

A new Throne-Amulet from Hedeby. First Indication for Viking-age Barrel-chairs

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ABSTRACT

In 2017 a throne-amulet made from bone, once retrieved from the diggings of the harbour excavation 1979/80 in Hedeby, was committed to the *Wikinger Museum Haithabu*. It constitutes the second specimen known from the site and fits well into the larger group of throne-amulets known from south-eastern Scandinavia. The academic discussion of these amulets as devotional pagan objects either in connection with the worship of *Óðinn* or else as thrones of *völur* is controversial. The piece from Hedeby harbour does not seem to depict the typical block-chair, though, but represents the first indication of the existence of Viking-age barrel-chairs used continuously until Early modernity.

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Figure 1. Hedeby harbour. Throne-amulet made from bone. Note the remnants of a barnacle on its barrel-shaped body (Photo: Museum für Archäologie, Schloss Gottorf).

Introduction

In late September 2017, during the ongoing excavation-campaign within Hedeby's inhumation burial ground '*Flachgräberfeld*' (cf. Kalmring 2017), conducted in an excavation tent open to the general public, a visitor came forward presenting a little plastic case for jewellery.¹ He reported that it held an unknown object from Hedeby, held dear in family possession since decades, which he now would like to have identified. On further inquiry it turned out that the object was found on one of the heaps of excavated material from the harbour excavation in Hedeby, which was conducted in the years 1979/80 (Kalmring 2010). At the point of discovery, the sheet pile box, in which the excavation

within the harbour basin had been executed, had already been removed. The object was met as broken into three pieces, but glued together by the finder. When he finally opened the lid of the little case, embedded in cotton wool, a miniature chair came to light.

The Miniature Chair from Hedeby Harbour

The presented object was made from a worked piece of long bone (Figure 1). It possesses a total height of 2.4 cm and an outer diameter of 1.9 cm as a maximum. The 3 cm thick back above a barrel-shaped body measures 0.9 cm in height and features a central

perforation of 0.5 cm in diameter (including a triangular gap due to the original rupture). The hollow interior of the long bone is slightly conical and possesses a diameter of 1 cm as a maximum width at its base. The barrel-shaped body is ornamented with an encarved rotating double-line at its base, midst and top, while the back's rear side is ornamented with yet another double-line at its base and top. Here it also features another pair of diagonal double-lines meeting at an imaginary point some 1.4 cm above the top of the back centred above the perforation. The lower half of the barrel-shaped body's front shows the remnants of a barnacle stressing an original find context in Hedeby's harbour basin and not from the landward shore sections of the trench equally examined in 1979/80.

Block-Chairs

At first glance by its shape the small piece from Hedeby harbour resembles full-sized block-chairs (Sw. *kubbstol*, No. *kubbelstol*). These basic chairs – in contrast to the more elaborate square box-chairs as e.g. known from the Oseberg boat-burial (Grieg 1928: 105–118; cf. Pedersen 2017: 114 Fig. 1) – are carved from a simple, hollowed-out trunk and feature a rounded back rest following the contours of the log (Grodde 1989: 55–61). One of the oldest preserved North European specimens of such a block-chair from the 5th century AD, made from alder and decorated with chip carvings, was found in a log boat-burial at Fallward in Lower Saxony, where it was accompanied by a corresponding footrest (Schön 1995: 20–23). From Scandinavia, the oldest preserved block-chair was, for a long time, thought to be the one of Sauland from Telemark in Norway. Its animal style-like decoration gave reason for speculation on its age with suggested dating's to 'the very oldest part of the Middle Ages', the '11th century' or even 'around and shortly after the year AD 800'. Yet a ¹⁴C-dating resulted merely in a late medieval dating of AD 1460±160 (Nodermann & Damell 1981: 110–114, with ref. therein). Contemporary figurative depictions of Viking-age block-chairs, though, can e.g. be found on a few Gotlandic Picture stones (cf. Lindqvist & Hult de Geer 1939: 108 Fig. 8–9; Drescher & Hauck 1982: 258–260; Grodde 1989: 59): Each two block-chairs are featured on the type

C picture stone Änge I, Buttle parish from the late 8th to early 9th century AD (Lindqvist 1942: 36–39) and on the type E cist-stone Sanda churchyard I, Sanda parish (= G181) from the 11th century AD (Lindqvist 1942: 107–109). In the depiction of the cart-procession of the Oseberg-tapestry (fragment no. 2) one carriage holds two occupied block-chairs ornamented with a zigzag-pattern (Hougen 2006: 17–24, 95–98 Fig. 1–3; cf. Grodde 1989: 59). Finally, even the chair of the god *Hórr* depicted in a gaming pieces from Lund was addressed as being about a *kubbstol* (Trotzig 1983: 365; cf. Grodde 1989: 59), yet its identification seems less secure. Generally, it can be stated that block-chairs were continuously in use in the folk culture of Norway and Sweden up until the early modern times (Salin 1916; Erixon 1938: 115).

