

Between Paganism and Christianity in the North



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A biography of the seiðr-staffs. Towards an archaeology of emotions

Hundred years of interpretations

The history of research on problematic artifacts, that are now perceived as possible *staffs of sorcery* (a term first used by Neil S. Price in 2002) related to the practice of *seiðr* began in the late 19th century. At that time several archaeologists from Norway came across a number of rather ambiguous finds in the form of iron rods, measuring from around 45cm to 82cm. In some cases, the recovered items had been adorned with bronze fittings along the shaft or had a basket-like feature at one of their ends. Most of those finds came from female burials dated to the Viking Age. However, a large amount of the early excavated graves were unfortunately very poorly documented and thus a lot of information about the archaeological context was lost forever. Other iron rods were found as stray finds, which made things even more complicated for future scholars.

As we shall see, the interpretations of those puzzling artifacts varied greatly in time. In the early years they were described mostly as roasting spits. Such an idea was first put forward by scholars like: Nicolaysen (1862-1866: 487), Undset (1878: 81; 1888: 29) and Lorange (1880). The roasting spit interpretation also appeared whenever those items were mentioned in museum yearbooks such as: *Bergens Museums Aarbog*, *Bergen Museums Tilvekst*, *Foreningen til Norske Fortidsminnesmerkere Bevaring* and *Det Kongelige Norske Videnskabers Selskabs Skrifter*. Some researchers believed that perhaps the iron rods were intended as components of lamps.

In the 20th century famous Norwegian archaeologists, Haakon Shetelig (1912: 188-194, 206-210; 1937: 210) and Jan Petersen (1951: 426), argued that those ambiguous iron rods must have been indeed used as Viking Age roasting spits. Petersen's (1951) interpretation soon became the most dominant one and accepted almost without question for the next few decades.

In the late 1960's and 1980's three iron rods from Birka (Sweden) decorated with elaborate bronze mounts, were interpreted as putative implements used for measuring textiles (Almgren 1967: 199; Kyhlberg 1980: 274-278; Hanson 1983: 8), although they closely resembled the above mentioned finds from Norway.

But the perception of the rods has finally changed significantly in the early 1990's. At that time, completely new ideas were put forward by Gundula Adolfsson and Inga Lundström (1993) during their exhibition *Den starka kvinnan. Från völva till häxa*, displayed at the *Statens Historiska Museum* in Sweden and the *Arkeologisk Museum* in Stavanger (Norway) (Adolfsson, Lundström 1995). Since then those puzzling artifacts were no longer viewed only as roasting spits (though this notion also prevailed, see for example Bøgh-Andersen 1999). It was argued that they could have served as powerful magical tools of Viking Age seeresses (Old Norse nominative singular – *völva*, “the staff bearer”, nominative plural *völur*).

The *völur* (McKinnell 2005: 95-108) were popular characters in both the Eddic Poetry and the saga literature. Some of the seeresses (especially the ones depicted in the Elder Edda) were seen as supernatural beings, whose advice was much needed by the gods. Although Óðinn was said to have been the most powerful of the Æsir, he still had to consult the *völur* and ventured to the realm of the dead (McKinnell 2005: 197-217) seeking their advice (as for example in *Baldurs draumar*). This fact indicates that the seeresses must have possessed (or were believed to possess) some truly supernatural or even divine qualities.

The wise women who appear in the saga narratives are mostly human and are often depicted as wanderers or outsiders, that venture through the world offering prophecies and advice to all those who might need them. They all specialize in practicing an elaborate magical craft known as *seiðr*¹. One of the most frequently debated accounts which describes both the attire of the Norse seeress and her *seiðr* seance is included in *Eiríks saga rauða* (ch. 4).

What seems striking is that both in the mythical and in the human world the *völur* are often equipped with a special, magical staff/wand. This item was their most distinctive attribute and a complex symbol of power. In his book *The Viking Way. Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, Neil S. Price (2002) has recently argued that it might be possible to find graves of such “wise women” (and men) within the archaeological material. He showed convincingly that there is much more reality behind the Old Norse texts than it was earlier assumed and that *seiðr* should be primarily perceived as a manipulative tool that could allow gaining control over weaker minds². In the course of his work, Price (2002) followed and greatly expanded the earlier interpretations put forward by Adolfsson and Lundström (1993; 1995) and provided more evidence supporting their “controversial” ideas. *Seiðr* was now for the first time shown in a broader

¹ Strömbäck 1935; 2000; Ohlmarks 1939; Stupecki 1998: 67-102; Price 2002; Solli 2002; Dillmann 2006; Heide 2006b; see also Gardela 2008d for further references.

² Price (2002:328) argued that the realism behind *seiðr* practices resulted from the fact that it formed a significant part of the Viking Age worldviews and influenced many aspects of the lives of Late Iron Age people. In a sense, such practices can be related to what is today known as “shamanism”.

context – sources from many fields were critically analysed and compared, which resulted in creating a new vision of the Viking Age realities.

Today, the new interpretations of the staffs are frequently debated in the academic literature (Duczko 2004: 174; 2006: 145; Steinsland 2005: 306-326; Heide 2006a; 2006b; 2006c; Domeij 2006: 294; Ingunn Ásdísardóttir 2007: 94-97; Mitchell 2007: 82) and among scholars working in various fields. Some people accept them and some categorically oppose seeing them as items for working magic. In 2006 the staffs were presented as tools of sorcery at an exhibition *Odens öga – mellan människor och mäkter i det förkristna Norden* displayed in *Dunkers Kulturhus* in Helsingborg and *Statens Historiska Museum* in Stockholm (Andrén A., Carelli P. (eds) 2006). In 2007 the same exhibition (slightly altered) was shown at the *Midgard historisk senter* in Borre (Norway). The visitors of *Odens öga...* could see a replica of a Swedish *seiðr-staff* from Klinta. Two replicas of the Norwegian staffs from Søreim and Hopperstad were also shown at an exhibition *Viking Visions* held at *Midgard historisk senter* in 2007.

Apart from the above mentioned iron examples, archaeologists were able to unearth two other wooden staffs dated to the Viking Age. The first one was found in the famous Oseberg grave, whereas the second one came from a bog in Jutland (Hemdrup). Their interpretations were also subject to a heated academic debate, but in the present times they are both viewed as possible tools of sorcery (Ingstad 1992a; 1995; Back Danielsson 2001; 2007: 233-239; Price 2002: 200-203; Gardeła 2008b; 2008c; 2008d).

In a number of my previous papers (Gardeła 2007a; 2008a; 2008b; 2008c; 2009) and my Master's Thesis (Gardeła 2008d) I mainly focused on discussing the symbolism of the staffs and attempted at expanding the earlier hypotheses on the functions and meanings of those fascinating items. I argued that they could be seen on various metaphorical levels and correspond to many more concepts than it was earlier assumed.

In the present paper I would like to sum up my current research on the *staffs of sorcery* but also expand and revise a number of my earlier ideas by focusing on what I call "a biography of the staff". It can be assumed that if those items were to be used as powerful magical tools, then their production must have also been a ritualized process. I will thus present a number of preliminary hypotheses on how the staffs could have been made and what special, symbolic actions might have been undertaken during that time. Later, I shall move on to presenting the staffs in action, by providing a number of new remarks on their possible usage in divinatory rituals. Finally, I shall attempt at discussing their metaphorical "death" by presenting how those items were deposited in the possible *völur* graves and other "transitional" locations.

On the subsequent pages of my paper I will pay most attention to three graves, which could be perceived as those of potential ritual specialists – the famous Oseberg grave (Norway), the quadruple boat grave from Kaupang-Skiringssal (Norway) and a double inhumation grave from Gerdrup (Denmark).

