



Making Sense of Things

Archaeologies of Sensory Perception

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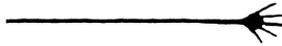
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Sense and Sensibility: Masking Practices in Late Iron Age Boat-Graves

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Introduction

Swedish boat-graves, especially those from Valsgärde and Vendel, have been the subject of many investigations and extensive research since their discoveries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (e.g. Stolpe & Arne 1912; Arwidsson 1942, 1954, 1977; Lindqvist 1950; Herschend 1997, 2003; Seiler 2001, Schönback 2002; Norr (ed.) 2008). The helmets retrieved from these burials are the focus of this paper, and these have been analysed with particular consideration for their role in sensory engagement – both for the person wearing the helmet and for those experiencing it from the outside.

The paper starts off with a short presentation of the boat-graves and the helmets therein, after which follows an equally short introduction of masking practices and the significance of masking practices during the Late Iron Age in Scandinavia. A more detailed discussion of the helmets of the boat-graves and their connection with sensual activities, the main theme of the paper, follows. Finally, a broader interpretation of the boat-graves themselves is offered and, lastly, conclusions are presented.

The boat-graves

Late Iron Age boat-graves are known most notably from Vendel, Valsgärde, Ulltuna, and Tuna of Alsike in Sweden. When excavated, the boat burials of Vendel produced such wealthy finds that an archaeological time period has been named after the location – the Vendel period – by which is meant the period from about AD 550 to AD 800. Contrary to the most common method of disposing dead bodies in the area at this period of time, the boat-graves contained inhumations, and comparatively large quantities of organic materials have survived. At Valsgärde the first boat burial took place at the beginning of the seventh century, and it was followed by fourteen subsequent boat-graves, seemingly one boat burial per generation. Five of these date to the Vendel period, and these are far more elaborate regarding the number and character of the grave goods than the boat-graves of the Viking Age (AD 800–1050). Since weaponry in the form of spears, swords, shields and helmets have been recovered here the Valsgärde (and Vendel) boat-graves have been interpreted as representing only the male gender. Boat-graves are also known from other countries, such as the Oseberg and Gokstad boat-graves from Norway, dating to the Viking Age. Another world-famous boat-grave, which is particularly interesting in this context, is the boat-grave of Sutton Hoo from East Anglia, which has close parallels with the Valsgärde burials.

The way in which the boat-graves have been equipped, as well as how the paraphernalia and bodies (animal and human) were positioned within and outside the boats, show next to no variation, thus implying highly standardized and ritualized rules for the stage-settings over decades, even centuries (Stolpe & Arne 1912:8, Arwidsson 1980:50). Although it seems as if only one boat-grave burial has been conducted per generation, this ritual regularity may paradoxically mean that the death of a person in one generation did not necessarily mark the end and the beginning of a new era. Rather, by sticking to old paths and a set formula for laying out the dead, a continuation of practices relating to certain families or clans was guaranteed to continue.

The equipment of the boats mainly consists of helmets, swords, shields, spears, buckles, saddles, drinking cups/glasses, cauldrons/kettles of iron, cauldron chains, pokers, scissors, axes, combs, dice and gaming pieces, drinking horns, currency bars, armour pieces, spits, pliers, hangers, frost nails, halters, animal leashes, hooks and textiles, for

instance in the form of blankets (Arwidsson 1980:52–53). From this listing it is clear that the weapons are just one category of object from the boat-graves, which implies that the notion of a male gender must be dressed with further connotations – other than those connected to war and battles.

Since few body parts have been recovered, it is assumed that a human body was placed in the middle of the boat, where remnants of a bed and a tent-like structure have often been retrieved. This space has been described by Herschend as a room “...for the everyday privacy of the aristocratic man”(Herschend 2001:70). Herschend (2001) has further linked the boat-graves with halls, as well as to journeying and symbols of this, describing how an aristocratic man becomes mature and civilized. The common absence of human bodies in the boat-graves has made analyses of sex and biological age impossible. However, skeletal material from animals is prominent at times.

