

An Insular Reliquary from Melhus: The Significance of Insular Ecclesiastical Material in Early Viking-Age Norway

By AINA HEEN-PETTERSEN¹ and GRIFFIN MURRAY²

5 *THIS PAPER presents and discusses a unique Insular reliquary shrine discovered in an early 9th-century woman's grave at Melhus, central Norway, over a century ago. In addition to a detailed re-evaluation of the shrine and its use in its original ecclesiastical context, the paper also proposes an alternative interpretation as to how the local pagan population may have conceptualised this Christian object after it arrived in Norse hands. While most of the Insular ecclesiastical items in Scandinavia were broken up and transformed into personal ornaments, the Melhus shrine was kept complete, suggesting it was considered to be of special value. It is argued here that this status should be seen in association with the shrine's involvement in local narratives and ritual aspects connected with the earliest voyages across the North Sea. The woman with whom the reliquary was buried may have played a central role in these rituals.*

15 In the autumn of 1906, farmer Johannes Melhus made a significant chance discovery of an Insular reliquary and a whalebone plaque from the topsoil of a Viking-Age burial mound in Melhus, Overhalla, located in central Norway. Following this discovery, an excavation was carried out by the Museum of the Royal Society in the summer of 1907. The reliquary,³ which is the focus of this paper, belongs to a group of Insular objects which have been referred to as house-shaped, or tomb-shaped, shrines.⁴ The Melhus find is one of 12 largely complete
20 Insular house-shaped shrines to have survived. Of these, five are known from Ireland, one from Scotland, three from Italy, and three from Norway.⁵ Fragments of these objects have also been recovered from Viking contexts in Ireland, Scotland and Scandinavia. The Melhus find is one of only two intact house-shaped shrines that have come from a datable context; ie from a Norse grave. The other is an example from Setnes in Møre og Romsdal, Norway (see
25 below). Despite the significance and rarity of this discovery, the results from the subsequent excavation have not been reviewed since they were first published, over a century ago.⁶ The shrine itself has never been the subject of a detailed re-evaluation, even though it has been briefly described or mentioned in numerous publications in the intervening years.⁷

30 ¹ Department of Historical Studies, Faculty of Humanities, The Norwegian University of Science and Technology, No-7491 Trondheim, Norway. aina.petterson@ntnu.no

² Adult Continuing Education / Department of Archaeology, University College Cork, Ireland. g.murray@ucc.ie

³ The Norwegian University of Science and Technology University Museum: T08144.

⁴ Blindheim 1984. The term house-shaped is retained here because it is a long established and recognisable term, even if it is likely to be a misnomer. The term tomb-shaped is preferred by some authors and for an argument in its favour see Ó Floinn 2013, 209.

⁵ Including the Melhus shrine; Ó Floinn 2015, 291.

⁶ Petersen 1907.

⁷ Eg Coffey 1909, 43; Anderson 1909–10, 270–72; Crawford 1923, 85–6; Mahr 1932, pl 10; Petersen 1940, 73–4; Raftery 1941, 39, 107, 115, 139; Henry 1965, 72, 99; Blindheim 1984, 1, 3–4, 6, 8, 10–11, 16, 44; Wamers 1985, 91 cat no 12; Youngs 1989, 134, no 128; Ó Floinn 1989/90, 52–3; Haseloff 1990, 168, 198, pl 147; Quast 2012.

Following a biographical approach to material culture, this paper revisits the Melhus shrine by discussing it in its Insular and Norse contexts, and uses this artefact as a case study to explore the use and importance of Insular ecclesiastical material in early Viking-Age Norway. Furthermore, it is argued that the Melhus reliquary's biography differed from the main narrative presented for Insular ecclesiastical material in Scandinavia, suggesting an alternative interpretation as to how the local population may have conceptualised this Christian object and the meaning they possibly imbued it with.

RELATIONAL BIOGRAPHIES AND MATERIAL CITATION

Looking at the biography of objects as a means of approaching their social use and meaning has become a widely utilised and well-established strategy within archaeological research since the approach was introduced by Igor Kopytoff in 1986.⁸ This perspective is based on the premise that a reconstruction of the life history of an object can be traced to reveal the way objects become invested with meaning through the interactions in which they are involved. From this theoretical standpoint, objects are understood to accumulate biographies as they repeatedly move between people, and 'the history of many artefacts is composed of shifts in contexts and perspectives'.⁹ In other words, meaning, use and relations are formed through context, but this is also a product of previous associations which together form a framework for the negotiation and creation of new meanings and uses.¹⁰

Nevertheless, classic approaches to the social biographies of things have been reinvigorated through current debates on the ontology of objects in connection with the 'material turn', which has placed more focus on relational and symmetrical perspectives, by acknowledging how the agencies of things, places and natural surroundings affect and contribute in social relations.¹¹ This framework seeks to identify the varied relationships between people and objects, and time and place, piecing together evidence from artefacts and sites to examine the role of an object's biography.¹² The role of biographies has, for instance, become a central issue in recent discussions concerning material culture and people's relationships with time and social memory.¹³ These studies focus specifically on how object biography and materiality together can facilitate acts of remembrance by creating mnemonic references to other things, places, people and times. In this context, the narrative aspect is fundamental: how past societies and individuals mediated their histories through various forms of material culture.¹⁴ Such narratives can comprise, 'tales and life stories, linkable to both beings and things where the associated objects can be given names, biographies and power'.¹⁵ This may be understood as a form of 'materialised narratives',¹⁶ or 'material citation' where certain items refer to a specific historical narrative of the past.¹⁷ Following this approach, material culture does not simply 'hold' stories and memories.¹⁸ Rather they are incorporated into it 'through the ways in which they were selected, transported, situated, experienced and used'.¹⁹

⁸ Kopytoff 1986.

⁹ Gosden and Marshall 1999, 172–4.

¹⁰ Ekengren 2009, 29–30.

¹¹ See Eriksen 2016, 484–5 for a summary.

¹² Eg. Joy 2009; Lund 2009; Aannestad 2015; Eriksen 2016.

¹³ Eg. Arwill-Nordbladh 2007; 2013; Hall 2015; Danielsson 2015; Lund and Arwill-Nordbladh 2016.

¹⁴ Williams et al 2015b, 9.

¹⁵ Arwill-Nordbladh 2013, 411–12.

¹⁶ Price 2010, 147.

¹⁷ Jones 2007; Lund and Arwill-Nordbladh 2016, 417–18; Williams 2016, 407.

¹⁸ See Jones 2007.

¹⁹ Williams et al 2015b, 8–11.

Drawing on the above perspectives, this paper will examine how the significance of the Melhus shrine, and similar ecclesiastical objects, may be seen in relation to its distinctive biographic references and the intricate relations and practises with which it became involved during its life cycle in early medieval times. This includes not only its relationship with people and other objects, but also, as we will argue, its involvement in local narratives and ritual aspects of the earliest voyages across the North Sea.

5

MELHUS, THE BARROW AND ITS FINDS

The Melhus farm is situated by the River Namsen, in the parish of Overhalla, Namdalen Valley, which lies in the northern part of Trøndelag (Fig 1). The farm is not mentioned in written sources before the first half of the 15th century, in Aslak Bolt's *Cadaastre*, and so we, therefore, have to rely on archaeological evidence when considering this farm and its inhabitants in the Viking period. The wider region of Overhalla has several concentrations of burial mounds, many of which have been excavated and shown to contain richly furnished boat and cist burials from the early Iron Age through to the 10th century AD. Based on the archaeological evidence, it is believed that this part of Namdalen, at the beginning of the Viking period, occupied a prominent position among the northern districts of Norway.²⁰ In addition to excellent arable land, the importance of Overhalla is closely linked to the River Namsen — a substantial waterway running through the valley connecting several inland areas with the coast, making a wide range of resources from a number of different habitats easily accessible for trade and exchange.²¹

With six recorded barrows presently known on the farm, Melhus is one of several places along the Namsen with a marked concentration of burial mounds. The reliquary was recovered from the largest barrow, which measured 22 m in diameter and was constructed on the highest point of a low natural ridge extending north to south, parallel with the river below. This location would have made the barrow a prominent feature for those who passed the farm on the river. Shortly after the discovery of the shrine, the find was reported to the museum in Trondheim and the following year an excavation was undertaken by the director, Theodor Petersen. The account of the find's location and excavation which follows is based largely on his written records from this investigation,²² as well as unpublished information in archives and museum catalogues. The discoveries of 1906 were not, however, the first artefacts recovered from the mound, since two young boys had found several items while playing on top of the barrow five years previously. These included an iron spearhead, a pair of shears, a large and elaborate fibula, two oval brooches, a bronze mount, a large collection of beads, an iron 'rod' (discussed below), an iron handle and three whetstones.²³ It should therefore be noted that nearly all the recovered artefacts were found before the excavation was carried out. Petersen's records, and consequently many of the interpretations presented in this article, rely heavily on the information provided by the farmer, 'the reliability of which is beyond doubt'.²⁴

²⁰ Sognes 1988.