Understanding the Oseberg grave (Vestfold, Norway)

The Oseberg grave, excavated in 1904, contained one of the most well known and best preserved finds from the Viking Age. According to earlier interpretations it was believed that the burial mound, in which a magnificent ship had been deposited, housed the remains of queen Ása – the mother of king Hálfðan the Black – and her slave-girl. The first scholar to present this idea was Anton W. Brøgger (1919). His interpretation was primarily based on earlier assumptions and research concerning the very name *Oseberg* undertaken by Oluf Rygh. He believed that the name *Oseberg* was derived from the words *Áse* (*Genitivus singularis* of the name Ása) and *berg* (hill). Quite obviously it was supposed to mean “The hill of Ása” (Ingstad 1995: 139). Sophus Bugge however, did not follow those ideas and argued that the word *Oseberg* should rather be read as “The hill of the Æsir”. His statement can be well supported by linguistic evidence and names of local farms. They reveal the possible existence of several pagan cult sites in the area. One of them could be a place called *Klokkeråsen* (Ingstad 1995: 140).

In 1982 Anne Stine Ingstad decided to confront the previous interpretations and suggested that the young woman buried in the Oseberg mound was Álfhildr – the first wife of king Guðrøðr (one of the Vestfold rulers in the IX century) who, after her death around the year 848, married the above mentioned Ása. Since he took Ása by force murdering her father and brother, the marriage was unlikely to last too long and had a rather dramatic ending. We can see the course of those grim events in a skaldic poem *Ynglingatal*, the twelfth century *Historia Norwegie* (X) and in the later *Ynglingasaga* (ch. 48) written down by Snorri Sturluson.

In the early 1990's Ingstad decided to expand and alter some of her earlier assumptions (1992a; 1995). She still sustained a hypothesis that one of the women of Oseberg could be a queen, but also tried to prove that the woman might have held a prominent function of a local priestess or rather a *völva*. According to Ingstad (1995: 145), the local communities must have respected her greatly, and due to that fact the Oseberg ship was anchored to a large rock – possibly to keep the deceased underground³, close to the places she visited and cared for during her lifetime: “It must have been important that the Oseberg queen should stay where she had been buried – in the barrow, with all the grave furnishings which accompanied her. The ship was fastened to a large stone, although there was an iron anchor in the burial. But this cannot have been thought sufficiently strong. It is possible that the people feared her,

³ In this context it is worth mentioning that in *Gísli saga Súrussonar* (17), the main hero Gísli throws a large stone into the ship on which Þórgrímr (his earlier opponent, whom Gísli murdered) was being buried: „They laid Thorgrim on a boat and raised the mound in accordance with the old ways. When the mound had been sealed, Gisli walked to the mouth of the river and lifted a stone so heavy that it was more like a boulder. He dropped it into the boat with such a resounding crash that almost every plank of wood gave way. ‘If the weather shifts this’, he said, ‘then I don’t know how to fasten a boat’.” (translation after Regal 2000: 523).

and guarded themselves against her returning from the dead to haunt them. I think it is more likely that she was considered of such great importance because of her diverse activities that they wished to keep her at any price and that she therefore must stay in her barrow with all her property and all she needed to be able to continue her work for peace and fertility in the valley”.

Ingstad strongly believed that in order to further unravel the mysteries of the burial mound one must attempt at a reinterpretation of the exquisitely preserved textiles (1995: 139-140). It has been argued that they might depict some kind of cultic procession. This is clearly visible on one of the fragments, which contains scenes with horses, wagons and masked characters bearing spears or staffs.

Another puzzling object retrieved from the burial chamber was locked within an oak chest studded with iron (Christensen 1992: 90-92). The chest was given a number “149”⁴ in the archaeological documentation. Neil S. Price (2002: 200) noticed that its decorative elements (clasps) clearly resemble those on another chest from Birka in Sweden (grave Bj. 845). It is significant to note, that the grave in Birka (Bj. 845) is also considered to be a burial of a Viking Age seeress (Adolfsson, Lundström 1993: 13; Price 2002: 140-141). Although the Oseberg was plundered, it is noteworthy that the oak chest “149” was not by the robbers. Perhaps they were aware of its contents?

Inside the chest (which has been opened *in situ* during the excavation) was a long wooden staff. Since I recently had an opportunity to carefully examine the item at the *Vikingskipshuset* in Oslo, it is vital to include several new remarks on its current condition.

Experiencing the Oseberg staff

The Oseberg staff was made of birch or beech⁵ and measures 107cm. Originally it consisted of two long pieces of wood, which were deliberately hollowed out, glued and bound with some organic material. Anne Stine Ingstad suggested that it could have been linen, but no remains of linen around the staff were ever found (1992a: 240-242). The inside of the staff was carved

⁴ See a detailed description of the contents of the chest in Brøgger 1917: 38-41; Grieg 1928: 118-120. The reports indicate that the chest included iron lamps, a number of spindles, distaffs and other tools for textile production. Their presence strengthens the possibility that the Oseberg staff was indeed a tool for working sorcery. As we know, *seiðr* practices were strictly associated with the concepts of spinning and weaving (see Dillmann 1982; Heide 2006a; 2006b; 2006c; Gardęła 2008c; 2009).

⁵ There is a problem with identifying the type of wood from which the staff of Oseberg was made. A catalogue of artifacts kept in *Vikingskipshuset* indicates that it was made from beech and this information is also supported by Grieg (1928: 271). However, later publications mentioning this item, indicate that it was made from birch (Price 2002: 200). While examining the staff I was unable to ascribe a certain wood type to it.

with a rectangular tool and polished. The outside surface of the staff bears six indentations (about 1cm wide) encircling the shaft (Plate 1, figs. 1, 2, 5, 11). They are all placed in almost equal distances from one another (the distances vary from 14cm to 25cm). The indentations could have been made with a carving tool or a knife. In the upper part of the staff there is also a strange cleavage (Plate 1, figs. 2, 3, 4). It is unclear if it was made intentionally or whether it occurred as the result of some earlier damage. We may assume that perhaps something was fitted in both the upper and/or lower part of the staff, but no remains of it survived nor were they identified within the corpus of artifacts from Oseberg (Plate 1, figs. 9, 10).

At some point after the excavations in 1904 the Oseberg staff, which had been originally found in several fragments, was glued together and attached to a wooden plank. Perhaps the intention of the conservators was to protect it from additional damage or maybe this was only done to display it better in the museum exhibition. In February 2008 the scholars from *Vikingskipshuset* in Oslo decided to remove the staff from the plank and conduct new research on the item. Since the staff was glued to the plank, a chemical substance left several circular marks on its surface.

The hypotheses on the function of the Oseberg staff have varied in time. It was first seen as a blowing pipe (Grieg 1928: 271; Christensen 1992: 134) and later reinterpreted as a possible attribute of a *völva* by Anne Stine Ingstad (1992a; 1995). This concept was further expanded by a number of other scholars (Price 2002: 200-201; Solli 2002: 227-228; Gardeła 2007: 113; 2008c: 33-34; 2008d: 92-93, 105, 110; 2009).

Before I present the newest interpretations of this strange item in the light of several Old Icelandic written accounts, let us first take a look at another boat burial, excavated at the Kaupang-Skiringssal Bikjholberget cemetery.

The Kaupang-Skiringssal quadruple grave (Vestfold, Norway)

Kaupang (Vestfold, Norway) was an important trading port in the Viking Age and it could be compared to the other similar sites in Ribe, Hedeby or the Swedish Birka. It was also one of the local power-centers in the 8th and 9th century (Skre 2007). The site was probably founded around 800 AD and abandoned in the mid 10th century (Batey, Clarke, Page, Price 1998: 88; Skre 2007: 13). The people who lived there maintained strong contacts and traded with merchants from the British Isles, the Rhine regions and the Danish people.

One of the most elaborate burials⁶ excavated there in the 1950's (the Bikjholberget cemetery) was a quadruple boat grave later labeled as Ka. 294-296

⁶ It is noteworthy that the external structure of the grave was a four-sided stone setting (Stylegar 2007: 71, 88).

(Stylegar 2007) and dated to the early 10th century⁷. Stylegar mentions (2007: 97) that the boat was originally 9 meters long and was aligned SW-NE. Two adults were lying on their backs in the centre of its deck: a woman (Ka. 294) with an infant or a small animal at her pelvis and a man (Ka. 295). They seem to have been almost touching one another with the tips of their heads. The second woman was sitting by the stern (Ka. 296). It is significant to add, that another male body was found under the ship (Ka. 297). His burial was dated to the 9th century (Stylegar 2007: 97).

