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An Eye for Odin? Divine Role-Playing in the Age of Sutton Hoo

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This paper presents some new observations concerning the construction of the Sutton Hoo helmet, as a point of entry to a wider discussion of pre-Christian religious and ideological links across Scandinavia. It will be argued that in certain circumstances and locations, such as the firelit interior of the hall, the wearer of the helmet was seen as both war leader and war god, a literal personification of Odin. This interpretation is supported and extended with a variety of Scandinavian finds from the sixth to tenth centuries, and arguably represents an unusually physical manifestation of the ritual border-crossing between human and divine elites. In the socio-political context of early medieval kingdoms, the dramatic imagery of the helmets and related military equipment had a critical role to play in the communication of power, the origin of military prowess, and the religious allegiance of a warlord.

Keywords: Sutton Hoo, helmet, mask, eyes, Odin, Medieval, Anglo-Saxon, Hellvi

Introduction

From the early Middle Ages onwards, the 'divine right' of kings and queens has occupied a central place in the ideological apparatus of European Christian monarchy—as in many other cultures—in some countries continuing nominally to the present day. The question of a possible equivalent concept in pre-Christian power structures has long been debated, especially in the context of the northern Germanic peoples such as the Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians during the late Iron Age or Early Medieval period (*c.* AD 450–1050).

Old Norse genealogical and mythological poetry contains several references to rulers' kinship with gods, particularly Odin and Yngvi-Freyr, though it is often unclear whether a literal or metaphorical link is intended (Faulkes, 2007). In the skaldic corpus in general, there are also many kennings that reference the divine descent of rulers. More explicitly medieval are the works of the Icelandic scholar and politician Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241), who wrote several treatises on the poetic arts and Scandinavian regal history. In his *Ynglingasaga*, an account of the early dynasties of Sweden and Norway, Snorri acknowledges their royal descent from Odin, but casts him as a human being who had migrated to Sweden from Asia in the distant past. The disposal of Odin's

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divinity could be expected of a Christian author, but it is nonetheless interesting that the genealogical link to Nordic kings is upheld. Unlike Scandinavia, Anglo-Saxon England has preserved contemporary textual sources, and here we find Woden/Odin listed as a progenitor of several royal lines in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* (*c.* 731), the *Historia Brittonum* (*c.* 830) and the various ninth-century versions of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (North, 1997).

The topic has a long history of scholarly discussion, with considerable swings of opinion for and against the idea of divine descent and sacral kingship as genuine institutions (as opposed to retrospective political expedients) of early medieval northern Europe. For Anglo-Saxon England, and despite the sources mentioned above, the prevailing tendency is still to reject the notion (see Chaney, 1970 for an early but still useful review, updated with North, 1997; an archaeological survey of current thinking on English identities can be found in Hamerow et al., 2011: parts I and IX). In Scandinavia by contrast, after generally being dismissed for much of the twentieth century, a broad consensus in *support* of sacral kingship has emerged in the last twenty years (the debate is summarized and fully referenced by Sundqvist, 2002, 2012). Ultimately, however, most of these arguments rest on textual and philological evidence, much of it dating to the centuries after the period in question.

Archaeologists too have sought to untangle the ideological allegiances of the late Iron Age polities on both sides of the North Sea (e.g. Carver, 1992, 1998; Farrell & Neuman de Vegvar, 1992; Kendall & Wells, 1992; Hedeager, 2011). In England, a key focus of this latter-day material discussion has been Sutton Hoo in East Anglia, the site of a high-status and probably royal cemetery of the seventh century, and famous for the 1939 discovery of the great ship burial in Mound 1 that even today remains the richest from the entire Anglo-Saxon period. Originally published in three volumes (Bruce-Mitford, 1975, 1978, 1983), the Sutton Hoo ship burial remains at the heart of Anglo-Saxon scholarship, a universal point of comparison referenced too frequently for meaningful citation here.

From the very early days of the discoveries there, it was obvious that in both its artefactual assemblage and form of mortuary behaviour, the Mound 1 find had many parallels in the wider Germanic world, particularly in Scandinavia and specifically in the boat burial cemeteries of central Sweden. The helmet and shield bore a very close resemblance to those from the graves at Valsgärde, Vendel and Gamla Uppsala in Swedish Uppland province, there were many other similarities among the weapons and other objects, and not least the ritual of ship burial itself seemed more Scandinavian than English (Sandwall, 1980; Lamm & Nordström, 1983). Martin Carver, the latest excavator of the main Sutton Hoo cemetery, has taken these links furthest in arguing for a complex and poetic web of aspiration, allusion, emulation, and competition between the Scandinavian petty kingdoms and their early English cousins (Carver, 1998, 2005). The material culture and monumentality of places like Sutton Hoo were central to this process, he suggests, as the fledgling polities of the North experimented with new identities for a future of their design. It may be readily understood how claims to divine genealogical descent would fit this picture, linking to other discussions on the potential material overtones of sacral power both within and beyond the Germanic world (e.g. Filmer-Sankey, 1996; Dobat, 2006; Williams, 2011).

The subject is a broad one, implicating as it does the nature of rulership in the

emerging nations of early Europe in the fading shadow of Rome and under the enduring influence of Byzantium, the links between power and spiritual belief, and how these ideas were played out in material culture at a time of great socio-political and religious change. The drawing of exact, demonstrable links between material culture and myth is of course always problematic outside the more orthodox cultures of the Classical world, but in rare instances it is possible. This paper re-examines the issue of sacral kingship from a purely archaeological perspective, presenting recent finds together with some new observations on familiar material. Although both our evidence and emphasis firmly focus upon the Scandinavian world, we also extend our discussion to its early English affiliates. As a starting point, we therefore take one of the best-known artefacts from Anglo-Saxon England, indeed, arguably the most famous single object from British archaeology: the Sutton Hoo helmet.

Figure 1. *The Sutton Hoo helmet, as replicated by David Roper for its wearer, Paul Mortimer.* By and © Ande Wick, used by kind permission.

