

The sovereign seeress – on the use and meaning of a Viking Age chair pendant from Gudme, Denmark

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ABSTRACT

The South Scandinavian chair pendants of the late Viking Age form a famous and much debated find category. They have been associated with the cult of Odin as well as female seeresses. However, their find contexts clearly link the pendants intimately to a female use-sphere and their condition shows that they have been worn intensely. With a new pendant emerging from the detector finds from Gudme, Denmark, the connection between chair pendants and dominant settlements is further strengthened. The female prerogative, the locational aristocratic reference in combination with the chairs association with royal privileges lead to the argument that the pendants have a connection to the deep historical presence of the seeress as a sovereign power across Northern Europe. Her position is explained as a triangulation of Seeress, Odin and King which are all represented as being seated. Consequently, seating is regarded as a main attribute and a recurring and noticeable privilege for all three characters. Thus, the chair *en miniature* is argued to function as a material anchoring of the socio-symbolic understanding of the seated sovereign seeress.

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Gudme in the south-east of Funen, Denmark, has long been an established *locus classicus* of the Scandinavian Iron Age; the first gold finds appeared in the 16th century, and the area has since produced several hoards (coins, hacksilver and the occasional gold items) in combination with elite settlements, as well as the largest Iron Age urn-field in Denmark, Møllegårdsmarken, not to mention the unique Lundeberg landing site (Albrechtsen 1971; Christoffersen 1989; Horsnæs 2018; Jørgensen 2011; Michaelsen 2015; Sehested 1878; Sørensen 2003; Sørensen 2010; Thomsen et al. 1993; Thomsen 1997; Thrane 1993) (Figure 1 and 2).

Already in the early 1980s the investigation of the Gudme-Lundeberg complex pioneered by combining metal-detector surveying and excavation. The outcome is 6700+ detector finds and more than four decades of archaeological research. Here the gold foil figures, several coin hoards (mostly denars and siliqua) and imported roman goods figure prominently, and not least the great hall-building overlooking the settlement. The latter being 47 x 10 m with eight pairs of enormous roof-sup-



Figure 1. Gudme is located more or less in the middle of present-day Denmark, and, via the landing site at Lundeberg, with easy access to the Great Belt and the larger waterways connecting the Danish isles and the continent (Graphics: M.L. Bendtsen, The National Museum).

porting posts and dated to the 3-4th century AD, completely changed the position of south Scandi-

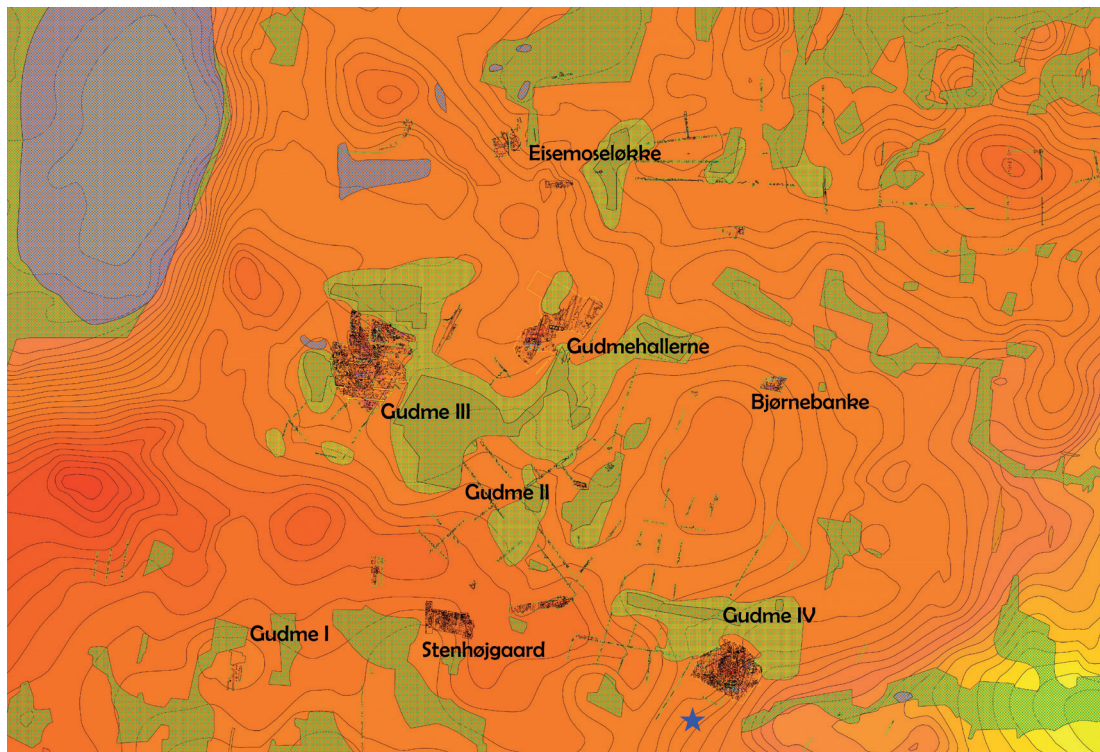


Figure 2. Beside the many detector finds, the excavated areas in Gudme all show intense activity in the form of postholes, pits and other types of depositions (Sørensen 2010). To the south the star (blue) demarcates the find spot of the chair pendant, and the last phase 12 of the nearer Gudme IV is early Viking Age (based on house typology and ceramics). However, the north-eastern section of Gudme IV contained a disturbed (ploughed out) late Viking Age hoard of 16 dirhams (the youngest a Talib b. Ahm. AD 944), a fragment of an ornamented silver arm ring, a silver bar and a silver nail, which indicates a contemporary farmstead in the vicinity. Lighter colours indicate wetland (Graphics: M.L. Bendtsen, The National Museum).

navian early Iron Age architecture as well as the understanding of the capacities of the elite of the time. Gudme thus became a first-generation central place in prehistory as in archaeological research in Scandinavia. The current project ‘Gudme – a settlement complex with elite residency and craftsmanship, 3-11th century’, (sponsored by the Carlsberg Foundation, Denmark) is focusing specifically on the detector finds, their character and composition. As always when digging deeper into museum collections, surprises inevitably occur. The same goes for the Gudme assemblage, which proved to contain a very small but very conspicuous find – a chair pendant.

The Gudme chair

Unsurprisingly, given its function as a pendant, the Gudme chair is a very small item. Including the two (barely visible) back legs, but excluding the suspension loops on the rear, the pendant itself is

less than a cubic centimetre; the seat is 10 x 10 mm and the backrest just 7 mm high (Figure 3).

