

THE RETURN OF VIKING SYMBOLS

O RETORNO DOS SÍMBOLOS VIKINGS



PESCH, Alexandra. *Vom Zauber der Zeichen: Die historischen Hintergründe von graphischen Zeichen, Symbolen und Ornamenten in der modernen Wikinger- und Mittelalterszene*. Rosenbach: AntikMakler, 2024.

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Man has always produced symbols, from prehistoric times to the times of space conquest. The world's most important religions have also always expressed strong artistic and

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cultural identities through symbols. The ancient Scandinavians were no different. One might wonder though: to what extent did Viking symbols – and their constant presence in movies, media, medieval festivals and even tattoos – really have the same meaning which is attributed to them in these media? This is the central issue that German archaeologist Alexandra Pesch investigates throughout her 130-page book.

The investigative work was herculean. It is not easy to find visual sources in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, particularly those from the Scandinavian area during the Viking Age. There is a lack of careful systematizations, comprehensive works and even specific academic books on the subject. Since the Second World War, productions on Nordic and Germanic geometric symbolism have largely ceased to be produced, breaking a vigorous tradition since the 19th century. In part, this was due to Nazism and many fanciful appropriations by right-wing groups – a theme that the author critically revisits with great mastery throughout the book.

In the largest systematization of Norse religious beliefs to date, there are not even brief references to the main geometric symbols (with the exception of the spiral), as in the recent *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North: History and Structures*, 2020. One reason for the lack of analytical studies on Viking geometric symbolism is that we do not have literary sources: it is as if this subject is surrounded by an almost absolute darkness (with the sole exception of the description of *Hrungnis Hjarta* in Snorri's *Edda*). Thus, we only have visual sources to deal with, which in turn are fragmented and sometimes difficult to access because they only appear in specialized publications (some available only in Scandinavian languages), making it difficult for researchers in general to gain knowledge on the matter. When some scholars have explored the subject (sometimes quickly and punctually), they have given only conjectural ideas.

Thus, Pesch's book starts from an essentially diachronic, typological, morphological and aesthetic investigative basis, dividing geometric symbols into three categories: knot motif symbols (Looped square, Solomon's Knot, valknut, triquetra); spiral motifs (triskelion, swastika); cross motif (solar cross, Celtic cross). Some symbols were left out of this general classification, such as those existing from the Renaissance grimoires (vegvisir, Ægishjálmur) and others recently invented (Black Sun), in addition to runes and runic symbols. Also



included in the book are some original symbols from the Viking Age, but with a figurative motif (such as Thor's hammer), or those of medieval origin, but with a meaning completely reinterpreted in the contemporary world (Irminsul). Thus, we can consider Pesch's survey to be very efficient, providing an overview of the historical morphology of each symbolism, its possible meanings in the medieval world and its contemporary reinterpretations, in addition to a bibliography at the end of each symbol, as well as a detailed list of the source for each image, at the end of the book. These properties make it a very valuable resource for the most discerning researchers.

In our opinion, Pesch's greatest success is in relation to symbols that did not originally exist in the Viking Age. In a masterful work, she demonstrates how a 12th-century relief engraving, found in a Christian monastery in Germany, became an official emblem of Nazism (the Irminsul), as well as a symbol of the extreme right and modern neopagans. Another very common symbol (and one that has been heavily reappropriated for political and esoteric reasons) is the Celtic cross, which in reality is not an originally ancient symbol, but a true invention of modernity (here it fits perfectly with what the British historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger called "The Invention of Tradition", 1983).

Or else a magical Icelandic symbol from the 19th century became the Viking compass (vegvisir). As expected, the runes, one of the greatest cultural identifications of the present day in relation to the Vikings, were not left out. Pesch demonstrates how a large part of the mystical or magical relationships and interpretations about runes came from esoteric authors from the 19th century onwards and especially influenced Nazism and the way in which contemporary Westerners interpret them - one example is the s rune, interpreted as a sign of victory, or the swastika being originally also considered a rune. We cannot fail to mention here that some academics prior to Nazism also passed through this reference - the famous translation of the swastika on the sword of Sæbø, considered by the British antiquarian George Stephens to be the rune of Thor, with the sound of T (Stephens, 1884, p. 243). Obviously, this is a mistaken idea.

Pesch's research also present a few problems. In our view, it has a deficient view of the meanings of the swastika, triquetra, triskelion and valknut: in general terms, her research



denies any kind of connection between these symbols and Norse deities, or even with any kind of mythical narrative or ancient Norse religion. On the other hand, it grants a direct connection with the Christian tradition, either as a symbol of Christ or with the religious culture of the new religion.

We agree with her diachronic reference, establishing that the swastika and the triskelion are symbols that have existed since Antiquity, while the triquetra and valknut originated from the Viking Age itself (they emerged after the 8th century, something that the German archaeologist had already published results on: Pesch, 2023, pp. 11-21). The problem is that symbols cannot be studied only by their individualized morphology: they also need to be analyzed in the figurative context of their object/monument and also from a comparative and/or combined viewpoint. Let us deepen our criticism in relation to each of the symbols pointed out.

