Life on the Edge:
Social, Political and Religious Frontiers in
Early Medieval Europe
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By Babette Ludowici
Life on the Edge:
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Early Medieval Europe

Edited by Sarah Semple, Celia Orsini and Sian Mui

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Preface

The sixth volume of the series 'Neue Studien zur Sachsenforschung' presents 36 papers presented originally at the 63rd Internationales Sachensymposium, held in St John's College at Durham University, from the 1st to 6th of September 2012. These proceedings have been published with the Braunschweigisches Landesmuseum and the Internationales Sachensymposium.

The theme of the conference 'Life on the Edge: Social Political and Religious Frontiers in Early Medieval Europe', was stimulated by the situation of Durham in the ancient kingdom of Northumbria. Formed from a series of smaller British polities in the 7th century, this political unit, at its greatest extent, reached from the Irish to the North Sea and from the River Humber north to the Firth of Forth, now in Scotland. It brought together British and Anglo-Saxon communities, but also at times encompassed Pictish populations. To the south, the kingdom spanned the old Roman frontier, and its legacy of fortifications, some of which continued in active use in the 5th and perhaps even 6th centuries. This frontier continued to exert an influence on the early medieval populations of the region, and Hadrian's Wall, the stone-built limit of Britannia, ultimately came to form a building medium for some of the remarkable early Christian churches and sculptures that survive in northern England today.

As a result of Roman and Romano-British legacies, cultural exchanges and contacts with Irish and North Sea communities, and conflicts and political alliances with British and Pictish territories, the region offers a unique landscape in which to consider issues of politics and identity in early medieval society. This gave rise to the conference theme, with the hope that members might contribute papers that touched on liminality, frontiers and boundaries, centres and peripheries and borderlands, as well as stylistic, artistic, linguistic and cultural divides. In total 42 members and invited speakers presented at Durham, with six poster presentations. Although not all participants chose to publish in the volume, this proceedings represents a rich and varied repertoire of papers that capture the temporal and geographic breadth of the event.

The articles included range widely, dealing with archaeology, art, and at times written sources, and cover the 1st to the 13th centuries AD. Geographically the papers touch on sites and finds from Britain and Scotland, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Poland. Articles encompass many topics, including exchange at the North Sea edge, the building of linear divisions and defences, central places and production, religious transition, cultural borders, burial and identity, and the limits between real and imagined worlds. A number of invited participants and contributors also provide a specialist view of northern mainland Britain, focussed on key political and religious transitions and important discoveries of sites and objects.

The conference organising committee comprised Sarah Semple, Becky Gowlan, Richard Gameson, John Henry Clay and David Petts (all Durham University), who were ably guided by the Internationales Sachensymposium UK Co-ordinating Committee: Charlotte Behe, John Hines and Chris Scull. In addition the event was made possible by the hard work of a group of Durham doctoral student volunteers: Jocelyn Baker, Brian Buchanan, Lisa Brundile, Celia Orsini and Tudor Skinner.

An important feature of the Durham meeting was the attendance of a group of Polish members, whose papers appear here under Section III. Space, Place, Frontiers and Borders. It seems apt that our conference on frontiers witnessed the bringing together of scholars working on early medieval archaeology in northern and eastern Europe. Another distinctive provision was funding from the Internationales Sachensymposium, Durham University and Durham's Institute for Medieval and Early Modern Studies, to support scholarships for PhD students and early career researchers, allowing them attend and present their work. As a consequence this volume includes articles by number of new researchers from different countries.

During the conference, an excursion was made to some of the key sites in Northumberand and County Durham: to Holy Island, Lindisfarne, to see the site of the early Christian monastic community, the surviving sculptures and the medieval priory; to Bamburgh Castle, a seat of power from late prehistory, through to the Viking and Norman periods; to Yeavering or Gelfrin, a central place and site of royal power and conversion in the 6th to 7th centuries AD; and to the Anglo-Saxon church at Escomb, Co Durham. The organising committee would like to thank Historic England for facilitating access to the exhibition at Lindisfarne, and David Petts for site tours of the abbey. Thanks are due to Graeme Young for the tour of the Bamburgh excavations, Eric Cambridge for introducing conference participants to Escomb, and The Gelfrin Trust for an on-site tour of Yeavering and the
exhibition, coffee and traditional Northumbrian tart served up at Kirknewton Village Hall.

