

Symbolism in rites of transition in Iron Age Norway

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IN RITUAL CONTEXTS religious and social elements are interwoven in complex relationships. The following paper will focus on social elements in mortuary practices and burial rites. I will not deal with the ritual in itself. Rather, the ritual will be regarded as some kind of outer frame, within which hidden processes are taking place, on a more unconscious level. One of these is the construction of social identity. I will further relate aspects of social identity expressed in the burial to perceptions of afterlife within the northern heathen religion. The paper refers to a doctoral dissertation.¹

I will apply the perspective of social construction on a group of Migration Period burials from south and west Norway (fig. 1). The Migration Period covers the fifth and sixth centuries AD. In the chosen group of burials objects decorated with the Nordic animal art are found (fig. 2). In the early phase of the Migration Period the art form is heavily influenced by provincial Roman metal work. The earliest pieces are probably made by craftsmen from the workshops in the provinces, widely and rapidly dispersed after the collapse of the Roman Empire. This classical inspired art is then, by local craftsmen, rapidly changed into a genuine Germanic expression, concerning motives, forms and composition. This process is often related to the creation of Germanic identity, and regarded as a need for material expression of identity in a period of alienation from the strong Roman influence.² Typical for this art form are the highly stylised animals entirely covering the surface of an object (fig. 2). The art is found over the entire northern Germanic area, down to the Lombard in Italy, but reaches its highest quality, concerning craftsmanship as well as artistry in the northern countries, as exemplified in the relief brooch from Kvåle in Sogn (fig. 2). The main questions in my dissertation concerned the social context of the animal art. In order to answer these questions,