Throne-Amulets

The suspension hole of the miniature chair from Hedeby harbour reveals that it was once worn as an amulet pendant.² Therewith it can be recognised as belonging to the larger group of Viking-age throne-amulets. Hitherto just one single throne-amulet was previously known from Hedeby, deriving from burial Hb 497 of the western part of the Southern Burial Ground ('*Südgräberfeld-West*') outside the town ramparts. The interment concerns a richly equipped, female coffin-grave containing a Terslevfibula (uncertain affiliation), two bead-necklaces including four pendants³, a belt buckle and strap end and a knife as personal equipment. Moreover, it contained a meat fork, a wooden chest with scissors, awl and tweezers, a bronze bowl with a painted wooden figurine, a splint box, a lead bowl with a wooden spoon and a wooden bucket as additional grave goods (Arents & Eisenschmidt 2010b: 147–150, pl. 69–73; Drescher & Hauck 1982: 243–244). A denarius of Louis the Child gives a *terminus-post quem* of AD 899–911 for the interment, which accordingly had been placed in the first half or middle of the 10th century (Arents & Eisenschmidt 2010a: 133, 166, 175; cf. note 2). The find-context of the throne-amulet itself is somewhat uncertain; it is said to have been found with the remnants of a gold-thread close to the left arm of the individual (Arents & Eisenschmidt 2010b: 146–147). The merely 2.5 x 2 cm large and 1.5 cm high pendent is made

of alloyed silver and shows a square box-chair with a tapering back rest crowned by a disc. It features arm rests in the shape of forward-pointing quadrupeds with tails. The quadrupeds might embody lions (or wolfs [Freki and Geri]). Two antithetically arranged swans (or ravens [Huginn and Muninn]) with long, bent necks roost on the chair's rear corners framing the back rest. The embedded seat seems to point to an original existence of a enthroned figurine, possibly made of organic material. Traces of wear as well as a repair of the mounting prove a long period of utilisation (Drescher & Hauck 1982: 238–241 Fig.1; Vierck 2002: 42–44, Fig. 10.2; Arents & Eisenschmidt 2010a: 127; 2010b: pl. 69.2).

Throne-amulets as an artefact-group are predominantly known from female burials and hoards from the middle and second half of the 10th century (Arents & Eisenschmidt 2010a: 128–129). Pendants as miniatures of box-chairs, beside the one from Hedeby-grave Hb 497, have been found in the female coffin-grave Bj. 844 from Birka-Hemlanden (grave district 1B) as well as in the hoards from Eketorp, Edsberg parish, Närke, and from Tolstrup, Aars parish, Vesthimmerland. In Gudme, Gudme parish, Fyn, most recently another box-chair pendant has been identified among the detector finds from the late 1980s deriving from the vicinity south of Gudme IV, where a Viking-age farmstead is believed to have been located (Dengsø Jessen & Majland in prep.; cf. Nielsen et al. 1994). All of them have in common, that they were made from silver, in case of the Eketorp-hoard even in gilded silver. The latter, too, featured an embedded seating pointing to the former existence of a enthroned figurine. The larger group of throne-amulets, however, are about pendants as miniatures of block-chairs: One specimen is a part of the collections of the Historiska museet in Stockholm with previously unknown find-context⁴, while each on piece was found in the female chamber-graves Bj. 632 from Birka-Norr om borg (grave district 2A) and Bj. 968 in Birka-Hemlanden (grave district 1A). From Gotland block-chair pendants are known from both the female inhumation burial 159 at Stora Ire, Hellyvi parish, and the inhumation cist grave 1966:08 at Barshalder, Grötlingbo parish (SHM 32181: 23605; Rundkvist 2003: 186), while from Öland one example was found in grave 8 at Folkeslunda, Långlöt parish. In Denmark,