An Eye in the Dark

The Sutton Hoo helmet is made of iron, covered with plates of tinned bronze that would have originally given it a shimmering silvery colour (Bruce-Mitford, 1978: 138–225; Marzinzik, 2007; Figure 1). The Mound 1 grave has been tentatively dated to the years around AD 625, but the helmet could have been made anything up to century earlier (see Norr, 2005, for a discussion of heirloom helmets). The neck was protected by a wide flange and the face covered by two separately attached cheek guards and a mask. The crown of the helmet was reinforced by a tube bound in silver wire, with gilt bronze animal-head terminals; called the *walu* in Old English (*Beowulf*, l.1031; Klaeber, 2008), this formed the primary protection against blows from above. The bronze plates covering the helmet's surface had been stamped in the *repoussé* technique, with interlace designs and what may be scenes from heroic legend or mythology. The face-mask is decorated with a flying animal in gilt bronze, designed so as to suggest human features: the body is the nose, the tail a moustache, and the wings form eyebrows (Figure 2). The eyebrow-wings are tipped with what appear to be boars' heads, and the lines above the eye openings are picked out in *cloisonné* garnets. Before continuing, it is first necessary to make a brief detour into a specific aspect of Anglo-Saxon jewellery technology.

The bulk of the garnet work from Sutton Hoo Mound 1 employs the cloisonné technique, referring to the setting of

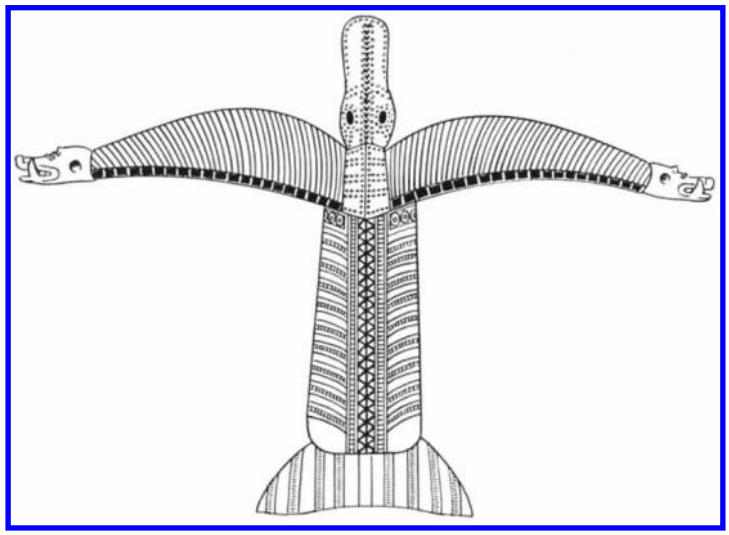

Figure 2. *The flying animal design extrapolated from the face-mask of the Sutton Hoo helmet, showing the cloisonné garnet inlays along the eyebrows.*
After Bruce-Mitford 1978, fig. 126. © The Trustees of the British Museum, used by kind permission.

stones within individual cells of gold (Arrhenius, 1985; Coatsworth & Pinder, 2002). Although garnets can be quite bright, especially if cut thinly, when placed in this way against a solid background their lustre is substantially dimmed. Early medieval jewel-smiths solved this problem by inserting wafer-thin foils of gold, or occasionally silver, at the base of the cells into which the garnets were set. Stamped with a cross-hatched pattern, the foils reflected light back through the stone to produce the gorgeous red glow for which the Sutton Hoo regalia is known. The use of gold foils in this way is virtually universal in Anglo-Saxon and Merovingian cloisonné garnet jewellery, and Sutton Hoo is no exception. In Mound 1, cloisonné garnets with foils are present on the boss of the shield, various parts of the sword, the lyre, purse lid, shoulder clasps, a number of strap fittings, and, as we have seen, the eyebrows of the helmet (Bruce-Mitford, 1978). Similar foils are also present behind *cabochon* garnets in jewellery of the same period, the term describing stones that have been cut in convex, hemispherical shapes, and mounted so as to stand proud of the surface to which they are fixed. In Anglo-Saxon metalwork, cabochon garnets are most often used as the eyes of animals, giving three-dimensional animation to their faces. In the finds from Sutton Hoo Mound 1, cabochon garnets are found on the shield and helmet, the scabbard-slider and a small gold wand.

In the entire Sutton Hoo find, there is one exception to the use of gold foils with cloisonné garnets: the helmet. The 23 garnets of the proper right eyebrow are all backed with foils, but the 25 garnets of the left eyebrow are not (Figure 3a and b). The 'missing' foils were noted but left unremarked by Bruce-Mitford (1978: 169) in the final report, and also mentioned by Marzinzik (2007: 29–30) in her short book on the helmet with a speculation that the discrepancies might derive from a repair. Both scholars also note that the gilding on

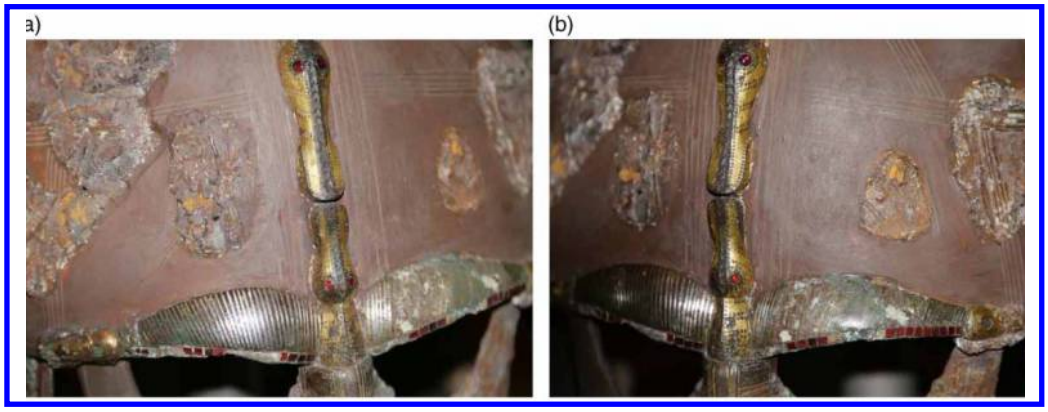

Figure 3. *(a) and (b) The eyebrows of the Sutton Hoo helmet and the front animal-head terminal of its* walu *crest, seen from the viewer's left (wearer's proper right) and right (proper left) respectively. In visible contrast to those of the proper right side, the garnets on the proper left eyebrow and the proper left eye of the animal-head crest terminal have no gold foils beneath the garnets. In Figure 3b, showing the proper left side, the foil beneath the cabochon garnet eye of the face-mask animal (above the nose) can be seen, accenting its difference from the others.*
By Lindsay Kerr, used with kind permission.

each eyebrow is subtly different, and the left is also slightly shorter than the right. From the technical analysis of the helmet (Oddy et al., 1978: 230), it is in fact clear that the two eyebrows were actually manufactured in different ways while being intended to look essentially the same.

