



CHAPTER 7

CHARISMA, VIOLENCE AND WEAPONS

THE BROKEN SWORDS OF THE VIKINGS

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There are few groups of prehistoric objects that have such allure as the Viking sword. In movies and literature, the Viking sword is described and depicted, drawing on both written sources and archaeological material. This contemporary fascination mirrors Early Medieval written sources in which swords are portrayed as the most important weapon. Approximately 3500¹³ swords dated to the Viking Age have been found in Norway, the majority in graves. A number of these swords were severely damaged and rendered unusable before deposition in the grave. The blades were beaten, bent or twisted, sometimes folded together in a way that needs preparation, expertise and equipment. The fact that these swords were subjected to special treatment, handled in a different

¹³ There have not been any comprehensive studies done on the swords of the Viking Age on a national level since Jan Petersen *De norske vikingesverd* (1919). This number is an estimation based on the assumption that the Museum of Cultural History holds roughly half of the archaeological collections on a national level. See also Martens (2003).

manner than the rest of the grave goods, underscores the distinctive role of swords in Norse society. In this article I will discuss the deliberate destruction of swords and other weapons from a cultural historical point of view. The irregular treatment of these swords is embedded both in the cultural historical perception of swords and in funerary rituals. A survey of Early Medieval written sources and archaeological material is essential for a more profound understanding of the phenomenon.

This study shows that even if the idea of a biographical or animated presence in a certain sword demanded a ritual for ‘killing’ these powerful objects during burial rituals, the bending, twisting and destruction of swords and other weapons must also be seen as an expression of a more general idea of swords, weapons and funerary rituals in Late Iron Age and Viking Age Scandinavia.

INTRODUCTION

One of the striking features of the material culture of Viking Age Norway is the many weapons that have been found. Buried in graves, the weapons reflect a society in which warfare and violence were widespread and important, both in a symbolic and physical sense (Andrén 2006; Price 2002). The prosperous male graves often contain highly ornate swords, imported from continental Europe or the British Isles, but also more

common graves contain swords and other weapons, plain in form and probably locally produced. One of the more puzzling features of the weapon graves of the Viking Age is the extensive practice of destroying weapons prior to burial. The swords have been deliberately destroyed. The blades are bent and broken, and the edges have severe cuts and traces of violent handling. This deliberate destruction also includes, to a lesser degree, other weapons.

Bending weapons before depositing them in lakes or graves is known in European prehistory at least since the Bronze Age (Bradley 1998). In the large depositions of weapons in bogs from the Roman Iron Age, several of the weapons were destroyed, bent or broken (Davidson 1994 [1962]:6–7), among them a find from Illerup-Ådal, Denmark. Bent swords are also found in several graves from the early Iron Age. The large weapon deposits from the Danish bogs are generally viewed as a form of sacrifice, giving the weapons to the gods as a payment for a victory in war (Ilkjær 2000; Jensen 2015). The general understanding of the destruction of weapons in Viking Age graves is often linked to the idea of a ‘killing’ of the sword so that it could follow the deceased into the afterlife (Davidson 1994 [1962]:484–485; Grinsell 1961). The violence of the destruction of weapons in deposits and graves is also associated with the violence and wildness of the Scandinavian warrior culture in the Iron Age (Andrén 2006:35).

Even though the phenomenon has been known since the early 19th century and frequently mentioned in museum records, there are no comprehensive studies of the bent and destroyed swords of the Viking Age.

There are brief mentions in archaeological literature (Davidson 1994 [1962]:6–7; Rygh 1877:189–191; Shetelig 1912:107, footnote 4 with references), but archaeologists have shown a lack of interest in the subject. Until recently the secondary treatment of objects, including reworking and intentional damage or repairs, did not gain a lot of attention in archaeology. In object studies, the focus has traditionally been on topics relating to production and provenance, stylistic and functional traits of the objects, and, to a lesser extent, on how the objects were integrated into multiple social processes over time. However, there was a noticeable change in the late 20th century, with the term object biographies facilitating increased focus on the dynamic agency and significance of objects through the processes of production, use, and deposition (Aannestad 2015b; Ekengren 2009; Gosden & Marshall 1999; Joy 2009). This study of deliberately destroyed swords from Viking Age graves is inspired by this line of thought. The article presents an exploration of the collection of swords in the Museum of Cultural History, Oslo, and employs a broad approach to the question of how this practice can be understood.

