



CHAPTER 6

TRANSFORMATIVE THEFT OF PAST AND PRESENT

THE HUMAN–HORSE BOND REFLECTED IN THE BIOGRAPHY OF THE VIKING PERIOD GAUSEL BRIDLE

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Around 1150 years ago, a ship sailed across the North Sea, bearing loot from Ireland to the west coast of Norway. Among the treasures were several finely made ornamental fittings of Celtic style in gilded bronze. When the fittings arrived on the west coast, their high level of technical execution and fine artistic craftsmanship were recognized and appreciated. Rather than melting down the metal, the fittings were reused as a horse's bridle. At some point, the horse was decapitated and the head with the bridle was buried with a high-ranking woman, archaeologists call her 'the Gausel queen'. The find was excavated by a farmer in the 1860s, and subsequently kept in the collections of the University Museum of Bergen. In 2017, the fittings were stolen and one piece is still currently missing.

This contribution considers the role of horses in the pagan Iron Age as a background to the biography of the fittings. It further explores the notion of charismatic objects through time and space, from early Christian Ireland and its hoarding and fetishism of sacred treasures, to their transformation into the world of Viking paganism and the death cult associated with horses, to the current obsession with – and hero worship of – the long lost Viking past.

THE CHARISMA OF HORSES: AN INSTANCE OF THE IRON AGE

Where is the horse gone? Where is the rider? Where is the giver of treasure? Where are the seats at the feast? Where are the revels in the hall? Alas for the bright cup! Alas for the mailed warrior! Alas for the splendor of the prince! How that time has passed away, under the cover of night, as if it had never been!

The time of horses and heroes is aptly commemorated in the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Wanderer*, which renders insights into the Iron Age ethos of the lord and lady of the hall with their retainers, freely sharing loot and mead. Giving the horse primacy in the laments of *The Wanderer* signals its importance in this world.

In the pre-Christian societies of the Scandinavian Iron Age (500 BC–1030 AD), vestiges of horses are found in a variety of sources. These attest to the important role horses played in everyday life, as well as in the sphere of mythology and religious practice. Horse bones are frequently found in human burials and in bog sacrifices. Likewise, horse trappings and equipment are found in such contexts. Various forms of depictions of horses are also placed among grave goods. The Norse sagas and the Eddic poems spin webs of meaning around horses, and their role is revealed as, on a macro level—pathfinders between the world of men and gods, and on a micro level—a companion species. I propose that horse equipment acts as a *binder*, and is material culture that manifests and forms human-horse relationships. Thus,

Figure 47. The Gausel bridle consists of altogether 13 gilded bronze fittings, and a bit. The fittings are of Irish origins. Photo: Terje Tveit, Museum of Archaeology, University of Stavanger.



binders came to represent human-horse relations, both in personal, day-to-day encounters, and in the sphere of mythology. The presence of horses and binders in human graves suggest that the ontological status of horses should ultimately be seen as a companion species with the ability to act, emote and perform magic in human society.

The presence of the bridle in the Viking Period woman's grave from Gausel in southwestern Norway, Stavanger municipality, Rogaland county, must be understood in this context. The place horses held in Iron Age society adds a rich layer of meaning to the material culture associated with them. However, other aspects of the biography of the objects that – at one point in time during their journey through history – taken together form a bridle, add yet deeper layers of meaning. The fittings from the Gausel find were probably originally used as bridle ornaments, but might not stem from one bridle. Rather, they were probably assembled from several bridles or possibly book clasps (Aannestad 2015b). The fittings originated from Christian Ireland, were raided by Northmen, and came to the west coast as loot or as gifts consolidating alliances between Norse

families settled in Rogaland and in Ireland (Bakka 1993; Børsheim & Soltvedt 2001).

