



Making Sense of Things

Archaeologies of Sensory Perception

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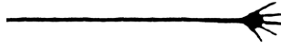
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Immortal Maidens: The Visual Significance of the Colour White in Girls' Graves on Viking-Age Gotland

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*The first of all single colours is white ...
We shall set down white for the representative of light,
without which no colour can be seen*

Leonardo Da Vinci

Introduction

In some Viking-Age (AD 800-1050) burials on Gotland, an island in the Baltic Sea, a large number of white shell-beads have been recovered together with glass-beads predominantly coloured yellow, green, red, blue and turquoise as well as beads of exotic materials such as carnelian and rock crystal. The beads were part of bead-sets from necklaces worn by females. Previous research assumed that the shell-beads were made of local limestone, but analyses have revealed that the beads were actually crafted from the exotic cowry shell (*cypraea pantherina*), originating in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea (Trotzig 1988:289; fig. 1).

The shell-beads draw attention to a discussion of the significance of the colour of the beads. The shell-beads are white and also have a texture that makes them different from the other beads. Furthermore, in a previous study by the author it has been shown that burials with the largest quantities of white beads or shell-beads belong to females between the ages of five and around fifteen (Thedéen 2008:78ff).

Shell-beads sometimes occur in the burials of infant girls or adult women, but they amount to only a few examples in total. The purpose of this paper is to explore the significance of the colour white of cowry shell-beads in burials from the Viking Age on Gotland, considering aspects of gendered age identities as well as fertility and status.

Colouring the past

The study of senses within archaeology has been a field of research since the 1990s (e.g. Classen 1993; Houston & Taube 2000). Various senses have been discussed since then and the usage, symbolism and visual aspects of colour in prehistory have inspired several studies. An appreciation for and attitudes towards colour have changed over the years, but the fact that it has been a matter of importance since antiquity is documented in written sources (Gage 1999:11ff). A colour study of great influence stating a neo-evolutionary approach was argued by Brent Berlin and Paul Key (1969). They emphasized universal meanings of colours determined by aspects of neurophysiology. Their opinions have been questioned by linguists and anthropologists, but also above all from an archaeological point of view because their basic colour terms, the



Fig. 1. White shell-beads arranged as a bead-set in a Viking-Age context - Hellvi, Ire burial 218A (Photo: Susanne Thedéen).

Munsell Colour Chart, do not consider the specific contexts or historical aspects of colour. The chart has also been criticized for overlooking colour symbolism and social meanings of colours (Sivik 1997; Gage 1999:79; Chapman 2002:45ff; Jones & MacGregor 2002:3ff). Furthermore, it has been argued that colour must be understood as relational, culturally constructed and may be related to wider aspects of cosmology, social categorization and gender relations (Owoc 2002:128). Colour can act as an important means of constructing difference through dress, adornments and bodily paints or substances. Colours may also be significant for signalling certain age groups or may be important in life course rituals marking altered identities (Turner 1967; Geirnaert 1992:56ff; Boivin 2000:373ff; Owoc 2002:127ff; Hauptman Wahlgren 2002:185ff; Thedéen 2004:102f).

The cultural significance of colour in archaeological, historical as well as anthropological contexts has been emphasized by several scholars (e.g. Turner 1967; Gage 1999; Jones & MacGregor 2002). According to studies conducted by Victor Turner it is white, red and black in particular that have been attributed cultural meanings (Turner 1967). However, other studies have shown that a variety of colours or combinations of colours may be ascribed cultural significance (e.g. Owoc 2002). The colour white specifically may hold a range or variety of meanings. White may refer to the sum of all other colours or white may denote no colour at all, that is it is colourless. A common view is to conceive of white as light. White has also been ascribed the colour of the metal silver in heraldry and the Latin and Greek root of the name of silver *arg-* signifies white or shining (Gage 1999). In societies of the western world white has traditionally been associated with innocence, purity, cleanliness, coolness, newness and virginity (Darvill 2002:74). In Eastern traditions as well as in African societies white has been ascribed meanings linked to death and sorrow, perhaps alluding to the white bones of the dead. Several anthropological studies have also shown that white has been associated with the spiritual world.

