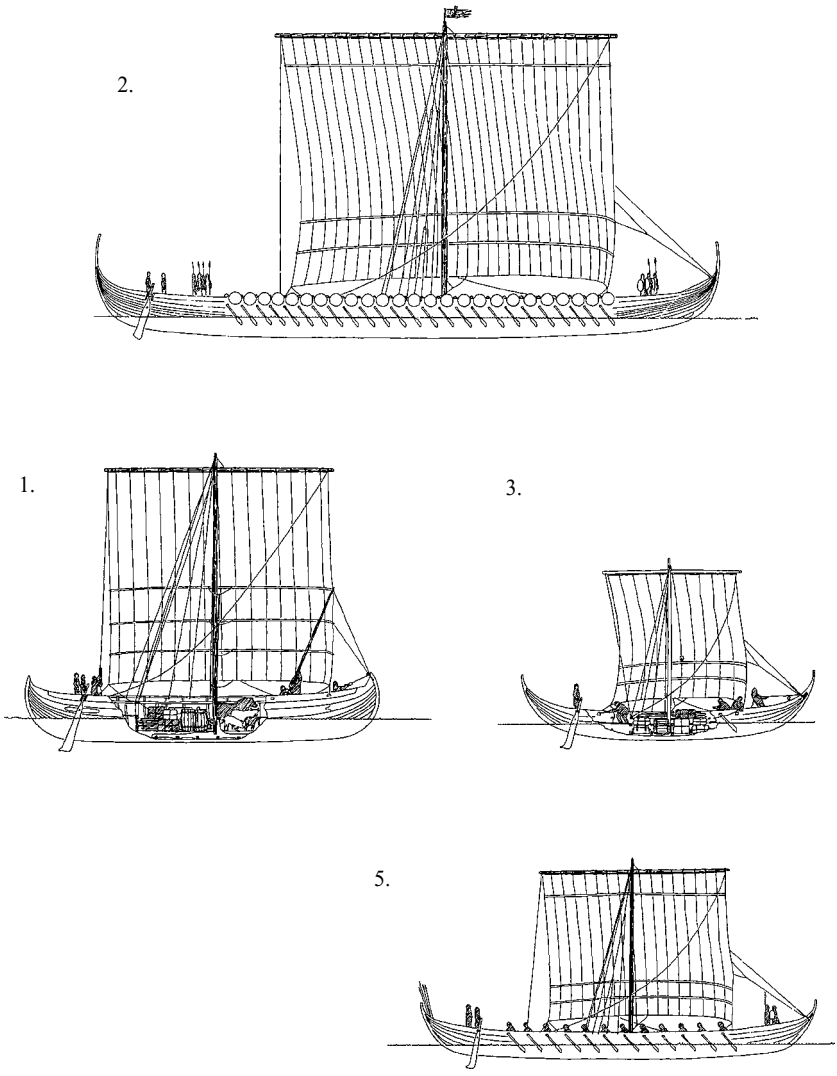

Figure 1 Four eleventh-century ships from Skuldelev, Denmark: two warships (above and below, nos. 2 and 5) and two cargo ships (centre, nos. 1 and 3). Reconstructions drawn at the same scale. Six vessels were originally believed to lie beneath the water at Skuldelev, but during excavation ship no. 4 was found to be part of the much larger ship no. 2. Ship no. 6 is not shown.

shows it was built in the Dublin area in 1042 and repaired some twenty years later.

The oldest known examples of specialised cargo ships are from the late tenth century or around 1000.[6] This group includes ships from Klåstad in the Oslofjord, Äskekärr near Göteborg, Hedeby harbour and Skuldelev. They were high and broad in relation to their length and had a half-deck fore and aft, so that there was an open space for cargo amidships. The mast could not easily be lowered and there were only a few oar-holes, indicating that they were rowed only in narrow channels or in certain manoeuvres. Cargo ships were sailing ships and the type was first identified in the Skuldelev ships (nos. 1 and 3) excavated in 1962. Skuldelev 1 was a capacious seagoing ship, 16.5 m long and built of pine in western Norway. Skuldelev 3 was about 14 m long and constructed of oak, probably locally, for sailing in Danish waters and the Baltic. Their cargo capacity was c. 24 and 4.6 metric tons respectively, while the Hedeby ship is thought to have been capable of carrying around 60 tons. Such specialised cargo ships imply a widespread trade in heavy and high volume goods, which were for daily use rather than luxuries. Here, ship archaeology supports other archaeological research, making important contributions to the history of trade.

Trading voyages on rivers, however, required efficiently rowed ships. Moreover, in many places, such as Russia, they needed to be dragged overland for short distances, and so could not be too heavy. It is likely that small ships or local boat types were used for such journeys.[7]

Economy and physical constraints

As elsewhere in Europe, agriculture in various forms was the predominant economic activity.[8] But with the growth of trade, both locally and abroad, the Viking Age saw the emergence of town-like settlements in Scandinavia (though not in Iceland) and trade and crafts became increasingly specialist occupations. Society was characterised by great social differences and was divided into three main groups: the unfree (slaves), the free and the aristocracy. There was further

6 E. Roesdahl, 'Dendrochronology and Viking studies in Denmark', in B. Ambrosiani and H. Clarke (eds.), *The Twelfth Viking Congress* (*Birka Studies* 3, Stockholm, 1994), pp. 106–16; Crumlin-Pedersen, *Viking Age Ships*, pp. 108–111, 199–203 and passim.

7 O. Crumlin-Pedersen, 'Schiffe und Schiffahrtswege im Ostseeraum während des 9.–12. Jahrhunderts', *Bericht der Römisch-Germanischen Kommission*, 69 (1988), pp. 530–63.

8 E. Roesdahl, *Viking Age Denmark* (London, 1982), pp. 51–67, 110–33; Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, pp. 41–5, 94–107; Roesdahl and Wilson, *From Viking to Crusader*, 126–41; Graham-Campbell, *Cultural Atlas*, 58–73 and passim.