This volume is edited by Sarah Semple, Celia Orsini and Sian Mui, and we are grateful for the goodwill and patience of authors, and their willingness to publish in English. Authors worked hard to meet the conference theme and the articles presented here are split into sections, to reinforce the connections and synergies between papers. An introduction to the volume comments on key common findings. The papers represent the state of study in 2013 when most contributions were submitted for publication, but many authors took the opportunity to update their articles in 2015–16. This is a double peer-reviewed volume, a process which takes time, but has significantly strengthened the cogency of the book, making it an original contribution to current thinking on the theme of social, religious and political frontiers in early medieval Europe.

The editors would like to thank Alejandra Gutiérrez for typesetting the volume, Babette Ludowici for assistance throughout the production process and Tina Jakob for assisting with translation. The conference was made possible through funding from the Internationales Sachsen Symposium, the Department of Archaeology and the Institute of Medieval and Early Modern Studies at Durham University. Publication costs have been met by awards from the Institute of Medieval and Modern Studies at Durham, the Department of Archaeology, Durham University, Arsc an UMR 7041 Archéologies Environnementales at Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne, and The Marc Fitch Fund.

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Abstract

Life on the Edge: Social Political and Religious Frontiers in Early Medieval Europe brings together articles from specialists from across eight countries. Resulting from the 63rd meeting of the Sachsensymposium in Durham in 2012, this volume takes its inspiration from the position of this city close to the Roman frontier, and its instrumental role in the development of early Northumbria. The 7th-century kingdom of Northumbria at times united British, Anglo-Saxon and Pictish populations. To the south, it spanned the old Roman frontier and its legacy of fortifications; to the north, it stretched into modern Scotland. As a consequence Northumbria offers a unique landscape in which to consider issues of frontiers and boundaries, centres and peripheries, and the kinds of events, allegiances, political and religious changes, that helped shape the northern European early medieval identity.

Articles deal with archaeology, art, and at times written sources, and cover the 1st to the 13th centuries AD. Geographically the papers touch on sites and finds from England and Scotland, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Poland. Articles encompass topics including: trade and exchange at the North Sea edge; the building of linear divisions and defences; central places and production; the delimitation of settlements; religious transition; cultural borders; burial and identity; and the limits between real and imagined worlds.

Zusammenfassung


Résumé


Dans cet ouvrage, différentes disciplines se côtoient pour répondre à ces questions, à partir des données archéologiques, de l’histoire de l’art et des sources écrites du 1er au 13e siècle de notre ère. Au niveau géographique, les articles portent sur les sites et les objets d’Angleterre, d’Écosse, d’Allemagne, des Pays-Bas, du Danemark, de Suède, de Norvège et de Pologne. Les discussions portent : sur les échanges autour de la Mer du Nord, les divisions internes des bâtiments et des habitats, les systèmes de défenses, les lieux de pouvoir et de production, les transitions religieuses, les tombes et les questions d’identité, les limites des cadres culturels et les limites entre les mondes du réel et de l’imaginaire.
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The Enigmatic Stone Faces: Cult Images from the Iron Age?

Torun Zachrisson

Introduction

The tradition of placing log or branch-shaped human-like wooden figures on cultic sites in the Nordic countries starts in the late Bronze Age and continues through the Iron Age into the Viking Age (Oldberg 1957; Capele 1995; Vanden Sanden and Capele 2002; Dahl 2007). These wooden images have been preserved in wetlands, where they have often proved to be the focus of a cultic site. Medieval Icelandic sagas mention that wooden anthropomorphic images (Old Norse trégrúd, skurðgóð, tréndrúðr, liðneski, staðr and hlautr) occurred at cultic sites in Iceland and Norway. These were most often kept indoors in a hof, a pre-Christian cultic building intended for sacrificial feasts. Platforms/altars (Old Norse stóllr, stólli) as well as other ritual objects could also be found inside (Sundqvist 2014, 113; de Vries 1970, 270; and Capele 1995, 44). Anthropomorphic images of stone, by contrast, are unmentioned in these sources (Capele 1995, 62) and yet three-dimensional human figures made of stone are part of prehistoric museum collections across Norway, Denmark and Sweden. All but one consist of a head of about the size of a human skull. Although none of the stone images have been discovered during an archaeological excavation, some of the contexts of discovery are highly detailed and open up the possibility that stone heads might have been part of pre-Christian sanctuaries. These artefacts have rarely been mentioned in scholarly literature, perhaps because they are difficult to date. Here Old Norse written sources are used to explore how a pre-Christian human-like image might have appeared, and parallels to these stone images are discussed.

