

The Weathervane from Heggen

Approaching a Discrete Artefact from the Nordic Middle Ages

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The small-scale images executed on the weathervane from Heggen represent the culminations of battles of real and fantastic beasts. The historical action of engraving the metal plate once changed this structure permanently, creating a unit which transgresses our modern contrasting notions of dead material and live animal body. This article examines the presentation of the material object in the museum exhibition today in relation to the ways of displaying it in the Middle Ages. Influenced by the material and sensorial turns and theories of artworks' "mythopoetic" efficacy as outlined by Didi-Huberman, it lays forth a new layer of understanding Scandinavian weathervanes concerning the capacity for apotropaic protection.



Figure 1. Screenshot from the digital 360° interactive version of the exhibition VÍKINGR at the Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo, Norway.

From Ship's Prow to Church Spire. This weathervane from Heggen Church had an earlier life as a decoration atop a ship. There are only four such weathervanes preserved in Norway. This is the oldest, made in the mid-1000s.

The Old Norse sagas tell of golden weathervanes mounted on the prows of warships. When people saw them glinting in the sunlight, they knew a chieftain or a king was approaching. The weathervanes were later removed and placed on medieval churches.

C23602, ship's vane, gilded copper alloy, from Heggen Church, Buskerud, Dated to 1000–1050.¹

Roaming the glass displays of the exhibition at the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo, a triangular golden object appears near the end of the room. It is damaged, the gilding cracking near the edges, and several hits from both sides have left the thin metal plate uneven and rough. Looking closer, fantastic animals in violent battles play out in dynamic compositions in front of the viewer. These ornaments are prime examples of Viking art in the so-called Ringerike style, with a precision of vivid detail comparable to early twentieth century *art nouveau* (or vice versa) (Fuglesang 1974: 13–20, 46; Graham-Campbell 2013). By presenting the object in the cool, quiet, minimalist hall flooded in bright lights, visitors today are asked to appreciate its impressive designs aesthetically, as a faded, once grand piece of handicraft.

The object on display is a weathervane dated to c. 1000–1050. The handout to the exhibition, quoted above, informs visitors that it was initially mounted in Viking longships, and secondarily moved to the spire of the early thirteenth-century church of Heggen, in inland Modum by Tyrifjorden, nearby Ringerike municipality. This much is clear from evidence discussed by previous researchers. In many ways, then, the exhibition handout presents what we positively know about the weathervane. From its previous uses, in the longship and the church's most holy location, the literally and essentially closest to the Godhead, the object must have been attributed vast powers. It was, it seems, constantly in use during the Middle Ages; never melted nor re-made, altered slightly but never significantly; and never buried nor deposited.

This article seeks to investigate the kinds of power bestowed on the weathervane from Heggen during the Middle Ages. Previously, the technical ways of attaching it to the longship stem have been discussed (Blindheim 1982; Engvig 2003a, 2003b). To others, artistic style has been the centre of interest as a key to understanding provenance (Brøgger 1925; Fuglesang 1974; Kielland 1927). A few have briefly commented

¹ From the informational handout to the exhibition *VÍKINGR* at the Historical Museum, Oslo, p. 20.

on the possible symbolisms behind the individual motifs, often as isolated from the vane's other properties.

In a recent study, Morten Stige underlined that the importance of the early medieval weathervanes derived from values beyond the symbolic and aesthetic realms, but did not explore this further (Stige 2020). This article continues this trail of thought. Focus is shifted from representation to action, situation, and experience: the performative aspects of the object in encounters with the medieval audiences. In this view, meaning and value is created when artefact and perceiver meet (f. ex Caviness 2006: 67; Carruthers 2013). The object's material and sensorial properties become crucial sources of knowledge, in addition to the specific physical and historical contexts in which they appeared; that is, the situations framing the encounter with the weathervane in its own time. The aim is not to *explain* the artefact; narrate its "biography" and provenance, which may never be fully understood due to a significant lack of evidence. Rather, the mute artefact is attempted "opened up", allowing various interpretations of historical functions and meanings to come to light and into discussion.

The time frame in this article spans the early and high medieval period in Scandinavia, from about 1000, when the object in question was created, to the fourteenth century, when the vane likely had been relocated to the church. As there is no consensus in research of the date of relocation, the wide time frame is meant to accommodate more precise future finds.

Three points will be made from three aspects of the weathervane as it is presented in the museum exhibition and the accompanying informational handout. The first looks at the Old Norse terminology and potential instrumentality. The second concerns a temporal aspect of the vane's aesthetics hardly accessible in the bright museum hall. The third explores the roles of the delicate and violent ornamentation, the most striking aspect of the artefact experienced in the museum but obscure to the eyes in the Middle Ages. I argue that the power of the weathervane in the early medieval period in Norway was understood as deriving from within the object itself, due to the ways it was displayed, which construed it as potent, energetic, active, and capable of affecting its surroundings.

