

# Archaeology and Odin in Late Pagan Denmark – A Note

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**ABSTRACT:** *This article discusses archaeological evidence for the veneration of Odin in late pagan Denmark. According to place-name evidence Odin was totally dominant in public cult at this time, and was closely linked to warriors and kings. (Actual evidence for a relationship with the great cult centre at Lejre is uncertain.) However, a group of riders' graves with weaponry from the tenth century represent a new burial custom for magnates, and it is argued that they relate to Odin and Valhalla. Female magicians, who have been convincingly identified in a series of Viking-Age graves, and miniature chairs, from which the once seated figure is usually missing, were probably also connected with Odin. Further, it has been suggested that miniature swords, spearheads and staves might have been Odinic symbols. Some figurative amulets, however, often featuring women in various guises and often interpreted as Valkyries, likely had an entirely different meaning.*

**RESUME:** *Artiklen diskuterer de arkæologiske vidnesbyrd om dyrkelsen af Odin i det sen-hedenske Danmark. Ifølge stedsnavnematerialet var Odin totalt dominerende i den offentlige kult på denne tid og nært forbundet med krigere og kongemagt. (Der er dog ingen sikre belæg for forbindelse med det store kultcentrum i Lejre.) En gruppe ryttergrave med våben fra 900-tallet, som især findes i Jylland, repræsenterer imidlertid en ny gravskik blandt stormænd, og der argumenteres for, at de relaterer til Odin og Valhal. Kvindelige magikere, der overbevisende er identificeret i en række vikingetidsgrave i Danmark og andetsteds i Skandinavien, samt miniaturestole, hvor den siddende figur som regel mangler, var sandsynligvis også knyttet til Odin. Det er desuden foreslået, at miniaturesværd, -spydspidser og -stave var symboler for Odin. Derimod har en gruppe figurative amuletter, der tit forestiller kvinder i forskellige situationer, og som ofte er tolket som valkyrier, formentlig en helt anden betydning.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Tenth-century Denmark; Odin worship; equestrian graves; weaponry; völrur; chair pendants*

Odin was the supreme god of at least part of pre-Christian Scandinavia, particularly celebrated by kings and warriors in Denmark in late pagan times. The literature is vast, most importantly in recent decades in the writing of Jens Peter Schjødt (e.g. Simek 1993, 240–249 *et passim*; Steinsland 2005; Dillmann 2007; Gunnell 2017; Schjødt 2020). The main sources are Old Norse texts and poems, together with place-names. While Old Norse literature tells of the characteristics of gods and their powers, myths and cult, place-names mainly tell of the varying popularity of gods within the Scandinavian countries and regions, and of where cult sites were situated (for example Brink 2007). Generally, these sources were written down considerably later than the period when pagan religion was alive and thriving.

Personal names with Odin are unknown in Denmark, in contrast to the widespread use of Thor's name (the male name Odinkar is generally rejected by modern scholars, see Kousgaard Sørensen 1974). Neither does Odin's name occur on rune-stones, again in contrast to Thor's. However, it does appear in an inscription of magic character on a piece of a human skull from eighth-century Ribe (Stoklund 2004). The arrival of dead warriors at *Valhöll* (Valhalla), Odin's hall of the slain, riding on Odin's eight-legged horse, Sleipnir, is probably pictured on a number of Gotlandic picture stones; such images, however, are unknown in Denmark. A number of pictures and small figures have been interpreted as Odin himself, including fairly coarse bronze heads with a horned head gear and figures with only one eye or a damaged eye, but such readings are often dismissed or seriously questioned (many examples are discussed in Helmbrecht 2011, 140–147, 167–169 *et passim*. On interpretations, see, for example, also Pentz 2018). Further, some eye problems may have been caused by casting errors. A scene on a cross in the Isle of Man, however, is widely accepted as Odin being swallowed by the wolf Fenrir. But here the context is Christian, and the image appears in apposition to a scene on the other face of the cross, which represents the Christian idea of resurrection (Wilson 2018, 106–109).

The scarcity of depictions of Odin, and of direct links between him and individual human beings, is thought to be due to fear of his dangerous and demonic character – a wild and unpredictable god, of weird behaviour and with many supernatural skills, he was the god of war, wisdom, poetry, weather, and magic.