Contexts for stone heads in the Nordic countries

Eight or possibly nine anthropomorphic stone images are known from the Nordic countries. From southern Norway there are three stone heads: from Rossland in Rogaland, Lunde on Lista in Vest-Agder and from somewhere in Sunnmøre (Tyn Oddleiblid at Setesdal in southern Norway, Birkeli 1943, 172 not included). From Denmark two have been found in Glibjerg and Bramminge in south-western Jutland. And finally two stone heads have been found in Ravlunda in Scania, in southern Sweden, and possibly an additional example, now lost, from Røsmo on Oland (Zachrisson 2013). In addition there is a seated stone figure from Örberga in Västmanland, west of the lake Mälaren that is not discussed further here (see Zachrisson 2007). The stone heads from Ravlunda, as well as the one from Rossland, belong to contexts that can shed light on the milieux where anthropomorphic images might have once appeared.

The two stone heads from Ravlunda in Scania, southern Sweden, are almost totally unknown and have never been published, bar recognition by this author’s local historical publication (Zachrisson 2013). The heads were classified as sculpture of unknown date when they were incorporated in the collections of the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm in 1920 and kept among medieval stone sculpture. One of the stone heads is of sandstone, 22 cm in height, and shows a male with marked lips and chin, who seems to be wearing a helmet with cheek guards (Fig 1: inventory no 16525). According to the register it was found in: ‘Stigalund’s wood’, one of the so-called ‘groves’ in the middle of the wood south of the estuary of Skepparpåsen, probably in the western part of the copse. The whole wood is only a few hundred metres in diameter. The other stone head is 27 cm in height and executed in granite and shows a male with marked eyebrows, nose and mouth, rendering it a stern appearance (Fig 2, inventory no 16511). This example was found between Ravlunda Church and the dolmen at Haväng. It could have been recovered somewhere close by the findspot of the first head, since Stigalund lies about half way between the church and Haväng, but this remains unproven. These stone heads were once included in the stone collections, though thought to be missing for the last decade, but have recently been re-found.

Ravlunda, meaning the ‘amber-grove’, was already in the 18th century renowned for its remarkable finds. According to legends there was once a town called Malestad with a sacred grove at the mouth of the River Skepparpåsen. Oral traditions also relate the discovery of five gold bracteates, and two gold foil figures or ‘guldgubbar’ at Stigalund — items now in the museum collection (Fæbø and Næsman 2013, 77; Helgesson 2014, 330). Charlotte Fæbø with Bertil Helgesson has made Ravlunda known as a central place-complex (Fæbø 1998; Helgesson 2002, 2013). By metal-detecting and small-scale excavations, they have been able to point to places for possible settlements, workshops, sanctuaries and a large burial ground. The archaeological finds date to the period c AD
300–1100 (FAABEK and NÄSMAN 2013, 77; HELGESSON 2014, 31; HELGESSON 2002, 68). Fieldnames on historical maps indicate an assembly site and a landing place at the river mouth. The legal rights (birkarett) for the market place were attested in a 15th-century document (FAABEK 1998, 160). In AD 1231 Ravlund was listed in King Valdemar’s cadastral as kongeleiv of the Danish king. Altogether this indicates a central place of supra-regional importance (Fig 3, HELGESSON 2014, fig 32).

