

# Engendering Performance in the Late Iron Age

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This paper deals with humanoid figures on gold foils from the Late Iron Age in Scandinavia. Interpreted as figures wearing masks, an effort is made to show the complexity, importance and significance of masking practices. The single Bornholm figures from the 6<sup>th</sup> century are interpreted as shamans performing rituals. Further, it is proposed that a restriction of masked appearances and performances to certain people (shamans) and places in the long run created stricter and more rigid gender roles in everyday life. The later gold-foil couples are seen as signs of divine communication, cosmological movement and seasonality, making up a mythology that legitimised political domination – the sacred lineage of rulers pivoting around an apical, ancestral cross-sex pair.

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## INTRODUCTION

In ample examples we find representations of masked figures on Late Iron Age (550-1050 AD) objects, for instance on the well-known helmet plaques from Öland and Uppland in Sweden, and of masked countenances on buckles and brooches (Kjærum & Olsen 1990). Even actual masks have been recovered, from Haithabu/Hedeby (Hägg 1985:69-72). Further, there is also reason to believe that the variety of masked appearances was present before the Late Iron Age. In this paper I will try to reach a deeper understanding of the possible meanings of masking practices, and their importance to social, cultural and cosmological worlds. Masking practices here include masked appearances and performances in rituals. I will begin by focusing on and discussing masking practices on an anthropological and performance-theoretical level. Using this as a point of departure, I will then discuss figures primarily on gold foils. These figures are here inter-

preted as much more than just ordinary human beings. They are *humanoid* figures – humanlike beings which have features often hinging on the supernatural, that is, which have masked appearances. This paper further investigates the possible implications of masking practices being connected not only to certain rituals such as shamanistic performances and initiation rites, but also to certain people or certain categories of people, such as shamans. It is suggested that a restriction of masked appearances and performances to certain people and places in the Late Iron Age, created stricter and more rigid gender roles in everyday life. This in turn meant an exclusion of people to a greater extent than before from dealing with transformation and change, from having contact with ancestors, and in the long run from having control of formal change.

## MASKING PRACTICES

Anthropological research has found that

masks appear in a variety of contexts, and they are known to have been used by many societies and peoples in the past (Mack 1994:9). Figures wearing masks are known already in the Bronze Age, exemplified by the bird-masked bronze figure from Glasbacka, Sweden, or the apparently masked figures found in rock-carvings in Bohuslän, Sweden (Burenhult 1991:187-188). The Celts used masks, especially animal masks (Klindt-Jensen 1957:89). The Romans used masks as well; in their parades masks representing mythological characters could be either male or female, although worn by men (Mack 1994:27). Then what about mask-wearing during the Iron Age in Scandinavia? In the Thorsbjerg bog a silver mask has been found, that dates to the Early Iron Age (Petersen 1995), and two bear/animal masks of felt material have been recovered from a shipwreck in Haithabu/Hedeby (Hägg 1985:69-72) dating to the Late Iron Age. These remind of the animal-clad figures on the helmet plaques from Vendel and Valsgärde in Uppland and Torslunda on Öland, Sweden. Further, some figures on the golden horns from Gallehus, Denmark are mask-portrayed (Axboe 1990a, b). Klindt-Jensen has pointed out that the wooden sculpture from Rude Eskildstrup, Denmark has facial features that resemble a mask (1957:89-90). The wooden sculpture is seen to be wearing a three-ringed collar, reminiscent of the collars of gold found in Ålleberg, Møne and Färjestaden in Sweden. Looking closely at these collars you see a number of different figures. There are birds, wild boars, dragons, lizards as well as humanoid figures (in their turn wearing golden collars!) and facial masks (Holmqvist 1980). The same facial masks can also be found on a few golden bracteates (Lindqvist 1926:20-23). Here the notion of the facial mask stands not only for a representation of a human face, but for a mask in the meaning of something that is put on to create new, or rather well-known, identities – perhaps a masked countenance recognised as being an

ancestor, a divinity or demon (cf. Holmqvist 1980:49). There are striking similarities between some gold-foil figures found on Bornholm and the wooden sculpture from Rude Eskildstrup. These similarities include extremely pointed chins, probable facial masks, bulbous eyes, the same markings on the figures' chests (probably resulting from the same garment) and their hands and legs in similar positions (bent legs symbolising a sitting posture) (figs. 1, 2). Further, some gold foil figures also have golden collars (fig. 10).

