



CHAPTER 4

THE IMMORTAL BROOCH

THE TRADITION OF GREAT ORNAMENTAL BOW BROOCHES IN MIGRATION AND MEROVINGIAN PERIOD NORWAY

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Although the transition between the Migration Period (ca. AD 400–550) and the following Merovingian Period (ca. AD 550–800) in Norway is characterized by a fundamental shift in material culture, one particular jewelry type survives the radical breach between the two periods: great ornamental bow brooches. These brooches belonged to the upper level of society, the Early Medieval aristocracy. The use of great ornamental brooches can be traced back to around AD 200, and it constituted a tradition that was kept alive until the Viking Age. Why this tradition survived for such a long time, and how it evolved during a period of several hundred years are themes addressed in this paper. The paper focuses mainly on the meaning and significance of the brooch tradition during the transition between the Migration and the Merovingian Periods in Norway, through the use of relief and disc-on-bow brooches.

In the middle of the 6th century several changes took place in society within the borders of present day Norway. There was a restructuring of settlements (Gjerpe 2017:194; Iversen 2013; Myhre 2002:186–191) and a decline in the number of graves, as well as in the inclusion of imported objects like glass and bronze vessels, and gold and silver objects among grave goods (Magnus & Myhre 1976:398–399; Røstad 2016:287, 292; Slomann 1969:42; Solberg 2000:186–188). Moreover, the pottery tradition ended abruptly (Fredriksen *et al.* 2014:1–2; Kristoffersen & Magnus 2010:82), iron technology underwent important changes (Larsen 2013; Stenvik 1997:253–259, 2015:90; Tveiten & Loftsgarden 2017:113), and the use of large scale trapping systems in the mountain and outfield areas came to an end (Bergstøl 2007:185–186, 195–200; Stene 2014:67). Weapons were radically modified and big boat-houses and hillforts were abandoned, all changes which may reflect alterations in the practice of war (Ystgaard 2014:262–264). New art styles emerged and old art styles went out of use (Hedeager 2011:61–62; Solberg 2000:183), and jewelry also went through important changes (Røstad 2016:381–384). Seen together, all these changes constitute a fundamental shift in the material culture representing the transition between the Migration Period (ca. AD 400–550) and the following Merovingian Period (ca. AD 550–800) in Norway.

However, a particular tradition surrounding the use of great ornamental bow brooches seems to have survived this radical shift between

Figure 25. Relief brooch from Tveitane in Vestfold (C11221). Photo: Eirik I. Johnsen. © Kulturhistorisk museum, Universitetet i Oslo.



these two archeological periods. The emergence of this brooch tradition can be traced back to the Roman Period around AD 200, and it constitutes a tradition that was kept alive until the Viking Age. In this paper I will discuss why this tradition did survive for such a long time, and explore how it evolved during a period of several hundred years. Embedded in this discussion is the question concerning the function of traditions (Hobsbawm 1983; Jones 2007), and what the cultural implications of the preservation of this particular tradition meant in the Roman Period and Early Medieval Scandinavia between ca. AD 200–1000. Part of the discussion also concerns the importance of heirlooms, and what characterizes the objects that are chosen as heirlooms in this tradition.

Various types of brooches belong to the category of great ornamental bow brooches, for instance disc-on-bow, relief and silversheet brooches, as well as so called ‘ornate’ (Danish ‘pryd’) and rosette fibulas. In the following I will however focus mainly on the meaning and significance of this tradition during the transition between the Migration and the Merovingian Periods in Norway, through the use of square-headed relief brooches (Figure 25) and disc-on-bow brooches (Figure 26).

CHANGES IN JEWELRY AND DRESS/COSTUME

One of the changes that took place during the transition between the Migration and the Merovingian Periods was a general replacement of jewelry types (Hines 1993:95; Røstad 2016:384) with the introduction of new types of glass beads and brooches (Figure 27) (Røstad 2016; Vinsrygg 1979:50–51).