Recent studies have emphasized the idea of animism in Viking Age ontology, perceiving the sword as a powerful presence, an inalienable object, associated or connected to a person or a lineage or having certain biographical features, therefore needing to be destroyed or taken out of circulation. The concept of charisma can be a fruitful approach towards gaining a more profound understanding of this phenomenon. According to Marianne Vedeler (this publication), charisma in objects can be seen as a capacity to evoke awe and adoration, associated with the object's material and immaterial aspects. Written sources emphasize the significance of swords. Norse poems and sagas tell stories about the sword as a marker of social status and prestige, but they also tell stories of swords with distinct powers: swords of beauty, swords with names and personal biographies, swords of magic and mystery (Aannestad 2015a; Brunning 2013; Burström 2015; Lund 2009, 2011, 2013, 2017). Was this capacity for power and magic, life and death a reflection of the perception of real swords in the Viking Age? And can the charismatic properties of swords be understood as a motivation behind their destruction in burial rituals?

THE BROKEN SWORDS OF THE VIKINGS

This study is a survey of the collection of Viking Age swords in the Museum of Cultural history at the University of Oslo. The museum holds archaeological material from southeastern Norway.¹⁴ This includes roughly half of the archaeological material from Norway. The collection represents different landscapes, ranging from the coastal zone to alpine areas, and subsequently probably also different groups of people in what was a politically and somewhat culturally fragmented region in the Late Iron Age and Viking Age (Solberg 2010 [2000]:277-293). Thus, the destroyed swords in the collection of the Museum of Cultural History can be a point of departure for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, both in Scandinavia and the Scandinavian diaspora.¹⁵

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- ¹⁴ The museum district includes 10 counties: Østfold, Akershus, Oslo, Hedmark, Oppland, Buskerud, Vestfold, Telemark, Aust-Agder and Vest-Agder.
- ¹⁵ Deliberately destroyed swords from the Scandinavian diaspora, e.g. in graves with other Scandinavian ethnic markers, are recorded at several locations in the British Isles, among them in Dublin at the cemetery Kilmainhaim (Davidson 1994 [1962]:10; Grinsell 1961:488-489) and in France, L'Île de Groix, Morbihan (Bjørn and Shetelig 1940).

The Museum's archaeological collection holds 1,598 swords dated to the Viking Age (750–1000 AD). 260 of these swords (16.3 %) have visible signs of bending or twisting the blade done prior to the deposition.¹⁶ The damage on the sword blades varies, from a slight twist to a completely folded or whirled blade (fig. 52). For the former, there are two main forms of bending, the U-shape and the S-shape, in which the U-shaped have one main bend, typically near the middle of the blade (fig. 54), and the S-shaped blades are bent in two places in opposite directions, in the upper and lower parts of the blade (fig. 53). In addition, there are several atypical variants, from the spiral seen in picture 52, to a completely folded blade in figure 55. A number of swords have also been registered with more irregular damage

¹⁶ This number includes swords with recorded information of bending and additional physical examinations of the objects. Traces of deliberate destruction are not always mentioned in museum catalogues. Due to corrosion and fragmentation it is often difficult or impossible to register signs of initial bending or twisting, and several of the damaged swords are so poorly preserved that it is not possible to tell whether they were subject to intentional destruction prior to burial. Therefore, the total number of deliberately destroyed swords is likely to be higher.

resulting in injured or broken blades, thus presenting a more violent and arbitrary impression.

There seems to be a slight distinction between the cautious bending as seen in figure 52, violent and irregular damage like cuts or slashes in the edges, and multiple and irregular bending often resulting in breakage of the blade in several places. However, the differences between bent and broken sword blades are not necessarily a result of different practices. The diversity in damage could also be the result of a difference in steel quality, affecting the flexibility of the sword blade, making some of the blades more fragile and easier to break. In addition, several of the apparently carefully bent swords also have traces of hard blows to the edges, presumably done prior to the bending. Thus, it is not possible to make a clear distinction between different ways of performing the destructive act on the swords, even though there seems to be a diversity of practices in the handling of the blades.