²¹ Farbregd 1979, 67–8.

²² Petersen 1907.

²³ T6574-82. Here and after T denotes a museum acquisition number for the Norwegian University of Science and Technology University Museum.

²⁴ Petersen 1907, 11–2.

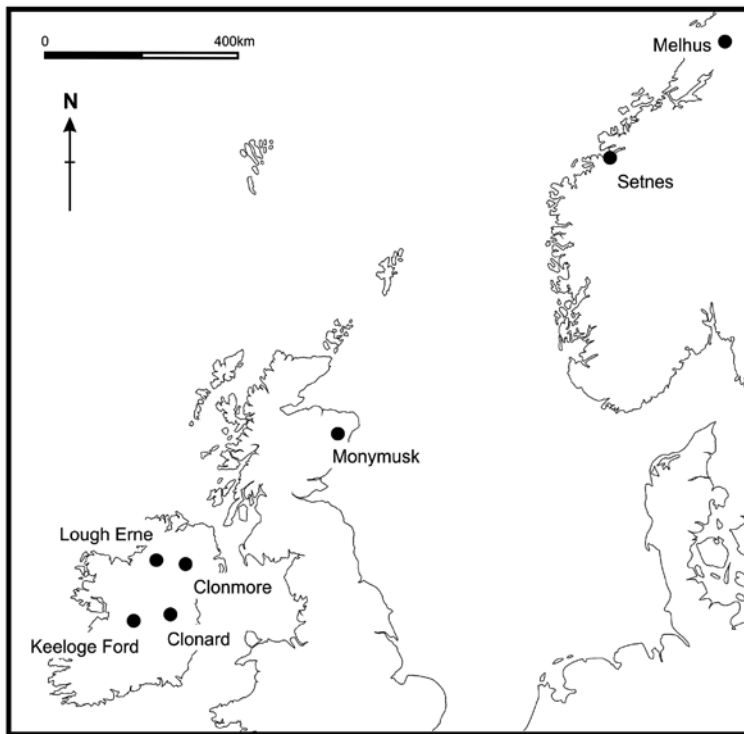


FIG 1

The location of Melhus, with other house-shaped shrines found in Norway, Ireland and Great Britain. The find location of the ‘Copenhagen’ shrine is not known and therefore not included. *Map by Philip N Wood.*

Petersen’s investigations soon revealed that the recovered objects came from a boat burial with an estimated length of 9 m, placed in a central position in the upper part of the mound. No skeletal remains were preserved, but the artefacts indicate that the boat most likely contained the double burial of a man and a woman. The reliquary was found near the middle of the boat, and so apparently it belonged to the woman. According to the finder, the reliquary had probably originally been enclosed in a wooden box, indicated by some fragments of fir tree wood found close by. This observation was supported by Petersen based on an impression from one of the shrine’s circular mounts on one of the wooden pieces.²⁵ The impression is still visible on the wood fragments, together with small traces of copper corrosion staining.²⁶

The jewellery was also found originally in the same area as the reliquary. This included a pair of thin-shelled oval brooches of the early form R643 (Fig 2). Most recently, the dates of the R643 brooches have been reassessed by Martin Rundkvist, who has isolated this group with five types (A-E) based on their decoration, shape and size.²⁷ He classified the pair from Melhus as Type R643A, defined by their ‘intricate interlace decoration, usually zoomorphic,

²⁵ Petersen 1907, 8.

²⁶ Visually examined January 2018.

²⁷ Rundkvist 2010.

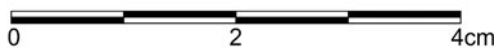


FIG 2

Oval brooches of the early type R643, from the Melhus burial. Photograph by Åge Hojem. © NTNU University Museum.

often asymmetric', and suggests that generally this group can be placed in the period from AD 770–840.²⁸

A similar production date has been suggested for the large and elaborate bronze fibula which was found in association with the oval brooches (Fig 3). In Norway, 53 brooches of this type are known, all of which are either stray finds or originate from female burials. They start to appear in the late 6th century, and gradually increase in size before they reach their maximum size towards the end of the 8th century.²⁹ The Melhus fibula is the largest example known from Norway, indicating that this brooch was made towards the end of the production period.

An unusually large necklace comprising 137 beads (now lost) was found in association with the brooches. All of the beads were made of glass, except one that was made of silver wire. Two fragments of a decorative Insular bronze mount are also believed to have formed part of the woman's personal dress ornaments (Fig 4).³⁰ After it arrived in Norse hands, it was reworked by the addition of a pin fastener attached to the back of the piece, where remains of untanned animal skin were also preserved. This could indicate that the piece had been used as a brooch to fasten a fur cloak on the dead woman. In addition to the reliquary and dress ornaments, further grave goods, including the mentioned whalebone plaque, a whalebone weaving sword and a spindle-whorl were discovered.

²⁸ Ibid 149–57.

²⁹ Glørstad and Røstad 2015, 186–7.

³⁰ T6576



FIG 3

The elaborate button-on-bow brooch from Melhus. *Photograph by Åge Hojem. © NTNU University Museum.*

The remaining objects recovered from the burial, which comprised two swords, a bearded axe head, a shield boss, spearhead and a whetstone, are believed to have belonged to a man and were placed further north in the boat.³¹ The spearhead is of Petersen Type E (R517), which started to appear in the latter part of the 8th century and were used into the first half of the 9th century.³² Similarly, the axe head is of Petersen Type B (R559), which is generally dated to the 8th century, with occasional types dating from the very start of the Viking period.³³ With regards to the axe head, Petersen noted that the expansion of the lower part of the blade towards the edge is less developed than in Type R559.³⁴ This could indicate that this axe is an early example of the type. The swords were very fragmented,

³¹ T8139–42, T6578, T6582.

³² Petersen 1919, 26.

³³ *Ibid* 38.

³⁴ Petersen 1907, 8.



FIG 4

The Insular repoussé mount from Melhus, reworked by the addition of secondary perforations and a pin-mounting plate on the back of the piece. *Photograph by Åge Højem. © NTNU University Museum.*

one (a short, single-edged sword) has been identified as a possible Type H (R500). The type has a wide chronological range, extending from approximately AD 800–950, but with most specimens belonging to the 9th century.³⁵ Taken together, the typological dating of both the weapons and brooches seems to fit well with an early Viking-Age date, which indicates that the Melhus reliquary may have arrived in Namdalen as a result of one of the earliest overseas voyages to Ireland or Britain.

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THE SHRINE IN ITS ECCLESIASTICAL CONTEXT

DESCRIPTION

The shrine, which is made of wood with copper-alloy mounts, consists of a rectangular box, with a lid in the shape of a steeply pitched hipped roof (Fig 5). Its maximum dimensions are 83 mm high, 118 mm long and 47 mm wide. A number of elements are now missing

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³⁵ Petersen 1919, 89–100.



FIG 5

The front of the Melhus Reliquary. Photograph by Per Fredriksen. © NTNU University Museum.

from the shrine. However, it is difficult to know what condition it may have been in when deposited in the grave, given the circumstances of its recovery. The core of the object is made from two solid pieces of wood, identified as yew, which were hollowed out to form the box and its lid.³⁶ There is some loss to the back and right side of the wooden core of the box through damage (Figs 6 and 7). The front of the shrine is covered by two copper-alloy sheets, one on the lid and one the box (Fig 5). Less than half of the copper-alloy sheet on the right side of the lid also survives (Fig 7), and one suspects that the rest of the shrine was similarly covered. These sheets have been identified as being made of bronze.³⁷ Binding strips at the edges of the shrine, C-shaped in cross section, held these sheets in place, as did the decorative mounts, where they occur. The binding strips were nailed in place and are now largely missing from the shrine, but their impressions can be seen on the wooden core, which was purposefully scored and shaped to receive them (Figs 5–8).