Cowry shells in their contexts

Cowry shells originate in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea and have enjoyed widespread use across time and space (Burgess 1970). The word cowry derives from *kauri* in ancient Hindi or Sanskrit, probably meaning shell. In Asian and African societies cowries have been used

as currency. In China this dates as early as c. 1500 BC, and in some African societies they were used right up until the twentieth century. In fact, the Chinese sign for money is in the shape of a cowry shell. Cowries are therefore also a general symbol for wealth and property in these societies (Hingston Quiggin 1949; Wang 1980).

In several contexts cowries have been worked into beads and been used as jewellery and a form of adornment. They have also been kept in an unprepared state, either as pendants or in bags, suggesting that they may sometimes have functioned as amulets. In a majority of societies the cowry has been associated with the female gender, symbolizing aspects of fertility and childbirth. This may be due to the form of the bottom of the cowry, which might be regarded as alluding to the vulva (Meaney 1981:123f; Lennartz 2004:198ff; cf. fig. 4). The fact that the cowry is collected from shallow waters also provides strong associations with water, which may be a significant element in relation to fertility and childbirth. In the Middle and New Kingdom in Egypt females wore cowries or imitations of cowries in girdles on the hips as amulets to secure fertility and to ensure safe childbirths (Meskell 2002:68). Amuletic features of cowries associated with fertility have also been suggested for Early Medieval Anglo-Saxon and Frankish contexts (Meaney 1981:123f). In Germanic and central European contexts cowries have instead been linked to perceptions of protection against the evil eye, but still acting as amulets (Lennartz 2004:206ff). The form of the cowry has also been associated with snake heads and was worn by women as amulets to protect against the evil eye in Russian, Baltic and Finnish contexts during historical times up to the nineteenth century. 'snake head' (Sw. *ormskalle*) as a name for cowries has been used in Sweden in historical times as well (*Nordisk familjebok*).

Turning to the Scandinavian contexts there are a number of different species of the cowry, the two most common in Scandinavia being the *cypraea pantherina* and the *cypraea moneta* (Jansson 1989:589ff; Johansson 2005:49ff). The *cypraea pantherina* was used to make shell-beads while the *cypraea moneta* was not worked but worn as pendants in necklaces. These cowries regularly have a hole with a bronze ring used for a string. There is evidence of cowries from the Vendel Period (AD 550-800) and the Viking Age, mainly from Gotland and Birka, the Viking-Age town in eastern Sweden, but also some examples from Öland, another island in the Baltic Sea, and from Ångermanland in the north of Scandinavia and from Scania in the southernmost part of

Scandinavia. There has also been a discussion considering whether the cowry beads were imported from the east (Jansson 1989) or if the shells were transported to Scandinavia and the beads were manufactured locally. No waste has been found from cowry bead production, which might support the idea that the beads were imported (Trotzig 1988:289). There is evidence in Russian and Baltic graves from the period AD 600-1000 indicating that the beads and cowries in Scandinavian contexts were imported from the east. White shell-beads are a common feature in burials on Gotland as early as the Vendel period. Cowries as pendants from the Migration (AD 400-550) and Vendel periods have also been observed (Nerman 1955:209f). Although only few in number, cowry pendants and beads continued to be used during the early Christian era as they are found in burials in some of the churchyards on Gotland (Carlsson 1999:61f; fig. 2). There is some evidence of cowries from settlements, too, but those remains will not be considered in this paper (Johansson 2005:51).

Keep a beady eye on the beads

In table 1 Viking-Age burials from Gotland with shell-beads are presented in relation to the estimated osteological age of the deceased. The table clearly illustrates that burials with large numbers of white shell-beads can be attributed to a certain age category of individuals,



Figure 2: Necklace with whole cowries from a Late Viking-Age churchyard, Fröjel (Modified after Carlsson 1999:62).

namely those between five and around fifteen years (Thedéen 2008; table 1). These individuals most likely denote a female gender representing girls judging from the similar burial outfit typically found in burials of adult females. Monochrome glass-beads of local production are also present in the burials. The glass-beads appear in the colours of yellow, green, red and blue or turquoise. One or two beads of carnelian or rock crystal

Table 1: Viking-Age burials with white shell-beads.