The helmets

Whereas some equipment may be found in sets or in greater numbers, such as spears, buckles, swords, animals, drinking gear, and tools, only one helmet per burial has been recovered in the boat-graves containing head-gear. In Vendel, five out seven Vendel period boat-graves have been endowed with a helmet (boat graves nos. X, XIV, XI, XII, and I). The two without (nos. VII and III) were plundered in ancient times (Lundström 1980). Valsgärde, on the other hand, provided evidence of four out of five Vendel period boat-graves containing one helmet each (Arwidsson 1980:52). Helmets were retrieved in boat-graves nos. 5, 6, 7, 8, while no. 13 contained none.

Vendel period helmets consist of a hood of iron and a facial mask, at times with a protruding nose (Arrhenius 1994:209). The eyebrows may further be marked and have a zoomorphic appearance (fig. 1). The helmets are also usually equipped with a crest or a ridge in animal form, which is further believed to have been partly detachable, fig. 3 (Arrhenius 1994:211).

The helmets from Vendel and Valsgärde – as well as Sutton Hoo – have ornamented plaques in bronze on the sides of the iron hood. Humans or human-like beings wearing masks can be seen on the helmet-plaques (figs 1, 4). These masks are similar to the helmets of which they are part, worn in real life (and death in this context).

The helmets are said to have their predecessors not from the then contemporary Reihengräber culture with its conically shaped helmets of copper, but instead from helmets of late Classical origin (from the fourth century and earlier) inspired by those from the house of the Roman Emperor and its closest staff (Almgren 1980). Some parts of the helmets, such as nose protectors in the shape of a bird which perched loosely on the nose (Lindqvist 1950:7), fig. 1, suggest that the helmets were not intended for hard battle, since a single blow, or perhaps even putting the helmet on and off a human head, would make the nose flap fall off or rest in a crooked position. Others seem to be too small to allow proper bolstering.

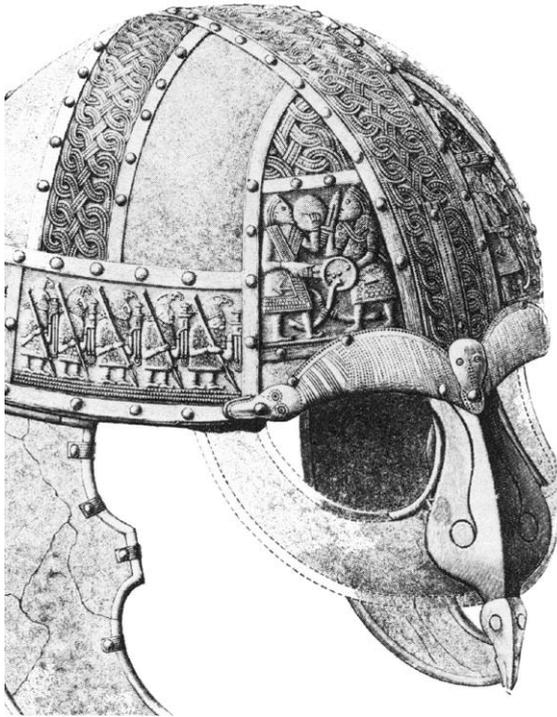


Figure 1: The helmet from Vendel XIV. When worn, the animal/bird covering the human nose can be interpreted as receiving enough air 'to come alive' through the constant inhalation and exhalation of air of the mask wearer. See also the plaque of the helmet from Valsgärde 8 in fig. 4, where the figures' ridges have seemingly come alive. (Almgren 1980:162)

A short theory of masking practices

The helmets of the boat-graves with facial masks benefit from being discussed in the context of masking practices in general. Anthropological studies have demonstrated that masks are almost exclusively found in connection with transitional situations, although they may at the same time also express aspects of power relations. Furthermore, masks may play an important role in gaining control over forces of both natural and human origin to help individuals, families or clans (King 1994). Within transitional circumstances the performer may use the mask as protection against possible evil forces, and the mask may also serve as a container or conduit for spiritual force and power (Pernet 1992:57; Emigh 1996:3, 14). Thus, a mask can be perceived of as invoking specific forces and their control, but likewise, perhaps in a modern way of putting it, the mask can bring out the other from within (cf. Kristeva 1991), that is, your own many unstable and paradoxical traits. A performer may invite such forces or powers through acting, but the power may also come from the very material of the mask itself, or the treatment it has undergone, or indeed from the figure or event that is expressed through the mask (Pernet 1992:128, cf. Mack 1995:62–63).

