

Negotiating normativities – ‘Odin from Lejre’ as challenger of hegemonic orders

Elisabeth Arwill-Nordbladh*

Department of Historical Studies, University of Gothenburg, SE 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden

(Received 8 February 2013; final version received 19 March 2013)

This article focuses on some bodily features of the figurine called ‘Odin from Lejre’. Some corporal characteristics convey an ambivalent touch to the interpretation of the miniature. So, for example, shows the clothing close resemblance to the late Iron Age female dress. This, combined with facial attributes that have been interpreted as a moustache, can be seen as a negotiation of the contemporary hetero-normative gender order. Moreover, the eyes of the figure demonstrate certain irregularities, maybe signifying differences in the visual capacities of the eyes. This corporal exceptionality in relation to (today’s) notions of body-normativity may imply that the Viking Age abled body sometimes was extended to include reduced visual capacity. The processing of both gender-normativity and body-normativity in one and the same precious item, may imply that the high-ranked setting of Lejre included performative practices that were negotiating both hetero-normative and body-normative hegemonic orders.

Keywords: Odin from Lejre; Scandinavian Viking Age; appearance; gender-normativity; body-normativity; intersectionality

Introduction

Sometimes new and surprising archaeological finds enter the scholarly scene, making us not only curious but also guide us in our search for novel and unexpected knowledge of the past. Such a find is ‘Odin from Lejre’, dated to the first half of the tenth century AD. The little silver miniature, depicting a human figure sitting in an honorary chair with a bird placed on each armrest and with the back of the chair decorated with two roaring beasts, shows us new facets of the connections between human beings – or maybe gods – animals, and accessories. The precious metal with its niello inlays and the figurine’s wealth of details, regardless its small size, may deepen our insight into the skills of the silver craftsmen of the time. The well-documented archaeology of Lejre’s special mixture as a magnate site with indications of trade, various craft workshops, and both mundane and ceremonial spaces (e.g. Christensen 2008, 2009) will provide a rich background for discussions of the figurine (Figure 1).

Already shortly after its appearance, the figurine stimulated eager discussions. Questions have, for example, targeted iconographic interpretations related to the figure’s identity. Is it a man or a woman, or maybe a deliberately ambiguous gender-position that is articulated (Christensen 2009, 2010, Back Danielsson 2010, Mannering 2010)? Does the figurine represent a human being or a god? If the miniature depicts a god, is it Odin who shows his presence, or might the figure symbolize some other character of the Viking Age mythical universe (Christensen 2009, Mannering 2010, p. 28, Sonne 2010)? Is it perhaps

a martial sovereignty, which is expressed (Sonne 2010, p. 35), an interpretation, which could be reinforced by Lejre’s aristocratic milieu (Christensen 2008, 2009, pp. 18–22, 2010, pp. 24–25)? Maybe the practice of a seer or a seeress is reproduced? The find is indeed open for a wide range of interpretations.

Some analytical concepts

Here we see examples of plausible categories of identity, or positions of the subject, that are connected with the corporal articulation of the Lejre figurine. The position of the body, its shape, clothes, and other bodily attributes, the body’s agential relation to the surroundings and its physical closeness to animal representations, are some of the themes that have been highlighted.

Over time the body in general has been an important field of study in archaeology, and maybe now the theme is more in focus than ever (see, for example, Joyce 2005, Boric and Robb 2008). For various categories of identity, like man or woman, young or aged, physically capable or incapable, sovereign or thrall, native or alien, or other relationally shaped positions of the subject, the body will be the node where identity is located and is given its particular physical reference. The body will comprise and situate various positions of identity, also understood as positions of the subject, in a web of interwoven or intersecting social orders, which are connected to, for example, gender, age, physical ability/disability, and rank. The sensing and acting body will also be the prime

*Email: elisabeth.nordbladh@archaeology.gy.se



Figure 1. The Lejre figurine (© Roskilde Museum/Ole Malling).

locus where the positions of the subject through different articulations such as actions, attributes, and use of space, will be confirmed, strengthened, stretched, bent, or denied. The actions, reinforced by their accessories can be understood as performative practices in a continuous process where the situated body is negotiated and renegotiated. And vice versa, through the performative practices of the situated body, the social orders that are connected to a specific identity category will be confirmed or challenged. In a social dynamic, the body and its material references will obtain an agential position (Alberti & Back Danielsson <http://www.springerreference.com/docs/html/chapterdbid/353662.html>).