The person who draws most attention is the woman sitting by the stern (Ka. 296). Stylegar assumes (2007: 96) that she could have been dressed in a rather uncommon way. The fact that fragments of leather were found near her oval brooches, might suggest that she was wearing an unusual type of leather garment (Stylegar 2007: 96). Moreover, by her left side there was a large stone with an iron rod/staff placed underneath. Following the earlier interpretations put forward by Neil Price (2002: 192), Frans Arne Stylegar (2007: 96) perceives this object as a *staff of sorcery* related to the practice of *seiðr* (see also Skre, Stylegar 2004: 20-22). The Kaupang grave (Ka. 294-296) belongs to the richest graves of potential ritual specialists. As Stylegar argues (2007: 99): “It is possible that Ka. 294 and Ka. 295 represents a married couple of high social standing, while the seated woman in the stern is a sorceress with a particular relationship with the couple, for whom she had been performing her services while still alive – as well as in death, judging from her position at the rudder, steering the little family towards the realm of the Dead”.

Stylegar’s (2007) interpretation is indeed very suggestive, but we cannot exclude the possibility that actually all the buried people were related to each other and formed a close group of *seiðr*-workers. From literary accounts, we know that sorcerers could have been buried in groups (see for example *Laxdæla saga* 37; for further discussion on this matter see Gardęła 2008d: 58-61).

The staff from Kaupang-Skiringssal

As I mentioned above, the Kaupang staff was found under a large rock placed inside a boat, to the left of the adult woman sitting by the stern (Ka. 296). The object is in the form of an iron rod with a basket-like ‘handle’ placed on one of its ends. The current state of this item is quite good, although it is preserved in three pieces (it was probably broken during or after the excavations, but this is hard to determine with all certainty). The ‘handle’ is broken in half and so is the

⁷ This grave was first presented in a publication by Blindheim, Heyerdahl-Larsen (1995: 22-24). However, the authors did not interpret it as a quadruple grave and treated the four burials separately. The iron staff found in Ka. 296 was seen as a roasting spit.

main shaft. In its present condition, the whole staff measures 74,5cm and weighs 265,3g (Plate 2, figs. 1-2). Three twisted rods with a ring on each one of them encircle the shaft in the 'handle' section of the staff (Plate 2, figs. 3-4). There are also two mounts binding the rods on either side of the 'handle'. An additional ferrule is attached to the upper end of the 'handle' (Plate 2. fig. 5).

What makes a staff? Is the seiðr-staff a “magic” object?

The actual functioning and existence of a *staff of sorcery* used by a *seiðr* performer depended mostly on the decisions and actions of its bearer (Gardela 2008d). Thus if the performer's behavior was persuasive enough to make the viewers believe in her/his supernatural powers, then the staff that she/he carried also immediately acquired a special dimension.

By seeing the practice of *seiðr* as an elaborate form of mental manipulation, which has the capacity to transform the mundane into the supernatural, we may arrive at understanding archaeological artifacts such as the *staffs of sorcery* in a completely new light. The potential *seiðr* requisites (staffs, elements of ritual scenery *etc.*) from archaeological contexts frequently appear in form of ordinary items. Yet in a special time and place, with the help of the powerful minds of Viking Age individuals, they became something entirely different – objects of magical qualities filled with multiple layers of symbolic meanings. In the eyes of some modern day people and ordinary museum visitors, the Oseberg or the Kaupang staffs would seem like nothing special. The first one would appear to them just as a piece of carved wood and the second staff – a metal rod devoid of any elaborate decorations. Yet for their owners, those seemingly simple items could have been of great importance. The unusual context of both finds (the Oseberg staff was placed in a chest and the Kaupang staff was pressed by a large stone) strengthens the possibility that they were tools used for magical practices. We have also seen that many other elements of both graves suggest that they both belonged to powerful and very wealthy individuals.

The working of magic and its paraphernalia always depended on human beliefs and traditions that shaped them through the ages. It is the same today. As archaeologists we can either believe in the staffs as tools of sorcery or not. In Marcel Mauss's words: “Magic, like religion, is viewed as a totality; either you believe in it all, or you do not” (2006: 113). Whatever we choose to believe, in such subtle cases we must always show our understanding for other interpretations and respectfully welcome their diversity

In the previous sections of this paper, I have discussed the history of research on the *staffs of sorcery* and described two of their finds in detail. I also aimed at providing some information on their context and reflected on matters of methodological nature. One might say, that I provided a historical or archaeo-

logical biography of those items. It is now time to attempt at showing their biography from a different perspective. We shall thus take a closer look at those items in the light of the *archaeology of personhood* (Fowler 2006) and what I call *the archaeology of emotions* (Gardeła 2007b). Perhaps by doing so, we could get one step closer to understanding what they actually meant for the Viking Age people over a thousand years ago.

A biography of the *seiðr*-staffs

(...) things and people participate in 'the same semantic universe'
making a true distinction between them impossible

Fowler 2006: 78

In this section, I would like to take a closer look at the “alternative biographies” of the *staffs of sorcery* and ways in which those items could have been made, transported, used and stored. Finally, I will attempt at examining how their “lives” ended. Many hypotheses expressed here have been greatly inspired by the works of Igor Kopytoff (1986) and Chris Fowler (2006). In his book, entitled *The Archaeology of Personhood. An Anthropological Approach*, Fowler (2006: 6) observed that when attempting at describing a “biography of a thing” it is vital to consider the whole story: “(...) from the extraction of natural substances, to the conception and construction of the object, through various stages of use and modification, repeated acts of consumption, destruction, and the use of fragmented components (...)”. He further adds that objects can have multiple authors and it is wrong to assume that every item was made just by one individual (Fowler 2006: 6). Fowler also noticed that in some societies there exist different relations and boundaries between objects and people. This implies that objects can indeed be seen as features of persons or even actual persons in their own right. Some of those interpretations can be closely related to the ideas published many years ago by Marcel Mauss (2007 reprint), who discussed similar concepts in his classic work: *The Gift*. Chris Fowler argues in this respect (2006: 55) that: “To give a gift is to give a part of oneself”.

Biographic approaches to material culture are recently gaining increasing attention among scholars working in different fields (see for example Wickholm 2006; Back Danielsson 2007: 233-239). Although at first they might seem controversial, I will attempt at showing that they could be successfully applied to the interpretations of items such as the *staffs of sorcery*⁸.

⁸ Frazer (1911: 32) mentions an interesting South-Slavic belief according to which, trees that grow on graves are considered as a fetish. He adds, that „whoever breaks a twig from it

Obtaining a staff of sorcery

The Old Norse sources generally remain silent when we search for details on how individuals came in possession of the *staffs of sorcery* or how they made them. This is by no means surprising. Terje Gansum (2006: 298) has argued that: “[r]itual and technological knowledge are strictly regulated in traditional societies, and such knowledge could not be freely shared”. Despite those problems, I believe that we can come up with a number of new hypotheses by carefully reading the Old Norse accounts, asking the right questions and reinterpreting the old material.

A fragment of an Eddic poem *Hárbarðzljóð* (20)⁹ suggests that, Óðinn got a magic staff (*gambantein*) from a giant named Hlébarðr. We learn from *Skáldskaparmál* (4) and *Þórsdrápa* that the god Þórr borrowed his staff from a spell-working giantess, Gríðr. A mythical hero of *Fjölsvinnsmál* (26) named Svipdagr tried to obtain a staff from a witch-giantess named Sinmara (Simek 2006: 285). In all three cases, the staffs seem to have a particular connection with the Giants. It actually seems that they were a product of their hands. This is also clearly suggested in *Fjölsvinnsmál* (26), where we read that the god Loki (under the name Lopt) made a magic staff named *Lævateinn* (Simek 2006: 185). An iron *staff of sorcery* (*járnstafr*) held by a Giant is also mentioned in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (33)¹⁰.

In *Styrbjarnar þáttur*, Eiríkr receives a staff (*reyrsproti*) from the god Óðinn and during a battle this item transforms into a spear (Turville-Petre 1975: 47). A similar event also occurs in *Gautreks saga* (7) This is particularly interesting,

hurts the soul of the dead, but gains thereby a magic wand, since the soul embodied in the twig will be at his service” (Frazer 1911: 33). This provides yet another piece of evidence that in many cultures items such as *staffs of sorcery* could indeed be perceived as actual persons or parts of persons.

