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Uppsala, 9th–15th August 2009

Volume 1

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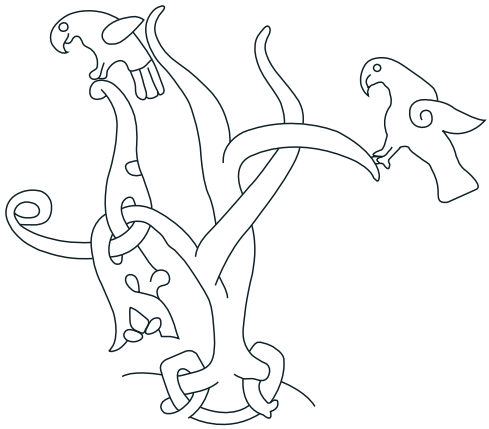

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Volume 1

Edited by

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The Good, the Bad and the Undead
New Thoughts on the Ambivalence of Old Norse Sorcery

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Introduction

This short paper presents, in a condensed form, a review of my most recent studies on the aspects of Old Norse sorcery and the initial results my PhD project which is currently undertaken at the *Department of Archaeology*, *University of Aberdeen*[1].

The ambivalence of Old Norse sorcery

Numerous Old Norse accounts such as sagas, skaldic poems and Eddic poetry but also medieval Norwegian chronicles (for example *Historia Norwegie*, *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium* and *Ágrip af Noregskonungasögum*) and rune-stones contain information on the enigmatic performers of a very special magical craft often referred to as *seiðr*. When taken collectively those sources imply that *seiðr* was a kind of operative magic which – among other things – enabled its practitioners to foresee the future, heal the sick, change weather conditions, reveal the hidden, shift into animal form or travel to other worlds in a state of trance. *Seiðr,* however, also had a darker side and could be employed to inflict physical or mental harm. At present, the darker aspect (or as Dag Strömbäck 1935; 2000 would see it: ”black *seiðr*”) of this practice lies at the core of my studies.

The undoubted existence of the two distinct facets of *seiðr*, which are so evident in the written accounts, has recently led me to reinterpreting a number of very atypical Scandinavian burials (Gardeła 2008b: 60; 2009a: 208–209; 2009b; 2009c). After having conducted a preliminary analysis of the available archaeological material I am inclined to believe that when given a closer look and viewed from an interdisciplinary perspective those graves may provide actual, material evidence for what some scholars understand as “social ambivalence of Old Norse sorcery” (Dillmann 2006: 457–586). Furthermore, they imply that there existed multiple forms of treating the deceased sorcerers and that the manner of burying the dead was dependant not only on the role which they played during their lives but also on a social perception of their actions and the very nature of their craft.

The archaeology of sorcerers

In 2002 Neil Price published his influential book entitled *The Viking Way. Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia* where he convincingly argued that it is possible to identify a number of Viking Age graves as belonging to ritual specialists involved in the practices of *seiðr*.

The graves discussed within his book (Price 2002: 127–161, 191–203) can be divided into a number of categories. Some of the alleged seeresses and sorcerers were buried in wagons, others in wooden chambers and a few of them were even interred on boats. Alongside several extremely rich graves, there are also less elaborate inhumation and cremation burials. In a number of cases the deceased were accompanied by animals such as horses or dogs. Although

[1] Due to the review-form of the present paper I will only reference the most vital literature and avoid debates of more general nature. History of research on Old Norse sorcery as well as the latest advancements in the studies of *seiðr* can be found in the works of Price (2002); Solli (2002); Heide (2006a); Dillmann (2006) and Gardeła (2008a; 2008b; 2009a; 2009b; 2009c).

all those graves are in many respects different from one another, there exist a number of interesting confluences. It is impossible to elaborate on them here, but it is significant to note that the main argument that makes it possible to view them as a special, coherent group of burials is the presence of iron "rods" in each one of them.