A great number of archaeologists deal with the possible influences and/or origins of objects, or styles of objects. This is also true for the archaeological materials included in this article (see for instance Lindqvist 1926, Klindt-Jensen 1957 and Holmqvist 1980, to



*Fig. 1. The wooden sculpture from Rude Eskildstrup. Its collar has been interpreted as a golden collar, a magical instrument for shamans and shamanistic acts. From Mackeprang 1935:Pl.V.*



Fig. 2. Gold foil from Bornholm, reminiscent of the wooden sculpture from Rude Eskildstrup, based on its pointed chin, bulbous eyes, possible facial mask, cross-marking on the chest. From Watt 1991:97.

mention just a few). Such analyses are, however, outside the scope of this article.

So far I have discussed actual masks and portrayals of masks, or masked figures. There are, however, additional significant dimensions to masking practices, other than the more tangible aspects. These practices are also well-suited to an anthropological and performance-theoretical mask discussion, as they are of great importance for understanding social, cultural and cosmological worlds.

First of all, I would like to point out that the concept of the mask is here not the same thing as our present-day notion of a mask. It is *not* simply about someone dressing up, or concealing her/his identity. Instead it can be seen as an actual embodiment; the person wearing the mask might be perceived as (temporarily) ceasing, becoming invisible or disappearing (Napier 1986:16). Even so, on one level the audience or onlookers might be fully aware of the masked appearance, but react with genuine emotions as if they were not, thus implying that spectators actively

perform and participate *in* the ritual (Pernet 1992:156-157). Interestingly, some cultures, described in our terms as “mask cultures”, do not even have a word for the mask in our sense of the word (Mack 1994:12). For instance in Central Africa, the generic term *makishi* refers not only to a range of masks, but also to the performance of which masking is a part, as well as the accompanying equipment and clothing (ibid:15-16). Further, *makishi* also stands for the dead in a resurrected form, such as ancestral spirits, and it also refers to charms, amulets and other magical things (ibid.). Masks (and everything else included in the specific case) can also be seen as gendered (Lévi-Strauss 1983) or even genderless (Kürti 1996:158). Masking is associated with rites of passage or other rituals marking change. This means it is part of ceremonies playing on the symbolics of birth and death, such as initiation rites and healing practices (Mack 1994:20). Some wooden masks from Nigeria are used at annual festivals, where their associations with lineage ancestors make it possible for them to be brought out at times of crisis when it is of importance to sustain and assert ancestral vitality (Mack 1994:55). Through masks change or transformations can be dealt with – they are ambiguous and paradoxical (Napier 1986:1-3). Of course, it is not possible to understand masks without considering the context of action in which they operate (Poppi 1994:194) and that masks often are accompanied by certain clothes or lack of clothes, certain gestures, bodily postures etc, in short everything that belongs to the act of performing. Thus masks have been found to be present in transition situations (Napier 1986:16). What is more, the liminal phase in rituals (Turner 1967) also seems to be appropriate to masking interpretations (Napier 1986). Almost always, laws and/or social rules are altered during transformational states (ibid:16). This is done by opposition, inversion or by the abandoning of prohibitions and normal rules (ibid). In Hungary, even

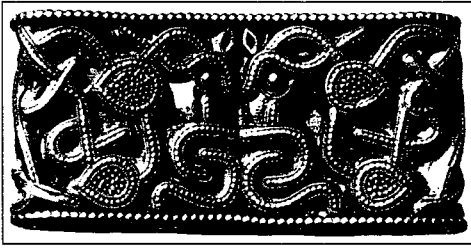


Fig. 3. Sword-sheath fitting from Tureholm, Södermanland, showing split representation. In the middle is an animal split in two from head to toe, seen in profile. At the same time, the two split animals might be perceived as being one. From Stenberger 1964:513.

today, an inversed world is acted out in the “women’s carnival” in village communities (Kürti 1996). The event is organised by and for women alone; they dance, sing bawdy songs and perform male dances sometimes dressed as males (ibid:151). The carnival is a temporary reversal of the usually harsh patriarchal gender roles. Through the performances at the carnival, a redefinition of gender-specific borders and actions is allowed (ibid:158). However, it is only, paradoxically, when crossing traditional borders at these carnivals that it is shown that everyday categories are limited, rigid and difficult to change (ibid).