That the absence of foils might result from a repair, and presumably therefore a shortage of gold, seems unlikely in view of the minute quantities needed. Additionally, given the evident skill required to shape the gold cell walls and cut the garnets so precisely, the decision to omit the gold foils on the left eyebrow appears all the more deliberate.

A further indication that this was not accidental comes from elsewhere on the helmet, in a feature of the *walu* crest over the crown. Here we find one more garnet without a foil backing: the cabochon forming the proper left eye of the long animal head terminal that meets the 'face-animal' above the eyes of the wearer (Figure 3a and b; Bruce-Mitford, 1978: 160). Thus, we have two eyes without foils, one above the other on the same side of the helmet. Though the link has never been previously remarked upon, it is almost impossible to see this as coincidental (cf. Mortimer, 2011: 26).

To understand what this absence of foils may have meant, it is necessary to take the helmet out of the museum and the pages of books, and instead to picture the original contexts in which it would have been used. Although the presence and absence of foils is still clear, several of the garnets on both eyebrows of the helmet are now lost, and photographs of the badly corroded and fragmented original bring out their qualities far less effectively than meticulous modern replicas, as in Figure 1. Even in daylight, the right eyebrow of the helmet would have appeared very bright, as its foils caught the sun, and there would sometimes have been a clearly visible distinction between the eyebrows. However, a still more evocative picture emerges when we take the helmet indoors, into the hall.

These buildings were the home of the lord, where his high-seat formed the absolute locus of power and a symbol for his

authority. The hall was the gathering place of the war-band, the venue for the gift-giving and oath-taking that bound early medieval warrior elites together, and the stage for the poetic recitals of elegant egotism that fuelled their world-view: the central arena for the militaristic societies of the early Germanic north (Enright, 1996; Callmer & Rosengren, 1997; Herschend, 1997; Pollington, 2009). We know from early medieval sources that helmets and similar war gear were definitely worn inside these structures: in *Beowulf* (l.396; Klaeber, 2008), for example, the eponymous hero disarms when entering the hall of his host, but retains his armour and *heregrima*, 'mask-helm'. In the gloomy interior, lit only by the central fire and perhaps occasional lamps, each warrior would appear as a mass of glinting golden sparks, his jewellery and weapons reflecting the shifting radiance of the hearth. Among this would come the occasional crimson flash of garnets, further bringing out the silver and gold highlights of their clothing. With a brilliance that varied according to their status, these men would have shimmered as they moved. It is in this context that the significance of the 'missing' foils in the eyebrow of the Sutton Hoo helmet becomes apparent.

We can picture the scene: a great hall full of warriors, retainers, and servants, some sitting, others moving about the benches and tables. It is very dark, the air filled with heavy layers of smoke from the fire, lit erratically by its shifting flames. Perhaps someone is reciting poetry, perhaps there is a lyre; people are talking, listening, and singing. At the head of the company, in the high seat, sits the lord of the hall himself—his helmet shining silver, its surface covered in writhing little figures as the raised images on its surface seem to move in the firelight, the gilt-covered animal heads and facial features glowing. His eyes are in shadow and cannot be seen, appearing as blank and empty holes in the mask, but one nonetheless stands out with its eyebrow a glittering red line, bright against the blackness. The effect is replicated on the face of the animal above his brows. When seen indoors by the flickering light of the fire, *the wearer of the Sutton Hoo helmet was one-eyed.*

So much for poetic imagination, albeit based firmly on the evidence. This phenomenon has been confirmed by re-enactors wearing helmet replicas in reconstructed hall buildings; ideally we wished to include an image of this, but a moving light source on a moving object, producing a moving effect in general dimness, is regrettably impossible to capture clearly in still photography. The archaeological test and interpretation of this observation comes when it is compared to other contemporary finds from the Germanic culture area, in particular from Scandinavia. It is also in this region that we can seek an explanation for what the one-eyed symbolism could have meant to the Sutton Hoo warrior's community. When the Nordic material is reviewed, a large amount of comparative data emerges, encompassing not only eye symbolism but also artefacts that clearly provide evidence of actual behaviour in connection with the depiction of eyes on high-status war-gear across Scandinavia.

Offering an Eye

We can turn first to an almost direct parallel, from the cemetery of Valsgärde in central Sweden. The burial ground spans most of the Iron Age up to Viking times, but is most notable for the sixth- to eighth-century boat burials that first provided the main parallels for Sutton Hoo. Grave 7 at Valsgärde, dated *c.* 620–710 (Arwidsson, 1977; Ljungkvist, 2008: 18),

contained a broadly similar high-status assemblage, including a decorated helmet. This latter has a *walu*-crest very like that at Sutton Hoo, and the proper left eye of the animal that forms its terminal above the helmet face is similarly absent a gold foil, resulting in a very visible difference that is further accentuated by the choice of much darker garnet (Figure 4). Elsewhere within the Swedish boat graves, from the period type-site at Vendel, the cabochon garnet forming the proper right eye of the animal terminal on the shield grip from grave 12 is also missing a foil, while one is clearly visible beneath the left eye (Figure 5; Stolpe & Arne, 1912); the grave has been dated *c.* 600 (Nørgård Jørgensen, 1999). We are not aware that these features have been noted prior to our re-examination of this material in the Uppsala and Stockholm museums, undertaken with the Sutton Hoo observations in mind.