Those "rods", which in several cases were decorated with bronze knobs, are currently believed to be attributes of the ritual performers and labeled as *staffs of sorcery* (a term first introduced by Neil Price in 2002). As Price (2002: 175–180) argued, the staff was one of the main attributes of the Late Iron Age performers and there exist many sources which confirm that they were strongly associated with the practices of *seiðr*. Furthermore, an account from *Laxdœla saga* (ch. 76) suggests that the deceased seeresses were actually interred with their staffs. This piece of literary evidence strongly supports the archaeological interpretations of the graves with iron rods as belonging to *seiðr*-workers.

New perspectives on the *staffs of sorcery*

In my master's thesis (Gardeła 2008a) and a number of academic papers (2008b; 2009a) I aimed at expanding the earlier interpretations of the staffs and argued that the iron "rods" from the graves of potential ritual performers possessed an extremely rich symbolism. I suggested that they corresponded with the symbolic concepts that were related to both domestic and military tools and activities. The staffs, in my view, worked as multi-layered metaphors and could have been perceived by the contemporary societies as objects of truly otherworldly qualities.

In one of my most recent articles (Gardeła 2009a) I argued that it is possible to discuss the *staffs of sorcery* in the light of "the archaeology of personhood" – a theory recently developed in the works of Chris Fowler (2006) – and perceive them as persons in their own right. This approach has led me to a reconstruction of the complex processes of creating, using and abandoning/depositing/destroying/killing the staffs. The most remarkable result which this research has revealed is that some of the staffs known from the archaeological contexts actually "died" in the same way as the human sorcerers. This is particularly apparent in the case of the staff found in the grave Ka. 294–296 in Kaupang-Skiringssal (Vestfold, Norway), which was found lying under a large rock (Stylegar 2007: 96; Gardeła 2009b: 193–195). As we shall later see, there exist a number atypical burials in Scandinavia, where individuals are also literally crushed with large stones. In my opinion, such graves could have belonged to malevolent *seiðr* performers and form a very distinct "new" category of sorcerers burials.

Furthermore, it can be added that there exist very interesting parallels to the Scandinavian *staffs of sorcery* in the Slavic and Baltic archaeological and ethnographical material (Gardeła 2008b: 51–52; 2009a: 201). I believe that by viewing the *seiðr*-staffs in a cross-cultural context, we might also arrive at a better understanding of the nature of their owners.

The *Kriwe* priest and the concept of divine crookedness

The names *Krívis* in Lithuania and *Kriwe* in Prussia were sometimes attributed to a pagan high-priest. However, it has been argued that *Kriwe* was not really a name of a particular person, but rather a term used for defining a certain category of ritual specialists (Tomicki 2000: 472; Banaszkiewicz 2002: 39–43; Kowalik 2006: 395–397; for an earlier – hard to accept – interpretation rejecting the existence of *Kriwe*, see Rowell 1994: 128). The prefix *kriv-* seems to be related to Indo-European concepts of twisting, turning or crooking (Tomicki 2000: 471–472).

One of the most famous sources which discusses the role of *Kriwe* is the *Chronicon terrae Prussiae* written by Petrus de Dusburg in the 14th century (Rowell 1994: 38–39, 125–128; Kowalik 2006: 395–397). In his description the author mentions a pagan temple in

Romuva/Romowe where a priest named *Kriwe* resided. He was the guardian of the sacred fire, possessed divinatory skills and was greatly respected by the society. The most important tool of his trade was a crooked staff. Another account can be found in the work of Simon Grunau from the 16th century, where we read about *Kriwe-kriwaito*, referring to a pagan priest in the temple of Perkunas in Wilno/Vilnus (Tomicki 2000: 472).

In his paper, Tomicki (2000: 472) interestingly argued that the name *Kriwe* could be related to the particular features of his staff. In his view the original *Kriwe* staffs might have been very similar to the staffs which were used as symbols of power over village communities in Poland and Lithuania until the 20th century. In Poland such items were known as *krzywula* (*krzywuła*), *kluka*, *kula* and in Lithuania *krivule*, *krievas* or *krive* (Tomicki 2000: 427). Staffs of this kind were often made from a very unusually shaped and twisted branch or a root (Tomicki 2000: 427).