The grove where the first stone head was found is called Ravlund grove or Stigalund, which according to Stefan Brink can be interpreted as the ‘fenced-in part of the grove’ (FAABEK 1998, 158). The wood south of the river is called Lunnane, ‘the groves’, and thus may have contained several groves, including the fenced one. The fen directly north-east of Stigalund is marked on historical maps as Ablgutháker, which can be interpreted as ‘the fen of the Algodi’. A godi was a chieftain and religious leader of a settlement district, a title still in use in place names and in runic inscriptions from Viking-Age Denmark (MÖLKE 1976; FAABEK 1998, 159). The beginning of the name of the hundred contains the Nordic word element *gl/, which is most often interpreted as ‘sanctuary’ and is also connected with ‘protected’ (ANDERSSON 1992, 88; VIKSTRAND 2001, 191; NYMAN 2014), although this has been questioned (BRINK 1992; ELMER 2004). Al- is comparable to Gothic ahl ‘temple’, proto-English ealh and proto-Saxon alah, and also occurs in old Baltic languages such as proto-Lithuanian aikas, aikas, with the meaning ‘holy grove, holy place, place at a height where sacrifices are made’ (VIKSTRAND 2001, 191). Aksmarc belongs to a group of district names across the Nordic countries referring to units ranging in size from a parish to a hundred that all contain the element al. These names types may have referred to a protected or sacred place in the centre of the district (VIKSTRAND 2001, 196).

One of the stone heads found in Norway has likewise been recovered from a rich Iron-Age context. The ‘Rossland-God’ is a stone head housed in Dalene Folkemuseum in southern Norway. It can be contextually dated to the late Roman Iron Age to the Migration Period. It is larger than the other examples measuring 58 cm in height. The figure has a stern look with marked eyebrows, eyes, nose, lips and chin (Fig 4). Barbro Dahl provides a thorough analysis of the head and its context (2003, 144). The stone head was found in Rossland in Sokndal, Rogaland, in the 18th century. Close by were two, perhaps three, stone troughs (1 x 0.43 m and 0.76 x 0.38 m respectively). There was also a base, 0.43 m in height that may have been carved as a support for the head (DAHL 2003, 78f). The stone head, base and troughs are made out of a local rock (labradorite or norri) and seem to have been manufactured locally. They were found in boulder terrain at the foot of the hill Haugen, which dominates the scenery. On the hill there is a stone table called ‘the Altar’ or Skammelen: a large slab, 1.25 x 0.80 m, placed on two stone legs. Presumably the stone head and troughs once stood there as well, but were thrown down. A right hand blow has damaged the nose on the head: a recognised method used to deprive stone images of their spirit and power (BROBY-JOHANSEN 1967, 162). The Rossland-god has been interpreted as a cult image, perhaps especially related to offerings of food (BIRKELI 1943, 106).

The stone head was found in the vicinity of a settlement, still visible in the landscape today through its house
foundations. These are of well known type, dating roughly to the late Roman Iron Age and the Migration Period (Myhre 2002, 170f). There are also several prehistoric mounds, cairns and long mounds/cairns as well as standing stones. The latter carry names like Gygio, ‘the giantess’ and Pinkensteinen, ‘the pee stone’. A nearby hill in the surroundings is called Trollstovo, ‘the troll cottage’, because of a deep crack reaching five metres into the rock that forms a shelter (Dahl 2003, 6). There are clearly rich oral traditions in the area. The place name Rossland, derives from Old Norse hross: horse and field. In the vicinity there are place names carrying the names of the gods Freyr and Freya: in the south Frøyjuland and in the north-east Frøyulog, the latter is probably a district name — Freyr’s Law — linking the god to the territorial division. To the north-west lie Frøyholm, Frøysundet and Frøyåkeren, the islet connected to the goddess Freya, and the sound and field connected with the god Freyr. There is also a settlement called Ba, the foremost farm (Dahl 2003, 101; Sønder and Stenshagen 1976, 118). No archaeological excavations have been undertaken at the site, but the combination of the stone head, altar and troughs, together with the place names and oral traditions, speak in favour of this being a sanctuary, probably from the mid-Iron Age (Lexow 1964, 82). The stone head can only be dated contextually to the same time period.

Figure 2. The stone head found between Ravlunda church and the Haväng (SHM 16511). Photograph: Ola Myrren, Swedish History Museum.

Figure 3. Map of Ravlunda with Ravlunda lund or the grove Stigelund marked close to Ahlgukäret to the right. After Heuforsen, 2014, fig. 32.
as the graves and the house foundations, thus roughly the late Roman Iron Age to the Migration Period.