In a number of graves with deliberately destroyed swords, damage has also been inflicted upon other objects. The most common are spears, often bent in a U-shape in the same fashion as the sword blades (fig. 59b). A number of graves contain spears and axes



Figure 52. Severely twisted sword with hilts of type R, pommel missing. In addition to the bending, the blade has severe cut marks at the edge near the point (not visible in the picture) (C15888). Photo: Kirsten Helgeland/Museum of Cultural History.

with cuts from hard blows to the edges. Deep cuts on shield bosses, inflicted with an axe or a sword are also quite common (fig. 56, fig. 59 c, d). In a number of graves the shield bosses are evidently damaged by weapons from the same grave, suggesting that the damages are inflicted during the funerary rituals, and not a result of previous battles etc. Signs of intentional damage on additional weapons are most common in graves with bent swords, but are also found in some graves where the swords have been left intact. However, intentional damages on other weapons that swords were not systematically recorded in this study, so the extent of this phenomenon is not known.

The warrior grave from Gjermundbu in Ringerike, Buskerud can serve as an example of a grave with



Figure 53. Sword with hilts of Petersen type O, double folded in S-shape (C13848). Photo: Kirsten Helgeland/Museum of Cultural History.

multiple and complex signs of destruction.¹⁷ The grave was discovered incidentally by a local farmer in 1943, and contained an exceptionally rich male grave with the equipment of an elite warrior of the Viking Age, including several weapons, a chain mail, stirrups, spurs, gaming pieces, tools etc. (fig. 57; see also Grieg 1947). The sword, of Petersen type S with silver plates on the hilt and Jelling style ornamentation, has signs of bending prior to cremation (Grieg 1947:3), but is now broken into three fragments. The helmet, so far the only helmet found in a Viking Age grave, also had signs of intentional damage, among which were perforations of the right front plate, clearly visible in figure 58. The size

¹⁷ C27317



Figure 54. Sword with hilts of unknown type, closest parallel in type Æ, blade and grip bent (C35118). Photo: Mårten Teigen/Museum of Cultural History.



Figure 55. Sword Hilts of Petersens type O, blade are twice bent (C52324). Photo: Ellen C. Holte/Museum of Cultural History.

and shape of the perforations indicate that they were inflicted by the spears in the same grave (V. Vike 2018 pers. comm.). In addition to the sword and helmet, the two axes in the grave both have deep cuts on the edges done prior to burial.

It is evident that the deliberate damaging of objects in Late Iron Age and Viking Age burials is predominantly inflicted on offensive, and to a certain extent, defensive weapons like shields, and in the Gjermundbu case, a helmet. However, there are occasional accounts of deliberate damage inflicted on other objects, among them the so called magical staffs (earlier interpreted as roasting spits; for a discussion of the interpretation of magical staffs in graves and deposits, see Brunning 2016; Gardela 2016:215–218). In the collection of the Museum of



Figure 56. Shield boss with a deep cut, probably inflicted with an axe from the same grave. C14535. Photo: Ove Holst/Museum of Cultural History.

Cultural History there are also observations of similar damage inflicted on scythes and weaver's batons.¹⁸

Consequently, the intentional damaging of swords and other weapons, weapons for both attack and defence, was a widespread practice in the Late Iron Age and Viking Age, and can be observed on 16.3% of the swords in the museum collection. Due to corrosion and general decomposition, it is in many cases not possible to determine whether the damage was done prior to burial, or if it is a result of post-depositional damage and poor preservation conditions. Thus, the estimated number of intentionally damaged swords and other weapons must be considered to be a minimum. Accordingly, the deliberate damaging of swords was not a deviant practice, but rather a widespread and quite common part of the diverse funerary rituals of the period. Furthermore, deliberate damage is observed mainly on swords and other weapons. Thus, it seems that this was a practice first and foremost associated with the warrior sphere of Norse society. I will return to this discussion later.

¹⁸ C23905, C33234

BROKEN SWORDS AND FUNERARY RITUALS

Both cremation and inhumation burials were practiced during the Viking Age in Norway, but the majority of burials are cremation burials with a cremation patch (Shetelig 1912; Stylegar 2007). Based on the recorded observations and registrations done by early 20th century scholars, it is generally acknowledged that the bent or broken swords occur in cremation graves during the Viking Age (Shetelig 1912:172), and this study confirms that this is somewhat accurate, with a few exceptions. Of a total of 260 swords with visible signs of intentional damage, 169 swords come from graves where there is sufficient information to decide on the treatment of the body (cremation/inhumation). Of these 169 swords, 155 are from cremation graves and 14 stem from what appear to be inhumation graves.