A mask such as a helmet defines not only the helmet wearer, but also those who do not wear facial gear (Proschan 1983:25). These contrasting effects are crucial – they invite and demonstrate paradox. Likewise, a facial mask/helmet defines what is perceived as a normal or ordinary face, and the abbreviation, exaggeration or intensification of facial characteristics in the mask makes it “...another face, opposed to the human one” (Oguibenine 1975:5).

It is only when Late Iron Age perceptions of an ordinary face are understood that the modifications and manipulations of the same signs may be recognized. Such alterations often resonate with ambiguity, contradiction and representation (e.g. Tonkin 1979, Urban and Hendricks 1983, Emigh 1996). Pollock has contended that masks work and gain their special effect by doing exactly this, “by operating upon the particular ways in which identity, or personhood, is expressed in any culture” (Pollock 1995:584). He reaches this conclusion by analysing masking from a semiotic perspective. This is not the Saussurian semiotics, where there is an arbitrariness between, in this case, masks as signifiers and the signified meaning (Pollock 1995:592). Rather, the opposite is the case – there is no arbitrary relation between the mask and its meaning, and

“[t]he form taken by masks is motivated...by their particular semiotics of identity” (Pollock 1995:590).

The distinctiveness of the face in the case of helmets, or its particular semiotics of identity, is expressed through the common exaggeration of the nose (for instance in the shape of a bird, fig. 1) and the accentuation of the eyes (through the eye sockets, figs. 1 and 3). However, the accentuation of the nose and eyes are not restricted to the helmets, but can be found on a few other Late Iron objects with figures such as gold foil figures, mountings, a yoke finial, runestones, and on pendants (Back Danielsson 2007:123–134). These features ultimately signalled the time and occasion for imminent transformations, the purposes of which were most probably to perform certain ceremonies relating to marriage, death, war, prophesy making (the Norse *sejdr*), and/or birth (Back Danielsson 2007:135, 205, cf. Skre 1996).

There are ample masking studies, however theorized and advanced, that emphasize over and over again that masks work as disguises (e.g. Urban and Hendricks 1983, Pernet 1992, Pollock 1995, Bailey 2005). This persistence could possibly be connected to the belief that a true and stable identity can be found beneath the worn paraphernalia. But when identity is treated as something fluid and constantly created and creating through performances (e.g. Butler 1990, 1993), it is obvious that it is insufficient to regard masks solely as disguises. Rather they are in fact components, parts that if successfully integrated by the performer will engender and reveal a new persona. Tonkin (1979:240) has likewise emphasized that what is created through the mask is a new being, creating emotional responses within the wearer and the co-performers or audience. Thus, importantly, masks or helmets work as a revelatory device.

Deleuze and Guattari (1988:168–169) make a distinction between the face and the head. The head belongs with the body, corporeality and animality, whereas faces are not connected to the body but rather with a system of plane and holes – obvious with the helmets from boat-graves where we encounter a metal plane and holes controlling, limiting and/or emphasising senses and expressions.

It is the orifices of the face that enable the ingestion of material, speech and song, tasting, kissing, fellatio, smelling, seeing, hearing, etc., which is why the face is deeply significant and may be described as the ultimate sensing box. As such it may be said to refer to the inhuman features of the human (Deleuze & Guattari 1988:171), or as being part

of neither a human nor an animal organism. It belongs “to conditions of apartness” (Shanks 2001:76). Therefore facial masks controlling, distorting or even hindering this ultimate sensing box are very powerful mechanisms. Of course, what is accounted for here on helmets/masks, is equally valid for the masks/helmets that are worn by the miniature figures that are an integral part of the helmet plaques.

On the significance of masks during the late iron age

Masks and masking practices were a prominent trait of (Late) Iron Age Scandinavia (Back Danielsson 2007). Actual masks, apart from boat-grave helmets, have been found from the period in question, and facial masks are frequently represented on, or fastened to, a variety of objects. Masking practices can also be traced through the (Late) Iron Age words *grimr* and *kuml*.