Front and top is evenly rounded off and the seat has a marked edge, basically the only type of ornament the pendant exhibits, presumably illustrating that the seating accommodates a pillow or some kind of webbing, as would a regular chair often have had. Overall the chair has a broad and very low profile. The original means of suspension on the rear is heavily worn and did eventually tear through. As a result, a secondary hole for suspension perforates the front of the seat and is equipped with a thin and twined silver thread. Just as the vast majority of chair pendants also the Gudme seat is cast in silver (2,08 grams). It is however, the first registered with a secondary suspension, and only the second to appear in a settlement context.¹ Being a regular detector find the Gudme pendant must be dated via typology, and luckily several comparable finds stem from datable contexts.



Figure 3. The Gudme chair pendant is indeed very small. But even with the almost negligible features, such as the small legs, the attributes of the chair are still unmistakable, and follow the expression of several of the other Vikings age finds of chair pendants. A unique feature is the secondary drilling of a suspension hole in the middle of the seat. The original means of suspension on the back is worn through indicating extended use (Photo: The National Museum).

Parallels and morphology

Similar pendants are found in several places in the southern parts of Scandinavia, and so far, only here (Gardeła 2014). The general features of the chair pendants will be divided into two designs, 1) box-shaped and 2) barrel-shaped (Figure 4a, b, Table 1).

The *box-shaped design* is also the more elaborate type when it comes to the plastic adornment of the chair – animal heads, carvings or armrests. Both the Hedeby I, Lejre and Nybølle pendants follow an analogous design with a seated character (preserved on the two latter exemplars, but interpreted as missing on the Hedeby I chair (Drescher



Figure 4. In the so far 21 known exemplars of chair pendants two design types can be discerned – the box-shaped and the barrel-shaped. The Gudme pendant belongs to the box-shaped type and exhibit a simpler design much alike the find from Tolstrup, Bornholm (upper fig.). The barrel-shaped version comprises a more diverse group and often have a more elaborate for of ornamentation such as the one shown here from Gravlev, Jutland (lower fig.), with filigree patterning on seat and sides. As is the case with the Gudme chair both the Tolstrup and Gravlev examples show significant wear to the suspension ring emphasizing that the small chairs were items used extensively (Photo: The National Museum).

DENMARK				
Bornholm	NMI, 25580	Barrel	Silver	Hoard
Fyrkat	NMI, D165-1966	Barrel	Silver	Grave, female
Gravlev	Dnf. 10/04	Barrel	Silver	Hoard
Gudme	FSM 6205/X55	Box	Silver	Settlement
Mysselhøjgård	ROM 6410PX455	Box	Silver	Settlement
Nybølle	C53078	Box	Silver	Detector find
Tolstrup	NMI, C6676	Box	Silver	Hoard
GERMANY				
Hedeby I	ALM KS Hb W394	Box	Silver	Grave, female
Hedeby II	SH1979-221.1	Barrel	Bone	Private stray find
SWEDEN				
Barshalder	SHM 32181	Barrel	Amber	Grave, female
Birka Bj. 632	SHM 34000 Bj. 632	Barrel	Silver	Grave, female
Birka Bj. 844	SHM 34000 Bj. 844	Box	Silver	Grave, female
Birka Bj. 968	SHM 34000 Bj. 968	Barrel	Silver	Grave, female
Eketorp	ÖLM 224617	Box	Silver	Hoard
Folkeslunda	SHM 35077/59	Barrel	Antler	Grave, female
Fölhagen A	SHM 3547	Barrel	Silver	Hoard
Fölhagen B	SHM 3547	Barrel	Silver	Hoard
Sandgårde	SHM 21187	Barrel	Bronze	Grave, ?
Store Ihre	SHM 22917:242B	Barrel	Amber	Grave, female
Unprovenanced	SHM 876	Barrel	Bronze	None
NORWAY				
Sarpsborg	C62189	Barrel	Silver	Detector find
Agder	not yet registered	Box	Silver(?)	Detector find

Table 1. Chair pendants from Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Germany. Based on an elaborated and updated extraction from the database found in Jensen 2010. Please note that the very recent find from Agder, Norway has at the time of publication not been registered and verified by the local museum authorities and does therefore not form part of the typological description in this article.

and Hauck 1982)) on a rather large chair with beast and birds accompanying the figure (Mitchell 2018). The other box-shaped chairs, such as Birka Bj. 844 or Tolstrup, have a more anonymous appearance where the pendant depicts a seat with a very low profiled backrest, almost as a stool, as well as a more basic type of carpentry. The Gudme chair has a very similar appearance to these latter two exemplars and will accordingly be typologically dated to the same period (i.e. Late Viking Age). The Eketorp find seems to present a sort of intermediate design combining the carved surface

of the more elaborate chairs and the low profiles of the simpler category. All the box-shaped pendant chairs are cast in silver (see Drescher and Hauck 1982 for a thorough description of the process), and only rarely do they show any secondary preparation, but the Lejre pendant has additional panels with niello inlay and the Eketorp chair show traces of gilding (and possibly also a missing seated figure as in the Hedeby I case). These have a more southern distribution than the second type, the *barrel-shaped pendants*. While the morphology of all the barrel-shaped pendant chairs is virtually

identical – a cut-out cylinder with a flat seat, no armrest and an oval back-rest – this type exhibit quite a diverse range of methods in their production as these are made of both silver, bronze, amber, bone and antler. Diversity is also the keyword with regards to their adornment where Fyrkat, Gravlev, Birka Bj 632, and the two finds from Förlhagen (A/B) all show elaborate adornments with filigree and (possible) gilding in intricate designs that at times cover the entire pendant.² The bronze and organic versions only rarely show any kind of decoration (perhaps with the exception of Hedeby II which might depict an actual barrel (Kalmring 2019)), whereas the material itself, especially amber and the bronze foil, would indicate that the production of the pendant must have been more complicated than the more mundane materials immediately indicate. Consequently, both of the two categories of chairs give evidence to a type of pendant that has been treated with a great amount of attention to detail in combination with refined and highly skilled craftsmanship. Especially when the minute scale is taken into account the demand for knowledge on the processing of precious metals would indeed make the production of the pendants particularly challenging, but would at the same time feed into the pervasive use of miniatures as pendants during the Viking Age.