In this study, the criteria used for defining a grave as a cremation grave are observations of oxide scale on the swords or other objects from the same context. Oxide scales are traces on iron having been exposed to high temperatures, often found on iron objects burned in funerary pyres. In addition to the observation of oxide

scales, the number of cremation graves also includes contexts with reported observations of charcoal and/or burned bone. On some of the blades there are visible signs of hammering overlapped by the oxide layers (Lund 2013:endnote 1), strongly indicting that the bending was done prior to the burning of the body and grave goods. However, the oxide layers are seldom preserved to an extent where it is possible to observe this, hence it is not possible to determine whether this was a common practice.

The 14 inhumation graves include swords from contexts with (records of) unburned bones, in which the placement of the grave goods and/or lack of charcoal indicate an inhumation burial, as well as burials with observations of mineralized wood from the grip or scabbard of the sword, making it unlikely that they had been in a cremation pyre. Unfortunately, none of these swords were found *in situ* or in professionally excavated contexts. This makes it difficult to determine the details of the funerary ritual.

91 swords are stray finds, and/or were found by non-professionals, and contain inconclusive information on the burial rituals due to a lack of information

Table 2a

COUNTY	SWORDS	BENT SWORDS	%
Østfold	40	1	2,5
Akershus	133	27	20,3
Oslo	23	1	4,3
Oppland	265	52	19,6
Hedmark	237	79	33,3
Buskerud	144	17	11,8
Vestfold	253	22	8,6
Telemark	222	36	16,2
Aust-Agder	87	6	6,9
Vest-Agder	54	9	16,6
Total	1458	250	17,1

Table 2b

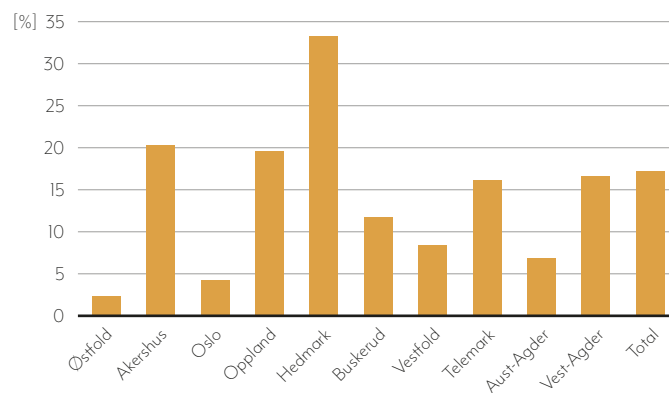


Table 2a, b. The table includes the swords with signs of deliberate bending and twisting from the ten counties in the collection of the Museum of Cultural History dated to Viking Age. Table 1a presents total number of swords, the number of swords with signs of being bent prior to the burial. Table 1 b visualise the percentage of swords with signs of deliberate bending for each county. The swords found outside the museum district were left out of the statistics, due to them being not statically significant in this context.



Figure 57. Sword, chain mail, and stirrups from the warrior grave from Gjermundbu in Buskerud. According to the museum catalogue, the sword was intentionally bent before the burial. Unfortunately, the blade is now split in three fragments. The sword is of type S (Petersen 1919) with ornaments of Jelling-style on upper and lower hilts, the sword type commonly dated to the 10th century (Petersen 1919). Photo: Museum of Cultural History.

Figure 58. The helmet from the grave from Gjermundbu. The helmet is damaged, probably from a spear or another pointed object on the right frontal plate. It cannot be ruled out that this could be the result of damage prior to the burial, the helmet being a part of a warrior's gear and probably used in battle. However, the damages on the sword and axes in the grave make it plausible that the damage was inflicted during the funerary rituals. Photo: Museum of Cultural History.



a)



b)



c)



d)



Figure 59 a–d. Grave find from Sør-Odal in Hedmark, flat grave with cremation patch. Both the sword, spear and both of the shield bosses are deliberately damaged, the shield bosses with severe blows from a sword or an axe. Sword of type T and spear of type K dates the grave to late 10th century. C37550. Photo: Kirsten Helgeland/Museum of Cultural History.

about the context, and extensive corrosion leaving neither oxide scales nor traces of organic material.