The lid is fitted to the box with two copper-alloy oblong hinges, rebated and fixed to the wooden cores, at the back of the shrine (Fig 6). The lid was fastened with a copper-alloy locking pin with a hinged handle (Figs 5, 8). The pin passes through a hole at the top of the box on the left side and runs along the opening of the shrine and through a small loop attached to the inside of the lid. This holds the lid in place, and by removing it, one may open it. The lid also features a copper-alloy ridge mount that consists of a hollow tube riveted in

³⁶ Petersen 1907, 7.

³⁷ Blindheim 1984, 44; Randerz 2014.



FIG 6.

The back of the shrine, showing the two hinges for the lid and some damage to the wooden core.
Photograph by Per Fredriksen. © NTNU University Museum.

place (Figs 5–6). Two separately made terminals decorated either end, only one of which survives. The surviving terminal consists of an animal head that turns back on itself, which is made of cast bronze.³⁸ There are also fixing holes in the centre of the ridge mount on the Melhus shrine to suggest that there was originally also a central mounting, as one finds in many other house-shaped shrines.

5 Decoration is concentrated on the front of the shrine (Fig 5). It was ornamented with three circular mounts, two on the box and one on the lid. Each of these was originally made from a copper-alloy ring or frame and a separately made ornamented disc. The ring is missing from the example on the lid, while the disc remains, which recent XRF analysis
 10 has shown to be made of brass.³⁹ The disc is decorated in the Ultimate La Tène style and consists of trumpet spiral ornament in repoussé. On the box, the two circular copper-alloy frames, or rings, survive, which are tinned.⁴⁰ The disc is missing from the mount on the left and only partial remains of the disc on the right survive; but enough remains to show that it was similarly decorated to the disc on the lid. Considering the likely date of the shrine

³⁸ *Ibid.* Upon discovery, the terminal was found detached from the shrine and was originally reattached upside-down; as can be seen in early photographs of it, see Petersen 1907, 7, note 2, pl II, fig 3. Its orientation has since been corrected, see Blindheim 1984, fig 39.

³⁹ Randerz 2014; Murray 2016b, 151; contra Petersen 1907, 7.

⁴⁰ Randerz 2014.



FIG 7

The right side of the shrine, with the remains of three fixing pins for the attachment of a hinged escutcheon, now missing. *Photograph by Per Fredriksen. © NTNU University Museum.*

(see below), brass is an unusual material in a pre-Viking context in Ireland. However, recent XRF analysis by Paul Mullarkey has demonstrated that the house-shaped shrine ridge mount from Park North Cave near Middleton, Co Cork, is made of leaded gunmetal, while a house-shaped shrine plate from Islandbridge near Dublin is of leaded brass, suggesting that the use of brass may have been more widespread.⁴¹ The choice of brass for the discs was probably for decorative reasons. Polished brass discs surrounded by copper-alloy tinned rings would have given the impression of gold and silver.

The shrine also featured hinged escutcheons for carrying straps on either side, with only that on the left side remaining (Fig 8). The remaining hinged escutcheon is made of

⁴¹ Murray 2016b, 150; see Mullarkey 2014, 750–51 for discussion.



FIG 8

Detail of the surviving enamelled and hinged escutcheon on the left side of the shrine.
 Photograph by Per Fredriksen. © NTNU University Museum.

5 copper-alloy and is decorated with red enamel and platelets of millefiori. All of the millefiori on the escutcheon is in the form of platelets made of nine squares of blue and white, or blue and yellow glass in an alternating pattern forming crosses. The bell-shaped lower section of the escutcheon features three projecting fixing holes, and is divided into three fields of red enamel. The central triangular-shaped field also has a platelet of blue and yellow *millefiori* set in its centre. The other two enamelled fields are roughly semicircular in shape.

The upper oblong section of the escutcheon, which can move freely back and forth on the hinge, is principally decorated with two rectangular fields of red enamel set with platelets of *millefiori*. Each field has a blue and yellow platelet in the centre surrounded by four smaller

blue and white platelets, all of which are set at an angle. Three smaller fields of enamel are situated towards the top of the escutcheon; one crescent-shaped and two sub-triangular in shape. The top of the escutcheon expands into an open ring, half of which is now missing. A further damaged section of this ring was still attached to the escutcheon when it was first photographed for the 1907 publication,⁴² but is now apparently lost. A fixing hole was positioned at the tip of the escutcheon, on the outer side of the ring. The tip with the fixing hole is now detached from the shrine. Remarkably, it is still attached to part of a surviving leather carrying strap by a knotted leather thong. The leather carrying strap, now in three pieces, was originally 120 mm long, 2 mm thick, and expands from 11 to 16 mm in width.

DATING

The shrine has been dated by scholars to the 7th or 8th century, on the basis of its style and techniques and the associated finds from the boat burial.⁴³ Notably, the *millefiori* ornament on the escutcheon aligns with Judith Carroll's Class 2a *millefiori*,⁴⁴ which mainly seems to date from the 6th and 7th centuries in an Insular context. This class is characterised by platelets of *millefiori* being set directly in fields of red enamel, with the appearance that the *millefiori* is 'floating' in the enamel. Notably this is found on a series of hanging bowls from England, including that from Sutton Hoo,⁴⁵ as well as on a number of zoomorphic-penannular brooches from Ireland, including the well-known example from Ballinderry, Co Offaly.⁴⁶ It also occurs on a hinged escutcheon from an Insular house-shaped shrine recently discovered in Hokksund, Buskerud, Norway, and on a hinged mount from Knowth, Co Meath, which is possibly also from a house-shaped shrine.⁴⁷ This suggests that the Melhus shrine may date from the 7th century, although one cannot be certain of this given the paucity of absolute dates for Insular metalwork from before the 11th century. Additional research on chronology and scientific dating should help to refine the date of the Melhus shrine in the future.

Ragnall Ó Floinn is the only person to propose a typology for Insular house-shaped shrines.⁴⁸ While in need of some updating in the light of more recent evidence, it stands as a model in which one may place the Melhus shrine. On the basis of the surviving evidence, it appears that the Melhus shrine belongs to a period when the use and manufacture of house-shaped shrines flourished. The typology is mainly based on the size of the shrines, which increased in size from the earliest examples in the 7th century (Group 1) to the latest examples in the 9th century (Group 3). It may be noted that the shrine from the River Shannon in Ireland, probably from Keeloge Ford,⁴⁹ was not included in Ó Floinn's typology and would appear to sit between his Group 1 and Group 2 categories.⁵⁰

The *Breac Maadhóg*, a portable reliquary from Drumlane, Co Cavan, Ireland, which dates from the second half of the 11th or first half of the 12th century, has been linked by some authors with the series of house-shaped shrines.⁵¹ However, the influence for the *Breac Maadhóg* were the large corporeal shrines decorated with holy figures that occur on the Continent and

⁴² See Petersen 1907, pl II, fig 4.

⁴³ See Petersen 1907, 17; Crawford 1923, 85; Raftery 1941, 107; Ó Floinn 1989/90, 52–3; Blindheim 1984, 10.

⁴⁴ Carroll 1995, 49, 53–4, 55.

⁴⁵ See Bruce-Mitford 2005.

⁴⁶ See Kilbride-Jones 1980.

⁴⁷ Øhrn 2015; Murray 2012, 539–43.

⁴⁸ Ó Floinn 1989/90, 52–3; cf Youngs 1989, 134–40.

⁴⁹ Ó Floinn 2015.

⁵⁰ Ó Floinn, 1989/90.