Seating as privilege

The academic interpretation of the symbolic meaning of the chair pendants have taken two main lines of inquiry, *firstly* as a reference to the practice of seiðr and the female völv, and *secondly* as a reference to the king's throne. The present paper will argue that these two understandings are not mutually exclusive, and will instead focus on the seemingly mundane practice of seating. Importantly, the concept of being seated evokes a series of reference to both kingship as well as the Norse/Germanic/Roman pantheon (see Drescher and Hauck 1982), wherefore the actual function of the chairs is viewed as the common denominator for the pendants – in essence a symbolic and embodied notion of the ordinary physical interactions people have with chairs as a furniture type. Also, in contrast to benches and bunks chairs are meant to

be used by one person only, and is also a very rare item to find in Viking Age or earlier periods, which seems to emphasise the exclusivity of the use of this piece of furniture. Perhaps this is the reason we only rarely find actual chairs let alone representations of them, as they are reserved for special individuals with special qualities. Consequently, the argument of the article is rather simple; only certain classes of people of high rank are allowed the privilege to be seated in public settings, and this could be the primary meaning content inherent to the chair pendants. However, the road to this privilege can be many, and the explicit display of the chair pendants (which have been worn intensively) could therefore be related more specifically to the function of being the ruler's advisor or seeress, and thus being seated alongside that person. The notion of giving advice and the ability to foresee events are certainly considered magical, and in combination with the apparent royal reference to thrones the main and ideal attributes of being seated seems to be a subset of the ideal attributes connected with Odin. Let us examine.

The seat as throne

The absolute basic social function of a chair would be that some are sitting down while others are left standing. In such a case, interactions and performative activities could occur in front of the seated. Exactly this feature, the privilege of having people performing before you, in honour of you, seems integral to the symbolism of the chair – it is *par excellence* a defining factor of the ruling class of both early medieval Europe and the Viking Age and integral to the concept of the power of the throne (Sundqvist 2015, 226-228). A direct reflection of the 'seated authority' can be found in the concept of the high-seat, a position that is generally accepted as a place of honour and held by the most prominent amongst the persons assembled in the hall-buildings of the aristocracy (Herschend 1997, 49-50; Sundqvist 2015, 221-223). The position of the high-seats often figures as the point of reference for the activities taking place in the hall, and the social hierarchy ranking is reproduced by the person's closeness to the high-seat – the apex of authority. Consequently, the entire layout of the hall-build-



ings has at times been fixed around the position of the high-seat, which is a situation recognisable at Helgö, Sweden and Borg, Norway where the external topography apparently has been incorporated into the interior of the hall building, and the high-seat presumably can be found at the highest point in the landscape, and the hall-building thus being built around this spot (Herschend 1997, 50-54; 1998, 28; Jessen 2012, 136-137). Comparable interior structures can likewise be found on other high-status locations such as Lunda, Sweden (Skjallberg 2008, 28-29), Högom, Sweden (Ramqvist 1992, 125, fig. 64; 2016, 101-102) or Järrestad (Söderberg 2005, 204-205, fig. 47). In all of these cases we are effectively witnessing a rather concrete social spatial organisation anchored in the use and possible position of the high-seat, and where authority *is* being seated. Also, the visual portrayal of a seated king can perhaps be seen on the Gotlandic picture-stone from Sanda Kyrka I where two

Figure 5. The Sanda Kyrka I picture stone is famous for several reasons, one of them being the depiction of two persons (presumably a female on the left and a male on the right) being seated and serviced or participating in some kind of (ritual?) transfer of a spear. The depiction is important in that it provides very good indications of the actual use of chair (thrones) in contemporary society besides the historical sources of both sexes (Photo: Historiska Museet, Stockholm).

persons sitting in chairs in the topmost part of the motif are handed over a spear from a standing figure, while a procession of what could be warriors, ritual personnel or perhaps visitors passes by beneath them (Karnell 2012, 14-15; Oehrl 2019a, 54)³ (Figure 5).

Comparable scenarios are also to be found in the archaeological records, where the combination of the chair and parading army can be found in the Oseberg ship-burial. Here the tapestry adorning the grave chamber atop the ship's deck depicts an elaborate scenery with multiple characters such as horned figures, armed and marching warriors, carts and presumably also berserkers and valkyries. As part of the grave-goods a small box-shaped chair, very similar in design to its pendant counterpart, with a broad squarish body and a low backrest, was placed somewhere near the mast (Brøgger, Falk and Shetelig 1917, table XV; Vedeler 2014), and could perhaps have been facing the grave-chamber (Figure 6).

A person sitting on the chair would therefore have been overlooking the tapestries, and 'relived' the vivid procession before their eyes. As a chair is a moveable object, also open-air processions in seemingly more *ad hoc* or desolate surroundings, as can be witnessed in the Överhogdal 1b tapestry (Horneij 1991, 153-155) took place, which is a situation also to be found in the written references. As described in the *Annales Laurissenses minores*, where the Merovingian King Childeric III and his itinerary meets his Frankish subordinates: 'On the day of the Marchfield, according to old-age customs, the people offered gifts to the kings; on that day, the king sat on the royal throne, the army stood around him in a circle, and the mayor of the palace stood before him' (Pertz 1826, 116, translated in Buc 2001, 108), and also in the later *Saga Ólafs hins helga* (chapter 80) by Snorri Sturluson where

Figure 6. The chair from the Oseberg burial share several design features with the box-shaped pendants: It has a low seat and a low backrest of a simple design, the legs virtually absent, and the seat itself is 'hollow' and must have been made with some form webbing and pillow. Consequently, besides size and materials the miniature and the model forms a relatively uniform type of furniture (Photo: Eirik Irgens Johnsen, University of Oslo).



a thing-meeting is taking place at Uppsala: 'On the first day, when the thing was opened, king Olaf sat in his chair and his hird around' (translated by the authors after Jónssons 1911). In both instances the seated is of royal lineage and positioned centrally, so that the spectacle can be performed in front of them.

Another exemplar of an oft-mentioned chair is the so-called 'Throne of the Marsh', found in a male boat grave in Wremen, Cuxhaven, Germany. It has a circular shape based on a hollowed-out trunk of an alder tree, and with an intricate pattern of carving covering both the body and the backrest. The seat is not preserved, but holes around the edge of the body must stem from attaching a webbing. The design looks very much alike the small barrel-shaped pendants, besides the backrest, and could be regarded an intermediate shape between the simple oval backrest and the more advanced box-shaped version. The grave is dendrochronologically dated to AD 431, and underline the *longue durée* of using chairs as a status marker (Schön 1995, 2015; Theune-Grosskopf and Nedoma 2006, 52).