There are noticeable regional differences in the occurrence of deliberately damaged swords (table 2a, b). Table 2a shows that the counties of Akershus, Oppland, Hedmark, Telemark, and to some extent Vest-Agder have the highest number of bent swords both in absolute terms (Table 2a), and in terms of the share of the totality of swords dated to the Viking Age (Table 2b). The majority of destroyed swords occur in inland areas, whereas the coastal areas have a lower frequency, both in relative and absolute terms. The variation in number and occurrence must be taken as an argument for local, regional, and cultural variations in funerary rituals in general, and weapon burials in particular.

The result from my survey of deliberately destroyed swords from eastern Norway is somewhat contrary to the remark Håkon Shetelig makes on the subject in his survey of Iron Age graves in western Norway (1912).¹⁹ According to Shetelig, deliberately destroyed swords

are observed in nearly all cremation graves with swords from the Late Iron Age and Viking Age in western Norway (Shetelig 1912:172). Shetelig does not substantiate his statement with statistics. However, the regional variation in the occurrence of destroyed swords in eastern Norway makes it likely that there could be substantial variations in occurrence between western and eastern Norway.

Regional variation in the practice of handling swords and other weapons must be seen in connection with the remarkable variety in burial practices in the Viking Age, both in the treatment of the bodies and in the inner and outer construction of the graves (Shetelig 1912; Price 2008). In certain areas, cultural practice and local identity can explain some of the differences in burial practices (Callmer 1991; Svanberg 2003), but in other areas, the variations are striking within the same areas and even the same grave mound (Shetelig 1912:177–179, 201, footnote 3 with references, fig. 406; Stylegar 2007:65–66). These variations indicate that several different ideas and concepts of death and the afterlife existed within the same group and to some extent within the same household (Lund 2013:49).

19 Vestlandet (western Norway) covers the district of the University Museum of Bergen, consisting of Hordaland, Sogn og Fjordane and the southernmost parts of Møre og Romsdal.

This study confirms the idea that deliberate damaging of swords is a practice that first and foremost has occurred as part of a cremation ritual. This observation is, as earlier mentioned, consistent with the established view on the destruction of swords in burials (Rygh 1877:189-191; Shetelig 1912:107). However, even if the large majority of bent or otherwise deliberately damaged swords are found in cremation graves, this study shows that bent swords also are deposited in inhumation graves. This implies that the connection between the act of damaging swords and cremation rituals has to be somewhat modified. From the data from eastern Norway we can draw the conclusion that even if there is a clear connection between cremation rituals and the bending of swords, regional variation in the practice is observable, leading to the assumption that even if deliberately destroyed swords are found in cremation graves from all over the Viking World including the diaspora, this is also a practice somewhat connected to local or regionally specific cultural or religious traits.

FOR WHOM THE SWORD BENDS

In an investigation of possible motives behind the deliberate destruction of swords, it is relevant to ask who was buried with the broken swords. Viking Age graves are assumed to reflect the social status of the deceased (Solberg 1985), even though several other cultural, social, and religious factors must have influenced the exterior and interior of the graves. It is generally acknowledged that graves with a full set of arms (axe/sword, spear and shield) are linked to high social status in the Viking Age society (Hofseth 1981; Solberg 1985), and that a sword seems to signify the highest social status (Martens 2003; Pedersen 2008; Solberg 1985). However, in Norway the number of graves with swords is so extensive that one must assume that the sword was a relatively common feature amongst the free men who owned land (Martens 2003). Therefore, a sword in itself does not necessarily mean that the owner was a part of the upper elite of society.

The high quality sword, here understood as swords with ornamented hilts and/or pattern welded blades and blades with inscriptions, make up at least 1/4 of the deliberately destroyed swords. Even if the majority of

these are plain, probably locally produced sword types,²⁰ the high number of ornamented swords²¹ suggests that the deliberate destruction of swords was a ritual performed among the social elites in the Viking society, as well as among the farmer with rights and resources to carry a sword.