What remains of the Gausel bridle is altogether 13 gilded bronze bridle fittings and an iron bit. The bridle was placed on or by a horse head in a stone cist, interpreted as a woman's grave due to the rich female jewelry, such as oval shaped brooches, a neck ring, two arm rings, a finger ring, a jet ring and a number of glass beads. A frying pan, a flesh hook, two knives, a copper bowl and fittings for drinking horns were also found in the grave, as well as a shield buckle¹³ (Bakka 1993). The fittings that together with the bit made up the bridle are in Celtic style and stem from Ireland (Bakka 1993; Aannestad 2015b). The location of the grave was found during an excavation in 1997, and reopened. Coffin nails, fragments of ornaments and a small box as well as horse teeth were found (Børsheim & Soltvedt 2001:171–172). Nearby, another grave was excavated: a boat grave with a man and a horse head by his feet. This horse also had a bridle with smaller ornamental buttons, but it does not match the splendor of the horse in the grave of the Gausel queen (Børsheim & Soltvedt 2001:180–197).

Figure 48. The Gausel bridle must have added splendor to its bearer. This artwork has probably contributed to the iconic status of the Gausel bridle. Illustration: Ragnar Løken Børsheim, Museum of Archaeology, University of Stavanger.

Another opulently adorned bridle from a Viking Period grave in Rogaland, from Soma, is similarly assembled from Irish fittings that might originally have been fastened to a bridle (Aannestad 2015b:80). Based upon a contemporaneous bridle from Navan, Hanne Lovise Aannestad (2015b:80, with references to Mahr & Raftery 1976; Youngs 1997) believes that the fittings from Gausel and Soma originally stem from Irish bridles.

Borne by horses, these bridles would have been truly magnificent, the gilded ornaments with their intricate Celtic ornamentation glittering as the horses moved their heads. The bridles are truly charismatic objects – when used as intended. Together, the combination of the biography of the objects and their association with horses bring together an opulent tapestry of significance that together forms their charisma. Charisma, in this respect, emanates from material culture in qualities that are beyond the tangible, but which constitute their history, their association with cultural and mythological complexes, and with specific humans or non-humans and their biographies. In short, the charisma of the one who carries an object rubs off on the object by association, both by ownership and by skin



contact. Objects worn on bodies become associated with the bearer. This is true for men carrying swords and for horses bearing bridles. Thus, the charisma of bridles cannot be grasped without considering the significance of horses.

Real-life horses were companions in work, war and wayfaring in Germanic Scandinavia in the Iron Age (500 BC–1000 AD). Scandinavia was a tightly knit region with extremely consistent ways of life, material cultures and myths (e.g. Hedeager 2011). The horse figures as an

important part of the shared Scandinavian Iron Age ethos (Oma 2011). Horse bones, tack, and pictorial representations of horses are found in various contexts ranging from house foundations, through wetland sacrifices, to various depositions in graves. I will explore how horses and their material traces came to symbolize the communication and interconnectedness, and even the seamless bonding between, first, on a micro level: horse and rider; and second, on the macro level: horse, society and the otherworld. I propose that material culture, through horse equipment, functioned as a means to create human-horse relationships and further as a means to symbolize them (Oma 2001, 2004). I shall present the world of the horse in the age of heroes, drawing on poetic lays and sagas in order to unravel the role of the horse as a companion, best friend and magical creature. I will not give an artifact-by-artifact description, a site-by-site outline, or a strictly chronological account. Instead, I will weave a tale that lets us glimpse the lives of horses throughout the pre-Christian Norse ages.

The objective of archaeology as a discipline is to intertwine patterns of understanding and knowledge from artifacts that are often flotsam and jetsam from

the past. We unearth pieces of the lives of those who lived before us—whole or broken—such as objects, living spaces and monuments. We put together the pieces we have been given and with them try to find patterns that can decode how people shaped and saw different aspects of their lives, such as their beliefs, traditions, values and way of life. The Iron Age of Scandinavia was a society that was heavily structured, both in terms of social hierarchy, and also in the perception and use of the landscape. Areas were perceived as ‘in’, and thus safe, or ‘out’ as in the unknown and dangerous beyond (Hastrup 1990). The horse had a particular role to play in the lay of the land—and the traversing of it. The ‘out’ zones needed to be negotiated, and one safe means of doing so was on horseback (Oma, 2000, 2001, 2004, 2011). Horses were thus pathfinders that would pick their way safely through the ‘out’ zones. Vestiges of the lives of horses, and the beliefs associated with them, are seen in particular kinds of situations: sacrifices, graves, settlements, and in addition in various visual media ranging from rune stones, to helmets, to jewelry. Also, fascinating and inspiring sources of information are the various literary sources that were penned in Early Medieval times but recount