⁵¹ Eg Crawford 1923, 82; Raftery 1941, 55, 154; Lucas 1973, 130; Ó Floinn 1989/1990, 52.

so, while related, it is not directly linked to the series of house-shaped shrines under discussion here.⁵² While a number of Insular house-shaped shrines continued to be used and repaired in the Late Middle Ages, it does appear on present evidence that the manufacture of these objects ceased in Ireland and Scotland by the 10th century. The reason for this may have been the impact that the Viking raids had on the Church in Ireland and Britain (see below). However, given that other types of objects, such as book and bell shrines, continued to be made in the 11th and 12th centuries in Ireland and Scotland, a more likely explanation for the cessation in the manufacture of house-shaped shrines is a change in religious practice/focus that made their function obsolete.

FUNCTION

Insular house-shaped shrines are characterised by a number of features. They are relatively small oblong boxes (80–192 mm in length), they feature escutcheons at either end for a carrying strap, and they have lids in form of steeply pitched hipped roofs, which are hinged and can be opened. It is these characteristic features which are suggestive of their function. On the basis of the surviving evidence,⁵³ they appear to have been reasonably common in early medieval Ireland, were also made and used in Scotland, and are found in Italy, probably as a result of missionary and pilgrimage activity by Insular ecclesiasts. Viking activity appears to have had an impact in terms of the distribution of both fragments and complete examples in Ireland, Britain and Scandinavia (see below). The shape of these objects is apparently based on late antique sarcophagi, which occasionally also feature hipped roofs/lids.⁵⁴ In this respect, they also bear a striking resemblance to the depiction of the Temple in the Book of Kells on folio 202v, the roof of which features a ridge pole and animal-head finials.⁵⁵ Indeed, Samuel Gerace argues that their form is based on a church building and suggests the term ‘church-shaped’ is more appropriate for them.⁵⁶ However, none of the early stone churches in Ireland appear to have had hipped roofs, although Tomás Ó Carragáin does not rule out the possibility that some timber churches in Ireland in the early period may have had them.⁵⁷

On the basis of the decoration, it appears that these objects were primarily meant to be seen from the front, which makes sense if one accepts that they were hung around the neck and carried on one’s chest. The fact that these objects were principally made to be carried has been discussed by some authors in terms of their use by journeying ecclesiasts.⁵⁸ Yet such discussion relegates these objects to a largely utilitarian function, which is incongruous with the high degree of ornament they display. To carry one of these objects on your chest on a journey would be awkward and wholly impractical. It is suggested here that these objects were made for ecclesiastic procession and display, and that it is within such a formal religious context that their original function is best understood. Notably, in this light, Ó Floinn views them as functioning specifically for the circuit of relics in early medieval Insular contexts.⁵⁹ Carrying straps were originally also a feature of the 8th- or 9th-century Lough Kinale book shrine⁶⁰ and the well-known bell shrine fragments from the Chapman collection,⁶¹ recently

⁵² See Murray 2014, 106–7.

⁵³ Which, including fragments, have yet to be catalogued in full.

⁵⁴ Eg Blindheim 1984, 2; Ó Floinn 2013, 209; 2015, 291.

⁵⁵ Eg Blindheim 1984, 3; Ryan 1989, 129.

⁵⁶ Gerace 2017, 89–91.

⁵⁷ Ó Carragáin 2010, 24.

⁵⁸ Eg Blindheim 1984; O’Donoghue 2011.

⁵⁹ Ó Floinn 2013, 210, tab 1; 2015, 301.

⁶⁰ Kelly 1993.

⁶¹ Youngs 1989, 143–4.

localised to the River Brosna at Wheery, Co Offaly, Ireland, by one of the authors.⁶² Carrying straps also occur on a number of Insular reliquaries dating from the 11th- and 12th-centuries.⁶³ Some of these later objects, like the house-shaped shrines, could be opened, or were not completely encased.

5 Nevertheless, the function of these objects as reliquaries has been questioned, and it has been suggested that they may have been chrismal, ie containers for the Eucharist or holy oil.⁶⁴ This idea has been put forward in a detailed discussion by Neil O'Donoghue.⁶⁵ Apart from the portable nature of these objects, the main physical attribute O'Donoghue uses to support this argument is the fact that these objects were meant to be opened and the contents accessible. However, there are also reasons why one would want relics to be accessible, and this was certainly a feature of some reliquaries in early medieval Ireland mentioned above, including an early stone and wood example from Dromiskin, Co Louth.⁶⁶ Two Insular house-shaped shrines, the 'Copenhagen' and Abbadia San Salvatore examples, contain relics that date from the Late Middle Ages at the latest. Indeed, it is possible that corporeal relics in the example from Abbadia San Salvatore could be original to the shrine.⁶⁷ The fact that Insular house-shaped shrines became larger over time suggests that the size or quantity of their contents increased through the centuries (see Tab 1) and this may be seen as reflecting an increase in the availability of relics in Ireland between the 7th and 9th centuries.

10 Gerace cautions that a focus on a single function for house-shaped shrines may be problematic.⁶⁸ However, one should also consider that the function of house-shaped shrines may have changed over time in an Insular context. Indeed, it is likely that this happened following the cessation of their manufacture. This is something we see with Insular croziers, which, by and large, were not manufactured after the 12th century and appear to have been regarded mainly as relics in the later medieval and post-medieval periods, rather than as staffs of office.⁶⁹ While the question of the original function and meaning of Insular house-shaped shrines is something that requires more detailed examination and discussion that can be afforded here, the evidence as it currently stands appears mainly to support a reliquary function for these objects.

IN NORSE HANDS

30 Before turning to the discussion of the use and significance of the Melhus shrine after it arrived in Trøndelag, a very central part of its biography needs to be considered: under what circumstances might the shrine have found its way into Norse hands in the first place?

The beginning of the Viking period is traditionally defined on the basis of the first recorded attack on Lindisfarne in AD 793. Following this assault, the last decade of the 8th century saw an explosion of attacks around the shores of Britain, Ireland and Francia, including raids throughout the Hebrides in AD 794, Iona, Lambay, Inishmurray and Inishbofin in

⁶² Murray 2016b, 153–4.

⁶³ Eg Mahr 1932; Raftery 1941.

⁶⁴ Youngs 1989, 135, no 129.

⁶⁵ O'Donoghue 2011; see also Blackwell 2012, 36–8.

⁶⁶ Ó Floinn 2013, 221–2, no 180.

⁶⁷ Ryan 1998.

⁶⁸ Gerace 2017, 88.

⁶⁹ Murray 2017.

TABLE 1
 Ó Floinn's proposed groupings of house-shaped shrines (1989/90, 52–3).

	Shrines	Length	Distinctive features	Dating
Group 1	Bobbio Clonmore Lough Erne (A)	80–106 mm	No wooden core	7th century
Group 2	Abbadia San Salvatore Bologna 'Copenhagen' 'Emly' <i>Melhus</i> Monymusk Setnes	105–134 mm	Enamel or millefiori Wooden core	late 7th–early 9th centuries
Group 3	Clonard (fragments) Lough Erne (B)	177–192 mm	Larger mounts No polychrome Wooden core	9th century

AD 795, mainland Scotland in AD 796, Ulster in AD 798 and Francia in AD 799.⁷⁰ Numerous early raids are recorded in Irish written sources,⁷¹ some of which include accounts of the breaking up, destruction or removal of shrines from ecclesiastical locations (see Table 2).⁷² Indeed, in AD 878, the threat of attacks forced the monks of Iona to send 'the shrine of Colum Cille and his other insignia' to Ireland, 'to escape the foreigners'.⁷³

From the various accounts, it appears that some of the shrines mentioned were portable and so perhaps easily stolen. However, in many cases it is recorded that a shrine was broken and/or carried off. This suggests the possibility that those shrines were too large to plunder intact and so were broken up for transportation. The pair of Irish finials from a woman's grave in Gausel, Norway, and the un-localised pair of finials in the Musée des Antiquités nationales, St Germain-en-Laye, France, possibly derive from such a large shrine.⁷⁴ The description of the tombs of St Brigit and Archbishop Conleth at Kildare by Cogitosus in his 7th-century *Life of St Brigit* give an impression of what such shrines may have looked like and the locations they occupied within churches.⁷⁵ It seems likely that the shrines mentioned in records of Viking attacks on Irish church sites were of major importance, which warranted the recording of their destruction and theft. It is apparent that smaller portable religious objects were also plundered in the course of these attacks as evidenced by the numerous, mostly fragmented, items of Insular Church metalwork discovered in Norse contexts in Ireland, Britain, and Scandinavia.⁷⁶ The plundering of these smaller portable reliquaries, crosses, croziers, chalices and other church furnishings, went unmentioned in the general records of plundering, murders and church burnings inflicted by the Vikings on Irish Christian sites. Much of this religious metalwork was broken up, with decorative elements being reused, for example, as brooches or to decorate lead weights.