Between gods and rulers

Interestingly, the dating of the 'Throne of the Marsh' coincides with the dating of the wooden figure found during peat cutting from Rude Eskildstrup (5th century), which presents a seated character (Mackeprang 1935, 248-250). Even if the wooden surface of the figure is deteriorated the facial features, a carved, large neck collar and a squarish object held in its lap is clearly visible. The interpretations have ranged from a votive deposit of a divine idol (ibid.) over a depiction of a masked person in trance (Danielsson 2007, 130) to a ritualised rendition of landownership of the elite

(Zachrisson 2007, 134-136).⁴ Further, considering that this figure seemingly is the first carved image of a seated character and at the same time marks a distinct change in the design of anthropomorphic figures (Sanden and Capelle 2001), we witness a changed attitude towards the position of the elite and their relationship with the pre-Christian pantheon. As just mentioned, exactly this seated position – on a chair that is – makes its way into the iconography in several medias during the 5-6th Cent. and does to some extent blur the line between gods and rulers, as the differing interpretations also underline. In effect, during the early Germanic Iron Age sacral rulership seems to have taking a more pronounced manifestation, and places the persons at the pinnacle of society in charge of (at least some of) the ritual communication with the other worldly beings (Dobat 2006; Schjødt 2010; Sundqvist 2008, 224-225; Warmind 1999, 232).

The actual use of chairs and their iconographic counterparts can to a wide extent be coupled with the aristocratic privilege of being seated in public as well as being the centre of and main spectator to large and elaborate processions and pageants. In essence, to see and to be seen, while positioned on the chair.

In effect, the depiction of the divine realm simulates an idealized behaviour of the lived life of the aristocracy that provide the premises for social organisation on a general level, where the

gods have structured cosmos, created the worlds for humans to live in, and laid down the rules of conduct in order to establish an organised society (Dumézil 1962, 30; Durkheim 1965, 22, 474-479; Schjødtt 1999, 41). This type of deific social simulation can even be described as a ‘cultural strategy’ providing the aristocracy with a mythological underpinning of their privileged socio-political position (Hedeager 1997, 72-75). For example, construction of great halls, high-seat and temples is a recurring theme in the description of the god’s lives, but who do the gods worship (Patton 2009, 213-214)? Obviously, the written sources are not unfolding the fantastic world of the pantheon, but just as much reflect a simulation of the ordinary societal order practiced by the aristocracy.

The seated seeress

Concerning the find context, the pendants are found both as part of grave-goods, hoards and of lately – since 2009 – also on settlements. With regards to the latter it is quite noteworthy that, besides Gudme, then Lejre, Denmark, is the only other settlement find spot and one which have an unmistakable relation to the early Danish royal dynasties (see Christensen 2015, 15-29 for a comparison of the written sources). The Lejre pendant is found in connection with the sequence of three very large hall-building excavated in 2009. Of interest here is not only the context but equally so the figurative characteristics of the Lejre pendant, where connotations to both Kingship, and the Norse pantheon can be recognised. Because the Lejre chair is very well preserved and exhibit the greatest amount of decorative as well as figurative elements, it therefore also provides an improved opportunity for a deeper interpretation of the components depicted, and possibly also the activities pertaining to an aristocratic seat like Lejre. Both the costume, facial expression and animal decorations adorning the chair is discernible, wherefore this window of interpretation resulted in a rather heated scholarly debate focussing on the identification of the person seated of the chair. Two main versions both based on the interpretation of the facial traits vs. clothing vs. the animals falls out in

favour of *Odin*, mainly so due to the male features such as the possible moustache (Christensen 2013) and *Freyja*, an interpretation based on the obvious female clothes the figure is wearing (Mannering 2013). Importantly, both researchers detect an extremely convoluted and ambiguous combination of references to the aristocratic as well as ritual life of the Viking Age.

Exactly this flirtatious use of and intermingling of traditional female and male features as well as earthly and otherworldly curiosities seems to frame the plenitude of meanings afforded by the miniature chairs. Even if the basic architectural layout of a chair is excessively plain then the suppleness of the references put into the furniture and the characters depicted with it, will affect the interpretive outcome in a way so that it somehow seems to defy the contemporary (as well as our current) definition of sex as well as clothing. Even to an extent which may imply that the high-ranked setting of Lejre included performative practices that were negotiating both hetero-normative and body-normative hegemonic orders (Arwill-Nordbladh 2013), wherefore the bodily features are virtually absent in the Lejre figure, making the apparel depicted the more important features to recognise (Danielsen 2010). A further notion on the importance of the performative paraphernalia (to which the chair pendants might even belong) and their ability to occasion certain ritual conceptions, is needed. This is so for the reason that...

‘The particulars of the völva’s clothing confirm the complexity and symbolic value of her dress, serving to transform the wearer into a völva and at the same time emit a complex message of secret knowledge and magic power to the viewer’ (Hedeager 2011, 124).

This ability to transform the wearer by the use of a certain ‘clothing codex’ could in itself convey a means to generate the ambiguous recognition of the gender of the seated person; the clothing, the equipment and most likely also the behaviour of the person is what would define that person as a seeress, and not necessarily the biological gender. However, the actual act of *seiðr*, might even have been conceptualised as a potentially gender-transforming activity (Mozt 1994, 10-12; see Laursen 2006 for a critical account of this interpretation), thus adding a further layer of complexity to the plasticity of the character.

Because of the difficulties in establishing a linear and singular explanation of the Lejre figurine, perhaps the best way to cope with the meaning content of the chairs and their users would be to embrace the diversity of the presentation – the figure is truly Freyja, the primordial keeper of the Æsir seiðr, but *also* Odin, the high King. However, it does seem beyond any doubt that the figure on the Lejre pendant is supposed to represent a feminine character whether it be Freyja as seeress or Odin performing as a female. Exactly this feature seems to define a central element pertaining to the miniature chairs, the female seer and the volatile powers of magic. A feature which is strengthened when including the find contexts of the pendants.

Principal female artefacts

Regarding the pendants themselves they have a very dominant female presence; *all* of the gender determinable contexts are connected to female graves, and the graves (8 total) represent an especially convincing 38 per cent of the totality of pendants covering the entire region they are found within. Representing 28 percent, the second most frequent find context is the hoards. Recently, Burström (2020, 271) has pointed towards the seemingly magical and commemorative character of the large Eketorp hoard and its relation to elite networks and an allusion to the feminine. Similar ideas have been promoted in relation to the Föhlhagen hoard (Helmbrecht 2011, 385-386) where the female traits and the almost grave-like composition seems to point towards an initiated, extraordinary and possible female personae (see also Kilger 2008). Among the graves, especially the Hedeby I, Fyrkat and Birka versions exhibit conspicuous finds and have, in good right, been identified as potentially containing women with special functions. In several instances, these noticeable find-constellations have been taken as indications of the women having a strong connection with the power of the völva, the female seers (Arrhenius 1961; Pentz et al. 2009; Price 2002; Roesdahl 2004; Solli 2002). Consequently, we witness a recursive structure where the individual placed on the Lejre throne has female characteristics, but also the actual use-frame of the pendants is related to the life, death