Categories of identity, such as gender, age, and so on, and the various positions of subjects that appear within such categories, are ascribed different values, which are based on the norms and values of a particular society. So, for instance, can the gender order that dominates our western society today, be described as a hetero-normative order. It can be expressed as an axis, where masculinity is placed on one end of the axis and femininity on the other. These two categories are usually distinguished through one or many significant makers (Hirdman 1988). This axis, or gender order, is often characterized by an asymmetrical hierarchy of values, where masculinity is ascribed a higher value and femininity a lower one. This asymmetrical construction can then be understood as a gender order of power, which is androcentric and hetero-normative.

Another example of categorizing identities is to ascribe norms and values to bodily abilities. In our society is the completely able body seen as a norm, and bodily variations that deviate and are placed far aside from the norm are often described as disabling, creating a handicap. Such a categorization is, however, a cultural construction. It can be understood as a position on an axis, where the completely able body is placed on one end and

the body with total lack of abilities on the other (Thomson 1997). Adding a hierarchy of values, this will be understood as an ability/disability order of power (Sw. *funktionsmaktordning*).

Often we take both the contents of a gender order and the notions of what can be understood as an able body-norm for granted, seen as something obvious and natural. However, the notions of what characterizes masculinity, femininity, and other gender identities, as well as ideas of what constitute the bodily norm, the body-normativity, varies over time and between cultures. This also means that the hegemonic orders that are associated with them are negotiable social and cultural constructions (Arwill-Nordbladh 2012). The corporal characteristics of the little silver figurine from Lejre might broaden our knowledge of such social dynamics during Scandinavian Viking Age.

An ambiguous figure

As soon as the Lejre figurine was found, the discussion circled around its gender. A common way to approach a gender-attribution is to analyze the corporal appearance (Sørensen 1997). Here the costume is central. For many scholars (Mannering 2010, Sonne 2010) the clothing of the Lejre figurine appears as a female dress. There are, for example, many similarities with the Swedish pendant from Aska, Östergötland, which undoubtedly depicts a woman (Figure 2, 3). A cloak, an ankle-length skirt or a kind of



Figure 2. The Aska lady. A gilded silver pendant found in a woman's grave dated to 950 AD, Aska, Hagebyhöga parish, Östergötland, Sweden. Photo by Christer Åhlin, The National Historical Museum, Stockholm.

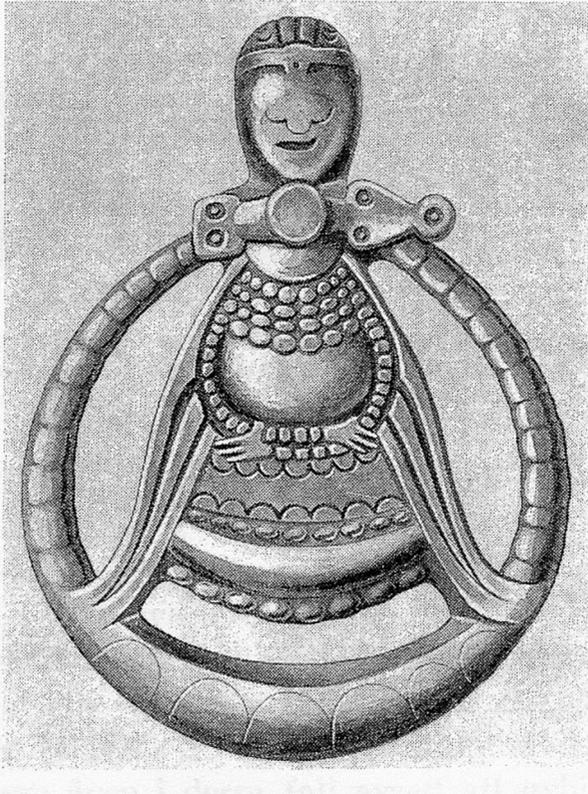


Figure 3. Drawing of the pendant from Aska. Drawing by Bengt Händel, ATA, Stockholm.

apron, and four rows of beads are similar for the two figures. A related apron-like garment is shown on the two figurines from Stavnsager, Jutland and Tissø, Zealand (Figure 4), both interpreted as women. The costume also resembles that of the figurine from Trønning, Zealand, which often is identified as a woman (in, for example, Jensen 2004, p. 353). Moreover, as Mannering demonstrates, has the clothing no clear similarities with the contemporary male costume. In those cases that a long cloak is part of a male outfit, the cloak's neck is not round, as here, but cut on the bias (Mannering 2010, p. 27). However, Christensen (2009, pp. 18–21) raises the idea that the costume could be inspired by contemporary clothing from the Roman or Byzantine church, where the officiating priests were dressed in ankle long costumes with long *stolae* or *palliae*.