Returning to Iron Age Scandinavia, we may also get support for our assumption that Scandinavia has traits of mask culture, from Lévi-Strauss. Through his studies of Asia and America, Lévi-Strauss found that split representation was a trait common to certain mask cultures (1967:258). Kristoffersen has discussed the split representation in the research of Lévi-Strauss in an article in 1995. Focussing on Late Iron Age artefacts, she avoids directly linking all of Lévi-Strauss’ thoughts on “primitive art” and its societies, but instead establishes the fundamental idea of transformation for this material (Kristoffersen 1995). She proposes that the animals on objects in Germanic art represented mortal as well as immortal aspects, and that they

expressed symbolic transformations in rituals. She points out that transformations were a recurrent theme in Germanic ideas of the soul, and that when the soul acted on its own, it often transformed itself into an animal. Further, she suggests that by ornamenting objects with animals, the objects changed into new unities that were given the strength of the animals, and were thereby able to watch over the owner of the object. Split representation is a common feature in some Scandinavian objects, in particular from the Migration period. Fig. 3 shows a fitting for a sword sheath, with split representation. This is signified by an animal, perceived as being cut in two from head to toe when seen in profile, but at the same time the two split animals might be perceived as being a single animal, when viewed *en face*.

#### BRINGING OUT THE OTHER WITHIN

There are two more aspects of masking practices that I would like to develop before going deeper into the possible meanings of humanoid figures. One theoretical point of departure in this article is queer theory. Sedgwick has argued that “...an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern



Fig. 4. An allegedly “loving” couple found on Helgö, Sweden. From Holmqvist 1961, front cover.



Fig. 5. Two figures of apparently same-sex embracing. Found in a grave with no apparent superstructure in Norsborg, Sweden. From Holmqvist 1960:112.

Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition..." (Sedgwick 1990:1). This means that our division of people into homo/heterosexuals, as well as our constant use of this division (it may be explicit, conscious or subconscious) pervades our Western societies to the extent that anything in these societies is perceived in the lines of normal (e.g. heterosexuality) or not normal (e.g. homosexuality). Queer theorists champion difference, and a major task is to increase the awareness of the fact that "normal people" as well have queer traits. One of the points for queer theorists is to critically analyse or try to get a perspective of normality from a relatively decentred perspective. Butler has also extensively discussed the workings of heterosexual hegemony in relation to sexual and political matters (e.g. 1990, 1993). It should be obvious that our interpretations of the past are full of present-day normalities. Queer theorists at least, try to give you an opportunity to confront your ideas of what is considered normal and usually unquestionable. How many writers declare that

they are writing from and thereby advocating, a "normal/male/heterosexual" perspective, although it is often demanded that queer theorists, feminists etc. should explain and justify their modes of thought (cf. Engelstad 1991; Wylie 1992). Let me present a current example of present-day heterosexuality forced upon an archaeological material.

Archaeologists have happily and easily acknowledged that gold foils depicting a man and a woman embracing are a "loving couple" (fig. 4). This description, or rather interpretation, seems in itself to have made it "impossible" to interpret or describe figures of same-sex to be embracing or loving couples. Two pendants with same-sex humanoids, closely resembling the gold foils in style, have been found. The bronze pendant found in an 8<sup>th</sup> or early 9<sup>th</sup> century grave with no apparent superstructure, in Norsborg, Sweden (ATA, Holmqvist 1960:111), can be interpreted as showing two women grabbing each other by the arms (fig. 5). Here it is contended that "...one could never interpret this as a pair of lovers or a fertility scene" (Holmqvist 1960:111). As a single find from Roskilde, Denmark, the second pendant, in gold, depicts two men embracing, one with a beard (fig. 6). Probably as a result of having



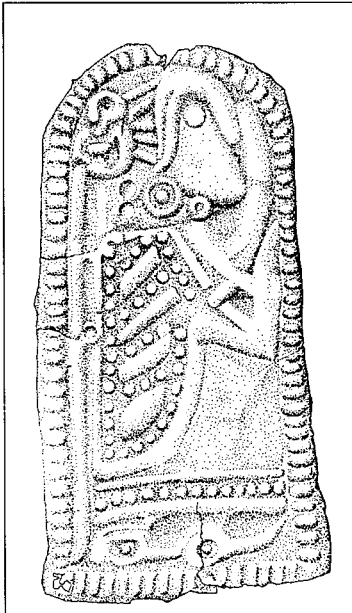
Fig. 6. Another example of two figures of same-sex embracing. Single find from Roskilde, Denmark. From Holmqvist 1960:112.