Fragments of helmets also reveal a similar pattern of behaviour. At the site of Uppåkra in southern Sweden, more than a decade of investigations have uncovered a major and long-lived settlement complex dating to the late Iron Age. Clearly a central place, one of its structures in particular was repeatedly rebuilt on the same site over centuries and has been interpreted as having cultic functions (Larsson, 2004). Near this building were several deposits of weapons, largely spears, lances, and shields, amongst which was a magnificent right eyebrow/eyelid from a helmet of similar type and date to those from Sutton Hoo, Vendel, and Valsgärde (Figure 6; Helgesson, 2004: 231–32). Given the context of military sacrifice, the eyebrow must represent a deliberate deposit and was likely removed from its helmet for that purpose.

A similar helmet fragment, in the form of a complete right ocular of gilded copper alloy with sculpted eyebrow and what may be eyelashes, has been recovered by metal detector from the settlement site of

Figure 4. *The long animal-head terminal to the* walu *crest on the helmet from Valsgärde grave 7, with the difference between the eyes clearly apparent from all angles; the effect is much starker than on the Sutton Hoo helmet.*
By Lindsay Kerr, used by kind permission.

Figure 5. *A close-up of the eyes on the animal terminal to the shield grip from Vendel grave 12; the cross-hatched foil can be seen beneath the proper left eye but is missing from the right.*
By Lindsay Kerr, used by kind permission.

Figure 6. *A decorated eyebrow/eyelid excavated from a sacrificial deposit at Uppåkra, Skåne, Sweden.*
Photo © Lund University Historical Museum, used by kind permission.

Gevninge west of Roskilde in Denmark (Figure 7; Christensen, 2002). Although it is uncertain whether the find is part of an as-yet unexcavated larger assemblage that may contain other pieces of the helmet, the excavators argue that it represents a deliberate deposition (Christensen, 2002: 43), and in any case it is striking that only the eye has been found. The object is difficult to date within the later Iron Age, but despite its comparatively inferior material quality, its closest parallels are clearly with sixth- and seventh-century helmets of the type discussed above.

An explicit ocular theme can also be traced in another aspect of helmet technology, interestingly coupled with implied action, in a well-known find from the Swedish island of Öland. The Torslunda matrixes are four bronze plates used for stamping the rectangular plaques or *Pressbleche* that cover the surface of the helmets (Arent, 1969; Bruce-Mitford, 1974: 214–22; Hagberg, 1976). Of the four different motifs, one depicts a wolfskin-clad warrior next to a near-naked male with horned headgear and spears, in a mobile posture that has prompted the term 'weapon dancer' for this type of figure (Price, 2002: 372–73, 385–88). Following long speculation as to whether the 'dancing' figure was missing an eye, scholars from the Archaeological Research Laboratory in Stockholm submitted the plate to a laser-scan, and conclusively demonstrated that its proper right eye had been struck out with a square-section object, probably a chisel (Arrhenius & Freij, 1992). The exact age of this Torslunda image is difficult to pinpoint, since two of the matrixes found there, including that with the one-eyed figure, were themselves casts of older matrixes (Axboe, 1987, who also makes valuable comment on the complexities of their construction). We do not know if the eye had been struck out on the original (either as a die or on the helmet to which it was attached), or on the Torslunda copy. However, two things here are significant. First, rather than manufacturing a one-eyed image to begin with, the helmet-smith chose instead to make a two-eyed figure and then to strike out its eye: we see evidence here for actions beyond the merely functional. Second, if it took laser scanning for modern researchers to be sure that the figure's eye really had been removed, then it can hardly have been obvious to early medieval people seeing the helmet(s) on which the resulting plaques had been fixed. In other words, it was not necessary to actually see the absence of an eye, which implies that knowledge of it may have been enough—and furthermore, that this knowledge was presumably not available to all.

Figure 7. *The helmet ocular from Gevninge near Roskilde in Denmark.*
By Henrik Jørgensen, © Roskilde Museum, used by kind permission.

The Torslunda figure is related to a larger category of horned figures appearing in various permutations on metalwork and textiles of the later Iron Age. Some are unequivocally one-eyed, others are arguably missing an eye, while most clearly possess two. Despite their superficial similarities, these figures may not all represent the same beings and a variety of interpretations have been proposed including gods, *berserkir*, war leaders and cultic initiates (discussed by Helmbrecht, 2008, 2011: 140–46, 167–69; see also Price, 2002: 385–88).

Several other one-eyed figures have been found that also show clear signs of an eye's punching after manufacture, as at Torslunda. At the trading outpost of Staraja Ladoga at the mouth of the Volkhov river in northwestern Russia, a small bronze ferrule in the form of a horned head was found resting among Scandinavian smithying tools in settlement deposits dated *c.* 750–800. Its left eye had been struck out by a sharp object (Roesdahl & Wilson, 1992: 150, 197, 298; the missing eye is hardly discernible in most published images, but NP has examined the object in St. Petersburg). A broadly similar horned statuette from Uppåkra in Sweden—the same site where the eyebrow mentioned above was found—also seems of later date than the other finds, extending perhaps into the ninth century (Bergqvist, 1999: 119–21). Here, the right eye has been depressed into a concave form while the left eye stands convex from the face. The third example, also from the Viking Age, though not dated more closely, is a small pendant horned head from Ribe in Denmark with a clear punchmark to the right eye (Jensen, 1991: 50).

A recent metal detector find from Øster Vandet in Thy, Denmark, suggests an intriguing adaptation of an imported object from Ireland, in the form of a gilded bronze face-mask (Baastrup & Petersen, 2010: 96–7; Baastrup, 2013). Dated to the eighth century, the piece is only a couple of centimetres long and was probably originally mounted on an ecclesiastical object of some kind, such as a casket or shrine. The mask was detached and filled with lead for re-use as a weight. Its eyes were inlaid with amber, but the left was missing when found. It is quite likely that this was an accidental loss, but, in view of the other parallels here, it is not impossible that the eye was deliberately removed after the object was taken into a Scandinavian social context.

Finally, the silver-gilt tongue of a buckle has been recovered from Elsfleth in north-western Germany, decorated with a mask-like face in which the left eye is very plainly missing (Figure 8; Mückenberger, 2012, in press). Gouge marks can be discerned where the eye area was dug away, leaving a jagged-edged hole. It is hard to be sure what kind of piece it was originally attached to, but a buckle of this kind fits well with high-status war-gear found at Anglo-Saxon sites such as Sutton Hoo, Prittlewell, and Finglesham. It has been provisionally dated to the sixth century, or perhaps slightly later.