A weighty argument for associating the destruction of swords with high social status in the warrior society is the existence of bent swords found in equestrian burials. These are rich weapon burials with riding gear like stirrups and spurs (Braathen 1989; Pedersen 1997, 2014). In all, eleven of the graves with bent swords also contained stirrups and spurs.²² Although horse equipment, like bridles and parts of harnesses, is quite common in both male and female graves in Viking Age Scandinavia, graves with stirrups and spurs are scarcer. These types of objects usually appear in rich male graves with other objects linked to high social status, like high quality

swords and spears (Braathen 1989; Pedersen 1997, 2014). The introduction of this technology in the Viking Age is associated with increasing contact with the Carolingian social elites (Pedersen 1997:132–133). The art of riding with a saddle, stirrups and spurs enabled the mounted warrior to employ his spear more efficiently (Pedersen 1997:131). It has been suggested that the men buried in these equestrian graves held certain political functions in the Viking Age society, associated with the expansion of the kingdom (Braathen 1989; Pedersen 1997, 2002), and the amount and quality of grave goods indicate a connection to the highest strata of the Norse society.

Thus, the occurrence of swords and the quality of many of the weapons and additional grave goods suggest that the deliberate destruction of swords and other weapons should be associated with the social elites in the Viking Age society. However, variations in the grave goods and the quality of the swords indicate that the deliberate destruction of swords was not a ritual reserved solely for the elite, but rather a practice including a wider array of individuals equipped with weapons.

20 Type M and Q, see Petersen 1919

21 Pattern welded blades or blades with inscriptions, sword types R and S, and some of the more elaborate H and K swords, see Petersen 1919.

22 C10790, C10791 (same grave), C11318, C13698, C13906, C15835, C15836 (same grave), C15935, C15973, C16023, C27317.

THE SWORD AS A SYMBOL OF POWER AND AUTHORITY

A point of departure for interpreting the meaning behind the practice of deliberately destroyed swords is the social and ontological significance of swords in the Viking Age.

There are no specific mentions of the destruction of swords in funerary rituals in Early Medieval literature, even though there are several descriptions of weapons being a part of the burial. This could be due to the late date of the sources, and that the ritual destruction of swords to a large extent was a non-uttered performative ritual act, physically and bodily expressed and accomplished, and therefore not remembered or found relevant in the oral transmission of the stories. However, from Norse literature there seems to be a number of somewhat related ideas of swords as significant and charismatic objects that can offer some clues to understand the practice of the destruction of swords and other weapons.

In *Hrafnsmál* (attributed to *Thorbjorn Hornklofi*), the following passage describes the sword as a part of the kingsmen's appearance or *persona*:

By their array and their gold rings, it may be seen that they are associates of the king. They possess scarlet cloaks with splendid borders, swords bound with silver, coats of ring mail, gilded baldrics and graven helmets and rings upon their arms; such things has Harald [Fairhair/Hárfagr] bestowed upon them.

Ravnsmaal, translated by Kershaw 1922

The swords are here presented as an identity marker, signifying a particular status or role in connection to the king. This is one of several references to a more general conception of the sword in Iron Age and Early Medieval society, associating swords in general, and ornamented swords in particular with authority and power (Brunning 2013:243–247, see also Härke 2000; Aannestad 2015a).²³

In addition to this general idea of swords, the written sources have numerous references to specific

²³ Similar descriptions of mighty warriors and kings with weapons are plentiful in the sagas and in the mythical poetry of the Edda, as in *Gudrunskvida II* (*The Second Lay of Guðrún*), v. 19, *Laxdæla saga* (*The Saga of the people of Laxárdalr*) v. 21. For a broader discussion of the sword as a personal adornment in the Viking Age, see Aannestad 2015a.

swords: swords with personal names, specific traits, and biographies.

One of the most well-known swords in Early Medieval Norse literature is the sword *Skofnung*. *Skofnung* is mentioned in several sources, linked to a number of warriors. It was said that the sword was the best of all swords in the northern lands, renowned for its supernatural hardness and sharpness, as well as for being imbued with the spirits of the King's twelve berserkers. After King Rolf of Denmark's death, *Skeggi* broke into the grave mound and took the famous sword *Skofnung* that was buried with the king. In addition to *Hrolf Krakes saga* and *Kormáks saga*, *Skofnung* is also featured in *Islendingadrápa* and *Landnamabok* (Davidson 1994 [1962]:172).