1 Kristoffersen 2000b; see also Kristoffersen 1999a, 1999b, 2000a.

2 Näsman 1998:108, Hedeager 1996, Kristoffersen 1995.

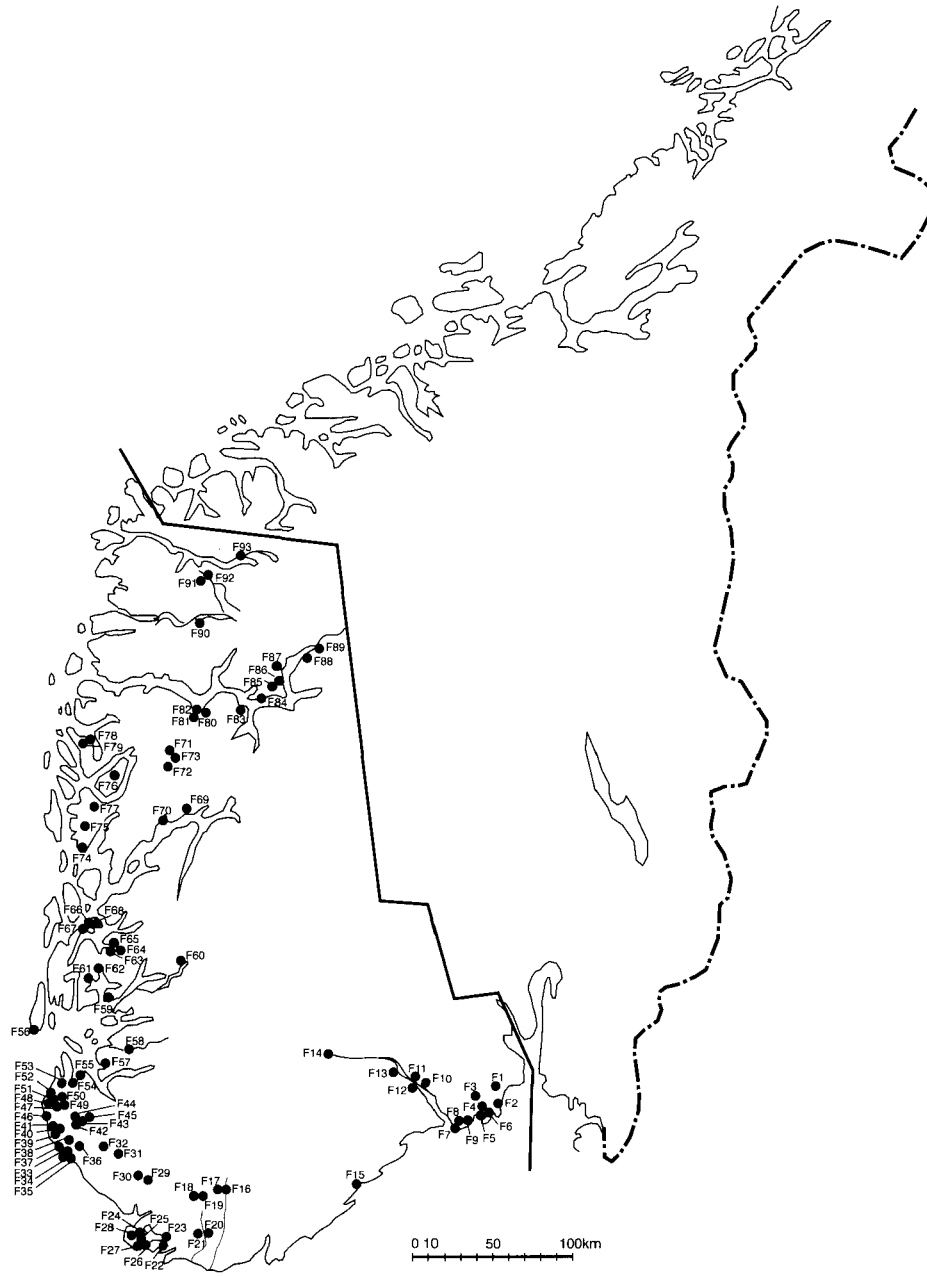


Fig. 1: Distribution of finds with objects decorated in Nydamstyle and Style 1 in southwestern Norway. Drawing by Ellinor Hoff, Bergen Museum.



Fig. 2: Relief brooches in Style I. Left: F90, top right: F32, bottom right: F85. See numbers on map in fig. 1. Drawings by Siv Kristoffersen. Scale 3/4.