Parish	Estate	Inv no	Beads	Cowry-beads	Osteological age
Halla	Broe	SHM 19734:25:2	16	1	0-1 months
Grötlingbo	Barshalder	SHM 27739:3	8		2 child
Hellvi	Ire burial 375	SHM 20826	43		3 0-3 months + 3-4 years
Grötlingbo	Barshalder	SHM 27739:1b	114		10 child
Hellvi	Ire burial 218A	GF C 9322	217		111 7 year
När	Smïss	GF C 9521:13-21	255		135 7-9 years
Hellvi	Ire burial 230A	SHM 23140	118		19 9-10 years
Hellvi	Ire burial 370	SHM 20826	257		118 10 year
Hellvi	Ire burial 182B	GF C 9322	220		59 10 year
Tofta	Gnisvärd		152		10 15-20 years
	Exc. Burial 2				
Hellvi	Ire burial 230B	GF C 9322	17		12 20-25 years
Färö	Vinor	SHM 22459:1	41		4 25-35 years
Othem	Slite	SHM 23896:2B	62		32 skeleton with foetus
Visby	Land S Kopparsvik	GF C 12675:140	22		1 female, age?
Visby	Land S Kopparsvik	GF C 12675:189	43		22 female, age?
Visby	Land S Kopparsvik	GF C 12675:277	17		1 female, age?
Eke	Gudings slott	SHM 33024:1/88	4		1 ?
Eke	Smïss	SHM 13084	62		16 ?
Eksta	Bopparve	GFC 11510	97		27 ?
Eksta	Hägur Excavation	1973-77 Gr. 2:3	11		3 ?
Eksta	Hägur Excavation	1973-77 Gr.3	37		6 ?
Fleringe	Utoje Excavation	1984	110		10 ?
Halla	Broe	SHM 20263	98		41 ?
Hangvar	Ire	GF C 9671	20		1 ?
Levide	Pejnarve	SHM 26714:25	45		3 ?
Sanda	Runne	SHM 27300:11	12		1 ?
Tingstäde	Furbjärs	SHM 10046	6		1 ?
Tofta	Krokstäde	SHM 24101:3A	240		109 ?
Tofta	Krokstäde	SHM 24101:3A	15		1 ?
Visby	Land S Kopparsvik	GF C 12675:123	9		1 ?
Visby	Land S Kopparsvik	GF C 12675:140	22		1 ?
Visby	Land S Kopparsvik	GF C 12675:277	17		1 ?

may also be part of the bead-set. The table also shows that children below the age of five and females over fifteen years of age wore white cowry-beads in their bead-sets or necklaces, but the number of beads in general, and of shell-beads specifically, are not as numerous in these burials compared to those of the girls aged five to fifteen.

There is further evidence that cowry shells were probably associated with the female gender in general and children in particular. Whole cowry shells (*cypraea moneta*) have been found in three Viking-Age burials on Gotland. These whole cowries have probably been used as pendants and would have been displayed in the bead-sets. As in European contexts, it has been suggested that those kinds of pendants, as well as the beads generally, worked as amulets (Bye Johansen 2004:468; Thunmark-Nylén 2000:225). The first burial is one of those with a large number of shell-beads, burial 218A, from the Ire cemetery in north-eastern Gotland, where a cowry was found inside a box brooch. The box brooch was found close to the beads on the chest indicating the cowry may have been part of the bead-set, but had lost its original context (Thunmark-Nylén 2000:406; fig.1). The second burial is grave no. 4 from Hallvards in Silte, south-western Gotland (SHM 22087:4), where a cowry shell was found as a stray find. An adult and a child were recovered from the burial (Thunmark-Nylén 2000:622; fig. 3). The third burial from Slite in Othem, eastern Gotland (SHM 23896:2B, fig. 4), is perhaps the most interesting, as it appears to have contained a female who was pregnant at her death, as bones from a foetus were found in the pelvis area (Thunmark-Nylén 2000:579). She also wore a bead-set comprising 62 beads of which half were cowry shell beads.