Tomicki (2000: 428) also mentions that references to sticks or clubs used as symbols of power could also be seen in the names of mythical or semi-historical characters such as Kij, Krak, Krok, Klukas and others (see also Banaszkiewicz 2002: 39–43).

He further argues that the pagan practice among the Baltic peoples could have also been referred to as *krzywanie* (Tomicki 2000). This term is closely related to everything that is unusual or supernatural, but also to looking inside a web or reaching into the other world.

All this implies that both the ritual practitioner *Kriwe*, his practice *krzywanie*, and the crooked staff *krzywula* were connected to the concepts of physical and metaphorical "crookedness". This "crookedness" was however not seen as a fault at all, but rather as a complex metaphor of supernatural qualities of the ritual performer as well as his actions and tools.

I strongly believe that the Viking Age *seiðr* performers and their *staffs of sorcery* recently identified in the archaeological material could also relate to concepts of "divine crookedness". As we have seen, this idea of "crookedness" seemed to be vital in the representations of tools for sorcery or authority among the Baltic peoples and also in the later Balto-Slavic folklore. It could also explain why most of the Viking Age iron staffs have a rather strange looking "expanded 'handle' construction". Apparently it is very similar to some of the 19th and 20th century staffs of the *krzywula*-type (Mierzyński 1885; Moszyński 1968: 897). Thus the physical and metaphorical "crookedness" of the *seiðr-staff* might actually prove to be an another way of expressing the "otherness" of the ritual specialist to whom it belonged.

The malevolent sorcerers and stones in graves

The Old Norse sources which contain information on the lives of *seiðr*-workers strongly suggest that there was a certain ambivalence in the perception of their actions. On one hand there existed greatly respected specialists whose main domain was conducting divinatory rituals and helping the contemporary societies in overcoming various problems related to their everyday lives. On the other hand, however, there were also a number of sorcerers who got involved in malevolent actions and committed acts of theft or murder. The saga accounts imply that there were specific methods of punishing the evil sorcerers. In most cases the punishment for practicing evil sorcery was stoning to death (Ström 1942: 102–115)[2]. From an archaeological perspective it is striking that the sagas provide rather precise details about the ways in which the evil sorcerers were interred. As the sources suggest, after the stoning procedure, the bodies of the deceased were also covered up with stones. It is also significant to note that the burial often occurred in a secluded place were people were least likely to pass by. Already during their lifetimes, the sorcerers were seen as rather ambiquous and marginal figures and this aspect of marginality seems to have also been apparent after their death.

[2] Other forms of punishment involved outlawry, drowning or burning.

In my latest research I have aimed at listing all the available Old Norse accounts which contain the motif of punishment by stoning and later comparing the evidence with a number of atypical burials from Late Iron Age Scandinavia (Gardeła 2009b; 2009c). So far, I have been able to identify seven Scandinavian graves in which the individuals (both women and men) were buried under large stones. Two such graves are known from Iceland[3], four from Gotland[4] and one from Gerdrup in Denmark. It is remarkable that the stones were placed directly on the bodies of the deceased, as if they were intended to "pin" them to their graves. What this meant is hard to interpret, but it is possible that the crushing with stones was done to avoid the dead from returning to the world of the living. However, such a strange ritual could have also had a number of other meanings (Gardeła 2009c). For example, according to several Old Norse accounts (*Hamðismál* st. 26, *Ragnarsdrápa, Skaldskaparmál* ch. 7*, Völsungasaga* ch. 44) stones seem to possess the capacity of breaking magic spells and piercing magically enhanced armor. If this was the case, perhaps the stones were placed in the graves to once and for all neutralise the magical skills of the deceased? Or maybe the stones prevented other people (other sorcerers?) from raising them from the dead, through the practice known as *útiseta*? Because the Viking mentalities were so diverse, we must always remain open to many interpretational possibilities.

The sorcerers from Gerdrup – a special case study

One of the most remarkable graves, which I consider as belonging to potentially malevolent sorcerers, was found in 1981 (Christensen 1982) in the village of Gerdrup (Zealand, Denmark) to the north from Roskilde. The burial mound was originally located on an beach ridge near an old tributary of the fjord.