Place-names in medieval Denmark do, however, show that Odin was venerated there; the only god whose name is compounded with words for cult sites: *-vi* (five examples including Odense), *-hille* (three examples including Onsild), and *-sal* (one example, Onsala in Halland). There are not very many outside this region. Further, a few Danish place-names, such as Onsbjerg on Samsø, and Onsö in Skåne, link his cult to natural features (fig. 1). This has led to the conclusion that Odin had a completely dominant role in the public cult in Denmark in late pagan times. The notion of Odin's close links to power and kingship is supported by the observation that Danish Odin place-names are often located near sites known to have been royal property in late pagan or early Christian times, including two of Harald Bluetooth's so-called Trelleborg fortresses – Nonnebakken in Odense, and Fyrkat in Onsild parish, and 'herred', near Hobro (Hald 1963; Kousgaard Sørensen 1992).



Figure 1. Odin place-names in Viking-Age Denmark (the present country with Skåne, Halland and Schleswig). Names are from the map in Kousgaard Sørensen 1992. Re-drawn 2020 by Grafisk Tegnesteue, Moesgaard Museum.

Regardless, the most important pagan cult site in Denmark was probably Lejre in Sjælland, near Roskilde. This site was also linked to kings, but the nearest Odin place-name, Onsvæd in Horns Herred (fig. 1), is about 20km north of Lejre, which by the tenth century had been an important cult place for centuries. The only mention of Odin in connection with Lejre derives from the late twelfth-century *Skjöldunga saga*, now lost, which may have claimed that Odin's son, king Skjöld, settled there – although this might be the interpretation of Arngrímur Jónsson, who wrote a Latin resume of the saga in 1596 (*Skjöldungernes saga*, 46–47; Arngrímur Jónsson 1982, 4).

Extensive excavations have been carried out at Lejre, and many buildings, other features and artefacts have been recovered. Among the latter is a small silver amulet with an ambiguous figure seated on a chair or throne with two birds and other ornaments (fig. 2). This has been much discussed, and interpreted as Odin with his two ravens, or alternatively as his wife Frigg, or as a *völva*, a female magician (Christensen 2015; on the amulet 194–203; Arwill-Nordbladh 2013; Price 2013, 174–177; Ingunn Ásdísardóttir 2020b, 1386). Perhaps several gods were venerated at Lejre.



Figure 2. Elaborate silver figure found at Lejre, Sjælland. Height 1.75cm. The tiny figure seems to wear female dress and jewellery but also to be bearded and to wear a hat. This, together with two birds on the armrests of the chair or throne has led to a possible identification as Odin with his two ravens seated on his throne, Lidskjalv. Alternatively, the seated figure may be his wife Frigg, or a *völva*, a female magician. © ROMU.

On the whole, archaeology plays a very small role in learned discussions of Odin. However, the group of riders' graves, dating to the first half and middle of the tenth century should be considered here. In my opinion this group constitutes a solid body of evidence for the veneration of Odin. I have argued this case in more detail elsewhere (Roesdahl 1983; 2006; 2021), and the ideas have mainly been accepted in archaeological literature (see, however, e.g. Steinsland 2005, 179; Dillmann 2007, 362–363). I here present them (in summary form) for a wider audience.

These riders' graves constitute a new burial custom for magnates, which was introduced into Denmark in late pagan times, the early tenth century. They occur mainly to the west of Storebælt: in parts of Jutland and in Langeland, and form a distinct group (figs. 3–4). Such graves were furnished with rich grave-goods consisting of weapons, riding-gear and sometimes a horse, as well as food and drink in containers and sometimes other objects such as a board game for entertainment – all useful equipment for a journey to Valhalla and for life there (Pedersen 2014; a volume based on a rider's grave excavated at Fregerslev near Skanderborg deals extensively with matters relating to such graves, see Pedersen and Schifter Bagge 2021).

Further, the distribution of this type of grave, and the associated grave goods, suggest that the men so buried had a strong relationship to the king. The grandest royal grave from pagan Denmark, in the huge burial mound in Jelling, also belongs to this period (the late 950s). It was almost certainly the grave of the last pagan king of Denmark, Gorm – a rider's grave of royal splendour. Although it was broken into long ago, a few grave goods survive, among which are mounts from an exquisite horse harness (on the mounts, see Krogh and Leth-Larsen 2007, 224–234; on Jelling, see Pedersen and Madsen 2017).

