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Jennbert, Kristina

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

ANIMAL MOUTHPIECES FOR HUMAN PROPERTIES AND IDENTITY – A SCANDINAVIAN PERSPECTIVE

Kristina Jennbert

Peoples' relations to animals and their various roles took many different expressions in the pre-Christian era. In certain contexts animals had practical functions, but in others they also had symbolic values. Animals were significant for humans in many different ways. Domesticated animals, wild beasts, and fabulous creatures were a part of different spheres of human life and were used in a variety of ways. We therefore find animals in most archaeological contexts. Domesticated animals are found above all as skeletal remains on farms, trading centres, in early protourban settlements and graves, while wild animals and fantasy animals are chiefly depicted on artefacts, picture-stones, and rune-stones. Rituals involving animals are attested from most of the pre-Christian period, indeed, all the way back to the Stone Age. The material traces signal attitudes to animals which are both similar to and different from today's. They therefore provide interesting perspectives on pre-Christian rituals and ideas, and not least on how people valued and related to animals using them as mouthpieces for properties and identity (Jennbert 2006, 2007, forthcoming).

Life style metaphors in grave rituals

Presumably, lifestyles and shared values were expressed in the death rituals. As in life, the staging of the dead person and their persona came to be visible in the ritual and in the ritualisation of the dead (Bell 1997), the animals and objects.

The burial custom could be characterized as a grave language, understood as a kind of montage, and significant for the persona of the dead but also an activator of norms and values, memories and traditions, net-working and regeneration, as well as religion and mentality in everyday life. The grave is a kind of montage of life style attributes, and a ritualisation of the dead within the setting of nearby farms and villages. The graves are installations of wealth and materiality, and rich equipped burials have a large package of attributes for several lifestyles and identities (e.g. Connerton 1989; Gurevich 1992, Jennbert 2006).

Ways of burying people have varied in the course of history. A recurrent theme, however, is the ritual use of animals in connection with death and burial. Finds of

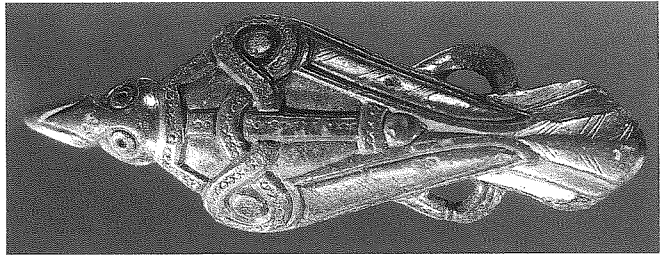


Fig. 1: Bird brooch U 560 from Uppåkra, Skåne, Sweden. Photo: Bengt Almgren. Historical Museum, Lunds University.

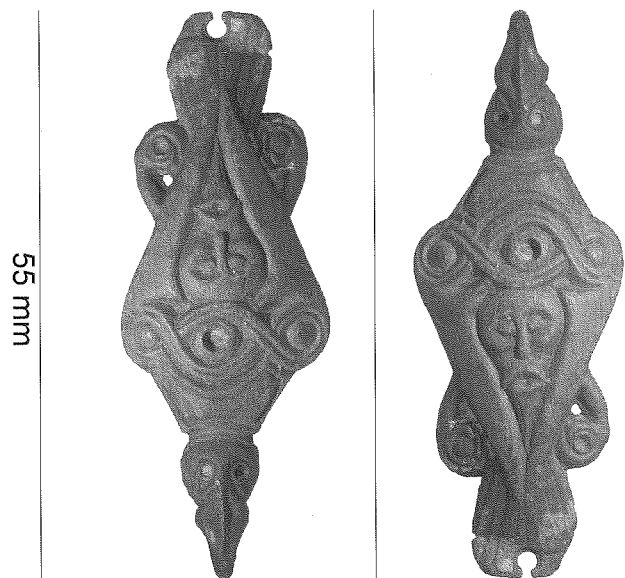


Fig. 2: Whose identity? Two perspectives of bird fibulae U 263 from Uppåkra, Skåne, Sweden. Photo: Bengt Almgren. Historical Museum, Lunds University.