The grave was more than a metre deep, filled with blocks of grass peat (Christensen 1997: 34) and it contained well preserved skeletal remains of two individuals – a man and a woman. They were both aligned NW. In the northern part of the grave against the man's head there was also a large stone (Christensen 1981: 21).

According to Christensen (1981: 21) the interred man was hanged, as suggested by twisted cervical vertebrae. Due to the peculiar position of his legs it is likely that his feet were bound[5] with a rope or some organic material (which unfortunately did not survive until the present day). He was buried lying on his back, aged around 35–40 years old and equipped only with a knife (16cm long) placed on the bottom part of his chest (Christensen 1981: 21–22). In Christensen's view the man was a *þrall* (a slave), but this might not necessarily be the only plausible interpretation (Gardeła 2009b; 2009c).

[3] Grave KT-25: 1 from Haugavað near Traðarholt (Árnesysla, South-West Iceland) and Grave KT-145: 2 from Vað (South-Múlasýsla, East Iceland) (Þóra Pétursdóttir 2007: 39, 54).

[4] All graves of this kind were found in Fröjel, Gotland: Grave 32/88, Grave 9/89, Grave 19/89 (Carlsson 1999) and an unnumbered grave discovered in 1998 (Carlsson 1998: 10–11).

[5] As Gade (1985: 161) observed, hanging in medieval Scandinavia was a penalty for treason, insolence, murder and offences of sexual nature like: adultery, seduction or abduction. It was also inflicted upon those who committed acts of theft, plundering or marauding (Gade 1985: 161). It is interesting to note, that in the Late Iron Age some individuals could have been hanged by the feet (Gade 1985: 173). Hanging by the feet would not cause the twisting of cervical vertebrae, but it is not impossible that – in case of the man from Gerdrup – the braking of the neck occurred after the hanging procedure, when the rope was cut. Perhaps the man fell from the tree and hit his head against the surface? Some scholars have (in my opinion very convincingly) suggested that in the memorable episode from *Hávamál* (st. 137) Óðinn was also hanging with his head down from the tree Yggdrasil (Fleck 1971: 142; Słupecki 2003: 120) and this motif of "ritual inversion" has many parallels around the world (Fleck 1971). It seems to me that the hanging of the man from Gerdrup had some very strong ritualistic overtones. On the possible relation between hanging and the initiations of *seiðmenn* see Solli 2002; 2008.

45cm to the east from the skeleton of the man there laid a skeleton of a woman. She had her head placed to the north and feet to the west. What is most remarkable, however, is that the woman was lying on her back and her body was crushed by two large boulders. One of the stones (30x45cm) was placed directly on her chest and the other one (20x30cm) was lying on her right leg (Christensen 1981: 21). Another boulder was placed to the east from the woman, several centimetres from her waistline. She was roughly 40 years old and equipped with a knife (14cm long). On her waistline the woman had a bone case containing small iron pins. Additionally she was given a roughly 40cm spear which was lying around 5–10cm from her right leg (Christensen 1981: 22).

Another ambiguous feature of the grave is that both the man and the woman seem to be "covering" their genitals. Furthermore, the poses in which they were interred appear to mirror each other: the man has his right hand placed on his right lap and the woman has her left hand placed on the pelvic girdle. The left hand of the man is under his pelvic girdle and the woman's right hand is under her pelvic girdle as well.

In this context we might recall the account of Ibn Fadlān who had a unique opportunity to observe a funeral of a Rus chieftain by the river Volga in the year 922. In his elaborate description of the burial ceremony he mentioned how the closest relative of the deceased – while being completely naked – approached the funeral pyre walking backwards and covering his anus[6]. It is quite possible that the covering of the anus was done to avoid the penetration by spirits[7].