Other features of appearance, signifying gender, are hairstyle and beard. The most common female hairstyle of this time, depicted on tapestries, carvings in stone and metal objects show either a knot-like coil ending in a long 'pony-tail', or a bun (Göransson 1999, p. 41). From this perspective, a gender attribution of the Lejre figurine is difficult. The coiffure, if any, is hidden under a helmet or maybe a hood, and will thus not be an unequivocal gender marker. It is true that Christensen (2009, pp. 16)



Figure 4. Gilded silver figurine from the magnate site of Tissø, Zealand, Denmark. Photo by National Museum, Copenhagen.

refers to the male Højby-figurine's rounded cap, but also the woman from Aska wears a rounded helmet-like headgear. Two Viking Age figurines depicting men, 'Odin from Uppåkra' (Figure 5) and 'Odin from Lindby' (Vikingatidens ABC, pp. 188) are equipped with a horned helmet and a pointed hat, respectively. Regarding the miniature from Lejre, it seems that those, who designed it, refrained from the possibility of making a clear gender specification in relation to hairstyle and headgear.

Concerning beard, the Lejre figurine's gender attribution takes another turn. Ademption, presence and design of beard and moustache are cultural interpretations of corporal characteristics that distinguish the male body (Göransson 1999, p. 35; see, for example, the figurine 'Odin from Lindby', which shows a moustache). At the transition between head and body, the Lejre figurine is equipped with two torus-like rings that conceal the neck and the mouth. The lower one is often understood as a neck ring, something that Christensen sees as a masculine attribute (Christensen 2009, pp. 15–16). The upper ring, which seems to be not fully closed, is more difficult to explain – a more imaginative association is that of a gag. Christensen claims that this feature is a moustache, which is made explicit on several interpretative analysis-drawings (2009, pp. 15, 20). If the 'upper ring' is a moustache, the gender identification will be more



Figure 5. Bronze figurine, often called ‘Odin from Uppåkra’, found in the Viking age Cultural Layer of Uppåkra, close to Lund, Sweden. Photo by Bengt Almgren, Lund University Historical Museum.

complex. As Sonne states (2010, p. 36), one conclusion might be, that we see a man, who is dressed in a so far unknown man’s dress. Another conclusion may be that we see a man dressed in a woman’s costume.

The latter idea, that the figurine depicts a man dressed like a woman, has also been discussed, in particular on the web (see, for example, the blog *Aardvarchaeology*, <http://scienceblogs.com/aardvarchaeology/2009/11/13/odin-from-lejre-no-its-freya/>). References have been made to Old Norse texts that characterize Odin as a sorcerer and shaman (Hedeager 1999, Solli 1999, 2002). In the Old Norse texts, sorcery is described mainly as a female activity, and the fact that Odin devoted himself to this task added a feminine dimension to his character. Also Thor is connected to a narrative, which includes his dressing in female clothes as he was compelled to appear as the goddess Freya, while tricking his stolen hammer back from the giants (Näsström 1986). The dishonor, according to the Old Norse texts, that usually was connected to male femininity did not meet these gods. Odin’s highly complex character and Thor’s brute force and flammable fighting spirit when he was compelled

to reveal himself, might have counterbalanced the disgrace of being associated with femininity. If the Lejre figurine puts an ambiguous gender attribution on display, this was most likely no shameful action. The precious material, the exquisite craftwork, and the find context quite close to the high-ranked setting of the Lejre Hall indicate that the ambivalent gender attributions were kept within decorum. As Back Danielsson (2010) suggests, this might have been a desired feature. If the costume designates femininity and the upper facial band represents a moustache and thus signifies masculinity, two contradictive gender markers are intersecting. Moreover, the possibility to choose a female coiffure or a distinctive male headgear has been avoided, in favor of a headgear that – for us – is more difficult to interpret, maybe being a more gender neutral cap or helmet. With this interpretation, the figurine from Lejre indicates that the heteronormative gender order where masculinity and femininity were clearly distinguished and separated, at least in some instances was open for negotiation.