difficulties in explaining two men in such a position, it is stated that the figure with a beard is a woman. “Her” beard would just be the unfortunate result of a primitive portrayal technique (Mackeprang 1943:69). In both examples, the possibility of two people of same-sex embracing and being lovers is completely rejected. This is highly inconsistent with the interpretation of an embracing man and woman as lovers. However, as shall be seen below, I do not consider the “loving couple” interpretation to be satisfactory, be it supposedly two women, two men or a man and a woman embracing.

Whereas queer theory almost exclusively is applied to sexual matters, queer theory in this article will encompass broader issues, focussing on other categorisations that also, just as unreflectively, are forced upon archaeological materials. Queer includes here aspects of ourselves or society that we generally do not want to recognise, but that nonetheless are a part of us. Kristeva has argued that we are all to some extent strangers to ourselves,

that we have alien traits that we do not know or recognise as being “us” (Kristeva 1991). Masking could in this context work as a catalyst, as a means of bringing out strange, extraordinary qualities of being, under a certain amount of control. Queerness might also consciously or subconsciously be used to control or dominate groups of people, where queer could be positive or negative, deviant or sacred, or something in between. In this context, wearing a mask may be perceived as a means of bringing out the Other within.

The second aspect of masking practices is that of Christianity and polytheism. Polytheistic preferences differ metaphysically from Christian monotheism. This difference is of fundamental importance when it comes to masking, “since polytheism is arguably not merely a religious preference but a distinct mode of thought and of universal organization” (Napier 1986:4). For instance, whereas Judaeo-Christians believe that the world was completed by the Creator after the seventh day and humans were created man or woman, some Native American religions recognise Earth as not being left in a perfect state after the act of creation (Lang 1996:186-187). The world remains in transformation for a long time, and anything existing on Earth is not unambiguous; rather humans, animals, plants, rocks, etc. may manifest themselves in two or more forms (ibid). Not only are they different cosmological apprehensions, but polytheism also includes a different way of looking at and assessing appearances (Napier 1986:4). “In a monotheistic tradition...any unaccountable transition or inexplicable manifestation may be attributed in the end either to god or to Satan...” (ibid:5), as opposed to polytheistic traditions where forces might be controlled and understood through mimesis, for example through impersonation (ibid:13).



*Fig. 7. Well-dressed female figure standing in a portal with a drinking horn. Found on Bornholm, Denmark. From Watt 1991:97.*

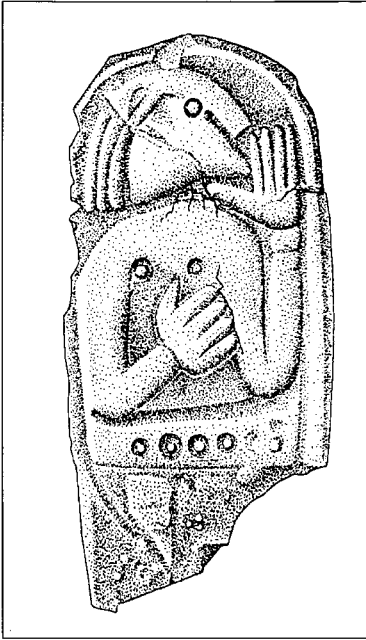


Fig. 8. Partly dressed male figure shouting, maybe to guide the shaman back from spiritual travels. Found on Bornholm, Denmark. From Watt 1991:97.

#### THE BORNHOLM FIGURES – SHAMAN SHAPE CHANGERS IN LIMINAL ACTION

Gold foils are generally dated to the 6-9<sup>th</sup> centuries and have been found in Denmark, Sweden and Norway. Traditionally, they are interpreted by archaeologists as having something to do with the cult, as portraying gods identified through later, medieval written sources, and/or they are described as being found at so-called central places, that allegedly served administrative, economic, political and religious functions (e.g. Olsen 1909; Holmqvist 1957; Steinsland 1991; Watt 1991; Hauck 1993; Andréasson 1995; Lundqvist 1997). The number of gold foils found on Bornholm amounts to ca. 2300; they were found within a small settlement area and have been dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> century (Watt 1991:94, 105). These gold foils show a great variety, almost always depicting a single figure that

is stamped, carved or cut out of very thin gold foil. The foils display humanoid figures that are well-dressed or half-naked, with or without a frame, apparently “dancing”, “shouting”, “drinking”, “standing still” or showing other postures, etc. (figs. 7-9).