Also connected to this change was the abandonment of decorations with animal ornamentation in Salin’s (1904) Style I, and the appearance of Style II ornamentation, a simpler form of surface-covering stamp designs as well as cloisonné decorations with garnets (Røstad 2016:49–50, 52–92; Solberg 2000:183). With the exception of small equal armed and disc-on-bow brooches, bow brooches were discarded in favor of simpler and often smaller brooches of other shapes: especially small round, so called conical brooches, but also s-formed and bird of prey brooches (Røstad 2016).

This change in feminine jewelry also represented a shift away from regional variation to the use of the same brooch types throughout Norway (Røstad 2016:273–296, 381). A related change that probably also

Figure 26. Disc-on-bow brooch from Haukenes in Nordland (Ts6362a). Photo: Adnan Icgagic, © Tromsø museum.



happened around the middle of the 6th century, was an alteration from a peplos type gown to either a sleeved tunic or a gown with shoulder straps (Blindheim 1947:78–89; Hines 1993:95; Røstad 2016:27, 348–349, 381–384; however cf. Kristoffersen 2006:20 who argues that gowns with shoulder straps were in use in Norway continuously from the Migration Period to the Viking Age). This change in dress is however harder to prove, since only very little textile evidence has survived (Vedeler *et al.* 2018). Nevertheless, it has been claimed that ‘innovation in dress often expresses more fundamental changes in society, and usually goes along with the actual or intended social advancement of new groups.’ (Schubert 1993:19–20). Seen in connection with the more general changes in society at this time, the radical changes in jewelry and costume may be interpreted as a result of a social transformation within society (Røstad 2016:348–349, 381–385).

a)



Figure 27. a–e: Brooches and beads from the early Merovingian period:

- a) conical brooch with animal decoration (C22744),
- b) bird-of-prey brooch (C58228/2),
- c) s-formed brooch (C10695),
- d) small equal-armed brooch (C52325) and
- e) glass beads (T7351).

Photo a), b), c) and d) Kirsten Helgeland,
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e) Ole Bjørn Pedersen. © NTNU Vitenskapsmuseet.

b)



c)



d)



e)



PRESERVATION OF A BROOCH TRADITION

There are thus few signs of continuity in the use of jewelry and dress during the transition between the Migration and Merovingian Periods. However, the impression of a rather severe breach of tradition is modified by the fact that relief brooches from the Migration Period and disc-on-bow brooches from the Merovingian Period have some common characteristics that indicate a connection and continuation of the practice surrounding these particular kinds of great ornamental brooches. Both types of brooches were usually quite large and richly ornamented (Figure 28), they were made of bronze or silver, but gilded so they looked like they were made of gold (Magnus 2001).

Both types were decorated in art styles associated with an elite or the aristocracy in the period they were manufactured: the relief style with animal ornamentation in so called Style I in the Migration Period, and Style II and III as well as cloisonné ornamentation with garnets in the Merovingian Period (Arrhenius 1985:197–198; Glørstad & Røstad 2015:182, 195; Hedeager 2005:233, 2011:61; Kristoffersen 2000b; Nielsen 1991:139). Moreover,

square headed relief brooches and disc-on-bow brooches have approximately the same shape.

Graves containing relief and disc-on-bow brooches represented the upper levels of society, the aristocracy, in Early Medieval society (Glørstad & Røstad 2015:195; Hines 1997a:295–301; Kristoffersen 2000b: 99–101, 105, 2015:398; Meyer 1935:87; Nylén & Schönback 1994:36–38). This is indicated by the grave contexts, the art styles applied on the brooches, and the way the brooches were manufactured using precious metals and advanced techniques like gilding, niello and cloisonné. This production required advanced technical knowledge and skills, and it is likely that these kinds of brooches were made by specialists working for local elites (Hjärthner-Holdar *et al.* 2002:168; Kristoffersen & Magnus 2015:132–134; Slomann 1969:33–34).