The eye, eyesight, and vision

In connection to the Lejre figurine one feature, which so far has not attracted much attention, may be worth some awareness. That is the styling of the eyes. Photographs show that the two eyes in some way differ from each other. The right eye is circular with a staring pupil while the left eye seems more indistinct and diffuse. Christensen (2009, p. 15) observes this trait and suggests that the blank look might have appeared because of abrasion or later damage. However, it might not be impossible that a certain difference of the eyes could derive from the stage of production (see discussion in Arwill-Nordbladh 2012, p. 51). Still, this may seem as a very vague and uncertain observation, better left aside, if it had been unique. However, there exist a few examples of figurines and other depictions where a deliberate asymmetry regarding eyes, eyesight, and look seems to have been a desirable feature (Arwill-Nordbladh 2012). Good examples are the two Viking Age bronze statuettes from Uppåkra (compare Figure 5) and Lindby, where the men’s faces show one ‘ordinary’ eye and one clear void on the place of the other eye (Larsson and Hårdh 1997, Bergqvist 1999; *Vikingatidens ABC* 1995, p. 188). Other examples are a man’s face on a mold for a strap end from Viking Age Ribe (Price 2002, p. 387, Helmbrecht 2011, pp. 144, 168) and on a tool handle from middle of the eighth century Staraja Ladoga (Price 2002, p. 388). Yet an example, now a couple of centuries earlier, is the well-known bronze matrix from Torslunda, Öland, Sweden, depicting a so-called ‘weapon dancer’ (Figure 6). Here one of the eyes has been deliberately removed (Arrhenius 1994, pp. 212, 214). The same trait seems to appear on the approximately contemporary pin of a belt buckle from Elsfløth (Mückenberger 2012). These examples concern



Figure 6. Migration Age bronze mold from Torslunda, Öland, Sweden, showing a so called ‘weapon dancer’ with a horned helmet. Photo by The National Historical Museum, Stockholm.

depictions of men, but a few items depicting women imply a focus on eyes and vision also in connection to female gender. So, for example, appears the condition of the eyes of the earlier mentioned Aska lady to be particular. Just as for the Lejre figurine, it seems as if the eyes had been exposed for wear or abrasion, creating an erased gaze (compare Figure 2 and 3). Another example, perhaps a bit more uncertain, can be seen at the earlier mentioned figurine from Tissø, depicting a woman who shows an unusual and expressive gesture, perhaps tearing her hair. In this case there is no removal of an eye, but rather the opposite, as one eye appears as being exaggerated, implying a focus on the ocular theme (compare Figure 4). Once again it must be said, that some of the cited examples may be uncertain; the diminutive size makes analyzes difficult, pictorial reproductions may be vague, and damages and weathering over time may weaken the evidence. Hopefully, future finds and observations may reinforce this still tentative picture.

If such variations connected to eyes and eyesight, which have been discussed here, had been articulated for our contemporary time, we might most likely have interpreted such bodily deviations as examples of disabilities or handicaps. But, as Lois Briggs (1997, p. 166) states in the discussion of ‘changing models of disability’ in the Old Norse and particularly in the Irish medieval literature: ‘Disabilities [...] are individually defined by the culture in question and it is our task, as unintended readers of archaic texts, to suspend our own cultural notions and to determine, in so far as possible, the view of the culture at hand’. People, who today expose limited and handicapping bodily abilities versus specific competences, might in another society, with the same bodily exceptionalities, have been placed high on the ability/disability order of power. A specific corporal particularity could have been included in the concept of body-normativity, even gaining the subject extraordinary and socially desired capacities

(Briggs 1997, pp. 165–166, Arwill-Nordbladh 2012, pp. 35–38). So, reminds us Briggs, for example, that blindness in some cultures was singled out as donating a specific capacity to bards and minstrels, priests, prophets, or shamans.

Anette Lassen (2003), who has studied the ocular topic of the eye, the gaze, and blindness in the Old West Norse literature, demonstrates the significance of this theme. The properties of the eye sometimes played a central role in characterizing different figures in the Old Norse narratives. As Briggs, also Lassen (2003, pp. 53–56), points out the blind gaze as a signifier to wisdom and prophetic ability. In particular, this was valid for the Odin-character (Lassen 2003, pp. 84–106). Moreover, the eyes could reveal both the personality and the social belonging of a figure. The look of kings and heroes were sometimes looking daggers, cutting like an edge, making the gaze difficult, and frightening to face. With a sharpened eye, the hero sometimes was able to ‘bind’ or deaden swords and thus be victorious in battles. The sharp and frightening look was also connected to the god Thor (Lassen 2003, p. 106). An eye as biting as a snake’s eye, showed the world that the person was designated for war (Lassen 2003, pp. 39–40).

