

# A Bit Arabic

## Pseudo-Arabic Inscriptions on Viking Age Weights in Sweden and Expressions of Self-image

Lotta Fernstål

There are many Viking Age weights in Scandinavia, and not least in Sweden. A few of the spherical weights with flat poles, which were used for weighing silver in trading situations, display so-called pseudo-Arabic inscriptions, i.e. writing which resembles Arabic but which is mostly illegible. Why did some people put Arabic-like writing on their weights, and what did they hope to achieve by this? These questions are discussed together with positive aspects of trade, interaction and encounters with foreigners, visual aspects of weights and weighing, as well as personal choices in the presentation of self-image.

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Many Viking Age objects in Scandinavia express long-distance, Eastern connections and influences. Certain drinking cups of glass, bronze jugs, dress mountings, textile fragments and, not least, a finger-ring from Birka with the inscription “Allah” engraved on the mounted amethyst, all demonstrate such interactions (see e.g., Lamm 2002; Hedenstierna-Jonson 2006a, 2006b). In addition to actual objects that were brought to Scandinavia, there are further traces of a desire to display Eastern connections, for example paper-thin, locally crafted replicas of Islamic coins that were worn as jewellery; see figure 1. The desire for an Eastern touch – or what sometimes can be called an Arabic and/or Islamic touch – is also expressed in local objects such as weights, on which there is sometimes pseudo-Arabic script. This writing gives the impression of being Arabic but is not correct, and is sometimes an illegible imitation of an actual script. In the case of the weights, the inscriptions imitate the writing on Islamic coins (Sperber 1996:101). As is well known, many Islamic coins were in circulation as well as hoarded in Scandinavia during this period. It appears as if pseudo-Arabic inscriptions were made by persons with little or no knowledge of correct Arabic writing and, further, as if it was fairly important to achieve a specific expression, or perhaps “spike”

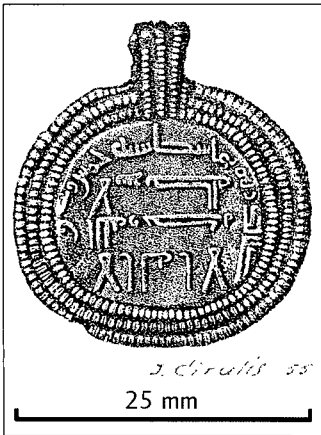


Fig. 1. One of 14 replicas of 8<sup>th</sup>-century Islamic coins worn in a set of beads by a woman who was buried in one of the Viking Age boat-graves in Tuna in Badelunda in the province of Västmanland, Sweden (see Nylén & Schönböck 1994). Drawing (detail): Janis Cirulis. © Västmanlands Läns Museum.

certain objects with additional meaning. This paper concerns these Viking Age weights with pseudo-Arabic inscriptions, and tries to answer the questions of why there was a desire to put Arabic-like writing on these objects and what one hoped to achieve by this. The material also gives an opportunity to touch upon positive aspects of trade, interaction and encounters with foreigners.

**PSEUDO-ARABIC INSCRIPTIONS AND SPHERICAL, FLAT-POLED WEIGHTS**

There is a large amount of Viking Age weights in Scandinavia (fig. 2). At the four places with the largest quantities in Sweden – Uppåkra in Scania, Birka in Uppland, and Paviken and Bandlunde on the island of Gotland – at least 900 weights have been found (see Gustin 2004b:89-96). Erik Sperber has identified eight of the weights in Sweden as having pseudo-Arabic inscriptions (Sperber 1996:98-100).