the sagas and myths from bygone centuries (Hedeager 2011; Herschend 1997; Sørensen 1991). These are sagas of heroes and kings, the Poetic Edda and the earliest laws. I draw upon these texts not just for the added flair, but because they reveal the deep structures of Iron Age society and the role it assigned to horses. I will follow a rough chronological order. First, I will explore the role of horses and their associated gear through Norse Iron Age societies, in relation to horses of sacrifice, horses of myth, horses of graves. Thereafter I will consider how the bit and bridle are poignant objects enabling the transmission of signals and communication between horse and rider, and eventually I will return to the Gausel queen and her steed, and the stolen bridle that symbolizes the bond between her and the horse.

HORSE SACRIFICES IN BOGS AND LAKES

Horse sacrifice is a phenomenon that was widespread across Asia and Europe from the Bronze Age (Anthony 2007; Mallory 1981; Piggott 1962) until the Christianization of Europe, when Christianity put an end to pagan customs. The practice of horse sacrifice takes the form of

bog sacrifices in southern Scandinavia. These were the deliberate depositing of creatures and objects in lakes and wetlands, and were widespread in the Early Iron Age, particularly in southern Sweden and Denmark (ca. 500 BC–400 AD).

Horses are the most commonly found sacrificed animals in both the early and the late Iron Age, although wetland sacrifices in general (with or without horses) are mainly concentrated in the early Iron Age (Klindt-Jensen 1968; Møhl 1957, 1962; Ferdinand & Ferdinand 1962; Hagberg 1963). Remains of other domestic animals are represented by skeletal specimens from meat-rich parts of the body, and the bones are frequently split for marrow extraction.

In some contexts, for example at Skedemosse (Hagberg 1963; Monikander 2006), the large amounts of horse bones are believed to be the end products of feasting – the old Norse sacred feast known as *blót* (e.g. Monikander 2006). At other sites an altogether different and more enigmatic form of horse sacrifice is seen. Horse heads are placed on top of horse hooves (phalanges), and in some instances the tongue has been cut out and the tail put in its place (Klindt-Jensen 1968; Møhl 1957, 1962).¹⁴

There are parts of other animals in the same sites, but currents in the lakes have led to the skeletal fragments of those animals to drift apart, which indicates that the bones were wrapped up in some organic material that has disintegrated, such as the skin of the horse.

Depositing these parts of the horse in water, testifies to the importance of water as a sacred element in the Iron Age. The lakes and wetlands were areas uninhabitable for people, and as such were construed as the otherworld, the abode of the gods. Giving beings and objects to the water expresses a will not just to communicate with the beings of the otherworld, but also to transcend the boundaries between the worlds (Oma 2011).

MIRKWOOD AND WAYFARING

Just as bog sacrifices can be seen as communicating with another realm, borders and their crossings were in general an important aspect of Iron Age societies, and assistance was needed by way of otherworldly interventions. A general reading of both the literary early Medieval sources pertaining to the Iron Age as well as the landscape and patterns of resources used, evokes

an image of a society divided by borders (e.g. Hedeager 1999b; Lund 2008; Wiker 2000). Anthropological theories on liminality inform us that borders are dangerous areas, and can be difficult and hazardous to cross (van Gennep 1960; Turner 1967). This reflects a fear of being stuck in the twilight, the ‘grey zone’, betwixt and between. In the Poetic Edda this zone is often described as *Mørkskog*, Mirkwood, that spans forests, mountains and wetlands, and is a dangerous place to traverse (Oma 2011:111–112). The only way of doing so is to ride through it; people never simply walk through (Oma 2000, 2001, 2004, 2005, 2011). The poems of the Poetic Edda describe the only safe means of crossing over such borders as being carried by horses. This reflects a well-founded fear: In those days wolves, bears and other wild animals roamed the forests and mountains. Crossing such liminal zones sets the horse apart, and in Norse folklore horses are often given the role of the pathfinder, always finding their way home.