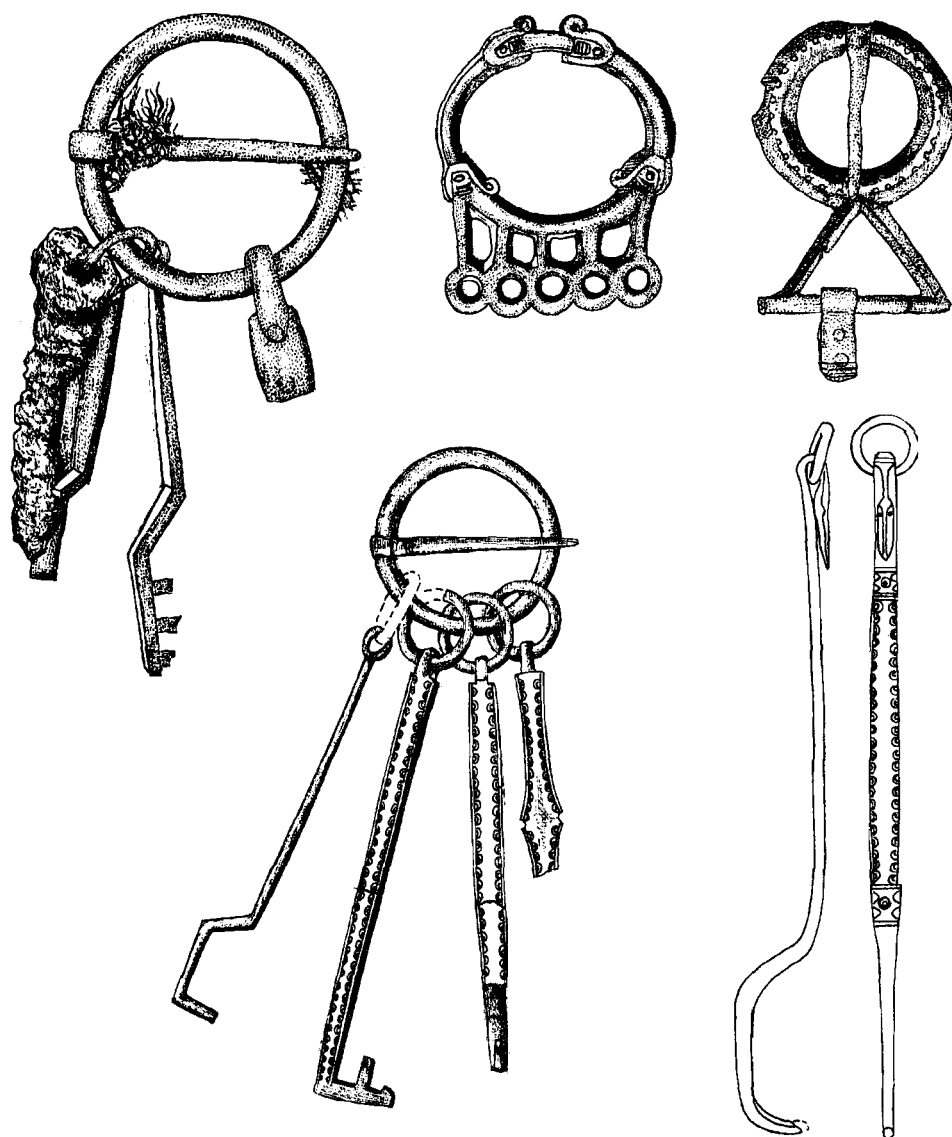


Fig. 3: Bronze keys and key rings. Top: F83, F84 and F17. Bottom: F77 and F17. See numbers on map in fig. 1. Drawings by Ellinor Hoff, Bergen Museum. Scale 3/4.

I studied the archaeological context. In which burials are the decorated objects found, and together with which assemblages?

83 of the finds I deal with are from burials. Most of them are found under mounds, usually large ones, and in the Norwegian context that means up to 30 m across. The majority are inhumation burials in stone cists, although skeletons are rarely preserved. The burials are richly furnished, many with gold and silver objects, and imported glass and bronze vessels. There is, however, variation, especially late in the Migration Period.

Two categories of burials are distinguished: burials with weapon (14) and burials with relief brooches (43). Weapon and relief brooches are never mixed. When these objects occur together in a grave, they seem to have belonged to different individuals. Relief brooches are often combined with smaller brooches and spindlewhorls. Keys and iron weaving battens occur in these assemblages (figs. 3–4), as also the golden bracteates. In seven of the assemblages with weapon, decorated sword equipment occurs, usually pommel, scabbard or buckle. Scales are also found in these graves. This small group consists of often exceptionally rich assemblages. The two categories are, through correlation with osteological sex-assessment, in areas where skeletons are present, often related to different gender defined social identities—males and females.³

Graves represent ritual contexts. As we find them, they are products of burial rites. In terms of theoretical framework, I focus on social aspects of rituals as Turner (1967), Bloch and Parry (1982), and Bourdieu (1977, 1996) discuss them. Rituals are emotionally charged, public situations in which social construction works very well—social categories and relationships become real, because they are presented as real in the ritual and unconsciously agreed upon by those attending.

Social order consists of relations manifested through different social identities. Inequality is fundamental to this order and often draws on categories which can easily be presented as biologically determined—as gender and age:⁴ ‘The power to name, to define a social identity and to ascribe characteristics to that identity is a political power’. The gender categories expressed in the burials referred to above, are therefore to be understood as symbolically and contextually situated—that is, if there is a need to express inequality, difference between the genders is focused upon. More than reflecting lived female and male lives, the images are constructing inequality in social categories.

In defining social identity, the performed aspect is important—what people do, their roles or sets of roles.⁵ Objects, which are visualised in the context of burial

3 For discussion of the assemblages with decorated sword equipment and their relationship with brooches, see Kristoffersen 1999b.

4 Moore 1994:24f, 92f; see also Bourdieu 1996.

rites, often relate to what people do. The objects are through the ritual context in a position to structure opinions of those attending. Expectations to social roles are created, and in this process, the social roles themselves. The objects are, thus, at work in defining social identity. Some of these objects are left for us, as the keys and iron weaving battens, and through which it is possible to learn something about these identities.

To sum up, I see in the burials the construction of social identities. The burials are constructed images of social roles—images that existed in society, but not necessarily described the individual in the burial. And in this construction, objects, left for us in the graves, were important. There is, however, no way to control the associations evoked by objects. The objects are, through their use, coded with different levels of meaning and could be read in various ways. This implies that construction is open to negotiation.