The Face in the Hall

The debate as to the meaning and possible function of these one-eyed images, and the ocular aspects of helmets, has been energized by a recent discovery from the Baltic

Figure 8. *The one-eyed buckle tongue from Elsfleth near Bremen, Germany. After Mückenberger, 2012, used by kind permission.*

island of Gotland, Sweden. In early 2011, the bronze face-mask of a Roman cavalry parade helmet was handed in to the county authorities on Gotland, with a claim that it had been found in the 1980s by a metal detectorist (since deceased) within the interior of an Iron Age house foundation in Hellvi parish in the north of the island (Figure 9; Widerström, 2012).

Around forty examples of such cavalry mask-helms are known from Europe, mostly clustering around the *limes* of the Empire, together with an equal number of fragments that may also come from similar objects (Garbsch, 1978; Junkelmann, 1996). Worn in the elite equestrian games of the *hippika gymnasia*, these helmets were prestige items of the officer class and each was unique, though several broad types have been identified. While many of the helmets appear to have been portraits of their owners, the Hellvi example belongs to a group representing the face of Alexander the Great, and includes images of Persian warriors and a forehead vignette of Hercules with the Nemean lion skin. This type is conventionally dated to the latter half of the second century AD, and the Hellvi piece is perhaps as late as the 190s given the popularity of the Hercules motif during the reign of Commodus. The Hellvi mask is the first Roman parade helmet to have been found in Sweden, and only the second from Scandinavia (the other being recovered from the Thorsberg bog sacrifice in Denmark; Jørgensen et al., 2003: 412).

The Hellvi mask as delivered to the museum was badly damaged, split into two parts diagonally across the face with the right eye area completely gone. Even on what remains, it can be seen to have several modifications that are unique among the entire corpus of these helmets. The first concerns its eye(s). All known Roman helms of this kind have open eyeholes, and some also have circular openwork irises of thin bronze, which increases their lifelike appearance but does

Figure 9. *The Roman cavalry face-mask from Hellvi, Gotland, Sweden.*
By Annika Carlsson, Riksantikvarieämbetet, used by kind permission.

Figure 10. *A detail of the Hellvi mask-helmet, showing the riveted secondary insertion of the left eye.* By Magnus Melin, used by kind permission of Gotland Museum.

not impede vision. The Hellvi mask originally had eyeholes of this latter kind, but, at some later date, a separate left eye was manufactured and inserted with brass rivets (Figure 10). Although much cruder in finish than the mask itself, and highly unlikely to be Roman work, the eye was intricately made and constructed in three separate pieces. The 'white' consisted of a polished bronze plate, into which was fixed an iris of silver-coated bronze with a pin that had been deliberately oxidized to create a dark pupil (Bannerman, 2011). The result would have been striking: a bright golden eye with a silver iris and black centre.

At Hellvi, the insertion of the secondary eye would of course preclude the object's use as a mask, and this was reinforced by the presence of several nails around the base of the neck. Also clearly secondary additions, they suggested that the mask had been fixed to some kind of rounded surface (the helmet face retained its original curvature), perhaps a post or even a figure of some kind.

At the time of the mask's delivery to the authorities, it was not known whether the other eyehole had also been blocked, and many other aspects of the object remained obscure. In the summer of 2011, the building claimed as the find spot was therefore excavated by a Gotland Museum team under the direction of Per Widerström (2012). Their work revealed a stone-walled, three-aisled structure with wooden roof-supporting posts of a type familiar from throughout the Migration Period in the Baltic islands, and usually interpreted as dwellings. Most of the material culture in the structure was unremarkable, including beads, spindle whorls, iron tool fragments, and ceramics of the kind common to such buildings. However, at the place claimed to be the location of the mask, approximately the mid-point of the structure along its eastern wall, very unusual finds were made.

The upper part of the wall had collapsed onto the floor surface, and in the rubble were found fragments of up to five imported Roman drinking horns of fourth century date, which are exceptionally rare finds from this region. The horns had been carefully dismantled into their component metal parts, and their rim mounts folded into small packages. With the horns were a dress pin of Baltic type, a broken neck ring, several buckles and a large number of thin mounts, together

with a fragmentary silver bracteate. It appeared as if all the objects had originated in a single location within the wall, perhaps a niche or storage area, and then fanned out across the floor when the masonry later fell in. Nearly 2 m from the wall, at right angles to the probable location of the original cache, stood the nearest roof-bearing post. In the floor at the base of this posthole, on the opposite, interior side from the wall with the cache, was found the 'missing' second eye of the mask, in its constituent parts of white and iris (Figure 11). The overall context was the same, dated *c.* 550 and therefore several centuries after the mask was made.

The rivets leave no doubt that this second eye was originally fixed on the mask, but the circumstances of its separation are not clear. Conservator Magnus Mårtensson (Personal Communication, 2011) has observed no tool marks on the rivets, and has therefore speculated that it may well have fallen out due to corrosion, or when the mask was first dug up by the detectorist. In our opinion, and that of the excavator, the singular fact that only the eye was found more likely suggests that it was deliberately removed. The obvious inference is that the 'eyeless' Roman mask had been given two new eyes, presumably after its arrival in Sweden. After this was done, one of the eyes had then been removed, making the mask one-eyed. The relative sequence is impossible to determine, but it seems likely that the mask was nailed to the roof-supporting post in the Hellvi building and the extracted eye buried in the floor below (Figure 12). It is probably not coincidental that the post chosen was directly in front of a wall cache containing valuable and possibly ritual objects.

The effects of firelight on polished metal objects has been mentioned above, and we can only wonder at the visual impact of this expressionless face with its single golden eye, apparently floating above the floor in the semi-darkness of the building's interior.