There have been attempts to sort these figures into different categories such as royal people, dancers, etc. (e.g. Watt 1992:206-219). However, I would like to suggest that these humanoid figures depict shamanic acts and performances. As is well known, masks frequently appear in contexts with shamans and transformations. Indeed, they are closely linked together, in my view, because of their connection with the supernatural. Eliade, in his very extensive studies of shamanism, has found that one of the most essential and common traits of a shaman is the mask (Eliade 1943, ch. 5). He also emphasises that the whole attire of the shaman is part of the masking practices (ibid). The earlier mentioned golden collars, with their myriad of animal and humanoid figures and masked countenances, have been interpreted as magi-



Fig. 9. Figure in portal, perhaps signifying the start of the journey to other worlds, a liminal and transcending phase. The drinking horn perhaps with sacred drugs, also underlines this. Note that the figure is holding a staff, to which the drinking horn might have been attached. Found on Bornholm, Denmark. From Watt 1991:96.

cal instruments for shamans and shamanic acts (Holmqvist 1980:99). Shamans are usually central in transformations, and are able to mediate between (the ethnocentric division of) the supernatural and the natural world, and are thereby in control of formal change (Napier 1986:16). This would mean that the well-dressed, framed, gold-foil man or woman could very well be the same person seen on another unframed, carved or cut gold foil. They would simply show different stages of the same act or performance. The more loosely portrayed, cut, and “inhuman” they are, the more ecstatic (fig. 10). Some seem to be standing in portals (figs. 7, 9) – perhaps signifying that they are just about to start the journey to other worlds, a liminal transcending phase. Others, framed or in portals, drink from a horn, maybe consuming sacred drinks/drugs for the realisation of the journey (figs. 7, 9). Since shamans were experts at transformations, it was also possible and sometimes necessary for them to transform themselves into animals (Mandelstam Balzer 1996:194). The few gold foils showing animals (found only on Bornholm) might thus be shamanic spirit animals that would help the shaman get to other cosmological worlds to gain knowledge or to have vital contact with ancestors (cf. Mandelstam Balzer 1996). Some figures on the gold foils display a feather-like garment (Watt 1987:5; see also Fischer 1974:29-30) that, alluding to birds, could be shamans aspiring to move (fly) between different elements (birds can fly in the sky, dive through water but also walk on the ground). Queer bird-shamans with large eyes, possibly with feathered mantles, are known already in the late Bronze Age (Strassburg 1997:110). The gold-foil “shouters” might be interpreted as the ones who would also guide the shaman back to the “real” world, by shouting so that the shaman could find the way (fig. 8). It is also notable that some cut gold-foil figures (in my interpretation shamans in trance or ecstasy) have been adorned with golden collars, just as the



Fig. 10. Cut figure dressed in a golden collar (cf. the earlier wooden sculpture from Rude Eskildstrup). Representation of a possible shaman in trance. Found on Bornholm, Denmark. From Watt 1991:98.

wooden sculpture from Rude Eskildstrup from the Migration period. I believe that these gold foils, since they show performance in action, were seen as actual embodiments of these performances, and were thus loaded with immense power. They were sacrificed on the ground at Sorte Muld, Bornholm (some had been deliberately folded or crumpled up), where a house from the Late Roman Iron Age had burnt down (Watt 1991:93).

The probable presence of shamans during the Iron Age has recently been discussed by Lotte Hedeager (1997a, b), though she focuses primarily on the Odin cult as *a*, or rather *the* shamanistic tradition. She takes support from among others Strömbäck, who proved the connection between prophecy making (*sejd*) and shamanism by studying Norse medieval sources, especially the saga of Erik the Red (1935). Of central importance to this *sejd* was the shape changing (Sw. *hamnskifte*) (Strömbäck 1935:160-190). The shaman often shape-changed into an animal, but shape changes into humanoid or fiendish figures are also known (ibid:161, 167).