bones suggest that people in certain contexts discarded dead humans and animals in a similar way. In certain periods, for example, dogs and horses were buried in special graves which closely resembled those of humans. In the 3rd century it became more common to deposit large body parts or complete bodies of a domesticated animal in human graves. Horses, sheep, goats, cattle, pigs, dogs, cats, hens, and birds of prey are animals that



Fig. 3: Falconry in practice with a Russian steppe eagle (Photo Kristina Jennbert 2007)

often occur in graves from the Scandinavian Iron Age, e.g. AD 200-1000 (Jennbert 2004, Jennbert 2006). This suggests that there was general prosperity and that humans and animals were very close at this time. The question is whether the choice of these animals was a confirmation of the strong personality of the deceased or his/her hunting skill, or ownership. One example of an interpretation of life style metaphors is the bird brooches, and birds of prey, with connotations of falconry (Jennbert 2007).

The bird brooches and falconry

The bird brooches belong to the south Scandinavian material equipment of the 7th century (Figure 1), usually as single finds, as in Scania (Strömberg 1961:116f), and Öland; a few are also found in Norway (Ørsnes 1955:149). However, especially on Bornholm, there are fibulae in female graves, in pairs or single as part of

a jewellery collection on the woman's breast (Ørsnes 1966:101ff; Jørgensen 1990:31f; Jørgensen et al 1997). The pictorial language communicates a bird body. The question is what kind of species is represented, and if it is generally possible to identify the species of birds from an art object? The perspective of the bird is an artistic design created by the artisans' skills and perception. The bird constitutes a sign with codes and elements of some understandable and recognized forms for people at that time.

Surely, the brooches had messages for the viewer. Yet, how could we as modern people decode this message in fragmentary surviving, ancient cultural material? The following interpretation of the bird brooches and the bird images is an associative argument between different archaeological and written sources in Scandinavia and the Continent, besides my own fascination with birds and falconry.

A closer study of the ornaments reveals an interpretation based on the form and stance of the bird's body. The stout aerofoil of the shoulders and the folded wings with the claws in a diving position suggests that the image represents a bird of prey. Untruly, the pictorial language signals a raven as has been put forward, even if a sitting raven's backside would be a possibility.

The bird brooches found in women's graves evoke falconry, an aristocratic form of hunting which is also attested by the bones in richly equipped graves, and the brooches and mountings with birds of prey in profile. Surely, the falconry links with the aristocratic consumption of game, perhaps for the table but also as an icon for wealth and social abilities.

The bones of birds of prey are predominantly found in graves, but bones of ravens are found nowhere; neither in graves nor at settlements or ritual places. Chronologically, birds of prey are buried in graves over a period of 500 years with the earliest at the end of the 5th century at Vendlas barrow located in the middle of Sweden (Seiler 2001, Tyrberg 2002). They are mainly situated in Eastern Middle Sweden, but a few of them are found slightly southwards, but not in southern Scandinavia. Large mounds with male and female cremations, bodies of horses and dogs, parts of sheep, goat and cattle were equipped with luxury commodities, partly from abroad (Vretemark 1983; Sten and Vretemark 1988; Tyrberg 2002)

The association between bird brooches and birds of prey, and a male face to female jewellery makes the wearer and the male person quite interesting (Figure 2). Whose is the prey? The bird fibulae and the association with falconry decode both a social identity and a lifestyle, expressed in the aesthetics of the time. Obviously, the bird brooches signal a message within the social elite, between men and women, and in Continental networking with eastern and western directions. The gender issues are supported with ideological preferences at the time.

The interpretation of the bird brooches as representations of birds of prey and falconry rely on associations between archaeological and written sources from the time in question.

Falconry is a skill, and a lifestyle. People have trained falcons and hawks for hunting for over a thousand years. Falconry is a co-operative scheme between the falconer and the bird of prey developed over many years (Figure 3). Falconry is supposed to have been introduced to Europe from Eastern Europe, perhaps already pictorially expressed in the gold bracteates of the 6th century (Åkerström Hougen 1974).