In Old Swedish, Danish, Icelandic and Norwegian the word for mask was *gríma* (Hellquist 1980). In Old Anglo-Saxon the word *grim* also meant facial mask. Importantly, Grimnir is also a name for the shape-changing god Odin (Heggstad, Hødnebo and Simensen 1975), meaning ‘the masked’ (Ström 1967: 110). Grim occurs both as prefix and suffix of personal names of the time, denoting people performing *sejdr* (Strömbäck 1935:35, Breisch 1994:125). *Sejdr* is a form of prophesy-making that has been compared to trance and ecstasy shamans in Siberia and was achieved when performing healing sessions, fortune telling, etc.

The rise in popularity of the god Odin after the Migration period (AD 400–550) in Scandinavia and in other Germanic areas is very much connected to the growth of a new social elite. This elite manifested its power through control over land, but was ideologically connected to a warrior religion/belief (Hedeager 1997:118–119). Political power resided in an authority that was gained through a cosmology that was well known, and a crucial element here would have been access to the world of ancestors and gods, gained through the powerful Aesir god Odin. Odin was the master of transformations; he could easily use a grand variety of cloaking devices. He could also turn himself into an animal gestalt to gain knowledge on all sorts of matters, and contact ancestors. Through the symbolism of animal art styles, the status of the warrior elites and their connection to divinity was made visible, tangible and mediated (Hedeager 1997: 83).

Helmets from Vendel and Valsgärde, Uppland, Sweden

A prominent trait of the helmets, the plaques, and other paraphernalia deposited in the boat graves is animal ornamentation, in particular expressions of human-animal engagements, amalgamations and transformations. In fact, the symbolism of the helmet as linked to human-animal transformation is a key element of animal-art in the period. This theme is therefore crystallised into the structure of the boat-grave helmets (Back Danielsson & Williams forthcoming). The intertwining bodies of the animals in the eye-brows, the crest/ridge, the nose, and the plaques of the helmets may have been employed as protective devices, but the human-animal relationship may also suggest a further theme linking protection with soul-journeying as well as far-seeing to acquire wisdom and knowledge.

The ornamented plaques of the helmets were made of bronze. This would have contributed to a shining helmet, which with its luminous plaques with miniature figures in battle or in procession (fig. 1) would have made an impression, stunning spectators. The luminous qualities of the helmet could equally have suggested a numinous presence (cf. Back Danielsson 2007:180–188). The helmets further signify a perpetuation – of the decomposing buried, of the divine amalgamation of human and animals, and through the plaques of possible celestial battles to be

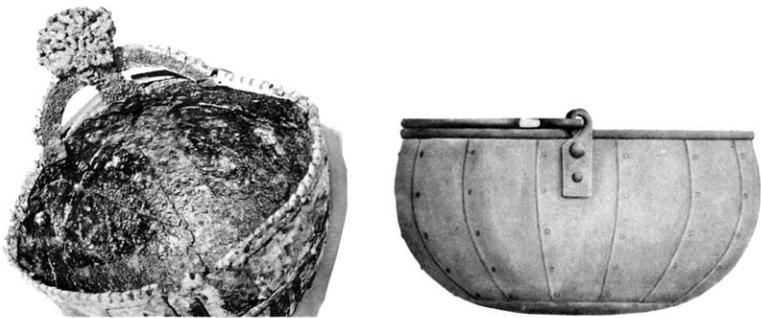


Fig. 2. Left: Interior of helmet from Valsgärde 8. Right: Cauldron/kettle from Valsgärde 8. The helmet and the cauldron have been made by forging together pieces of iron. The helmet and the kettle are linked together through their form of construction and manufacture. This association is also metaphorical, where the kettles gave real food, and the helmets with plaques gave celestial food for thought. (Arwidsson 1954)

won. The iron helmets with their luminous and numinous plaques of bronze thus capture an essential paradox: how ritual transformations are frozen in time, and are therefore eternal.

I have already remarked on the hybrid character of the helmets in terms of inspiration from geographical areas and different time periods, and highlighted their amalgamation of humans and animals. The ways in which they have been manufactured also carry other allusions, in particular to kettles and indeed, in their turn, to currency bars. These objects have also been retrieved from the boat-graves. Both kettles and helmets may be made by forging pieces of iron, like currency bars, together (fig. 2). This link may also be described as metaphorical where the kettles gave real food, and the helmets with plaques gave celestial food for thought.