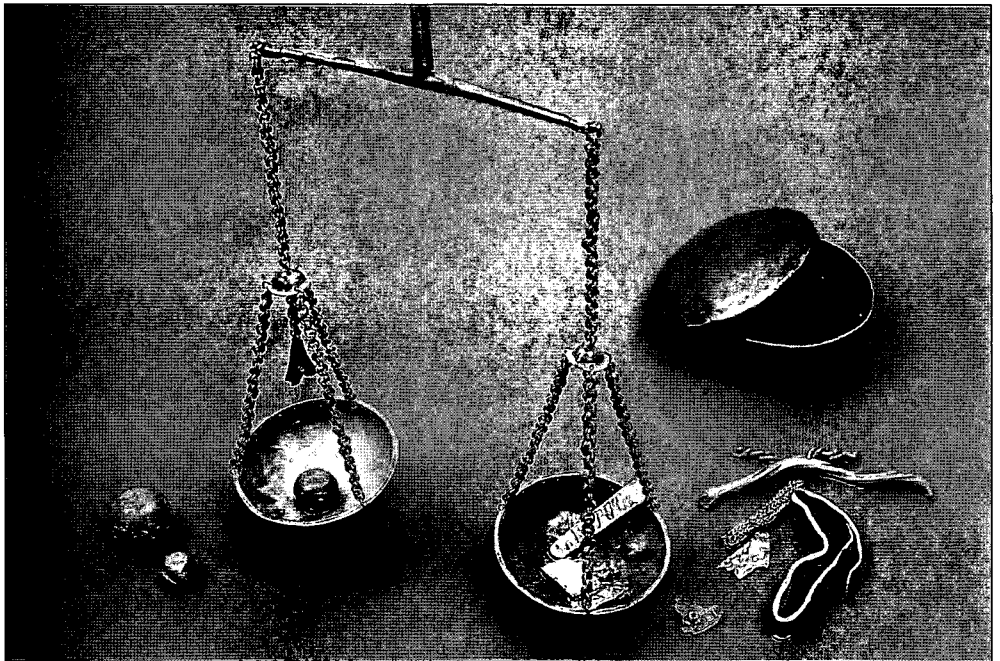


Fig. 2. An example of a set of weights and scales from Långbro in Vårdinge Parish in the province of Södermanland, Sweden. A small box to hold the scales belonged to the equipment as well. SHM 15115. © Statens historiska museum.

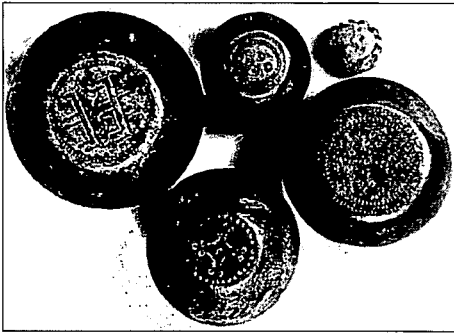


Fig. 3. Examples of Viking Age weights with different kinds of markings: points, circles and lines as well as one with a pseudo-Arabic inscription (Kisch 1965: 102). The weight with the inscription is from Nysätra Parish in the province of Uppland, Sweden, and can also be seen in figure 4 (UMF 3442).

This is a rather small amount of the total number of weights, but it is a material that continually attracts attention, in text or illustration (see e.g., Montelius 1872:

178; Kisch 1965:102; Sperber 1996:ch.8; Gustin 2004b:102f).

The pseudo-Arabic inscriptions are all placed on spherical weights with flat poles, i.e. opposing sides, and it is on the poles that the inscriptions are found, see figure 3. The weights are in different conditions, and some of the inscriptions are difficult to distinguish due to corrosion and cracks in the surface, see figure 4. However, in all the inscriptions that are legible today it seems as if the Arabic word *bakh* was important to include, and not only once but twice with one mirroring the other, see figure 5. This word means *first-class/good/prima* and was originally used on Islamic coins from the second half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. On the Nysätra weight in figure 5 part of the inscription probably also reads *rasûl Allah*, or Allah's prophet (Sperber 1996:96, 100). An interesting parallel in connection with these inscriptions is that the spherical weights with flat poles, the weight system they are thought to have been part of, and also the scales they have been used with, seem to derive from Islamic and Eastern areas (see e.g., Arne 1919; Kyhlberg 1975; Sperber 1996, 2004:62; Gustin 1997 and works cited therein, 2004b:passim; von Heijne 2004:68).

The spherical weights with flat poles usually consist of an iron core that is coated with a bronze/copper alloy, but there are also weights of this type manufactured entirely from a bronze/copper alloy (Gustin 2004a:19). They came into use in the Baltic Sea region during the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century and were used throughout the Viking Age, and they have been found at trading places, manufacturing areas, in graves and as stray finds (e.g., Gustin 2004b). Together with the cubo-octahedral weights, they constitute a group of normative and standardized weights that mainly have been used for weighing metal as means of payment in economic transactions (e.g., Gustin 2004a:19, 2004b:111). This is different from, for example, cylindrical lead weights, which rather seem to have been used in workshops and in particular in connection with bronze casting (Gustin 1998:80).