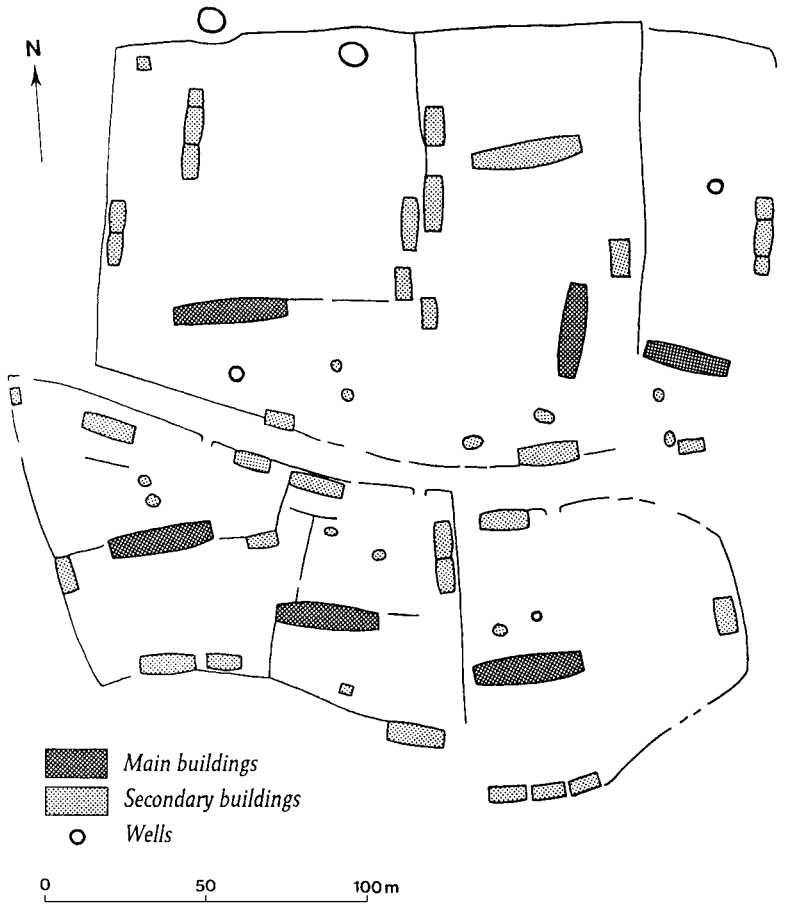

Figure 2 Plan of Vorbasse village in Jylland, Denmark, c. 900. Six fenced farms with gates opening onto a central track or street.

differentiation within each group, for instance between landless free men and great landowners, or between professional warriors and craftsmen.

Almost everyone lived on a farm, though many as servants or slaves. In Denmark, farms were often grouped in villages, while individual farms were common throughout much of Norway and Sweden. Excavations have shown that a farm normally consisted of a collection of buildings divided from their surroundings by an enclosure or fence. A whole village has been excavated at Vorbasse in Jylland (Figure 2) (cf. Chapter 3). It had six or seven farms, which were placed on either side of, and each with a gate to, the street. Here, each

farm consisted of a main building about 30 m long, placed more or less centrally in the farmyard, with most of the rest of the buildings along the enclosure, and a few scattered across the yard. The main building had living quarters in one end and a byre in the other, with room for 20–30 animals, presumably cattle (as suggested by traces of stall dividers).[9] The oldest towns in Scandinavia are Ribe and Hedeby in Denmark and Birka in eastern Sweden, all founded in the eighth century or around 800, probably by kings, just as many later towns were. Town houses had some functions that differed from those in the country and were adapted to these needs.

Buildings[10] were mainly of wood, with which most of Scandinavia was well supplied, but some had walls of wattle and daub, and in northern Scandinavia and Iceland the walls were often insulated with outer walls of turf. The few stone buildings known from the Viking Age are the remains of churches from the very end of the period. Dwelling houses had plenty of storage space. A hearth or oven, sometimes both, served for heating and cooking. Entrance doors were normally simple but could be decorated with carvings or iron fittings, and door locks were common. Keys and locks were usually simple – their most important function was to mark ownership. Later written sources suggest that theft from a locked area was viewed as a particularly serious crime and punished accordingly. The keyholder, usually the mistress of the farm, therefore had a special responsibility and status.

Inside, houses were often divided into several rooms (Plate 4). Light was provided by small window-holes, the hearth or smoke-holes in the roof; oil lamps and tallow candles could be used for extra light. The walls of more elegant houses could be decorated with carved panels, as described in the early tenth-century skaldic poem *Húsdrápa*; some surviving carved panels from Flatatunga in Iceland are from an eleventh-century church. For special occasions, the walls were also decorated with figured tapestries running horizontally around the room; some fragments survive, especially from the Oseberg grave. Many dwellings had low, broad platforms along the walls, where people sat or lay, protected from draughts and cold feet. The most important items, apart from kitchen utensils, were a loom, textiles and furs, small stools, and lockable chests and boxes. Other furniture was rare and restricted to the

9 See also S. Hvass, 'Wikingerzeitliche Siedlungen in Vorbasse', *Offa*, 41 (1984), pp. 97–112.

10 See notes 8–9; G. Ólafsson (ed.), *Hus, gård och bebyggelse* (Reykjavík, 1983); K. Schietzel, 'Die Baubefunde in Haithabu', in H. Jahnkuhn et al. (eds), *Archäologische und naturwissenschaftliche Untersuchungen an Siedlungen im deutschen Küstengebiet*, 2 (Bonn, 1984), pp. 135–58; H. Schmidt, *Building Customs in Viking Age Denmark* (Herning, 1994).

upper classes. The surviving examples are mainly from richly furnished graves: chairs and beds, and a little washstand. Furniture could be painted, or decorated in other ways. Thus, the beds from the Oseberg and Gokstad graves have bedposts carved with large animal heads, and the remains of chests found in Trondheim and elsewhere have their surfaces adorned with elegantly carved animal ornaments.[11]

The physical framework of life and death was determined by social status and wealth. In the Oseberg grave,[12] a high-ranking woman, possibly a queen, was buried in 834 in her ship covered by a large mound. The conditions of preservation were uniquely good, and her grave goods give a fascinating impression of what a royal or aristocratic household at that time would contain in the way of furniture (beds, chair and chests), kitchen- and tableware, tools for working fine textiles, conveyances (wagon, sledges and the ship itself), and a lot more besides (Plates 5 and 6). Wood was widely used, some of it richly decorated, showing that wood was one of the most important materials for both utilitarian objects of every description and for artistic expression.

Religion

The religion of the Viking Age was polytheistic. A multitude of gods and powers influenced the different aspects of life. Religion was woven into life and culture, and not, like Christianity, administered by priests and carried out in special buildings. There was no sharp division between the secular and the religious; religious notions were linked to every aspect of life and all action was religious action. Religion was also intimately associated with secular power as farmers, chieftains and kings were also religious leaders. The gods participated in all aspects of life, and they had to be invoked on all occasions, so that both women and men were cult leaders.[13]

11 See note 8; A. W. Brøgger et al. (eds.), *Osebergfundet*, 2 (Oslo, 1928); Graham-Campbell, *Viking Artefacts*, cat. nos. 24–90, 453–4; H. Elsner, *Wikinger Museum Haithabu: Schaufenster einer frühen Stadt* (Neumünster, 1989).

