

## Finding poetry in the ground – a kenning of silver from Neble, Zealand

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### Abstract

A circular pendant or brooch found near Neble, Zealand, is interpreted as a double-sided amulet, decorated respectively on one side as a shield and as a wheel on the reverse. This dual iconography is suggested as a material reference to the kenning shield-wheel, known from Snorri Sturluson's *Skáldskaparmál*.

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In recent years, the comparable nature of Viking art, poetry, myths and cognition have been intensively studied (e.g. Hedeager 2011; Andrén 2000; Domeij Lundborg 2006; Price 2010 and 2014; Lund 2017). More specifically, it has been pointed out that the complicated composition of poetry seems to have much in common with the concept of art that is found in the animal ornamentation and non-figurative patterns of the Viking Age (Lie 1952; Andrén 2000, 11; Stavnem 2014, Mundal 2020, 339-342).

A specific narrative literary genre within Old Norse poetry consists of shield poems (Clunies Ross 2011, 58-59; Mundal 2020, 299). The shield poem in itself is not only limited to Viking Age poetry, and this particular type of poetry may be encountered as early the time of Homer, whose *Iliad* (Book 18) describes the shield of Achilles (*Homeric Iliad*, 2001, XVIII; Squire 2013). Decorated shields are thus a remarkable literary motif, which can be found in texts from antiquity, throughout the Middle Ages and into the Early Modern period. The poetic device of shield description is called *ekphrasis*, the description of a work of art produced as a rhetorical exercise. The aim of the poet or skald performing *ekphrasis* is to transfigure his or her audience into eyewitnesses to the myths and scenes depicted on the shield. This performance took place in high-status buildings, namely halls,

where guests were received and feasts were held. Shields and woven or embroidered decorative wall hangings, like the Oseberg tapestries, adorned the walls and were probably intended to motivate the performers (Clunies Ross 2007, 163).

The shield poems were one of the most high-status genres of skaldic art. In manuscripts of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, the high status of such poems is evident from the extensive attention devoted to this poetry and the practitioners of *ekphrasis*. The shields providing inspiration for the poets were treasures, which were lavishly ornate and decorated with depictions of ancient myths 'that could be expected to evoke a counter-prestation from the skald recipient in the shape of a magnificent, celebratory poem (Clunies Ross 2005, 79).

No such decorated shields are still preserved today, but traces of paint on pre-Viking and Viking shields and fragments of shields suggest that ornate shields originally existed (Warming et al., 2020, 167-169). The shields described in the poems might not have had any functions in battle, but may have been manufactured in exclusive environments for the purposes of performance and remembrance. In the sagas shields certainly functioned as gifts that were intended to inspire poets and skalds, such as the shield given to Egill Skallagrimson by Einarr Helgason which, much to Egill's regret, obliged him to compose a poem



**Figure 1.** Silver miniature shield with incised whorls or spirals, and central protruding boss. Avnslev, Funen, Denmark. Diameter 3 cm (Photo: The National Museum of Denmark, Rikke Søgård).

about the shield. Egill later lost the shield, but retrieved its golden fittings, suggesting that its decorations were not just confined to carvings or paintings (Barreiro 2014, 124-125).

Shields are depicted on picture stones and tapestries, although such depictions only provide us



**Figure 2.** Gilded bronze miniature shield with elaborate decorations in Late Viking style, marked rim and protruding boss. Diameter 2.5 cm. Kirke Hyllinge, Zealand, Denmark (Photo: The National Museum of Denmark, Søren Greve).

with a few indications of their original decorations. By far the best source for shield decoration is the numerous miniature shield amulets found from burials, excavations and hoards, and recovered as stray finds by private metal detecting (Gardela and Odebäck, 2018; Jensen 2010; Duczko 1989). The distribution coincides roughly with the extent of the Scandinavian Viking world with an emphasis on the eastern and southern areas. In their article Gardela and Ödebäck listed no finds from England, while examples from Russia are several (Gardela and Ödebäck 2018, 86-87). With their circular shape and a boss in the centre, these miniatures – manufactured in silver, bronze or more rarely in gold – imitated real-sized actual objects and directly correspond in form and appearance to the few shields that have been found on excavations. Given that they are only 2-4 cm in diameter, the miniature shields obviously do not allow for more elaborate decorations, but the design patterns clearly correspond with the object they represent. Identifying the miniatures as shields is a simple kind of visual literacy, demonstrating the ability to find meaning in imagery. Simple lines, sometimes dotted, provide a common visual 'vocabulary', reducing the overall complexity while still 'naming' characteristics such as 'rim' and 'boss', which define the object as a shield (Figure 1). More complex decorations are found on a few miniature shields, maintaining the visual keywords such as 'rim' and 'boss' (Figure 2).