A strategy for communicating with the divine was to use the horse as a go-between, carrying the message across to the other, otherwise unreachable, side. The quality of pathfinding could explain why horses are the

most frequently sacrificed animals in the liminal zones of bogs and lakes. Undoubtedly the sacrificial horse's role as transcending boundaries is drawn from experiences in real life. I draw upon two lines of argument to support this premise, the first being the practice of free-range horsekeeping, the second being the horse as transporter.

First, little is known of how horses were kept, but some evidence from the sagas suggest that flocks of horses were left to roam and breed in the wild, and when the need for a steed arose a horse was taken in and tamed. In the *Volsungasaga*, we find the story of how the legendary horse Grani became Sigurd's—the dragonslayer's—horse. Sigurd was granted the right to choose a horse for himself, and went off into the woods. He met Odin disguised as an old man, who advised him to chase the horses into a deep river and choose the one who remained standing. A young, grey, large and beautiful horse held his ground, and became Grani, Sigurd's trusted steed. It is notable that Grani was tested for his bravery in the realm of water.

The story hints as to how horses were kept: clearly the wild (forests, mountains and wetlands) is their abode

and Sigurd must enter here to find them. No archaeological evidence could demonstrate whether this way of keeping horses was used, but based upon historical evidence from Gotland in the Baltic Sea, archaeologist Anneli Sundkvist (2001, 2004) suggests that in the Iron Age horses were kept in herds left to roam in the wild until the time they were needed. It is thus likely that horses inhabited the wild, known as Mirkwood in the Eddic poems. They were born there, raised there, and became intimately familiar with the elements, as well as the landscape and its inherent dangers.

This brings me to my second line of argument: horses implemented journeys and transport across land. They could then, once tamed, use their knowledge of the wild to carry their people gently and safely across hostile ground, perilous territory. They came to possess a particular skill that set them apart from other beings; the carriers that traversed the dangerous wilderness, taking people across to the other side. Mirkwood is a metaphor for a non-place – the liminal zones – between worlds that do not normally communicate. In the Eddic poem *Skirnismál*, the god Frøy sends his servant Skirnir to court the giantess Gerth, and Skirnir agrees to do the

dirty work provided he gets to borrow Frøy's horse to cross the dangerous no man's land, saying: 'Then give me the horse that goes through the dark and magic flickering flames.' Before setting off on the hazardous journey Skirnir spoke to the horse:

*Dark is it without, and I deem it time
To fare through the wild fells,
(To fare through the giants' fastness);
We shall both come back, or us both together
The terrible giant will take.*

verse 10, The Poetic Edda, 1936a

Clearly, to Skirnir, he and the horse are on equal footing based upon the way he talks to the horse. They are in this together for better or worse, two as one.

HORSES IN LATE IRON AGE GRAVES

When humans used horses' powers, they used some technical aides to communicate with their steed from horseback—a bridle with a bit. I suggest that the bit came to symbolize the connection between rider and

horse, and even the transcending of boundaries that riders and horses together accomplished. This could account for the fact that bits, bridles, and sometimes either whole horse carcasses with or without tack or the head of the horse became increasingly common grave goods in the later periods of the Iron Age, the Merovingian and Viking Periods (550–1030 BC). Space does not permit going into great detail regarding context and finds in the graves, such as the nature of the faunal remains, human and horse sex, grave goods, and types of monument, so suffice it to say that vast variation is found across time and space (see Oma 2011:73–94 for a detailed account). However, some patterns are obvious: by the Viking Age a very large proportion of both male and female graves contains horses or something connected to the horse (e.g. Andersen 1996; Braathen 1989; Jørgensen & Jørgensen 1997; Meling 2000; Müller-Wille 1972, Oma 2000; Sundkvist 1992, 2001). Similar to the bog sacrifices in the early Iron Age, both heads and hooves can be found in Viking Age graves. The head and/or tack is most frequently found, while high quality harnesses with fittings made of gold, silver or bronze are recurrently found (Jørgensen & Jørgensen 1997;

Müller-Wille 1972; Sundkvist 1992). Ice studs, predecessors to the horseshoe and fastened to the hoof to prevent slipping, that represent the hooves are sometimes found close to the dead. There is no apparent logic to what went into the graves: one horse might have one ice stud, two harnesses, and three stirrups. It seems to be a case of *pars pro toto*: You give what you have and one part represents a whole. Towards the end of the Viking Age the practice of sacrificing horses in graves became standardized, before it disappeared around 1050 together with the last of the non-Christian burial traditions (Braathen 1989).