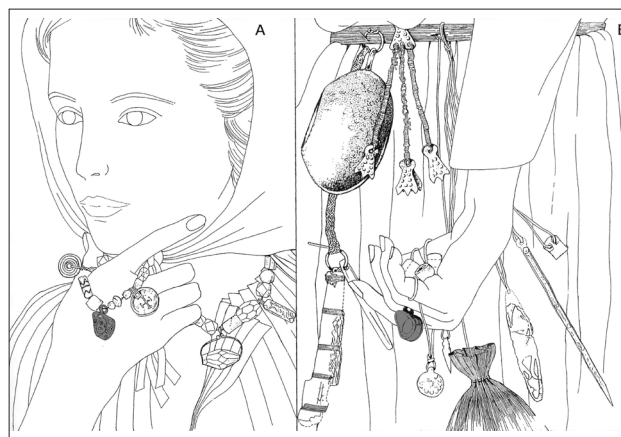


Figure 2. Throne-amulets (grey) combined with additional pendants on a necklace or charm bracelet. Reconstructional drawings after features Birka chamber-grave Bj. 632 (A) and Fyrkat wagon body-grave 4 (B) (modified after Vierck 2002: fig. 12).

one block-chair amulet was found in the famous female wagon body-interment grave 4 from the ring-fortress of Fyrkat. However, block-chair pendants are not exclusively found in graves, but also in hoard-contexts: The Föhlagen-hoard in Björke parish on Gotland even contained two throne-amulets. Another piece was found as a part of a hoard from Bornholm with unknown find-context and one in the Gravlev-hoard in Hornum parish, Vesthimmerland (Drescher & Hauck 1982: 248–256, 301, with ref. therein; cf. Price 2002: 163–167). Among the known block-chair throne amulets the variety of basic materials seems to be more heterogeneous; while silver dominates the picture (Bj. 632, Bj. 968, Fyrkat, Föhlagen, Bornholm, Gravlev), there are even specimens worked from bronze (Riddare by), amber (Stora Ire, Barshalder) and antler (Folkeslunda). All of the throne-amulets listed above have in common that they were found unoccupied without featuring an actual sitting individual. Two recent detector finds of silver box-chair amulets from Denmark, however, are occupied by a figurine. And while the individual on the amulet from Nybølle, Horslunde parish, on Lolland is quite basic and lacks any greater details, the one from Lejre shows a person dressed in a knee-length robe, a pectoral of pearled lines and wrapped in a cloak wearing some kind of hood or hair decoration (Christensen 2009; Pesch 2018).

Semantics – Magic Thrones?

The discussion of the semantics of throne-amulets, often carried on a necklace or charm bracelet and in combination with beads and additional amulet pendants (Figure 2), is considerable. Their identification as symbolic thrones of ‘an earthly or other spiritual power’, possibly of the Norse god *Óðinn*, was recognised from early on (Arrhenius 1961: 156–157; cf. Roesdahl 1977: 141; Koktvedgaard *Zeiten* 1997: 21–22; Gräslund 2005: 380–381). H. Drescher & K. Hauck (1982) composed a comprehensive catalogue on throne-amulets and categorised them into ‘solium (box-chair) amulets’ – according to the royal throne (Gr. *θρόνος*, Lat. *solium regale*) of the occidental Emperors, modelled after Mediterranean antetypes – and into ‘block-chair amulets’. In the Scandinavian cultural area both categories of empty thrones as a devotional object seem to ‘glorify the divine in adoration and ensures its presence’, since the seat ‘invites the supernatural to abide by’; occupied thrones with indications for lost figurines (or actual sitters) praise the glory of the depicted divinities. The authors, however, have reservations in ascribing both types of thrones solely to *Óðinn* (or this wife Frigg), which they consider imprudent (Drescher & Hauck 1982: 244–245, 299). In his chapter ‘throne – bishop’s throne – magic throne’ H. Vierck (2002) elaborates on the point of a Norse pagan transformation of an Antique and Jewish-Christian throne symbology going back to the throne of Solomon (‘the Wise’), its adaption in the Byzantine and Carolingian Emperor’s thrones as well as their imitation for Bishop’s thrones as heirs to the Davidic kings. Despite the fact, that he emanates from Christian Bishop’s thrones as being the actual models for these solium-amulets, Vierck argues that the semantic is less likely to be found in their immediate significance as manorial insignia of gods and men. The fact that most of the throne-amulets were found without a sitter to Vierck (2002: 50, 54) does not necessarily have to be related to the *hetoimasia* (Gr. *ἑτοιμασία*, ‘ready throne’) in expectance of an *epiphany* (Gr. *ἐπιφάνεια*, manifestation/appearance), but can also be understood as the thrones possessing some magical inherent *Ge-stalttheiligkeit* (‘shape-holiness’) themselves. In their Norse, transformed appearance he links the latter to *seiðr* and to the thrones of the female seeresses