Both relief and disc-on-bow brooches are usually found in richly furnished women's graves. The women who owned and wore the brooches were buried in large, often monumental burial mounds (Glørstad & Røstad 2015:195; Kristoffersen 2015:398), and their graves usually represented the primary graves in the mounds. This indicates that the mounds were built as monuments for these

Figure 28. Relief brooch from Dalum in Nord-Trøndelag (C4816).
Photo: Ellen C. Holte, © Kulturhistorisk museum, Universitetet i Oslo.



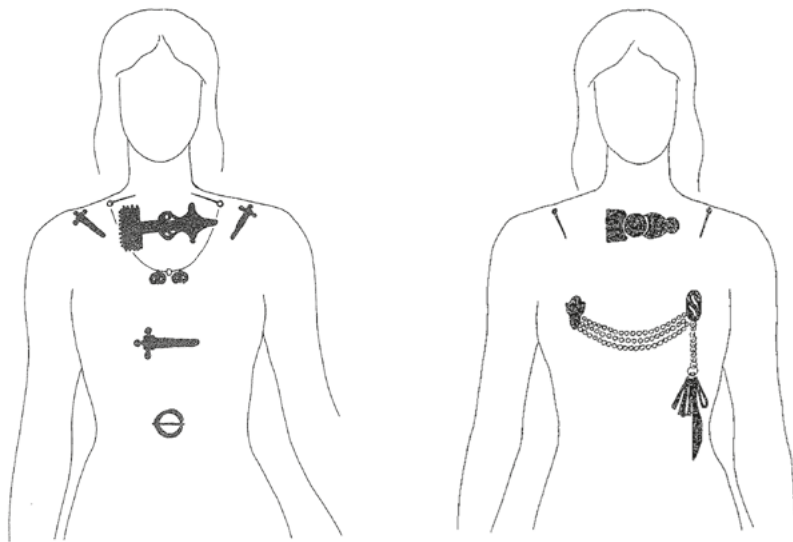


Figure 29. Position of relief brooch (L) and disc-on-bow brooch (R). Illustration after Jørgensen & Jørgensen 1997:fig.46g and a.

particular women, and that they held a certain position in society. In both periods the graves with great ornamental bow brooches often contained implements or tools used in textile production, like weaving-battens and spindle whorls as well as keys and containers like chests and caskets (Kristoffersen 2000b:105, 130–137, 2004, 2015:398; Glørstad & Røstad 2015:195). Imported glass and bronze vessels were part of the burial goods in many of the Migration Period graves that contained relief brooches (Kristoffersen 2000b). One grave with a disc-on-bow brooch from Åker in Hedmark contained a glass beaker of probable Anglo-Saxon import (Martens 1969:80; Røstad in prep). However, imported prestige goods of this sort were no longer common in the Merovingian Period, but many of the graves with disc-on-bow brooches contained

chests or caskets of wood or other kinds of organic materials (Glørstad & Røstad 2015:195). Moreover, some of the disc-on-bow brooches from the Merovingian Period have been found in Viking Age graves, and several of these late graves contained imported insular objects (Glørstad & Røstad 2015:206). Siv Kristoffersen (2000b:136–137, 2004, 2015:399–400) has argued that the particular combination of keys, weaving-battens and great ornamental brooches was role defining and symbolized a social role as ‘lady of the house’ (Norwegian ‘husfrue’).

Another common characteristic of square-headed relief brooches and disc-on-bow brooches was the way that they were worn. Both types were usually worn the same way: fastened across, horizontally high up on the chest in front of the neck (Figure 29).

Figure 30. Gold foil figure from Hov in Oppland. Photo: Kirsten Helgeland. © Kulturhistorisk museum, Universitetet i Oslo.



This also applies to silversheet fibulas/brooches from the late Roman and early Migration Periods, which are usually perceived as the direct predecessors of relief brooches (Kristoffersen 2015; Meyer 1935; Røstad 2016:147). The position of the brooches can be inferred by how the brooches were found in the graves (for instance Glørstad & Røstad 2015:figure 9 and Kristoffersen 2000b:appendiks F83–F86). Moreover, this manner of wearing disc-on-bow brooches and possibly also square-headed relief brooches was depicted on some contemporary gold foil figures (Figure 30).