However, an important question is if the spherical, flat-poled weights and in particular the pseudo-Arabic inscriptions actually were locally manufactured in Scandinavia or around the Baltic Sea. Besides the obvious language confusion of the inscriptions, which indicates that the weights have at least not been inscribed by persons who were fluent in Arabic (e.g., Gustin 1997:173), there is also

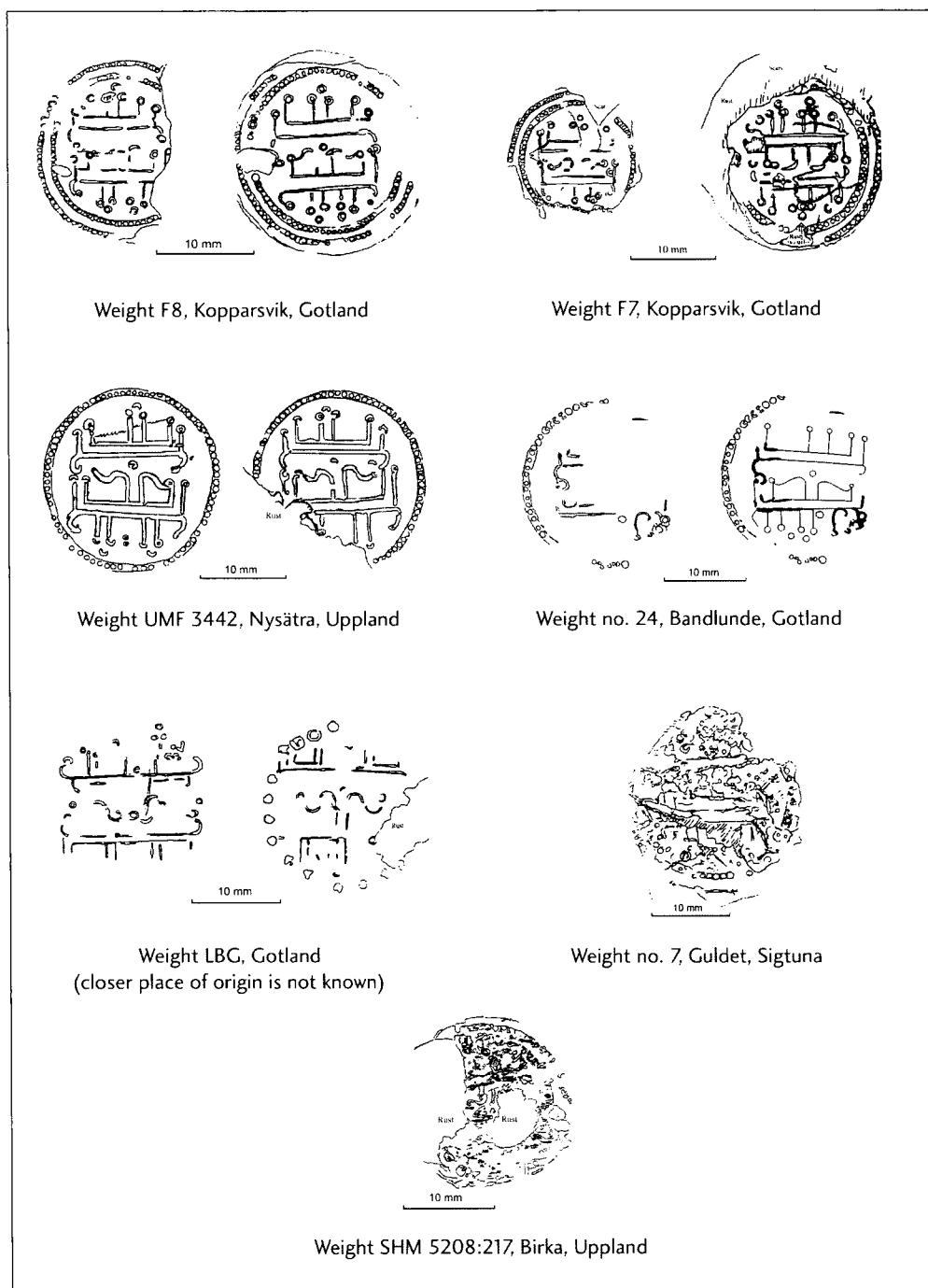


Fig. 4. Drawings of the spherical weights with flat poles identified by Erik Sperber as having pseudo-Arabic inscriptions. The conditions of the weights vary. The names for them and their find locations are given in Erik Sperber's work on balances, weights and weighing (for more details on these weights, see Sperber 1996:96-100). Drawings: Erik Sperber (op. cit.).