Another stone head was found further south in Norway in the 1950s in an old stonewall (Stylergar pers comm) on the farm property Lunde nr 6, part 55 by Lundevågen (Fig 5). It is however unclear if Lunde, meaning 'the grove', refers to a holy grove or not, but this site lies in an area rich in continental imports from the late Roman Iron Age and the Migration Period at Lista, Vest-Agder (Stylergar 2007, 107, 141). Most of the finds are related to a large coastal burial ground with well-furnished graves situated beside a bay. The finds concentrations around Lundevågen have made researchers suggest that there might have been a trading place in the late Roman Iron Age and the Migration Period (Gries 1938; Sjømann 1961). Traces of a hall building probably from the late Roman Iron Age were discovered some years ago (Stylergar 2006, 426). A thick cultural layer has also been detected at the site, but not yet excavated (Stylergar and Appel 2004). The stone face is about the size of a human head, round and with oval eyes, a marked nose and a straight mouth. It seems to be furnished with some sort of headgear — a helmet or a special kind of hairstyle.

A third stone head from mid-Norway is on display in the Stone Age exhibition in the Museum of Bergen. This egg-shaped head is 24.5 cm in height and manufactured from porphyry. The eyebrows, eyes and nose are marked, and the lips parted (Fig 6). The stone head has existed since earlier times in the museum, with no other information than the signature: ‘Samimær’ (University Museum Bergen, inventory no B7699). Summare is a large region of over 5000 sq km and the exact find spot remains unknown.

The two stone heads that are known from south-western Jutland in Denmark differ from the rest by having three faces. In the 1950s a stone head that stood in a garden in the village Glemberg some 30 km east of the coast of western Jutland was presented in an article in Kuml by a local priest Knud Høgsbro Østergaard (1954, 57). The head is 27 cm in diameter and made of granite; two of the faces are elaborate while the third seems unfinished (Fig 7). The faces have marked eyebrows, round distinct eyes, straight and marked noses, and full lips. One of the faces has a triangular mark on the forehead and a collar/halo/rim that surrounds the face. The other elaborate face has a triangular diadem with an inscribed bead at the forehead. In addition, there is a triangular shaped stone with a stone face in relief that appears to have functioned as the base of the stone head. The stone head was originally placed close to a spring so rich in water that it formed a small pool (Høgsbro Østergaard 1954, 62). In a neighbouring village Bramminge, situated only 15 km away, there is a similar granite stone head 31 cm in diameter with three faces that have marked eyebrows and eyes, straight noses and full lips. Two of the faces have the same type of triangular ornaments at the foreheads as the Glemberg-head: one of them has the triangle with the inscribed bead; the other has a triangular mark together with the collar/halo/rim around the face. At the neck there is an additional ring or neck-rim. Letters have been added later between the faces.

The dating for the Jutish stone heads has been discussed and it has been suggested that they could emanate from the Christian period, but mostly they have been interpreted as Celtic (Høgsbro Østergaard 1954, 62; Ross 1967). The stone head from Corleck, Co. Cavan, Ireland is considered to be the best parallel to the Jutish stone heads (Ross 1967, 114,
The notion of three-headed creatures was present in Jutland in the early Migration Period, however, demonstrated by an image depicted on the smaller of the Gallehus' horns discovered in south-western Jutland (JENSEN 2004, 121). Gods with multiple faces are also known from the Slavonic area — an area that Denmark was in close contact with during the Viking Age through intermarriages, migrations and trade (CAPELLE 1995, 52; SANDEN and CAPELLE 2002; see also LAMM 1985). Neither the multiple faced gods from the Slavonic region, nor the one depicted on the Gallehus horns, however, carry the halo/ring.

On the island Öland in Sweden, half of a carved human stone face was found in 1911 in a field north of Resmo spring in Resmo parish (JOHANSSON 1955, 171). Resmo spring is the most famous spring on Öland that once had enough water to power a watermill. According to oral traditions the spring played a role in the Christianisation of Öland. It had been in continued use as a holy spring until the 19th century (ZACHRISSON 2013). Unfortunately the stone head was soon lost, but the combination of a stone head and a powerful spring is reminiscent of the context of the stone head from Gleißberg.