Eldar Heide (2006b: 355–356) recently suggested that perhaps the reason why *seiðr* was seen as a perverse practice resulted from the fact that the practitioner was believed to become possessed and penetrated by spirits during the ceremony. Due to this act of metaphorical penetration a male *seiðr*-worker was immediately ascribed a feminine role. Furthermore, as Heide argues (2006: 356), while some spirits entered the body through the respiratory passages others – the more hostile ones – perhaps did so through the backside. We cannot be sure why the two individuals from Gerdrup had their hands placed under the pelvic girdle but perhaps this had something to do with the notions sketched above. In this context we may also recall the finds of Migration Period golden bracteates, such as the one from Allesø in Denmark, where a man is covering his genitals with his right hand (Duczko 2002: 176).

Christensen argued that it is likely that the deceased woman was considered as a sorceress and that the peculiar deposition of her body within the grave might reflect the acts of stoning that we know from the written accounts (1981: 27–28). I agree with Christensen but I am convinced that the spear placed by her right leg was in fact a special kind of *staff of sorcery* (Gardeła 2008b: 59–60; 2009b: 209). We know from the Old Norse written accounts that staffs often "transformed" into spears (Gardeła 2008b: 59) and that the spear Gungnir was an important attribute of the god Óðinn – an undoubted master of *seiðr*.

To conclude, I find it incredibly remarkable how closely this burial reminds the passage from *Eyrbyggja saga* (ch. 20) where there is a mention of a man named Oddr who was accused of cutting off a woman's arm and for that act sentenced to death by hanging. Immediately afterwards his mother, a sorceress named Katla, was stoned to death for helping Oddr to hide from his pursuers. The hanged man, the stoned woman and the location of the grave itself at a beach near to the fjord reflect the grim story of the death of Katla and her son Oddr very clearly. No other potential sorcerer's burial seems to parallel the written accounts as

[6] As we read in the account of Ibn Fadlān (translation after Montgomery 2000: 20) : „Then the deceased's next of kin approached and took hold of a piece of wood and set fire to it. He walked backwards, with the back of his neck to the ship, his face to the people, with the lighted piece of wood in one hand and the other hand on his anus, being completely naked".

[7] On this notion see for example: Price 2002: 360–361; Duczko 2004: 151–152; Heide 2006c: 168.

closely as that from Gerdrup. Of course we must be mindful that the events in *Eyrbyggja saga* take place in Iceland and not Denmark, but it is apparent that the same custom of treating the dead sorcerers was known in many parts of Late Iron Age Scandinavia.

My hypothesis, which shall be expanded in the nearest future, is that from among all the burials of the alleged Viking Age ritual performers, there could be distinguished two basic categories: graves with staffs and graves in which the individuals were crushed with stones. The first category could perhaps be ascribed to highly regarded seers and seeresses whereas the other category belonged to malevolent sorcerers who committed some violent acts. The existence of such distinct types of burials in the archaeological material reflects the ambivalent nature of Old Norse sorcery which is observable in the written accounts[8].

Conclusions and future research

The archaeological evidence for the ambivalence of Old Norse sorcery has until now never been discussed in the academic literature, but the problem of ambiquity of Viking Age magical practices was certainly observed in the earlier works of philologists and historians of religions. In my opinion by trying to build bridges between those disciplines it is possible to create a new and fascinating picture of the Viking Age realities.

In the further stages of my research the evidence from the Scandinavian world will be viewed in comparison with the worldviews and burial practices of the Slavs[9] as well as the Baltic and Finno-Ugric peoples.

[8] Of course this view is open to expansions and alterations. The past was not simply ”black and white” and in many respects the Viking mentalities were as complex as those of our own. It is quite probable that there may exist more types of sorcerers’ burials. In my view, female graves with spears or graves in which the spears were thrusted into the ground could perhaps also belong to potential ritual specialists. This problem, however, requires further research and cannot be discussed here.

[9] In the Slavic archaeology there exists a concept of the so-called ”vampire burials” (Wrzesiński 2008). In those graves, the individuals are often found with their heads chopped off or they are buried facing the ground. In some cases the bodies of the interred were also covered with stones. My preliminary hypothesis is, that perhaps some of the alleged ”vampire burials” (especially the ones with stones), actually belonged to Slavic sorcerers or pagan priests.