⁷⁰ Forte et al 2005, 54; Downham 2000.

⁷¹ Lucas 1967; Etchingham 1996.

⁷² Lucas 1967, 180–1; 1986, 34; Downham 2000.

⁷³ *The Annals of Ulster*, in Mac Airt and G Mac Niocail 1983, 332–3; *Chron Scot*, in Hennessy 1866, 166–7.

⁷⁴ Youngs 1989, 145.

⁷⁵ Connolly and Picard 1987, 25.

⁷⁶ Eg Bourke 2010; Ó Floinn and Harrison 2014, 153–5, 174–7, 202–3; Murray 2016a; Wamers 1985.

TABLE 2
Records of Viking attacks on shrines in Ireland from AD 795 to 900.

Place	Year	Details of Attack	Source
<i>Rechru</i> (Lambay Island, Co Dublin)	795	Burned by the heathens and 'its shrines were broken and plundered'	<i>AU</i> (795), <i>AFM</i> (790)
<i>Inis Phátraic</i> (St Patrick's Island, Co Dublin?)	798	Burned by the heathens and they 'broke the shrine of Dochonna' / 'took the reliques of St Dochonna'	<i>AU</i> (798), <i>ACL</i>
Bangor, Co Down	823/4	Plundered by heathens and 'the shrine of Comgall was broken by them' / they 'shook the relics of Comgall from their shrine'	<i>AU</i> (824), <i>ACL</i> , <i>AI</i> (823), <i>AFM</i> (822)
Donaghmoyne, Co Monaghan	832	Shrine of Adomnán carried away by foreigners	<i>AFM</i> (830), <i>AU</i> (832), <i>ACL</i> , <i>GS</i> (832)
Armagh, Co Armagh	845	Abbot with his insignia/relics and followers carried off by the foreigners / 'shrine of Patrick was broken and carried off by them'	<i>AI</i> (845), <i>AU</i> , <i>AFM</i> (843), <i>ACL</i>
Lorrha, Co Tipperary	c 845	Plundered by foreigners, 'where they broke the shrine of Ruadan'	<i>CGG</i> , <i>AU</i> (845)
Lough Neagh?	c 900	Foreigners 'seized on <i>Étach Padraig</i> '	<i>AFM</i> (895)

A number of house-shaped shrines were to meet with the same fate, such as those represented by the escutcheon from Inchicore and a roof plate from Islandbridge, near Dublin, both of which appear to have come from Viking graves.⁷⁷ Fragments of house-shaped shrines also form part of the Hiberno-Scandinavian assemblage from Shanmullagh, Co Armagh,⁷⁸ while fragments of another shrine were recovered from Park North Cave, Co Cork, in what is likely to have been a Viking context.⁷⁹ Fragments of house-shaped shrines have also been discovered in Viking graves in Scotland and most numerous in Norway.⁸⁰ In this setting, it may also be worth drawing attention the so-called 'Hostage stone', found in excavations at the early monastic site on the island of Inchmarnock, in the Firth of Clyde in western Scotland in 2001/2002. The stone was probably carved in the 8th or 9th century and it pictures a scene with a boat, three armed warriors in armour, and what appears to be an ecclesiastical figure holding an item believed to be a house-shaped shrine. While the narrative displayed on the stone has been debated, it has been principally interpreted as the seizure of an ecclesiast by a group of armed and seaborne warriors.⁸¹ Is this perhaps how the Melhus shrine may have arrived in Trøndelag?

Although Insular ecclesiastical items from Norwegian sites have been generally regarded as 'loot', this view has been questioned since the 1970s by a number of researchers who have suggested that these finds may rather represent evidence for undocumented early Christian missions to Scandinavia.⁸² This interpretation is largely inspired by the record of Ansgar's early 9th-century mission from Germany to southern Scandinavia, which has prompted the suggestion that there may also have been earlier, undocumented Christian missions.⁸³ For

⁷⁷ Ó Floinn and Harrison 2014, 154–5, illus 87, 202–3, illus 127.

⁷⁸ Bourke 2010, 27, figs 18, 23, 25, 26.

⁷⁹ Murray 2016b.

⁸⁰ See Wamers 1985, tab 7; Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998, 116, fig 7.2; Ó Floinn and Harrison 2014, 155.

⁸¹ Lowe 2007, 63–5.

⁸² Eg Blindheim 1976, 26; Mikkelsen 2002; Zachrisson 2004, 167; Nordeide 2011, 151–2, 301.

⁸³ See discussion in Murray 2015, 108–10; 2016a, 177–8.

example, in close vicinity to a woman's burial of the in the 10th century which includes a house-shaped shrine (Fig 9) and a fragment of a crozier at Setnes, Rauma, Norway, archaeological evidence suggests the presence of a Christian church with two associated cemeteries, on the island of Veøya, Rauma.⁸⁴ Some of the graves are dated to the late 9th and early 10th centuries, making it the earliest Christian graveyard identified in Norway.⁸⁵ Sæbjørg Nordeide has suggested that this early, single Christian community may have been a monastery founded and settled in the 9th century by monks from Britain or Ireland. While this possible monastery appears to have existed for a time in peaceful co-existence with its pagan neighbours, the Christians may later have been driven away, resulting in their items being confiscated by the local population.⁸⁶ However, there is little evidence to support the presence of foreign monks on the island, and the archaeological basis used for suggesting a 9th-century establishment of the Christian community is also debatable. Conversely, it can rather be argued that the community at Veøya was founded somewhat later in the mid-10th century, possibly as part of a mission strategy conducted by one of the earliest Christian kings of Norway.⁸⁷

While the Setnes shrine was buried at a time when there may have been Christian activities nearby, the situation was entirely different when the Melhus shrine arrived in Norway, around a century and a half earlier. The Melhus burial represents one of the earliest contacts between Norway and the Insular world of Ireland and Britain, and it seems clear that the shrine came to Trøndelag well before the establishment of the church on Veøya, and also before the first recorded missionary attempts further south in Scandinavia. Based on the date and finds-context of the Melhus shrine, it is tempting to consider this particular find as direct evidence of plundering and raids which took place at the very beginning of the Viking period, as attested by the historical records. As recently stressed by one of the authors of this paper,⁸⁸ the Viking raids on church sites in Ireland and Britain at this time are so well recorded that we ought to be careful not to ignore this strong evidence of the initial negative impact of the Vikings in the lands they plundered. While the missionary theory may not be dismissed as an alternative explanation for how the Setnes shrine ended up in Norway, we consider it far more likely that both the Setnes and the Melhus shrines arrived in the hands of returning Viking raiders, rather than in the hands of Christian missionaries.

FROM ONE RITUAL CONTEXT TO ANOTHER?

The Melhus shrine is in relatively good condition, with much of the current damage probably relating to post-depositional circumstances. It is notable then, that for one reason or the other, this piece was retained intact rather than being broken up for the creation of personal ornaments — as was the case with the majority of Insular church metalwork in Norse hands, including the Insular mount from Melhus, which was detached from its parent object and turned into a brooch (Fig 4). Furthermore, the shrine appears to have been placed in the grave empty and was possibly contained inside a wooden box — suggesting its value was not as a functional container. This cannot be explained by mere reference to an aesthetic appreciation of the item, but must rather be seen in association with the object's biographical references and the new relationships in which it became involved.

⁸⁴ NTNU Vitenskapsmuseet: T18198.

⁸⁵ Solli 1996; Nordeide 2011, 142–5.

⁸⁶ Nordeide 2011, 145–52.

⁸⁷ Solli and Stamnes 2013, 190.

⁸⁸ Murray 2016a, 177–8.



FIG 9

The Insular house-shaped shrine from Setnes, Rauma, Norway.
 Photograph by Per Fredriksen. © MNU University Museum.