Sometimes, the look could reveal the identity of a hero, even if the subject changed his shape. In this connection, Lassen mentions an episode from the saga of Didrik of Bern that can be linked to an eye that was manipulated. The hero, who was planning to carry out revenge, was recognized and stopped to fulfil his plans. He then went to see a person skilled in medical tasks who ‘broke out his eye’. When the wound was healed, he could approach in disguise and pursue his revenge. Lassen concludes that ‘just as the eyes can reveal ones identity, even if you change shape or come in disguise, may the ademption of an eye serve as a disguise in itself’ (Lassen 2003, p. 26). In the Saga of Didrik, we can thus see a very concrete example of a processing and changing of the eye and look. Is this not what we see also on the figurines, even if the contexts, and maybe meanings, are different?

Thus we can realize that eyes, sight, and looks were an important theme within the Old Norse text corpus. A special area was the manipulated and restricted sight. That this restriction not necessarily implied restricted capacities is also clear. Rather, it could mean changed and maybe extended and exclusive abilities.

Even if the archaeological material is sparse, it shows in a very manifest way that the ocular theme was part of various performative practices during late Iron Age in Northern Europe. Its significance, in the form of an exaggerated presence of eyes and looks in connection with the mortuary sphere, has been explored by Howard Williams and colleagues (Williams 2011, Nugent and Williams 2012). Prophecy, access to hidden worlds like the afterlife, or calling for ancestral attention maybe some of the

reasons for this emphasis. The small figurines, which are the focus for the present discussion, indicate that the theme of gaze and eyesight was processed also by demonstrating limited or varied visual abilities. Just as Lassen shows that the early medieval texts present a number of meanings and contexts associated with eyes, eyesight, and look, so imply variations connected to visual capacities in the, admittedly scant, late Iron Age iconographic material, a more complex understanding of the ocular theme.

The exaggerated emphasis of eye and look that Williams and Nugent can show – maybe articulated on the figurine from Tissø – the one-eyedness and the removed eye at the so called Odin-figures from Uppåkra, Lindby, and Ribe and the somewhat older images from Staraja Ladoga, Elsfløth, and Torslunda, and the abraded and worn eyes on the Aska lady and on ‘Odin from Lejre’ indicate different contexts and meanings in relation to the overarching visual theme. The variability in relation to gender, material, expression, and contextual setting, suggests that in some specific social arenas, it was acceptable and maybe even desirable to articulate a limited visual capacity. Such negotiations of bodily abilities and disabilities demonstrate that corporal capacities were open for social and cultural interpretations within an ability/disability hegemonic order.

Conclusion

With its ambiguous gender attribution and with the different articulations of the pair of eyes and their looks, the little figurine from Lejre demonstrates how norms and values related to both gender and body may have been negotiated. Within one and the same item, variations connected to both the hetero-normative and the body-normative hegemonic orders are expressed. This may indicate that at least in some instances in Scandinavian Viking Age, such matters were structured in a broader way than our present-day concepts approve of. So in addition to the new knowledge about past times’ social relations, interactions between man and animal, and craft, the Lejre figurine can also serve as a proof of past times’ variability in connection to what we today often see as self-evident hegemonic orders.