12 A. W. Brøgger et al. (eds.), *Osebergfundet*, 1–3, 5 (Kristiania–Oslo, 1917–28); A. E. Christensen, A. S. Ingstad and B. Myhre, *Osebergdronningens grav* (Oslo, 1992).

13 For an introduction to Old Norse religion, see P. A. Munch, *Norse Mythology: Legends of Gods and Heroes* (New York, 1954); J. de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, 1–2 (Berlin, 1956–7, 2nd edn); E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia* (Westport, 1975, 2nd edn); F. Ström, *Nordisk hedendom: Tro och sed i förkristen tid* (Göteborg, 1985, 2nd edn); G. Steinsland and P. Meulengracht Sørensen, *Menneske og makter i vikingenes verden* (Oslo, 1994); M. Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myth in Medieval Icelandic Society*, 1: *The Myths* (Odense, 1994).

Place-names, runic inscriptions and stone carvings are authentic witnesses to the veneration of gods in the Viking Age. The male gods – Thor, Odin, Freyr, Njord, Baldr, Heimdal and others – were venerated all over Scandinavia, and each had, as far as we can tell, his own main function. Thor was the god of farmers, protecting humans against the giants and ensuring the fertility of the land. Odin was a much more complex deity, the god of warriors, poets and the aristocracy. He represented wisdom, magic and the art of words, but also death, ecstasy and treachery. Odin had no morals and, while Thor defended the world of gods and men against the forces of chaos, Odin crossed the boundaries to meet them. His mysterious character, more than any other god, inspired the blossoming of the Norse view of the world in literature and myth.

There are two families of gods in the mythology, the *æsir*, including Odin and Thor, and the *vanir*, including Njord, and his son Freyr and daughter Freyja. Njord was associated with the sea and fishing, and Freyr was the god of human lust and fertility (Plate 7). Freyja is the only one of the Norse goddesses who seems individualised to us. Like her brother, she was associated with sexuality and fertility, and according to the mythological poem *Grímnismál* she had her own realm in the world of the dead, where she welcomed half of those who fell in battle.

The other goddesses appear in mythology mainly as groups. The Norns are goddesses of fate who demarcate each person's life-span. The Valkyries are Odin's maidservants, who in times of war choose those men who will die and ride to Valhall, Odin's realm of the dead. Tenth-century graves, with the dead man buried with his weapons and his horse, are perhaps evidence of this belief[14] (Plate 8). According to the myths, the dead warriors will fight together with the gods in their last battle against the forces of chaos at *Ragnarǫk* 'the doom of the gods'. The mythology has little to say about the *dísir*, but we know that they were female powers, and skaldic poetry tells us that sacrifices were made to them on farms.

The congregation was wherever people were gathered together: on the farm, in the village or at the king's court. On the farms, cult activities were led by the farmer and his wife, at the court by the king and queen. Humans and gods had a relationship based on reciprocity, a kind of friendship in which people held a *blót* (sacrificial feast) for the gods in return for their help. The

14 M. Müller-Wille, 'Frühmittelalterliche Prunkgräber im südlichen Skandinavien', *Bonner Jahrbücher*, 178 (1978), pp. 633–52; E. Roesdahl, 'Fra vikingegrav til Valhal', in T. Kisbye and E. Roesdahl (eds.), *Beretning fra andet tværfaglige vikingesymposium* (Højbjerg, 1983), pp. 39–49.

feasts were held in the autumn, at the solstices, and in the spring. According to later literary sources, animals were sacrificed, and ale was drunk with a toast for *gott ár ok friðr*, 'a good year and peace'. Excavations at Viking Age farms, for example the chieftain's farm at Borg in Lofoten in northern Norway, show that large cooking-pits were used in the hall, and it is likely that these were employed for religious festivals.[15]

Myths and world view

Norse myths are preserved in medieval copies of Eddic poems and in prose form in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, and some of them are confirmed by stone carvings from the Viking Age. Our understanding of the mythology is strongly influenced by Snorri's comprehensive vision in his *Edda* (see also Chapter 15).[16] This is the attempt of a learned medieval author to comprehend the logic of, and to explain systematically, a world which was mythical and so not logical, and therefore fundamentally different from our modes of thought. The myths encode an understanding of the world and an attitude to life which is fundamentally different from the Christian one, and this increases our confidence in them. In the middle of the world was *Miðgarðr*, the human world, and outside this was *Útgarðr*, where the giants and the forces of chaos had their home. Furthest out, in the sea, lay the Midgard serpent, a great sea monster, encircling all creation (Plate 9). In this world view there is no fixed centre: the middle and *Miðgarðr* are wherever humans live. In the middle of the mythic world stood the world-tree *Yggdrasill* and, in human reality, this manifested itself in the farmyard tree, marking the centre of the life of farm and family.

The duality of the pre-Christian world view can be seen in the relationship between the gods and the giants, which is both antagonistic and interdependent. The first living creature was the primeval giant Ymir. The gods, themselves of giant race on their mothers' side, killed him and created the world from his body. In this way, they made the cosmos out of the matter of chaos. The cosmos is constantly threatened by the giants, but the gods were also dependent on them, because they had the wisdom and the skills which the gods needed. In *Ragnarǫk*, the gods will battle against the forces of chaos and die. The world will be destroyed, but a new one will arise.

15 G. Stamsø Munch, 'Hus og hall: En høvdinggård på Borg i Lofoten', in G. Steinsland et al. (eds.), *Nordisk hedendom: Et symposium* (Odense, 1991), pp. 321–33.

16 Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* is published in English translation by A. Faulkes in *Snorri Sturluson: Edda* (London, 1987).

Morality

The morality of the Viking Age was no more a fixed doctrine, telling people how to behave, than its religion. The key concepts were freedom and honour.[17] All men and women were free, unless they were slaves and thus considered the property of others with no right of self-determination. However, free status did not mean the freedom to do as one wished. It meant self-determination and inviolability within limits established by the community. The free person had honour – respect in the eyes of others and himself – and his honour protected him from encroachment by others, which is why it was so important. Society had little or no centralised power; a man had to defend himself and his family, or at least demonstrate that he was capable of doing so. In this way he also obtained the support of others, as honour was not a personal matter; the individual possessed it together with his group: his family, his household or his assembly group. The failure of one individual would bring shame on the whole group. Anyone harmed by strangers would be supported in his revenge by his group.

Blood vengeance, i.e. killing, was the answer to all kinds of injuries, from killing, rape and wounding down to what we would consider insignificant blows. However, revenge was not essentially a personal response. It could fall on someone who had had nothing to do with the injury, but who was related to the culprit. The idea was to hurt the opponent's group and restore the balance. Vengeance was a duty and anyone not taking revenge lost his honour, with serious consequences for his social status.