THE NARRATIVE ELEMENT

As recently suggested by a number of scholars, it can be argued that ‘loot’ deposited in Norwegian graves may have served to visualize and signal successful overseas expeditions. These objects were more than just the spoils of military activity, or booty, they also carried people, places and stories with them.⁸⁹ There is good evidence from sagas, skaldic poetry, Eddic verses and picture/runic stones, to suggest that Scandinavians lived ‘in an intensely storied world’, where a range of narratives and tales about gods, supernatural beings, journeys, and historical events involving people who actually lived all formed an important and integrated part of society.⁹⁰ Although the majority of these narratives are lost to us today, Neil Price has highlighted the importance of acknowledging the central place they once occupied in the minds of the early medieval Scandinavians. His stress on ‘the power of stories’ is highly relevant when considering the social impact of the earliest overseas voyages.⁹¹ Descriptions and references to individuals or groups of Scandinavians who set out on long, distant voyages occur frequently in Norse sources and on rune stones, many of which commemorate men who were lost or died on their journeys in ‘the East’ or ‘the West’.⁹²

⁸⁹ Eg Sheehan 2013, 818–20; Ashby 2015, 99–102.

⁹⁰ Price 2010, 145–9; Hedeager 2011; Williams et al 2015a.

⁹¹ Price 2010, 145–51.

⁹² See Jesch 2001, 67–107 and 2015 for an overview.

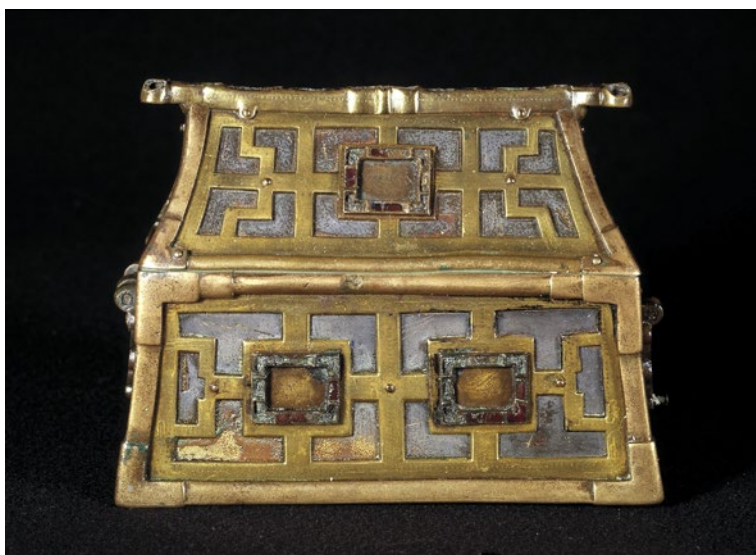


FIG 10

The Insular house-shaped 'Copenhagen' shrine, from a church in Norway.
Photograph by Lennart Larsen. © National Museum of Denmark.

The narrative element of sea voyages is for instance illustrated in Judith Jesch's recent work, where she explores how 'the perils and joys' of sailing in the archipelagic waters of northern Britain and beyond is verbalized and conceptualised in Old Norse poetry from the 11th to early 13th centuries.⁹³ Here, she shows how stylistic elements, used in some dramatic stanzas describing sea journeys, functioned to enhance and 'to give immediacy to the story in performance' when dramatized for an audience 'in the local chieftain's hall'.⁹⁴ On the return to Trøndelag, one can thus only imagine the range of stories of the overseas voyage, and the retrieval of the Melhus shrine and mount from the Insular world, which were likely to have been composed and performed. These tales must have made a lasting impression on their audience, especially at the very start of the Viking period when it has been argued that the Insular world would have been perceived as an unfamiliar and distant place.⁹⁵ Those who were involved in the expeditions may have gained particular benefit from the public re-telling of narratives, as these acts ensured that both the events and many of the individuals involved became fixed in the communal memory.⁹⁶ In addition to the economic prospects, the stories and renown that followed the first successful wave of overseas voyages must have encouraged future expeditions that would take place more frequently during the early part of the 9th century.

The telling of these stories may have involved a form of material manifestation, with the artefacts from the journeys celebrated within the narratives. This may be understood as a form of 'material citation', where certain Insular ecclesiastical items referred to a specific

⁹³ Jesch 2015.

⁹⁴ *Ibid* 326–7.

⁹⁵ Eg Graham-Campbell 2001, 32; Glorstad 2014, 167–70; Ashby 2015.

⁹⁶ Following Jesch 2006, 264.

historical narrative visualising and communicating the tale of particular places, expeditions or people. By keeping the memories of these events alive and remembered, storytelling and ‘material citations’ functioned to link societies with their past, and to mediate collective memories.⁹⁷ Therefore, material references in the form of Insular artefacts provided society with the means not only to connect with narratives of distant times, but also to recent events and to a more or less contemporary but geographically distant place.⁹⁸

COSMOLOGICAL AND RITUAL ASPECTS OF THE EARLIEST OVERSEAS RAIDS

Cult and religion must have been an integral part of life in pagan society, with a close connection between cult, political, social and economic activities. The centre of pre-Christian religion lay in religious practice (*forð sidr*) — sacred acts, rituals and worship of the gods.⁹⁹ There is no evidence of a professional ‘priestly’ class; most probably chieftains and prominent men or women acted as religious leaders in addition to their other roles in society.¹⁰⁰ These rituals and customs are likely to have been practiced differently, both geographically, and between groups of different social standing.¹⁰¹

Considering the strong role of religion in all areas of Norse society, rituals must also have played a vital part in preparations for the overseas expeditions, in order to secure a successful voyage and the safe return of the crew members. The journeys to the Insular world are likely to have been adventurous and memorable experiences, while also representing a significant risk for the crew members due to shipwrecks, disease and illness, privation and violence. The dangers involved with sea voyages are portrayed in numerous skaldic representations which describe the struggle between the stormy, unpredictable and hostile sea, sometimes imagined as a troll or ravenous sea-goddess, and its prey, the ship, often represented as an animal (eg a horse, ox, or stag).¹⁰² While being both a primary food source and a vital means of communication, the sea was also recognized as a potentially dangerous force which in Old Norse could be ‘*kaldr*’ cold, ‘*strangr*’ strong or ‘*skelfor*’ turbulent, representing a constant challenge to the seafarers.¹⁰³ The many Norse depictions of the sea as an unpredictable and liminal zone may reflect the actual risks associated with overseas voyages, especially in unfamiliar waters far out at sea.¹⁰⁴ However, to reduce the risks, certain apotropaic measures could be undertaken, and early medieval poetry and sagas describe some of the rituals and symbolism that could accompany the journeys to new and unknown lands, designed to safeguard the voyagers. For instance, according to the Eddic poem *Sigrdrifumál* (stanza 10), runes (*brimrunar*) could be carved or burnt on the stem, on the blade of the steering oar and burnt into the oars themselves, ‘to protect ships at sea from the fury of the waves’.¹⁰⁵ In this context, it is worth noting the remains of a runic inscription comprising the three first letters of the old futhark alphabet and two overlapping ship symbols, engraved on the back of an Irish bronze ladle found in an early 9th-century woman's burial at Skei, Steinkjer, in North Trøndelag.¹⁰⁶ Could this be archaeological evidence for protective runes and symbols

⁹⁷ Arwill-Nordbladh 2007; 2013.

⁹⁸ Following Lund and Arwill-Nordbladh 2016, 417.

⁹⁹ See Price 2002 or Solli 2002 for a detailed discussion of the practice of ‘*sidr*’.

¹⁰⁰ Jørgensen 2014, 145–7; Ljungkvist 2011, 260–3.

¹⁰¹ Brink 2007, 105.

¹⁰² Clunies Ross 1998, 132–4; Steinsland 2005; Jesch 2015.

¹⁰³ Jesch 2001, 178, see also Jesch 2015.

¹⁰⁴ Holtmark 1989; Aannestad 2015, 243.

¹⁰⁵ Clunies Ross 1998, 132.

¹⁰⁶ Hagland and Stenvik 2008.

as described in Norse poems, carved on the ladle to safeguard its new owners on the journey back to the Norse homeland?