Burial rites, however, also deal with death, and are related to beliefs in an after-world and afterlife. They deal with transformations from one state to another, transformations which concern social identity and the incorporation of this identity among the dead forefathers,⁶ and involve the reassertion of society by the belief that the soul has been incorporated into the society of the dead.⁷ This transfer of the soul from one social order to another is invoked to explain parallels between the symbolism of mortuary, initiation rites and marriages.⁸ The importance of rituals connected to the life cycle of the ruling families are highlighted upon concerning the Germanic society of this period.⁹

In the following I will discuss social construction among the living society, and then relate this to the society of the dead. I will argue that through the occurrence of relief brooches, bundles of bronze keys and iron weaving battens, a group of burials can be related to the construction of the image and role of the Lady of the House. The interpretation of the keys is central to this understanding.¹⁰

Due to their form, lack of use-wear and the way they are carried, the symbolic function of the bronze keys is regarded to be of importance. They are beautifully made and intended to be noticed. The form is changed during the Migration Period, from the simple keys with a hook, that could be made from a hammered band, to more complex forms cast in a mould (fig. 3). It is possible that this change also concerns their meaning, meanings which could have developed through the

5 *Ibid.*

6 Discussion in Oestigård 2000:395f, with reference to Goody 1962.

7 Bloch and Parry 1982:4.

8 *Ibid.*

9 *E.g.* Näsman 1996:59.

10 See also work on this topic in Germany by Steuer 1982, Dübner-Manthey 1987, 1990.

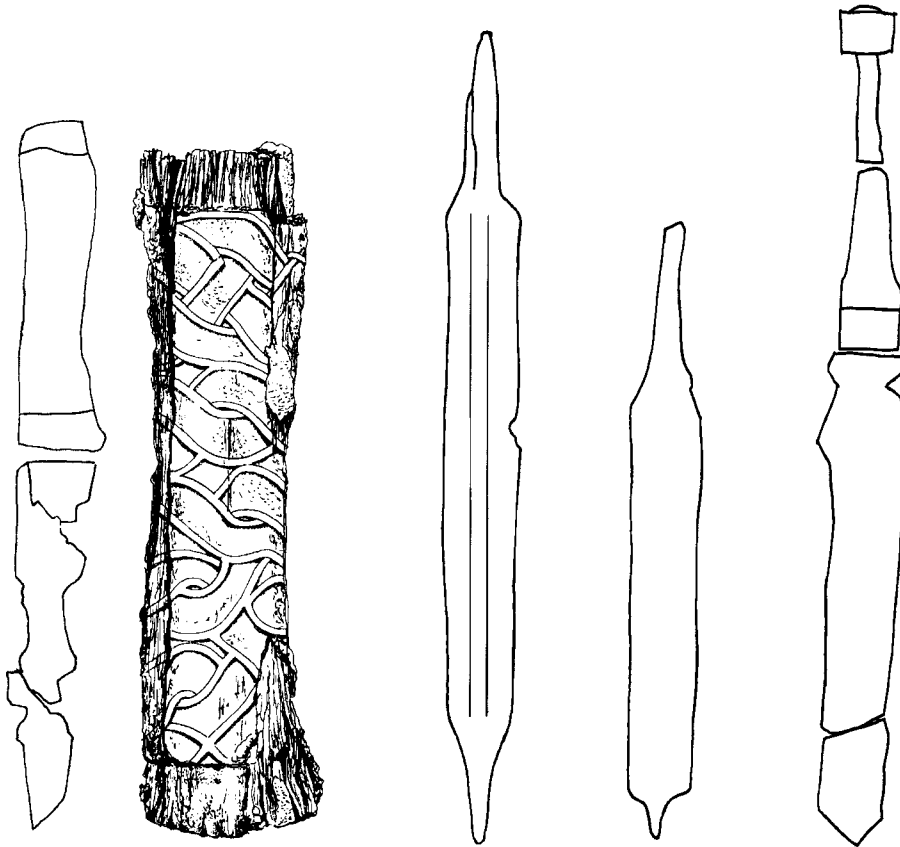


Fig. 4: Iron weaving battens. From left: Beater with decorated wooden handle (F86) and beaters (F83, F84, F25). See numbers on map in fig.1. Drawings by Ellinor Hoff, Bergen Museum (handle), Siv Kristoffersen (beaters). Scale 1/4.

use of the elder forms. With the bundles of cast keys came also the different and individual edges, which are able to function in relation to different kinds of locks. These keys do not give the impression of being used as their sharp edges lack use-wear. Keys in bundles seem to be made as sets, each key representing a variation on a common form, in terms of cross section, proportions and ornamentation. Thus all the keys in a bundle seem to be made simultaneously as a single set. These keys are not being made one by one, according to a growing need for more chests or caskets. They are either made together with a collection of such containers, with different locks, or they are made without any functionality in this aspect. Both possibilities highlight the importance of the bundle with the different edges. The way they are carried seems to support this lack of functionality. The keys are not attached to strings and could not be moved freely. They are attached to the key

ring, which, from the position in the graves and fragments of textiles, seems to have been fastened to a dress or textile belt. The ring might with ease have been loosened and might not have been used frequently. Again, however, practical concerns are not prevailing. It is the social significance of the keys which seems to be of importance.