Veðrviti

The exhibition handout identified the gilded artefact as a *weathervane*, that is, a wind or weather indicator. The Old Norse called them *veðrviti*. A total of four early medieval *veðrviti* are known today in Norway and Sweden, named after the church they

were once mounted in: Heggen, Tingelstad, Söderala and Källunge.² The weathervanes have relatives in numerous cultures up to our own time, and may all be defined by their light-reflective surfaces and, according to the terminology, the ability to indicate the wind's directions.

The four early medieval *veðrviti* conform to an object type designed and used in similar ways. Each is a 2-3 mm thin plate of copper alloy³ cut to a triangle of about 28-35 x 19-23,5 cm, with a deeply arched underside and a blunt upper inner corner of c. 97-98°.⁴ Because of this upper angle, the tip of the vane points upwards if the short side is attached to something vertical, like a ship mast or vertical spire. What is more, a cast figurine of a lion, or in the case of the Tingelstad weathervane, a dragon, is attached at the outer tip. The solid figurine ensures that most of the object's weight is firmly placed at the outer pointed edge. However, an upwards-turning metal triangle heavy at the tip, will be an unstable wind indicator. A simple piece of fabric would be a better option.⁵ If, on the other hand, the sloping vane is attached to an equally sloping rod, its straight upper edge would rest horizontally for a balanced look. This position, however, would prohibit the weathervane from indicating the wind.

² These four objects are in fact only one group of weathervanes from the medieval period in Scandinavia: two other types exist. The first is an early type of miniature weathervanes dated c. 800-900, of which nine exemplars have been found in Norway, Sweden, Åland, Germany and Russia. The second group succeeded the early medieval vanes, all dated c. 1200-1300, and found in Høyjord, Norderhov, and Tovdal, Norway (see Eide 2021 for an overview of the medieval weathervanes discovered thus far in table I).

³ Blindheim analysed the four early medieval weathervanes' metal compositions in 1983. The vane from Heggen consists of over 90% copper, while the figurine is 70% copper, 20% zinc, 5% lead and 5% other metals. The three other weathervanes are of similar copper alloys (Blindheim 1982: 104). No other chemical analysis has been undertaken, nor of the related types of weathervanes.

⁴ The exception is the vane from Tingelstad, with an upper corner of 90°. Blindheim discovered that this is a secondary modification. He also observed that the vane from Heggen too had a portion of its lower arched underside cut off secondarily, which preserved the blunt upper angle. Reasons for the different modifications remain unclear (Blindheim 1982: 99, 103-104).

⁵ The poor utility of the metal vane as wind-indicator was in fact proved in an experiment carried out by Olaf Engvig. He attached a replica of the vane from Heggen to a vertical mast and stem, concluding that it cannot have been used as technical wind indicators in any of the positions (Engvig 2003a, 2003b).



Figure 2. Carved image found under the Bryggen in Bergen, dated c. 1200-1250. © Illustration by Asbjørn E. Herteig (Hougen 1974, 12).

Several images and texts indicate the latter alternative as the likely way the *veðrviti* were fastened to early medieval longships. Consider first an image from Bergen (figure 2). It displays no less than 45 ship's stems, probably depicting the front of a levy fleet. Three of the stems have triangular vanes with the characteristic arched underside and indications of ornamentation. All three face the same direction; towards the sea. If this is a levy sailing, as might be expected, towards the right in the picture, the vanes would face the opposite direction if they were wind-indicators (Hougen 1974: 10–13). Indeed, the image displays another, square vane turning the opposite way to the *veðrviti*, with cords flapping in the wind. This must be a functional wind indicator in a lightweight material. Other images support this argument, depicting triangular vanes in ship stems turning towards the sea and not the ship. This suggests a discrepancy between the Old Norse terminology and the actual, practical functionality of the object type.

The Old Norse sagas mention the *veðrviti* several places. For instance, *Óláfs saga ins helga* tells of King Knútr of England and Denmark, who in 1025 sailed to fight King Olaf of Norway and King Onund of Sweden. When they retreated last minute, Hárekr of Tjøtta, liegeman of King Ólafr, attacked:

Then he had the sail lowered and also the masts, the weathervane taken down and all the ship above the water line wrapped in grey awnings, and had rowers on a few benches fore and aft and made most of the men sit low down in the ship.

This made the ship appear to Knútr's men as an ordinary salt- and herring ship:

[...] But when Hárekr got on into the sound and past the army, then he had the masts raised and the sail hoisted, had a gilded weathervane put up. The sail was as white as snow and coloured with red and blue stripes. Then King Knútr's men

saw and tell the king that it was more than likely that King Óláfr had sailed by there (Snorri Sturluson 2014: ch 158, p. 195).

The vane was set up swiftly, discretely, *after* the mast, thus probably in another place (Stige 2020: 106). Moreover, *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* tells of weathervanes put up right before an attack in order to indicate danger when it was already too late for the enemy to escape:

The King called his councillors to him. And it was settled that the small-ships would fare first and the long-ships after them, and the masts should stand up in them. Then the Ribbalds would think they were all ships of burthen or small. And so it was done. [...]. The Ribbalds thought these were ships of burthen on a voyage and rowed as straight on against them as they could. But when they fell to shooting on board the small-ships at those who were nearest to them the Ribbalds saw that weathervanes [*veðrviti*] glistened in the sunshine of the long-ships. Then they thought they knew that there were greater men in company with the Birchshanks than liegemen alone (transl. by Dasent 1997: ch. 66; *Hákonar saga*, ch. LXIX, p. 235).