Notably, there are ships' prows roughly scratched on the base of the 'Copenhagen' shrine, which is the third intact Insular house-shaped shrine known from Norway (Fig 10).¹⁰⁷ This object has a different biography to that from Melhus, as it was apparently never buried. It is recorded as being from a church in Norway (location unknown) and was in the Royal Collection in Copenhagen since at least 1690. After the incising of the ships' prows on the object, a runic inscription was added on the base of the shrine.¹⁰⁸ The Norse runes, which have been read as '*Ranvaik a kistu thasa*' (Ranvaik owns this casket), may be dated to the 10th century.¹⁰⁹ While different and later, than the evidence from both Skei and Melhus, the association again with a woman is highly significant. The ships' prows may have fulfilled a similar protective function for the seaward journey home.

Moreover, Norse sources describes how rituals were carried out sometimes before setting out on longer sea journeys, to get supernatural support in order to secure a successful journey and transition to unfamiliar territory.¹¹⁰ This, for instance, is illustrated in the well-known story of Ingolfr Arnarson, the man who, according to the *Landnámabók*, is said to have been the first settler to take up a land claim in Iceland, and his blood-brother Hjørleifr.¹¹¹ The story tells that Ingolfr held a great sacrifice before setting out on the journey, with the intention of seeking good omens concerning his future. While Ingolfr arrived safely in the new land, Hjørleifr, who was unwilling to sacrifice, ran into misfortune on the way to Iceland when his ship got lost in a storm. When Hjørleifr eventually arrived on Iceland, he was soon murdered by his Irish slaves. The story gives a clear impression that Hjørleifr's bad luck was the result of his unwillingness to sacrifice, and therefore not involve supernatural beings in his plans before setting out on the journey.¹¹²

Although the Norse sources were written down long after the first Viking expeditions, they are often used to discuss the mentality and beliefs of Old-Norse society.¹¹³ The examples above illustrate the dangers connected with sea voyages and how various rituals played a vital part in preparations for longer overseas expeditions. In other words, seafarers were depending on 'successful conquest of the sea', which involved securing the favour of the gods that they believed in to keep them protected and to guide them on their journey.¹¹⁴ The individuals who officiated in religious rites were important to their communities in daily life, and perhaps especially so in the spiritual equipping of those crossing the liminal zone (the seas) to the new and little known Insular world. Is it possible that the new Norse owner of the Melhus shrine held such a position? Her large button-on-bow brooch may provide some vital clues.

35 A 'MISTRESS OF THE CULT' AND HER RITUAL TOOLS

The Melhus example is one of 24 button-on-bow brooches from Norway believed to have been produced in the latter part of the Merovingian period (Phase 3, approximately AD 725–800).¹¹⁵ With a length of 240 mm, the Melhus brooch is the largest specimen of this

¹⁰⁷ O'Meadhra 1988; Youngs 1989, 138–9, no 131; Rosedahl and Wilson 1992, 260, no 131.

¹⁰⁸ O'Meadhra 1988, 4.

¹⁰⁹ Olsen 1960, 144; Judith Jesch pers comm.

¹¹⁰ Clunies Ross 1994, 190.

¹¹¹ Clunies Ross 1998, 138–9.

¹¹² Ibid 138.

¹¹³ See Hedeager 2011, 21–30.

¹¹⁴ Nordvig 2013, 190–1; Jesch 2015.

¹¹⁵ Glørstad and Røstad 2015, 189–91.

type ever found in Norway. The large size indicates that such brooches were not intended for daily use, but rather only worn on specific occasions where the women themselves had central roles. Arrhenius has suggested that they were used as part of a priestess costume during pre-Christian rituals, a view recently supported by Glørstad and Røstad.¹¹⁶ It is also possible that these brooches may have been fastened on wooden carvings of Norse gods during *blot* (ritual offerings of food and drink), or other ceremonies.¹¹⁷

The ritual significance of the button-on-bow brooches is emphasized by their iconographic depiction, for instance, on the 'Freya' silver pendant from Aska, Hagebyhöga in Sweden (Fig 11), and on a number of gold figure-foils found in Scandinavia.¹¹⁸ Here they are clearly depicted worn across the lower neck area of the women,¹¹⁹ similar to the in situ position of three such brooches from Norwegian graves.¹²⁰ A distinctive feature on the 'Freya' pendant is the four rows of 'dots' below the button-on-bow brooch, which is believed to represent a large bead necklace (Fig 11). Thus, it is intriguing to note that many of the Norwegian burials with button-on-bow brooches also contained large collections of beads, with the necklace from Melhus comprising at least 139 pieces. While bead necklaces are not a characteristic feature on gold figure-foils picturing women with button-on-bow brooches, the ritual context in which these occurs is nonetheless of great importance. Gold figure-foils occur from the late 6th century to the early 9th century, and are generally ascribed to ritual practice since they are most commonly encountered on settlement sites and buildings of religious significance, such as Sorte Muld on Bornholm, Uppåkra in Skåne, and Mære, Steinkjer.¹²¹ Although not discussing the button-on-bow brooches specifically, Margrete Watt has suggested that some of the figures shown on gold foils may depict a 'secular elite' who fulfilled roles in pre-Christian cult practice.¹²² For this elite, 'control of religion was one of the pillars on which their position of power rested'.¹²³

Further indicators of the ceremonial role of the Melhus woman are reflected in the whalebone plaque found in the same area as the reliquary shrine (Fig 12). Their function is debated, but they are traditionally regarded as smoothing boards.¹²⁴ Following this view, Olwyn Owen has proposed that such items 'had a religious significance' and were used for 'pressing precious linens for ceremonial occasions'.¹²⁵ However, many of the plaques, including the Melhus example, display clear signs of cutting and chopping, suggesting that these items may have been used as serving platters for food at high-status banquets.¹²⁶ Although representing different views, both interpretations propose that the plaques were used on specific occasions where the women themselves had central roles. It may therefore be of significance that six of only eight certain whalebone plaques from Trøndelag were found in women's burials which also contained Insular items. This includes the previously mentioned find from Skei, Steinkjer.¹²⁷

¹¹⁶ Arrhenius 1962; Glørstad and Røstad 2015.

¹¹⁷ Arrhenius 1962, 97.

¹¹⁸ See Glørstad and Røstad 2015, 197–99.

¹¹⁹ Lamn 2004, 49.

¹²⁰ Glørstad and Røstad 2015, 195–9.

¹²¹ Watt 2005; 2011.

¹²² Watt 2011, 244–6.

¹²³ Jørgensen 2014, 147.

¹²⁴ See Owen 1999, 77–81 for a summary of this discussion.

¹²⁵ Owen 1999, 79.

¹²⁶ Isaksen 2012, 100–4.

¹²⁷ Stenvik 2001; Graham-Campbell 2001.



Fig 11

The female figure (suggested to be Freya) depicted on the Aksa amulet, wearing a button-on-bow brooch.
© Statens Historiska Museum.

The Melhus burial also contained a plain, square-sectioned iron ‘rod’, 0.48 m long, traditionally regarded as a roasting spit (Fig 12).¹²⁸ Many such examples have, however, been reinterpreted in recent years as ritual tools, so-called divination or *völva* staffs, the main attribute of the *Völva*, a type of Norse seer described in Norse poems and sagas.¹²⁹ Our example does not display the distinguishing features such as a basket or cage-like handle and bronze polyhedral mounts, associated with the ritual type as identified and discussed by Price.¹³⁰ The longer and tapered end on one side of the rod indicates that it may have had a wooden handle. It remains unknown, however, whether this handle was a plain type or perhaps an elaborate example similar to the metal handles associated with the ritual staffs.

The significance of the Melhus brooch and its wearer means that we need to think differently about the use and meaning of the reliquary after it arrived in Norway — it was more than just ‘booty’, or a nice present for the family of a returned Norse warrior. The early Viking-Age date of the burial suggests that the shrine circulated in Norse hands for only a relatively short time before it was buried, indicating that the religious provenance of the shrine was probably well known to its audience. Can the shrine therefore be interpreted as evidence of the conduct of religious activities undertaken with tools which were brought from

¹²⁸ Often with reference to Petersen 1951, 421–30.

¹²⁹ Eg Price 2002; Gardela 2016.

¹³⁰ Price 2002, 175–204.