⁹ *Miclar manvélar ec hafða við myrcrídor,
þá er ec vélta þær frá verom;
harðan iotun ec hugða Hlébarð vera,
gaf hann mér gambantein,
enn ec vélta hann ór viti.*

*Mighty love-spells I used on the witches,
those whom I seduced from their men;
a bold giant I think Hlebard was,
he gave me a magic staff,
and I bewitched him out of his wits.*

Hárbarðzljóð (20), text after Kuhn, Neckel 1983: 81; translation after Larrington 1999: 72.

¹⁰ A staff bearing the same name (*járnstafr*) was also an attribute of Járngrímr, a character who appears in *Njáls saga* (133). Járngrímr could actually be an another name for the god Óðinn (Price 2002: 177).

since it seems that spears appear to have a strong connection with the *staves of sorcery*¹¹. Óðinn's famous spear named Gungnir was an item made by the Dwarves, the sons of Ivaldi (*Skáldskaparmál* 9, 33) and it had runes carved on its surface (*Sigrdrífumál* 17). Since in other Old Norse sources the spears often have magical connotations, it is possible that a symbolic spear could also function as a staff of a seeress. Through such metaphors, she would strengthen her particular connection with Óðinn – the master practitioner of *seiðr*. Lotte Motz (1996: 84) has interestingly touched upon this problem in one of her books: “Since Óðinn does not use his spear as an aggressive weapon, but as a magic instrument, since it alternates with a reed, it is possible to assume that the spear had [been] the magic staff, which is held by the sorceresses. The change from reed into deadly weapon is indeed valid in Icelandic texts”

We might conclude that whatever the form of the staff was, it clearly had to be perceived as an item of otherworldly origin. The myths imply that a lot of those items were originally owned or made by the Giants (such as Hlébarðr, Loki/Lopt, Gríðr) or in case of Óðinn's spear/staff created by the Dwarves. Either way, they seemed to be items of particular qualities because they had come from another world (that is a world alien to the person who was trying to obtain the staff). Perhaps, in the human realm, the individuals who made the *staves of sorcery* also tried to associate them with different dimensions or mythological landscapes? And indeed (in a perceptual sense) for the Viking Age people it would be quite possible to find or create an item from another world¹². For example, staves made from strangely twisted roots would be related to the underworld and those made from freshly cut wooden saplings might refer to the world of the forest. Likewise the iron examples could have been carbonized with animal or human bones, and in this way a special connection with the dead would be established. Those matters shall now be explored in greater detail in the light of several other written accounts.

¹¹ Michael Enright argued in this respect (1996: 245): „It may be (...) that both Wodan's spear and sibyl's staff have the same origin and the difference is accounted for by the fact that each denotes authority in different areas. In Wodan's hand the staff becomes a spear because that is an ancient symbol of warrior rule; Veleda's emblem remains staff-like weaving beam or distaff, however, because it still suggests some type of authority and is also easy to associate with weaving sticks, spindles and weaving-swords, all of which remind one of the widespread concept of the weaving of fate”.

¹² An interesting remark on „otherworldly items” was recently put forward by Lotte Hedeager (2007), who argued that during the first four centuries AD, Roman tablewares, weapons and jewelry gained a special cultural identity. She presumes that for Germanic societies items „manufactured within a foreign culture, whether Roman or Provincial (...) were considered of mysterious or divine origin because they came from the outside world” (Hedeager 2007: 46). She further adds that: „They reached the barbarian peoples as war booty and through ceremonial gift exchange in political alliances, and in funerary rites they were buried with the dead because they might have encapsulated the specific qualities and powers of the person while alive” (Hedeager 2007: 46).

Wooden twigs and roots

As I mentioned above, we don't really know how human individuals of the Viking Age came in possession of the staffs and how exactly those items were made. Nevertheless, some inspiring ideas can be deducted from a careful reading of the Eddic poem, *Skírnismál* (32):

*Til holtz ec gecc oc til hrás viðar,
gambantein at geta,
gambantein ec gat*

[I went to the forest, to the living wood,
to get a potent branch (*gambantein*)
a potent branch (*gambantein*) I got.]

*Skírnismál (For Scirnis) (32)*¹³

As we can see, to obtain a wooden *staff of sorcery*¹⁴ one had to go to the “living woods” (*hrás viðar*). It is very hard to say what kind of wood was used to make that particular staff, yet its “liveliness” could be understood as “freshness”. The wood is most elastic and slender when it is freshly cut and it seems that this slenderness is particularly important. It is also likely that Skírnir's staff was actually made from a root. As Neil Price argued (2002: 179): “The name [*gambantein*] means simply ‘gamban twig’, and has definite connotations of slenderness and flexibility (...) it is made from freshly-cut sapling, which supports the idea of a slim cane”. Unfortunately, we don't have any direct literary evidence that would prove a hypothesis that the creation of the staff was also a ritualized process which involved symbolic acts. We can only infer from the further parts of *Skírnismál* (36), that Skírnir's staff acquired its special qualities after he had carved runes on its surface (and still we don't know, if he actually carved them on the staff and not in front of the Giantess Gerðr, which he was trying to enchant) (Mitchell 2007: 84) and after he had spoken magic formulas.

Some scholars assumed, that the wooden *staff of sorcery* described in *Skírnismál* was the only item made from that material known from the written accounts. However, I do believe that we can find another reference to wooden staffs in *Hávamál*. An object of this kind could be mentioned in one of the spells which Óðinn uttered after he had fallen from the cosmic ash, Yggdrasil:

¹³ Text after Kuhn, Neckel 1983: 75; translation after Larrington 1999: 66.

¹⁴ In the fragment quoted above it is named *gambantein*, but in an earlier strophe of the poem (*Skírnismál* 26) it also appears as *tamsvöndr* – “a taming wand”. One may see an interesting relation between the name *gambantein* and the name of a Germanic seeress *Gambara* or *Gambaruc* mentioned by Paulus Diaconus and Saxo Grammaticus respectively (Ślupecki 1998: 73-74).

*Þat kann ec it setta, ef mic særin þegn
 á rótom rás viðar:
 oc þann hal, ec mic heipta qverðr,
 þann eta mein heldr enn mic.*

[I know a sixth one if a man wounds me
 with the roots of the sap filled wood:
 and that man who conjured to harm me,
 the evil consumes him, not me.]

*Hávamál (151)*¹⁵

I am convinced that the verse “á rótom rás viðar” is referring to a *staff of sorcery*. Larrington’s translation “with the roots of a sap filled wood” is not entirely correct here, however¹⁶. Hugo Pipping (1928: 19) observed that a sappy piece of wood would not be suitable for carving, and suggested reading it as “á rótom (v)rás viðar” – “with the roots of gnarled (crooked) tree” (for further comments on the interpretations of this verse see Evans 1986: 138-139). Twisted and elastic roots would also perfectly match the idea of items like *gambantein* and *tamsvöndr* that we know from *Skírnismál*. Moreover, the fact that roots grow down, reaching the underworld seems to fit well with the ideas related to *seiðr* practices. As we shall see in the next section, they also relate to the staffs used by Baltic pagan priests.

It is significant to add, that on the possible *staffs of sorcery* from Hemdrup (Jutland, Denmark) one can observe a runic inscription (Moltke 1985: 350-355; McKinnell, Simek, Düwel 2004: 66-67; MacLeod, Mees 2006: 127-128). It is thus possible, that some of the wooden staffs acquired additional qualities by inscribing magic formulas onto their surface. Unfortunately, the Hemdrup staff is so far the only wooden item of this kind that bears an inscription. I was unable to find any special markings on the staff from Oseberg.

The supernatural qualities of the wooden staffs could have also resulted from choosing a specific type of wood for their production. While discussing the symbolism of the Hemdrup staff, Back Danielsson (2007: 238) argues that since it was made of yew, it is possible that the owner picked this wood-type for a reason. Yew is known as a strongly poisonous tree.