It has rightly been noted that the Ribbalds would have noticed the *veðrviti* right away had they been in the ship's mast top. In both passages above, weathervanes identify a ship as a warship and install fear in enemies (Bugge 1931: 179–180). A third saga passage tells us that vanes could be attached and detached to the ship as loose objects, and that they could switch ownership, in this instance between earls and bishops:

After that the bishop lent [the earl] the ship with her figureheads and all her [*veðrvitum*] (transl. by Dasent 1997: ch. 67; *Hákonar saga*, ch. LXX, p. 236).

Next, king Hákonar's new ship had weathervanes, shields, and heads in the stems, making it appear striking, awe-inspiring, blood-red golden, like fire:

King Hacon had many other big ships and excellently well fitted. And in the sunshine it seemed very like as if fire burnt on the heads and vanes [*veðrviti*] and gilded shields which were on the stems and sterns. As Sturla sung:

Twice-tried gold, O Rhine-flame giver,
In scrolls upon thy sails was seen,
The blood-red prows stretched out like necks

Rose high above thy Dragon ship
The rows of shields glowed bright as fire
Gold-mounted at thy galleys sides,
The burning gold-wave deeply reddened
All shields among that glistening fleet. (Transl. by Dasent 1997: ch. 291; *Hákonar saga*, ch. CCCXLVII, p. 188).

The following lines explain how a whole ship's stem detached and fell into the sea after a crash between the two ships. The weathervane, however, stuck to the sail of the other ship:

When the king sailed east out of Vegg, the Hardangers Thorir Grips' son and Bard Gro's son ran aboard the ship of archbishop Einar, and from the stern down to the waist, all fell into the sea together, the stern and the shields which were on it; but the vanes [*veðrvitana*] caught in the sail of Thorir's and Bard's ship, and they sailed away with them (*Hákonar saga* ch. CCCXLVII, p. 189; transl. by Dasent 1997: ch. 291).

The *veðrviti* cannot have been functional wind-indicators based on the saga testimony. It seems that the Old Norse name persisted regardless of its practical function, likely referring to a previous function for the same object type. That is, the name originally denoted the functional wind-indicators, which today are lost due to the fragility of their material. These vanes found their way to the ship stems as decorative, heavier metal plates, thus losing their primary instrumental function. This transition must have occurred before the weathervanes that remain today were created (Stige 2020: 103–105).



Figure 3. Heggen Church, Buskerud. The weathervane is depicted as attached to a sloping spire on the roof of the northern transverse ship of the church in this image of unknown origin and date. © Blindheim, 1984.

The weathervane was subsequently removed from use in longships and attached to the exterior of Heggen Church. This spire was most likely sloping like the ship stem.⁶ The vane may thus never have acted as a wind-indicator during its entire material life, albeit continuously referring to this function through name.

Nevertheless, *veðrviti* were worth mentioning and depicting. The sagas present them as proud, impressive, and triumphant, alongside dragons' heads and golden shields in the warships. They were not reserved for specific ships, chieftains, or levies. The status they conferred seems interpersonal, and they were used by both bishops and earls. Above all, the saga evidence suggest that the power of the vanes was connected to materiality; their ability to create striking and fascinating spectacles unlike mundane experience, thus persisting in memory.

Vibrant materiality

The minimalist museum display floods the golden weathervane in bright, steady lights so that every ornamental detail, dent, and metal pore are equally aestheticized. This is a very different experience from any medieval encounter with the object. The sagas suggested this, describing them as of “burning gold”, “glistening in the sunshine”, and speaking of “blood-red prows”. In fact, almost every saga passage mentioning *veðrviti* emphasised the golden surfaces or described the visual effects of this material; they “glistened” and looked “as if on fire” in the sun. By displaying the golden vanes outdoors far away from the audience, elevated in the sea- or landscape, a vane's appearance fluctuated and vibrated due to constantly changing light- and weather conditions. Further, they moved without human interference; when the ship moved, or when a gust of wind caused the vane in the spire to turn. The animated, “burning” vanes thus produced extraordinary sensory spectacles. The experience of the weathervane from Heggen today, then, lacks a central aspect of the medieval aesthetic: the temporal, complex, ephemeral, and ever-changing. Enabling, and fuelling, the golden spectacle was the vanes' materiality.

⁶ Lamm 2002, 36; Blindheim 1982, 108. See figure 3. The Tingelstad vane was probably mounted on a vertical church spire, and this is the likely reason for its previously mentioned secondary modification to a right angle, enabling free rotation with the wind. The vanes from Källunge and Söderala might also have been mounted on vertical church spires, but were not modified, and thus indicated the wind unstably.



Figure 4. The weathervane from Heggen, side A. © Museum of Cultural History, Oslo.