Vengeance, like the concept of honour, maintained the peace, as even the possibility of blood vengeance was a guarantee against violence and other offences. Although there were great social differences, and power was unevenly distributed, death was the same for all, and all could take revenge.

Runes

Scandinavia got its own script – runes – in the first or second century AD.[18] The origins of this writing system are debated, but it is clear that it is related to alphabets that already existed in the Mediterranean area, especially the

17 On the ethics of the Viking Age, see V. Grønbech, *The Culture of the Teutons*, 1–3 (Copenhagen and London, 1931). On ethic values as presented in the sagas of Icelanders, see P. Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære: Studier i islændingesagaerne* (Oslo, 1995, 2nd edn).

18 Handbooks on Scandinavian runes include E. Moltke, *Runes and their Origin: Denmark and elsewhere* (Copenhagen, 1985); S. F. B. Jansson, *Runes in Sweden* (Stockholm, 1987).

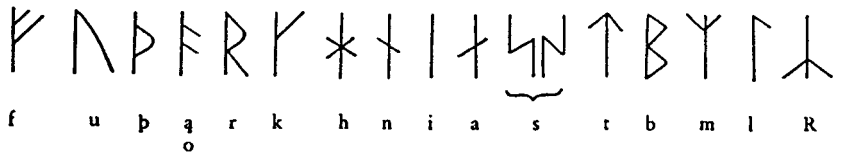

Figure 3 Viking Age Scandinavian runic characters: so-called 'normal' or 'Danish' or 'long-twig' runes.

Roman. However, the runic alphabet is an independent creation of a Scandinavian or North Germanic culture of which we know very little. The oldest surviving inscriptions are found on jewellery, weapons and other implements. Usually these consist of only one or two words, a name or possibly a religious formula.

The runic 'alphabet' is called *fuþark* after its first six characters (Figure 3). There were originally twenty-four characters but during the eighth century these were reduced to sixteen. This innovation must have been the result of a centrally coordinated initiative to renew a writing system which had become out-of-date in relation to linguistic developments. This systematic and planned simplification proved its usefulness in the succeeding centuries and the reform shows that there was an active interest in script in Viking Age Scandinavia; however, writing played quite a different role from that which it was to play later when the Roman alphabet was adopted. In theory, runic characters could be used just like Roman ones (e.g. for longer texts), but as they were not used in this way, we have to conclude that the Vikings saw no reason to do so. It is likely that runes were used for short messages and letters, but they were not viewed only as a means of communication, for they could also link objects and monuments to concepts, myths and narratives.

The custom of erecting rune stones to commemorate the dead arose in the Viking Age. In this way, memories could be preserved in what was otherwise an exclusively oral culture. The names of the survivors, those who raised the stone, were just as prominent in the inscription. The runic inscriptions marked a change in the generations and possibly inheritance. Sometimes, the rune carver was also named (and this could be a survival from the days when the runes themselves had meaning). An example is the longest Danish rune stone inscription at Glavendrup on Fyn, commissioned around 900 by Ragnhild for her dead husband, Alle. He is called the *goði* (cult leader) of the Sølver, and the honourable *þegn* (captain?) of the *via-lið* (a group of warriors?). Alle's sons are also mentioned, but not by name, and it says that 'Sote carved these runes in memory of his lord'. Then follows an invocation to the

god: 'Thor hallow these runes'. Finally, there is a curse on anyone who destroys or moves the stone. Such a monument was clearly pregnant with religious and social meaning.

Most rune stones were raised after the introduction of Christianity and, in Sweden especially, there are large numbers of inscriptions invoking the Christian God (see Chapter 7). One of the most attractive Christian memorials was raised in Norway during the eleventh century at Dynna in Hadeland. A mother had a bridge built for the soul of her dead daughter, and erected a stone with this inscription: 'Gunvor, Thrydrik's daughter, had a bridge built in memory of Astrid, her daughter. She was the most skilful girl in Hadeland.' The slender 2.82 m high stone is decorated with Christian pictures: at the top, the Christ child stands on the star above Bethlehem; the Three Wise Men ride in the middle; and, below, two of them give gifts to the Virgin Mary in the stable with the manger in the middle (Plate 10).

There is nothing to suggest that Viking Age poetry was written down in runes: its essential characteristic was orality. However, some inscriptions have metrical form. There are examples of memorial inscriptions using *fornyrðislag* ('old lore metre'), and one inscription, the Karlevi stone on Öland in the Baltic, has a well-formed skaldic stanza in *dróttkvætt* ('court metre'). This stone was erected around the year 1000 to commemorate a Danish chieftain.

Poetry

The runic inscriptions in metrical form show that the Viking Age had, from the very beginning, an oral poetry very like that written down in Iceland in the thirteenth century, based on the common Germanic metrical principle of alliteration. Unlike Old English and Old High German poetry, however, the Scandinavian version is stanzaic and partially syllable-counting. These poems are divided into two main types, Eddic and skaldic, which are quite different in their form, content and function.[19]

Eddic poems were traditional, anonymous and, presumably, popular. They comprise ancient tales of gods and heroes, mythic knowledge and narratives

19 For a short survey of Old Norse poetry see P. Hallberg, *Old Icelandic Poetry: Eddic Lay and Scaldic Verse* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1975). See also E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry* (Oxford, 1976); R. Poole, *Viking Poems on War and Peace: A Study in Scaldic Narrative* (Toronto, Buffalo and London, 1991). General introductions to Old Norse literature can be found in J. Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas: Iceland's Medieval Literature* (Reykjavík, 1988); P. Meulengracht Sørensen, *Saga and Society: An Introduction to Old Norse Literature* (Odense, 1993).

that take place in a distant past. The poems present themselves as ancient, but without any precise chronology. The typical metre is *fornyrðislag*, in which the stanza consists of eight half-lines, joined into full lines by alliteration. The main rules for alliteration are that initial consonants alliterate with the same consonant, although clusters like *sk, sp* and *st* alliterate only with the same cluster. Vowels, however, alliterate with any other vowel. Each half-line has two stressed syllables and a varying number of unstressed syllables. In a full line, the alliteration is determined by the first stressed syllable of the second half-line, and this syllable alliterates with either one or both of the stressed syllables in the first half-line.

We find an example of this form on a rune stone from Hällestad in Skåne, erected around the year 1000 to commemorate Toke, who died in battle in eastern Sweden. In the text and translation below, the alliterating syllables are italicised.

SaR flo *æig*i	He ran not *off*
at *Up*salum.	At *Up*sala.
*Satt*u drængiaR	*Her*oes set up,
æftir *sinn* broður	*hon*ouring their brother,
stæin a bjargi	a *stone* on a hill,
*støð*an runum.	*stead*ied with runes.
pær *Gorms* Toka	They att*en*ded
*ging*u næstiR.	*To*ke Gormsson.