Another well-known sword in saga literature is *Tyrfing*, known from *The Saga of Hervör and Heidrek* (*Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*). In a dramatic passage, Hervor demands that her dead father, King Agantyr, give her the sword, buried with him in the grave mound on the island of Samsø in Denmark. Hervor's motive for this deed is that *Tyrfing* is an important symbol of royal power for Hervor to pass on to her son and heir. In the saga, *Tyrfing* is portrayed both as a symbol of

royal power and lineage, as well as an object with certain magical powers linked both to its origin and the circumstances surrounding its production, as well as to the biographical features of the sword.

The Saga of Hervör and Heidrek is one of the legendary sagas, generally viewed as less historically accurate than other sagas, often containing references to supernatural motives and beings. However, the story of the sword *Tyrfing*, can serve as an example of a certain motif or the idea of swords in general, reflected in written sources. From *Saxo* to the Norse sagas, stories of swords with magical and symbolic characteristics are told: dangerous and magical swords that give the owner power and authority. The idea of powerful swords is probably part of an older European tradition, articulated as a central motif in *Beowulf* and other old myths (Bazelmans 1999; see also Davidson 1994 [1962]; Brunning 2013). Sue Brunning explores the idea of the 'living' sword from an interdisciplinary perspective, and focuses on the relationship between the warrior and the sword in Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian cultures from 500-1100 AD (Brunning 2013). She examines life histories, biographies, sword names, character descriptions, and various

contexts, both in archaeological material and contemporary literature. *Skofnung* and *Tyrfing* have ambiguous powers, they represent both a trait and a potential, being difficult to control, but also a necessary means to gain power over people, both symbolically and physically. The tales of *Skofnung* and *Tyrfing* also exemplify an important ontological characteristic of the Viking Age: the idea that certain objects could have a personality, or be considered to have a form of life (Brunning 2013; Burström 2015; see also Lund 2009, 2011, 2017).

THE CHARISMA OF THE VIKING AGE SWORD

The term charisma is a fruitful approach to the cultural and ontological understanding of Viking Age swords in general, and the deliberate destruction of swords and other weapons in cremation graves. According to Marianne Vedeler (this volume), the term charismatic object refers to the situation where forces are present in an object. The object is no longer merely an object. It becomes a *thing of value*, linked not only to the functional or economic properties of the object, but to a

broader collective narrative. The collective narrative entails the idea of the magical, transcendental, or religious power residing in the object. Through these collective narratives, the charismatic objects acquire the power to control people, and by controlling the object, you also controlled its powers (Vedeler this volume).

As stated earlier, the powerful swords in Early Medieval Norse literature are a recurring motif, representing a form of collective narrative of the sword. As an example, the sword *Tyrfing* represents the idea of the charismatic object as stated by Vedeler: an object of value and power that can be handed over from person to person, the transaction following certain given rules. Written sources mention several objects with transferable powers, objects that could transfer charisma and power from the leader, as in the term *haminga* (Price 2002).

The Norse society was a warrior society. Warfare, violence and weapons were means of power, and had symbolic importance as expressions of the warrior role and warrior values. In the Late Iron Age and Viking Age the idea of certain swords and swords in general was well known, rooted in oral histories and in the martial and material culture of a society where war and

warfare were central, both in everyday life, and as a fundamental ideological characteristic (Andrén 2006; Härke 2000; Price 2002). The extensive acts of destruction of swords and other weapons in cremation graves could be seen in connection to the swords having special powers, inalienable objects that had to be removed from circulation, with the act of destruction as a way of preventing the re-use of this potentially destructive or dangerous object. This is in line with the argument used by Reiersen (this volume), who sees the destruction of serpent-head rings in the Roman Iron Age as a destruction of specific objects with charismatic, dangerous, and non-transferrable characteristics.