The vane from Heggen is engraved and gilded by fire.⁷ The thin golden layer perfectly covered the base to make it look as if of solid gold. A precious and costly material, gold carried with it an abundance of associations for a medieval audience related to wealth, power, strength, and generosity. The smiths' knowledge of metalworking was believed to come from Mimir's well, the source of all wisdom, and related to Odinn, the god of wisdom, magic, and of smithing. Smiths were believed to transfer their supernatural powers to the metalwork they made (Hed Jakobsson 2002: 286–288; Ekberg 2002: 4; Wright 2019). On a more general level, Old Norse kunst, artworks, were conceived of as objects whose value related to knowledge, insight, and sorcery, and thus itself embodying a magic potential (Kristoffersen 2010: 262). All golden artefacts and metalwork generally may thus have carried specific associations of inherent properties in the early medieval period.

⁷ The techniques of engraving “de opere punctili” correspond to the recipes of artmaking in Theophilus Presbyter's twelfth-century treatise *Schedula diversarum artium* (Presbyter 1961, book 3, chapter LXIII, pp. 129–131).

The sagas' emphasis on materiality may be largely due to the vanes' signal functions. An individual, flat object with a golden, mirror-like surface can reflect a sun-beam across vast distances at the right angle. The ability to create light flashes to far-away viewers may have been valuable. The constant swinging of the vane due to the movement of the ship or the wind in the church spire, would send golden flashes in all directions. Standing at one angle, the sun's reflection in the vane would overwhelm the eyes, circumscribing vision for a second. From another angle, in another weather, the vane looked darkened, matted. Consequently, it was during changing weather events that the vanes shone the brightest, creating a *fluxus* of ever-changing light.

These signal effects were observed first-hand by Olaf Engvig, who sailed the North Sea with two replicas of the Heggen vane. He observed that the vanes allowed the two ships to communicate, calling them "grey weather lanterns":

Not only did they sparkle in bright sunlight. Even in overcast or dull skies their flashing or signalling effect was worth recording as outstanding. Most impressive was their appearance when the sun was low on the horizon. It was almost frightening how the vanes sent off beams of light [...] (Engvig 2003a: 6).

That is, in darkened weather the little available light would magnify in the golden surface, glowing and shining brilliantly, as if independent sources of light.

Similarly, a weathervane in the church spire marked the church's position in the landscape. The golden vane would appear as a single golden spot of light to approaching pilgrims, depending on the position and angle of the perceiver related to it, in addition to the ever-shifting weather- and light conditions. The visual signal effects would have attracted the gaze of a perceiver in the distance, holding it in wonder at the extra-ordinary spectacle. Here too, the vane would look like a light source on its own, from which a pulsating glinting effect and bright signals were sent in several directions, due to the surface covered tightly by the layer of gilding.

Looking closer at the material artefact in the glass display, another aspect of the medieval encounter with the weathervane might be deduced, an aspect wholly integrated in the visual, golden spectacle it generated. It seems that the weathervane was once not only visible, but also audible. In fact, all the four early medieval vanes' undersides have around fifteen small holes pierced through the outer fittings, in addition to a hole through the mouths of the top figurines. Interestingly, all the holes are damaged in various degrees at the same place, at the bottom, many of them broken through

entirely. The Heggen vane's underside has been altered, perhaps due to the significant damage at the holes which can be observed on the three other vanes. The holes must have carried something of considerable weight to cause erosion on solid metal.

It is generally agreed upon in previous research that the reason for the damage is depicted in the mentioned image from Bergen (figure 2). The drawer has affixed short lines from the arched underside with small, round objects hanging in them. It is likely that a small metal ring was attached to each of the holes in the vane, in which a string with metal objects in hung freely.⁸ Set in motion, the rings caused erosion on the bottom of the holes which is visible today. If this is correct, the hanging metal objects would, when clinging into each other, add a distinct aural aspect to the experience of a weathervane. The free-flying metal device would have produced low, metallic, sonorous noises. It is uncertain when the acoustic device dissociated from the weathervanes, and it may have persisted well after relocating to the church spire.

The noise of the vanes unfolded parallelly with the visual golden effects in shifting light. While the noise would be audible only at shorter distances, a strong gust of wind in the right direction could send the sounds far off in a flash. While the visual effects imposed on the perceiver from afar, the acoustics may have amplified this visual radiance.

The early medieval weathervanes thus generated spectacular visual and acoustic signals unfolding in temporal performances. The ever-changing event of light and sound was animated by two agents external to the vanes which put them in motion. The first was mechanical and man-made: the physical attachment to the stem or spire, enabling movement. The second agent included natural forces of wind, weather, and light which made the material move, fuelling the entire multisensory spectacle. In this way, the vanes moved without direct human contact. This was likely interpreted as a sign of inherent agency, dynamism, and a "kind of life" in the weathervanes. The saga passages quoted above indicated this in describing them as shaking in the wet wind and *attaching* and *detaching* seemingly by their own will. Centrally, the vanes appeared *as if* on fire; and not *as* burning, or as fire *itself*. There was awareness of the crafted, earthly materials the vanes were made up of, and all the while they were more than this mere materiality. In short, the vane created *signs of life*; movement, shifting visual and aural appearances which created an illusion of life by motion, while retaining its status as crafted by earthbound, dead materials (Jørgensen 2017: 261, 264–268).