In later written records¹¹ keys are related to wedding ceremonies. In *The Lay of Thrym* the thundergod Tor is dressed up like Frøya as a bride to get back his hammer:

Bindo vér þór pá brúðar líni !
hafi hann it mikla men Brísinga !
látom und hánom hrynja lukla,
ok kvenváðir um kné falla,

Let a housewife's door keys dangle about him
Let woman's weeds be worn by him
Let him bear on his breast bridal jewels,
On hood his head, as behooves a bride.

In *The Lay of Rígh* a bride is described as she is brought home to her husband:

Heim óku þá hanginluklu, geitakyrtlu,
giptu Karli; Snør heitir sú; settiz undir ripti;
biuggu hión, bauga deildu, breiddu blæiur ok bú gørðu.

A bride they brought him with bunch of keys dangling,
in goatskin kirtle, gave her to Karl.
Snoer was she hight and sate under veil,
a house they reared them and rings bestowed,
their linen they spread, and the larder stocked.

In early medieval legislation from all the Nordic countries keys are related to the social identity of the Lady of the House,¹² where she is assigned the responsibility for valuables that could be locked in chests and caskets. The keys are also mentioned together with the bed, in early medieval wedding ceremony recitements. The woman was given to the man: 'in honour and as wife and to share his bed, to hold his lock and keys'.¹³

11 *The Lay of Thrym* (15–16) and *The Lay of Rígh* (23) in the *Poetic Edda*, edition Helgason 1971, translation by Hollander 1962.

12 References in KLMN XII: 384–388, VII: 133–136.

13 My translation.

The keys are, in the written records, mentioned in plural—as bundles. Above I have argued that the bundles were made as sets. Further, they would probably have been handed over to women as sets, on a special occasion. In analogy with the written sources, I have suggested the possibility that these occasions were wedding ceremonies or other rites of transition. Through these the role of the Lady of the House would have been defined, a definition, which was repeated in the burial ritual, in which we know that the keys played a part. To this identity the responsibility represented by the keys was crucial. The bundles with the different edged keys corresponding with different locks work very well in relation to this responsibility, practically or symbolically. The keys relate the role to the farmstead, and it is important to bear in mind that the farmsteads where these burials are found were the large, central ones that constituted the very core of society. The relation to the farmstead is underlined by the local tradition expressed in the ornamentation of the brooches, which is distinguished from the common Scandinavian tradition generally found in the sword equipment.

The textile equipment found in the discussed assemblages—spindlewhorls, hook-mounts for distaffs (in one of the graves there were nine) and iron weaving battens—adds the aspect of highly developed textile production to the role of the Lady of the House. The spindle whorls often found in pairs (fig. 4) are by far the most common of these tools. Iron weaving battens are more rare. As the bronze keys, the iron weaving battens predominantly occur in rich assemblages with relief brooches. In the Migration Period the battens were fairly short with the characteristic protruding end (fig. 4). They had a long, sometimes decorated, wooden handle which was held with both hands when beating up the weft. Some of the beaters are pattern welded, and some seem to have been made from swords. As in later periods, they probably had their parallels in wood or bone. The iron beaters are believed to have some functional advantages.¹⁴ It is known, at least when working with certain materials, to give more control of the pressure.¹⁵ However, in the different parts of the Germanic area where they occur, their social significance is focused upon, as they are regarded as a symbol of The Lady of the House within higher social circles.¹⁶

The production of textiles was a central activity on the farms and could have constituted an essential part of the life of a Lady of the House, both as an executor and administrator. Textile products were important within the local economy of the farm, but also their role in exchange systems and long distance trade has been discussed.¹⁷ In mountain areas production of wool has always been of importance,

14 Hoffmann 1974:44, Crawford in Chadwick 1959.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Chadwick 1959:35, Werner 1962:34f, Koch 1977:93, Knaut 1993:105.

and is also documented in the Migration Period, as in the county of Vest-Agder and Sogn.¹⁸ These are areas where textile equipment is richly represented in the assemblages from the graves, where also textiles of excellent quality are found.¹⁹ And precisely the production of high quality textiles has been related to the larger, central farms. The iron weaving battens, thus, seem to represent an economically and socially significant production, and probably were of importance in the definition of the role of the Lady of the House.