First of all, regarding the swastika. The author provides a brief but intense systematization of the swastika in the ancient world, its various forms, its various contexts of use and, of course, its variations in meaning. She comments that the swastika became rare after the bracteates at the end of the Migration Period, which is completely true, and points out that the *only exception* would be the Oseberg Tapestry. Here she omits the well-known Snoldelev runestone (from the eighth century, beginning of the Viking Age): at no point in the book is there a photograph of this runestone, nor a complete reproduction of the figurations and the runic inscription. It is only mentioned on pages 27 and 37, but to highlight the horned triskelion, of which there are reproductions in the book. This is the most famous Nordic monument with a swastika, studied since the 19th century and which was used by the Nazis for ideological promotions against Denmark, which was occupied by their military troops.

Since its first study in 1812, the Snoldelev Stone has been linked to the myths of Odin (Abrahamson; Thorlacius, 1812, p. 278-322), due to the fact that the swastika exists in the bracteates and the three-horned triskelion refers to the three mead vessels, an interpretation that we follow in our own study (Langer; Alves, 2024). Several studies indicate that the symbols existing in the bracteates had some direct or indirect connection with the god Wotan/Odin – they would be images that evoked the protection of the gods (Magnus, 2005).



Recently, the discovery of the Vindelev bracteata (IK 738) raised questions about Klaus Hauck's classic view that the images of knights would be Odin himself – and yes, a knight who extols his relationship with this very deity (*/Iz Wōd[a]nas weraz; He (the catcher) (is) Odin's man, Imer; Vasshus, 2023, p. 94*). In Vindelev, the swastika is interposed between the inscription and the knight's face, demonstrating that it is not a simple apotropaic symbol (as Pesch claims in his book), but a true mark of connection between a leader and the deity. We do not deny the solar meaning that Pesch alludes to in his work, certainly the main basis of the swastika's meaning in the ancient world, but its solar meaning was also used to reinforce elements of the tripartite ideology, one of the bases of the aristocratic elite of the Scandinavian warrior world since the Iron Age.

Thus in several bracteates the swastika was united with tripartite symbols – the numerous variations of the triskelion and ternary circles, as in DR BR55; IK 129,2; DR BR38; DR BR 40; DR BR 43; IK 13,1. The inscription on the Snoldelev stone (DR 248), which mentions a reciter from the Ramsø region, was linked linguistically and religiously to the god Odin (Sundqvist, 2009, p. 660-661; Brink, 1996, p. 255-258). The presence of a swastika with a horned triskelion in Snoldelev (and not a triquetra, as Pesch claims) thus follows a much earlier tradition, originating from the Iron Age (for a bibliographical discussion on Snoldelev, see our study: Langer, Alves, 2024). Another material that confirms a connection between the swastika and the ancient warrior elite is the Guttenstein sword scabbard with a representation of a warrior wearing a wolf's skin, and next to it, an ornate swastika. It is also important to highlight the tombstone from Näsby, where on the outer side of the tomb lid, a large swastika was engraved and on the other side, various weapons were carved, such as a spear, a shield and a sword (Nordén, 1934, p. 35-53).

One piece of material that points to Odin's connection with the swastika is the Tornes figurine (which was not mentioned or reproduced in Pesch's book), found in Norway, featuring solar representations, swastikas and deers. The statuette was identified with the deity due to details of its eye (Ringstad, 1996, p. 103). However, we do not deny that the swastika could also have other meanings. One example is the Oseberg tapestry in 9th-century Norway. In addition to the procession scene (where it appears next to the Looped square, mentioned by Pesch in the sense of a procession), the swastika also appears in other scenes



(fragments), such as in front of a building – here its meaning of good luck (apotropaic) seems to be evident, confirming Pesch's generic position for this symbol. In the Rolvsøy tapestry (Norway, dated to the 10th century, but in a pre-Christian funerary context, Bernardi, 2023, p. 30, 43) a swastika is depicted on the front of a ship, a clear sign of good luck (another example of a Viking Age swastika that Pesch ignores in his book). But returning to the Oseberg tapestry – could we consider that in another fragment from Oseberg, the scene of women dancing around a swastika would reveal an apotropaic sign? And the same symbol depicted below the scene of the hanging tree? Here we must return to other research that demonstrates the connection of the swastika with deities and the divine in the ancient world, from Greek gods to Mithra, or related to a military elite of warriors (Blujiene, 2000; Vaitkevičius, 2020; Dennis, 2016; Coimbra, 2014; Burilo-Cuadrado, 2014). The association of dancers in a position of movement and ecstasy next to swastikas in a fragment of the Oseberg tapestry also occurred in the bracteates (as in IK 197) and the scene of the hanged men has a direct relationship with the myths of Odin, as does the central valknut of the picture stone of Stora Hammars I and its connections with the scenes of the hanged men in this same monument.