⁸ Salin suggested the presence of such "metal leaves" already in 1921 (Salin 1921: 2). Lighter materials like textile would not have damaged the holes to the degree visible on the vanes.

The vibrant, mirror-like surface of the vane thus generated manifold, temporally unfolding spectacles of variegated visual and aural signals. These signals immediately captured the eyes and ears of perceivers from a distance. The complexity of the sensorial spectacle evoked certain feelings in the perceivers; the sagas described that the vanes evoked awe and installed fear and terror in viewers of the weathervaned ship. Furthermore, it seems that the light- and noise-generating weathervane caused a heightened sensibility to the situation in which the vane appeared. Attached to the ship stem or church spire, the vane became synonymous with the power of the edifice it was attached to; the violently powerful and skilful Viking naval power or the shielding, reassuring permanence of the church building.

Engraved animals

None of the saga passages mentioned that the *veðrviti* are covered on all surfaces by ornaments. Only some drawers indicated decor by arbitrary, sketchy lines inside the triangular shapes. A reason for the notable absence is that few people, mainly those responsible for attaching the vane to the stem or spire, had opportunity to see the ornaments up close (Bugge 1925: 25; 1931: 183–184; Munksgaard 2004: 476; Stige 2020: 106–107). Everyone else, standing even at shorter distances, would be unable to see the specific motifs. By placing the vane far from most viewers, it was only intelligible through golden flashes and low ringing noises.

The museum exhibition, on the other hand, offers the opportunity to study the ornamental detail. The vane is engraved on both sides. On one side (side A, see figures 4 and 6) a large and a small lion follow each other in a leap forwards. The smaller lion in front is looking back at the larger one as if chased (Wilson & Klindt-Jensen 1966: 136–137). Their elongated bodies have spiral hips, fur indicated by small trefoils on the large lion, with ears, a large eye, and an open mouth. They have head pieces, like majestic crowns, composite of trefoils and elongated tendrils ending in small curls, and corresponding tails. The elongated tendril is repeated in the acanthus rank pattern on the framing fittings, where they grow down towards the lion motif. A “frieze” of stylised acanthus is placed between the fittings and lions. The double ornamental band provides compositional balance and rhythm. The inner frieze on the other side (side B, see figures 5 and 7) is in fact classicising: semi-circular arches are joined by a ring, each arch finishing in a fleur-de-lis (Brøgger 1925: 16). At the centre is a large eagle in battle with a snake. The eagle has a long neck with feathers. Like the lions on side A, the eagle has a large head piece and wings of elongated, curled tendrils. Around its neck and wings is the strangling snake, the eagle flapping the wings and opening the beak in a cry.



Figure 5. The weathervane from Heggen, side B. © Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo, Norway.

The repeated use of tendrils and trefoils blur the lines between plant and animal ornament, into a delightfully ambiguous yet linear and precise design. Each detail is a repetition yet rendered uniquely and differing slightly from the others. The animal bodies are stiff, but looping, dynamic, and the eagle strong and energetic in its struggle. The ambiguous forms making up the complex and unified composition puzzles the eye up close, prohibiting the gaze from fixing at a single detail. It invites a playful exploration of every minute detail, twist, and turn. Perceiving the ornaments in open air, in motion, would add a temporal unfolding of colours, light, and sounds, complicating the act of trying to discern the individual motifs. The obscure, enigmatic, complex style of the animal battles invited fascination, then as now.

The theme of the animal battle is common for three of the early medieval vanes.⁹ They depict serpent-dragons, lions, birds, and eagles; high-status animals of predation

⁹ The vanes from Heggen, Källunge and Söderala vanes features similar animal battles, while the vane from Tingelstad depicts the biblical David rescuing the lamb from the lion. Here, the theme of animal violence features in a specific biblical narrative (1. Sam 17, 34–35).

valued for aggression and physical strength (Høilund Nielsen 2002: 212, 214). The motifs can further be characterised as evoking the idea of violence itself, perhaps with a sense of impartiality: it is difficult to predict a winner. The clearest example is on the vane from Källunge, depicting two identical, mirroring serpents biting the other's tail in an equal battle. Side B of the vane from Heggen depicts a small serpent looping around the neck of a large eagle, strangling it. Despite the size difference, the eagle opens its beak in a cry, and flaps its wings in struggle.