One of the oldest – if not the oldest – shield poems is *Ragnarsdrápa*, attributed by Snorri to the court skald, Bragi Boddason, which was possibly composed in praise of the Viking chieftain Ragnarr loðbrók (Clunies Ross 2017). Bragi probably lived in the first half of the 9th century (Mundal 2020, 299). In the opening stanzas 1-7, the skald describes scenes painted or carved on an ornate shield that his patron, perhaps Ragnarr loðbrók, had given him.

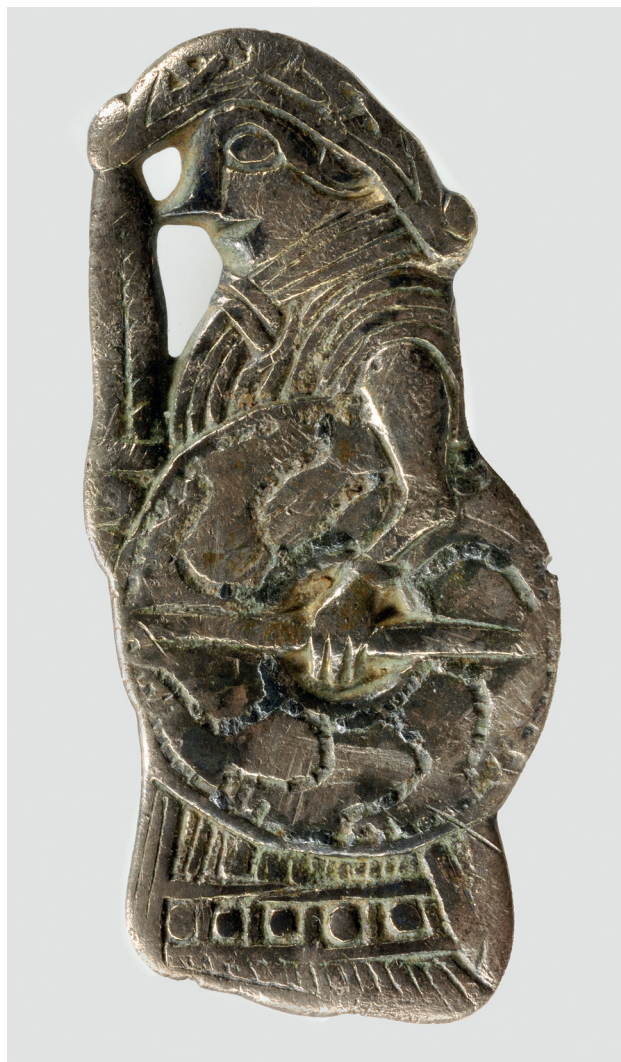
In his analysis of *Ragnarsdrápa* and its description of the decorated shield, John Hines argued that 'there is nothing intrinsically implausible about a special, ninth-century Viking Scandinavian shield painted – perhaps on both sides of the board – with representative scenes as described by stanzas 1-7 of *Ragnarsdrápa* (Hines 2007, 234-235). Hines' suggestion is confirmed by a small

bronze figure, possibly representing a shield maiden or Valkyrie, found in England, but obviously rooted in the Anglo-Scandinavian milieu. The figure is shown holding a traditional circular shield gripped from the inside of the boss, therefore exposing the reverse of the board (Figure 3). The inside of the board is decorated with a number of spirals swirling from the centre. Whether such decorations existed in reality is uncertain, but shields decorated on both sides obviously existed in the minds of artists and poets.

*Ragnarsdrápa* states that it was the patron Ragnar who gave the shield, and it is possible that the skald originally performed his poem live, probably in the presence of, not only this patron, but also the shield described in the poem, thus directly 'reading' and interpreting the scenes depicted on the shield. This reading is an advanced form of visual literacy, which was dependent upon the skald's ability to interpret, negotiate and produce meaning from the information that was presented. A shield did not, of course, provide enough space for a complete cartoon-like narrative of whole myths, even if both sides of it were decorated. As has been pointed out by Signe Horn Fuglesang, serial pictorial narratives should not be expected in Viking art (Horn Fuglesang 2007). The pictures on the shields seen by the skalds instead functioned as mnemonic devices, and in this respect the decorated shields can be compared to the Gotlandic picture stones.

An important characteristic of Norse and Anglo-Saxon poetry is the use of the so-called kennings. A kenning is a figurative expression used in place of a name or noun. Understanding the concept of kennings can be difficult. In metaphorical kennings, the base word relies on a comparison with, for example, something of similar shape. Shield poems involve numerous kennings, including the word 'shield' itself. There are many kennings for 'shield', and a lot of these have martial connotations, such as 'morðhjól', literally 'murdering wheel' or 'killing wheel', as found in the poem *Útfarardrápa* (Gade 2009, 490).