At the time of the offering or deposition of the many gold foils on Bornholm (the 6<sup>th</sup> century) big changes were taking place both in Scandinavia and in Europe (Hedeager 1997a:26). Hedeager has stated that in these turbulent times, wars and fighting were to a greater extent than before one way for a social elite to sustain or gain influence or control in society (ibid). The power of this social elite was manifested through control over the land,



but was ideologically connected to a warrior religion/belief. Such a religion/belief pivoted around the Æsir god Odin (ibid). The political power resided in authority that was gained through a cosmology that was wellknown, and a crucial element here would be access to the world of ancestors and gods, gained through the powerful Æsir god Odin (Hedeager 1997a:118-119). The iconographic works of Hauck have linked Odin to many gold bracteates from the 5<sup>th</sup> century (Hauck 1983, 1986; see also Hedeager 1997b:265, 274-275 for further references). Medieval sources tell of Odin as the master of *sejd* (Ynglingasaga, ch. 7) although somewhat contradictory, but very queer, it was considered inappropriate for a man to make a prophecy (Steinsland & Meulengracht Sørensen 1994:82). Instead, this task was to be performed by women. Men who engaged in *sejd* could be called derogatory names connected to the word *argr* or *ergi*, which was used to describe a man who could be conceived as the passive, penetrated part in a sexual relationship (Carlsson 1996:112-113; Steinsland & Meulengracht Sørensen 1994:82). Despite this, the most shameful of acts, Odin could dress in women's clothing to make prophecies (Steinsland & Meulengracht Sørensen 1994:51). Odin might as well be named the god of queerness, since he has so many, sometimes contradictory, strange, dangerous and powerful characteristics. He is the god of war, the god of wisdom, the master of prophecy making, the god of creation, magic and death (Bæksted 1988). The queer characteristics of Odin have recently been discussed by Brit Solli at the 1998 EAA meeting held in Göteborg.

Through the rise of a prominent warrior ideology, shamanism became "officially" monopolised. Shamanism seems now to be primarily linked to the Æsir god Odin, the raging, ecstatic war-god. Of interest here is also the fact that one of Odin's names is *Grimnir*, meaning "the masked" (Ström 1997:110). A warrior-based ideology pivoting

around an Odin cult may very well have been a prominent feature during the (mainly later) Iron Age, but it is equally important to point out, through the archaeological material, the possibility of other, perhaps less visible ideologies. At the time of the sacrificing of the gold foils at Sorte Muld, it is possible that Bornholm was exposed to stress from the outside in the form of Arianism and Christianity, which challenged the old ways and traditions. It is further possible that the rather sudden appearance of the god Odin in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries was also one of the challenges that triggered the need for repetitive performances, exemplified by the sacrificed gold foils. These performances were a means of confronting new issues in old ways, also indicating important transformations in society. Compared with the sacrifices in bogs, common mainly in the Early Iron Age but also continuing later, the performances of shamans might have been perceived as having a greater impact if they could be activated somewhere on dry land, where one conducted different, more frequent activities. The sacrificing of gold foils on Bornholm at the site of a burnt down Late Roman Iron Age building could have been a way to try to connect to older times. Perhaps it was thought of as a means of revitalising and connecting to ancestors, considered necessary in a time of crisis or stress. These metaphorical journeys were also spatial journeys; they had directionality and movement. We may envisage houses, yards, walks, etc. making up an entirety of cosmic embodiment. Describing Sorte Muld on Bornholm as an administrative, economic, political and/or religious centre would then hardly be sufficient; rather, it could be seen as a place for enacting cosmic movement and travel, or even travel without moving physically (cf. Parkin 1992).

CONTROLLING GENDER VARIANCE  
BY "MONOPOLISING QUEERNESS"  
Shamans, who often play decisive powerful roles in societies, can be described as queer

in the sense that they can move between the male and the female sphere, the sexually active and the sexually passive, humankind and animal-kind, the ordinary world and other cosmological worlds, as well as have contact with gods, have powers to heal people, and other sorts of extraordinary gifts (Mandelstam Balzer 1996; Lang 1996). In many cultures, such as within the cultural traditions of Siberia and the Native North American Cultures, people exhibiting what we in the Western world would describe as deviant behaviour, for example cross-dressing, are generally perceived as having sacred genders or having been touched by the supernatural (Mandelstam Balzer 1996:164; Lang 1996:187). This in turn goes partly back to the religion and world-view of a given culture, described above.