No consensus on how to understand the motifs has previously been reached. Several pre-Christian and Christian iconographical interpretations are available, for instance with the serpent-dragon or the lion as the good or evil part in the battles of good and evil.¹⁰ An alternative is interpreting all large animals as the evil part of the battle, as a principle of Norse art (Lundborg 2006: 42). These may be relevant explanations. If the battle motifs conveyed specific stories or didactic messages to the public, however, it seems inexpedient to render these on the small surfaces of the vanes, with complexly intricate details, only to be placed far from the audience, on top of that, in a location constantly in movement.¹¹

The meaning of the ornaments thus cannot be fully explained through any one surviving text: they are not primarily narrative nor didactic in character, nor were they discernible to most people. It seems that the motifs evoked a sense or a *spirit* of battle; the lethal violence of predatory beasts battling by twisting around each other. The bound, intertwining animal bodies in Viking-age art may more generally relate to military values, and thus become metaphoric for the bestial liquidation of enemies through battle.¹² According to this interpretation, the vane represent the climax of a violent, beastly battle.

¹⁰ Most literary sources of these beastly animals, particularly variations of the serpent-dragon, are related to war and violence (Acker 2012: 2–3).

¹¹ Other, contemporary images rendered narratives in clearer, less detailed ways to make the story easily recognizable. For instance, images of Sigurd Fåvnesbane have a clarity of style and form, ordered inside medallions separating the story from surrounding ornaments, following the logical sequence of the story.

¹² Lundborg 2006: 38–41. Lundborg found a poetic counterpart to the bound animal bodies in *Beowulf*. In the final battle with Grendel, Beowulf will: “with steady nails | to the bed of death | get that beast bound | and hold him hard | in my grip of hand | until his last moment Beowulf”, lines 963–966.



*Figures 6 and 7. Illustrations of the main animals depicted on the weathervane from Heggen.
© Brøgger, 1925.*

By re-presenting something, something is made present. As such, it can protect against that which it re-presents. In this way, a re-presentation of evil protects against evil (Donceel-Voûte 2018: 17–20). That is, by drawing the shape of an animal onto an artefact, it is filled with the powers of the animal the drawing represents, as the imposition of a graphic element onto the artefact changes its structure and creates a new unit. The artefact *becomes* or is transformed into the animal graphically rendered on it, while retaining its function, for instance for a box to contain things within it. The new unit could actively watch over what that box contained. “The final product is a whole: utensil – ornament, object – animal, box – that speaks”, as Lévi-Strauss explained it (Kristoffersen 1997: 246–247; Lévi-Strauss 1963: 260–261). Norse Migration period swords and jewellery with animal ornamentation have been interpreted accordingly (Kristoffersen 1997; Hed Jakobsson 2002: 283, n25). The unification of object and animal made swords share its powers with the depicted animal, thus increasing the sword strike’s lethality. The animal depicted, on the other hand, *became the sword*. The transformation was not understood metaphorically but as a real transformation with practical consequences. By engraving bestial and violent animals, real or fantastic, on the weathervanes, they were imbued with the fierceness believed to be characteristic of these animals. The artefact with engravings of violent evil became potent deflectors of just what it represented.

This is the notion of *apotropaia*, generally defined as the ability of an artefact, word, or phrase to ward off evil (Weinryb 2016: 122). The perhaps most common apotropaic symbol is the evil eye. This symbol was imported to pre-Christian Scandinavia from the East, and likely brought the processes of apotropaia with it (Bill 2016: 143). By placing weathervanes in outwards-sloping fore stems, the top animal would look out in the direction of sailing, towards the sea and the possible dangers ahead. Vanes placed in back-stems pointed behind the ship, the top animal looking for and protecting against followers and back-hand attacks.¹³ The watching gaze of the top animal was protective, like the evil eye, sending evil back by mirroring it. In this way, one function of the weathervanes was like the protective, gilded animal and dragon ship heads.¹⁴

¹³ Comparing to ninth-century animal heads on the Oseberg sledges, fixed to the sledges’ fronts and backs looking forwards and backwards like the vanes, protected against evil. They have open mouths and more pronounced eyes than the top animals on the vanes. It seems there may have been a continuation of animal ornamentation on travelling vessels for apotropaic protective functions (Bill 2016: 147–153).

¹⁴ The sagas describe golden heads attached to longships as gold, loose objects, so frightening to the “land spirits” that they must be removed before approaching land. This is accepted as evidence for their apotropaic function. See *Landnámabók* in *Hauksbók*, ch. 268.

Thus, for the apotropaic transformation to take place, the specific motifs did not have to be discernible to the audience. However, the engraved weathervane needed to be displayed. Not only did the top animals look out for their gazes to meet and avert evil forces; the re-presentations of evil had to be seen. Light is a powerful apotropaion, a central passageway for evil to roam freely. Sound is another apotropaion familiar to Norse medieval society (Bill 2016: 144–146; Weinryb 2016: 124), continuing in Christianity through for instance bronze bells. Through the ritual of baptism, bells could avert evil forces through its powerful sounds. Signals of light and sound were thus capable of transporting evil and apotropaic forces. These signals unleashed into the environment when on display, communicating the apotropaic potential of the vane acquired through the engravings. Displayed in the ship or church spire, the golden vane became an energetic, potent source constantly radiating signals of light and sound into the environment, and thus creating a particular protective aura about the ship or church. Ensuring this, as seen, was the constant mechanical movement of the vane in both ship stem and church spire without direct human intervention. The rich, golden red, vibrating, fire-like energy would attract the gazes of people from a distance, hold it in fascination, and provoke feelings of awe and fear. The visual, audial effects and the resulting emotional affects may have suggested a superhuman force within the artefact; it may have been interpreted as evidence to its ability to protect against dark forces, physical, visible, or invisible.