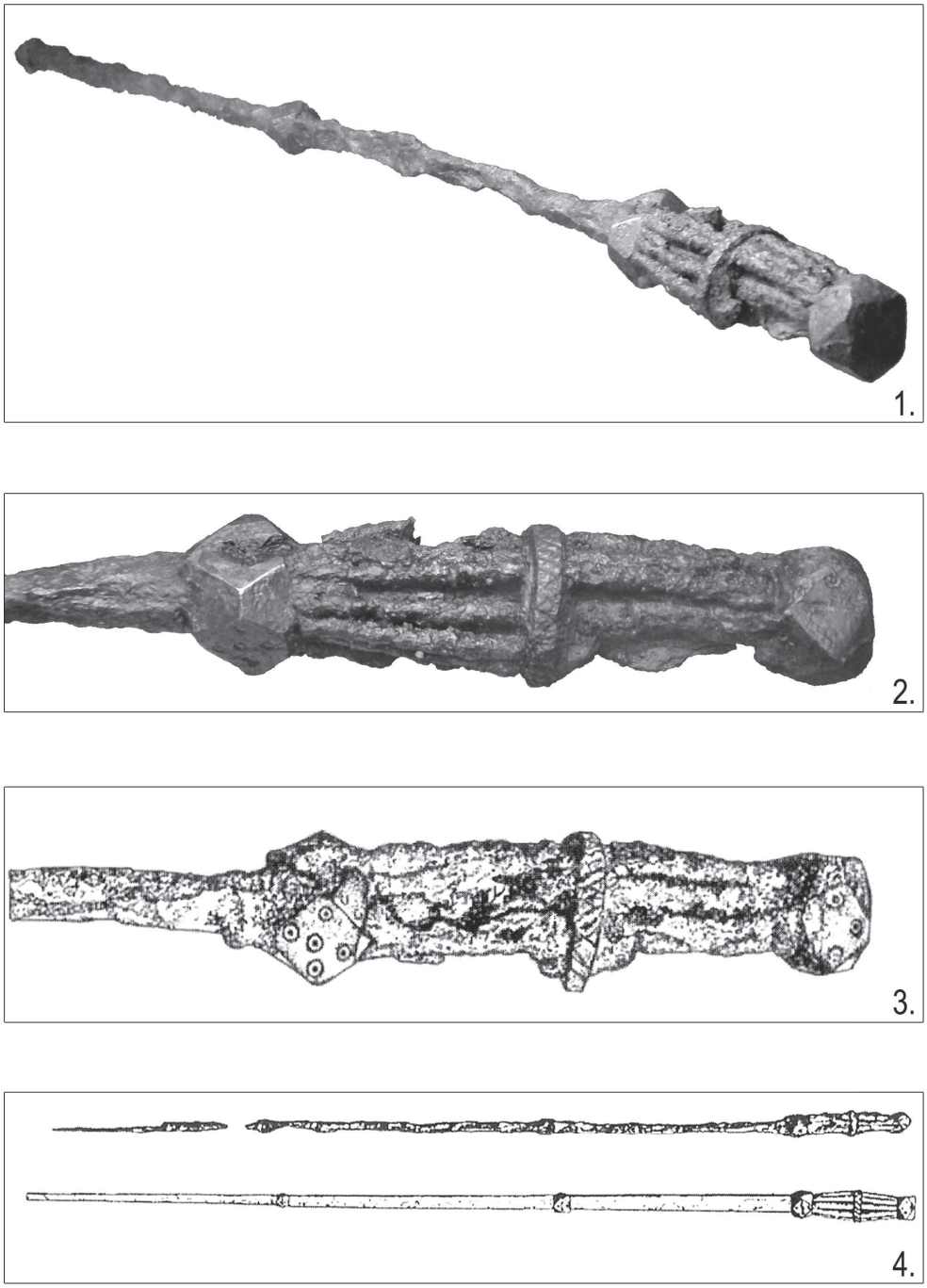

Figure 1. An iron staff of sorcery from grave Bj. 834 at Birka (Uppland, Sweden). Photographs © Leszek Gardeła, drawings after Price 2002: 182–183.