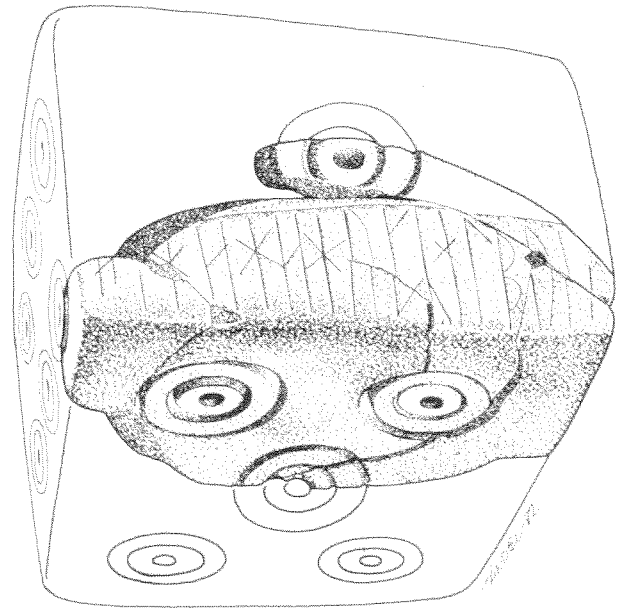


Fig. 4: The dice from Vallentuna, Sweden ca 600AD (after Sjösvärd et al. 1983)



Fig. 5: Gold bracteate with an image of ambiguous quadrupeds, Ravlunda, Ravlunda sn, Scania, Sweden (after Thomsen 1857, Table VIII, no .144)

The earliest legislation on falconry is the Salic Laws during the reign of Clovis I, the first king of the Franks (ca. 500 AD):

“If anybody steals a hawk from a tree, and he is proved guilty, besides the return (of the object) and the informer’s fee, he shall be judged liable to the extent of 120 dinarii, which makes up 3 solidi. 2. If anybody steals a hawk from a perch, let him be judged liable to the extent of 600 dinarii, which make up 15 solidi. 3. If anybody steals a hawk from inside the household, and he be found guilty, let him be judged liable the extent of 1800 dinarii, which make up 45 solidi, besides the return (of the object) and the informer’s fee. Add 1. If anybody steals a sparrowhawk let him be judged liable to the extent of 120 dinarii, which make up 3 solidi, besides the return (of the object) and the informer’s fee”. (after Epstein 1943:506)

But there were also other similar laws in other Western countries, which presumes that the falconry already had existed, but also that the sport had become very popular – a fashion of the time (Åkerström-Hougen 1974).

Evidently falconry was a custom which was widespread in the upper classes, as we can also interpret from Scandinavian archaeological contexts. In the Vallentuna burial (around 600AD), a very well equipped male cremation just north of Stockholm, Sweden, the grave goods include one horse, four dogs, steaks of sheep, cattle and pig, birds of prey and their prey, luxury goods among them a dice with runes, which are interpreted as “hawk” (Figure 4) as the name of the dead warrior (rinker) (Sjösvärd et al. 1983).

Animal language – the Nordic style

People let animals speak for themselves. Beasts of prey, birds, serpents, and fantasy animals were part of the imagery, for example, on ornaments and weapons, picture-stones and runestones. Certain objects were produced in large series, for instance the Vendel Period beak fibulae, bird fibulae, and fish fibulae, and the animal-headed brooches of the Viking Age. The ornaments are decorated with the basic theme of a bird, fish, or other animal body.