and commemoration of females. That is, both the wearer and the motif seem intimately connected to a female sphere of activities. Importantly, this being a symbolically laden artefact (as defined by Zeiten 1997, 5) it not only seems to define special attributes pertaining to certain Viking Age females, but likewise to a specific relation to powers bestowed upon them from some kind of magical and otherworldly source – a source which in Norse mythology is intimately connected to both Freyja as well as Odin (Simek 1993, 90-91). But then why would such a crossdressing endeavour as might be depicted with the Lejre figure have an appeal to Odin, a man? It would seem to be a dangerous path to follow as the stigmatising of biologically male persons who dressed as females is eminent and they might have had to face some kind of social degradation and perhaps even punishment (Hedeager 2011, 126-128). Some directions might be found in Norse mythology: Here, a special trait cling to the biographical profile of Odin in that he repeatedly acquires his special qualities by austere sacrifices; in order to gain wisdom and intelligence he voluntarily gets a sensory handicap by pledging an eye to the well of Mimir (Völuspá), he self-sacrifices on the branches of Ask Yddgrasil and gains access to rune-lore (Hávamál) and he seemingly also socially kills his masculinity when crossdressing and enters the female domain of seiðr – a practices conveyed to Odin and the Æsir community by Freyja (Ynglinga Saga; Völuspá).⁵ Even though these examples describe a serious deconstruction of various parts of his lived life, they also define Odin as a transgressive, omniscient and magical being of an indefinable social and corporeal life (Price 2002, 389-391). And the reason why the seeress (via Freyja) is allowed a social standing comparable to the King himself, even to a degree where she is seated next to him (as we might witness on the Sanda stone), is that she masters the powerful and dangerous seiðr – an ability that even Odin himself desires. Another important goddess in the Æsir pantheon is Frigg the wife of Odin. Being the consort of Odin she, alongside Freyja, ranks foremost of the Norse goddesses. This position also provides her with exclusive privileges such as featured in Grímnismál, where she sits upon the high-seat Hliðskjálf, and debates the fates and psychology of their foster sons with Odin. Clearly the Queen

figure is regarded an equal companion and qualified adviser, which offers a wiser and more precise assessment of the situation they discuss than does Odin the king. On the continent the concept of the Frigg/Frija goddess can be traced centuries back (Lindow 2003, 128-130; Simek 1993, 94) as can the idea of the queen ruler among the Germanic tribes.

Germanic roots – Christian appropriation

Female semi-goddesses with magical abilities positioned at the pinnacle of political power runs a long history in the Germanic areas. The possibility for women to gain political strength and wide-ranging societal importance often seems connected to their prophetic talents, because...’The importance of fate in Germanic mythology and literature cannot be overstressed, and it was seeresses and supernatural women who were inextricably linked to the destiny of men’ (Morris 1991, 29).⁶ The most renowned of these could possibly be Veleda as she is being portrayed in *Historiae* by the Roman chronicler Tacitus. Importantly, her political powers very much rested in her supposed ability to perform divinations – even to an extent where the Roman Commander Cerialis, after several embarrassing defeats, asked her to allow the fate of war to take another direction – and was therefore celebrated as a semi-goddess by the Germanic tribes who also brought her great gifts and offerings (Dobat 2009, 135-39; Simek 1993, 356-357). And Veleda was by no means the only female sovereign mentioned in the Roman sources; Ganna of the Semnonen who functioned as the seer of the kings of the Semnonen and had diplomatic relation to the Roman administration (Castritius 2005; Dio Cassius, Roman History, book LXVII/15; Tacitus Germania 39). Even if of a different tribe, Ganna in many ways became the successor of Veleda. Also, Queen Boudica is, according to Roman Historian Dio Cassius (Roman History, Book LXII/6), said to have performed divinations before battle and possibly also had connections to the priestesses of the Celtic goddess Andraste (Koch 2006, 52). References to witchcraft in the pages of the History of the early Frankish Kingdoms clearly underline the continued importance of the royal seeress, even

if a Christian world-view started dominating. For example, Gregory of Tours describes how the great King Merovech consults a seeress before partaking in the heathen ritual of Trial of the Sortes (Morris 1991, 33). Another case can be found in the numerous occasions where Gregory of Tours point out witchcraft in the court of the Franks and, in particular, with King Childebert II and Queen Faileuba (Gregory of Tours, History of the Franks, IX.38). Even under the pious Carolingian rule the seeress Thiota is examined by the bishops of Mainz for doing divinations (Annales Fuldensis MGH SS, I, 365). In the later Norse texts, this intimate relation between royal personas and seeresses seems to continue the already century long tradition. For example, Queen Gunhild, wife of King Erik Bloodaxe, almost epitomizes, for good and for bad, the Norse literary understanding of the powerful magic of Viking Age royals (Dronke 1981; Friðriksdóttir 2013, 476-478). However, the notion of the seeress is not exclusively linked to royal milieus, but is likewise portrayed in more mundane contexts. Accordingly, a central paragraph is to be found in the Eiríks saga rauða (Saga of Erik the Red), where it is described how the Greenlandic völva called Thorbjörg the Seeress (Þorbjörgu Spákonu) is welcomed to the house of Torkel the farmer. Interestingly, the first thing they do is to arrange her at a highseat upon which a pillow of chickenfeathers is placed (Ægidius 1997, 54-57). Here, the seat is clearly understood both as an entry point for her doing her magic, but also a privileged place with a fine pillow.

An obvious critique would be that we are witnessing a primarily Christian group of writers, but the many recurring references to the female seer and her noticeable flair for political manoeuvres stands out very clearly, and cannot but be understood as a genuine concept of female rulership and social power within the described societal settings. Furthermore, the literary references are describing areas which are basically on the verge of or literally in the process of converting to Christianity. The fluid and often dynamic ideological platform of transforming societies where seemingly conflicting ways of ritual live are grouped together (Gräslund 1991; Jessen 2012; Staecker 1999, 382-392), seems to apply for the Viking Age pendants as well as for the activities of the sovereign seeresses – they ap-

pear together right on the brink of the introduction of Christianity in the Scandinavian region – and might not be neither Christian nor pagan.⁷

For the reasons just mentioned, an equally pertaining topic when interpreting the chairs has been to define the chairs as either Christian or pagan (e.g. Jensen 2010, 60 *contra* Price 2002, 167). The matter remains unresolved which could relate to the fact that even though the use of chair pendants clearly is a Scandinavian phenomenon they are most likely all to be dated to a period when the ideological platform of the elite is changing from a pagan to a Christian setting. Especially when the geographical distribution of the finds is taken into consideration – from Hedeby on the continent to the Swedish Uppland region, where the Christianisation of the latter area took place somewhat later – one must expect a different frame of use and a hybrid one at best.⁸ This situation is also evident when considering the other artefacts accompanying the chairs. Both Thor's hammers (Eketorp and Gravlev) and Christian crosses (Barshalder and Birka Bj. 968) can be found together with the miniature chairs, thus underlining the diverse religious contexts the chairs appear within. Consequently, the chair seems to be equally employed in Christian as in pagan settings, and seem to point to the common denominator, as has also been described above, in that they combine the act of being seated with the privileges of the echelon of society. Additionally, in both the pagan as

well as the Christian understanding of the activities of the bearers they operated on the fringes of normality. The difference being that the pre-Christian understanding of the seeress seemingly has a sense of dignity attached to it, while in the later periods not so much (see below).