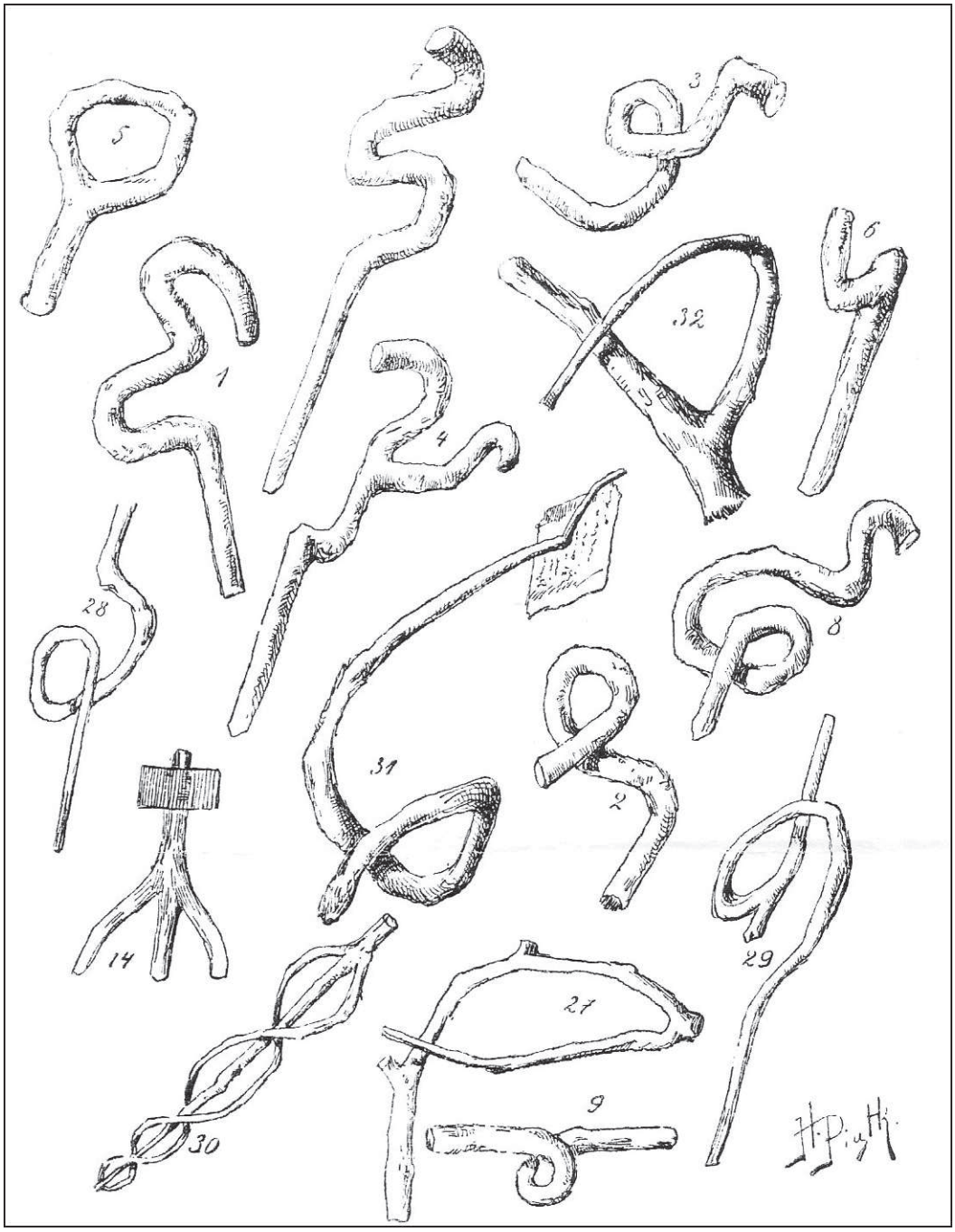

Figure 2. A selection of nineteenth-century staffs of the krzywula-type from Lithuania and Poland. After Mierzyński 1885: figure 1.

Figure 3. The remarkable Gerdrup grave (Zealand, Denmark). After Christensen 1997: 35.

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