The presence of horses in the realm of death is deepened further by the deposition in graves of objects that depict horses. Images of horses are found on free-standing pieces of jewelry, where they are trotting, on the move. Such jewelry is frequently found in graves (Gjessing 1943). Horse brooches usually depict horses in motion, such as the beautiful Veggerslev brooch, that shows a trotting horse with his head held high, a powerful chest and slender hind parts (Gjessing 1943).

Seeing the different pieces of evidence together gives an impression of horses in motion. In visual media the

horse is trotting. In everyday life horses were a very important means of transport, and also the quickest way to get around on land. Horses in sacrifices and in graves were essential to the symbolic communication and transportation between spheres that would normally not communicate. Crossing these boundaries, between life and death, or between the world of humans and of the gods, was something that the people of the Iron Age could not do on their own, they needed to be carried by a horse. I suggest that the horse has a very important symbolic role in helping to create windows of opportunity through which transformations can take place. This seems to be an enduring structure throughout the Iron Age, possibly even as far back as the Bronze Age. The concept of horses being able to transcend limits between worlds came to be an organizing principle – a significant part of the Iron Age worldview, although different periods had different ways of expressing and using it. Such a quality would explain why horses attained such a high status, since this power would be imperative to possess and control.

THE BRIDLE: A HUMAN–HORSE BINDER

I argue that horse equipment acts as a *binder* that allows communication and mutual becomings between humans and horses. I suggest that the creation of a particular material culture of humans and animals acts as an articulation of the relationship between them, and is instrumental to the communication, articulation and structuring of their relationship. Binders facilitate the enactment of a relationship, and ease communication and performance between humans and animals. Humans who actively engage with animals will develop the tools that are necessary for controlling and manipulating their behavior, and the different animal species will each have their own way of responding. These kinds of objects can also be what Ingold refers to as ‘the whip, spur, harness and hobble’, that he interprets as objects used to dominate, designed either to restrict or to induce movement and/or pain (Ingold 2000:73). However, I argue that Ingold’s position is simplistic, and grants animals neither agency nor the ability to respond and participate in a way that is instrumental to the outcome of events. Contrary to Ingold’s suggestion, I hold that animals possess agency, and that they can respond

and participate in their worlds in ways that impact and influence their life-worlds (see Oma 2010 for critique of Ingold’s position). Birke, Bryld and Lykke (2004:171–172) demonstrate that rats in the lab, through their ability to respond, are instrumental in the formation of the material culture that surrounds them.

I suggest that some kinds of material cultures have been formed – *co-written* – by humans and animals both, by responding to each other. Such objects are, I argue, binders. The bridle is a binder that creates communication and the joint co-creation of action and meaning between horse and rider. Animals as well as humans conduct their relationship through these binders. Their behavior is conditioned and learnt through them, and young animals are socialized through them. Binders therefore exist at the interface between humans and animals. Through particular kinds of material cultures, relationships emerge as an intra-action (cf. Barad 2007).

Thinking of riding in relational terms moves the focus from the rider as carrying out an action, to an understanding of the rider and horse as simultaneously carrying and being carried by each other. Xenophon’s oft-quoted statement of how riders trust their horses

Figure 49. A bit from the Gausel boat grave, excavated in the late 1990s. Photo: Terje Tveit, Museum of Archaeology, University of Stavanger.



in danger refers to the sense of the agency of horses in ancient Greece, and also of the intense bonding, and even merging, between rider and horse. Game (2004:172–173) uses the centaur as a metaphor to understand the intense and seamless relationship between horse and rider.