A common feature of these burials with whole cowries is that they all represented burials of female adults and children. The burials of the adults were most likely females as evidenced by dress-related objects such as box brooches, animal-headed brooches, tool brooches with keys and knife as well as arm-jewellery. The children represented in the burials were a foetus, a child around age one and a seven-year-old girl judging from the female dress-related objects found in the burial. The burial of the seven-year-old girl thus uncovered both a cowry pendant and numerous cowry shell-beads. The child in the grave with the cowry classified as a stray find may have been a boy, as a penannular brooch was found close to the cranium of the skeleton. Also, four beads were recovered, a number found in both male and female graves.



Figure 3: Cowry shell probably used as a pendant - Silte, Hallvards (National Museum of Antiquities).

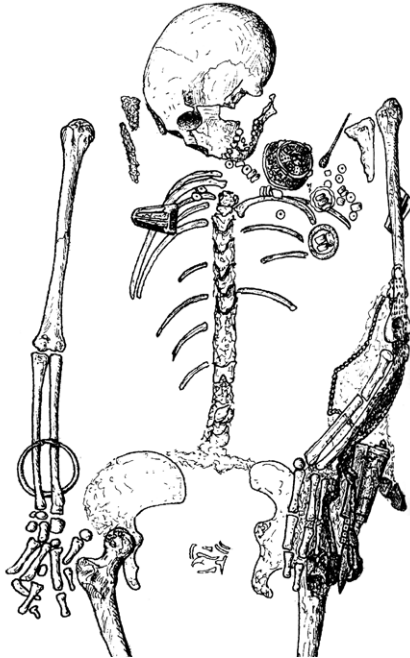


Figure 4: Burial of a pregnant woman with whole cowry and beads made of cowry shells - Othem, Slite (Modified after Thunmark-Nylén 2000:579).

Other evidence of cowries confirms the association with the female gender and children during the Viking Age. In all burial contexts with cowries in Scandinavia, except for one example of a male grave on Birka, the osteological evidence indicates that cowries were deposited in the burials of females or children (Johansson 2005:51). Even the male gender of the Birka burial may be questioned. A knife, two rings, one blue and one yellow bead and an unidentifiable part of an iron object were recovered from the burial. This gives no clear indication of the sex of the deceased (SHM 12159). The deceased may very well have been a female. An example of an adult and a child buried together in the churchyard at Fardhem in southern Gotland (SHM 27774) indicates that the tradition of females and children being linked with cowries continued into Christian times (Thunmark-Nylén 2000:174f).

The pattern of association with females and infants is also in line with the evidence from Medieval European contexts. There are other similar examples of pregnant women being buried with cowries (Meaney 1981:123ff, Lennartz 2004:198f). Furthermore, Annette Lennartz has shown that the deposition of cowries in burials may be linked to certain age categories. The cowries seem to have been deposited with adult women as well as infants and juveniles of a probable female gender, but rarely in the burials of males or mature and elderly people in European contexts (Lennartz 2004:198f). The conclusion also appears to be valid for Gotlandic burials with cowries. In addition to the burials with a large number of shell-beads presented in table 1, cowries are also deposited in the burials of infants under the age of five, juveniles and adult women, but not in the burials of mature and elderly women. However, in these burials the total number of beads and the number of shell-beads only amount to a few compared with the number of beads in the burials of the girls aged five to fifteen. One example is a burial with a female aged 20-25 buried with a necklace made of seventeen beads, twelve shell-beads and five glass-beads (Hellvi, Ire, GF C 9322:230B). Another example is an infant below the age of five who was buried wearing a necklace with eight beads consisting of two shell-beads and six glass-beads (Grötlingbo, Barhalder, SHM 27739:3). This pattern adds to the understanding of the cowries having been connected to certain gendered age identities.