In the following, in a broad sense and on a general level, I will try to investigate the possible implications of a “monopolisation” of queerness or certain appearances. This means that any deeper analyses of gender constructions during the Late Iron Age are not included. For a thorough discussion of gender constructions during the Viking Age, see Arwill-Nordbladh 1998.

Earlier, I described Odin as a god with queer characteristics. However, Odin is not alone in exhibiting queer traits; others do too, for instance Loki, Balder and also Thor, when he was on his cross-dressing quest (Bæksted 1988). The medieval Norse literature has many references to cross-dressing. Apart from gods acting queer, there are also stories about other beings cross-dressing, for instance in the account about Aud and Tord in the saga of Laxdóla, where the former wife of Tord, Aud, dressed in trousers like a man and mounted a horse, a sword hanging by her side. Gods, and other people in the sagas, are allowed queer behaviour and gender variance (like cross-dressing), but paradoxically, the gender roles in everyday life during the Late Iron Age were probably very strict and sharply divided between men and women (Breisch

1994:81; Steinsland & Meulengracht Sørensen 1994:115). Men and women who cross-dressed could be punished by being partially outlawed, according to Icelandic laws (Breisch 1994:82, from *Grágás* 2:254). Strict gender roles might be further supported by the change in grave rituals, at least in the Mälars Valley, Sweden, where for instance the number of personal objects linked to the deceased increased between the Early and the Late Iron Age (Bennett 1987:184-185). This in turn makes gender more easily distinguishable. It is thus possible that with the appearance of a “new”, by a warrior ideology, “monopolised” shamanistic tradition during the Migration period there emerged also a stricter division between gender roles in everyday life. Essentially, queer traits were now allocated and ascribed, to a greater extent than before, to gods rather than to humans. By creating rigid gender roles for ordinary men and women, they were given less opportunity to develop or exhibit the queer qualities that were considered necessary for making contact with the supernatural or ancestors. In essence, following the line of reasoning above about masking practices, the dealings with change and transformation, and as an extension the control of formal change, were now to a greater extent outside the spheres of these people. What is more, the sagas reiterating multi-faceted gendered actions were a means of re-establishing gender-specific borders in everyday life. But at the same time, while flourishing in the sagas, the “traditional” everyday gendered actions appear to be rigid, limited and difficult to change.

#### GOLD-FOIL COUPLES – DIVINE COMMUNICATION AND COSMOLOGICAL MOVEMENT

Gold foils depicting pairs, commonly called “loving couples”, are generally said to be of a later date than the single figures found on Bornholm (Mackeprang 1952:105 and below). Couples have also been found on Bornholm, but only ca. 10 out of a total of

2300 gold foils (Watt 1992). One of the buildings in connection to where gold foils were found, at Slöinge in Sweden, has been dated to the early 8<sup>th</sup> century (Lundqvist 1997:93-94). The loving couples found on Helgö, also in Sweden, are assumed to belong to the 8<sup>th</sup> century (fig. 4) (Holmqvist 1957:211). Of an earlier date, but nevertheless later than the Bornholm figures, are the “loving couples” found in Lundeberg, Denmark, which belong to the late 6<sup>th</sup> or the mid 7<sup>th</sup> century (Thomsen 1993:88). Further, the loving couples have mostly been found in connection with special buildings, sometimes in post-holes, at so-called central places (Lundqvist 1997; Andréasson 1995). The previously discussed Bornholm figures, on the other hand, could not be proved to be linked to a contemporaneous building (Watt 1991:93). Gold-foil pairs are frequently framed and/or sumptuously dressed, and are always stamped, never cut. (See Andréasson 1995 for an extensive listing of gold foils found between 1740 and 1994.)