There is hitherto no record of deliberately destroyed swords in Danish Viking Age graves (Pedersen 2011:57). Given the correlation with deliberately destroyed swords and cremation burials, one reason for this absence could be that cremation burials from the Viking Age are few in Denmark, mainly existing north of Limfjord. Danish cremation burials dated to the Viking Age are generally considered to be modest graves with little or no grave goods (Ramskou 1951). However, unlike Norway, wetland deposits of objects,

tools, weapons, and jewelry are widespread in southern Scandinavia. Julie Lund sees the wetland depositions as a way of taking dangerous or inalienable objects out of circulation (Lund 2008, 2011, 2017). In Anglo-Saxon England, the finds of deposited weapons in wetland areas seem to increase during periods when weapons disappear from grave finds. John Hines has therefore suggested that burying weapon in graves and in wetland deposits are different solutions to the problem of handling inalienable or charismatic objects in a safe way (Hines 1997b:378–382; see also Härke 2000). Given the presumably shared understanding of certain swords as charismatic or inalienable objects in Norse society, the widespread practice of destroying weapons and especially swords in funerary rituals in Norway may be understood as being comparable to wetland deposits in southern Scandinavia.

As previously stated, the large majority of deliberately destroyed swords are from cremation graves. It seems that funerary rituals had a significant impact on the treatment of weapons, and that the act of destroying swords was an integral part of the cremation ritual. Cremation of the dead is performed in various forms

throughout the Late Iron Age and Viking Age (Shetelig 1912:179–201). Even though cremation takes various forms, the general idea is that the burning of the dead often represents a rite of passage (van Gennep 1960), a transition of the individual into a different state of being (Williams 2015). Cremation of the dead can also be understood as a way of releasing the spirit of the dead (Fowler 2004, 92–93; Williams 2015), and as a form of sacrifice, giving the dead to deities (Fowler 2004:95; Østigård 2000:50).

The cremation process is often one of several ways to transform the physical body in the burial, and it is linked to a sort of theme, involving the transition of other forms of material culture (Williams 2015). Thus, the destruction of swords and other weapons in cremation rituals can be seen not only as an act of ‘killing’ certain charismatic and potentially dangerous swords. The deliberate destruction could also be an act of transformation, either as part of a violent ritual performed during the burial helping the transition of the dead warrior, or as an act performed upon the weapon itself, transforming the power of the weapon to a different state of being. This theory also coincides with the idea of

the charismatic sword, having a form of magical, transcendental, or religious power residing in the object itself.

SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article gives an overview of the deliberately bent and otherwise destructed swords of the late Iron Age and Viking Age in south-eastern Norway. Damage varies from careful folding of the sword blade to violent handling with blows and cuts, often including other weapons from the same grave. The destruction of objects is a practice first and foremost carried out on weapons, linking it to the warrior sphere of the Norse society. Regional variations in frequency show that culture specific traits were significant, and that the deliberate destruction of weapons in funerary rituals was one of several different practices reflecting a complex set of ideas about death and the afterlife in the Norse society. The close connection between cremation burials and the practice of destroying weapons confirms the idea that the practice should be understood as an integral part of the funerary ritual. However, the destruction of

swords in Viking Age graves cannot be fully understood without taking the collective narrative of swords in the Norse society into account. The charismatic swords of the Viking Age were magical, powerful and dangerous, and therefore needed to be handled in a safe way to protect society.

Archaeological, historical and ethnographic studies confirm that the practice of breaking and destroying objects during burial rituals was widespread from pre-history onwards in various cultures all over the world (Grinsell 1961). According to Grinsell, the reasons behind the ritual destruction of objects are multiple, varying from the mundane and practical to the spiritual and ontological (Grinsell 1961; see also Grinsell 1973; Gardeła 2016:216–217). The tales of certain charismatic swords from written sources can certainly provide a general

idea of swords and weapons in the Viking Age. However, the charismatic properties of certain swords from Norse literature and poetry are not sufficient to explain the number of swords and other weapons that were bent, twisted, and in other ways broken and laid down in graves in the Viking Age. To fully grasp and understand the phenomenon of breaking and burying swords in the Viking Age society, we need more research, both technical studies of the various practices of destroying weapons and other objects, the different stages of the funerary rituals, and the religious and social contexts of burial practices. Thus, the violent destruction of swords and other weapons is a key to expanding our knowledge of the complex relationship between funerary rituals, ideas of death and the afterlife, and conceptions of war, violence and weapons in the Viking Age society.

