Into Viking Minds: Reinterpreting the Staffs of Sorcery and Unravelling *Seiðr*

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Contexts and Borders of the Viking Minds

Although the Old Icelandic sagas and the poems of the Eddic corpus were written down long after the Viking Age itself, they still remain precious accounts which enable reconstruction of certain aspects of pagan world-views (McCreesh 1980; Słupecki 1998, 9–10; Price 2002, 53–54, but see also general discussions on saga criticism in Jónas Krístjánsson 2007, 206–07, 213; McTurk 2007). Those sources can provide details on a number of subjects and may give an insight into spheres of life that are otherwise impossible to investigate, such as individual approaches to religion, cultic practices, and beliefs (Price 2002, 67, 395; Jónas Krístjánsson 2007,113). However, such details are not always easy to identify: in many cases it is necessary to read between the lines and interpret or reinterpret the text several times to arrive at the most convincing or comprehensive reading. As an archaeologist I thus consider it vital to compare our hypotheses about past realities with research results from academic disciplines that lie beyond our own field of expertise (cultural and physical anthropology, history, linguistics, philology, etc.). Such an interdisciplinary approach to the studies of the Viking Age is indeed difficult, yet can certainly give fruitful results (Price 2005a).

In this article, I present my latest research on the meanings and functions of the so-called *staffs of sorcery* (a term first used by Neil Price in 2002).[1] Such objects,

[1] I presented an earlier version of this paper at the conference 'Religion on the Borders: New Challenges in the Academic Study of Religion', which took place at the Södertörn University College in Stockholm (19–22 April 2007). I would like to thank all the participants for their kind

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known from a number of written accounts (for a detailed discussion of most of those accounts see my MA thesis, Gardeła 2008c), might have once been the most important attributes of seeresses and sorcerers in late Iron-Age Scandinavia. Serious attempts to identify them in the available archaeological material began several years ago (Adolfsson and Lundström 1993; Adolfsson and Lundström 1995; Back Danielsson 2001; Price 2002). This opened many new research possibilities and allowed scholars to show the 'subtlety and sophistication of the Viking Mind' from a fresh perspective (Price 2002, 93). Today, therefore, we not only have the descriptions of the staffs in written accounts and possible iconographic representations, but perhaps also authentic material examples which come from a number of archaeological sites located in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Finland, Eastern Europe, and the British Isles. The form of those items is, in most cases, individualized, which suggests that they were personal and intimate objects with which unique thoughts, memories, and emotions were connected (Gardeła 2008c). We must also realize that the use of the staffs in practice depended mostly on the decision of their bearers,[2] and this too might result in the specific, individualized shape, form, and decoration of each staff.

The borders of ancient mentalities are often very difficult or even impossible to cross today. Nevertheless, despite the spatiotemporal distances between the locations of the archaeological sites where the staffs of sorcery have been found, we can

reception of my paper, and extend my warm thanks to Olof Sundqvist, with whom I have discussed my ideas and interpretations in detail. Professor Neil S. Price has read and provided valuable comments on the paper which helped me to avoid inaccuracies. I would also like to thank Professor Leszek Paweł Słupecki, who helped me to obtain some of the necessary articles and books and also commented on several sections of this paper. However, the responsibility for the final version of the manuscript is mine alone. My visit to Södertörn would not have been possible without the financial support from the Dean of the Faculty of History of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Professor Danuta Minta-Tworzowska, and my MA thesis supervisor Professor Włodzimierz Rączkowski. I wish to express my warm thanks to both. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewer who provided comments on how to improve my manuscript. The English text was revised by Roman Gardeła, James Potter, and Alaric Hall — to whom I owe great thanks for many valuable comments on its final version.

[2] In a paper on cognitive archaeology, Neustupný makes the interesting argument that 'the creation of every archaeological artifact might be considered as an event. Similarly, many other points in the "life" of an artifact, including many cases of its termination of "death", can be considered to be archaeological events [. . .]. Thus, by considering artifacts as events, archaeology becomes a discipline occupied to a large degree with human individuality' (2001, 32). For general discussions on the role of cognitive archaeology and aspects of the ancient mentalities, see also Renfrew (2000a; 2000b) and Fowler (2006).

find many striking similarities among the artefacts. This suggests that their creators (the craft-workers who were responsible for making these objects or the ritual performers themselves) often followed a shared pattern, shared similar world-views, and operated within the same framework of symbols and myths. The detailed multidisciplinary analysis of the staffs and their meanings can bring us closer to unravelling some of the mysteries of Viking minds which these similarities imply. What do the staffs mean? Does their shape recall the forms of any other objects? Is it connected with other ideas and concepts and are these items a part of a larger group or complex of symbolically interlinked ritual requisites? All these issues are considered in detail in the following sections.

It seems impossible to discuss the symbolism of the staffs of sorcery without attempting to understand the context in which they were used; by doing so, I argue that they adverted to overlapping planes of the worlds of humans, gods, and other supernatural beings. I present the staffs as complex, multidimensional metaphors. However, we must begin with a short introduction to the art of *seiðr*.

The Art of Seiðr

The art of *seiðr* could be seen as a distinctive phenomenon of the Viking Age (though it is quite possible that it had a much earlier origin, possibly already in Antiquity, as suggested by Słupecki 1998, or in the Migration Period, as proposed by Hedeager 1997; Hedeager 1999, 73–85; and Back Danielsson 2007, 94–98).[3] In the latest interpretations (Hedeager 1997; Hedeager 1999, 73–85; Price 2002; Steinsland 2005, 306–26; Simek 2006, 199–200) it is seen as a very specific form of shamanistic spiritual practices performed mainly by skilled seeresses (ON *vǫlva*,

[3] On various aspects of *seiðr*, see for example Strömbäck (1935; with others, 2000); Ohlmarks (1939a; 1939b); Buchholz (1968); de Vries (1956–57, I, 330–33); Schmidt Poulsen (1986, 175–78); Clunies Ross (1994, 198–211); Hedeager (1997); DuBois (1999, 121–38); McKinnell (2000; 2003); Price (2000; 2002; 2004; 2005a; 2005b; 2006); Solli (2002); Raudvere (2003, 89–170); Steinsland (2005, 306–26); Heide (2006a; 2006b). See also Andrén and Carelli (2006). Some Polish scholars have also discussed aspects of *seiðr*; however, detailed descriptions are to be found only in the works of Słupecki (1998, 69–102; 2003, 91; 2004b, 223; 2007, 97). *Seiðr* was also mentioned in a paper by Tomicki (2000, 459–62) and books by Kempiński (2003, 145–49); Urbańczyk (2004, 209); and Kulesza (2007, 10). Recently, I have published several articles concerning *seiðr* and its different aspects (2007a; 2007b; 2007c; 2008a; 2008b; 2008c; forthcoming a; forthcoming b; forthcoming c).

a female *staff* bearer; plural *vǫlur*) or in some cases sorcerers (ON *seiðmaðr*, a *seiðr* practitioner; plural *seiðmenn*).[4]

A careful analysis of Old Icelandic written accounts indicates that many of those who practised the art of *seiðr* led the lives of wanderers (Gardeła 2008c). *Eiríks saga rauða* (ch. 4), *Laxdœla saga* (chs 35–37), *Norna-Gests þáttr*, *Örvar-Odds saga* (ch. 2), and other sources support this view and suggest that *vǫlur* and *seiðmenn* often traveled or operated in groups of several people (Słupecki 1998, 82). The constant movement from place to place was in most cases a direct effect of the functions which *seiðr* practitioners held in society; in some cases it resulted from their unenviable status as outsiders and outcasts (Steinsland 2005, 313). Nevertheless, several written accounts relate that *seiðr* practitioners were treated with great honour and respect (*Eiriks saga rauða*, ch. 4, and *Vatnsdœla saga*, ch. 44, for example). Yet people always felt somewhat uncomfortable among them.

In particular, men who performed *seiðr* were seen as controversial characters (Price 2002, 122–24; Heide 2006c, 167; Gardeła forthcoming a). As a consequence of the fact that this art had strong sexual overtones and by definition (see *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 7) was attributed to women, male practitioners were referred to as *argr* (Ström 1973; Ström 1974; Clunies Ross 1994, 207–11; Blain and Wallis 2000; Price 2002, 210–14; Solli 2002, 140–64; Steinsland 2005, 308–09). This meant that they were perceived to belong to the same group as passive homosexuals or 'unmanly' men. I believe that, to some extent, this 'unmanliness' could have resulted from the fact that *seiðr* was metaphor for domestic activities such as the processes of spinning and weaving (and those were strictly attributed to women). The practice of *seiðr* was probably unsuitable for an ideal man who, in the common belief of the Viking-Age Scandinavians, should rather fight and fulfil his destiny by means of sword and not feminine sorcery (Solli 2002, 148–59).[5] Because of that, many actions undertaken by sorcerers often led to ostracism and resulted in falling into disgrace and disfavour with rulers or landowners (see *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, ch. 34; *Óláfs saga Tryggvassonar*, ch. 62; *Laxdœla saga*, chs 35–37; *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, ch. 6).

[4] Other names of *seiðr* practitioners appear as well (see Price 2002, 126–27). In this paper I will generally refer to them as *vǫlur* and *seiðmenn*, but it is vital to be aware of the various kinds of seeresses and sorcerers who appear in the written accounts. Their names could also imply their specific attitudes towards their craft and the ways in which they were perceived by the late Iron-Age societies.