vǫlur (Vierck 2002: 57–58). This connotation is also taken up by N. Price (2002: 167) who argues that their combined appearance with other amulets on necklaces ‘strongly suggest that such chairs were among the symbolic equipment of the *vǫlur* [themselves] and their kind’ (critically Jensen 2010: 58–61, 189). The controversial discussion within the scientific community, which enflamed subsequent to the discovery of the throne-amulet from Lejre with its occupant addressed as either ‘Odin from Lejre’ or – in its interpretation as a *vǫlva* – as the ‘Lejre Lady’, shows the great difficulty which lies in the interpretation of this particular group of devotional pagan objects (Pesch 2018, 464–470).

Barrel-Chairs

The barrel-shaped body of the „block-chair“ miniature from Hedeby harbour in question, taken together with the rotating double-lines at its base, midst and top, however, seems insistently to point to the fact that we are not looking at a block-chair, but rather at a miniature of a tube-chair (Ger. *Tonnenstuhl*, Dut. *tonnestoel*) with barrel hoops (cf. Roesdahl 1999: 103). Vertical planks representing staves seem not to have been indicated with additional carvings by the artist. While *realia* of tube-chairs are rarely preserved, they commonly appear in Renaissance’ tavern scenes of Dutch paintings or Books of hours. Generally, tube-chairs as a generic term are differentiated into barrel- and pail-chairs (Ger. *Fass- and Kübelstuhl*) depending on the moulding of the staves themselves (von Stülpnagel 2016): Pail-chairs consist of straight, unbent staves and are thus either cylindrical or frustum-like tapered in shape.⁵ Barrel-chairs instead consist of fined-down lanceolate staves, which were bent on a fire forming a bulge held in place with winded hoops. This constructional fact implies that barrel-chairs always had to have been complete barrels in the first place and are thus solely about secondary products.⁶ While pail-chairs can be further distinguished into pail-chairs with simple armrests (von Stülpnagel 2016: 13, drawing 6-9) and armrests from additional boards (von Stülpnagel 2016: 13, drawing 1-5), barrel-chairs can be discriminated by their bulge somewhat vaguely into barrel-chairs with lesser- (von Stülpnagel 2016: 13, drawing 10-15) and greater bulge (von Stülpnagel



Figure 3. a. Barrel-chair as depicted in a 17th-century pen-drawing. Detail from Isaac van Ostade (1621–1649), ‘Hungry peasants having a frugal meal’ (PK-T-1715. Digital Collections, Print Room. Leiden University Libraries, Leiden University [Creative Commons]).

b. Rendering of the bulgy barrel-chair depicted in Isaac van Ostade’s ‘Hungry peasants having a frugal meal’ (after von Stülpnagel 2016: drawing 19 [mirrored]; drawing K. von Jeinsen).

2016: 13, drawing 16–19). Based on this comparative body the amulet from Hedeby harbour with its squat, bulgy shape thus can be positively identified as a miniature of a barrel-chair with greater bulge. It has an almost identical, full-sized counterpart in the tube-chair depicted in a 17th century-pen drawing by Isaac van Ostade (Figure 3a–b) dramatically stressing the persistence of this type of basic seating furniture up into Early modernity.