Just as was the case with the interpretation of the Lejre figurine, the ideological context of the chairs seems to be very flexible. Perhaps this recurring aspect of malleability might be better understood when contemplating that the conceptual anchoring of the miniature chairs could be grounded, as the current text argues, in the more overarching phenomenon, namely the privilege of being seating. To even further complicate the picture, the privilege of being seated also reaches deep into the highly hierarchical clerical system of Latin Christendom. As noted by Pesch (2018, 487-89) the famous *albeit* later chess pieces from Isle of Lewis exhibits some of the same characteristics as the miniature chairs, especially Lejre, where bishops in long ropes are seen seated in chairs of similar appearance as the South Scandinavian pendants. Additionally, the Lewis chess pieces portrays the King and Queen as seated and the Queen even holds the position of advisor/counsellor (or originally *vizier*) to the King (Burström 2019)). However, this resemblance just underlines the strength and malleability of the overarching principle of seating we here advocate (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Over the southwestern entrance of the Hagia Sofia Basilica in Istanbul a mosaic depicting a seated Virgin Mary holding the Child Christ form a vivid example of the Christian ecclesiastical privilege connected to being seating. The mosaic is from the 10th century and thus contemporary with the chair pendants (Photo: Steven Zucker, Creative Commons).

The historical trend of the use of the throne is well attested and the Christian dignifying use of seating has the same continental root as we can expect the Scandinavian pendants to have (Salin 1916, Drescher and Harck 1982). Consequently, neither Christian nor traditional Scandinavian belief systems have ‘patented’ the authority of seating – it is in essence a common feat.

One chair, triangulated reference

Thus far, we have described several of the characteristics pertaining to the pendant chairs; their morphology, their find context and distribution, their connection with the sovereign seeress and not least their possible intricate metaphorical references. Consequently, and in contrast to the general interpretation of the purpose of the small chair pendants resting on their main function as amulets – where amulets are understood as containing some kind of apotropaic power warding off evil powers for the individual person wearing them and attributing them with such powers (e.g. Arhenius 1961; Gardela 2014, 46; Gräslund 2005, 379-82; Zeiten 1997, 21-22; see Fuglesang 1989 and Jensen 2010, 7-10 for more critical definitions) – the current perspective also includes the capabilities and status of the wearer thus regarding the object and the wearers social context as mutually dependant.

For that reason, we believe that the concept of seating in itself would qualify as the common thread through all of the above – why else would a chair become a pendant in the first place? Therefore, that a chair affords seating must have had some kind of pregnancy to it. Seating is quite a notable social event and a very recognisable one as well in that virtually everybody would have experienced people being seated under certain circumstances, while others must stand. And the chair (or throne) must furthermore be regarded as a royal symbol *per se* (Duczko 1985), even to the extent where the populace demands the kings being seated in the high-seat, just as depicted in *Hákonar saga góða* (Sundqvist 2015, 228). Accordingly, the intricate relations that envelops the privilege of seating, and in this case materialised as a miniature chair, could be conceptualised as a triangulation of two historic character types, the Sovereign Seeress and the King, and a supernatural being, Odin, which we have seen are all described with being seated as a defining privilege (Figure 8).

Their mutual links would to a large extent be defined by functional links (i.e. the characters acting in the world), with a conceptual grounding: between the King and Odin the concept of Royalty is grounded in heritage and a divine descent. Between the Seeress and Odin, the link is based on the concept of *seiðr* and the act of performing divinations, while the King and Seeress would

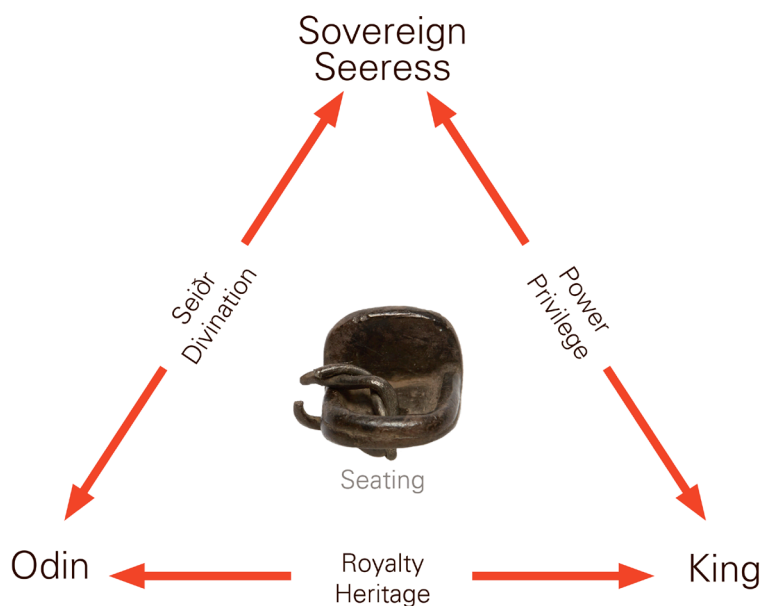


Figure 8. Illustration of the relationship between Seeress, Odin and the King and possible functional links (Graphics: M.D. Jessen and M.L. Bendtsen, The National Museum).

be based on a more secular power-relation where the actual privilege of being seated could be negotiated and initiated. In principle, our overarching interpretation of the meaning content of seating requires all three relations between the characters to manifest, but would not necessarily stimulate all of the mentioned links in all the situations where seating is referred to in equal measure. In the case of the miniature chairs, archaeology informs us that the predominant use-frame is female, thus, as a material manifestation the miniature chairs would highlight the aspect of the Sovereign Seeress, but this particular manifestation would still be dependent on the royalty linkage between Odin and King, for the concept of being privileged by being seated to be realised. In addition, the woman as ruler in concert with the King, in his absence or as existent sovereign Queen must be included as well, as the historic as well as the overall prominent, elite localities and contexts the pendants appear in, underline a special status of the women in question. For all we know, the pendant is feminine and underline the power status of the wearer in a subtle, yet distinctive manner.