Both types of brooches often show signs of wear and some of the brooches had been repaired before they ended up in the grave with their last owner (Arrhenius 1962:94; Gjessing 1934:139–140; Glørstad & Røstad

2015:181–182; Hougen 1937:56; Kristoffersen 2015:393; Petersen 1928:172; Røstad 2016:333–335). Again, this also applies to silversheet fibulas from the late Roman and early Migration Periods (Carlsen 2001:116). It has been argued that these brooches were *heirlooms* and had been inherited through several generations, probably within the same family. Furthermore, the heirloom interpretation is supported by the fact that the brooches are usually found with other types of jewelry, which are at least one generation younger than the brooches (Glørstad & Røstad 2015:191–192; Kristoffersen 2015:393; Røstad 2016:164, 334–335). The disc-on-bow brooches in particular seem to have been kept in circulation for a long period of time (Arrhenius 1962:94); in some cases there is a span of over 100 years among the jewelry in the

same grave (Glørstad & Røstad 2015:191–192). Several disc-on-bow brooches produced in the Merovingian Period have been found in Viking Age graves, and in some cases these brooches actually remained in use until the very end of the 10th century (Gjessing 1934:139–140; Glørstad & Røstad 2015:181–182, 191–192; Petersen 1928:172). The fact that one kept these brooches for such a long time implies that they had a very special meaning, and were regarded as having particular value in Early Medieval society.

RUNIC INSCRIPTIONS

Some of the great ornamental brooches also had runic inscriptions, and this is a feature that can be traced back to the Roman Period around AD 200 when runes are found on, among other things, rosette fibulas. There is continuity in the inscription practices from the Roman Period to throughout the Migration Period (Straume 2005:172–173). Like the relief and disc-on-bow brooches, the brooches with runic inscriptions from the Roman Period were found in richly furnished women's graves; graves that are seen as representing the elite (Przybyła

2015:358–359). The brooches with inscriptions from the Roman Period are mainly composite brooches richly decorated with stamped gilded sheets, whose manufacture is associated with an upper tier of society (Przybyła 2015:355–360). In Scandinavia runic inscriptions have been found on quite a restricted number of bow brooches: seven brooches from the Roman Period including five rosette fibulas (phases C1–C2/C3), five relief brooches from the Migration Period, and on only one disc-on-bow brooch from the Merovingian Period (Kristoffersen 2015:394; Przybyła 2015; Zimmermann 2015:405). In addition, a relief brooch from Børtnes in Norway⁷ has an imitation of Latin or Greek looking letters (Shetelig 1914:61; Straume 2005:172). There emerges a certain regional pattern in that the brooches from the Roman Period come from Denmark (five) and Scania in southwestern Sweden (one), while the brooches from the Migration Period come from Norway (four) and Gotland (one). The Merovingian disc-on-bow brooch also comes from Norway⁸.

7 C1416 and C3249.

8 T1010: Strand, Åfjord, Sør-Trøndelag.

Linguistically the brooch inscriptions from the Roman and the Migration Periods belong to the same tradition (Zimmermann 2015:405), while the inscription on the Merovingian brooch belongs to a somewhat later stage of Primitive Germanic and possibly from the transition between the Primitive Germanic and Old Norse languages (Olsen 1960:1–10, see also Zimmermann 2015:footnote 3). The inscriptions from the Roman Period usually contain male names, often in combination with ‘made by’ (Przybyła 2015:360). The Migration Period inscriptions are more varied, but usually also contain the verb ‘writan’ or ‘talgijan’, i.e. ‘write’ or ‘form’/‘block’ (Imer 2015:88), a personal name, a title/common noun, and the pronoun ‘ek’, i.e. ‘I’ (Straume 2005:174 with reference to Düwel 1998:491; Zimmermann 2015:413). It has been suggested that the male names represent the maker/craftsman of the brooch or the giver and commissioner of the brooch, in the last case with the implication that the brooch had been worn by the wife or daughter of the giver (Przybyła 2015:360–361). Lisbeth Imer (2015:87–89) argues that the inscriptions from the Roman Period are ‘master-inscriptions’, i.e. inscriptions made by the maker of the brooch. This is a

well-known Roman tradition, in which inscriptions on brooches by the craftsman as well as specific workshop stamps are common.