The weaving battens represent, according to the discussion above, a highly developed craft, that would have taken a long time to learn. This learning may have been a part of the preparation for the discussed role. On the Continent, where skeletal remains are frequent, both keys and iron weaving battens occur in the graves of young girls. Even though the marrying age might well have been low, it is also possible that these objects were given to the girl as she enters her period of learning, as in a transition rite. The weaving battens could thus be seen in relation to a longer process that in the end led to the role of the Lady of the House in practice.

The weaving battens, as textile equipment in general, additionally carry cultic connotations,²⁰ which can be deduced from the relation of such tools to metaphors of prophecy. Important for these interpretations are later written records and the occurrence of related presentations on contemporary gold bracteates.²¹ The process of textile work evokes associations related to the passage of time and to a lifetime: crossing and twining threads produce fabric and thread of different quality and length. The work may be interrupted—the thread may be torn apart—or the work can be brought to an end—as a long-lived life. The gift of prophecy has been related to women, in Germanic culture, as in many Indo-European cultures.²² In the Northern mythology a close connection between women and concepts of time and death is emphasised.²³ Also the golden bracteates, amulets in gold loaded with symbolic images, have been associated with women gifted in

17 Lund Hansen 1987:234, Myhre 1987:184.

18 Hagen 1953, Kristoffersen in Bakka *et al.* 1993 with references.

19 For example Hougen 1935:58ff, Bender Jørgensen 1986:157ff, Nockert 1991.

20 For example Enright 1990, Hjørungdal 1991.

21 Bæksted 1988, Enright 1990, Hauck 1985, Strøm 1985, Wamers 1988; see also the discussion in Kristoffersen 1995.

22 Bæksted 1988:49, 215ff, Clunies-Ross 1998:245f, 297ff, Enright 1991:59ff, Strøm 1985:200ff, Wamers 1988:72f; but see also Holtsmark 1970:85.

23 Clunies Ross 1998:245, with references.

prophecy.²⁴ This category of objects is found in combination with relief brooches in seven of the analysed graves.

The way prophecy is mentioned in the records indicate that it had a predominant relationship with the earlier cult of the Vanir, a cult which is assumed to date back to the Migration Period.²⁵ Furthermore, we know from later written sources that the Lady of the House performed rituals that took place on the farmsteads.²⁶ Women have especially been associated with the cult of the goddess Frøya,²⁷ who is related to prophecy in the myths. This is further underlined by her birdskin/feather, which indicates her shamanistic character. There are also associations to her through the relief brooches and keys. Her keys are mentioned in *The Lay of Trym* above. The relief brooch is of actual importance in the same poem through the interpretation of Brisingamen as a large brooch with a bow.²⁸ Finally Frøya means *frue* as in the Lady of the House.²⁹ One could establish a connection between Frøya and burial assemblages containing the objects discussed here. On the other hand, these connections may also represent a chain of associations related to the female images within groups of higher social levels. This could find expression in various ways, also in the images of the goddesses. All the same, however, it is reasonable to add a cultic aspect to the social identity discussed. It does not mean that all Ladies of the House have had the gift of prophecy. It represents a level of meaning, and a basis for power, to which one could relate.

The keys and the relief brooches underlined the local character of the role of the Lady of the House. However, we have seen that the textile production had implications, which extended beyond the local. The importance beyond the farm and the inter-regional aspects of the role is further indicated through the distribution of the valuables in her care and through marriage alliances.

In the process of weaving a meaning of bringing together and crossing threads is embedded, and through these associations the textile equipment seem to be associated also with another aspect of the role. The Lady of the House is regarded as a weaver of relations. *Gebärfähigkeit* is considered to be central in the evaluation of the Germanic society concerning a woman's social position,³⁰ and she also is responsible for creating relations in which children can grow and prepare for their adult life. Through distribution of food, from breast feeding to the adminis-

24 Hauck 1985:155ff.

25 Clunies Ross 1998:248, 250, Steinsland 1985.

26 Olsen 1926, Olsen 1966, Steinsland 1985.

27 Steinsland *ibid.*

28 Arrhenius 1962, Kühn 1959:50.

29 *Ynglingesaga* 10.