From the 5th century and well into the Christian period, objects belonging to both the male and the female sphere were decorated with animals and imaginary creatures. An eye, a foot, a thigh, and a head from some domesticated or wild animal were often put together to give a fantastic animal in an ingenious pattern. This style of art is usually called Norse animal ornamentation. Serpents, birds, wild boar, and quadrupeds also adorn artfully stamped gold bracteates and other splendid

objects of precious metal. Norse animal ornamentation, with its complex zoomorphic motifs, changed in the course of the Late Iron Age, however. Finally the animal motifs were taken so far that they became totally illegible to those who were not familiar with the symbolic meanings of the style. This zoomorphic language probably reflects a link between the Norse areas and continental Christian Europe. From these contacts, Norse animal ornamentation developed its distinctive imagery which contained information about the owner’s identity and their beliefs concerning divine powers.

The zoomorphic motifs are usually composed of several different animals. A quadruped, for example, could be given pig’s feet and bird’s claws and horns like a goat or cow (Figure 5). Norse animal ornamentation is overflowing with figures of such ambiguous species. Fantastic beasts composed of serpents, dragons, birds, and humans are ingeniously depicted with their faces in profile or *en face*, with separated or joined body parts, and with what seems to be a specifically composed language of body gestures.

The animal ornamentation with its images of transformations between human and animal was a kind of animal language used by influential people and probably vis-à-vis mighty powers. In Norse mythology, many-sided and powerful beings are not portrayed as a definite species. They were something in-between real beings and imaginary creatures. Their properties meant that they could act freely and flexibly to solve serious problems. Transforming beings played a major part in Norse cosmology, both at the creation of the world and at its destruction. Transforming beings enabled unlimited possibilities, and power.

The merger of culture and nature

Rituals and transformations of animals and blends of human and animal in pictorial art link the archaeological evidence with the Icelandic narratives and the art of poetry itself. The material expressions also give a background to interpretations of personal names, attendant spirits (*fylgjur*) in animal form, and shape-changing. People’s relations to animals and the role of animals thus become more distinct and more nuanced.

Personal names in the Viking Age and Early Middle Ages reveal people’s attitudes to animals (Janzén 1947, Jennbert 2003). Wild animals were common in the naming of persons, with bear, wolf, eagle and serpent dominating heavily, while fox, wild boar, beaver, raven, hawk, falcon and sparrow were less common. Among the domesticated animals, horse, cock, and goose occur occasionally as part of personal names. For some reason,

men had animal species in their names much more often than women. Perhaps animal qualities like speed, strength, courage or cunning were supposed to be transferred to the bearer of the name and could therefore be associated with the self-image of the family. The names could also be linked to good or evil forces, or to honour, power, and integrity. Personal names are therefore part of the merger of culture and nature that is found in Norse mythology.

Animal *fylgjur* in Icelandic literature are associated with male characteristics. Among the attendant spirits of the leading men, tame animals are represented by ox, goat, and boar. Those from untamed nature were fox, wolf, deer, bear, polar bear, swan, eagle, falcon, leopard, lion, and serpent. Imaginary beings such as giants, dragons, and fabulous birds could also protect men in leading positions. The animal *fylgjur* of the more anonymous men included cattle, pig, wolf, hawk, and other birds (Mundal 1974). An interesting aspect is that horses are not associated with animals as attendant spirits. Persons with animal names and animal *fylgjur* marked transformations between human and animal. Certain people also had the ability to change their shape temporarily. Domesticated animals from farm contexts and wild animals from the Norse fauna contrast with the more exotic animals. Polar bear, lion, and leopard testify to far-reaching contacts since these animals did not occur naturally in Scandinavia. There is thus no agreement between the animal species in the fauna of *fylgjur* and the species found in the archaeological record. Perhaps the transformed bodies in the applied art and interwoven animal and humans can be compared with the shape changers of which we hear in mythological tales and sagas? These tell how mortals and gods, above all Odin and Loki, could change their appearance. They could act outside their own bodies, for example, swimming or flying, concealing themselves, or deceiving others. They could also play other parts by transforming themselves into animals. What a power to own for a prestigious person!