As we have seen, the Oseberg staff was made from birch or beech. Although the exact wood-type is uncertain, it can be added that birch trees played an impor-

¹⁵ Text after Kuhn, Neckel 1983: 43; translation after Larrington 1999: 36.

¹⁶ Similar reading was earlier proposed by Clarke (1923: 83): „by the roots of a sapling” and Bellows (1968: 64): „with a sapling roots to send me”. Other translations suggest that the roots were carved with runes. See for example: Bray (1908: 107): „in runes on a moist tree’s root”; Hollander (1964: 38): „with runes on gnarled roots written”; Taylor, Auden (1969: 58): „cut runes on sapling’s roots”.

tant role in Siberian shamanism. Climbing a birch tree symbolized the shamanic journeys (Maciotti 2006: 61; Gardela 2008d: 105). Such a tree was thus a metaphor of the *axis-mundi*. Similarly, the *seiðr* staff could work as a mount of the seeress on which she could travel to the different realms.

The concept of “divine crookedness”

I have argued elsewhere (Gardela 2008c: 51-52) that we may observe some similarities between a pagan magical practice of *krzywianie* performed by the Baltic priests (known as *Krive*) and the performances of *seiðr*. The staffs of the *Krive* priests are said to have been made from twisted branches or roots (Mierzyński 1885; Moszyński 1968: 867; Tomicki 2000: 472). In Lithuanian and Polish folklore similar staffs were given a number of different names such as: *krzywula*, *kluka*, *kula*, *krakulica* etc. and they all referred to the concepts of crookedness. Such crookedness was understood as a sign of special powers and supernatural qualities of the item (Tomicki 2000: 477-478). Tomicki (2000: 478) also mentions that the holy trees of the pagan Prussians often had very unusual, crooked or twisted shapes – they could have been split or had excrescences such as gnarls etc. Some of the most admired trees were also said to have three huge branches twisted in mysterious shapes. In Tomicki’s opinion (2000: 478) all this proves that in the Prussian culture “crookedness” was considered as a form of sacredness (on related ideas see also Banaszekiewicz 1998: 7-44; Słupecki 2006: 129).

Reflections of such “divine crookedness” would not only be visible in case of the Viking Age staffs made from roots (which unfortunately did not survive to the present day), but also among the iron examples which had the *expanded ‘handle’ construction*. The “crookedness” of the staff (or its handle in shape of a twisted basket) would not only refer to the magical qualities of the object itself, but also to the supernatural (or divine) skills of its bearer. In one of the later Scandinavian sources (*Þórsteins saga bæjarmagns*) there is even a mention of a crooked staff (*krókstafr*) which is used by one of the characters to go on a *gandreið* (Price 2002: 178).

Let us now take a closer look at some new hypotheses on how the iron staffs could have been made in the Viking Age, and what ritual actions might have been involved in that process.

Enchanted Metal. Transformation and remembering the dead

Creating an iron staff, like the ones known from archaeological contexts, was indeed a hard and demanding task. It certainly required the help of a specialist, a skilled professional blacksmith (and perhaps a jeweler too). Neil Price ar-

gues, that manufacturing an object such as some of the staffs could have been more difficult than making a pattern welded sword. Having discussed this matter with several modern Viking re-enactors and blacksmiths, I am inclined to agree with this statement. Of course, it is also possible, that the seeresses or sorcerers themselves possessed the necessary skills to produce items of this kind, but I would rather argue that this was a rare case¹⁷. Nevertheless, *Gísla saga Sírussonar* (11) mentions a blacksmith-sorcerer named Þorgrímr Nef. This indicates that some of them had the power to transform both metal and human fate. Although, Þorgrímr does not seem to possess a staff (or at least no information about it is provided in the text) he re-forged a spearhead from the remains of Gísli's broken sword, the *Grásiða* (see Kroesen 1982). Smiths and *seiðr* performers do have a lot in common. They are both liminal characters, who can tread between the worlds. Smiths can create items that can be used for the good (such as tools) but they can also make objects of destruction (weapons). Likewise, a seeress or sorcerer can "produce" favorable fates for their clients and give good prophecies or manipulate their lives in an evil way.

Coming back to the problem of staffs, we must bear in mind, that none of their examples were found in smithies (and actually I don't think we should expect to find them there). As I mentioned above, most of them come from graves or were discovered as stray finds, without any precise details on the context of their deposition.

While discussing these matters a question comes to mind – was the difficult process of creating an iron staff somewhat special? Did the individuals responsible for making such items approach them in a particular way? If the staffs were to be used as powerful tools for ritual performances, we cannot deny such a possibility. Yet, due to lack of sufficient information we can only speculate here. In this context I find the interpretations of Terje Gansum very inspiring (2004; 2006). The author argues in one of his papers that in the Late Iron Age human or animal bones were sometimes used to enrich and carbonize iron (Gansum 2004: 45) in order to give it not only better physical qualities but also supernatural powers. Gansum (2006: 45) believes that the fact that production of iron was sometimes situated at cemeteries had a deeper symbolic significance. It meant that the smiths conducted a ritual labour at the cemetery, since the bones were considered a certain medium for birth, rebirth and death of the iron artefacts. By doing so the blacksmiths were ascribed a liminal position in the society. Gansum further adds: "The official mythical version may be that the earth gave birth to the iron, as a womb. The birth-symbolism is associated with the giantess. The dwarfs gave artefacts souls and a life of their own". Furthermore, he (Gansum 2004: 45) assumed that the robberies of graves could be seen as attempts to gain

¹⁷ We do know from the Old Norse mythological accounts that smiths were believed to possess magical skills. One may recall the blacksmith named Völundr (see *Völundarqviða*) or Regin (see *Völsungasaga*), that exemplify it really well (Grimstad 1983; Haaland 2004: 12-14).

bones of specific individuals (see also Back Danielsson 2007: 248-249), who played important roles in their lifetimes. Gansum (2004: 45) suggests that some robbers could have actually been conducted by blacksmiths who were capable of combining “the power of the dead with weapons in a symbolic and straightforward way. The earth encloses the spot where transformation takes place, and connects together with dwarfs, knowledge, death and Odin.”

In my opinion new perspectives presented by Terje Gansum can be applied to the problem of the *staffs of sorcery* in an interesting way. As we know, the *völur* maintained permanent contact with the otherworldly realms – they acted as mediators between the living and the dead. They also possessed a metaphorical skill to shift into animal form.

In this context, using bones of the ancestors (or perhaps deceased powerful seeresses or sorcerers) and/or the remains of specific animals (perhaps those considered by the *seiðr* performer as her or his guardian spirits) to carbonize the iron for the production of the staff seems particularly substantiated. Ing-Marie Back Danielsson (2007: 248) described how the process of carbonizing iron with human and animal bones could have been perceived by the Late Iron Age societies. She suggested that the mingling of soft iron with ancestral or animal bones could have been perceived as an intercourse resulting in the birth of an item which carried characteristics of the chosen parents (Back Danielsson 2007: 248).

By seeing those processes in such a way, the animal ornamentations of the Birka (Bj. 660) and the Klinta staffs (Price 2002: 181-185) receive a completely new dimension. Perhaps the animal faces represented on the mounts of the staffs could refer to the kinds of animals, whose bones were used to carbonize their iron shafts? The dead animals and/or humans would thus be the metaphorical “parents” of the staffs who filled them with their powers.

The importance and great worth of the staffs can also be stressed by the fact that some of them were given names (Price 2002: 176). For example, the staff owned by a *spákona* Þórdís from *Vatnsdælasaga* (44) was named *Högnuðr* (“useful”) and a staff of the Giantess Gríðr bears the name of Gríðavölr (“Gríð’s staff”) (*Skáldskaparmál* 18).