While the inscriptions on the Roman Period brooches thus possibly constitute production marks/brands made by the craftsman, only one of the Migration Period inscriptions has been interpreted in a similar way. This is a fragmentary and illegible inscription made in connection with repairs on the brooch from Tu in Rogaland (Imer 2015:117). The Migration Period brooch inscriptions are, as stated above, more varied than the earlier inscriptions, and have been interpreted in different ways. The inscription on the brooch from Eikeland in Rogaland⁹ has been explained as naming the giver, while another interpretation of the same inscription pays more attention to genealogies, and may as such be connected to the theme of heritage and perhaps inheritance that the brooches represented as heirlooms: ‘I, Wir, of the descendants of Wir, inscribe runes asni [?]’ (Knirk 2015:421). Moreover, it has been suggested that the inscriptions on three relief brooches

9 S9181g.

may have played a part in religious rites conducted by the women who wore them (Imer 2015:117–118; Magnus 2001:118). The inscription ‘ek erilar’ (Olsen 1937) on one of these brooches, the relief brooch from Bratsberg in Telemark¹⁰ (Figure 31), has been interpreted as an upper class title, transcribed: ‘I, the eril/earl’ (Knirk 2015:431) or a social position connected with the (warrior) elite (Imer 2015:63).

The inscription on the Merovingian disc-on-bow brooch differs from the rest not only in language, but also in ‘formula’. This inscription reads ‘siklisnAhli’, which has been transcribed as the three words ‘sigkli/sigli’, ‘nA’ and ‘hli/hlé’. The interpretation of the inscription is disputed, but there is a general agreement that the first word means ‘jewel’ (Norwegian: ‘smykke’, Old Norse and Old English: ‘sigle’) and that the last can be translated as ‘protection’ (Olsen 1960:1–10). Suggestions for the meaning of the word in the middle include ‘needs’ (in plural), ‘the dead’ or ‘dead person’ and ‘near’. Even if the exact meaning of the rune ‘nA’ remains uncertain, the meaning of the inscription seems clear

¹⁰ C26566.

in that it implies that the jewel functioned as a protection (Imer 2015:123). Magnus Olsen (1960:10) describes the content of the inscription as ‘isolated’. It not only differs from those found on earlier brooches, it also diverges from inscriptions on other types of Merovingian Period brooches (Imer 2007:table 4.12), as well as on Viking Age jewelry (Aannestad 2015b:122; Imer 2007:table 4.14 and 4.16; Liestøl 1982:44–47).

The inscriptions from the Roman Period are usually on the catch plates of the pins/needles, while on the Migration Period brooches the inscriptions are on the back of the head or foot plates and in one case in connection with the pin construction. On the disc-on-bow brooch from the Merovingian Period, the runes are on the back of the foot plate. Since most of the brooches from the Roman Period have high catch plates, the inscriptions may have been visible even when the brooches were worn or fastened to the clothing. Moreover, different types of ornamentation are frequently placed similarly on the catch plates of rosette fibulas (Przybyła 2015:figure 9; Straume 1988:167, figure 1–4h), which may also imply that the runes were perceived as a kind of ornament and/or something that added extra



Figure 31. Relief brooch with runic inscription on backside from Bratsberg in Telemark (C26566).
Photo: Eirik I. Johnsen. © Kulturhistorisk museum, Universitetet i Oslo.

value to the brooch (Imer 2015:89). The positioning of the inscriptions on the brooches from the Migration and Merovingian Periods on the other hand implies that they were not meant to be seen when the brooches were in use since they were then turned towards the wearer (Kristoffersen 2015:394; Magnus 1992:136; Straume 2005:176). However on these brooches also, ornamentation has been found in the same place as the runes, i.e. placed on the back of the plates or on the catch plate (Hougen 1937:56; Kristoffersen 2000b: 315–316, 2015:397–398; Straume 2005).