The visual significance of the colour white of cowry shell-beads

One important issue is whether it is possible to determine if the shell-beads were significant for their white colour in addition to the origin, form, texture and contexts where the shell-beads have been recovered. To date, in their work and discussions on the meanings of cowries, scholars have not commented upon the possible significance of colour. One of the burials with numerous beads from Vallstena, Uppgarde (SHM 32397:5/63), in eastern Gotland, did not contain shell-beads but instead had numerous white glass-beads, confirming the importance of their white colour. The burials from Hellvi, Ire, burial no. 182B (table 1) in north-eastern Gotland and Tofta, Gnisvård, burial no. 2 (table 1) in western Gotland also contained large numbers of white glass-beads, which were probably used to balance the shell-beads which were not as numerous in these burials compared with those in other burials with shell-beads. Accordingly, one may conclude that the colour white had a visual significance. This is demonstrated by examples of burials that lacked, or which had only a small number of shell-beads, but which used white glass-beads as a substitute.

The appearance of high status Viking-Age women was probably colourful judging from analyses of colours from fragments of textiles deriving from various parts of the female dress. Fragments from textiles indicate that various visible parts of the dress such as the skirt and the outer garment were probably coloured blue and red (Geijer 1938:180ff). Furthermore, adornments such as brooches, and not least beads in various colours, contributed to the overall colourful appearance. The colour of the beads shifted from the Vendel period to the Viking Age (Callmer 1977; Petré 1984). This most likely implies not only changes in fashion, but rather an altered meaning of colours in connection with wider aspects of society. It is of importance, however, to note that when the colour of other beads changed the white cowry shell-beads used during the Vendel period continued to be used during the Viking Age. This signals a probable continuity in the meaning envisioned for both the shell-beads and their colour white.

One aspect to consider is that the white cowry-beads were probably the only object of material culture displayed in this colour. Other visible adornments or textiles comprising the dress had other colours. The chemise was probably also white, but would not have been visible to any great extent, as the skirt and the outer garment concealed the

chemise. The whiteness of the beads would have been visually striking and in distinct contrast to the other colours of the dress in general and of the other beads in particular. Furthermore, there are examples of the beads having been arranged in certain combinations or sequences on the strings. This may indicate that the bead-sets created and displayed patterns or symbols on the chest; patterns of significance that acted as markers for certain identities. A bead-set was recovered in situ from a burial in the Kopparsvik cemetery. The white shell-beads had been displayed in a pattern of three and three with a coloured bead in between (Thunmark-Nylén 2000:856). This provides evidence of the colour white reflecting a certain visual significance possibly linked to a certain identity. It also indicates that the meaning of the colour white was created in relation to the colour of the other beads in the bead-sets. Another significant aspect is the fact that cowry shells may come in various colours in their natural state, but turn white as they are manufactured and transformed from shell to bead. This may have implied an alteration of meaning where the beads were thought of as achieving new qualities and connotations.

It has been suggested that the cowry beads had a meaning that underlined feminine individuality while also expressing exotic ideals (Trotzig 1988:293). However, it was assumed that the burials with shell-beads represented adult females, and there has been a lack of awareness for the osteological evidence suggesting the beads were in fact worn by rather young girls. The majority of evidence points to girls in a specific age category between five and fifteen, thus representing females, but for the most part not sexually mature or fertile ones, implying that wearing cowry beads or cowry pendants probably signalled a certain gendered identity which was linked to sexual immaturity or unavailability. The material also accompanied a pregnant woman and another woman buried with a child, individuals who might also have been considered untouchable or requiring protection in some way. In a previous study I have argued that the white shell-beads and glass-beads were perhaps added to the necklace of the girls in a life course ritual to mark the entry of a new life stage. The choice of beads may imply that the white colour of the beads had a symbolic meaning; a meaning that was associated with virginity and purity and reserved for girls aged between five -fifteen years. When the girls entered the next stage in life as a sexually mature woman the white beads were given to another, or perhaps shifted in some other way in a life course ritual as they had lost their visual meaning

and symbolism (Thedéen 2008). This argument is in line with Salin who stresses the fertility aspect of cowries (Salin 1949-59 in Meaney 1981:245). Lennartz argues, however, that an interpretation of fertility is problematic as cowries are also common in the burials of infants, and infants are not obviously linked to fertility (Lennartz 2004:197). But Salin suggests that young girls wore cowries to ensure a successful and proper sexual development; the cowries do not refer to present fertility, but to success in future fertility (Salin 1949-59 in Meaney 1981:245). This seems to be an explanation that could also be valid for pregnant women wishing to ensure a safe childbirth.