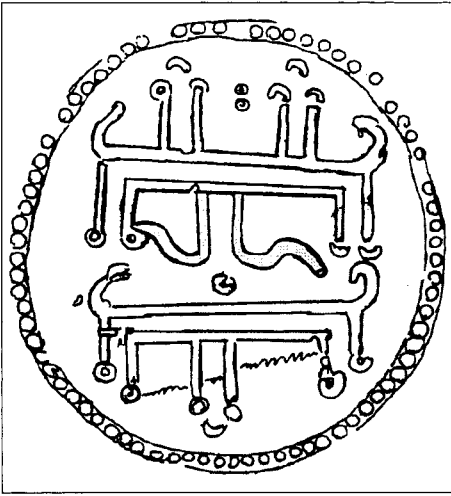


Fig. 5. The weight from Nysätra Parish with the part of the inscription that is supposed to read *bakh* marked with grey. The word is included twice and means first-class/good/prima (Sperber 1996:100, 96 fig. 8.1 – the picture is somewhat modified).

handicraft waste in the form of so-called *Schmelzkugeln* in material from Birka, Hedeby and Sigtuna that has been suggested to derive from the manufacturing of spherical weights with flat poles (Söderberg & Holmquist Olausson 1997; see also Ambrosiani & Gustin 2002; Gustin 1997, 2004b:161). Thus, one assumption is that the weights were

locally manufactured in Scandinavia and also inscribed in this region.

Markings on weights are usually considered to have served to simplify the identification of the weights in trading situations (see e.g., de Brun 1917; Kyhlberg 1980:271; Gustin 2004b:104). The material is heterogeneous and the execution of the markings is considered to have been each owner's own business (Kyhlberg 1980:270; cf. Sperber 1996:66). To the best of my knowledge, the markings were always made after the weight was manufactured and were not part of the casting process. They probably were made by the owner or by order of the owner and according to his or her wish. The markings were usually produced in rather simple techniques, for example by pouncing and/or incising, and no specific handicraft skills seem to have been necessary to make them. There are for example points, circles and double circles as well as lines forming different patterns, see figure 3. It is usually the heavier weights that have the pseudo-Arabic inscriptions (Gustin 2004b:102) and they are made with a combination of the above-mentioned techniques.

An interesting view in connection with the pseudo-Arabic inscriptions on weights is that weight markings also functioned as owners' labels (Sperber 2004: 73). This means that choosing different kinds of labels to assign weight-sizes and especially to express possession was not only functional but also part of how the owner wished to express his or her identity and present him- or herself in certain situations. The question, then, is why were symbols that imitated Arabic sometimes used? In order to try to answer this it is important to understand the background to the phenomenon, and therefore some aspects of Viking Age trading and of the use of scales and weights will be discussed below.

THOUGHTS ON TRADE – OR TRADE AS A WORLD OF NEW POSSIBILITIES  
 Many negative terms have been used regarding the social implications of trade and encounters with strangers. In earlier research it has, for instance, been

suggested that the interaction as well as encounters with strangers, which the Viking Age trade to a large extent involved, constituted a risk of being cheated, a stressful situation while weighing means of payment, suspicion and language confusion (e.g., Gustin 2004b:*passim*; see also e.g., Dahl 1998:290). The actual meeting with strangers is also described as a further moment of risk (Gustin 2004b:203). In addition, trade in general has been described as a potentially violent business, for which the Garrison at the Birka trading centre may have had a protective function. It is suggested that the warriors at Birka functioned as “guarantors, defending trust and security in trade” (Hedenstierna-Jonson 2006b:89).

Based on associations like these there are further views that trade and meetings in connection with trade were controlled by relatively strict rules, which were intended to eliminate the risks. It has been proposed that prices were more or less fixed and not subject to negotiation, or at least that trade was mainly a matter of exchanging things of equal value, a process in which e.g. haggling was not allowed (Gustin 2004b:176, 264). One can wonder, however, how persons with different interests agreed on what was of equal value without discussions, or how that was agreed on, on a general level. It seems a bit simplistic that trade would take place with more or less fixed price tags during the Viking Age, or at least with what may be called mental price tags that everybody recognized and agreed to.