The written form of this stanza is exceptional at such an early date, when occasional *fornyrðislag* stanzas and longer poems in the same metre were still normally transmitted orally.

We know the poems mainly from the Icelandic manuscript *Codex Regius* dated c. 1270 (see also Chapter 15), which contains eleven mythological and nineteen heroic poems. The collection opens with the visionary poem *Vǫluspá*, 'The Prophecy of the Seeress', which uses grandiose but obscure images to present the course of the heathen world from its creation to its destruction in *Ragnarǫk* and into a new creation.[20] It is followed by *Hávamál*, 'The Words of the High One' (i.e. Odin), a series of didactic stanzas, some concrete and rational, and some magical.[21] This is followed by three other poems with Odin as a main character, two of which, *Grímnismál*, 'The Words of Grímnir', and *Vafþrúðnismál*, 'The Words of Vafþrúðnir',

20 *Vǫluspá* is edited with commentaries by H. Pálsson, *Völuspá* (Edinburgh, 1996).
21 *Hávamál* is edited with commentaries by D. A. H. Evans, *Hávamál* (London, 1986).

present mythological knowledge in monologue and dialogue form respectively.

Other poems tell myths. *Skírnismál* reproduces in dialogue form the crucial myth of the god Freyr's sexual passion for the giant maiden Gerd, and his messenger's attempts, using promises, threats and violent curses, to persuade her to meet the god. This *hieros gamos* myth about the meeting between a god and a female from the gods' enemies, the giants, was used to explain pre-Christian royal ideology: the fruit of this union, King Fjǫlnir, became the ancestor of the Swedish and Norwegian royal dynasties.[22]

Thor is the main character in several poems. *Hymiskviða*, 'The Lay of Hymir', shows his fight with the Midgard serpent, a theme we also find depicted in stone carvings from the Viking Age, showing Thor and the giant Hymir in a boat on the sea (Plate 9). Thor has caught the monster on his great fish-hook and is raising his hammer to despatch it when the frightened giant cuts the fishing-line with his knife. This snapshot presumes knowledge of poems like *Hymiskviða*, telling the myth in which the giant is a mediator between the god and the monster, the latter being a part of the cosmos in pre-Christian thinking. *Þrymskviða* tells a myth which is probably closer to the duality of Christianity. Here, the giant Thrym steals Thor's hammer (Plate 11), the most important defence of the gods, and demands marriage to Freyja to return it. In a burlesque trick – Thor, the manliest of the gods, is dressed up as the bride – the giant is fooled, and he and all his tribe are killed. The myth is a counterpart to that of Freyr and Gerd, where the god and the giantess are united. A marriage between a goddess and a male giant, however, was unacceptable in the mythical way of thinking, as it would mean that the gods lost their mastery of the cosmos.

Most of the *Edda*'s heroic poems have themes from legends about the Volsungs and Niflungs. This complex of legends is also known from the later German *Nibelungenlied* from c. 1200, and there are references to it in the Old English *Beowulf* (eighth century to c. 1000). In Scandinavia, these stories of Sigurd *fáfnisbani* (the slayer of Fáfnir, the dragon), his wife Gudrun, and her brothers Gunnar and Hogni, were popular in both the Viking Age and the Middle Ages, as can be seen from a range of carvings from most of the areas settled by Scandinavians, from the Isle of Man in the west to Sweden in the east (Figure 4).[23]

22 G. Steinsland, *Det hellige bryllup og norrøn kongeideologi: En analyse av hierogamimyten i Skírnismál, Ynglingatal, Háleygjatal og Hyndluljóð* (Oslo, 1991).

23 S. Margeson, 'The Vǫlsung legend in medieval art', in F. G. Andersen et al. (eds.), *Medieval Iconography and Narrative: A Symposium* (Odense, 1980), pp. 183–211.

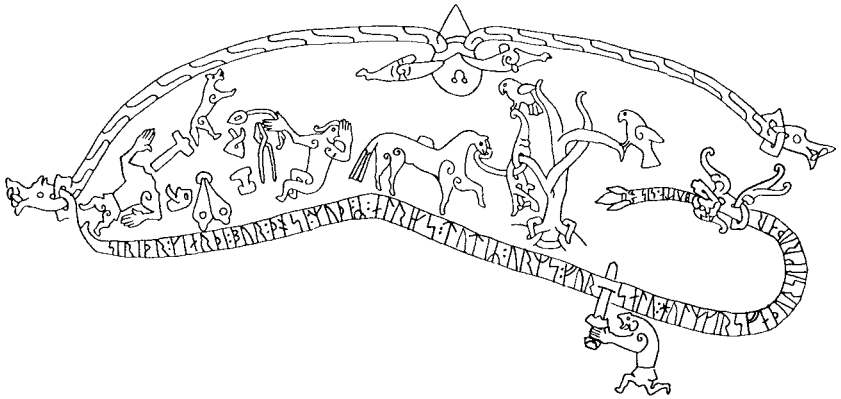

Figure 4 The story of the Germanic hero Sigurd *fáfnisbani* (the dragon-slayer) carved as a runic inscription on the Ramsund rock, Södermanland, Sweden. Eleventh century.

The dating of the surviving Eddic poems is a much-debated question and we have no guarantees that the same poems existed in pre-Christian times, indeed, it seems most likely that they developed through several centuries of oral tradition. The very question about the age of the surviving poems is probably misguided, as change is in the nature of oral composition and it is only with the advent of writing that a fixed form becomes important. We know that the metrical form of the poems is old and we can assume that their contents, the myths and legends, go back to the Viking Age. The rest is a variation on narrative, knowledge and theme, a variation that continued for centuries. It is likely that the best poets and performers created poems that lasted for a long time.

Vǫluspá, comprising the whole heathen world view in its powerful vision, is probably such a poem, remembered without major alterations from when it was created in the last phase of heathendom as a conscious response to Christian ideology. Some of the poems seem more archaic in language and form than others. The heroic poem *Atlakviða*, telling of Gudrun's second husband, Atli – historically the same as Attila, king of the Huns – who betrays her brothers and has them killed, is possibly an old poem, fortuitously preserved in its Viking Age form.