Rhythm that creates one whole is experienced as joyous by horse and rider both, and a sense of transcendence and a blurring of boundaries results (Argent 2010, 2012; Evans & Franklin 2010). Bridles act as binders that make certain things happen just so—they allow human and horse to co-create the act of riding. In a society that largely depended upon horses for travelling and getting about, it is understandable that the bit was a poignant object.

BRIDLES AND HORSES IN THE IRON AGE

Having ascertained the potential agency of horses and the communicative ability of their equipment, let us turn to the Scandinavian Iron Age. In general, bridles were not significantly different from today (Carnap-Bornheim & Ilkjær 1996). However, mostly the bit and sometimes metal trappings have been preserved. Organic material, such as leather straps and textiles have vanished in the soil. Both snaffle bits and curb bits were in use—although snaffle bits dominate (Sundkvist 1992), and there is ample scope for variety regarding the construction of bridles (Andersen 1996). One particularly fertile source of information regarding the multifarious nature of bridle design is the war booty sacrifice at Illerup Ådal in Denmark. About 1800 years ago an

invading army from the north made their way into what today is the Danish peninsula Jutland. The prospective usurpers brought cavalry, and their leaders were also on horseback. However, the local army firmly stood its ground and the raiders were thoroughly beaten. In the wake of the battle the victorious locals destroyed the armor and trappings of the warriors and their horses. They slashed the leather belts, reins and straps, and bent the swords, spears and shields—seemingly in a fury. The remains of the booty were cast in a shallow lake, that has since silted up and become a vast bog. Archaeologists have uncovered most of the site and unearthed a wealth of information. Previous to this find, a typology of horse tack was developed, investigating it from the perspective of a timeline evolution. However, the horses of the invading army were equipped with such assorted tack that it became clear that horses were ‘dressed up’ according to their own and/or their rider’s individual status (see also Argent 2010 for similar argument). In some cases horse tack was decorated with fittings made of gold and silver, and the horses must have been a sight to behold as they pranced on the battlefield, glittering in their gold and silver carapaces! In technical terms, there

is also variety (Carnap-Bornheim & Ilkjær 1996). Both snaffle bits and curb bits are seen, and the snaffle bits are mostly rather mild. Curb bits are normally associated with a larger degree of control, and the fact that the bits varied along a scale of mildness versus severity indicates that the riders actively sought out the best solutions for their individual relationships to their horses.

FORMING A BOND

The material culture, the human-horse binder, needs to be enmeshed in a joint practice. A seamless human-horse relationship must be *entrained*, a neologism which Game (2001:3) explains as ‘learning to come in tune with’ and demands openness and receptiveness from the Other (i.e. the animal). Humans and horses entrain riding together in a horse-human rhythm, in which they learn how to tune into one another. Horses and riders entrain the relation, the rhythm between, the transporting flow, the *riding*. Riding well demands that one forgets the human separate self, as riding is ‘absorbing horse, taking horse into our body’ (Game 2001:9) When one learns and embodies a motion, the motion is

Figure 50. Horses are often curious and want to be in on the action. Here, a horse nudges an archaeologist during an excavation. Photo: Olle Hemdorff, Museum of Archaeology, University of Stavanger.



inhabited. Thus through rhythm, horse and rider come to inhabit riding. This happens when there is time depth to a relationship, and hard work—hours of training that lead to sensual, kinesthetic and intimate knowledge of each other resulting in horse and rider moving together ‘as one’ (Game 2001). Consequently, thinking of riding in relational terms moves the focus from the rider as carrying out an action, to an understanding of the rider and horse as simultaneously carrying and being carried by each other (Evans & Franklin 2010:176–177; Thompson 2011). Horse and rider are engaged in the process of mutual becoming, co-creating the performance of riding. Argent (2012) explores the potential for transcendence between humans and horses in depth and investigates human–horse non-verbal communication

through ‘notions of corporeal synchrony, entrainment, boundary loss, bonding, joy and ecstasy that might be seen to function similarly for both humans and horses, as social actors.’ More precisely, she sees transcendence playing out thus: ‘When we entrain, our bubbles of space and our experience encompass more than our senses alone provide; we are both giving and receiving identity to something larger—and in such transcendence lies ecstasy.’