Interpretations that view encounters with strangers as almost always releasing feelings of threat etc. are probably based on sociological, ethnological or anthropological research on identity, ethnicity and/or “us and them” thinking (see e.g., Hodder 1990 and work cited therein; Eriksen 1996; Gustin 2004b and work cited therein). There is no doubt that one always categorizes every person one meets, just as one is always categorized by others. The first three variables to immediately classify someone are probably sex, age and ethnicity. While interacting, new variables are added and first impressions changed or confirmed. In this there is also the possibility to enhance one’s self-image and the impression one wants to give others, for example by means of details in dress, objects one uses, words chosen while talking, etc. The list of possibilities for expressing identity could be endless. As will be discussed below, the use of pseudo-Arabic inscriptions was one detail in expressing an image of oneself. In the process of categorization one also judges whether the person is one of “us” or one of “them”/the “Others”. This is where ethnicity comes into the picture and where, as I understand it, the feelings of threat etc. are supposed to arise in e.g. trading situations.

However, such feelings are not always, or perhaps not even often, the only ones that arise during new meetings. Perhaps we are very much influenced in our interpretations of how the world is today, what with growing divides between “us” in the Western world and the “Others” in other parts of the world, and walls being built – political, ideological, mental and actual. But of course identity and the well known are and always were important and more often than the foreign give a sense of security. I therefore agree that the foreign *may* frighten us, but I also claim that it triggers other senses as well, not least curiosity and adventurous

feelings as driving forces. Positive aspects such as driving forces do not often attract attention in archaeological research, but I would like to propose some positive aspects of Viking Age trade, interaction and meetings. Such may have included, for example, pleasure in making a deal or a new acquaintance as trading was probably a rather social activity, a feeling of excitement, touches of adventure and enjoyment, and not only gaining new experiences but perhaps also new knowledge while chatting during the transaction. Interaction, meetings and trade may have been seen as something difficult and dangerous in many ways, but also as openings to a world of new possibilities.

### VISUAL ASPECTS OF WEIGHING AND WEIGHTS

Viking Age trade and systems of payment in Scandinavia and the Baltic region were to a large extent based on the metal value in weight rather than the monetary value. This is shown by the scales, weights and the large amount of clipped coins and cut-up silver objects that exist from this period (e.g., Gustin 2004a:17, 2004b:164). Accordingly weighing played an important role in many transactions, and large amounts of weights have been found in, for example, Birka where trading constituted a significant part of the activities there (see e.g., Kyhlberg 1973, 1980:201; Gustin 2004b).

As mentioned above, it has been suggested that one way to eliminate risks while trading was to make prices non-negotiable (Gustin 2004b:176, 264). Be that as it may, weighing was an integral part of trading situations and as such was a rather visual act (see fig. 6). Weighing may have involved many aspects, among other things exactitude and specific knowledge since the weighing procedure did not only involve adding weights in one bowl and comparing them to the weighed object in the other, but also a subtracting method in which certain weights were used together with the weighed object in one of the bowls (Kyhlberg 1980:150). And in spite of the supposed fixed prices, perhaps there sometimes was discussion about prices, haggling, and changing the quantity of payment, the weights and the combination of weights in order to come to an agreement that both parts



Fig. 6. An imagined Viking Age trader in action, wearing Oriental-style puffy pants and holding up his scales in an almost triumphant pose. The drawing is from the often-reproduced work *Vikingen* ("The Viking"), originally from 1967. Drawing: Åke Gustavsson (Almgren 1995:25).

were pleased with. It is not difficult to picture social but also solemn and almost ceremonial acts around the transfer of goods, in which the scales and weights had an important and concrete role in constituting a link between the trading partners with their different interests and in which the weights also visualized rather abstract values and made them real.

The work with scales and weights demanded precision, a steady hand and a sure eye. In modern research, weights have not only been discussed from their practical function as a measurement of value, but also with regard to aspects like trust, reliability and honesty (Gustin 2004b). That different kinds of economic fraud existed during the Viking Age is indicated by the archaeological material. One example is the counterfeit coins which have a less valuable core than the surface gives the impression of (see e.g., Rispling 2004:38-42, Gustin 2004b:172f). Also nicks and pecks on coins in Scandinavia show that people believed there was reason to test the genuineness of them, and to cut up the silver coins to get smaller and lighter pieces indirectly proved the authenticity of the metal. Ingrid Gustin (2004b) means that, over time, the use of certain types of weights – for example the spherical weights with flat poles on which pseudo-Arabic inscriptions appear – came to represent trust and reliability, and further that the markings on them were part of the important creation of an impression of the equipment's reliability, rather like a certificate of solvency. Ornamentation made it more difficult to make changes in, for example, the weight's size.