A possible explanation for this material anchoring of the triangulation of Odin, King and Sovereign Seeress in the miniature chairs seems to rest in the potent metonymic connection between the material object and the conceptual content it conveys. To begin with, there is an 'item for act' metonymic relation that is anchored in the worldly and social dimension of being seated on a chair. An act in which the actual pendants would have been unusable since they are clearly too small and fragile, even to have functioned as toys.⁹ As virtually any kind of practical usability is nullified, the chair pendants must have been produced with the intention of generating some kind of symbolic concept. Hence, the act of being seated is simulated through the miniaturised chair, and the 'item for act' metonymic relation therefore piggy-backs on the knowledge and experience people have with this particular furniture type – both with regards to its physical affordances and social setting. Importantly, due to the lack of function the metonymic structure is solely constituted by the material qualities of the pendant itself, and the very simple notion of proportion becomes a defining factor in creating the metonymic relation (Jessen

2013, 331-333; Whitridge 2016). Consequently, by downscaling the chair, an explanation based on the natural functioning of the pendants becomes less plausible, and for that reason a mimetic explanation seems justifiable (Knappett 2012; see also Edgeworth 2010). The conceptual triangulation of the Sovereign Seeress, the King and Odin thus becomes a blended entity anchored in the material character of the miniature chairs themselves. To fully grasp the mimetic content in congruence with the metonymic reference of the chair pendants the trinity cannot be separated. Importantly, as a result of this blending the small chairs change character and seem to attain an emblematic quality, and in this case a miniature artefact with special connotations and properties that point to being seated and, most likely, more specifically to the magical abilities of *seiðr* of the sovereign seeress.

As small as they come

The minute scale of the pendants, we are virtually on the brink of the artisans not being able to make them any smaller, does however, seem to limit their usefulness as 'active' emblems in a social setting. At least it would be necessary to be close to the wearer to be able to recognize the pendants and their form. Still, if we acknowledge the pendants as referring to the secret knowledge of *seiðr*, the ability to keep them off-limits to the public eye, might even have been an attractive attribute. In such a case, the seeress could carry the pendants hidden, close to her body, and perhaps more importantly, exposing them to the public could be a potent act in itself. This last point, the unveiling of the pendants, might be central to the use of the chair pendants as ritual items. In her 2011 book Helmbrecht describes a group of female figures that hold their necks, or seemingly more correct their necklaces (Helbrecht 2011, 123-125). Different interpretations have been attempted (*ibid.* 125), but none which have taken into account their immediate find contexts. Here the Birka grave Bj. 968 is essential as the buried female's necklace contains a barrel shaped chair pendant and literally right next to it a pendant of female figure holding her necklace was found (Arbmann 1943, 394-396). Consequently, we suggest that the posture of the females holding their neck,

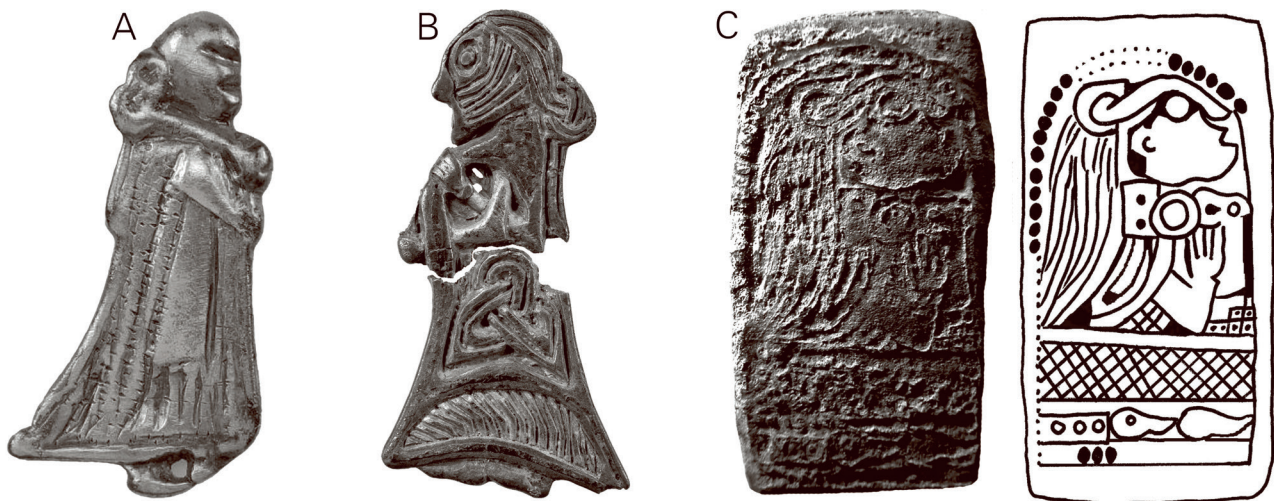


Figure 9. As pointed out by Helmbrecht (2011) the gold foil die from Sättuna (C) depicts a female, possibly seated, lifting her chin and holding forth her jewellery as if to display her disc on bow brooch, while the pendants (A: Birka Bj 968 left and B: Tissø middle) depict two women holding their neck or necklace (Photo and drawings: G. Hildebrand, Historiska Museet, Stockholm, Pia Brejnholt, Nationalmuseet, Denmark, and M. Rundkvist, University of Łódź).

is, instead, that of the unveiling of the pendants in their necklaces. In this case, with grave 968 we witness a meta-manifestation of this practice where the necklace with pendants accompanying the deceased reproduce both the ritual objects, while the artefacts could also illustrate the moment where the pendants themselves are exposed to the public. Importantly, a more recent find of a similar iconography but of different workmanship is noteworthy; the Sättuna gold foil die depicts a female figure lifting her hand to display her (oversized) disc on bow brooch while apparently being seated on a low stool (Figure 9) (Rundkvist 2007, see also Watt 2019, 200–202 on the gold foil depictions of seeresses). A very recent detector find from Boeslunde, Denmark, of a small, gilded silver-figurine of a female with exposed necklaces show resemblance to the Sättuna foil, and could possibly depict the women on a square dais or even seated on a chair. As is the case with the other female figurines also the Boeslunde woman has a recognisable row of several necklaces.

However, with the small Sättuna die we are perhaps witnessing the first hints at a hitherto overlooked ritual act, that of the verification of the identity of the seated seeress – the unveiling of the chair pendants. Moreover, the iconography clearly informs us of a link between seated women, presentation of their jewellery and this possibly in connection with a public display.