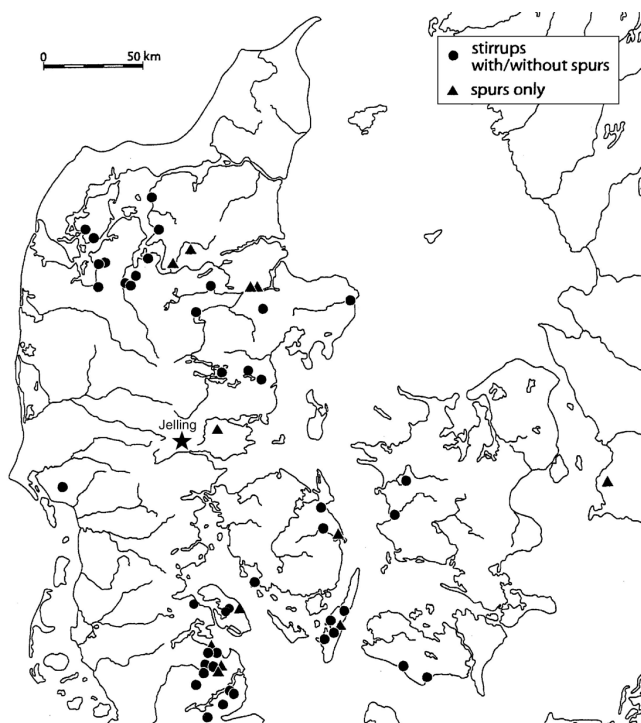


Figure 3. Distribution of riders' graves in tenth-century Denmark. Courtesy of Anne Pedersen. The Jelling and Fregerslev graves added by the author. For map with more details, see Pedersen 2014, vol. 2, Map 21.

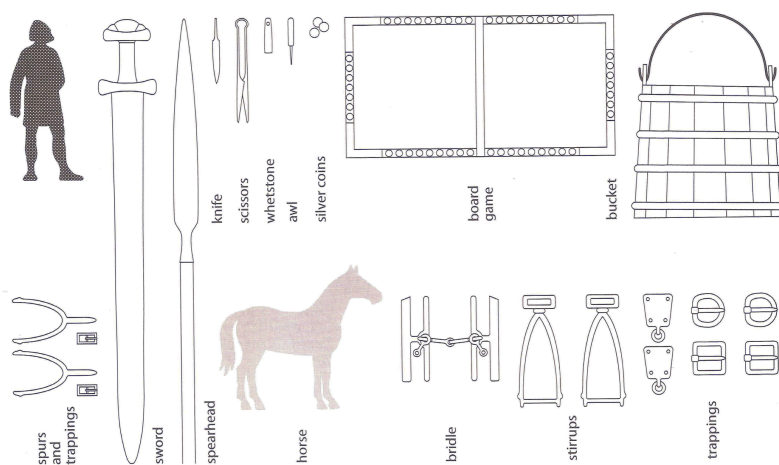


Figure 4. Schematic drawing of grave goods in a typical riders' grave (example from Brandstrup in Central Jutland, excavated in 1953, see Pedersen 2014, vol. 2, cat. no. 208 and pl. 29 and 30:1). Today modern techniques may reveal further items that have nearly disappeared, as in the Fregerslev grave (near Skanderborg) which was excavated in 2017 and previous years. Drawing Flemming Bau c. 1982.

Burial in a rider's grave was undoubtedly accompanied by elaborate ceremonies and rites, of which we can only guess. Ibn Fadlan's description of a chieftain's burial at the Volga in 922 gives some idea of the period's long and complicated burial rituals (Price 2010). In the case of the riders' graves they probably included processions (Nygaard and Murphy 2017), in which the horse which was to follow its master into the grave presumably played a role. There may also have been rituals using a spear, one of Odin's attributes, with which to mark the dead man and thus dedicate him to Odin – especially if he had not been killed in battle (cf. Schjødt 2020).

Given Odin's close relations to kings and warriors in late pagan Denmark, and that Odin was the ruler of Valhalla, where such men were thought to spend their afterlife fighting and feasting (without women), and given the many public Odin cult sites in Denmark (indicated by place-names), it seems clear that this new burial custom and the riders' graves were related to Odin, who was, incidentally, the only horse-riding god.

The introduction of this burial custom for kings and (male) magnates in the first half of the tenth century was, however, probably also linked to a pagan reaction to approaching Christianity, and social meanings were undoubtedly in play. It may also be noted that a new burial custom for women of the same social group appeared at about the same time. Such women were buried with their grave goods in the body of a wagon – symbol of a wealthy woman's mode of transport – instead of in a normal coffin. That said, writers of Old Norse literature were not very concerned with women and do not elaborate on where they went after death. Perhaps their destination was Freyja's hall in *Folkvangr*, it was certainly not Valhalla (on this burial custom, see articles in Pedersen and Schifter Bagge 2021; on Freyja, see Ingunn Ásdísardóttir 2020a).