30 von Ohlberg 1990:223ff.

tration of large banquets in the hall, such relations are created.³¹ The discussion has emphasised Germanic women within higher social circles and their role in the attachment between father and son, and leader and the followers of a war band.³² In the hall she would carry around the meadcup, a ritual through which the hierarchic order was established and renewed.³³ Social bonds were created, which became real, because they were presented as real.³⁴ The acceptance of the cup was of juridical and religious importance.³⁵ Her role is possible because she is an outsider, but still connected with the war band through her relationship with the leader. The Lady of the House would also have been in position to establish relationships between families, above all through marriage alliances. Within the Germanic society it would have been important to demonstrate these alliances. One would therefore expect that she carried the dress and jewels of her own family, and that she was buried in it. And there are examples in the burials of women which stand out as strangers, who might well have come through a marriage.

The different aspects of the role of the Lady of the House that have been discussed are elements without any functionalistic interrelationship. These are elements which are combined in different ways and at work in different contexts. And they are, in the burial, not an expression of a lived life in this role, but understandings of and expectations of the role, existing in the Germanic society. These expectations might, as we have seen, also be expressed in transitions rituals where young girls would have started their preparation for the role.

In the tools related to the textile production, there is embedded a plurality of potential meanings that constitute a basis for different interpretations and definitions of the role. The economic and cultic aspects would have had the ability to function in different contexts and would have been able to serve different interests. The economic aspect, with the importance in the exchange systems, of textile production would function in relation to the political system and the social structure, that is, the preservation of the social order. The gift of prophecy was, according to Margaret Clunies Ross,³⁶ regarded as treat to the society, and attempts were made towards its marginalisation in the ritual system. Prophecy also placed one in a position to influence decisions, which in turn formed the future, and was as such a serious basis for power, a power that was in no need of weapons. Further, by focusing on the economic and political associations embedded in the iron weaving

31 Håland 1997.

32 Enright 1988:171, 199ff.

33 *Ibid.*

34 Bourdieu 1996.

35 Enright 1988.

36 Clunies Ross 1998:252.

battens one would be in a position, through rituals, to transform the cultic aspect—and conversely. These different aspects of meaning, then, constitute a foundation for negotiation and freedom from the imposed symbols in the social construction. There is a possibility of the attendees not being convinced by the social construction in the ritual, because the associations evoked may be different.

What about death? Can the discussed elements of the role give meaning to the entering into an afterlife? Can aspects of this social identity give meaning in relation to the society of the dead? In Northern heathen religion the experience of death is given much attention.³⁷ Gro Steinsland underlines two mythical motifs of fundamental importance: marriage and death.³⁸ Not only do these motifs occur in different themes, they melt together and become the *marriage of death*. The poems and sagas give examples where death is describe as an erotic experience, the dead and a representative from one of the kingdoms of the dead joined together in a ritual marriage. In literature reference is often made to dead men. Steinsland argues, however, that there are indications, as in the images on standing stones, that women also could expect a marriage in death. It is also known that she might be reunited with her dead husband.³⁹

The keys were associated with marriage, however the more formal aspect of the union. Nevertheless they take their part in the chain of associations related to the context of marriage, and the connection of the formal and sexual aspect was also expressed in the mentioned marriage formula through keys and bed. All the elements, which are related to the construction of the identity of the Lady of the House, could in fact be related to marriage, because this constitutes a situation where the definition of her role must have been important. Even though some of the elements may have been relevant in an earlier transition rite, still they have a renewed importance in the context of marriage. Could it be that the Lady of the House carried her symbols into a new and final marriage, in death? Through this ritual her social identity, embedded in the keys as well as the textile equipment, relief brooches and golden bracteates, was integrated with the society of the dead in an afterworld. These symbols were given their meaning in life through rituals of transitions and marriage, and are through burial given a meaning in death. We are back to the theory of how burial rites dealt with death, the transitions and the parallels between the symbolism of mortuary practices, initiation rites and marriages.

37 Steinsland 1991:422.

38 *Ibid.*; see also Steinsland 1992.