The visual significance of the colour white in written sources

Aside from the use of white shell-beads, there are few other examples of the material significance of the colour white during the Viking Age. This may be due to colour pigments not being retrieved from objects or other material culture, or it may be caused by the fact that the colour white was important in organic materials or as a bodily feature which has not been preserved. In contrast, it may be significant that the colour white appears in several contexts in Norse written sources. This form of evidence is not without obstacles, however, not least because, with the exception of eleventh-century rune-stones, the relevant texts were written during the medieval period, 200-300 years after the Viking Age. Furthermore, they were composed by Christian authors for a Christian audience. This context may have particular implications regarding the meaning of the colour white, which is highly symbolic in Christian thought.

In the runic inscriptions from the eleventh century it is sometimes mentioned that someone died in white robes (Sw. *vita vadir*) (Peterson 2006). This is to be understood as a death that occurred shortly after baptism, while the individual was still wearing the white robes one wore for ten days following baptism. The colour white also appears in connection with the gods Heimdal and Balder who are mentioned as the 'white' or 'shining' gods (*Snorri's Edda* (Sw. *Snorres Edda*)). White seems to be a colour imbued with meaning in both pre-Christian and Christian contexts and there is little reason to believe the cowries had certain religious connotations as they continued to be used in necklaces found in burials in the early churchyards dated to the late Viking Age.

The cowries are still connected to the female gender as in an example from the churchyard in Fröjel. An adult woman aged 30–45 had been buried with a necklace consisting of sixteen beads of which as many as ten were whole cowries (Carlsson 1999:61f; fig. 2).

On the whole, it is possible to associate the colour white with maidens in Norse literature (*The Poetic Edda* [Sw. *den Poetiska Eddan*]). The ‘maiden’ is a concept used to denote young unmarried females. The concept does not appear to be used in reference to old unmarried women. Maidens seem to be described as pure white, and where different body parts are mentioned, predominantly the arms and the neck, they are described as white-coloured (Göransson 1999:164ff). One example of this is *The Lay of Völund* (Sw. *Völundarkvida*) where two maidens called Ladgunn Svanvit and Hervor Allvitr are mentioned. Hervor is described as the shimmering white maiden and the young white in the poem (*The Poetic Edda*). Another example is *The Ballad of Allvis* (Sw. *Allvismal*), where Allvis is cited as a soft-white (Sw. *mjällvit*) maiden. In addition, the ‘maiden’ is an acknowledged concept during the Viking Age as it occurs in a contemporary runic inscription (U 29) (Peterson 2006). Taking these examples into account, it may reasonably be suggested that the white of the shell-beads alludes to purity, virginity and innocence, and we might then conceive of the girls in the five to fifteen age-group as ‘maidens’. An identification as maiden is indicated by the manner in which the girls had the external appearance of socially adult females through dress, but biologically were not yet sexually mature or available, although potentially fertile as suggested by their age.

Another example is *the Song of Rig* (Sw. *Rigstula*), where there are strong colour associations including for the colour white (*The Poetic Edda*). *The Song of Rig* is a narrative detailing the rise of the social structure of society. The god Rig travels from one family to another and finally to a third. These families form the genesis of the three social levels: earls, farmers and thralls. It is the classic colour triad black, red and white that appears in *The Song of Rig*. The lower stratum of society or the thralls are connected to the black colour in various ways. The middle stratum, that is the farmers, are linked to the colour red. The colour white has strong associations with the kin of the earl or the upper echelon of society. The visual meaning is clear through expressions such as white-skinned, mother has a neck whiter than the whitest snow, cookies white from wheat, white cloth on a table...