Back to Sutton Hoo

In the light of the Scandinavian and German comparative material reviewed above, the Sutton Hoo Mound 1 assemblage was examined anew in order to explore any other iconographic or behavioural markers of this kind. The first of these revived an old controversy, as it has long been known that one of the gold and garnet mounts on the purse lid—the right hand of two depicting a male between two animals—also has damage to the eye of the humanoid. There is a clear gouge mark by the figure's proper left eye (the same side as on the helmet) and the garnet itself was missing when excavated, though a copy has since been inserted to restore its supposed original appearance. The British Museum's experts are divided on the matter, some arguing that the absent stone probably results from loss or damage rather than intention (Care Evans, Personal Communication, 2011), while others, such as the late Sutton Hoo publication director Rupert Bruce-Mitford, believed that the removal of the eye was deliberate (Webster, Personal Communication, 2011). The same motif, a one-eyed figure between animals, is found on textiles from the Högom princely grave in Norrland, Sweden, and dating to *c.* 500; here too the intentionality of the ocular asymmetry has been debated (Nockert, 1991: 97). For both the Sutton Hoo purse lid and the Högom textiles, this may have to be re-evaluated in the light of the observations above.

The ocular theme at Sutton Hoo has recently received another addition, in the new studies made of the large whetstone or so-called sceptre. The sculptor Brian

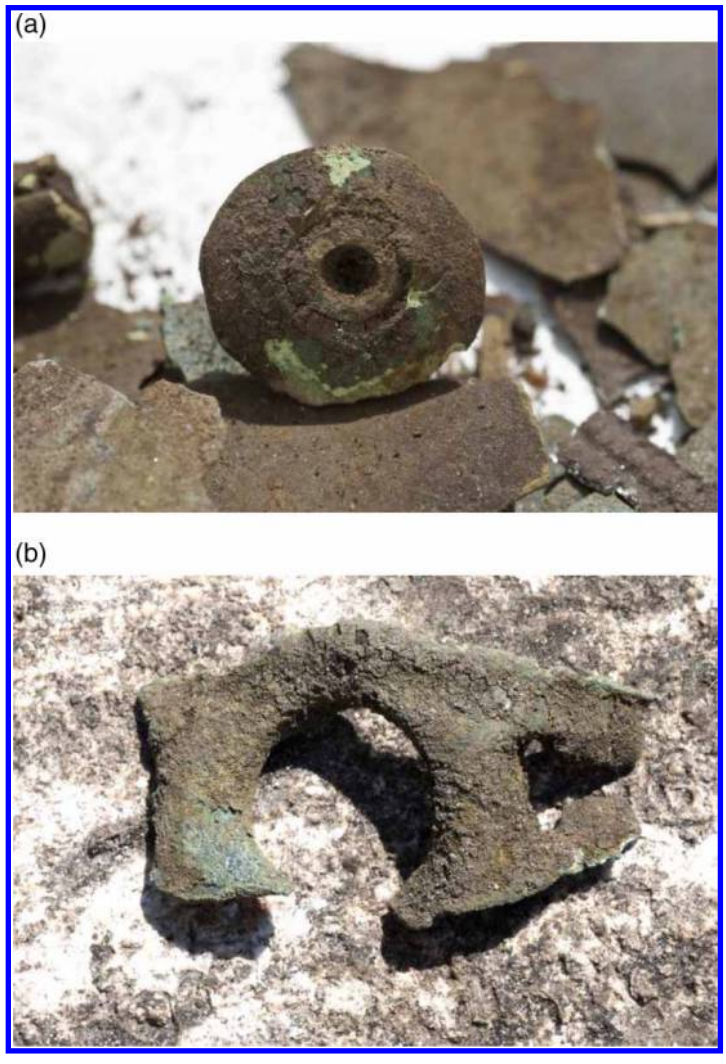

Figure 11. *(a) and (b) The separated components of the second eye from the Hellvi mask, as found in the floor of the building at the foot of a roof-bearing post.*
By Magnus Melin, used by kind permission of Gotland Museum.

Ansell, together with smith David Roper, has produced the most accurate replica of the whetstone ever attempted, in preparation for which they and others subjected the original to an unparalleled intensity of research (Mortimer & Pollington, 2013). Among their findings was the fact that one of the eight faces on the whetstone also has alterations to its proper left eye, which has been struck out and enlarged (Figure 13). The whetstone is made of greywacke, harder than iron and thus very difficult to carve, and there is no doubt that this manipulation was both deliberate and time-consuming. Here too there are behavioural implications, considering how the object may have been used. The Sutton Hoo helmet is only one-eyed in certain light conditions, but the effect is then clearly visible; in the case of the whetstone, the difficulty of actually seeing the reworking of the whetstone also

Figure 12. *Part of the Iron Age building at Hellvi under excavation in 2011. The remains of the stone wall foundation can be clearly seen at the edge of the trench, with a stone-set hole for a roof-supporting post in the foreground. The second eye of the mask was recovered from the floor surface abutting the near side of the post, in the same area indicated to be the original metal detection find-spot of the mask itself.*
By Per Widerström, used by kind permission of Gotland Museum.

privileges knowledge over observation, like the Torslunda matrix.

It has also been suggested that eyes in general form an unusually prominent part of the Sutton Hoo regalia's visual scheme (Williams, 2011), linking to prominent ocular imagery in other early Anglo-Saxon funerary contexts (Nugent & Williams, 2012). Regardless of whether all of the ocular effects claimed by Williams were actually perceptible to early medieval audiences, we have identified a specific context in which asymmetry definitely was intentional and presumably therefore significant. As far as we are aware, only one other Anglo-Saxon grave has produced garnet work with missing foils of this kind. On the elaborate buckle from the Taplow burial, one of the two cabochon garnet mounts behind the tongue is missing a foil, and it is not impossible that these features also represent eyes; the buckle may have been made as early as *c.* 570 though the burial is dated to *c.* 620 and is thus contemporary with Sutton Hoo (Webster, 2012: 61–65). Curiously, the garnets without gold foils at both

Figure 13. *Face B1 of the whetstone 'sceptre' from Sutton Hoo Mound 1; reworking of the proper left eye can be clearly seen.*
By Hannah Simons, used by kind permission.

Valsgärde 7 and Taplow each bear a diagonal cut on their surfaces, perhaps a marker of some kind.