As has also been argued convincingly for these disc on bow brooches (Glørstad and Røstad 2015, 197–199) the often highly worn (even torn) brooches seems to have been heirloom objects integral to the identification of females with influential, perhaps aristocratic, lineages. In a similar vein the Gudme chair pendant has been repaired with a secondary suspension, and one which clearly disregards any representation of functionality by penetrating the seat of the chair. Is this instance, the miniature object itself has seemingly become just as important as the iconographical reference to a real size chair. Perhaps this secondary use of the pendant, as with the disc on bow brooches, indicates a new wearer, and in that case also a transfer of the powers and opportunities that followed the functions of the seeress and is recognized by the pendants. Exactly how these mystic abilities of the seeress could have been bestowed upon the next in line eludes us, but two possible ways, or a combination thereof, are through inheritance and through initiation (see Nygaard 2016 for textual references to both types of numinous transferal). However, there seems to be a propensity for the social elite to also act as a ritual elite (Ljungkvist 2011, 260–261), wherefore an actual hereditary situation could be argued for, as is also the case for the disc on bow brooches (Glørstad and Røstad 2015, 195).

Concluding remarks – a return to Gudme

As we have argued throughout the current text, the small chair pendants cannot be understood without taking into consideration their symbolic meaning content as well as the actual contemporary magical activities with which they seem to be intimately connected. However, there are also other factors to consider such as the dating of the pendants, which can broadly be placed in the 10th century AD. The start of this century also seems to mark an introduction of several new types of pendants, including the miniature chairs (Jensen 2010, 58-60). As argued in connection with the Thors' hammer pendants, this change is most likely related to an increasing pressure from the Christian mission exerted on the traditional ideologies of Southern Scandinavia during this period (Staecker 1999, 243-244). Thus, an intensification of the use of specific types of personal artefacts could be interpreted as a counter-reaction against the advancement of the cross in its most physical sense. A similar scenario could explain the daily functioning of the chair pendants. Wearing the pendants would underline a sort of doubly identity indicator where both an appreciation of the traditional ideologies can be recognized and the sanctioning of the social importance of seiðr is at display, but possibly also at the same time categorise the wearer as a seeress performing these exact magical acts. The woman herself, carrying the chair pendant, would quite possibly have been an active political agent in Viking Age society, but the pendant would emphasize a concept of rulership in which female agents take centre stage in the political power struggles, and she would certainly have been under the aegis of the aristocracy. Thus, the pendants display privilege and would promote a sense of 'the old traditions' that seems to represent an intensification of resilience towards the Christian mission. An ideological change that, over time, would diminish female opportunities for power and independence, and definitely would pinpoint the seeress as a negative character.¹⁰

At the same time, because the authoritative character of the chair and seating has such a deep history and operates in both Christian and pagan settings, the understanding and 'reading' of the small pendants could very likely work under both

religious perceptions. This would even further open the political, perhaps diplomatic, possibilities of the wearers.

The identification of the small chair pendant sheds new light on the last phases of the Gudme settlement, that had its heydays from ca. AD 250-550; as already remarked by Hayo Vierck in 1984, the pendants have a strong link to places with a distinct royal fingerprint, such as Hedeby, Fyrkat or Birka (Vierck 2002, 45), but since his writings also Lejre (alleged mainstay of the Skjoldunge dynasty) and Sarpsborg (Norwegian capital under King Olav II the Holy) have been added to the pool of find-spots.¹¹ As we are dealing with a definite elite-level artefact dating to the Late Viking Age it seems to indicate a hitherto overlooked revitalisation of the Gudme settlement in this period. Furthermore, the symbolic connotations that this small type of furniture possesses seems closely connected to the actual activities one would expect to have taken place in and around the preceding large hall-buildings at Gudme (Lund Hansen 2011; Sundqvist 2011). In that sense it is interesting that 'the Gudme seat' now figure among famous Viking Age find localities such as Lejre, Birka and Hedeby which all display a century-deep history as *vicus regius*. Despite its miniscule dimension the miniature chair lets us know that the Gudme area still were an important region, and a region that was under the auspices of the royal powers and possible also held a magico-ritual position in Viking Age society.

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Notes

1. The recent finds from the harbour at Hedeby, Germany, and from Sarpsborg, Norway, could both be termed settlement finds, but it cannot, however, be ruled out that they stem from disturbed hoards.
2. In comparison to the general character of Viking Age pendants, the number of pendant chairs made of silver is overrepresented and thus places them in a special category when it comes to the choice of material used (Jensen 2010, 133).
3. The central motif in Alskog Kyrka is similar, but is now severely damaged by a perforation (Oehrl 2019b, tafel 25c).
4. Zachrissons compelling idea concerning the ritual transfer of landed property is tied to the two gold foil figurines from Bolmsö, and we would like to point attention to the similarly seated gold figurine holding its lap from Skrædergård (National Museum of Denmark inv. C36351).
5. It has to be stressed that the authors are quite sympathetic to the use of the (mostly) later literary sources as a means to understand and highlight select aspects of Viking Age ritual life. We considered the careful use of these sources as advocated by Schjødt (2009) a sound academic path to follow.
6. The human cognitive ability to ‘imagine things going wrong’ seems to form an evolutionary grounding of the pervasive use of prophecies and predictions within religions around the globe (Sørensen 2019). In other words, because bad things might happen in the future, we want to know about the future.
7. That ‘magic’ still had a role to play in the Christianised world can be seen in the recurring prohibition against heathen activities in the early Scandinavia law codes (Simsek 2019, 375f.).
8. The overrepresentation of Viking Age crosses in the Danish find material does to some extent point in the direction that certain pendant types seem to follow the tide of conversion (Jensen 2010, 133), but also that ‘contrasting’ pendant types does not exclude them being found together.
9. The means for suspension and well as the relation to adult female burials and rich votive offering also rule out this possibility.
10. In a more distressing sense, the introduction of the chair pendants might even be regarded a premonition of the changing attitude towards the knowledgeable woman changing from a revered seeress who occupied an important position in Viking Age society next to the King, into an understanding of a malicious ‘evil woman’ excluded and persecuted in the witch-hunts of the Middle Ages (Mitchell 2011, 176-9).
11. Exactly the eastern part of Funen has seen an upsurge in find from the Later Germanic Iron age into the early medieval period. Especially the excavations at Munkebo Bakke in connection with the prominent Ladby Burial will be interesting to follow (Beck 2019). Especially the sequence of prominent hall-buildings in connection with several finds of precious metals is noteworthy and underline East Funen as a seemingly overlooked central area in the Viking Age (Beck, Christiansen and Henriksen 2019).

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