Parallels

The human head is reckoned as the most typical of Celtic symbols (Ross 1967, 61). The cult of the head was an important part of the Celtic religion and can be found in iconography and sculpture and is mentioned by classical writers. Heads were thought to be able to act independently on their own, and thus not only represent the whole, but operate as if the full body was not needed (Ross 1967, 156–8; FREDENGREN forthcoming, 17). A 10th-century Irish written source mentions the Battle of Allen in AD 722, where, after the battle, the decapitated heads of heroes were tended to. One head that was placed on a pillar performed a chant, another was washed and food placed in front of it as if participating in the post-battle feast (Ross 1967, 156f). Human heads that were placed on standing stones were thought to make the stones move and act (Ross 1967, 147, 159; FREDENGREN forthcoming, 18). Although stone heads are closely associated with Celtic culture, the most numerous depicted heads in Britain and Gaul can be dated to the
Romano-Celtic period (Green 1986, 218). Researchers have therefore suggested that these stone gods may have been a result of the cultural encounter between the abstract Celtic art tradition and the monumental stone carving traditions of the Romans (Tynbee 1962, 16; Green 1986, 224).

Stone heads have sometimes been found in shrines in the British Isles. Recently a carved stone head was found close to an excavated small altar. The altar was placed in a bathhouse at the Roman fort of Bingham, in County Durham. Bingham was one of the largest forts in the region and situated on the Roman road between York and Hadrian’s Wall. The carved stone head is c 20 cm in height, made of sandstone and dated to the 2nd or 3rd century AD. The style of the stone head is linked to regional Romano-British traditions. A similar example, with an inscription that identifies the relief as the god Antenociticus, was found in 1862 at Newcastle upon Tyne, not far from Durham. Remains of a forearm and a leg were also recovered, suggesting that the head may have belonged to a life-size statue. Antenociticus was a deity approached in relation to military affairs. This Romano-Celtic male deity is supposed to have been worshipped locally at Hadrian’s wall and belongs to a type of divinity associated more broadly with the frontier regions of the Empire (Bingham International Field School 2014).

Discussion

There was strong Roman influence on the Nordic societies: on infrastructure, dress, tableware, religion and burial customs (Lund Hansen 1987; Kaliff and Sundqvist 2004; Andreén 2014; Andersson 2013). We can count stone sculpture among these influences. An indigenous stone sculptural tradition began in the late Roman Iron Age in Sweden when picture stones, inspired by the Roman tombstone tradition, were manufactured in the Mälars Valley and on Gotland (Andreén 2011, 50; Lindqvist 1941, 91f; Holmqvist 1952).

Such innovations are also known from Norway where a similar type of development occurred (cf Myhre 2006, 241). The stone heads might be part of this tradition, emerging in the late Roman Iron Age. That two of the stone heads appear at the central place Ravlunda seems in many ways logical. Central places were milieus where imported objects, wealth and new lifestyles inspired by the Roman culture emerged, including for example the consumption of bread (Zachrisson 2004; Bergström 2007) and the use of surgical instruments (Fürbich 2011). The central places have been divided into two major groups: central places of the first and second generation (Jørgensen 2009). In the first group we find Gudme and Sorte Muld in Denmark and Uppåkra and Helgö in Sweden, which begin in the pre-Roman or Roman Iron Age. To these we can now add Västra Vång in Blekinge. Examples of the second generation sites are Tisså, Lejre and Toftegård on Zealand and Järnestad in Skåne.

The core area of a central place is normally dominated by a short and high hall designed for ritual purposes, in combination with a longer residential building (Jørgensen 2009). Already in the first generation of central places we find this specific building constructed for ritual purposes. It has been highlighted through the excavations in Uppåkra, Sweden, where the structure has been interpreted as a cultic building — a Norse pagan temple. It was erected c AD 200 and rebuilt at least six times on the same spot and was in continuous use until the 950s (Larsson and Lenntorp 2004; Larsson and Söderberg 2012). A central place not only contained buildings where religious rituals took place indoors, but there could also be open-air cultic sites in contemporaneous use, as in Tisså and Helgö (Jørgensen 2009; Zachrisson 2004). At the outdoor cultic site at the central place Helgö there were altars that seem to have been part of the cultic site by the rock (Zachrisson 2004). Whether the fenced in grove at Ravlunda also could have contained altars remains unknown. A central place linked to a territorial district such as Ravlunda in Alsmark’s herred would, however, be the place where we would start to search for Romano-Germanic cultural encounters. The hundreds/herads were formed early to meet the needs of crews for ships (Andersson 2000; 2004), probably already in the mid-Iron Age. The martial society in the Nordic countries was heavily influenced by the encounter with the Romans at Limes (Lund Hansen 1987; Andreén 2014; Andersson 2013).