[5] In *Bósa saga* (ch. 2) the main hero Bósi refuses to learn sorcery (*tǫfr*) from his foster-mother Busla, because he does not want to be remembered as a trickster.

Expanding Earlier Interpretations

In most dictionary definitions (see for example Heggstad, Hødnebø, and Simensen 1975, 360; Cleasby and Vigfusson 1957, 519–20; Zoëga 2004, 353),[6] *seiðr* is seen as a magical practice involving reciting incantations.[7] Some scholars follow those interpretations and argue that the verb *síða* can even mean 'to sing' (Näsström 2006, 238). However, a closer look at *seiðr*'s usage shows that such an interpretation (although to some extent correct) is imprecise. Neil Price, for example, comments on *seiðr* in these words:

> more than anything else, *seiðr* seems to have been an extension of the mind and its faculties. Even in its battlefield context, rather than outright violence it mostly involved the clouding of judgment, the freezing of will, the fatal hesitation. (2002, 64)

Price — as well as several other scholars (Heide 2006a; Heide 2006b; Heide 2006c; Domeij 2006, 293–95) — suggests that the word *seiðr* could be mainly associated with the symbolic binding/catching/capturing/summoning of spirits or other beings (Price 2002, 64). Słupecki mentions that in *Sigurðardrápa* Óðinn gains mental control over a woman named *Rindr* with *seiðr* (*seið Yggr til Rindar*) (1998, 77), which also supports the possible 'magical binding' applications of this practice (see also Heide 2006c). This might correspond to the possible relation of *seiðr* to domestic spinning and weaving practices. Eldar Heide follows this line of reasoning, and argues that one of the fundamental meanings of the word *seiðr* is simply 'a thread':

[6] In *Ynglinga saga* (ch. 7) Snorri Sturluson provides his own description of *seiðr*, its applications, and practitioners. He also mentions the problem of *ergi*: 'Óðinn kunni þá iðrótt, svá at mestr máttr fylgði, ok framði sjálfr, er seiðr heitir, en af því mátti hann vita ørlög manna ok óorðna hluti, svá ok at gera mönnum bana eða óhamingju eða vanheilendi, svá ok at taka frá mönnum vit eða afl ok gefa öðrum. En þessi fjölkyngi, ef framið er, fylgir svá mikil ergi, at eigi þótti karlmönnum skammlaust viðat fara, ok var gyðjunum kend su íðrótt' which translates to 'Óðinn knew the skill from which follows the greatest power, and which he performed himself, that which is called *seiðr*. By means of it he could know the futures of men and that which had not yet happened, and also cause death or misfortune or sickness, as well as take men's wits or strength from them and give them to others. But this sorcery [*fjölkyngi*], as is known, brings with it so much *ergi* that manly men thought it shameful to perform, and so this skill was taught to the priestesses [*gyðjur*]' (text and trans. Price 2002, 70).

[7] See also Simek's dictionary (2006, 199–200, 280) which provides a more detailed definition. Other interpretations of the word *seiðr* can be found in de Vries (1962, 467–68), Strömbäck (1970), Fritzner (1973, 198), Lindow (2001, 265–66), Kempiński (2003, 145–49).

> *seiðr* etymologically means 'thread' (cf. Old English *sāda* and Old High German *seito* 'a cord, halter, snare'), the practicing of *seiðr* essentially being about spinning a thread. In attracting *seiðr*, which is the most common form of *seiðr*, the threads would be souls or spirits sent forth in shape of threads in order to attract things — for which there is broad evidence. There is also some evidence that such a 'mind thread' could pass through respiratory passages and that it could have phallic symbolism. (2006a, 356)

Heide's new interpretation should be seen as a very significant contribution to the studies of *seiðr*. Since the possible staffs of sorcery from archaeological contexts clearly resemble distaffs (an idea first put forward by Heide 2006c, but see also later interpretations by Gardeła 2008c; Gardeła forthcoming c), then in a metaphorical sense they can be used to spin the threads, which might be conceived as the sorcerer's mind (Heide 2006c, 164–65) or metaphorical spirits (Heide 2006c, 166). Such spirits (or helping spirits) are called upon and then wound around the distaff — in the same way as is done with wool and flax in case of spinning — or they are simply inhaled by yawning. Some evidence for this interpretation can be inferred from *Hrólfs saga kraka* (ch. 3).

I am convinced that in fact the art of *seiðr* should be seen as a metaphor for domestic activities such as spinning or weaving. Spinning and weaving are typically female practices, often with taboo connotations. What is more, they are both potentially social (group) practices (just like *seiðr* rituals, where the presence of assistants and helpers is required, usually in the form of a choir), during which songs are sung, stories told, and finally — while performing the same monotonous and repetitive actions of spinning or weaving — one gets tired and falls into a sort of trance. All this fits well with the picture of *seiðr* illustrated by the sagas. As Hilda Ellis Davidson says,

> When the manufacture of cloth was on a more professional basis, women and girls gathered in the 'spinning rooms' in Germany and Denmark to work at the preparation of wool and linen thread; these women's gatherings were a fruitful source of folklore and traditions about female supernatural beings. They were centres of feminine activity; in some areas men did not dare to enter. (1998, 100–01)

The best known 'spinners of fate', the Greek *Moirai* and their Roman equivalents the *Parcae*, are all related to ancient traditions and spinning symbolism common among the Indo-Europeans (Enright 1990; Berggren 1993). *Moirai* were most often portrayed as three old women — Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos. During their work they often sang songs. Ellis Davidson points out that their decisions were sometimes even more important than those of the gods (1998, 98). We may also find beings that are attributed similar functions in Slavic beliefs. They are called *rodzanice* (Old Russian *rožanica*, *rožděnica*) and related to the god Rod

(Szyjewski 2003, 198; Strzelczyk 2007, 173).[8] The *rodzanice* were given offerings of bread, cheese, mead, children's hair, and porridge (Brückner 1985, 168–75, 270–72; Szyjewski 2003, 192–94; Gieysztor 2006, 205–06; Strzelczyk 2007, 174).

The concept of 'spinning *seiðr*' (Heide 2006c) can of course also be closely connected with the Old Norse *nornir* — three old women known as *Urðr*, *Verðandi*, *Skuldr* who spun the threads of destiny and were capable of shaping human fate (*Gylfaginning*, ch. 15).[9]

Heide supports most of his interpretations using ethnographic analogies and sources from times long after the Viking Age (2006a; 2006b; 2006c). However, he notes that such an approach can lead to finding logical parallels between seemingly distant concepts of magic, and that there is a universal Indo-European root of such practices. He is convinced 'that if sources and folklore of other parts of Europe were examined, one would find much of the same pattern there, because the notions in question are so basic' (2006a, 357).

I followed a similar line of reasoning in one of my previous articles (Gardeła 2007a, 117–18) and expanded it further in my master's thesis (Gardeła 2008c). I argued that there are strong connections between the old magical practice known as *krzywanie* undertaken by pagan Baltic priests called *kriwe* (in Prussia) or *krìvis* (in Lithuania), and the performers and performances of *seiðr*.[10] The crooked staff of the Baltic priests known as *krzywula* (Mierzyński 1885; Moszyński 1967b, 897) could work as a metaphor indicating the otherness and 'divine crookedness' of the

[8] Beings of this kind are also known under other names such as *rodzienice*, *różanice*, *rojenice*, *sudiczki*, *sujenice*, *sudzienice*, *narecznice* (Strzelczyk 2007, 174)

[9] Karen Bek-Pedersen (2006) has recently argued that we hardly have any evidence to support the claim that spinning or weaving practices were attributed to the *nornir*. While analyzing a fragment of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* (stanzas 2–4), she notices that '[r]ather than spinning or weaving, the situation described in the poem seems to be that of twining' (Bek-Pedersen 2006, 127). Bek-Pedersen later argues that the poem does not disprove that *nornir* spin and weave and she supposes that it indeed 'hints strongly in that direction' (2006, 127). The only problem here is that *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* is thought to be a rather late source (possibly eleventh-century) and its imagery could have been subject to various foreign influences. All in all Bek-Pedersen seems to be very cautious about attributing spinning and weaving to the figures of the *nornir*. Nevertheless, the final question about the actual practice performed by those supernatural beings still remains open (Bek-Pedersen 2006, 128). In my opinion, since it is clear that the *nornir* have something to do with textiles, we cannot exclude the possibility that whatever they do with the threads in the literary narratives, they had to have spun them in the first place.

[10] On Baltic pagan priests, see for example Kosman (1989, 90–119); Rowell (1994, 38–39, 125–28); Tomicki (2000, 471–72); Kowalik (2004, 395–97).

ritual specialist who used it, and I have suggested that the same could apply to the strange shapes of the *seiðr*-staffs from archaeological contexts — they also enhance the strangeness of their bearers.

Price pointed out that

> uncritical ethnographic analogy is a constant danger in shamanic research, but I strongly believe that any meaningful study of *seiðr* must look seriously to the work being done not just in the Sámi homelands but also in Siberia, Alaska, Canada, the Northern continental United States, and Greenland. (2004, 279)

However, I argue that in order to unravel the *seiðr* complex one should also look closer at the ritual practices conducted by the Eastern and Western Slavs as well as the Baltic and Finno-Ugric peoples. I hope to conduct such research in the near future.