Mouthpieces for human properties

Animals and zoomorphic images in the archaeological sources provide a background to the myths involving animals. It is clear that animals play a significant part in Norse mythology. Odin's horse, Thor's he-goats, and Freyja's cats are examples of central animal figures in the lives of the gods. The background, however, gives a much more varied picture of the role of animals than we see in Snorri's *Edda*. The animal species in the archaeological sources which relate to ritual practice are much more numerous than what we find in the texts.

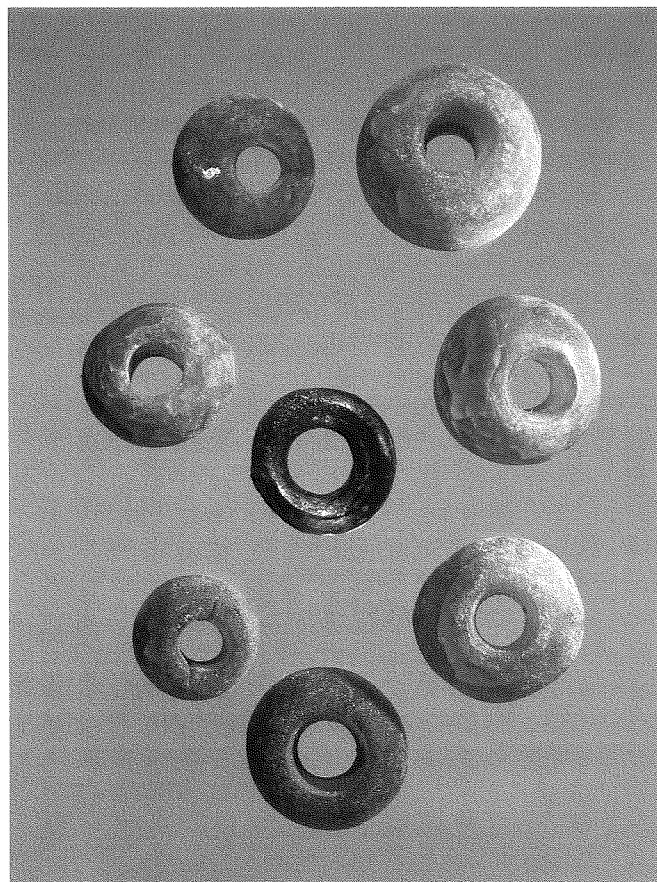


Fig. 6: Amber beads and a small bronze bead in the deposit of two female sheep, Agerbygård, Bornholm. Photo: Bengt Almgren. Historical Museum, Lunds University.

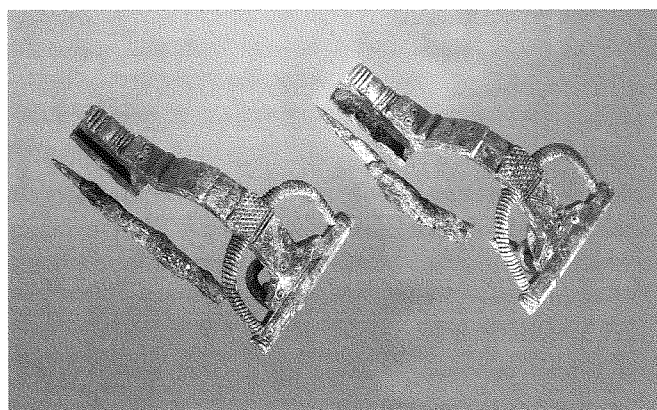


Fig. 7: Two identical brooches in the deposit of two female sheep, Agerbygård, Bornholm. Photo: Bengt Almgren. Historical Museum, Lunds University.