Sensations for humans and animals

A helmet with a facial mask affects, distorts or even deprives you of your senses. In the case of Valsgårde 8, the only sense untouched by the helmet/mask is sight (fig. 3). However, it could also be interpreted as if this one sense is heightened, in focus or through being omnipresent. When worn in real life, the helmet with a facial mask would have altered the way the wearer moved his/her head, as well as affecting the person's speech – the tone and character of the voice. It also would have altered one's breathing, as inhalation and exhalation of air flowed less freely. If and when worn in battle the eye sockets could have been intimidating to opponents. This gaze could further confer political and sacred authority by the wearer of the helmet (cf. Williams 2010).

The helmets of the boat-graves are often recovered from the middle of the boat, although not located in the same place where the head of the (supposed sleeping or) dead should have been found. Instead, it seems as if the helmets were placed in prominent, visible positions in front of a tent-like structure made of carpets of birch bark, which acted as a roof of the burial chamber (Arwidsson 1980:56). This means that the helmet was to be seen, perhaps perceived by spectators as a greeting or intimidating presence by someone – an embodiment of an ancestor, divinity, or aristocratic warlord? The helmet here works as an exoskeleton, present although a human body – an interior – would not be present. The eye sockets of the exoskeleton are thus of importance – they seemingly stare at you from any direction but especially from

the front, whether they are occupied by human eyes or empty. Also, the shining qualities of the helmets, reiterated earlier, are of importance in this context. In sum, the paradoxical traits of the helmet were surely pivotal and paramount, and explain what seems to be the prominent placing of the helmets in the boat-graves.

Herschend (2003:47–9) has suggested for Valsgärde 8 that the construction was kept open until the human body had disintegrated, whereupon the burial was covered. This suggests that the boat-grave was an open stage for spectators to see (and sense!), for a long period of time. There were, as noted above, a number of dead animals deposited inside and outside the boat in addition to the human corpse. An encounter with the open boat-graves, whether as an invited spectator or a participant, or by passing the Valsgärde boat-grave burial ground by boat or by foot, must have been a multi-sensuous experience, odoriferous and colourful in character.

The helmet plaques – miniature figures as performing objects

Upon the plaques of the helmets human-like beings in miniature are seen wearing masks, resembling the masks of the helmet of which they were part. The plaque figures are not embodied as immobile, but rather



Figure 3: Parts of the equipment of Valsgärde 8. The one sense least affected by the helmet and mask is sight. (Arwidsson 1954)

as performing acts that may be described as events, stories or rituals. I would like to use the concept 'performing objects' to describe how these miniatures may have worked. Performing objects are "material images of humans, animals, or spirits that are created, displayed or manipulated in narrative or dramatic performance" (Proschan 1983:4). Boat-grave burials are such narratives and enduring dramatic performances. However, the term 'object' is rather misleading since an object can become an actor or subject during performances; and an actor, a person, can even be transformed into an object (Benjamin 1979; Veltruský 1964). Through their engagement the boundary between living and immobile dead matter is obliterated (Jakobson 1975:8).

Importantly, the performing objects must be understood as playing part in stories or events, where the (re)presentation of a character, for instance Odin, may not be the most important aspect of the figure (Back Danielsson 2007, 107). The mediated events are instead essential. Such events or stories may explain a cosmos or a world system as well as the historic and mystic diversity of the community. They are generally used to describe the founding actions of the world, of humanity, of the clan or of a particular institution (Back Danielsson 2007:107; Mack 1994; Pernet 1992).

In semiotic terms performing objects act as symbols, as signs of signs and more seldom as signs of objects, with the crucial consequence that they are often abbreviated (Bogatyrev 1976:33). Performing objects and miniaturization make such manipulations possible and necessary, and these may be described in terms of simplification and/or exaggeration (Johansen 1997:57), or in terms of abstraction and compression (Bailey 2005:32).

What abbreviations and/or abstractions have the figures of the plaques undergone? Here I focus on one of the plaques from the helmet deposited in the boat-grave of Valsgärde 8.