However, female magicians, the so-called *völur* (sing. *völva*, meaning 'staff-bearer') were probably connected to Odin. They are known from Old Norse sources and from a few images. Further, a group of unusual women's graves throughout Scandinavia has convincingly been identified as graves of *völur* (Price 2002). The most distinctive object among their grave goods is the staff, a cultic tool, which may take various forms (Gardela 2009; 2016), as, for example, a long iron rod, or, as in a grave at the Fyrkat fortress, a slender and elaborate iron staff with decorative mounts of copper alloy (Roesdahl 1977, 97–101, 143, 150–151, fig. 137).

Among other remarkable objects in this grave was a tiny chair-shaped pendant, from which something, probably a once-seated person, is missing (fig. 5), as is normal for such pendants. They are known mainly from Denmark and Sweden, and if the missing figures were images of Odin, as has been suggested, and as possibly at Lejre (Arrhenius 1961; Roesdahl 1977, 101–102, 140–141, 150, and figs. 141 and 232; Zeiten 1997, 21–23, 59–60; on Lejre see above), the reason for their removal might be to break the link to this pagan god. This would have been particularly relevant in the Fyrkat cemetery, which belongs to the decades following the official conversion of Denmark in c. 965 (Roesdahl 2004). Various pendants in the form of miniature tools, including

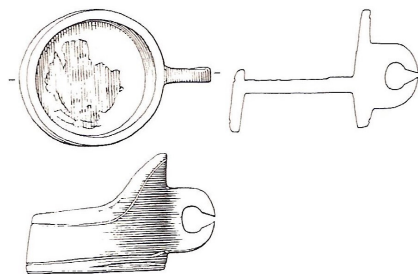


Figure 5. Chair-shaped silver pendant with gilt details. Diameter 1.3cm. Traces on the seat show that something, probably a seated figure, is missing. From female grave at the Fyrkat fortress in north-east Jutland. After Roesdahl 1977 fig. 141. Drawing Flemming Bau.

staves, spears and swords found in graves, or settlements or silver hoards, have also been tentatively associated with Odin (Zeiten 1997; Pedersen 2009, 293–95).

In recent years many small two-dimensional figurative amulets have come to light; they have often been found by metal-detectorists, while others are from archaeological excavations. Such amulets used to be known mainly from female burials in Sweden, but types and numbers have multiplied. Among them is a group showing a standing woman with sword and shield. Another group shows a woman on horseback carrying a spear, together with a standing woman with a shield; some of these women wear a helmet. On the back is a lug for suspension (Arrhenius 1961; Zeiten 1997; Helmbrecht 2011, 119–128 et passim; Pedersen 2009, 296). A few small three-dimensional female figures are also known. These types have a clear Danish distribution, although examples are found elsewhere (Gardela 2013). A long trailing dress and sometimes hair show that they are women, but the weapons and horses make them sexually ambiguous, as is the ‘Odin’ figure from Lejre (fig. 2). Interpretations have been sought in mythology, and they are generally seen as images of Odin’s Valkyries, and thus as evidence of a widespread and early cult of Odin. Recently a number of clay moulds for mass-production of such amulets (and other types) were found in a bronze-casting workshop in ninth-century Ribe, which also made oval brooches and other ornaments. The stance and dress of processing figures on the Oseberg tapestry, and the practical function of the amulets as female jewellery, provide, together with other observations, convincing arguments for a re-interpretation of the whole group. Here it is seen as related to themes of ritual rather than to mythology, and emphasizes the cultic role of women. “As amulets and as part of female formal dress, these trappings harnessed the potency of ritual actions involving the transgression of social — especially gendered — norms” (Deckers, Croix, and Sindbæk 2021).

Archaeological evidence of Odin in Denmark is, then, indirect and sometimes uncertain. The burial custom of male magnates in late pagan Denmark is our best evidence for his cult, and, if correctly interpreted, it provides contemporary sources for his veneration, and is in full conformity with the Odin place-names. The *völur* graves probably also relate to Odin, and, if so, all these graves are contemporary sources for

the understanding of rituals. Besides, some chair- or tool-shaped amulets possibly relate to Odin, but the so-called Valkyrie amulets should almost certainly be dismissed. Finally, as was argued long ago (Hald 1963; Kousgaard Sørensen 1992), the cult of Odin, as the main male god closely associated with kings and warriors, must have eased the acceptance of Christianity and Christ in the magnate classes. Was this perhaps also part of the background for the transformation at Jelling from a grand royal and pagan memorial to an even grander Christian one?

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Michael Lerche Nielsen for help with place-name literature, to Pieter-Jan Deckers, Sarah Croix and Søren Sindbæk for showing me their unpublished manuscript on the amulets, to Søren Sindbæk and David M. Wilson for comments to my text, and likewise to the anonymous peer-reviewer. Thanks also to David M. Wilson for revising my English. Omissions and errors are of course my own responsibility.

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