References

- Alberti, B. and Back Danielsson, I.-M., Gender, feminist and queer archaeologies: USA perspective. In: C. Smith, ed. *Encyclopedia of global archaeology*, Chapter 1024. Springer. Available from: <http://www.springerreference.com/docs/html/chapterdbid/353662.html> [Accessed 22 May 2013]
- Arrhenius, B., 1994. Järnåldern. *Signums svenska konsthistoria*. Lund: Bokförlaget Signum, 163–225.
- Arwill-Nordbladh, E., 2012. Ability and disability. On bodily variations and bodily possibilities in Viking Age myth and image. In: I.-M. Back Danielsson and S. Thedéen, eds. *To tender gender. The pasts and futures of gender research*. Stockholm studies in archaeology, 58. Stockholm: Stockholm University, 33–59.
- Back Danielsson, I.-M., 2010. Liten lurifax i Lejre. *Arkæologisk forum*, 22, 30–33.
- Bergqvist, J., 1999. Spår av religion i Uppåkra under 1000 år. In: B. Hårdh, ed. *Fynd i centrum. Keramik, glas och metall från Uppåkra*. Uppåkrastudier 2. Acta Archaeologica Lundensia 2. Series in 8° No 30. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 113–125.
- Borić, D. and Robb, J., eds., 2008. *Past bodies. Body-centred research in archaeology*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.
- Bragg, L., 1997. From the Mute God to the Lesser God: disability in Medieval Celtic and Old Norse literature. *Disability & Society*, 12 (2), 165–177.
- Christensen, T., 2008. Lejre and Roskilde. In: S. Brink and N. Price, eds. *The Viking World*. London and New York: Routledge, 121–125.
- Christensen, T., 2009. Odin fra Lejre. *ROMU – årsskrift fra Roskilde Museum*. Roskilde: Roskilde Museum, 7–25.
- Christensen, T., 2010. Gud, konge eller ...?. *Arkæologisk forum*, 22, 21–25.
- Göransson, E.-M.Y., 1999. *Bilder av kvinnor och kvinnlighet. Genus och kroppspråk under övergången till kristendomen*. Stockholm Studies in Archaeology 18. Stockholm: Stockholms universitet, Arkeologiska institutionen.
- Hedeager, L., 1999. *Skygger av en annen virkelighet: oldnordiske myter*. Oslo: Pax.
- Helmbrecht, M., 2011. *Wirkmächtige Kommunikationsgeräte. Menschenbilder der Vendel- und Wikingerzeit und ihre Kontexte*. Acta Archaeologica Lundensia Series Prima in 4°, No 30. Lund: Lunds universitet.
- Hirdman, Y., 1988. Genussystemet – reflexioner kring kvinnors sociala underordning. *Kvinnovetenskaplig tidskrift*, 3, 49–63. Available from: <http://scienceblogs.com/aardvarchaeology/2009/11/13/odin-from-lejre-no-its-freya/> [Accessed 5 February 2013]
- Jensen, J., 2004. *Danmarks Oldtid. Yngre Jernalder og Vikingetid 400 e.Kr.–1050 e.Kr.* København: Gyldendal.
- Joyce, R., 2005. Archaeology of the body. *Annual review of anthropology*, 34, 139–158.
- Lassen, A., 2003. *Øjet og blindheden i norrøn litteratur og mytologi*. København: Museum Tusulanums Forlag.
- Larsson, L. and Hårdh, B., 1997. Uppåkra – ett hövdinga- eller kungasäte. *Fornvännen*, 92, 139–154.
- Mannering, U., 2010. Mand eller kvinde – gør det en forskel?. *Arkæologisk forum*, 22, 26–29.
- Mückenberger, K., 2012. Den enøjede. *SKALK*, 56 (6), 11–15.
- Nugent, R. and Williams, H., 2012. Sighted surfaces. Ocular Agency in early Anglo-Saxon cremation burials. In: I.-M. Back Danielsson, F. Fahlander and Y. Sjöstrand, eds. *Encountering images: materialities, perceptions, relations*. Stockholm studies in archaeology, 57. Stockholm: Stockholm University, 187–208.
- Näsström, B.-M., 1986. Tor som transvestit: kvinnligt och manligt i Trymskvädet. *Svensk religionshistorisk årsskrift*, 2 (1986), 77–89.
- Price, N.S., 2002. *The Viking Way, Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*. Uppsala: Uppsala University.
- Solli, B., 1999. Odin the queer. On ergi and shamanism in Norse mythology. In: A. Gustafsson and H. Karlsson, eds. *Glyfer och arkeologiska rum. En vänbok till Jarl Nordbladh*. Gotarc series A, 3. Göteborg: University of Gothenburg, 342–349.

- Solli, B., 2002. *Sejd: myter, sjamanisme og kønn i vikingenes tid*. Oslo: Pax.
- Sonne, L.C.A., 2010. Den lille sølvfigur fra Lejre. Bemærkninger til tolkningen af en mulig Odin-figur. *1066-Tidsskrift for historie*, årgång 40 (3), 32–39.
- Sørensen, M.L.S., 1997. Reading dress: the construction of social categories and identities in Bronze Age Europe. *Journal of European archaeology*, 5 (1), 93–114.
- Thomson, R.G., 1997. *Extraordinary bodies: figuring physical disability in American culture and literature*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Vikingatidens ABC*, 1995. Stockholm: Statens Historiska Museum.
- Williams, H., 2011. The sense of being seen: ocular effects at Sutton Hoo. *Journal of social archaeology*, 11 (1), 99–121.