On this plaque (fig. 4), the ridge of the helmet worn by the rider, consisting of an animal being, perhaps a snake or a bird, appears to be alive, and has risen to some extent from the helmet, and now partakes in the action with an active gaze. In my interpretation, this means that the mask-wearer has successfully invited powerful forces, whether exogenous or non-exogenous, and is able to control them; a new persona is thus created. This is discernable through the whole story of the plaque: the gazing animal, the mask-wearer mounted on a galloping or trotting horse in full armour and the god of war Odin (?) found on

his/her right side. Furthermore, the plaque figures, perhaps indicating a numinous presence, were beings with agency in these transformational processes. Perhaps the plaques of the helmets, displaying the correct or desired outcome of the mask wearing, were used as precautions or divine guidance for the successful transformations into a warrior and/or a divine entity. From my earlier description of the helmets it may be suggested that the helmets were not intended for hard and actual battles. The battles could have been more symbolic, for instance part of stories retelling how certain powers were asserted, controlled and contained. As previously remarked they could have described the founding actions of a particular institution or clan, and in extension were a way of upholding and perpetuating social control.

The design of the helmet clearly affected the wearer's senses. However, it can also be suggested that when worn the senses and abilities of the wearer could be heightened by the senses and abilities of the animals that were integrated into the helmet, and its plaques. The plaques show birds, for instance, and birds of prey have excellent sight.

Weapons, also represented on the plaques, were designed with clear references to animals, and consequently equipped with essential senses. A spear had eyes and the blade was evidently the beak of a bird (fig. 5). Needless to say, spears must fly and by good eye sight they arrive at their proper destinations, where the beak may penetrate, or indeed engulf, the target. Thus here we have an example of how the senses of creatures other than humans are recognized and paramount, and it also demonstrates how these senses were perceived as integral parts of objects – turning them into living subjects with agency!

Continuing with Valsgårde 8 (fig. 4), the ridge of the helmet, or animal gestalt, was surely regarded as an essential part of the appearance/performance, since it is disproportionately large on the plaque. Equally, the possibility cannot be overlooked that the animal gestalt of the helmet crest might have been given life when the helmet was worn, and literally life/air was supplied through exhaling air through the nose (see fig. 1). One necessary ingredient (out of four) for the creation of life according to the anthropogenic myth in *Voluspá* (verse 18) was the adding of breath (Steinsland 1983) (note that the ancient and current Swedish word for breath: *andedräkt*, which literally means 'the attire of the spirit'). It is also important to note that the actual metal bird – the nose protection of the real helmet – sat loosely in its place, giving the impression of a free-flying bird.

The miniature figures of the helmet plaques contribute to the intelligibility of the world, since knowing the whole before the parts of the whole is gratifying for the intelligence (Rosenblum 2001:21). Miniature figures are further ways of exploring and creating ourselves through a different site of signification (Tillis 2000:175). Through this site of signification an array of issues and emotions may be more effectively illuminated in comparison to using performing, living human beings (Skipitare 2000:125).

Much more than martial and mortuary materials

The helmets of the boat-graves, as well as other paraphernalia in the burials such as swords or shields, are connected to war. Weapons were martial implements, but they were also powerful symbols implicated in the constitution and commemoration of masculine social identities and ethnicity in early Anglo-Saxon England as well as Late Iron Age Scandinavia (e.g. Härke 1990, 1997, 2000). In the mortuary realm they become increasingly restricted in the display of the identities of an emergent aristocratic class during the late sixth and early seventh centuries (Härke 1990, cf. Herschend 1997, 2001). Weapons were constitutive



Figure 4: One of the plaques from the helmet of Valsgärde 8. Here the animal gestalt of the helmet (the crest), worn by the rider, is seemingly alive. Its significance is underlined by the fact that it is represented in an exaggerated mode. Drawing: Per-Olof Bohlin. (Arwidsson 1980:58)

of a martial aristocratic personhood that extended beyond those that used them to encapsulate new families who were experimenting with symbols of power drawn from multiple sources, some of whom may have had aspirations towards royal status. They were artefacts of power, agency and social memory, evoking and commemorating a distinctive style and character of person in a period of rapid socio-political and ideological conflict and change (Back Danielsson & Williams forthcoming, Williams 2010).