Traveling with a staff

The seeresses and sorcerers of the Icelandic saga narratives and the Eddic poems are often depicted as wanderers and outsiders (Steinsland 2005: 313). They travelled from one estate to another, giving prophecies and received gifts in return. If the word that describes them, *völva*, is to refer to a “female staff bearer” (Simek 2006: 367-368) then we can assume that the staff was her distinctive attribute, through which she could be easily identified. But what exactly happened to the *völva*’s staff while she was traveling? How was it carried or transported? It is hard to imagine that she

held it in her hand during the whole journey. Some staffs are also too small to use them as walking sticks – their pointed ends strongly exclude such a possibility. It is also rather unlikely that the staff was somehow attached to the seeresses' or sorcerer's belt like a knife or a sword. The iron handle would come in the way and hurt her/his side. The only plausible solution I see, is that the staffs were carried in something like a sheath or a scabbard. During our recent discussion, Professor Neil Price mentioned that at least two kinds of cloth were wrapped around the staff from on the Isle of Man – but the purpose of that is still unclear (perhaps to protect the staff from damage? Or maybe this had some symbolic meaning?).

Although we have no direct textual information about how the Viking Age *seiðr*-performers traveled with staffs, we do know from mythological sources (*Skáldskaparmál* 4), that the god Þórr uses a staff (*Gríðavölr*) given to him by the Giantess Gríðr to cross a river¹⁸: “Thor then travelled to the river Vimur; a great waterway. He buckled on the belt of strength and supported himself against the current by placing Grid's pole [Gríðavölr] on the downstream side while Loki held on to the belt of power”.¹⁹

The staff in ritual performances

We have no direct literary or iconographic evidence on how the staffs were used (or held) during the *seiðr* seances. Jenny Jochens (1996: 74) once suggested that during the *seiðr* ceremony, a seeress would perform an actual or metaphorical act of ritualized masturbation with the staff. Eldar Heide on the other hand, convincingly argued that the staff could have worked as a symbolic distaff and that the whole concept of *seiðr* was strictly connected to the ideas of spinning or weaving (Heide 2006c). In my previous papers I have aimed at expanding this view and argued that actually all the elements of ritual scenery resembled tools and equipment used for spinning and/or weaving (Gardeła 2008c; Gardeła 2009). By seeing the prophetic *seiðr* rituals in this way, we may assume that a seeress was sitting on a chair and held her staff between her legs in the same way as the distaffs were held. This can also strengthen an idea that during the *seiðr* ritual, she was actually riding the staff to the otherworldly realms and mythical landscapes (Price 2002: 178; Bonnetain 2006: 145-146).

¹⁸ An interesting parallel to this event can be found in *Landnámabók* (289). The passage describes how a sorcerer named Loðmundr hinn gamli used his staff (*staf*) to direct a river flood away from his farm. It is interesting to add that the one of the features of the staff was a ferrule. Apparently, some of the staffs we know from archaeological contexts also have a similar element attached.

¹⁹ *Þá fór Þórr til ár Þeirrar er Vimur heitir, allra á mest. Þá spenti hann sik megingiörðum ok studdi forstreymis Gríðavölr, en Loki helt undir megingiarðar. Skáldskaparmál* (4). Text after Holtsmark, Jón Helgason 1971: 88; translation after Byock 2005: 90-91. See also Słupecki 2003: 151; Gardeła 2008b.

Storing a staff

As I observed before, most of the staffs we know come from funerary contexts. The Oseberg staff however, was placed inside a chest. It is of course hard to imagine, that a wandering *völva* carried a chest with her (unless she did not travel by foot), but it is not unlikely that items of special significance were placed in chests when not in use. We may find some suggestive evidence for storing *staffs of sorcery* inside the chests in an Eddic poem *Fjölsvinnsmál* (25-30).

In this poem, Svipdagr asks Fjölsvinn about a weapon capable of killing his enemy Viðofnir. Fjölsviðr answers, that there is a staff (named *Lævateinn*²⁰) made by Lopt (a nickname of the god Loki²¹) near the Gate of the Dead (*Fjölsvinnsmál* 26). The staff is said to be laying inside an iron chest of Sinmara (possibly a name of a witch/seeress), which is locked with nine locks.

The fact that the staff was said to have been made by Loki also strengthens its usage in *seiðr*-related rituals. As we know, Loki – with his transformative skills and frequent appearances in female form – was also capable of performing this magical craft.

Finally, it is worth mentioning, that the Oseberg chest (nr. 149) in which the wooden staff was found was also adorned with iron fittings, and had three (but not nine, like in the poem) locks. Number three and nine were very significant numbers for the Norse and perhaps in both cases they were attributed additional meanings (Gardeła 2008b: 25-26).

Killing the staff by stoning, burning and drowning in a bog

When the *seiðr* performer died and his staff could not be passed to someone else it was deposited in a number of ways. Most of the staffs we know today from archaeological contexts were placed inside the graves, by or on the body of the supposed *seiðr* performer. However, three staffs were placed in a rather strange manner.

²⁰ According to Simek (2006: 185) the name *Lævateinn* could be translated as „damage wand”. Simek does not perceive it as a possible *staff of sorcery*, but rather a sword or a kenning for a sword (2006: 185). Kempniński (2003: 191), on the other hand, believes that *Lævateinn* was an arrow. Both interpretations cannot be accepted. Lotte Motz has convincingly argued, that the name *Lævateinn* could be translated as “poisonous bough” and that there is no possibility for seeing it as a sword (1975: 142). According to Motz, it is rather “a death bringing bough or sprig” and “a magic instrument” (1975: 142) – a *staff of sorcery*.

²¹ Loki calls himself *Lopt* in *Lokasenna* (6) and *Hyndluljóð* (43). The name *Lopt* also appears in *Þórsdrápa* (1), *Haustlög* (8) and *Gylfaginning* (32). According to Rudolf Simek (2006: 197) it could be translated as “the airy one, the god of the air” referring to Old Norse *lopt* meaning “air”. John Lindow interestingly argues that if the word was understood by the medieval Scandinavians as related to sky, then “perhaps we should think of Loki flying about in Freyja’s falcon coat” (2001: 220).

As we know, the Kaupang staff was found lying under a large rock. However, there is also one more staff, that seems to have been deposited in a similar way. It was found in Fuldbý (Bjærnede sogn, Sorø Co. Denmark). Johannes Brøndsted interpreted it as a whip-shank and observed that it resembles another find from Gävle (Gästrikland, Sweden) – which I also perceive as a possible staff. In his publication on the Danish inhumation graves, he described the context of finding the Fuldbý staff in a rather elusive way (Brøndsted 1936: 197): “The particulars of the finding state that these two objects, a whip shank and a fragmentary stirrup, were discovered in 1868 about half a metre down in the ground “under or by a large stone”. In all probability they represent a man’s grave”

I have already mentioned the wooden staff from Hemdrup, which had been found stuck inside one of the Danish bogs (Skautrup 1951; Andersen 1971; Back Danielsson 2001; 2007: 233-239; Price 2002: 201-203; Gardęła 2008d: 104-105). The item measures 50cm and is made of yew, its surface is polished and decorated with a scale-like pattern. It also has runic inscriptions and several carvings representing a human being, ambiguous animals and a triquetra knot. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that one of the ends of the staff had been burned. Back Danielsson (2007: 238) argues that this could have a cleansing function: “Through fire the soul, spirit or illness was transformed, or rather purified and made harmless”. Her conclusion was, that (Back Danielsson 2007: 239): “(...) the staff from Hemdrup may be interpreted as a powerful, transforming and multi-associative tool, that could only have been used within and by a bog, a place just as transitional and filled with spectacular powers as a shape-changed being”.

The powers of the Hemdrup staff had thus been neutralized by setting it up in a bog (and thus, drowning). In this way, the item became harmless and perhaps the intention of whoever placed it there was to metaphorically kill it.