The 'Archaeology of Seiðr*' and the Graves of Ritual Specialists*

As we have seen, the problem of *seiðr* has been extensively discussed by philologists and historians of religion,[11] but for a long time, scholars lacked evidence beyond the written accounts for its actual existence. Some even thought that the *vǫlur* were purely fantastic beings — created by the vivid imaginations of medieval authors.[12]

Neil Price's book entitled *The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia* proved to be a milestone in research on *seiðr* (see the reviews by Townend 2003; Carver 2004). Its author managed not only to recapture and describe the phenomenon of *seiðr* in the light of written sources, but he also provided substantial evidence for the historical existence of such a practice. By trying to perceive a reality behind the stories, Price was able to reinterpret a number of atypical burials as possible graves of *vǫlur*, *seiðkonur*, or the like. From among those burials, grave 4 in Fyrkat (Jutland, Denmark) is particularly noteworthy, since it contained remains of *hyoscyamus sp*. which is a psychotropic substance giving strong hallucinations (Roesdahl 1977, 83–104; Schmidt Poulsen 1986, 172; Koktvedgaard Zeiten 1997, 44; Price 2002, 149–57; Gardeła 2007a, 112–13).

[11] Many new and stimulating ideas or interpretations of *seiðr* can also be found in the works of Blain (2002; with Wallis 2000) and Wallis (2000; 2001; 2003), who themselves have an emotional approach to ancient spiritual practices and are deeply involved in activities which could be considered as 'neo-shamanic engagements with archaeology' (Wallis 2001).

[12] McKinnell (2000, 241); but see also Schmidt Poulsen's paper (1986) where he discusses the difficulties of combining archaeological and religio-historical views on the aspects of magic.

There are also three other interesting graves (Bj. 834; Bj. 845; Bj. 660) found during the excavations at Birka (Gräslund 1980, 27–43; Price 2002, 128–41, 181–83). People placed within them must have been greatly respected: their high status is reflected in the finds of exclusive weaponry (in case of the double burial Bj. 834), jewellery, and other goods.[13] Yet they did not contain any psychotropic substances. However, the key artefact which enabled Price to interpret those graves as possible *vǫlva*-burials was the presence in each one of a strange iron rod.[14] Price sees those items as possible staffs of sorcery, which might have functioned as distinctive attributes of the Viking Age *vǫlur* and were symbols of their craft and profession. All of the staffs found in Birka belong to the so-called *expanded 'handle' construction* type, which means that their iron handles are made with an openwork construction (Price 2002, 191–95). They are also decorated with bronze fittings, which matches the description of a staff from *Eiríks saga rauða* (ch. 4). It must be added that several Norwegian staffs have an iron ring attached to their upper end (for example, the staffs from Myklebostad, Kaupang, Søreim, Hopperstad, and Veka). This feature also seems to match a description of a staff used by the sorcerer Loðmundr hinn gamli in *Landnámabók* (ch. 289).

Artefacts of this kind were earlier given a number of interpretations, from meat-spits (Petersen 1951, 425–29; Bøgh-Andersen 1999), whip shanks (Brøndsted 1936, 196), or items used in a forge (Brandenburg 1895, 3 and table IX) to lamp fragments or implements used for measuring textiles (Kyhlberg 1980, 274–78; Hanson 1983, 8; Ringstedt 1997, 135–44). It is currently possible to identify a corpus of over forty artefacts of this kind, recovered mainly from funerary contexts in Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Finland, Russia, and the British Isles.[15]

[13] We must bear in mind that these items are all associated with both the domestic and military domains. *Seiðr* seems to be a sort of stew of both the seemingly subtle everyday choirs and the aggressive warlike attitudes.

[14] Price's book (2002) also inspired Stylegar's new, and indeed very interesting, interpretation of one of the boat graves from Kaupang as a possible burial of a 'couple and their sorceress' (2007, 95–99). Stylegar argues that 'it is possible that Ka. 294 and Ka. 295 represent 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' (2007, 99).

[15] I have recently interpreted several more examples of possible staffs of sorcery (Gardeła 2007a; Gardeła 2008c). One of them is an iron staff from Przyładoże (see Brandenburg 1895, 3 and table IX). Brandenburg described it as an item of unknown usage and assumed that it could have been one the smith's accessories used in a forge (1895, 3). Yet the miniature rattle attached to the loop

Although in the most recent archaeological exhibitions and publications (see for example Stylegar 2007, 95–99) the iron staffs are often viewed as items possibly related to *seiðr*, in his latest book Władysław Duczko remains more cautious:

> The iron rod-staff has been given many explanations — from roasting spits to implements for measurement — and there is no doubt that this object was a multifunctional item, but it is doubtful that it was a symbolic wand with its content restricted only to the seidr. This object indicates the special status of the owner, a social status, identifying the woman as a ruler of the household. (2004, 173)

I am inclined to agree with such arguments, but they require further exposition. At first glance, many of the staffs from archaeological contexts seemingly have nothing magical about them at all. They simply look like ordinary, everyday tools. Working with *seiðr*, however, meant dealing with another kind of reality — an elaborate world of thought which had the capacity to change the ordinary into the supernatural. The search for *seiðr* is thus a search for details and subtleties which are all hidden within even the most banal objects. Finally, we must realize that the iron staff became a tool for sorcery only when its bearer decided to use it in such a manner and when other participants of the ritual believed in her (or his) power and the magic with which the *seiðr* paraphernalia were enchanted. It was all 'real' because the minds of Viking-Age peoples considered it real. Additionally, the atmosphere of the place, the time of the day, costumes, and words and songs chanted by the performers all no doubt enriched the spiritual experience.

By viewing *seiðr* in this way, the staffs begin to appear as many-layered metaphors. They play a part in a ritual drama, which some *seiðr* performances essentially were (Gunnell 1995, 56–57, 335–39). We shall now try to see through those layers, unravel them, and attempt to understand them. In my discussion, I focus mainly on the examples of the staffs with the expanded handle construction, as I believe their possible symbolic meanings[16] can be closely related to the concept of

on top of the iron rod which resembles the so-called *staff pendants* (Arrenhius 1961; Fuglesang 1989, 15–16; Koktvedgaard Zeiten 1997, 24–25, 60; Price 2002, 203–04; Gardeła 2008a) indicates that this was rather an object used in rituals (Gardeła 2007a, 117). Its close resemblance to some of the Eastern European whip shanks seems puzzling as well. Perhaps this is not purely coincidental and indicates that the staff could be related to the concepts of riding a 'shamanic mount' or indeed be a symbolic mount of the seeress or sorcerer.

[16] See Price's discussion and observations on the 'New' Viking-Age archaeology: 'in our interpretations of material culture we are ready to perceive new levels of subtlety, from the small-scale of objects and technology, through architecture and settlement patterns, to larger questions of landscape, social structures and the *longue durée*. Above all we have begun to recognize what

spinning and shaping human fate. This will form a starting point for providing new interpretations of the ritual platforms used during some of the *seiðr* rituals.

Seiðstafr*: The Concept of Creation, Spinning Fate, and Capturing Spirits*

As mentioned above, spinning and weaving had strong symbolic dimensions in many ancient cultures. It is likely that such associations originated with spinning and weaving themselves. Tomasz Wujewski provides a good interpretation of the symbolism of spinning and weaving in his work on Antique Anatolian sepulchral stellae (1991, 10–13). He noticed that everything seems to indicate that the distaff and spindle were both symbols commonly used in Antiquity; support for this hypothesis can be found in Greek and Roman written sources and other archaeological evidence (Bąbel 1979; Berggren 1993; Wujewski 1991, 10–13). Spinning and weaving were associated with the concept of circular movement generally, which is a perfect form of existence. If the distaff and spindle were held by a divine being, then they became symbols of omnipresence and power. The god or the goddess was thus seen as responsible for the fate of every individual. Iconographic representations of a woman holding a spindle and a distaff were to inform that these items are not only tools, but they are also a symbol of her high, royal, or divine status (Wujewski 1991, 12).

Spinning and weaving can also be closely related to the concept of maternity and fertility.[17] Artur Kowalik (2004, 90) writes about such ideas in the light of ancient myths and pagan Slavonic beliefs:

> Czynność tkania wyraża zatem symbolicznie proces tworzenia życia, przede wszystkim w aspekcie mnożenia i wzrostu, ale także ideę rozwijania przestrzeni na zewnątrz. (2004, 90)
>
> [Weaving expresses in a symbolic way the process of creating life, especially in relation to multiplication and growth, but also the idea of developing the space outwards.] (my translation)

archaeologists call the meaning-content of material culture: the fact that the form, ornamentation and daily use of artifacts — or buildings, or landscapes, or many other things — may contain more dimensions than the merely functional' (2005a, 376).

[17] Szyjewski notices that most of the rituals of initiating young women to the secret female groups (in the sense of a social group) are connected with the concepts of birth and fertility (2001, 504). Young girls are being prepared for the final initiation by older women. Szyjewski also argues that such initiation is in most cases related to aspects of sexuality and some other traditional female practices such as spinning, singing, and dancing in a very erotic or obscene manner (2001, 504).

In this context it seems appropriate to mention a passage in *Norna-Gests þáttr,* which describes the moment when Gestr was born and three seeresses (*vǫlur*, *spákonur*) appeared in his parents' household (Heide 2006c, 166). Although it does not involve spinning or weaving, it does illustrate the power of *vǫlur* to determine fate. They were asked to provide a good and prosperous future for the newborn child, and thus they played an important role in the process of the creation of Gestr's fate and destiny. We learn from the story that the youngest of the three women, whose words were not taken into consideration by the other two skilled seeresses, became very irritated. She cast an evil spell and said that the life of Gestr was to end as soon as the candle lit by his bed burned out. The oldest *vǫlva* quickly extinguished the candle and gave it to Gestr's mother, who returned it to her son after many years. Gestr was said to have had many adventures and lived a long life of three hundred years until finally, with the aid of King Óláfr, he lit his candle and died.