In addition, the domesticated animals seem more important and symbolic in the archaeological sources than in the *Edda*. There are nevertheless some narratives which describe domesticated animals, for example, the tales of the animals at Alfheim, a farm that was famous for its pig breeding. Wild animals, in contrast, are stressed more in Snorri's *Edda*. The archaeological images of serpents and dragons arouse associations with the dragon Fafnir and the Midgard Serpent Nidhogg, although the texts cannot directly explain the material traces. The most prominent animal both in Snorri's *Edda* and in the archaeological record is the horse. In *Skáldskaparmál* there is a stanza describing the importance of horses for the world: "Arvak and Allsvinn draw the sun, as was written above. Hrimfaxi or Fiorsvartnir draw the night, Skinfaxi or Glad go with the day." In the archaeological sources both horse and dog often appear in connection with funeral rituals (Sigvallius 1994). Dogs, on the other hand, have a low profile in the texts, with the exception of the dog Garm, who guarded the underworld until he broke free at Ragnarok. There is both an imbalance and a concordance between the different animals that occur in Snorri's *Edda* and the archaeological material. The prominence of special animals seems to have something to do with their relationship to leading groups both in the divine world and in pre-Christian society. The link, for example, between horses, important gods, and mortals is clear. There is an aristocratic and masculine bias in the recorded myths (Clunies Ross 1994), and it seems as if the Norse mythology, as it was written down, served as a historical background to an equally aristocratic and learned environment in the 13th century when it was committed to parchment.

The archaeological evidence shows that rituals usually have a long history and can be traced far back in time. Animals were actors in these rituals, serving different purposes. Domesticated animals were particularly important in rituals at houses and farms. A special find is the deposit of two sheep on the Agerbygård site on Bornholm. Two complete sheep were placed in a shallow pit when a building was to be erected on the site. Among the skeletons were two identical brooches, a small bronze bead, and seven amber beads (Figures 6, 7). The find can be dated to the time around AD 400. Animals were also significant at funerals and wetland rituals. Wild animals and fantasy creatures were significant for identity and cultural transformations. The long temporal perspective of archaeology thus gives us opportunities to distinguish how rituals with

animals underwent variation and change in the course of the first millennium AD. There were clear changes in mortuary practice in the 3rd century AD, and from that time we can detect rituals which survived throughout the Viking Age. It is possible that the different rituals were connected to special situations which had to do with events in a person's life cycle or special happenings in connection with peace agreements, war, conflicts or other traumatic experiences. Animals were evidently of great significance for the life of people at the time. Animals signal ownership and power, but they also say something about people's character. One can envisage that what was then perceived as "history" also gave identity and power. The animals' historical background was thus important for the way the rituals were performed. If one had knowledge of a very distant time, of myths and cosmological origins, one could reconnect oneself and one's family to this history by performing the rituals. Pre-Christian ritual practice can therefore be said both to have religious causes and to be an expression of contemporary values. Animal symbolism hints at everyday realities close to the grass-roots level of the farm, but also an aristocracy with all its need for political and ideological signals (e.g. Hedeager 2004; Jennbert 2004).

Animals were an important part of the human life-world, and they stand out as significant forces in the mythology in which fantasy creatures were created. Real animals and fantasy animals became mouthpieces for human characteristics and reflections of people's social position. With the aid of animals one could show who one was, and with animals one could moreover control the higher powers.

English translation by Alan Crozier



Kristina Jennbert a Swedish archeologist, situated at Lund University. I am fascinated by the potential of archaeology to study the life-world of human beings using a long temporal perspective. Material culture and materiality give millennia-long perspectives on people's differing cultural expressions, mentalities and lifestyles, as well as their cosmological understanding of the world around them and the social and political games played throughout human history. My research is chiefly geared to relations between humans and animals, the archaeology of religion, landscape archaeology, and the role of archaeology in society. Archaeology is a part of its own times and has ideological and political dimensions. It is therefore also important to scrutinize the ethical dimensions of archaeology and the pictures communicated about the past.

kristina.jennbert@ark.lu.se

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BEAVER IN THE ECONOMY AND SOCIAL COMMUNICATION OF THE INHABITANTS OF SOUTH ESTONIA IN THE VIKING AGE (800-1050 AD)

Heidi Luik

Abstract

Among the faunal remains from South Estonian sites of the Viking Age, beaver bones are quite numerous. Pendants of beaver astragali and teeth are also found at these sites. The high percentage of beaver bones and their fragmentation suggests that beaver was both a fur animal and a food animal. Apparently beaver had an important role in the economy of the inhabitants of South Estonian sites. It has been presumed that the wealth of some hillfort settlements in the Viking Age was based on the trade in beaver furs. The pendants of beaver bones evidently possessed a symbolic meaning in social communication of the Viking Age society; perhaps they marked a certain social group.