The Eyes of Rulers

The Sutton Hoo helmet was made to seem one-eyed, matching figures on the whetstone and arguably the purse; at Valsgärde, a similar effect was created, with parallels on the Vendel 12 shield-animal; at both Uppåkra and Gevninge, the 'eye' of a helmet was removed and seemingly sacrificed; the eye of a figure on the Torslunda matrix was struck out, like that on similar images from Staraja Ladoga, Uppåkra, Ribe and Elsfleth; something similar may have happened to the imported Insular face-mask from Øster Vandet; and at Hellvi, an old Roman mask was first given two eyes, then one was apparently removed and buried (Table 1). When the above examples are taken together, there is a remarkable consistency in the thematic removal or alteration of an eye. The objects span the period from the start of the sixth century to late in the Viking Age, but although these dates are often broad in range, there is a clear sense that the mid-sixth century may have seen the beginnings of this phenomenon.

Interestingly, these finds represent a material correlation, or perhaps confirmation, of a characteristic that has previously been observed in early medieval literature. Edith Marold (1998) has collated a number of literary sources that suggest the eyes of leaders, heroes, and kings were believed to be in some way special. Among other properties, there are descriptions of the eyes of rulers as being glittering, illuminated from within, possessed of especially keen or even clairvoyant sight, and to present a singularly terrifying gaze. Examples include the tenth-century poem *Arinbjarnarkviða* by Egill Skalla-Grímsson, where mention is made of the 'piercing glance' of King Eiríkr blóðøx (Erik Bloodaxe) of York, looking out from under his 'Helm of Terror' (strophes 4 and 5). Rulers are also said to be 'snake-eyed', using the same adjectives employed to describe the eyes of mythological creatures such as the

Table 1. *Suggested chronological sequence and facial side of the 'altered eyes' presented in the paper*

Object and location	Deposition date AD	Altered eye (proper)
Högom textiles, Sweden	*c.* 500	Left
Elsfleth buckle tongue, Germany	*c.* 500–600	Left
Hellvi helmet mask, Gotland, Sweden	*c.* 550	Right
Torslunda matrix, Öland, Sweden	*c.* 550–700	Right
Uppåkra helmet eyebrow, Skåne, Sweden	*c.* 550–700	Right
Gevninge helmet ocular, Roskilde, Denmark	*c.* 550–700	Right
Vendel grave 12 shield grip, Uppland, Sweden	*c.* 600	Right
Valsgärde grave 7 helmet crest, Uppland, Sweden	*c.* 620–710	Left
Sutton Hoo Mound 1, East Anglia, England Helmet eyebrow, animal head, whetstone and purse-lid figure	*c.* 625	Left
Uppåkra figurine, Skåne, Sweden	*c.* 700–900	Right
Øster Vandet mask-weight, Denmark	*c.* 700–900	Left
Staraja Ladoga ferrule, Russian Federation	*c.* 750–800	Left
Ribe pendant head, Denmark	*c.* 750–950	Right

Midgard Serpent (Marold, 1998). Ocular symbolism also extends into the pantheon of Ásgarðr—Thor's eyes are said to blaze, Odin has unnervingly keen sight and so on. Perhaps a similar being is referred to on the B-bracteate from Nebenstedt in Lower Saxony, with the inscription, 'One with a gleaming eye consecrates the runes' with the obvious if controversial link to these signs as potential instruments of power (Looijenga, 2003: 211–12; McKinnell et al., 2004).

There is a natural link between these descriptions and the high-status helmets from sites such as Vendel, Valsgärde, and Sutton Hoo, covering all or part of the face and leaving the eyes prominently displayed, encircled, and guarded. By definition, it is the eyes of military and/or political leaders that are being emphasized, manipulated, and differentiated. Perhaps most striking of all is that many of these one-eyed pieces were altered after their manufacture and were not originally made to look that way (though the future intention may have been implicit in the trajectory of their design). The suggestion of 'offering' or in some way 'giving up' an eye is evident, as is the fact that it was apparently not always necessary for these alterations to be readily visible. This pattern of behaviour has interesting implications, and raises an obvious question as to its meaning.

An Eye for Odin?

One-eye symbolism of course has a broad currency in European mythology, not least that of the Celtic world, but in the present context it seems advisable to limit our study to the Germanic North from which the above examples come. In seeking a parallel for the one-eyed ruler figure in the traditional stories of this region, there is a single individual that springs instantly to mind: the Æsir god Odin.

In brief, the relevant tale relates how Odin travels to one of the roots of the World-Tree, beneath which is a well whose waters contain all wisdom and intelligence. The well is guarded by a being named Mimir, who demands one of Odin's eyes as a pledge in return for allowing the god to drink from the water (*Gylfaginning* 14; Snorri Sturluson, 1987: 17). According to the Eddic poem *Völuspá*, Mimir drinks mead from the eye each morning (strophe 28, Larrington, 1996: 7; see also Lassen, 2003, and Bragg, 2004: 71–78; cf. Arwill-Nordbladh, 2012). No text specifies which eye was surrendered.

The story has thematic links with several of Odin's other adventures, in which wisdom is purchased after great effort and at terrible cost. The knowledge thus acquired is contingent, a precious resource to be only sparingly communicated, often at a heavy price. The connection between such hard-won insight and the proper qualities of a leader is very clear.

Clearly, interpretation of the objects reviewed above must be contextualized, and we should be open to variation and multiplicity in their meanings (Price, 2006; see also Helmbrecht, 2008, 2011). However, with varying degrees of confidence and with the exception of the Hellvi mask, all of the one-eyed figures mentioned here have previously and independently been identified in print as representations of Odin following the feature of the single eye. In the case of some objects, the connections stretch further, as with the Sutton Hoo whetstone, which on the basis of a passage in the Prose Edda has been suggested to have been an Odinnic symbol in its own right (Simpson, 1979: 96; Wilson, 1992: 168–69). The web of symbolic and literal associations between Iron Age rulers and

the Germanic god of elites, war, and wisdom appears natural in these circumstances, and gains only sharper focus in the context of such close correlation with material culture.