To relate the interpretations presented above to singing/chanting, ritual platforms, and the art of *seiðr* in general, we must again return to the iron rods which Price (2002) interpreted as staffs of sorcery. Their symbolic content will now be considered in the light of several other Old Icelandic accounts.

In *Eyrbyggja saga* (ch. 20) we find the story of a woman named Katla who struggles to save her son Oddr from death at the hands of two men, Arnkell and Þórarinn. They both come to Katla's house looking for Oddr, but she makes her son sit still beside her, and thanks to her magical skills they see only a distaff in his place. The same thing happens again when the two men come back to Katla's house for the second time in search of her son. On that occasion, Katla was 'playing with a goat there, trimming its forelock and beard and grooming its coat' (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 20; trans. Vesteinn Ólason 2003, 104). The third time the men come, she transforms her son into a domestic boar lying under the midden. In each of those cases the men are unable to see through Katla's trick; they manage to do this only after they finally summon a woman named Geirriðr, who neutralizes Katla's spells. Afterwards Arnkell and Þórarinn sentence Oddr and stone his mother to death.

Here, magic is used in connection with domestic practices. Oddr is first transformed into a distaff, and afterwards into a goat and boar respectively. As we may observe on the basis of *Eyrbyggja saga*, magic (or, we might infer, *seiðr* specifically) can be used to manipulate the human mind and alter the perception of the world (Heide 2006c, 166). Perhaps the easiest way to achieve that is to make connections with the most common and simplest of things?

One such mundane thing is indeed a distaff.[18] As mentioned above, the staffs of sorcery from archaeological contexts clearly reflect the form of distaffs.[19] A seeress bearing such an item signifies her skills in spinning and shaping the threads of human fate, as well as her high social status, and a divine element which she herself embodies. In this reading, her staff is also an item closely connected to a number of other domestic practices — from shearing the sheep to the process of spinning and the act of weaving cloth on a loom. All those actions are a part of a greater process of premeditated 'creation' — that is, making something according to a strictly defined scheme or procedure.

Price noticed that there are some striking similarities between the 'handles' of the staffs of sorcery and openwork key handles from Gotland (2002, 188–89). Such analogies do not seem to be purely coincidental. Price also argues that the keys could to some extent imitate the staffs (2002, 190). I suggest that it works the other way round: it is the staffs which do the imitating. Yet the spinning and weaving concepts always remain at the centre of reference. The openwork construction is only practical in the case of items such as distaffs, since flax or wool are being attached to it. The 'expanded handles' of the staffs of sorcery could have had something attached to them (perhaps precious stones as might be suggested by *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 4), but it is hard to say if they had any other function.

Tomasz Kurasiński (2002) has presented an interesting analysis of key-finds in which he discussed their possible symbolism. In the light of his interpretations, a key had an important connotation of social domination, and giving away the keys or passing keys to another person meant entering serfdom — dependence and deprivation of all rights. According to biblical accounts keys were associated with opening the gates to the realms of the dead (Andrén 1993; Kurasiński 2002, 195), but the keys of the apostle Peter were also associated with the concept of binding and unbinding. In Viking-Age beliefs a key could be seen as one of Freyja's attributes as well as an attribute of women of high social status.[20] Finally the key was

[18] On different types of distaffs from ancient and modern times as well as their usage, see for example Moszyński (1967a); Baines (1977, 94–103); Wąsowicz (1987); Wielowiejski (1993).

[19] However, there are also other utensils related to textile production that have a similar openwork construction to the 'handles' of the putative staffs of sorcery. They are known from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ethnographic material and named *nøstepinne* in Norway or *vindepinde* in Denmark. Some of the Danish examples were painted in bright colors (blue, orange, red). Most of those items were made of wood and used as winding rods.

[20] In *Þrymskviða* (st. 15) the god Þórr is given keys as an additional attribute to his female costume in which he then travels to the world of the giants to recapture his hammer *Mjǫllnir*.

also used in various magical practices — locking and unlocking, binding and loosening, capturing and freeing (Kurasiński 2002, 196–97), which generally matches the concept of *seiðr* described above and the idea of summoning and binding spirits. It is worth noting that the term *varðlok(k)ur* used for describing a chant intoned by a young woman named *Guðríðr* during a prophetic *seiðr* séance in *Eiríks saga rauða* (ch. 4) might refer to 'capturing, locking spirits'. A key is also related to domestic and funerary spaces: it can be used to open the doors of the house or the doors to the other worlds (Kurasiński 2002, 200). Thor Ewing mentions that keys played an important role during Viking-Age weddings (2006, 169). On the basis of accounts from *Rígsþula* and *Þrymskviða* he shows that they were inseparable elements of the bride's costume and formed symbols of her status as the lady of the house and her duties or responsibilities for all the goods contained within it.

We can thus conclude that in late Iron-Age Scandinavia a key had similar connotations to those which were described in Kurasiński's paper (2002): it was a symbol of a higher social status, and an item strictly connected with female characters (Aannestad 2004), that could be used to open or close in a symbolic sense as well as a literal one. *Seiðr* itself, as well as the staffs of sorcery, can be easily related to the same ideas as those mentioned above.

It is also crucial to notice that the iron staffs and their form have phallic connotations and so do the distaffs. Because of that we can view them as related to the concepts of creating a new life or providing fertility in general — often in a very erotic sense. Brigitta Johansen suggested that the long item represented between the figures of a man and woman shown on the golden foils known as *guldgubber* could be viewed as a staff of sorcery or a metaphorical dragon, which in her interpretation was to protect the women from various dangers and difficulties (1996, 86). The staff, however, could also be related to a horse and act as a metaphorical mount which a seeress or sorcerer uses while 'travelling' to the otherworldly realms. Some scholars have suggested that staffs might have been used to obtain a state of ecstasy or orgasm through ritual masturbation (Jochens 1996, 74; Price 2005b; Heide 2006c, 168; Gardeła 2007a). Although it is hard to imagine doing that with a long iron staff, it is not unlikely that some *seiðr* rituals at least included sexual movements imitating intercourse. If the staff was to be held like some of the distaffs (or like the witches' broomsticks), between the woman's legs, this interpretation could indeed be quite plausible (see Heide 2006c, 168).

Another possible relation between staffs and horses can be seen in *Vǫlsa þáttr*, where a phallus wrapped in linen and leeks is used during a special ceremony. Perhaps the name of Óðinn's stallion *Sleipnir* (apparently born from homosexual intercourse between Loki and the giant Svaðilfari), which means 'the sliding one',

could also be seen as having some erotic or shamanistic connotations (Price 2002, 320–23; Kempiński 2003, 195–96). We may also assume that Óðinn's stallion was in fact his 'staff'.[21] A close association between the staffs of sorcery and horses is apparent when we look at the examples of whip shanks from Przyładoże (Brandenburg 1895, 3 and table IX; Gardeła 2007a, 117; Gardeła forthcoming a) or on the find from Gävle in Gästrikland (Brøndsted 1936, 196; Price 2002, 189).

While discussing the possible deeper meanings of the items found within the famous Oseberg ship burial, Ingstad noted that the presence of lamp stands (both among the archaeological finds in the burial and depicted on the famous tapestry recovered from the chamber) could also bear some symbolic value. She argues that

> the lamp was a symbol of life, of the light of divinity, of immortality, of wisdom — and of even more qualities connected with wisdom, and intellect, and with good works. A lamp borne in front of a procession showed that those following were royal personages, or at least extremely important people, or divine kings. (1995, 141)

It is also important to note that some of the lamp stands resemble the shafts of the iron examples of possible staffs of sorcery (see the discussion of Viking-Age lamps in Resi Heid 2002 and illustrations therein). This might not be purely coincidental and might allude to some of the concepts mentioned by Ingstad (1995, 141). In this case the staff would also symbolize wisdom, intellect, power, or almost divine enlightenment.

The staff of sorcery could also be seen as a metaphorical spear. Óðinn, the ultimate master of *seiðr*, had a strong connection with this particular weapon, and owned a magical spear called *Gungnir* (Simek 2006, 124). This special relation is clearly visible in a number of his names: *Dǫrruðr*, *Geirdróttinn*, *Geirlǫðnir*, *Geirtýr*, *Geirvaldr*, *Geirǫlnir*, *Gungnis váfaðr* (Simek 2006, 124). He also threw a spear to start the first war with the Vanir gods (*Vǫluspá* st. 24) and wounded himself with a spear during his initiation (*Hávamál* st. 138). Gungnir was made by dwarfs (*Skáldskaparmál*, chs 9, 33) and had runes carved onto it (*Sigrdrífumál* st. 17). By carrying a symbolic staff-spear the *vǫlva* would also stress her special connection with the highest of the gods. Lotte Motz noted that Óðinn does not use his spear as an aggressive weapon but rather as a magic instrument (1996, 84). Since it often alternated with a reed, according to Motz it is likely that his spear also functioned as his staff of sorcery — similar to the ones held by sorceresses (1996, 84).

[21] Bonnetain (2006) argues that it may be possible to view the ash tree Yggdrasill as a horse with similar functions to those attributed to Sleipnir.