The Viking Age layers of South Estonian hillforts and settlements contain a large number of beaver bones as well as pendants of beaver bones and teeth. These finds suggest that beaver must have occupied an important place and significance in the local people's lives in that period. Was the significance of a practical economic nature, or did the pendants of beaver bones express something else?

Beaver bones from Viking Age sites

Of wild animal bones, elk and beaver are most numerous among the finds from South Estonian settlement sites and hillforts (Table; Figure 1). In the hillfort of Rõuge, beaver bones even outnumber elk bones (22.9%); in the settlement site at the foot of the hillfort beaver bones are slightly less in number than elk bones (22.3%) (Aun 1992, table 6). In Viljandi, beaver bones make up 20% of all bones from the Viking Age layer, and they are also relatively numerous (15.9%) in the disturbed layer, which mostly contained Viking Age finds (Rammo, Veldi 2005, 105, 110). By way of comparison it is interesting to note that beaver bones are also quite numerous on some Latvian sites (Table; Paaver 1965, table 10). At the hillfort of Krutik near Beloozero in Vepsa, bones of wild animals make up 71-79% of all faunal remains in different settlement layers; the percentage of beaver bones among them is 80-97% (Table; Golubeva et al. 1987, 63). Such large numbers of beaver bones proves that beaver occupied an important place in the economy of the

Viking Age population of South Estonia and neighbouring areas. The fact that bones were mostly crushed and preserved only fragmentarily, suggests that beaver was also used as a source of meat (Paaver 1956, 5). Written sources – the Arabian geographer and historian Abu Hamid al-Garnati's notes from his journey from Bulgaria to Hungary – mention the use of beaver meat by the Vepsians who lived east of Estonia, from the 12th century (Leimus, Kiudsoo 2004, 38). Beaver fur (Figure 2) was highly valued, which is also reflected in Oriental written sources; for example from the mid 9th century Persian scholar ibn Hurdadbih; from the 10th century Arabian geographer and historian ibn Hauqual and from the 12th century works of Abu Hamid al-Garnati (mentioned above). It has been presumed that the trade in beaver furs might have been the basis for the rise of hillfort settlements of that period (ibid.).

Pendants from beaver bones and teeth in Estonia

The important symbolic meaning and the general significance of beaver for the inhabitants of Viking Age South Estonia is indicated by finds of pendants from beaver bones and teeth at archaeological sites of that period. To date 24 pendants of beaver's astragali, from seven sites, and eight tooth pendants, from two sites, are known (Figure 3).

From Rõuge five astragalus pendants and at least six tooth pendants have been found – the upper part of some of beaver's teeth, where a hole was usually drilled, is broken and it is not clear whether these teeth were used as pendants (Figure 4; Luik, Maldre in print). The number of pendants found at the settlement and hillfort is nearly equal: three astragali and three tooth pendants were found from the hillfort and two astragali and three tooth pendants came from the settlement. From Otepää two astragali and two tooth pendants are known (Figure 5; Maldre 2001, table 2, fig. 12: h, l). Eight astragalus pendants were found at the settlement site of Kivivare; at the hillforts of Tartu and Unipiha one pendant has been found, two astragalus pendants come from the hillfort of Vooru (Tvauri 2001, 161, fig. 81: 1; Aun 1992, 68, pl. XXXI: 2, 5). Five pendants have been found at Viljandi (Rammo, Veldi 2005, 104, fig. 4; Valk 2006, 122, fig. 4: 4).

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BESTIAL MIRRORS

USING ANIMALS TO CONSTRUCT
HUMAN IDENTITIES IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE

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Edited by Aleksander Pluskowski, Günther Karl Kunst, Matthias Kucera, Manfred Bietak, Irmgard Hein

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