Discussion

At the core of the relationship between war-leaders and the shape-changing god Odin is the notion of border-crossing, the transgression of liminal zones between nature and supernature, between power and the divine right of kings with which we began. Perhaps we see in these objects a kind of pagan transubstantiation, the military ruler literally becoming, or hosting, the war-god himself? The concept of masking—in all its meanings—has been widely studied in connection with the later Iron Age and its frequent poetic allusion to shifts of identity and transformation (e.g. Gunnell, 1995, 2007; Price, 2002; Back Danielsson, 2007).

On the Sutton Hoo helmet, the parallel absence of foils on the eyebrow and the crest animal suggests a link between the wearer, the identity represented by the face of the helm, and the animal that literally guards the crown of the head and thus the wearer's life. It is also possible to see the entire helmet as a similar creature: the *walu* crest forming the spine topped by the long animal head above the mask's brows, the sides of the helm as a body, the cheek guards as wings and the neck protector as a tail. It may even be this kind of headgear to which the disguised Odin of the *Grímnismál* refers when he introduces himself in strophe 46 with the words, *Heto mek Grímr*, 'I am called Mask' (Larrington, 1996: 58; his other names include *Grímnir*, 'Masked One').

Do these finds also have something to tell us about the 'origins' of Odin? The 'introduction' of the Odin complex has been discussed in many variations (most recently by Hedeager, 2011), with influences varying from the east and west. The use of a Roman object (the Hellvi mask) in this context is interesting, in that it repeats a pattern of Imperial emulation and influence long noted in the North—for example, in the design and use of bracteates (and not least in the evolution of helmets; see Hauck, 1981). Some scholars have even argued that the Odin cult actually originated in the military rituals of the Empire, especially the worship of Mithras (Kaliff & Sundqvist, 2004).

These southerly connections also emerge in other links, including those of symbolic meaning. For example, the Hellvi mask has intriguing parallels with Sutton Hoo even in its original Roman context. Both helmets depict wholly or partly legendary figures (Alexander and Hercules at Hellvi, possibly Woden/Odin at Sutton Hoo), and both provide an opportunity for the wearer to appear simultaneously as themselves and also as an incarnation of their respective mythological beings. This seems unlikely to be coincidence.

In drawing our conclusions, we must first be aware that although an Odinnic symbolism seems clear to us, at the time it may have meant something subtly different, perhaps also varying from one context to another. The trajectory of storytelling and myth-making may have come very far indeed from the mid-sixth century to the thirteenth, when most of our sources were written down (cf. Lassen, 2011). The meaning of these narrative objects may best be understood as a web of connections, intersections, and implications. Within its tangles we can discern the importance of border-crossing and liminality, masking, and drama, the role of ritual warfare, leadership and sacrifice. Here too are the divine rights of power,

the suggestion of leaders as gods, and a remarkable ideological consistency over time and space. We may also, just possibly, be able to say something about the antiquity of Odin.

Today, we see these objects as separate pieces, fragmentary and corroded, reassembled, and catalogued as archaeological finds. To truly understand them, they must be put back into their original context, not least as worn by living people, indoors, outdoors, at peace and in war (Figure 14). When confronted with masked beings such as these, what did the northerners of the late Iron Age see—were they men, or divinities, or both?

This is something for the modern museum visitor to consider, when viewing the Sutton Hoo helmet in its display case in London: it is not often one gets the chance—in literal rather than symbolic terms—to stare into the face of a god, and to meet its gaze looking back across the centuries.

Figure 14. *A re-enactor dressed as the warrior from Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo, mounted at the head of a troop wearing armour and equipment drawn from contemporary central Swedish boat graves of the Vendel period. Reconstructions by the Wulfheodenas living history group, photo by Paul Mortimer.*

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Un oeil pour Odin? Jeux de rôles divins durant l'Âge de Sutton Hoo

Cet article présente de nouvelles observations concernant la construction du casque de Sutton Hoo, afin de permettre par ce biais un débat plus vaste sur les liaisons religieuses et idéologiques préchrétiennes en Scandinavie. Nous verrons par la suite qu'en certains circonstances et lieux, comme par exemple à l'intérieur de la salle éclairée au feu, le porteur du casque était considéré à la fois comme chef de guerre et dieu de la guerre, donc comme une personnification littérale d'Odin. Cette interprétation est appuyée et étendue par une variété de découvertes scandinaves du 6e au 10e siècle et représente sans doute une manifestation matérielle extraordinaire du passage rituel de la frontière entre élites humaines et divines. Dans le contexte sociopolitique des premiers royaumes médiévaux, l'imagerie dramatique des casques et du matériel militaire connexe jouait un rôle essentiel dans la communication du pouvoir, les origines des prouesses militaires et l'allégeance religieuse d'un chef de guerre. Translation by Isabelle Gerges.

Mots-clés: Sutton Hoo, casque, masque, yeux, Odin, médiéval, anglo-saxon, Hellvi

Ein Auge für Odin? Göttliche Rollenspiele in der Zeit von Sutton Hoo

Dieser Beitrag präsentiert eingangs einige neue Beobachtungen zur Konstruktion des Helmes von Sutton *Hoo, um dann zu einer umfangreicheren Diskussion vorchristlicher religiöser bzw. ideologischer Verbindungen quer durch Skandinavien zu gelangen. Es wird erörtert, dass unter besonderen Umständen und an speziellen Orten, wie z. B. in einer feuerbeschienenen Halle, der Träger des Helmes gleichermaßen als menschlicher Kriegsführer und als Kriegsgott, als tatsächliche Personifikation Odins wahrgenommen wurde. Diese Interpretation wird durch eine Reihe von skandinavischen Funden des 6.-10. Jh. unterstützt und erweitert, die wohl eine ungewöhnlich physische Manifestation der rituellen Grenzüberschreitung zwischen menschlichen und göttlichen Eliten repräsentieren. Im sozio-politischen Kontext frühmittelalterlicher Königreiche spielte das dramatische Erscheinungsbild der Helme und der damit verbundenen militärischen Ausrüstungsgegenstände eine Schlüsselrolle bei der Kommunikation von Macht, militärischen Könnens und der religiösen Bindung eines Warlords.* Translation by Heiner Schwarzberg.

Stichworte: Sutton Hoo, Helm, Maske, Augen, Odin, mittelalterlich, Angelsachsen, Hellvi