In this context it is vital to mention that when the sagas and other written accounts describe the death of sorcerers by the hands of hostile people, it often occurs in a number of unusual ways. For example:

- The sorcerers are killed by stoning (*Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* 39; *Eyrbyggja saga* 20; *Gísla saga Súrussonar* 19; *Laxdæla saga* 37) and/or their graves are heaped with stones (*Laxdæla saga* 37; *Gísla saga Súrussonar* 19)
- The sorcerers are killed by drowning (*Laxdæla saga* 37)
- The sorcerers are tied up and left on the skerries. Eventually they drown (*Ólafs saga Tryggvassonar* 63)
- Oddr, the son of sorceress Katla is killed by hanging (*Eyrbyggja saga* 20)²²

²² As Gade has earlier observed (1985: 174) this is the only source which indicates that hanging might have been a punishment for sorcery in Iceland. Yet, we have no information that Oddr was a sorcerer himself. Gade points out however, that his execution might have resulted from the fact that his mother had given him a brown tunic which could not be penetrated by any weapons. But it is strange, why he was not stoned like his mother (Gade 1985:

- The sorcerers are killed by burning (*Haralds saga ins hárfagra* 34, *Ólafs saga Tryggvassonar* 62; *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium* 11)

Could the stones in the graves of sorcerers have some special significance?²³ Were they used to keep the dead and their objects underground or did they have any other symbolic meanings?²⁴ The answers to those questions certainly require further, interdisciplinary research, which I hope to conduct in the nearest future. It is also incredibly interesting that the sorcerers are killed in exactly the same ways as their staffs – by drowning and burning (the Hemdrup staff) or stoning (the Fuldbý and Kaupang staffs). This fact strongly indicates, that such remarkable items could have been indeed perceived as actual “persons” in their own right.

As a final remark, I wish to mention an interesting possible analogy to the problems discussed above. In Stordalen (Trøndelag) archaeologists have found traces of some striking symbolic activities taking place at a smelting site. The shaft of the furnace with the slag pit was closed with “a flat slab of special slate” (Haaland 2004: 14). Haaland (2004: 14) supposes that this action could not have any functional purpose. Instead it might have been done to symbolically close the pit and conceal the secret knowledge. Perhaps similar thoughts accompanied those who were responsible for the burials of sorcerers and their equipment?

The staffs of sorcery as multi-layered metaphors

I have argued elsewhere (Gardeła 2008c; 2008d) that the possible *staffs of sorcery* from archaeological contexts could be viewed on a number of symbolic levels. It is likely that they did not correspond to just one idea but were a container for many hidden meanings. A multidisciplinary analysis of the staffs’ forms, decorations and their archaeological contexts allowed me to arrive at the following interpretations, which unfortunately can only be briefly summarized here²⁵:

174). Perhaps the shirt made him invulnerable to stones as well? The other explanation is that he was hanged because he cut off the hand of woman named Auðr during a fight (Gade 1985: 174).

²³ Brit Solli (2002: 328) argued that some of the Norwegian phallic-stones could actually mark the graves of potential *seiðr*-performers (both male and female ones). On the special role of white stones in graves from the Bronze Age and the Iron Age see also an interesting article by Carlie (1999).

²⁴ Apart from the Oseberg, Kaupang and Gerdrup graves which contain stones arranged in interesting ways, we know of two other burials of potential *seiðr* specialists that were heaped with stones or covered with stone slabs: Veka (Vangen sogn, Hordaland, Norway) and Klinta (Köpings parish, Öland, Sweden) (Price 2002: 142-149, 196-198).

²⁵ For a detailed explanation of the interpretations of the *seiðr-staffs* please refer to my paper: *Into Viking Minds: Reinterpreting the staffs of sorcery and unravelling seiðr* (Gardeła 2008c) and my Master’s Thesis (Gardeła 2008d).

- The *staff of sorcery* as a distinctive attribute of the *völva* but also a symbol of her power and association with a group of *seiðr* performers.
- The *staff of sorcery* as a symbol of *axis mundi* – in this case the ash Yggdrasill.
- The *staff of sorcery* as a distaff, recalling the concept of spinning fate, and a symbol of feminine control over the household.
- The *staff or sorcery* as roasting spit. Ideas of domestic fire, warmth, transformation.
- The *staff of sorcery* as a phallic object, associated with creation and bringing life. This dimension also brought associations of sexuality, eroticism, and perversion.
- The *staff of sorcery* as a key used for opening and closing passageways to other worlds.
- The *staff of sorcery* as a whip-shank, connected with horses, fertility and Sleipnir.
- The *staff of sorcery* as a spear, connected with Óðinn and one of his main attributes, the spear Gungnir.
- The *staff of sorcery* as a lamp, related to wisdom, intellect and power.
- The *staff of sorcery* as a flute or other ritual musical instrument, associating the staff with concepts of trance and ecstasy.
- The concept of “divine crookedness”, whereby the unusual shapes and “basket handles” of the staffs from archaeological contexts symbolize the otherness of their bearers as well as their magical skills.

The symbolism of the Gerdrup grave (Zealand, Denmark)

My most recent observations on the *staves of sorcery* may also be used to understand the metaphors behind a unique early Viking Age (c. 800 AD) grave discovered in 1981 in the village of Gerdrup, to the north of Roskilde (Christensen 1982; 1997; Jesch 1991: 25). As noted by Christensen it was more than a meter deep, filled with blocks of grass peat and contained two skeletons – an old woman roughly forty years old and a thirty-five-year-old man (1997: 34). Most likely the man was hanged, as suggested by the twisted cervical vertebrae²⁶. He was buried with his feet bound.

Possibly the most important figure in the grave is the woman. Although no signs of violence are visible on her skeleton (Christensen 1997: 34), she was buried under two large stones placed directly on her body. She was equipped with a knife, a bone case containing small iron pins, and a forty centimetre long spearhead placed by her right leg (Christensen 1997, 34). Christensen finds it

²⁶ See an interesting paper on hanging in Scandinavian law and literature by Gade (1985).

“reasonable to guess that she could have been a sorceress or a priestess” (Christensen 1997: 34). In the light of my earlier interpretations (Gardeła 2008c) and the ideas presented within this article, the spear which was placed by her feet could have been indeed used as a special *staff of sorcery*.

The fact that she was buried under large stones is also very significant. We know from a number of sources that sorcerers’ graves were heaped with stones (*Laxdæla saga* (37)) or that sorcerers were stoned to death (*Eyrbyggja saga* (20)). I mentioned above, some of the *staffs of sorcery* from archaeological contexts were also found under large stones. All this makes the Gerdrup grave one of the most interesting “new” burials of potential *seiðr* performers.

The archaeology of emotions. Staffs and the question of ethics

If we believe that the Viking Age minds perceived the above discussed items as *staffs of sorcery* then we will only be right to some extent. The ancient mentalities were as complex as ours. Thus, we cannot assume that all the inhabitants of the Viking world were religious fanatics. Among them, there might have also been skeptics. At a time when the *seiðr* rituals were performed some people were strongly convinced about their effectiveness and some probably rejected them completely. As we have seen, the functioning of *seiðr* depended mostly on belief, self-suggestion and mental manipulation. Not every mind is easy to play with.

Today, interpreting the staffs or any other artifacts of ambiguous nature is also a matter of our own faith or visions of the past as well as our empathy towards the individuals who shaped it. Nevertheless as archaeologists of Viking religion, we must always try to approach such relics with humility and respect. This respect should be equally directed both to the artifact, and to the individual who might have used it in the old days. One might say, that to some extent the staffs could be perceived as otherworldly items even by ourselves – primarily because they come from contexts that are alien to our modern way of thinking and seeing the world.

As a final remark I would like to add, that while examining the Oseberg and the Kaupang staffs, I felt rather uneasy. I am convinced that dealing with items which were recovered from unique and puzzling archaeological contexts requires a specific approach. On one hand I knew that I needed to examine the staffs in a professional way, make precise measurements and study them very carefully to be able to provide as much new information as possible. On the other hand, I was constantly wondering if I am actually allowed to even see them. I kept relentlessly asking myself, whether the original owner of the staff would allow me to touch it? The three unique graves discussed above (Oseberg, Kaupang, Gerdrup) contained stones which could have been placed within them (or above them) to keep the dead and their items underground, forever hidden

from the eyes of men. Could the fact that the archaeologists revealed them once again be perceived as crossing the borders set by Viking Age peoples and thus a lack of respect for their decisions? Such questions trouble me today, while writing these words and sharing my observations on the nature of the staffs.

Nevertheless, in the present paper and a number of other articles, I hope to have shown that what we are dealing with is not as simple as it may seem. The problem of the *staffs of sorcery* is not only interesting from a strictly archaeological or religio-historical view. It can also make us debate the nature of our professions. It provokes new thoughts on matters as subtle as ethics and the treatment of ancient remains, which are often neglected both during fieldwork and in our publications²⁷.