The literary sources that, inadvertently, describe the underlying structures of the Iron Age (Herschend 1997; Sørensen 1991), reveal just such a relationship between horses and their people. Likewise, the presence of horses in graves—an arena not just for grieving and reflecting upon the position and character of the dead, but also

for preparing for the afterlife—indicates an intense relationship between humans and horses. In the Iron Age society of Scandinavia, it appears that the horse is not seen as subordinate, but rather there is full knowledge of the character and abilities of the horse—some of which are beyond human performance. To (again) quote Xenophon—‘in dangers, the rider entrusts his own body to his horse’ (Xenophon 2002[1894]). Certainly this is what Iron Age people did.

There is clearly an emotional component to the human–horse relationship, considering that the mourners have placed horses, or tokens of them, with their dead. Let us return to the legends of the heroes Sigurd and Grani. The most evocative of the stories is Grani’s reaction to Sigurd’s death. In the Eddic poem ‘The Second Lay of Guðrún’, Guðrún recounts how it happened that she found out that her husband Sigurd was dead:

*From the Thing ran Grani with thundering feet,
But thence did Sigurth himself come never;
Covered with sweat was the saddle-bearer,
Wont the warrior’s weight to bear.*

Guðrún held the reins of the horse and began to cry, as she understood what had happened:

*Weeping I sought with Grani to speak,
With tear-wet cheeks for the tale I asked;
The head of Grani was bowed to the grass,
The steed knew well his master was slain.*

verses 4 and 5, The Poetic Edda, 1936b

Is this the description of an unusual bond? It certainly demonstrates that such bonds were deemed possible, and that horses had the potential agency both to have and express strong feelings. Further, I find it remarkable that Grani in this story ran to Guðrún and grieved in front of her. This reveals a belief in horses having the ability to understand human relationships. Grani seeks out the wife of Sigurd to mourn together with her, and thus to facilitate a mutual recognition of the love they both bore for Sigurd—a recognition in which they can find solace, as two persons who loved this man deeply and miss him dearly.

Keeping the accounts from the sagas in mind, I find it remarkable that bits and other horse equipment were

included amongst grave goods. Whereas it is likely that horses represented a generic symbol as transformers and facilitators of the crossing of worlds and spheres that are normally not in contact with one another, it is also very possible that parts of horses and riding/wagon equipment in graves express intense, personal horse-human relationships. Thus, these kinds of grave goods exhibit lived relationships, enchainment of humans and animals, and eventually personalized human-horse mutual becomings. A oneness between rider and horse, where species barriers are obsolete, can be glimpsed in these graves, through the beauty of attunement and entraining humanness and horseness that can evolve through horseriding.

IRON AGE BITS: BINDERS WITH A SPRINKLING OF MAGIC

The enactment of relationships by means of objects that facilitate communication between humans and animals happens, as outlined above, through binders. I suggest that the various pieces of horseriding equipment found in graves and sacrifices are such binders.

Animals as well as humans conduct their relationships through these binders, their behavior is conditioned and learnt through them, and young animals are socialized through them. Binders exist at the very interface between humans and animals and come to represent their relationships. Material culture is both a means to create relationships and a means to symbolize them. The presence of horse equipment in graves consequently refers to the action of riding and also symbolizes the human-horse bond that arises out of riding.

In addition to a deep and trusting real-life relationship between humans and horses, another element was present in the horse: the magical ability to communicate with the supernatural. The following quote from Tacitus' *Germania* illustrates this point succinctly:

(...) but it is peculiar to them to derive admonitions and presages from horses also. Certain of these animals, milk-white, and untouched by earthly labor, are pastured at the public expense in the sacred woods and groves. These (...) are accompanied by the priest, and king, or chief person of the community, who attentively observe their manner

Figure 51. This fitting from the Gausel bridle were amongst the objects that were stolen during the break-in at the Museum of Bergen in 2017. Photo: Terje Tveit, Museum of Archaeology, University of Stavanger.