The observations may also be compared with a unique early Viking-Age (AD *c.* 800) grave which is now displayed in the permanent exhibition of the Roskilde Museum. The grave was discovered in 1981 in the village of Gerdrup, to the north of Roskilde. As noted by Christensen it was more than a metre 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 vertebrae. He was buried with his feet bound. However, for present purposes 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 three 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 suggests that it is rather unlikely that she was a so-called 'shield maiden' or a 'valkyrie' but he finds it 'reasonable to guess that she could have been a sorceress or a priestess' (Christensen 1997, 34). In the light of my interpretations above, the spear which was placed by her feet could in fact have been used as a 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 (*Laxdœla saga*, ch. 37) or that sorcerers were stoned to death (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 20). Some of the staffs of sorcery from archaeological contexts were also found under large stones, as in the case of the staff from grave Ka. 294–96 in Kaupang–Skiringssal (Bikjholberget, Vestfold, Norway) (Stylegar 2007, 96) and the staff from Fuldby (Bjernede sogn, Sorø, Denmark) (Brøndsted 1936, 197).

Although I have discussed a number of possible ideas about the meaning of stones in graves of *seiðr* performers in my master's thesis (Gardeła 2008c), this overlooked matter should certainly be examined in greater detail.

To conclude this section it is also worth looking at a unique, wooden staff from Hemdrup (Northern Jutland). The find is dated to AD 900–1000. It measures fifty centimetres and was found in 1949 standing vertically in a bog into which it had been thrown (or perhaps deliberately placed). This item had two runic inscriptions and a number of puzzling zoo- and anthropomorphic representations. The earliest interpretations describe the artefact as a throwing stick or shepherd's stick (Skautrup 1951), but in 2001 Ing-Marie Back Danielsson proposed a new interpretation (which she expanded in 2007, 233–39). In her opinion the item from Hemdrup should be seen as a staff of sorcery related to the art of *seiðr*, and the images of a man and creatures that surround him may represent a shaman and his guardian spirits. According to her, the staff could be metaphorically connected with a flute: one of its ends is shaped in a similar way to such musical instruments.

Back Danielsson (2001) stresses that this staff (if used as a flute) could have been helpful in obtaining a state of trance or ecstasy, during which the shaman was capable of travelling through different mythical worlds. The concept of breathing air in and out through the flute and thus producing sound/melody/words is well supported by the later interpretations of *seiðr* described by Eldar Heide (2006a; 2006b; 2006c). Heide suggests that by breathing in the air and later sending it forth, it is possible to attack a chosen victim and cause physical or mental harm (2006c, 164–66).

The material presented in this section suggests that the staff of sorcery (whatever its form might be) was a visible, distinctive attribute of the power and high social status of its bearer. It was also a miniaturized form of the *axis mundi* — in this case, the ash tree Yggdrasill. The fact that the staff was held by a seeress or a sorcerer signified her or his unique ability to travel within the worlds that were set upon it (Gardeła 2007a, 117).

At the beginning of this paper, I suggested that the staffs seem to be very personal objects. Saying this brings us to the farthest point we can reach in interpreting the meaning which they had for their bearers: we approach a border that cannot be crossed, created by the unique thoughts of an individual. For this, we can assume no pattern and thus we may only hold on to the possible general variants or conceptions of the staffs' meanings which were outlined above.

I have argued that most of the items mentioned in this section, such as distaffs, spindles, or keys, were commonly used within the households of the Viking Age. As we have seen, they correspond to the symbolism of *seiðr* and to the shapes and forms of the putative staffs of sorcery. This was no doubt a deliberate process which enabled people to understand the magical activities associated with *seiðr* through metaphor. In this argument such activities referred to mundane things or actions and not to completely abstract ideas known only to those who possessed secret knowledge.

In the next sections of my paper I argue that ritual practices related to *seiðr* refer to feminine domestic activities. Through the usage of metaphors and theatrical features, such activities acquire another, more sacred dimension.

Artistic and Domestic Dimensions of Seiðr

Price's view that the one of the characteristics of *seiðr* was the ability to take control over weaker minds (2002, 64) is convincing. However, I suggest that this ability

depended greatly on the way in which a certain ritual was conducted and whether it was persuasive enough.[22]

As I have argued, archaeologically preserved staffs of sorcery, which we infer were used during *seiðr* rituals, were not necessarily very distinctive or elaborate: in most cases they seem rather mundane, their hidden powers presumably arising from the simplicity of their form and its metaphorical associations. It is thus likely that *seiðr* (as well as many other practices of a magical character) was in fact very theatrical (Gunnell 1995, 335–39) and, as I suggested above, provided the possibility of changing the ordinary into the supernatural. This theatricality could have made *seiðr* more persuasive, allowing performers to manipulate the emotions of the participants of the ritual, but might also have helped them to understand its message. The unique account of *Eiríks saga rauða* (ch. 4), which describes a *seiðr* ceremony in Greenland, illustrates the possible artistic dimension of such practices. The author of the saga elaborates on the details of the *vǫlva*'s unusual costume: a blue cloak decorated with stones and long stripes, a necklace made of glass beads, a hat or hood made of lamb skin and lined with white cat skin, a staff adorned with brass fittings, a wooden belt with a large pouch attached to it in which amulets (*taufr*) were kept, shoes made of hairy leather with knobs of tin attached to them, catskin gloves, a brass spoon, and a knife with a broken tip and a handle made of walrus ivory. Given the arguments presented above, I suggest that if the staff carried by the *vǫlva* really resembled the staffs from archaeological contexts, it is likely that the spectators of the ritual perceived her as a 'shaper of fate', holding a symbolic distaff. We may recall that a seeress named *Feidelm* mentioned in the Old Irish epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge* carried 'a weaver's beam of white bronze, with golden inlay' in her hand (Enright 1990, 67). Admittedly, a weaver's beam is not the same thing as a distaff, but it indicates that various textile utensils were perceived as symbols of dignity in neighbouring cultures.

[22] Among the items that might most deeply have influenced the participants of rituals were ritual masks. Two masks made of felt were found in one of the shipwrecks in Hedeby (Hägg 1984, 69–72, 185–88). They resemble the faces of bulls, bears, or perhaps wolves. Since these items do not seem to be very positive one might agree with Price that it is rather unlikely that they were used as children's toys (Price 2002, 171–74). It is plausible that they are in some way related to various forms of cultic or military practices in which masked warriors equipped with spears or perhaps even staffs participated (Gunnell 1995, 66–76). Possible representations of such rituals can be seen on the finds of plaques from Öland and Germany. Finds depicting miniature warriors/weapon dancers (?) could also be related to this concept (Holmqvist 1960; Ringquist 1969; Duczko 2002; Price 2002, 369–74, 385–88).

The passage in *Eiríks saga rauða* also contains information on elements of ritual furniture, in its mention of a *háseti* ('high-seat')/*seiðhjallr* ('*seiðr*-platform'). Since the *seiðr* séance took place at night, the surrounding darkness must have also affected the audience's mood and perception of the objects used. Additionally, the women forming a circle and chanting unusual songs would have further provoked the spectators' imagination.

Słupecki suggests that the role of a 'choir' in the *seiðr* rituals could have been crucial (1998, 97). The 'choir' also appears in *Gǫngu Hrólfs saga* (ch. 28), where twelve evil sorcerers chant a song while standing on a high stage-platform built inside a house in the forest (Słupecki 1998, 95).

In considering the group performance of *seiðr* and the specific architecture needed in the ceremonies, it is helpful to look at a passage from *Laxdœla saga* (ch. 35) where the sorcerer Kotkell conducts a ritual with his two sons. They all sing special songs (*galdrar*) of evil nature while on a large *seiðr* platform (*seiðhjallr mikinn*) built especially for the occasion. We may infer that the platform in *Laxdœla saga* (ch. 35) was similar to the one described in *Gǫngu Hrólfs saga* (ch. 28) mentioned above.

Both of the platforms described in *Gǫngu Hrólfs saga* and *Laxdœla saga* are large, allowing several seeresses or sorcerers to gather upon them. These platforms do not seem to be very elaborate constructions — *Laxdœla saga* suggests that they were built ad hoc on the spot, while in *Eiríks saga rauða* (ch. 4), the *seiðhjallr* is ready the day after Þorbjǫrg's arrival — but simple yet symbolic objects, recalling a larger framework of concepts and ideas. Neil Price noted that

> no *seiðr*-platform has ever been excavated in a Viking Age building, or at least it has never been recognized as such. From the saga accounts it is clear that these constructions were either especially built for such occasion — and therefore dismantled afterwards — or else a permanent feature of the hall was temporarily adapted for this use. In neither instance would any special archaeological trace be found. (2002, 163)

Eldar Heide suggests that the *seiðhjallr* concept can be related to spinning (2006c, 166). Such an element of 'ritual scenery' could have also been a permanent feature of the hall — an elevated place like a high seat for example. The conclusion we might draw from the sources describing ritual furniture is that the concept of 'elevation' was important in the practice of *seiðr*. It was perhaps closely associated with the symbolic notion of looking at the world from above and seeing it from a much wider perspective[23] or simply holding an important position (at the time of

[23] Perhaps the stone described in *Grógaldr* (st. 15) on which the *vǫlva* Gróa stands to chant her spells could also be seen as a platform related to the concept of symbolic elevation and seeing above

the ritual) and being metaphorically as well as physically higher than the viewers of the ritual. We know that the throne of Óðinn, *Hliðskjálf*, had a similar purpose (Kiil 1960; Lindow 2001, 176; Kempiński 2003, 106; Simek 2006, 152) and that it was related to such ideas (though in the Poetic Edda it only appears in the prose introductions to *Grímnismál* and *Skírnismál*). According to Lindow (2001, 176) the name *Hliðskjálf* appears to mean 'doorway-bench' or 'watchtower'.