The markings on weights were a means of visual communication, and it appears that there were several layers to this. Directly the markings communicated the size of the weights and their relative order within the owners' personal sets, but they also communicated trust and reliability. In addition, as the design of the markings was each owner's own business and also functioned as the owner's label (see above), they also communicated something about the owner. As mentioned above, the markings on the weights are heterogeneous as there are points, circles and lines in many different combinations. However, the patterns are mostly variations on a theme in which the same elements have been used in different combinations. Although there are variations, most owners of weights have followed a recognizable tradition. Stepping out of this tradition – at least partly – were those who chose to provide their weights with text that looked like Arabic, but even the pseudo-Arabic inscriptions follow the tradition in the technique and even these weights are decorated with the recognizable points and circles. These persons seem, however, to have wanted to give a special and somewhat different picture of themselves than other persons handling weights and scales. An interesting phenomenon, which I won't discuss further, is that there does not seem to be a single weight with a runic inscription.

In Scandinavia, Arabic script was probably mainly known from silver coins from the Caliphate, which most likely served as models for the pseudo-Arabic inscriptions on weights. As mentioned above, one inscription on coins that has repeatedly been replicated is that which says *bakh*, or first-class/good/prima



(Sperber 1996:96). With the discussion above in mind, concerning markings on weights as a kind of “certificate of solvency”, the hypothesis can be put forward that this repeatedly written word referred to the reliability of the (at least in the owner’s eyes) first-class weight that had been provided with the word, and so indirectly also to the owner of the weight. At any rate, it seems likely that there was some Scandinavian knowledge of this particular Arabic word since it has been written correctly at least a few times. Whether the buyer always recognized the word when the trader handled the weights is another question, but he or she could always be told. That there was (pseudo-) Arabic text on the weight could, however, hardly have been passed over by many who saw the weight. There were many Islamic coins in circulation and pieces of such were used in trading, and therefore the image of the script was well known.

### A BIT ARABIC

Weights with Arabic-looking texts were used in a time when there were many other kinds of long-distance, Eastern influences in Scandinavia besides the scales they were used with and the weight system they were used within (see above). Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson has in recent works discussed the strong Oriental influence on the Birka warriors’ dress and weapon accessories, and also the dress of persons in power was heavily influenced by Oriental styles (Hedenstierna-Jonson 2006a and 2006b and works cited therein). As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, many Viking Age objects in Scandinavia express long-distance, Eastern connections and influences, and we know from runic stones and literary texts that people from Scandinavia travelled far eastwards (see e.g., Larsson 1997a). We also know from the runic stones that tell of the men following Ingvar, that travellers did not always return (see e.g., Larsson 1997b:121-154). Despite this, judging from the amount of long-distance, Eastern objects and influences in Viking Age Scandinavia it seems likely that the Eastern, Oriental, Arabic and/or Islamic was alluring and desirable (cf. Lindquist 2002), perhaps as an ideal image of the “Other” as part of a Viking Age Orientalism. Academic discussions of Orientalism focus mainly on occidental negative views of the so-called Orient, but also an elevated, overly positive and ideal image is part of a similar exoticism (e.g., Said 1995; Lundahl 2002). In this there may also have been an exciting touch of adventurousness.

The construction of what constitutes “us” and what constitutes “them” is a continuously ongoing process, and so is the construction of personal identity and how this is expressed (cf. contemporary gender research, e.g., Sørensen 2000; Connell 2002). In the case of the weights with pseudo-Arabic inscriptions, we get a glimpse of personal and quite individual expressions of self-image and of how some persons wanted to be seen by others. As discussed above, long-distance Eastern traits in general were held in high esteem during the Viking Age, and weights with pseudo-Arabic inscriptions actually constituted an intersection where the local met the (seemingly) distant. Perhaps these inscriptions on weights reflect

the owners' wish to surround themselves with a somewhat more cosmopolitan "aura" than other persons possessed, and possibly the inscriptions contributed to expressing the users' know-how in trading. The pseudo-Arabic inscriptions probably indicated that the owner of such a weight was rather experienced and knew what it was like out in the world through trading expeditions far from home. Such a person would, of course, be well experienced and good with the vital equipment used in trading transactions, i.e. the scales and the weights. The word *bakh* may have referred to (see discussion above) a first-class trader with first-class weighing equipment, reliable and trustworthy – perhaps even a bit Arabic. Ironically, this was expressed by means of inscriptions that in essence were falsifications, at least if the intention was to have them perceived as "genuine" Arabic. Whether trading partners and customers fell for the trick is, however, another matter.

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