The geographical origins of the Eddic poems are just as much debated as their age. They were all written down in Iceland but it is likely that similar poems were known throughout Scandinavia in the Viking Age. Some of the surviving poems were probably known in Norway, which had a common language with Iceland, and may even have originated there. Danish heroic

poems are known from Saxo's Latin translation in his history of Denmark, *Gesta Danorum* from c. 1200 (see Chapters 8(b) and 15).[24]

Unlike Eddic poetry, the matter and function of *skaldic poems* are located in actual situations. As the term indicates, they were composed by professional poets, the skalds. We usually know their names and many of them appear in the sagas. Skalds composed poems about the deeds of princes, their own experiences, love for a woman, or hatred for an enemy. An important aspect of a skald's art was improvisation and he could use a skaldic stanza in repartee. There are many examples of this in the sagas of Icelanders and, even if they are not all genuine, they give, like the kings' sagas, a credible picture of the skalds' activities. While Eddic poems are traditional and impersonal in form, the skald cultivated individual artistry in his compositions. The poem was his original and personal contribution, by which he wished to be remembered. The skald's real audience was the prince and his court, and the core of surviving skaldic poetry is court poetry.

The earliest skalds we know were ninth-century Norwegians. Brage 'the Old' Boddason composed *Ragnarsdrápa* for the Danish Viking king Ragnar Lothbrok, describing the mythological pictures on a painted shield, including Thor's fight with the Midgard serpent. Also most probably from the ninth century is the *Ynglingatal* of Tjodolv, which deals with the legendary kings of Sweden and the Vestfold kings of Norway and their modes of death in thirty-seven stanzas. Living during the transition from heathendom to Christianity, Eyvind Finnsson composed the impressive memorial poem *Hákonarmál* for the Norwegian king Håkon the Good in 961.

Several of the great Icelandic skalds were later depicted in the sagas of Icelanders, notably Egill Skalla-Grímsson, whose saga has preserved most of his improvised poetry plus three *drápur*, longer poems. We know the court poets mainly from the kings' sagas, where their poetry was quoted for purposes of both documentation and embellishment. Among the Icelandic poets who made careers at the courts of Scandinavian kings, Sighvatr Thórðarson composed for both St Olaf and his son Magnus in Norway, as well as for Knut the Great in Denmark. Sighvatr was also an ambassador for King Olaf, demonstrating the high social status of the skald.

No art was more admired than that of the skalds. They were patronised by kings and earls, and their best stanzas unite great art with intellectual depth. It is a personal poetry, in which the poet shows what he can achieve, which is why the skalds laid so much emphasis on artistic form. The great

24 K. Friis-Jensen, *Saxo Grammaticus as Latin Poet* (Rome, 1987).

skalds demonstrated a very subtle consciousness of form and their metres are the most intricate that have ever been developed in Scandinavian literature.

The most common metre was the aforementioned *dróttkvætt* which, like the Eddic *fornyrðislag*, consists of an eight-line stanza with alliteration, but in addition the stanza has regular half-rhyme and full rhyme within the lines. Word order is very free and skalds regularly used a technique whereby two or three sentences were intertwined in a way which makes finding the correct syntax a task in itself.

The most characteristic aspect of skaldic style is found in what are called *kennings*, metaphorical circumlocutions that resemble riddles. The kenning consists of a base word, and a determinant which makes it possible to solve the riddle. For example, 'horse of the sea' is a circumlocution for 'ship': the base word is 'horse' and the determinant is 'of the sea'. Kennings are often based on a legend or myth. Thus, 'the burden of dwarfs' is a kenning for 'sky', because the myth relates that the gods made the sky out of Ymir's skull and placed a dwarf in each of the four corners of the world to hold it up. 'Freyja's tears' is a kenning for 'gold', because Freyja wept tears of gold. A kenning can be expanded with further elements, so that 'gold' could become 'the dew of Freyja's eyelashes', where tears are the dew of eyelashes.

A stanza composed by Eyvind Finnsson for the Norwegian king Harald Grey-fur can be cited as an example of skaldic art.[25] The alliterations are marked by bold type, the half- and full rhymes by italics:

Bárum, ***U**llr*, um ***a**lla*,
ímun*lauk*s, á *hauk*a
*fjǫll*um **F**ýris*vall*a
***f**ræ* Hákonar *æ*vi;
nú hefir **f**ólk*stríð*ir ***F**róð*a
fá*glýj*aðra *þýj*a
***m**eld*r í **m**óður *hold*i
mellu *dolg*s um *folg*in.

A literal translation in prose word order would be: Ull of the battle-leek! We carried the seed-corn of the Fyris plains on the hawk-mountains for the whole of Hákon's life; now the enemy of the people has hidden the flour of Frodi's joyless slave-women in the flesh of the mother of the giant-woman's enemy.

25 The stanza is also commented on in Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*; and by K. von See, *Skaldendichtung: Eine Einführung* (München and Zürich, 1980).

To understand the stanza, we have to interpret its kennings. The skald begins by addressing the king and calling him 'Ull of the battle-leek'. A 'battle-leek' (and here we have to imagine its blade above the ground) is a kenning for 'sword' and Ull is a god's name, so the 'god of the battle-leek' is the warrior, the king. The 'seed-corn of the plains of Fyris' is 'gold', based on the legend of the heroic Danish king, Rolv *kraki*, who strewed the gold behind him when fleeing with his champions from the army of the Swedish king. The 'hawk-mountains' are the 'arms' on which a hawk sits when the hawker is out hunting. In the second half of the stanza, King Harald Grey-fur is called the 'enemy of the people'. The 'flour of the joyless slave-women of Frode' is a new kenning for 'gold', referring to the legend in which the Danish king Frode used two giant-women Fenja and Menja as slaves to turn the grinding mill Grotti, which produced gold and not flour. Finally, the 'flesh of the mother of the giant-woman's enemy' is a multi-element mythological kenning. The 'enemy of giant-women' is the god Thor. Thor's mother is Jord (Earth), and her flesh is the earth.

A brief paraphrase of the stanza would be 'When Håkon was king, we wore gold on our arms. Now you, King Harald, have buried it in the earth.' Thus, Håkon was generous, as a king should be, but Harald is a tight-fisted and therefore despicable king. Through the kennings, the two historical kings are each compared with a legendary king: Håkon with the ideal king Rolv and Harald with the unlucky Frode. Thus, skaldic poetry could be political, too.

Ornamental and figurative art

The Viking Age was notably fond of decoration, probably in all social classes. Art, both ornamental and figurative, was vital, confident and common throughout Scandinavia.[26] It strove for contrast, colour and harmonic movement. It was a heavily stylised and mainly applied art, unfurling in a lively fashion on functional (in the broadest sense) objects of every kind: ships, sledges, buildings, furniture, brooches, bowls, cups and much else besides (Plates 12 and 14). Apart from two groups of memorial stones (the decorated rune stones and the picture stones from the Baltic island of Gotland) (Plate 13),

26 D. M. Wilson, and O. Klindt-Jensen, *Viking Art* (London, 1966, repr. 1980); Graham-Campbell, *Viking Artefacts*, passim; S. H. Fuglesang, 'Art', in Roesdahl and Wilson, *From Viking to Crusader*, pp. 178–83; Roesdahl and Wilson, *From Viking to Crusader*, passim; S. H. Fuglesang, 'Viking art', in Ph. Pulsiano (ed.), *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (New York and London, 1993), pp. 694–700; Graham-Campbell, *Cultural Atlas,* pp. 98–9 and passim; D. M. Wilson, *Vikingatidens konst* (*Signums svenska konsthistoria*, 2, Lund, 1994).

almost all surviving art objects are purely secular, unlike in contemporary Christian Europe. Many survive because they acquired a secondary function as grave goods in heathen burials.