But the swastika also points to its possible connection with another deity in the Viking Age. A knife handle recovered from Staraya Ladoga from the Viking Age (another significant absence in Pesch's book), found in a cult context (along with rings with Thor's hammer pendants and runic amulets), features engravings of Thor's hammer and on its tip, a swastika and six Sól runes (Petrenko; Kuzmenko, 1979, p. 78-84). This latter pattern was already observed in bracteates (as in NM 1048). Thor's hammer was related to the swastika in folklore (where it appears in the name *Þórshmar*, in Icelandic grimoires) and in Sweden, *Fattigklubba*, a hammer with swastika used in rural brotherhoods in the 18th century (Mejborg, 1889, p. 16). These last two cases gave rise to the 19th-century interpretation that the swastika was a symbol of the thunder god, culminating in Georges Stephens's aforementioned philological interpretation of the swastika on the sword blade of Sæbø (Stephens, 1884, p. 243) and the painting *Tors strid med jättarna* (Mårten Eskil Winge, 1872). In any case, this link between the hammer and the swastika in the Viking Age requires more detailed research in the future.

In our latest research (Langer; Alves, 2024) we proposed the possibility that the swastika was replaced by the valknut and the triquetra during the Viking Age. This would have

happened due to the fact that these symbols have never been found together on the same object or monument with a swastika (unlike the triquetra and the valknut, both engraved side by side in one case: the Gotlandic box brooch, Main, 2020, p. 68). And in the case of the horned triskelion, it appears together with a swastika in Snoldelev and a valknut in Stenkyrka Lillbjärs III picture stone (G 268), demonstration of our hypothesis.

Pesch also denies the connection between the valknut and the triquetra with the Norse deities. In this sense, we list the evidence:

1. The runestone of Sanda I, Gotland, which has on its upper face a square interpreted as a scene from Valhalla, in the male figure on its right - considered a representation of the god Odin (Oehrl, 2023, p. 199; Jungner, 1930, p. 65-82) - on its back appears a triquetra of points. Also in the picture stone of Barshaldershed in Grötlingbo, a triquetra appears next to the scene where a valkyrie receives a dead man (Oehrl, 2023, p. 198) - once again, a context totally connected to Odin. A small figurine discovered at Tissø depicting a woman wearing a dress with a large triquetra - possibly a valkyrie, the goddess Freyja or a *husfrue* (Gardela; Pentz; Price; 2022, p. 110).
2. A pendant discovered in Tissø, Denmark, interpreted as a depiction of Odin or a leader imitating Odinic characteristics (Pentz, 2018, p. 23-24), has triquetras on both sides of its face (again, a visual source outside of Pesch's book).
3. We demonstrate the relationship between the god Thor and the Borromian-type triquetra, which existed well before the spiked triquetra in the Scandinavian area, especially in objects connected to cult spaces and the god's hammer (Langer; Alves, 2024).
4. The first populations of the city of Novgorod (of Norse origin) made ritual deposits before the first houses were built, inserting several objects in this location (between 930 and 950 AD): several pendants of Thor's hammer, anthropomorphic figurines, as well as amulets with many representations of triquetras and triskelions (Musin, 2019, p. 182; Langer, Alves, 2024).
5. One of the strongest pieces of evidence for a connection between Odin and the valknut is the sacrificial scene on the stone of Stora Hammars I, Gotland. Here the

valknut seems to take up the meaning of the swastika present in the scene of the hanging tree at Oseberg.

Other studies are connecting tripartite symbolism in ancient Scandinavia. Three-pointed monuments, the *treuddar*, were part, as were geometric symbols (triquetra, triskele and valknut), of the tripartite ideology is connected with the Iron Age elite's ancestral óðal-claims based on a legendary or divine descent (Main, 2020, p. 1-53). The numerical symbolism expressed in several Viking Age miniature pendants also connects the *number nine* with the religious practices and concepts of mythical figures such as Odin and his initiatory rites, as demonstrated in an extremely meticulous way by the article by Leszek Gardela, 2022, p. 15-36. Previously, Tom Heller carried out very detailed research demonstrating the relationships between Odin and the valknut (Hellers, 2012). Another more recent study points out interesting connections between the valknut and the world of heroes (Westcoat, 2015, p. 1-23), which were also part of the ideology of the warrior elite in ancient Scandinavia. But we do not question the fact that the swastika, the triquetra and the triskelion were reinterpreted by the new religion and became symbols of Christianity. *But only one was left out*: the valknut is not found in churches, baptismal fonts or other material objects in Scandinavia after the 11th century. Further evidence that it really was an important element of identity of the old religion (Langer; Alves, 2024).

Another significant absence from Alexandra Pesch is the symbol of the spiral. Although she accurately points out this in its relation to the triskelion, such a symbol should have had a section of its own for the Viking Age: the spiral appears as an individual symbol in pendants, earrings and various visual manifestations of the Viking Age (including the picture stones of the island of Gotland), especially on shields, and may have connections with both the serpent and the Sun itself, as well as being connected to the deities and myths of the main gods of the warrior and aristocratic elite.

Despite the interpretative limitations that we have outlined, Alexandra Pesch's book is an important advance in the study of geometric symbolism in Viking-Age Scandinavia, creating yet another publication for future scholars and paving the way for the interest of

academic publishers. We hope that the book will soon be translated into English in order to reach a broader audience.

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