If light and sound are central passageways for evil to roam freely, to be exposed and avoided, they also need to be controlled. As seen above, the sagas explained that golden weathervanes were attached to the ship stems right before attacking or approaching the enemy. This may be sketching an image of a possible ritual of mounting and dismounting of the vane right before and after an attack, to unleash the vane's apotropaic energy at a highly strategic time. By mounting the vane, creating an aura of light and sound, a magic layer of protection around the ship, the ship would be stronger in situations of extreme vulnerability. The act of mounting a weathervane to a ship stem, making it visible and audible, may have been believed to activate its apotropaic potential to protect. The dismounting of the vane signalled that the danger was over.

In this way, placing a vane in a ship stem right before an attack was an integral and strategic part of that military operation. Violent and beastly animal power was unleashed into the environment and may have been viewed as complicit to success. The actions of raising and demounting the sounding, golden weathervane to specific locations may be viewed as a kind of ritual practice which regulated the passageways for evil. It is difficult to ascertain specific ritual practices related to vanes without additional

evidence. However, the widespread belief in the powers of certain objects to protect; the human need to control and regulate such power; in addition to the evidence of the uses of the vanes found in the sagas, make it likely that specific rites followed belief in their apotropaic potential. The visio-aural experiences, activated by ritual, enabled the apotropaic forces inherent in the vane to be effectively communicated.

The argument above also sheds new light to the choice of ornamental style. As the mere *evocation* of predatory animals sufficed to transform the material artefact and fuse it with the animals' perceived powers, mimetic likeness to the animals as such was unimportant (Kristoffersen 2010: 263). Thus, the engraver may have had creative freedom with the design. The choice of a wonderfully complex, looping, and perplexing design was likely according to the medieval taste for variegated, complex designs capable of fascinating and entertaining.¹⁵ In this way, the engravings served not only the function of transforming the material artefact into an evil-warding instrument; but also, to install awe through beauty. The presence of ornament on the vane perpetuated, even though the individual motifs were difficult to make out from a distance. The mere fact that the vane from Heggen was ornate, through its sumptuousness, in addition to the precious materiality, the vane was immediately perceptible by the sense organs as an object of wealth, or surplus power and otherworldly beauty. The aesthetic aspect was significant, enabling the golden weathervane to be revered as an artefact of magical efficacy.

Interpretatio Christiana

It is uncertain when the exhibited golden vane relocated to the church spire. Most previous researchers agree it was probably during the later eleventh to the early fourteenth centuries. It has been suggested that the golden weathervanes ended up in churches alongside other ship equipment when these were not in use. The storage of ship gear in churches was in fact enforced by the law of Magnus Lagabøte.¹⁶ Conse-

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas described a medieval taste for the multisensorial and variegated aesthetic: "For if many sensations are perceived as a rational mixture, they are made pleasurable; just so in tastes, when a thing is according to due proportion either sharp or sweet or salty; then indeed things are entirely pleasing, and all that is mixed is more pleasing than what is single: so a concord is composed as much of a high voice as a low..." Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia De Anima* 3, lectio 2, no. 15 (cited from Carruthers 2013: 47-48).

¹⁶ "The sails shall be taken care of by those who are the most judicious and live closest to the church closest to the ship. But all the equipment shall follow the sail to the church, as well as all tools, and it shall be stored so that it will not be damaged". *Law of the Realm*, Part III: *Landeverbsbolken*, ch. 14.4 (cited from Munksgaard 2004: note 3). Indeed, all four early medieval weathervanes were discovered in churches close to the sea and lakes which we know Vikings sailed.

quently, researchers have proposed that the vanes were mounted to church spires when their old function in the longships was forgotten (Bugge 1931; Blindheim 1982). It is my contention that this theory undermines the vast powers that medieval people attributed to the vanes. That is, regardless of how the vane ended up in Heggen Church, which may equally be as a gift from a ship owner, it was hardly a coincidence that it ended up in the highest point of the church building, in one of the location the closest to the Christian Godhead. If a primary function of the vane had been as apotropaic device, this would not prohibit them from acquiring Christian aspects of meaning. Besides, as seen, ship vanes could protect any edifice; ownership changed unproblematically.