Ornamental art had its roots in the fifth century AD and the motifs were primarily stylised animals. Whether an imported influence from western Europe or an independent Scandinavian creation, a specific type of animal ornament – the gripping beast – entered Scandinavian art towards the beginning of the Viking Age. It is a lively, strong beast with a head seen from the front and feet gripping everything. It remained popular for nearly 200 years (Plate 15). Animal motifs remained dominant throughout the Viking Age, but birds, snakes, ribbons and knots also appeared and, from the middle of the tenth century, western European plant ornaments stimulated the further development of animal ornament. Masks are also seen but human figures are otherwise rare.

We no longer know how contemporaries understood these motifs. Most likely they were mainly decorative and without any specific meaning, although some may have had a particular significance. This is especially true of the great beast (probably a lion) entwined with a snake, which was introduced on King Harald Bluetooth's large rune stone at Jelling when Christianity was publicly introduced into Denmark (see Chapter 7) (Figure 5; Plates 21 and 22): this remained an important motif in art for over a century and a half, in the end mainly on jewellery.

There was also a narrative art,[27] in a characteristically semi-naturalistic style, clearly distinct from the idiom of ornamental art. Most significant in the surviving material is the group of large picture stones from Gotland, traditionally dated to the eighth and ninth centuries, although some of them may be up to a hundred years later. Some of the scenes can be identified with myths or legends known from Old Norse literature. A few monuments in stone from elsewhere in Scandinavia or from areas of the British Isles with Viking settlement (e.g. the Isle of Man) have narrative art in the same style and with the same type of motifs: the heathen god Thor's fishing trip or the story of Sigurd *fáfnisbani* (see above). Images from myths and legends used to decorate shields and the walls of halls are described in skaldic poems, and from

27 See note 26; S. Lindqvist, *Gotlands Bildsteine*, 1–2 (Stockholm, 1941–2); R. Bailey, *Viking Age Sculpture in Northern England* (London, 1980); S. H. Fuglesang, 'Ikonographie der skandinavischen Runensteine der jüngeren Wikingerzeit', in H. Roth (ed.), *Zum Problem der Deutung frühmittelalterlicher Bildinhalte* (Sigmaringen, 1986), pp. 183–210; E. Nylén and J. P. Lamm, *Stones, Ships and Symbols* (Stockholm, 1988); P. M. C. Kermode, *Manx Crosses. With an Introduction by David M. Wilson* (Angus, 1994, 2nd edn; 1st edn 1906).

Figure 5 Three sides of the Jelling stone, Denmark, c. 970.

the very end of the Viking Age we have some Christian pictures. But despite much research only a few of these images can be identified and understood today.

Woodcarving was undoubtedly the most important form of artistic expression, probably along with textiles. However, objects of metal (especially bronze, silver and gold) survive the best, often as clothing fasteners in a range of qualities. Some fasteners were mass-produced, and a variety of techniques were employed. Other materials were also used, whale- and other bone, antler of deer, elk and reindeer, walrus tusk, and amber (Plates 14 and 16). Relief effects were favoured, with contrasts of materials and colours as well as the play of plain and ornamented surfaces. A brooch could be of gilt bronze with silver and niello; a stirrup could have patterns in silver and copper against

black iron; gold and silver jewellery was often embellished with filigree and granulation. These techniques were then imitated in cheaper moulded and gilt bronze jewellery.

Larger items of wood and stone were often painted, as we can see from traces of colour on furniture, shields, building timber and rune stones, for instance, as well as from references in skaldic poems and in some Swedish rune stone inscriptions. Sometimes we are told the names of both the carver and the painter – rune stones are the only signed works of art from the Viking Age in Scandinavia. The colours it has been possible to reconstruct were bright and usually several were used to create contrast and clarity. Black, white and red were common, but brown, yellow, blue and green are also known. Clothing was also brightly multi-coloured and sometimes had embroidered patterns, as can be seen from the fragments in the chieftain's grave from Mammen, Denmark.[28]

The ornamental idiom developed quickly in the Viking Age, and the art is usually classified into different styles: Style III:E (emphasising continuity with earlier art), Borre style, Jellinge style, Mammen style, Ringerike style and Urnes style (Plate 20). Most are named after the sites at which good examples of the style have been found and, with the exception of the Borre and Jelling styles, which were more or less contemporaneous, each developed out of and supplanted its predecessor. This development happened partly as a result of external influences, especially from England and from the Frankish and German empires. Older theories about influences from Ireland or the Orient are not supported by the evidence and today scholars generally emphasise internal development and continuity.

Scandinavian art had some effect on art in those areas of England, Ireland and Russia which had Scandinavian settlement, but not as far as we know in Normandy. In England and on the Isle of Man, stone monuments continued to be produced by the Scandinavianised population, sometimes decorated in a local version of Scandinavian styles. Some of the most interesting are the tenth-century stone cross, about 4.5 m high, from Gosforth in Cumbria, with both heathen and Christian images (Plate 17), and the house-shaped gravestones called 'hogbacks' in northern England. Some of these, notably in Brompton, have muzzled bears of unknown significance at the gable ends. The early eleventh-century gravestone from St Paul's churchyard in London

28 On colours, see references cited in note 26, passim; Roesdahl, *Viking Age Denmark*, p. 187; Jansson, *Runes,* pp. 153–61; M. Iversen (ed.), *Mammen: Grav, kunst og samfund i vikingetid* (Århus, 1991), p. 123–53.

(and thus from Knut the Great's time), inscribed with runes and decorated in the Ringerike style, is however a purely Scandinavian product.[29]

Besides formal art there are also some graffiti. As everywhere, such pictures are quick sketches of whatever was in the carver's sight or mind. A comb from Sigtuna in Sweden shows the Christ Child, elsewhere we see some elegant ornament or animals, but most commonly the graffiti show ships with elegantly curved prows.