of neighing and snorting; and no kind of augury is more credited, not only among the populace, but among the nobles and priests. For the latter consider themselves as the ministers of the gods, and the horses, as privy to the divine will

Book 1, verse 68–69

So, where does this leave horses in the Iron Age? Obviously their presence in life was ubiquitous. Additionally, they held a powerful symbolic significance, and as such they served as tools for people in dealing with the crossing of borders relating to life and otherworlds. They could go where humans could not, and thus they possessed some properties that were unique to them, and also desired. This ability is that of transformation, and of transcendence. But beyond the generic level, by way of Norse literature we know of horses that were given names, such as Grani, Svadilfare and Sleipnir. This exemplifies how horses were invested with agency in the Scandinavian Iron Age. Thus, it can be firmly established that horses in some cases were perceived as agents that possessed personhood. This allows an exploration of the ontological status held by horses. The presence of

horses in graves, alongside people, or even the presence of binders, tokens of the interface of human–horse relationships, indicates that the ontological status of horses should ultimately be understood as a companion species with the ability to perform magic. Implicitly, they had the ability to act and emote in human society.

TRANSFORMATIVE THEFT

The Gausel queen, the horse head and the bridle assembled in a Viking Period grave must be understood within this wider context, where the bridle embodies the human–horse bond. Simultaneously, the bridle represents the violence of its transformation from Christian Ireland to pagan Norway, and the practice of pillaging and looting monasteries. The ornaments on the bridle were taken from its original early Christian Celtic context and deposited in a pagan Norse grave, where its meaning was understood both in relation to the human–horse bond and more widely to the role of horses as transformers between different spheres in pagan mythology (Oma 2011, 2016). The origins of the bridle ornaments, with their particular religious significance,



probably played a part in the reuse of the bridle ornaments since the significance of their Christian origins became instructive for which context the ornaments should belong to. The bridle became enshrined in the complex surrounding the horse, women and the journey into the realm of death (Oma 2011, 2016; Roesdahl 1978). Similarly, other Christian objects, enshrined in their holiness, were looted during raids on monasteries and became transformed and translated into a pagan understanding of the world (Glørstad 2010), in which objects with religious connotations belonged in graves rather than in churches. Still, the objects retain their outlandish origins, and thus their charisma is increased, as another layer of meaning is added to their singular biography.

In the summer of 2017, the ornaments of the Gausel find were amongst the objects stolen in a break-in at the University Museum of Bergen, where mostly Viking Period finds were targeted (<http://www.uib.no/universitetsmuseet/109704/innbrudd-på-historisk-museum>). Archaeologists as well as Viking enthusiasts all over the world mourned the loss of these irreplaceable and

invaluable objects, and conspiracy theories abounded. The big question was, however, would these objects – our joint cultural heritage – ever reappear on the public scene? Would we ever see them again? Further, the theft played right into the fetishism of Viking objects, which extends beyond jewelry and precious metal ornaments, to encompass the whole complex of embodying costume, personal appearance and even the Viking persona, inspired by both fascination with the sagas and portrayals in several television series and movies during the 2010s and earlier. In this respect, the Viking period artefacts and their authenticity represent a physical link to that longed-for past.

At the Museum of Archaeology, University of Stavanger, many employees were especially haunted by the nightmare that the Gausel find was lost forever. The proximity of the find place to the museum premises, the large-scale excavations in 1997–2000 when the grave was reopened and a wealth of new information about the surrounding cultural landscape was unearthed (Børshem & Soltvedt 2001), as well as the fact that these singularly beautiful ornaments were put on a bridle placed

in a female grave, contribute to the understanding of this find as the most spectacular Viking Period find from Rogaland. Luckily, all ornaments save one have now been retrieved. The bridle in particular is imbued with a charisma that results from an entangled web of its Celtic origins, its brutal Viking Period theft and ensuing transformation into a pagan burial ritual, and not least its direct association with horses. The ornaments assembled into a bridle are therefore imbued with not just their biography and aesthetic qualities, but further

with their function as a bridle, to be placed on the head of a horse and to facilitate communication between horse and rider – and as such, symbolize the intangible human-horse bond.

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