Some ideas as to what the seats used in the performance of prophetic *seiðr* may have looked like are suggested by the finds of miniature chair pendants deposited in several richly furnished female burials, and in hoards, from the Viking Age. Most of them were described in detail by Price (2002, 163–67) whereas Władysław Duczko analyzed the ornamentation and crafting techniques applied during their production using a find from Birka, grave Bj. 632 as an example (1985, 69–70; but see also Vierck 2002, 42–59).

Miriam Koktvedgaard Zeiten has discussed all the finds of miniature chairs from Denmark and some of their analogues, suggesting that they may be viewed as amulets possibly related to the cult of Óðinn and the art of *seiðr* (1997, 21–23, 44, 59–60). She also argued that similar thrones also appeared within the iconography of the Viking Age in an apparently religious context.

It must be noted that surprisingly similar, round, wooden seats appeared as household equipment in Scandinavia even in the early modern period (they are often referred to as *kubbstolar*). However, as Salin (1916) indicated, such items also have many analogues from other regions (they were known before the Viking Age, for example among the Etruscans).

Seiðr platforms or chairs have not hitherto been interpreted in relation to archaeological material. I believe that we can indicate at least one connection, however: a chair recovered from the famous Oseberg ship burial (Christensen 1992, 131). I find it striking that (to my knowledge) no scholar has ever attempted to look closer at its symbolic connotations; its presence in the grave of a possible seeress (Ingstad 1995; Price 2002, 159–60; Nordström 2006a; Nordström 2006b) could in my opinion suggest some metaphorical meanings for it. It could indeed be seen as one of the *seiðr* chairs we know from the written accounts. It originally had some painted decorations and this might parallel the description of a ritual seat from *Fóstbræðra saga* (ch. 23) with carvings representing the god Þórr (Gardeła 2008a, 24).

in order to foretell future events. Siikala argues that 'it was not just any stone; it was a stone beneath which the guardian spirits resided' (1990, 201).

It also closely resembles the miniature chair pendants. Admittedly, the Oseberg chair is square at the bottom, but this is not very problematic since we also have square miniature chairs found in Hedeby (Schleswig-Holstein) in Germany (Price 2002, 166, fig. 3.45), Tolsrup in Jutland (Koktvedgaard Zeiten 1997, 21, fig. 25), and from grave Bj. 844 in Birka (Price 2002, 164, fig. 3.40). Its height would also correspond to the imagery from the Sanda I stone.[24] Yet the chair from the Oseberg burial may not be the only element of *seiðr* furnishings that can be identified within the recovered archaeological material. I shall come back to this problem in the section on 'Unravelling the *Seiðr* Complex'.

The argument that cube-shaped wooden seats were used in Scandinavia during spinning is crucial for my further discussions on the hidden logic behind the *seiðr* complex. We can find suggestive evidence for this interpretation in the medieval Norwegian church from Ål in Hallingdalen, where an image showing a woman seated on a *kubbstol*-type chair with a spindle and distaff in her hands is preserved (see Salin 1916, fig. 10). I believe that this can well support the concept of *seiðr* that I presented above — a magical performance rooted deeply in domestic practices.

Taken together, these pieces of evidence suggest that there was a clear relationship between the objects used in *seiðr*: they were all symbolically interlinked and revolved around the central concepts of spinning and weaving.

In the next two sections, I discuss two other remarkable elements of ritual furniture: the 'door hinges' and 'door lintels', above which a woman is lifted in *Vǫlsa þáttr*; and the mysterious 'doorframe' mentioned by Ibn Fadhlān.[25] Although those items seemingly have nothing to do with the practice of *seiðr*, I will argue that they both belong to the same semiotic universe — an elaborate world of thoughts and metaphors shared by individuals dealing with various forms of ritual practices.

[24] A picture stone from Sanda in Gotland (Sanda I) bearing a scene which has been interpreted as an act of welcoming a fallen warrior in Valhǫll (Imer 2001, 77; Price 2002, 167). The left side of the engraving shows a woman seated on a seat or throne which clearly resembles the miniature chair pendants. In her hand she is holding a long item which looks like a staff. There is also a representation of an animal or a spirit above the woman's head. If the stone from Sanda really illustrates a *seiðr* séance, then it might refer to a moment when the seeress breathes in the spirits by yawning — as described in *Hrólfs saga kraka* (ch. 3) — which allows her to enter a state of trance.

[25] For more information about Ibn Fadhlān and his *Risāla*, see for example Arne (1941); Lund Warmind (1995); Słupecki (1998, 96; 2004c); Montgomery (2000); Duczko (2004, 137–54; 2006, 116–29); Lewicka-Rajewska (2004, 135–41); Ellis Davidson (1998, 163–67); Jesch (2005, 119–23).

The Door Motif in Vǫlsa þáttr *and* Risāla

In the story named *Vǫlsa þáttr*, preserved in *Óláfs saga Helga* as found in the fourteenth-century *Flateyjarbók* and mentioned above in the section on '*Seiðstafr*: The Concept of Creation, Spinning Fate, and Capturing Spirits', we encounter a description of a rather unusual ritual (Słupecki 2004a, 104–11; Price 2005b). The phallus (named *vingul* or *vǫlsi*) of an old, fat horse is first cut off and later wrapped with leeks, herbs, and a linen cloth by the mistress of the household. Perhaps the woman believes that thanks to such actions the *vǫlsi*, which she afterwards hides in a chest, will grow in strength and size. We might infer that the luck and prosperity of her relatives might improve concomitantly. On an autumn day, three cloaked wanderers (in fact King Óláfr and his retinue) approach the settlement and they are welcomed at the woman's house. At that time a special feast and a ritual are being prepared. During the ritual the horse's phallus is passed from one person to another. Each character speaks a verse about it. Finally, when the time comes for the King to speak, the disgusted Óláfr throws the *vǫlsi* on the floor, where it is snatched up by a female dog. The irritated woman then speaks the following words:

> *hefui mig um hiarra*
> *ok a hurdasa*
> *vita ef ek borgit fæ*
> *blætinu helga*. (*Vǫlsa þáttr* in Guðbrandur Vigfusson and Unger 1860–68, 335)
>
> [lift me over door hinges
> and over door-lintels
> to see if I can retrieve
> the holy sacrifice.] (trans. Price 2002, 168)

The process of lifting the woman above the door hinges, as described in the lines above, might be an attempt to look into the other worlds in order to retrieve the lost object.

A trace of similar ritual performances that can be related to looking into the other worlds above the door hinge or the doorframe can also be seen in another famous account, the *Risāla* (ch. 90) by Ibn Fadhlān:

> When Friday afternoon arrived, they brought the slave-girl to something they had made, which resembled a doorframe. She placed her feet on the palms of men and they raised her over this frame, she spoke some words and they lowered her again. A second time they raised her up and she did again what she had done; then they lowered her. They lifted her a third time and she did as she had done the two times before. After it they brought her a hen; she cut off the head, which she threw away, and then they took the hen and threw it into the ship. I asked the interpreter what she had done. He answered, 'The first time

> they raised her she said "Behold, I see my father and mother." The second time she said, "Behold, I see all my dead relations seated." The third time she said, "Behold, I see my master seated in Paradise, and Paradise is green and fair, and with him are men and servants. He is calling me, take me to him."' They passed along with her to the boat and she took off two bracelets which she had on and gave them to the old woman who was called Angel of Death, and who was to kill her. (trans. Duczko 2004, 140)

The complex ritual actions described by Ibn Fadhlān must have made a great impression on him. They were different from the things he had seen before (Gardeła 2007b) — unique and exotic. A number of scholars have discussed the problem of the 'doorframe' (or rather the thing that 'resembled a doorframe') mentioned in his account and whether it would be possible to find such a construction within medieval iconography or archaeological remains. It has also been discussed whether or not such a structure could be used as a platform in the practising of *seiðr*.[26] There have been several suggestions that an object similar to the 'doorframe' is represented on one of the parts of the Bayeux tapestry (Kiil 1960; Słupecki 1998, 95–96; Tomicki 2000, 462): according to *Gesta Herewardi*, a seeress mounted on a tower accompanied William during his attack on Hereward's island stronghold in eastern England, and thus it seemed logical to place her and the ritual construction on the tapestry (Strömbäck 1935, 116; Kiil 1960, 87–89; Słupecki 1998, 95–96; Price 2002, 163).

Price suggests that it is possible to link the 'doorframe' and *seiðr*, but that it would perhaps be more accurate to connect it to some other rituals of a prophetic character (2002, 168). Nevertheless, he notes several similarities between the ritual described in *Vǫlsa þáttr* and the *Risāla*. They both consist of the same elements: singing or speaking magical strophes, ritual scenery (the doors or the 'door hinges' and the 'doorframe'), and above all strong sexual overtones and the motif of looking into other worlds or into the world of the dead. Price says:

> All this bears an astonishingly exact resemblance to Ibn Fadhlān's account, with no possibility that the poem could have been influenced from that direction. We cannot say for sure what the 'door frame' was, but the combination of Ibn Fadhlān and *Völsa þáttr* does indicate that such a construction had a place in the Norse paraphernalia of vision experiences (and not least the poem also confirms that what Ibn Fadhlān saw really was a door, rather than this being merely choice of his imagery). (2002, 168)

[26] See Kiil (1960) and a critique of his interpretations by Tomicki (2000, 459–62). For a detailed discussion on the mysterious 'doorframe' described in Ibn Fadhlān's account, see Marit Monsen's paper (1969) on the portal symbolism and transcending symbolism. She also indicates that it is likely that the portal depicted on the Bayeux tapestry could be similar to the one described in *Risāla*.