Architecture

The four Danish circular fortresses – Trelleborg (Plate 18), Nonnebakken, Fyrkat and Aggersborg – demonstrate Scandinavian prestige architecture. These and other large sites also show that Scandinavian kings and engineers were just as capable of complicated spatial planning as they were of planning large military actions. The circular fortresses were put up by King Harald Bluetooth around 980 and were used for only a short time, but they belong to a series of large building projects from his reign. The fortresses vary in size from Aggersborg's 240 m internal diameter to Fyrkat's 120 m. The construction materials were turf, earth and timber. The earthwork was a perfect circle with gates at the four points of the compass. These gates were linked by streets both through the centre of the fortress and around the inside of the earthwork. Each quadrant of the fortress had large, equal-sized houses arranged in quadrangles.[30]

No standing buildings survive from the period, but excavations and reused timber give an impression of what they were like. Thus, there are good examples of large houses from the circular fortresses. Only postholes survived, but these showed that the houses were built of timber with straight gable-ends and curved long walls, which meant that the ridge and surfaces of the roof were also curved. A full-scale reconstruction of one of the houses from Fyrkat (c. 28 m in length) has been undertaken: the result is a vibrant and supple building (Plate 19). Upper-class secular buildings were most likely

29 See note 26; Bailey, *Viking Age Sculpture*; J. Graham-Campbell, 'From Scandinavia to the Irish Sea: Viking Art reviewed', in M. Ryan (ed.), *Ireland and Insular Art A.D. 500–1200* (Dublin, 1987), pp. 144–52; Roesdahl and Wilson, *From Viking to Crusader*, pp. 74–87, 96–105, cat. nos. 259–312, 365–431; Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, pp. 168–77 and passim; Kermode, *Manx Crosses*.

30 O. Olsen and H. Schmidt, *Fyrkat: En jysk vikingeborg*, I: *Borgen og bebyggelsen* (København, 1977); E. Roesdahl, 'The Danish geometrical Viking fortresses and their context', in *Anglo-Norman Studies*, 9 (*Proceedings of the Battle Conference 1986*, 1987), pp. 208–26; E. Roesdahl, 'Prestige, display and monuments in Viking Age Scandinavia', in H. Galinié (ed.), *Les Mondes Normands (VIII^e–XII^e s.)* (Caen, 1989), pp. 17–25.

decorated with carvings, as we can see from re-used timber in late Viking Age churches such as that at Urnes in Norway (Plate 20) and Hørning in Denmark.[31]

Sacred buildings are hardly known from the heathen period. The monumental architecture of this time consisted of large burial and memorial mounds, and stone settings in the form of ships. The building of a mound involved the precise calculation of size, shape and outline. They were built of carefully laid turf, and in the chieftain's grave at Ladby, Denmark, a circle of closely packed posts was found, marking the foot of the mound and preventing its slipping outward.[32] Today, the mounds are greatly reduced: they have collapsed inwards, the foot has slipped outwards and the shape has often been disturbed by human activity.

At Jelling, the mounds, ship-setting and rune stones, all of royal dimensions, formed a series of colossal landscape sculptures (Plates 21 and 22). Archaeological investigations and dendrochronological datings in recent decades have shed new light on its complicated construction history. There were three main building phases stretching through several decades around the middle and second half of the tenth century. It started as a heathen dynastic monument in two distinct phases, begun by King Gorm and enlarged by his son Harald Bluetooth, but after the official acceptance of Christianity in Denmark around 965, the same Harald turned it into a Christian dynastic monument including a large church. The original axis, defined by a ship-setting probably about 170 m long, was retained, even though the ship-setting – the largest in Scandinavia – was destroyed by this transformation into a Christian monument. King Harald's great decorated rune stone still stands on its original spot, on the axis just south of the present church (built c. 1100) and precisely halfway between the two great mounds, the focal point of the Christian site (Figure 5). Its inscription reads: 'King Harald ordered these monuments to be made in honour of his father, Gorm, and his mother, Tyre – that Harald who won for himself all Denmark, and Norway, and made the Danes Christian.' With its long inscription in horizontal rows and its large images, the stone appears to have been partly inspired by Christian manuscript art. The north mound was originally a heathen burial mound built for Harald's father King Gorm and closed around 958–9. After the introduction of Christianity some years later, Gorm was probably moved to the grave which has been found in Jelling's first

31 Olsen and Schmidt, *Fyrkat*; Schmidt, *Building Customs*.

32 O. Olsen, *Hørg, hov og kirke: Historiske og arkæologiske vikingetidsstudier* (København, 1966); Roesdahl, *Viking Age Denmark*, pp. 163–8; T. Capelle, 'Schiffsetzungen', *Praehistorische Zeitschrift*, 61:1 (1986), pp. 1–63.

church. The south mound was also built in this earliest Christian period, without a burial and probably as a cenotaph and memorial or for public ceremonies performed on its large flat top.[33]

The Jelling monuments were created for royal display in the final years of heathendom and the first years of Christianity. The monuments from both these periods are the biggest of their kind in Denmark and (apart from the ship-setting) they could remain side by side when the new faith became the country's official religion. It is noteworthy that in his Christian rebuilding, King Harald used traditional Scandinavian monuments (like the rune stone and the mound) as far as possible, but in a new way, and that there was still a focus on the dynasty. The architecture of Jelling gives a clear signal of continuity and emphasis on traditional culture, despite the conversion to Christianity. No doubt this was also a political message.

The view that the people of the Viking Age were romantic, primitive and sometimes noble barbarians is a construction that came out of a symbiosis of the nineteenth century's view of culture, the lapidary and foreign accounts of heathen men's harryings in the Viking Age, and the dramatic tales told in the outstanding literature of the later Norse sagas. This view was supported by the national romantic art of the nineteenth century, inspired by the same sources.[34] Recently, this view has changed in tandem with both our increased archaeological knowledge about conditions in Scandinavia and a new approach to textual sources, as well as a new view of culture and many years' interdisciplinary research into the period.

33 K. J. Krogh, 'The royal Viking-Age monuments in Jelling in the light of recent archaeological excavations', *Acta Archaeologica*, 53 (1982), pp. 183–218; Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, pp. 161–5 and passim; K. J. Krogh and O. Olsen, 'From paganism to Christianity', in S. Hvass and B. Storgaard (eds.), *Digging into the Past: 25 Years of Archaeology in Denmark* (Copenhagen, 1993), pp. 233–6; K. J. Krogh, *Gåden om Kong Gorms Grav: historien om Nordhøjen i Jelling* (København, 1993).

34 H. Zettel, *Das Bild der Normannen und der Normanneneinfalle in westfränkischen, ostfränkischen und angelsächsischen Quellen des 8. bis 11. Jahrhunderts* (München, 1977); R. Page, *'A most vile people'* (*The Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture in Northern Studies*, London, 1986); E. Roesdahl and P. Meulengracht Sørensen (eds.), *The Waking of Agantyr: The Scandinavian Past in European Culture* (Århus, 1996); D. M. Wilson, *Vikings and Gods in European Art* (Højbjerg, 1997).