Fig 12

The whalebone plaque and iron 'rod' from the Melhus burial.
Photograph by Åge Højem. © NI NU University Museum.

one ritual context (the Christian) to another (Norse)? Objects may acquire biographies and associations not only when they pass between people, but also through other mechanisms such as ritual performance and the drama in ceremonial action relating to particular objects.¹³¹

When the Melhus shrine was discovered it appeared to have been placed in the grave empty and was possibly contained within a wooden box — suggesting that it may not have been on daily display as an exotic curio. Rather, for much of the time the shrine was possibly covered up and was 'active' only intermittently, when exposed on specific occasions. Such withdrawal from everyday use may have served to 'exaggerate its effect when it was uncovered for use in ceremonial performances'.¹³² Although the specific rites and use associated with the shrine are lost to us today, it is worth highlighting that part of a leather carrying strap was still attached to the hinge of the shrine when it was discovered. It is therefore possible to suggest that it was worn around the neck of the Melhus woman as part of a ceremonial costume. While originating from a very different religious context, it is interesting to note

¹³¹ Gosden and Marshall 1999, 174–5; Joy 2009, 550–4; Hedeager 2011, 138.

¹³² Joy 2009, 550–1.

that the famous ‘Buddha’ figure from Viking-Age Helgö also appears to have been carried, as when it was discovered it had a secondary leather strap, which was found folded and bent around the Buddha’s neck and left wrist.¹³³ By demonstrating religious power — through the display and incorporation of foreign religious items into their own rites — such items can be said to have played a part in reinforcing the position of their Norse owners and households. In the case of the Melhus shrine, it served as a visual reminder of a successful raid which included the crossing of a powerful and dangerous zone (the North Sea), a crossing which may have included the support of ‘the mistress of the cult’.

Therefore, the large fibula and the reliquary shrine are unlikely to represent purely ‘wealth’. Rather, where weaponry was essential for the exercise of physical power, some types of jewellery were essential for the practice of ritual and magic power, which invested its possessor with a respected, but also perhaps a feared status.¹³⁴ It is in this light that the significance of the relationship between the Melhus reliquary and the large fibula becomes clear: both were instruments for a specific exercise of ritual power. The woman buried with these ritual tools must have held a special position in her society, as further emphasized by the large burial mound and the boat in which she was placed. In association with the body and other objects of the grave, these tools created a visual tableau which conveyed to viewers idea about belonging and travel, ownership of the objects and their purposes, and the social relations within which they were entangled.¹³⁵ In this perspective, the deposition of the Melhus shrine in a clearly pre-Christian context strongly suggests opposition, rather than adherence, to Christianity.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As we have argued in this paper, the find of the Melhus reliquary in an early Viking-Age barrow in Norway clearly mirrors the many contemporary historical references to the breaking up, destruction and removal of shrines from ecclesiastical locations in Ireland and Britain. There was, however, more to this particular piece than just the spoils of a Viking raid:

Not only was a precious object of a church treasury somewhere in Ireland [sic] carried away, but the object was considered by its new owners as something of very special value. It had not been transformed into something else more practical by them as was the case with so many Irish book-mountings and shrine fragments.¹³⁶

It did seem to retain a certain narrative and ritual significance after it arrived in Norse hands, but in a rather different religious setting than it was originally intended for. The inclusion of this item as one of the gravegoods of a woman, who probably held a special position in pre-Christian cult practice, highlights the importance of ritual aspects of the earliest raids overseas. These aspects must have been particularly important for the first generation of overseas voyagers, when the Insular world was still perceived as an unfamiliar and distant place and not yet fully understood.

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¹³³ See Gyllensvärd 2004, 3, fig 2.

¹³⁴ Hedeager 2015, 153; see also Magnus 2004.

¹³⁵ Following Williams 2001, 58–64.

¹³⁶ Raftery 1941, 107.

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Abbreviations

- ACL *The Annals of Clonmacnoise* (trans C Mageoghegan [1627], ed D Murphy 1896)
- AFM *The Annals of the Four Masters: Annála Ríoghachta Éireann* (ed J O'Donovan 1854)
- AI *The Annals of Inisfallen* (trans and ed S Mac Airt 1988)
- AU *The Annals of Ulster* (eds S Mac Airt and G Mac Niocaill 1983)
- CGG *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* (ed J H Todd 1867)
- CS *Chronicon Scotorum* (ed W M Hennessy 1866)
- NTNU Norwegian University of Science and Technology

Résumé

Un reliquaire insulaire de Melhus et la signification du matériel ecclésiastique insulaire en Norvège, au début de l'Âge des Vikings par Aina Heen-Pettersen et Griffin Murray

Une châsse reliquaire insulaire unique en son genre a été découverte il y a plus d'un siècle, dans la tombe d'une femme datée du début du 9^e siècle, à Melhus, dans le centre de la Norvège. Ce papier réexamine en détail cette châsse et son utilisation dans son contexte ecclésiastique d'origine. Nous proposons également une autre interprétation de la manière dont une population païenne locale aurait pu conceptualiser cet objet chrétien, une fois arrivé entre des mains scandinaves. Si les articles ecclésiastiques insulaires en Scandinavie étaient pour la plupart mis en pièces et transformés en ornements individuels, la châsse de Melhus est restée intacte, ce qui suggère qu'on lui conférait une valeur particulière. Nous avançons ici que l'importance de la châsse découle de la place qu'elle occupait au sein des récits locaux et des pratiques rituelles liés aux premières traversées de la mer du Nord. Il est possible que la femme occupant la tombe dans laquelle se trouvait la châsse ait joué un rôle central dans ces rituels.

Zusammenfassung

Ein Inselreliquiar aus Melhus und die Bedeutung von auf Inseln gefundenen kirchlichen Gegenständen im Norwegen des frühen Wikingerzeitalters von Aina Heen-Pettersen und Griffin Murray

Vor über einem Jahrhundert wurde im Grab einer Frau aus dem frühen 9. Jahrhundert in Melhus in Zentralnorwegen ein einzigartiger Insel-Reliquierschrein entdeckt. Der vorliegende Artikel bietet eine detaillierte Neubewertung dieses Schreins und seiner Verwendung in seinem ursprünglichen kirchlichen Kontext. Wir schlagen auch eine alternative Interpretation dafür vor, wie eine lokale heidnische Bevölkerung diesen

christlichen Gegenstand vielleicht konzeptualisiert hat, nachdem er in den Händen der Wikinger hier angekommen war. Während die meisten auf Inseln befindlichen kirchlichen Gegenstände in Skandinavien zerlegt und zu persönlichen Schmuckgegenständen umgeformt wurden, hat man den Melhus-Schrein vollständig gelassen, was darauf hindeutet, dass man ihn für besonders wertvoll hielt. Hier wird argumentiert, dass die Bedeutung des Schreins sich aus seinem Platz in lokalen Erzählungen und rituellen Praktiken ableitet, die mit den frühesten Reisen über die Nordsee zusammenhängen. Die Frau, mit der dieser Schrein begraben wurde, hat vielleicht bei diesen Ritualen eine zentrale Rolle gespielt.

Riassunto

Un reliquiario insulare da Melhus e il significato degli oggetti ecclesiastici di arte insulare nella Norvegia del primo periodo vichingo di Aina Heen-Pettersen e Griffin Murray

Una teca reliquiario insulare unica nel suo genere fu rinvenuta più di un secolo fa a Melhus, nella Norvegia centrale, in una tomba femminile dell'inizio del IX secolo. Questo studio offre una completa rivalutazione della teca e dell'uso cui era destinata nel suo contesto ecclesiastico originario. Proponiamo inoltre un'interpretazione alternativa sul come la popolazione pagana locale possa avere concettualizzato questo oggetto cristiano una volta giunto in mani norvegesi. Mentre la maggior parte degli oggetti ecclesiastici di arte insulare in Scandinavia venivano smontati e trasformati in ornamenti personali, la teca di Melhus venne conservata intatta, facendo pensare che le si attribuiva un valore speciale. Qui si sostiene che l'importanza della teca derivava da resoconti locali e da pratiche rituali collegate ai primi viaggi attraverso il Mare del Nord. La donna con la quale fu sepolto il reliquiario potrebbe avere avuto un ruolo centrale in queste pratiche.