39 Steinsland 1992:327.

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DISCUSSION

N. Marinatos: I think you will be interested to know that in Greek culture, too, the key is a symbol of the woman's power. I was just discussing with Stella Georgoudi how the priestess of Athena is called the κλειδοῦχος, which means that she carries the keys. Even in domestic contexts, in the *Odyssey* for example, it's either the lady of the house or the matron of the house, that is a kind of senior servant, who had access to the keys. This is a very interesting parallel to what you have said.

S. Georgoudi: We have in Greek context keys related not only to the mistress of the house, and with priestesses and priests, but also with goddesses. This is very important. We have different goddesses defined as holders of keys, such as Athena, Hera *etc.* It is very striking to see that among the gods, the god that possesses keys is Hades. He is the keeper of the keys of the Underworld. Can the key in the Nordic context also have a connection with death? Not only as a sign of the dead person, I mean.

S. Kristoffersen: Keys are present in Nordic graves and it is possible that they could gain such a meaning in relation to the burials.

D. Handelman: To continue the theme of keys, I have been told by Prof. Barbara Klein of Stockholm University that into the first half of the twentieth century in Sweden the wives of farmers prominently displayed the keys to the various buildings of the farmstead on their waist. This strongly suggest control over the life-giving properties of keys and whatever the keys enable access to. And I am deliberately saying it in this obfuscating way but I think that the implications are clear. In that sense, it is interesting. You open up a burial site and all you have are material objects—you are uncovering perhaps a ritual in process, frozen. This is another level from the social, undoubtedly as you argue, influenced by the social, reflecting back onto the social order. What you find in the gravesites, unless you are working in a society which had secondary burial, or removal for example of the skulls of ancestors for use in ongoing life without reburial, people in the world were not expected to see the inside of the grave again. In that sense they were creating a closed phenomenal world for the dead, of the dead, wherever the dead were expected to go. The dead were engaged in some kind of ritual process for which you have various of the artefacts. What kind of ritual process was going on in the cases of these burials?

S. Kristoffersen: There are in the written sources from the Continent and the Anglo-Saxons sphere accounts about such rituals. The members of the upper class concerned by the burial were present as spectators.

D. Handelman: If you only read it the way you read these materials, then you are treating the inside of the grave as a reflection of social order. But what was going on inside the grave apart from whatever reflections of social order were put in there belonged to the world of the dead, the dead moving through various processes, towards the Underworld, towards some kind of afterlife. This also has to be read in order to get the full picture.

S. Kristoffersen: You mean the ritual...?

D. Handelman: I mean the continuation of the ritual. The ritual existed above ground to establish the bases for the ritual below ground. But the ritual below ground then may have gone on without the participation of the living above ground, although in various cases the living above ground still continued to take an active role in helping the deceased succeed in getting to wherever the deceased were supposed to go. So you've got these two levels which should be treated in a complementary manner.

S. Kristoffersen: I will think about that.

M. Khatzigeorgi: I would like to add a small detail: the Eastern iconographical type of the Resurrection, which is Jesus' descent into the Underworld, and the Harrowing of Hell, also contains the very interesting theme of the keys. Jesus is depicted going down into the Underworld in a triumphant manner, following the motif of Herakles' descent into Hades, pulling Adam and Eve out of their graves. At the same time he is triumphantly stepping over the black abyss, the chasm which represents the Underworld. There we see in a black space the keys spread out. These were the main symbol of Hades, of the Underworld's power. This is the way the motif of the keys is used in Byzantium after the ninth century, the Eastern Medieval period equivalent to the period you are dealing with. It continues up to our days.

G. Albers: Were the graves also separated by architecture and placement? Were the graves with swords set apart? Were they marked differently above ground?

S. Kristoffersen: Not really. I can't see any pattern. These graves are not in great cemeteries as in Germany in the same period. They are just a few grave mounds in close relation to the farms.

G. Albers: So each mound would have one sword grave, or how does it work?

S. Kristoffersen: It doesn't work. The material doesn't carry analysis far enough for sustained statistical examination. The graves can have a sword each, but they will not have a decorated sword each, because that item would appear probably only in one grave in the region.

G. Albers: Since there was no visible distinction of elite graves above ground, do you think that there was a display of the offerings before burial?

S. Kristoffersen: If they are to function in the way I suggest, then somebody must have seen the contents—not necessarily a large group, but at least the people of this high social level.