It has been suggested by Steinsland that the “loving couples” portray the divine wedding known from *Skirnismál* between the god Frö and the giantess Gerd, and she connects this to the myth of *hieros gamos* (Steinsland 1991; see also Hauck 1993 for iconographic identification). Her interpretation has to some degree been criticised by Clunies Ross (1994). However, there are several medieval texts that describe divine weddings, for example the *Hákonardrápa* and the *Háleygjatal* (Sundqvist 1997:99), though these do not appoint Frö and Gerd as the wedding couple. In *Hákonardrápa*, Hákon Jarl is identified with the god Odin, whose conquest of Norway is described as an erotic act or wedding between Odin and the goddess of land/fertility (ibid:98-100). In this case, the conquest/wedding takes on a cosmic meaning (ibid). This implies that gold foils depicting a man and woman embracing are not mere “loving couples” but actually signs of divine communication and cosmological movement

and seasonality. Further, calling the places “central” on economic, administrative and political levels ignores the aspect of these places as fundamental for imposing cosmic order as a sacral hegemony, the sacred court embodying cosmological geography. Continuing with the sagas, it is further stated that the divine wedding resulted in the first king of the Ynglinga dynasty (Steinsland 1991). At the time of these later “loving couples”, the warrior ideology might have fully incorporated the shamanistic tradition into its womb. Instead it became important for the people in power (maybe kings) to explain their origin in a mythical setting. Later, through the medieval Snorre and his “Ynglingasaga”, this origin-myth was historicised (Sundqvist 1997:104-109). Gold-foil couples, showing stereotyped, aristocratic, well-to-do bodies of a man and a woman, portrayed with conservative traits in the choice of clothes or total appearance, reminding of the earlier “shamanistic” gold foils from Bornholm, came to be a means of sustaining and controlling gender variance. At the same time, the origin of the people as an aristocratic couple made up a mythology that legitimised the present political domination. Mythic genealogy connected the gods with the rulers, so that their sacred lineage history pivoted around an apical, ancestral cross-sex pair. Interestingly enough, this mythology of obligatory cross-sex bonding was not uncontradicted locally.

I have previously mentioned the two pendants with same-sex couples embracing (figs. 5, 6). The circumstances of their different depositions (Roskilde: a possible offering; Norsborg: a grave with no apparent superstructure) do not have the “central” or public qualities that do the loving couples found in, often, huge buildings. This might indicate a form of individual opposition, where these pairs tell another story (than the *hieros gamos*) that we cannot find in the medieval sagas. Although, of course, they do not depict homosexuals in love or whatever,

they do appear to hint at a world of same-sex erotic acts and intimacy. Although deprived of their cosmic legitimacy, due to their being locked out from the “central ritual contexts” where legitimate cosmic enacting takes place, they were definitely designed as if they had access and relevance to the cosmos after all.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article deals with humanoid figures on gold foils, present in Late Iron Age Scandinavia. Earlier interpretations generally reduce these figures to signify “cult”, “power” or known figures/stories from later written sources. In this article, they are interpreted as wearing masks in an anthropological and performance-theoretical sense of the word, and I have tried to show the complexity, importance and significance of masking practices. I have proposed that the gold foils found on Bornholm depict shamans at different stages of shamanistic actions. These shamanistic rituals were metaphorical journeys that enabled cosmic movement and travel or even travel without moving physically. At the time these gold-foil figures were sacrificed, a strong shamanistic Odin cult had emerged, which was to a large extent monopolised by a warrior ideology. This ideology also implied a monopolisation of queer qualities, like cross-dressing and changing one’s appearance with masks, often linked to shamans. These qualities were considered necessary for making contact with ancestors or supernatural beings, for dealing with transformation and change, and in extension control of formal change. A restriction of queer appearances to certain people (such as shamans) and certain places led to a stricter and more rigid division of gender roles in

everyday life for ordinary people. This might be discernible, for example, through the punishment for cross-dressing, or by the more easily recognisable genders in grave material in the Late Iron Age as compared with the Early Iron Age.

At the time of the later “loving couples”, the warrior ideology might have fully incorporated the shamanistic tradition into its womb. Instead it became important for the people in power (maybe kings) to explain their origin in a mythical setting. Using the gold foil couples displaying stereotyped, aristocratic, well-to-do bodies of a man and a woman, portrayed with conservative traits in the choice of clothes or total appearance, and also reminding of the earlier “shamanistic” gold foils from Bornholm, was one way of sustaining and controlling gender variance. At the same time, the origin of the people as an aristocratic couple made up a mythology that legitimised the present political domination. Mythic genealogy connected the gods with the rulers, so that their sacred lineage history pivoted around an apical, ancestral cross-sex pair.

*English revised by Laura Wrang.*

#### ABBREVIATIONS

- ATA Antikvarisk-Topografiska Arkivet, Stockholm. (The Antiquarian Topographical Archive, Stockholm.)
- KVHAA Kungliga Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien. (The Royal Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities.)

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