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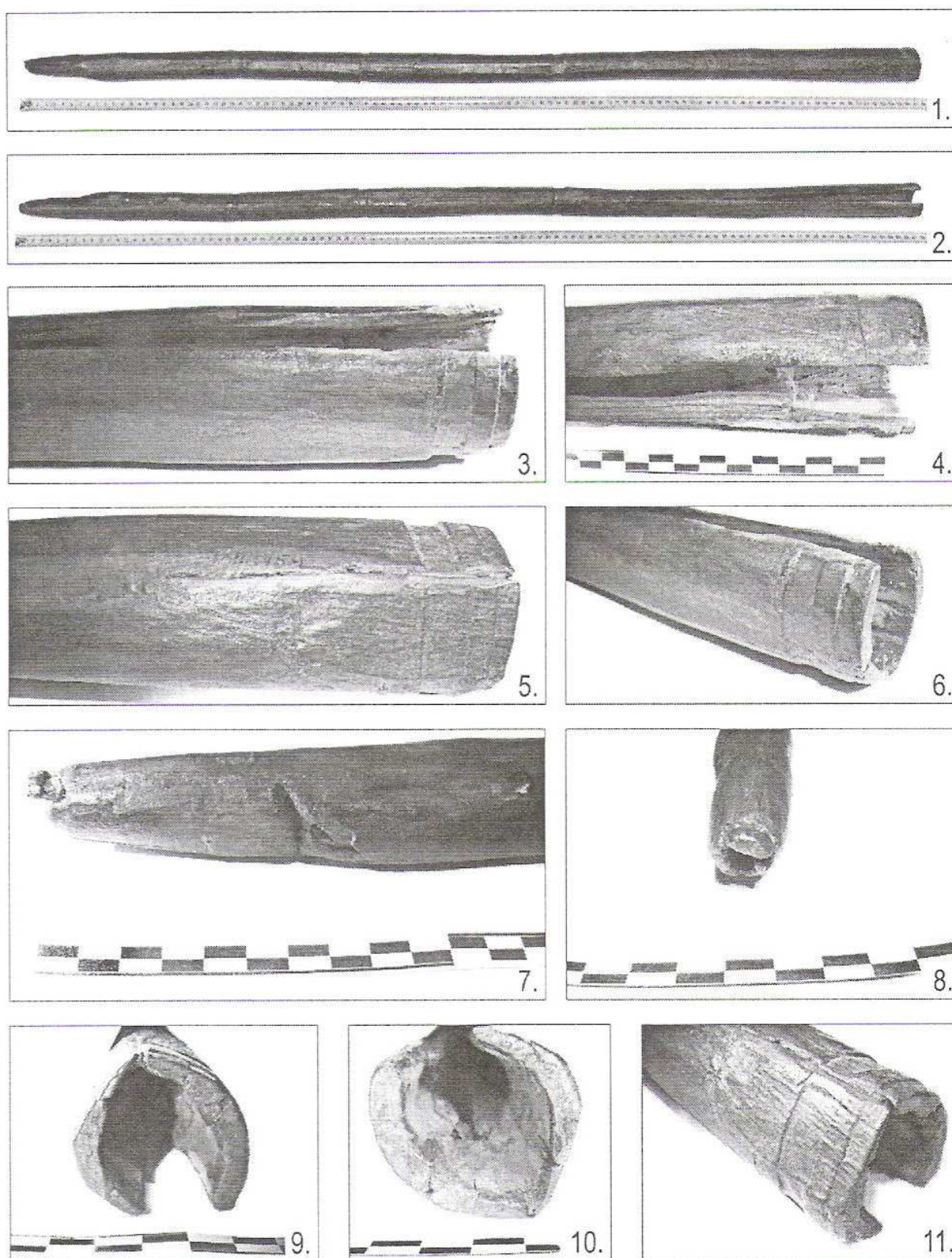


Fig. 1. A wooden staff of sorcery from Oseberg (Vestfold, Norway), dated to the 9th century. All photographs by Leszek Gardela

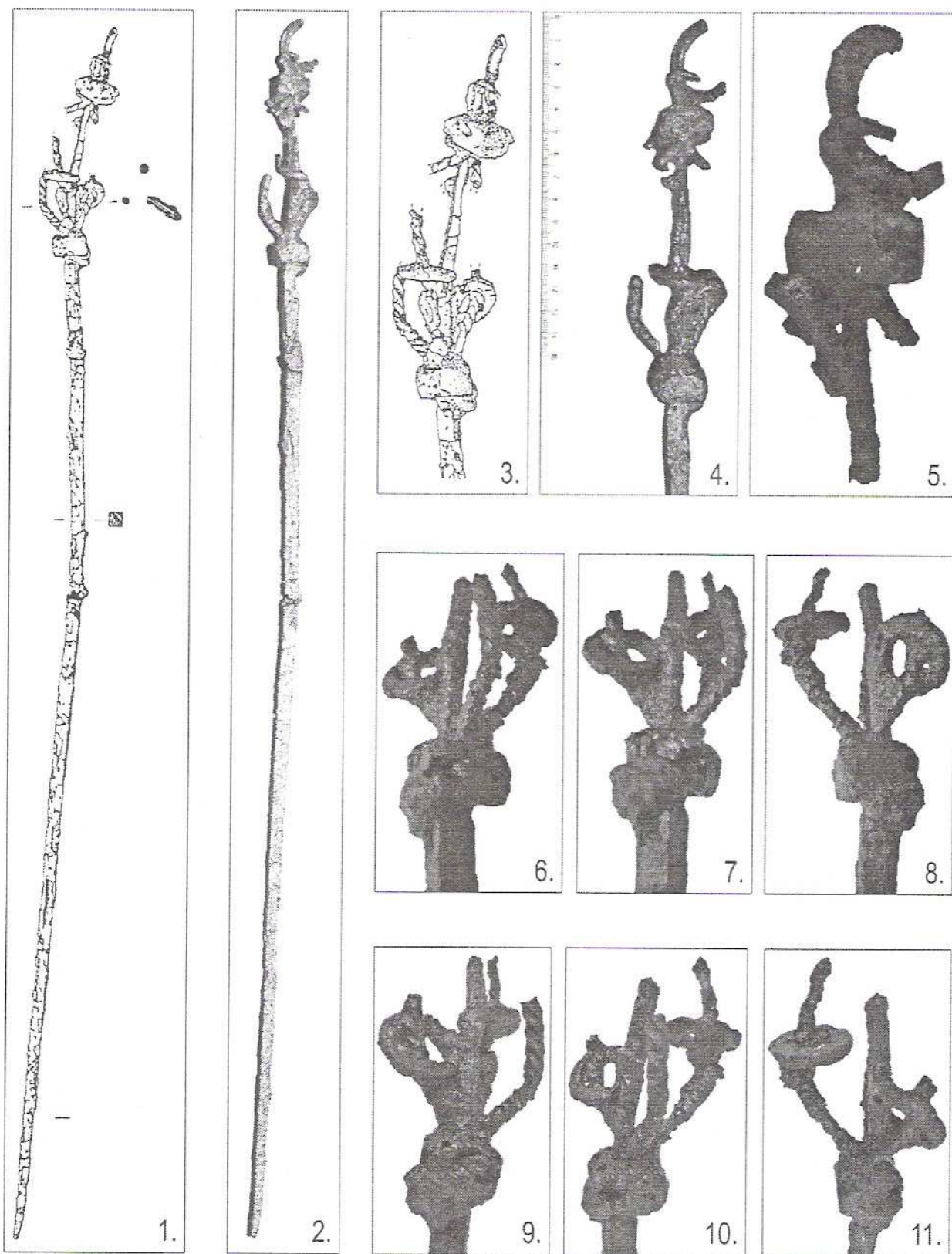


Fig. 2. An iron staff of sorcery from Kaupang (Vestfold, Norway), dated to the 10th century. Figs. 1, 3 after Blindheim, Heyerdahl-Larsen 1995: pl. 15. All photographs by Leszek Gardela

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