In the next section I argue that all the facets of *seiðr*, as presented within the written accounts and the archaeological material, are closely related and form a coherent complex. I shall also present a new interpretation of the mysterious construction that 'resembled a doorframe' described by Ibn Fadhlān.

Unraveling the Seiðr *Complex*

> Mannahöfuð váru fyrir kljána, en þarmar ór mönnum fyrir viptu ok garn, sverð var fyrir skeið, en ör fyrir hræl. Þaer kváðu þá visur nökkurar:
>
> 1. Vítt er orpit
> fyrir valfalli
> rifs reiðský,
> rignir blóði.
> nú er fyrir geirum
> grár upp kominn
> vefr verþjóðar,
> er þær vinur fylla
> rauðum vepti
> Randvés bana.
>
> 2. Sjá er orpinn vefr
> ýta þörmum
> ok harðkléádr
> höfðum manna;
> eru dreyrrekin
> dörr at sköptum,
> járnvarðr yllir,
> en örum hrælaðr;
> Skulum slá sverðum
> sigrvef þenna.

(selected passages of *Darraðarljóð* in *Brennu Njáls saga* 157, Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 454–55)

> [Men's heads served as loom weights, and intestines from men as weft and warp, a sword as the beater, and an arrow as the pin beater. Then they spoke some verses:
>
> Far and wide
> with the fall of the dead
> a warp is set up:
> blood drains down.
> Now, with the spears,
> a grey woven fabric
> of warriors is formed
> which women friends
> of Randvér's killer [Óðinn]
> complete with a red weft.

The fabric is warped
with men's intestines
and firmly weighted
with men's heads;
blood-stained spears serve
as heddle rods,
the shed rod an iron-bound axe
and arrows are pin beaters.
With our swords we must beat
this fabric of victory.] (trans. Price 2002, 333–34)

Darraðarljóð, dated to the beginning of the tenth century (Price 2002, 322), constitutes a part of *Njáls saga* (ch. 157) and describes a scene in which twelve *valkyrjur* weave a fabric of battle and thus shape human fate according to their will.[27] We might assume that this act influenced the result of the battle with which it was associated (Enright 1990, 66; Price 2002, 332; Słupecki 2003, 243; Simek 2006, 56–57). At the very moment when the macabre tapestry is completed, the *valkyrjur* tear it to pieces and ride on horseback to the north and south.[28]

The motif of human heads serving as loom weights has parallels in one of the passages from *Jómsvíkinga saga* (ch. 7), where Ingebjörg Óttarsdóttir dreams of weaving a grey cloth (Price 2002, 384). After some time, the weights come loose and roll across the floor. One of them turns into the head of King Haraldr Gormsson. This magical event was thought to imply approaching battle and his rapid death. Both sources show that activities connected with spinning or weaving are closely connected with the idea of shaping and seeing the future. They are also a prelude to things to come — events often of a tragic character.

The evidence of *Darraðarljóð* and *Jómsvíkinga saga* constitutes additional support for the claim that domestic activities accompanied by certain artistic actions, words, and songs had a symbolic dimension.[29] In the light of the discussions

[27] Six names of these women are known from the verses of *Darraðarljód*: *Hildr*, *Hjǫrþrimul*, *Sanngriðr*, *Svipul*, *Guðr*, *Gǫndul*. The name *Gǫndul* may also be associated with *seiðr* practices (on the *Gǫndul* name, see Price 2002, 341). *Gǫndul*, as noted by Simek (2006, 115) etymologically belongs to ON *gandr*, a word for magic, or a magic wand (staff of sorcery). It is also one of the names of the goddess Freyja, who herself was also a *seiðr* practitioner (Näsström 1995, 83–85).

[28] Simek argued that 'the lay itself allows the supposition more of the weaving movement of the valkyries through the fighting warriors in the battle itself, rather than a weaving on a far-away loom' (2006, 57).

[29] It is worthwhile to mention here that even the grinding processes were attributed with magical characteristics. Grinding was connected — as we read in *Grottasǫngr* — with shaping/grinding the fate. The grinding mill Sampo discussed in the Finnish *Kalevala* may have had the same function.

presented above, it seems possible that the construction which Ibn Fadhlān described as resembling a door frame was in fact a warp-weighted or a two-beam loom.[30] According to *Risāla*, the female ritual specialist (referred to as the Angel of Death), was responsible for preparing new clothes for the dead Rus chieftain. This implies that the Rus did have a loom in their camp, and also that it was important that the clothes for the fallen chief were prepared by the person familiar with the art of magic. The use of looms in metaphors of a supernatural character is confirmed by both *Darraðarljóð* and *Jómsvikinga saga*, whereas the ritual connected with looking above the door hinges and lintels is mentioned in *Vǫlsa þáttr*. The significance of the loom as a part of ritual furniture may also be supported by some of the interpretations of the staffs of sorcery as metaphorical distaffs or keys (used for symbolic binding and locking spirits) which I discussed in detail in the section on '*Seiðstafr*: The Concept of Creation, Spinning Fate, and Capturing Spirits'. Moreover, the wooden chairs of *kubbstol* type could also have been used during domestic activities related to spinning or weaving. The presence of silver miniatures of these chairs (chair pendants) in rich female burials may not be purely coincidental, rather having a deeper, symbolic significance. I have suggested, on the basis of historical and ethnographic evidence, that they could bear resemblance to constructions such as the *háseti* or *seiðhjallr* which are described in sagas. It is, of course, hard to say whether the rituals described in *Vǫlsa þáttr* and *Risāla* can be seen strictly as *seiðr* rituals (and it is rather more likely that they were something else). However, it is possible to perceive them as reflexes of a shared semiotic universe, revolving around the most basic, core concepts familiar to all Indo-Europeans: in this case, the symbolism of spinning and weaving. Those concepts can be seen within many other forms of Norse, Slavic, and Baltic magical practices and are not exclusively employed in *seiðr*.

My arguments above have presented the following different readings:

1) *Seiðr* as a magical art, the basis of which was typically feminine domestic activities such as spinning, weaving, grinding, and women's songs.
2) The staff of sorcery as a distinctive attribute of the *vǫlva* but also a symbol of her power and association with a group of *seiðr* performers.

[30] In the light of this interpretation, other non-utilitarian applications of looms found in a famous Oseberg burial may also be considered. Is it possible that one of them may have been used during some form of ritual which resembled the scene of lifting a woman above a doorframe described in *Risāla*? The Oseberg loom and chair (see a photograph of this chair in Christensen 1992, 131) would then be the first elements of *seiðr* architecture from an archaeological context (Gardeła 2008c).

3) The staff of sorcery as, symbolically, a distaff, recalling the concept of spinning fate, and a symbol of feminine control and responsibility for or power over the household.
4) The staff of sorcery can also be associated with a roasting spit, and so the ideas of domestic fire, warmth, transformation, and the woman as a mistress of the household.
5) The staff of sorcery as a phallic object, associated with creation and bringing life. This dimension also brought associations of sexuality, eroticism, and perversion.
6) The staff of sorcery as a key used for opening and closing passageways to other worlds, connected with the concept of binding and catching spirits (*varðlok*(*k*)*ur*).
7) The staff of sorcery as symbolically a whip shank, connected with horses, fertility, and Sleipnir, Óðinn's stallion.
8) The staff of sorcery as a spear, connected with Óðinn and one of his main attributes, the spear Gungnir.
9) The staff of sorcery as a lamp, connected with wisdom, intellect, and power.
10) The staff of sorcery as a flute or other ritual musical instrument, associating the staff with concepts of trance and ecstasy, but also breathing in spirits and sending them to attack the chosen victim.
11) The concept of 'divine crookedness', whereby the unusual shape and 'basket handle' of the staffs from archaeological contexts symbolize the otherness of their bearers as well as their magical skills.
12) The wooden throne/seat of *kubbstol* type is used during spinning and weaving activities, and could have also been employed in *seiðr* practices; silver pendants found in the possible *vǫlur* graves resemble the *kubbstolar*, which indicates a possible connection of such seats with both *seiðr* and the concepts of spinning or weaving human fate.
13) The warp-weighted loom or two-beam loom as a symbolic 'doorframe' leading into another world, and the frame on which the fabric of human fate is woven.

Powerful Minds

Thanks to skilful mental manipulation and crafty theatrical practice adding sacred dimensions to mundane objects, the art of *seiðr* becomes an act of magic. It can be aimed at ensuring prosperity and well-being, at the same time securing a happy fate

for people involved in the process. This is the same aim common to all women who are responsible for taking care of the household and preparing food or clothes for their families. Although their activities do not necessarily have magical aspects inherent in them, they nevertheless form an everyday set of ritualized practices. People sing and tell stories, remember the past and make plans for the future while performing those everyday chores. *Seiðr* makes use of these concepts, enriches them with more profound, metaphorical meanings, redefines what is expected, and adds a new dimension to them. This allows the participants to experience a unique event, a mystery. It is a mystery the basics of which they understand. 'Magical' objects used in it bear close resemblance to those that the people of the Viking Age used on an everyday basis. Those objects create a network of mutually interrelated connections of a domestic, artistic, and symbolic nature. On the other hand, as argued above, *seiðr* practices and paraphernalia could also be used to inflict damage and physical or mental harm.