In the examples it is not the colour of the dress or adornments that have been ascribed meanings, but rather bodily appearances and other physical attributes.

A further aspect of *The Song of Rig* is that all unmarried females are called maidens, indicating that the concept was not used only to denote young, high-ranking females, but was used as an age category in general. The high status maiden is cited as being fair haired (Sw. *ljuslätt*) which the newborn baby boy is also said to have had, but with the implication of pale or faded hair (Sw. *blekt hår*) used. In line with the circumstances found in *The Song of Rig*, the colour white of the shell-beads may be linked to status, an expression for girls from the upper stratum of society. Together with beads of carnelian and rock crystal, the cowry shell beads originated in remote places. These beads, and especially the cowries, cannot be viewed as objects for everyone. Rather, they represented signs of contacts and wealth (Jansson 1989:631). The girls buried with the cowries belonged to a kinship group that was wealthy and powerful and the family showed its position through the exotic white shell-beads.

A last example of the colour white in the written sources takes us back to Gotland and is cited in the creation myth of Gotland. It is the mother of genesis in the *Guta Myth* who is called *White-star* (Sw. *Vitstjärna*). The name *White-star* alludes to aspects of nature and chaos and is the type of name often attributed to giantesses. She is the wife of Havde and the mother of the three sons of Gotland, each of whom inhabited one-third of the island. Before the sons were born she had a dream in which three snakes appeared on her chest. Her husband interpreted the dream: she will give birth to three sons and they will be the first inhabitants of Gotland (*Guta Myth* [Sw. *Gutasagan*]).

The snakes in the dream are interesting as snakes are common symbols of fertility (Johansen 1997:73f). This may be interpreted as the three sons who would represent lineages of fertility which would be influential, enduring and prosperous in Gotland for many generations. *White-star* is also the mother of all lineages on Gotland and it may have been important to stress and remark on a certain kin's relationship with old lineages. This was probably significant in connection to funeral rituals when relations were renegotiated both within a kinship group and between powerful families. Dying young could be viewed as a great loss to society and young girls who had survived the early vulnerable years

of life possibly maintained an inherent power, potential and vividness as they stood on the threshold to womanhood. They represented the ability of the family to endure and last into the future. In this sense some girls from certain lineages were conceived of as potential mothers of genesis for her kin. Girls may in this way be significant from the perspective of the fertility of the kin (Mizoguchi 2000:149). When a child dies a link in the chain of a lineage is broken. In addition to significance in life the white shell-beads may have been displayed on the chests of girls during the funeral ritual. The shell-beads worked as symbols of the potential fertility of the kin with associations with White-star, the mother of genesis. The girls were possibly conceived of as white maidens, unavailable as women but available as future wives and mothers of a lineage. The girls may have worn a certain dress in death wearing white shell-beads which signalled and ensured a rebirth and new life in the realm of the dead (Salin 1949-59 in Meaney 1981:245).

Concluding remarks

Some common features may be attributed to cowry beads and cowry pendants such as an association with the female gender, aspects of fertility and wealth as well as indications of their having properties as amulets. This paper has drawn on some of these aspects while adding to the discussion some thoughts on the significance of the colour white of shell-beads and taking the local context of Viking-Age Gotland into consideration. It has been revealed that white cowry beads in Viking-Age burials on Gotland have a strong association with the female gender and to children. Furthermore, it has been argued that the white colour of shell-beads displayed patterns of visual significance and symbolic associations in the appearances of females and children. It has been suggested that the visual significance of the colour white is linked to an identity of the buried girls as maidens. But the colour may also indicate that the maidens originated from influential families and lineages of importance and wealth. In this sense the colour white is used both to express a certain gendered age identity as well as representing a particular social status. Furthermore, it has been proposed that the cowry beads displayed on the chests of the girls signal aspects of the future fertility of the kin or rebirth of the girls in the realm of the dead.

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