Staves from coopered vessels do appear in great quantities in Hedeby: 204 specimens derive from settlement contexts, while 31 were found in the harbour. This group can be complemented by another 137 stave vessel-heads or lids from the settlement and 11 from the harbour (Westphal 2006: 29–31, 37–44, pl. 13–15). Among the former there are 17 so-called ‘well-staves’ – named after wells made of imported barrels in secondary usage – of which 14 samples were found in well-contexts (Westphal 2006: note 31). Wells made from large transport barrels constitute the most frequent type of well in Hedeby. Due to the fact that they were dug down deep into the humid, waterlogged ground some were almost fully preserved. These barrels, made from alien silver fir (*Abies alba*) and thus imported to Hedeby as containers from the upper Rhine area, possessed a height of 2.5 m, a maximum of 0.8 m in diameter and a volumetric capacity of 800 l (Schietzel 1969: 41–45; 2014: 146–149; Behre 1969: 10–13; cf. Schultze 2008: 364–365 note 41). In terms

of fastening of stave-vessels in general in 63 cases wooden hoops with a length of up to 0.953 m are documented in Hedeby (Westphal 2006: 43), but in 102 cases even metal hoops, too (Westphal 2002: 168–169, pl. 64). Due to the fragmentation of the latter the reconstruction of their original length certainly is hindered; yet only in six cases they might actually have belonged to vessels other than buckets with a diameter of ≥ 0.3 m. The preserved barrels from the wells exclusively featured wooden hoops. Whether or not one of the remaining three of the 17 ‘well-staves’ in secondary usage might possibly have belonged to a barrel-chair has to be regarded as highly uncertain; for now, they must be reckoned as mere remnants of demolished, imported barrels (Schietzel 1969: 44).

Discussion

Until today, the find of one stool from 1937 is the only surviving piece of an actual seating furniture known from Hedeby (Grodde 1989: 51 pl. 66.1; Westphal 2006: 87 pl. 66.3).⁷ The throne-amulet from grave Hb 497 at least suggests a familiarity with the solium-box chairs of the leading clergy as models for the (miniature) *volva*-thrones in an underlying process of adaption, imitation and transformation. Therewith, also this artefact group, as earlier demonstrated for the Thor’s hammer pendants (cf. Staecker 1999: 234–237), has to be understood

as a pagan reaction to Christian influences, which is also in accordance with their suggested 10th century appearance. Even for the amulets depicting a miniature of a more basic form of seating furniture such as block-chairs, the same semantic qualities – possessing some magical content – are apparently allotted. The throne-amulet from Hedeby harbour, however, does not depict a block-chair in miniature, but in fact a barrel-chair. Hitherto, barrel-chairs in general have not been archaeologically documented, though ‘a manufacture in pre- and protohistoric time [in Central- and Northern Europe] is completely conceivable’ (Grodde 1989: 60; transl.: author). While it is tempting to deduce an actual existence of full-size barrel-chairs in Hedeby, too, which might have served as a model for the amulet, one might wonder why even a seating furniture only created as a recycled, secondary product, could become the model for a throne-amulet and thus ascribed magical qualities – the ‘Viking mind’ obviously can hardly be equalised with our modern perception of values. The usage of bone for the pendent from Hedeby harbour not only enhances the variety of basic material – bronze, amber and antler next to the predominating silver (Jensen 2010: Fig. 3.6.3) – displayed within the group of block-chair amulets. Also, and even more importantly, the artefact constitutes the first indication of the existence of barrel-chairs in the Viking world.

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Notes

1. The author is grateful to assistant medical director Dr. H. Seifert, Busdorf, who kindly ceded the object to the collections of the *Wikinger Museum Haithabu* (SH1979-221.1).
2. For a critical discussion of the terminology cf. Koktvedgaard Zeiten (1997: 3–5) and Jensen (2010: 5–8).
3. Cf. Delveau (2017: Fig. 8), bead period BP VII (= AD 905–935). Divergent dating given by Delveau (2017), who by mistake applied the “hypothetical dating” instead of the “tentative absolute chronology” to J. Callmer’s bead periods (cf. Callmer 1977: 77, 170).
4. Henceforth identified as deriving from Riddare by, Hejnum parish, Gotland (SHM 876: 106656).
5. Among the collection of block-chairs of the Nordiska museet in Stockholm there are two tube-chairs of uncertain age misguidedly addressed as “kubbstol”. Since both feature straight, unbent staves they are as a matter of fact about coopered pail-chairs (von Stülpnagel 2016: 13, drawing 7–8).
6. The secondary usage of transport-barrels in Viking-age contexts is e.g. well documented in the context of wells (see below).
7. In a burnt pit-house, feature “Haus I/[19]33” from the trial trench-cross section (N 98–106 metres), another charred stool was met. It could not become recovered though (photo-binder “Hedeby 1933 Photo 201–249”, picture 213/[19]33 from November 1st 1933; cf. Jankuhn 1933/34: 346; Hilberg 2007: 195 Fig. 5).

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