The search for Viking mentalities is a search for different readings or possibilities and not for objective truth. It is the search for details and emotions which were fragile, subtle, personal, and intimate. The unravelling of the *seiðr* complex is still far from complete — and probably never will be. Nevertheless, if the difficult quest does not bring us closer to understanding the Viking-Age peoples, then perhaps it will help us to strengthen our respect for the great and powerful minds of unique individuals buried within the old mounds.

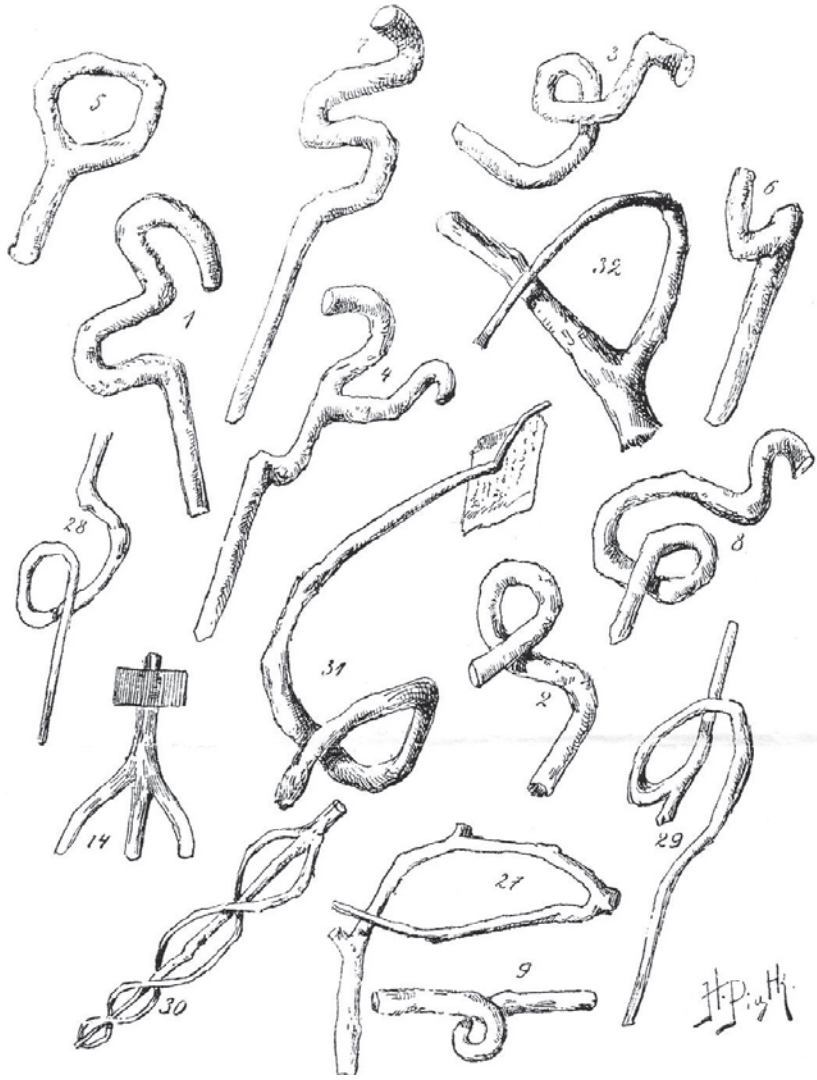
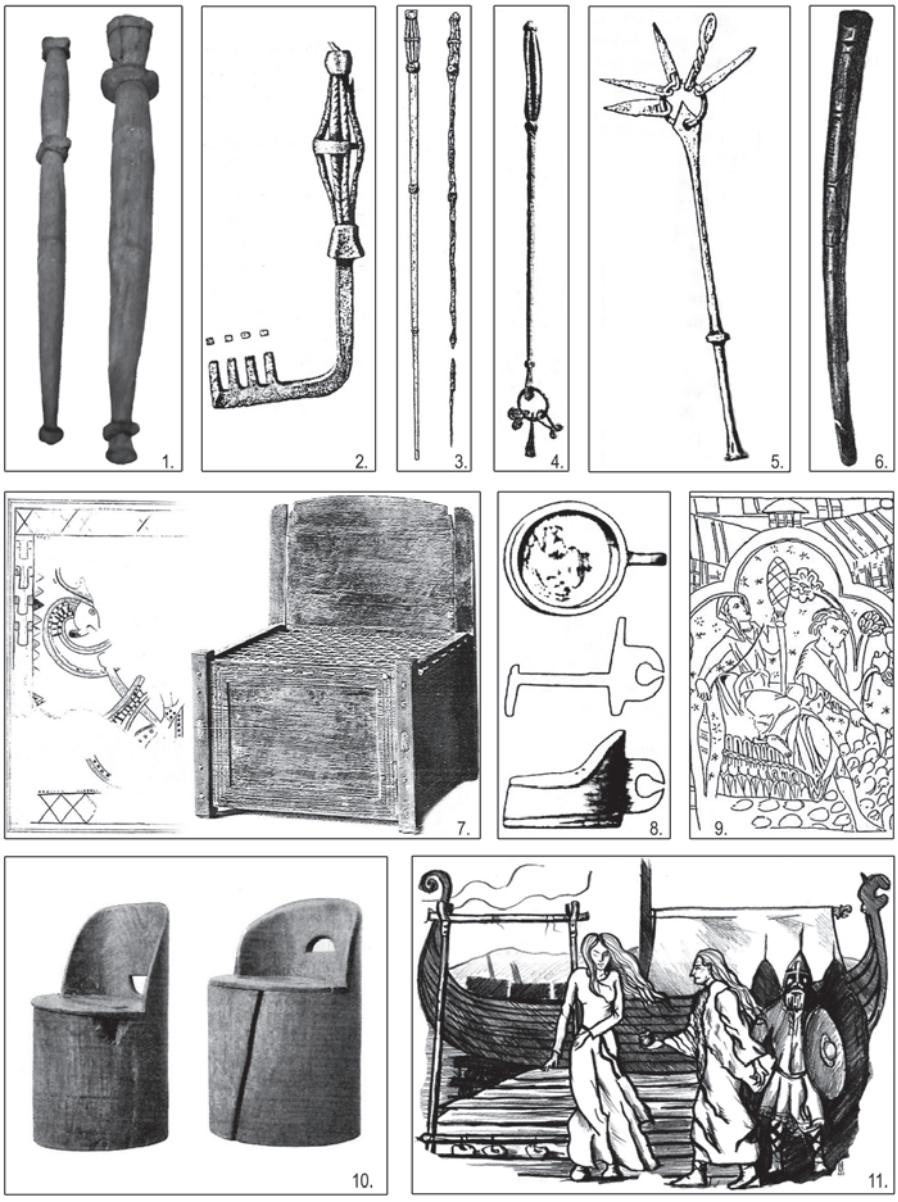


Figure 1. A selection of nineteenth-century *krivula/krywula/krzywula* staffs from Poland and Lithuania, which were often used as symbols of authority. Note how their crooked shape corresponds with the openwork 'handles' of the possible 'staffs of sorcery' from the Viking Age. (After Mierzyński 1885, figure 1.)


1.
2.
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4.
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10.
11.

Figure 2.
1. Two distaffs from the Oseberg burial. Note how clearly their form resembles the possible 'staffs of sorcery' (from Vikingskipshuset, Oslo). (Photo: Leszek Gardeła.)
2. An iron key from the Mästermyr (Gotland, Sweden) tool chest. Its openwork handle is the same as the constructions of some of the staffs. (After Price 2002, 188.)
3. An iron staff from Birka (Björkö, Uppland, Sweden) grave Bj. 834. (After Price 2002, 182.)
4. An iron staff from Gävle (Gästrikland, Sweden). (After Price 2002, 189.)
5. An iron staff from the Ladoga region (Przyładoże, Russia). (After Brandenburg 1895, 3, table 9.)
6. A wooden staff from Hemdrup (Jutland, Denmark). (After Price 2002, 201.)
7. A wooden chair from the Oseberg burial, which was most likely used for spinning or weaving. It could also be interpreted as a possible '*seiðr*-chair'. (After Christensen 1992, 131; © Kulturhistorisk museum, University of Oslo.)
8. A silver miniature chair-pendant from a '*vǫlva*-grave' at Fyrkat (Jutland, Denmark). (After Price 2002, 165.)
9. An iconography from Ål church (Hallingdal, Norway) representing a woman seated on a chair of the *kubbstol* type, holding a distaff and a spindle. (After Salin 1916, 68, fig. 10.)
10. Two wooden *kubbstol* chairs from Hälsingland, Sweden. (After Price 2002, 166.)
11. An artistic interpretation of the burial ceremony described by Ibn-Fadhlān. The mysterious 'door-frame' is seen here as a vertical loom. (Drawing: Marcin Górecki.)

Both figures were assembled by Karolina Michałowska. I wish to express my great thanks for her help and effort. I also wish to thank Marcin Górecki for preparing the illustration of the burial ceremony.

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