However, it must be emphasized that the boat not only contained weapons but also a number of other artefacts of ceremonial character and others that were connected with feasting. Thus the boat-graves also allude to household activities, smithing activities through diverse tools, and food production – implying a domination of many socio-cultural spheres. The boat itself, as well as the sacrificed horses with frost nails, and a number of animals from different biospheres, also speak of the ability to travel in all sorts of areas, seasons and dimensions. It must also

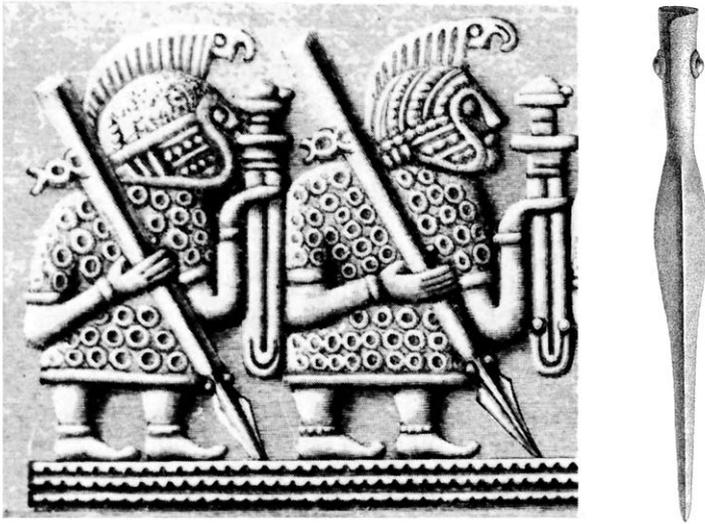


Figure 5: Left: Helmet plaque from Vendel XIV. Right: Spear from Ren, Bollnäs, Sweden. The plaque materializes combatants seemingly with animated gear – the spears are equipped with animal senses to make their mission possible: sharp-eyed sight and an engulfing or penetrating beak. Compare with actual spear found in Hälsingland, Sweden. (Arbman 1980:27 [left image], Montelius 1901: 5 [right image])

be observed that the Valsgärde material, both weaponry and household equipment, were partly, and sometimes completely, unserviceable at the time of deposition in the boat-graves (Arwidsson 1980:50). Some objects were visibly worn and had been repaired in ancient times. Also, other objects bear references to ancient times, such as the helmets.

All together the objects deposited in the boat-graves are artefacts with long life-histories, and they must certainly be connected to specific stories that were important, perhaps not (only) for the buried individual, but for specific families or clans. Arwidsson's observation (1980:51) that the boat-graves do not contain any personal equipment such as finger-rings, arm-rings or any other paraphernalia belonging to a costume (though see Herschend 2001 for another view of this phenomenon) supports this idea. Furthermore, the helmet as a mask cannot be considered personal (see masking theory above). Equally, the helmets, swords, stabbing knives etc., were almost never worn by the deceased. Thus the boat-graves, through the head-empty but prominently placed helmets, may instead be described as an expression of domination of several social and cultural spheres in Late Iron Age Uppland: the access to ancestors, the control of transformations, the ability to travel (or rather the great mobility of the nobility), the ability to make and host feasting arrangements, etc. In all these spheres an activation as well as a skilled control of a variety of senses are required. These senses not only included those of human beings, but equally of refined objects such as spears with animal senses.

It is also worth pointing out that a large number of (old or ancient) objects in the boat-graves are made of iron, and also, as mentioned earlier, that currency bars have been retrieved in boat-graves. In combination with the position of boat-graves next to the 'highways' for iron production areas up north (Ambrosiani 1980), this could imply a dominance over iron trade, or at least highlight the importance of stories relating to how iron was wrought and bought (cf. Kopytoff [1986] on the social life of things and Shanks [1998] on the life of an artefact).

Conclusions

It is evident that the helmet not only represented physical protection but was also perceived as transforming the wearer and could afford him/her supernatural qualities and abilities. In this sense, the helmet was a symbol of wealth and status and provided protection in battle,

but also gave the wearer a transformed, perhaps even divine, persona. The helmet worked as an exoskeleton of the dead, and yet, with its luminous and numinous properties and omnipresent gaze through the eye sockets, embodied in eternity a transformed relative, ancestor or new-born divine being. This could explain the helmet's prominent and often visible position in the boat-grave.

In addition, the whole assemblage of equipment in the boat-graves may be seen as an activation of sensory engagements that are linked to memory. The senses helped create, establish and valorise memories of past relations and desired futures. These relations were both material and immaterial and included relations to things, people/clans, animals, journeys, divinities and consequently stories of pasts. The sensory engagements further forged together aspects of masculinity, animality, death, lifestyle and body.

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