Officially, the Church banned magic. But belief in and practices of magic in various forms were socially deep-seated in early medieval Scandinavia and did not cease with the introduction of Christianity (Price 2019: 324–325). A significant exception to the Church's ban on magic concerned, for instance, magic that could protect. Only a fine line separated pagan apotropaic magic from Christian miracles and relic works. The ambiguous attitude of the early church towards apotropaic magic meant that protective images were frequently employed by Christians, particularly through the symbol of the cross whose protective power derived from God. Another example is the pagan convention of wearing protective amulets, which in the Middle Ages were designed unaffected by the religious change, or mixing pagan magic elements and spells with liturgical narratives and crosses, engaging both traditions actively.¹⁷ Apotropaic images adorned churches, especially at weaker points like doors, arches, and pillars, that is, thresholds, to prohibit invisible evil forces from entering (Maguire & Maguire 2007: 69–71; Donceel-Voûte 2018: 37–38). Magic objects in church contexts should thus not be considered folkloric. They were continuations of pre-Christian magic as magic permeated all of society and was practiced by religious and secular powers and the lower classes (Nordanskog 2006). Thus, if a prime function of the weathervanes was as apotropaic devices, this does not preclude them from secondarily functioning as apotropaic device after it has been placed. Its original function as an apotropaic device did not have to be forgotten for the church to appropriate it, neither is it likely it ended up in the symbolically charged location by chance. It is likely that the church knew of the powers inherent in the material and employed it for their own purposes.

All the while, by appropriating the old weathervane into the church spire, its meanings developed. All Christian objects served a specific purpose, pointing beyond

¹⁷ Korsvoll 2018: 150–152, 160. This is particularly relevant to the case of the vane from Tingelstad, which mixes elements of the Christian faith with that belonging to older, pre-Christian traditions.

itself to a deeper Christian meaning. Christian visual arts aimed at dazzling their spectators by precious materiality and ornamentation – aiming to exceed the beauty of earthly nature, not to imitate it (Loic 2019: 413–414). Gold was particularly suitable as the earthly counterpart to heaven’s splendour, from which God’s light radiates. The earthly material pointed towards that which resides in the sky in conjunction with it. In a material understanding too, gold was rare and enigmatically powerful: it does not corrode, it resists fire, and is thus a potent symbol for nobility, purity, and wisdom. It thus appropriately represents the supernatural (Bucklow 2009: 300, 323; see f. ex. Lamentations 4:1, Job 23:10). Accordingly, by placing the golden weathervane in the church spire, allowing it to perform its golden spectacle, it could aptly be understood as making perceptible aspects of heaven’s splendour. The apotropaic protection the golden vane conjured and radiated, may have expressed a God-sent power to ward off evil by means of His greatness, triumph, and wealth, which is also contained within His Church, and which protected that very building from harm, spiritual and physical. In this way, the apotropaic potential believed already inherent in the material artefact may have been cast in a Christian light, the power to protect understood as deriving, ultimately, from the Christian godhead, reflected through the artefact.

Artefacts can be neither inherently pagan nor Christian. The ship *Mariasuden* was dedicated to the Virgin and had relics in the stems (*Sverris saga*, 122). Viking ship gear was moved to or made for churches; like two *skipsbrandr* placed in front of the church door of Miklagardr on Iceland (Falk 1995: 95). In a cultural climate where pre-Christian and Christian aspects of culture mixed and entangled, the apotropaic potential of the golden weathervanes did not necessarily have to be forgotten before being mounted in church spires. It seems the early Church not only allowed the appropriation but judged it important and beneficial. This practice may indicate a tolerant or ambivalent attitude to magic practices with pre-Christian roots, especially that of apotropaia, in early medieval Norway and Sweden.

The continuous belief in the magic potential of the vanes met a continuous demand for magic protection, a demand which transgressed questions of religion. Thus, the convention of making and displaying efficacious weathervanes seems to have been strategically and knowingly manipulated to serve different practical purposes according to the specific situation and its requirements. Attached to a ship stem, the vane was probably believed to aid and protect in battle, largely due to the animal battle ornamentation. Mounted in the church spires, their past efficacy was exploited, persisting, while also gaining a religious significance; or rather, magical and religious aspects of meaning blurred together without distinctions. The vane’s power to avert

evil was understood as ultimately deriving from God.¹⁸ It seems that physical, immediate circumstances, the particular kind of edifice, specific situations, and the ways of displaying weathervanes, were central for the ways in which they were understood.

The potential for apotropaic protection was one of the principal reasons for the elevated status and exceptional treatment and display of the gilded weathervanes in the Middle Ages. There were likely other reasons too, and it is difficult to positively determine specific magic principles where little direct context is left. Previous research has largely looked for representative values in the ornamental motifs and in the weathervanes as such. I believe the element of magic belongs to this discussion, as it has been disclosed above as a central reason for the construction and practices of display of the weathervane.

The weathervane from Heggen is not a unique example but stands for a whole convention of attaching older ship vanes to church spires. While only a few weathervanes have survived, these represent a fraction of the medieval total (Blindheim 1982), in addition to the numerous discovered related artefacts. This article has investigated one token of the type through a magnifying glass, focussing on its material, sensorial, aesthetic properties, and the physical, historical situations in which it appeared in the Middle Ages. Through immersion into medieval encounters with the weathervane, I hope to have contributed to nuance the understanding of a spectacular, yet often underestimated, mute material trace of the Middle Ages.

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¹⁸ Other objects similarly functioned partly for magic and partly for votive purposes (MacLeod & Mees 2006: 163).

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