Should we be surprised that the stone heads presented above have such a crude appearance? Perhaps not: parts of life-size Roman bronze statues have been found in Gudme on Fyn in Denmark (Jensen 2003, 426) and on Gotland, Sweden (Swedish History Museum Inventory no 11375). But indigenous anthropomorphic figures of bronze were made on Öland in Sweden and on Fyn in Denmark during the Roman Iron Age/Migration Period. These statuettes culturally transformed the ‘Roman look’. Some of these bronzes have special hairstyles/helmets and their facial expressions and looks can be compared with the stone heads (Lund Hansen 1987, 228; Andersson and Dünér 2004, 771).

The importance of heads

Boulders in the form of human heads could serve as the foci of cult-sites in wetlands in the Nordic countries and did so at the beginning of the Iron Age in Vendsyssel, northern Jutland, Denmark (Friis 1971, 41). A natural boulder, looking like a head with one eye and grim smile, was found in a bog in Branderslev, Hjørring amt. It was surrounded by masses of pottery dating from the late pre-Roman and the early Roman Iron Age (Becker 1961, 102; Friis 1971, 49f; Ross 1967, pl 1b–1c). In the vicinity in a bog in Jeslev, pits filled with six human juvenile skulls, a skull of a dog and a skull from an older stallion were found and pots had also been deposited.
The cultic site was in use between AD 1 and 150 (pers comm. Vendyssel Museum). This shows that human heads could represent one of the main sacrificial objects in the early Roman period in Denmark. Another extraordinary find comes from Jæren in south-western Norway where the skulls of four, perhaps five infants, were discovered in a 'twine' spring in a bog. The skulls all belonged to the Roman Iron Age (LILJEHAMMER 2011). Human skulls as well as other skeletal parts from the pre-Roman Iron Age/Roman Iron Age have been found in a wetland in Hedmark, Norway (SELLEVOLD 2011; RESI 2011). The human skeletal material from wetlands in Sweden is rich and under analysis and publication by archaeologist Christina Fredengren and osteologist Camilla Lofqvist. Heads have thus played an important part at certain ritual sites in the Roman Iron Age in the Nordic countries.

In Norse mythology the talking head plays a vital role. In Ynglinga saga, ch 4, Snorri Sturluson (Snorri Sturluson Heimskringla) describes how the wise Mimir was beheaded while a hostage in a war, but Odin tended the head with herbs, chanted over it and gave it powers to speak and reveal secrets to him. In ch 7 we are told that Mimir’s head is with Odin where it reveals information from other worlds. In Gyfaginning 14 (Snorri Sturluson Edda), Snorri relates how Mimir owns the spring of wisdom and that he is a full man of wisdom because he drinks from the spring. Mimir is closely related to Odin, who gets his knowledge from drinking from Mimir’s well, but he has had to pawn his eye for this right. At Ragnarok Odin gets advice from Mimir at the spring (Gyfaginning 50). But the relation between Mimir’s spring and Mimir’s head is nevertheless difficult to define (SIMEK 1993, 216).

The historian of religions Anders Hultgård, has pointed to two historical sources from the Viking Age that mention that heads of sacrificial animals were hung in a sacred grove or on poles. Ibn Fadlan describes his encounter with Rūs at Volga in the 9th century. The men thanked their gods by slaughtering animals, the meat they gave away as gifts, but the heads of the sacrificial animals were hung on a large idol (MONTGOMERY 2000, 107). Adam of Bremen in the late 11th century mentions that sacrifices of animals and humans took place every ninth year in Old Uppsala (Adam of Bremen, Book IV). There is some confusion over what body parts were given to the gods and what were given to the participants of the sacrificial meal. In the text there is an opposition between capita ‘whereas the bodies’, which can only be explained if ‘capita’ refers to heads (HUtgård 1997, 32 no 62). It is quite probable that Adam refers to rituals where the meat of the sacrificial animals was consumed, while the heads of the same animals were consecrated to the gods and hung in a sacred grove (HUtgård 1997, 32 no 62). But if humans were sacrificed it was probably whole human bodies that were hung in trees and not solely heads (HUtgård 1997, 36 no 76). The head was a powerful symbol in various ways and connected with the otherworld during the Iron Age and through until the Viking Age.

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Snorri Sturluson

Snorri Sturluson

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