The shield of *Ragnarsdrápa* featured scenes from various legends: Þórr fishing, Gefjun ploughing the soil out of Sweden and creating Zealand, and the myth of Hildir Högnadóttir (Stavnef 2004). The latter legend was about the female warrior Hildir, who entered the battlefield of the 'never-ending



**Figure 3.** Helmeted female warrior wearing a long, dress-like tunic, and holding a shield and sword. The depiction is very detailed, showing decoration on the helmet, a fullered or pattern-wielded sword blade, and decorations on the inside of the shield. Silver with niello inlay. Height 4 cm (Photo: Suffolk County Council, CC BY-SA 4.0).

battle' as a Valkyrie. The myth is probably also depicted on some of the Gotlandic picture stones (Guðmundsdóttir, 2012; Oehrl 2019, 223-227) (Figure 4).

When performing, the skalds probably clarified some of the poetical metaphors – the kennings – by recounting the legends that had given rise to them. In his *Skáldskaparmál*, meaning 'The Language of Poetry' in Old Norse, Snorri Sturluson elaborates on kennings, the skald Broddi Boddason, *Ragnarsdrápa* and the myth of Hildir Högnadóttir. Snorri points out the skald's description of Hildir's shield as an example of a kenning: Hann kallaði sköldinn Hildar hjól en bauginn nǫf hjólsins, 'He labelled the shield



**Figure 4.** Picture stone from Gotland, Lärbro Stora Hammars I. The fourth panel shows a boat with sword and shield carrying men heading towards a woman who has three armed warriors behind her. The depiction has been interpreted as a scene from the legend of Hildir (Photo: By Berig, CC BY-SA 3.0),

Hildir's wheel, and the boss the hub of the wheel.' Moreover, Snorri explicates this kenning as *ofljóst*, meaning 'enlightened' or even 'over-obvious' (Stavnem, 2014, 325). However, the heuristic nature of how kennings are deciphered means that the cognitive processes they involve are more than just poetic devices, but more like riddles, and the *ofljóst* kenning could be classified as word play.

A miniature shield brooch or pendant was acquired by the National Museum of Denmark in 2014. It had been found by a private metal detectorist on a field near Neble, Boeslunde, in South-West Zealand; several significant artefacts from the Viking period have also been found in this field.

The miniature shield is decorated on both sides. On one side, swirling bands – the most common motif on miniature shields (Gardeła and Odebäck, 2018) – radiate from a raised central boss (Figure 5a). The boss has been pierced and is surrounded by small circular perforations. Along the edge of the shield is a narrow groove. A boss is

also visible on the reverse, which is also bordered by small perforations. Between these and the rim/edge is decoration in Borre style, involving braided ribbons and three triangular wolf heads (Figure 5b). The central boss — or hub — is pierced and rusty fragments of iron occupy the hole. The stylistic character of the decoration implies a date of c. 850-950.

Many miniature shield amulets have decorations which can best be described using a nomenclature associated with wheels, such as 'punched running wheel motif' or 'resembling a running wheel with the spokes made of punched dots or circles' (Gardeła and Odebäck, 2018). Viking miniature amulets include many different weapons and utensils, and wheel amulets, with rim and spokes in openwork and a hub, have also been found. The Neble amulet, however, represents both a wheel and a shield.

The relationship between Viking art and poetry is complex and open to different interpretations (Mundal 2020, 342). The skalds' use of synonyms means that we must be careful about accepting the literal meaning of individual words at face value. However, the clear representation of the Neble brooch's shield boss as a wheel hub shows the powerful associative way that visual art works in relation to word art, and that similarities between Viking art and poetry even extended down to concrete elements, such as the kennings. The brooch also encourages speculation about more common knowledge of myths and the ability to read imagery outside the elite circles of the skalds. As the way to explain many poetical metaphors – kennings – was by telling the legends that gave rise to them, this suggests that more ordinary people could recognise meaning from the concentrated message of an artefact such as the Neble amulet. The meaning might even have been *ofljóst* – obvious – to them. As Snorri said: 'People have many such sayings so as to compose in a concealed way...'

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**Figure 5a-b.** Gilded silver miniature shield – and wheel. Neble, Zealand, Denmark. Diameter 3 cm (Photos: The National Museum of Denmark, Rikke Søgård).



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## Notes

- 1 Literally ekphrasis means “description” in ancient Greek. An ekphrastic poem is a reflective and narrative description of a work of art, whether a painting, a building, a sculpture or—as here—a shield.
- 2 Faulkes translated the sentence: ‘He called the shield Hild’s wheel, and the circle the hub of the wheel’ (Edda: Skáldskaparmál, 118-121).
- 3 After having examined the amulet from Neble, my colleague Peter Vang Petersen has come to the conclusion

that the shield decoration could be a secondary addition to the cast wheel amulet. If this was the case, the association shield-wheel was possibly not initiated by the artist but by the owner of the amulet. I am grateful to Peter Vang Petersen for sharing his observations with me.

4 Here, cited after Kreis, 2004, 146.

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