The social context of the runic inscriptions from the 3rd to the 8th centuries is associated with an upper tier of society, and runes in this period are usually understood as an elite phenomenon (Imer 2015:55–66; Knirk 2015: 431). In general, runes are rare during these centuries, and their restrictedness may have been the source not only of adding special value to the objects on which they were inscribed, but also of bestowing on the owner another kind of status than just material wealth (Imer 2015:62). Runic inscriptions probably had a magical significance in the Early Medieval Period (Andrén 1991:249–250; Axboe 1991:191; Hedeager 1999a:230; Magnus

1992:140–142), which added special value to the brooches in much the same way that the personal biography of each brooch and the direct connection with previous owners the brooch represented must have made them especially significant (Kristoffersen 2015:398). Seen in this light even the more prosaic master and/or giver/commissioner inscriptions may have been perceived as magical. The runes on the disc-on-bow brooch imply that the brooch functioned as an amulet, and this may actually mean that the brooch and the inscription worked together, and as such made the impact/effect even more powerful. If this was the case, the position of the runes turned towards the bearer may be explained as a wish for physical contact with the runes. Touching or direct contact with the body may have been seen as a means of imparting protection or perhaps strength to the bearer (Gilchrist 2008:151–152, 2013:179).

ANIMATED DECORATION

Both relief and disc-on-bow brooches were decorated with animal art styles. Animals played a central role in pre-Christian ideology, and according to Lotte Hedeager

(1999a, 2005, 2011:61–66) animal art represented coded cultural knowledge based in a pre-Christian cosmology. Kristoffersen (1995) has argued that objects adorned with animal decoration were perceived as animated with the animal's power and strength. By taking on the animal's powers the object, for instance a brooch, functioned as a means of protection for the wearer. The relief decoration applied on, among others, relief and disc-on-bow brooches might have added to this belief through the effect created by light and shadow reflecting on the shining surface of the brooches causing the animals to move with shifting light (Kristoffersen 2015:398). Moreover, the shape of several of the brooches resembles animals (Burstrom 2015:40; Magnus 1999a:figure 2), like flying dragons (Figure 32) or crawling lizards or snakes (Figure 33).

On disc-on-bow brooches the effect created by the glowing red garnets also contributed to bringing the brooches to life, as the garnets shone with an 'eternal light' (Arrhenius 1962:88–89). This innate light may have been a reason why garnets were regarded as containing protective and transferable powers, a belief that is documented in antique written sources (Arrhenius 1962:90–91).

GREAT ORNATE BROOCHES: THE CULT OF FREYJA AND ARISTOCRATIC MEMORIES

A connection between relief and disc-on-bow brooches and the pre-Christian Norse cult of the goddess Freyja has been established in earlier research (Arrhenius 1962; Kristoffersen 2000b:137–139). It has been argued that these types of brooches represent *Brisingamen*, Freyja's necklace which held a special position and is mentioned in several stories in Norse mythology, and that the women who wore and/or handled the brooches were priestesses worshipping Freyja and/or female ritual specialists (Arrhenius 1962:93–97; Hedeager 2015:143–144; Magnus 1995:39, 1999a:167, 170–171; 2001:292). *Brisingamen* means a glowing or flaming ornament worn at the neck, and this corresponds well to the relief and disc-on-bow brooches decorated with gleaming gold or 'burning' red garnets, and which were worn or fastened in front of the neck (Arrhenius 1962:92–93). Moreover, the runic inscription found on the above mentioned disc-on-bow brooch from Strand in Trøndelag, contains the rune 'hli'/'hlé', which not only translates as 'protection' as stated above, but as a protection that lends warmth

Figure 32. Relief brooch from Ilesjøen in Østfold (C15668). Photo: Kirsten Helgeland.
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Figure 33. Relief brooch from Dalum in Nord-Trøndelag (C4816). Photo: Kirsten Helgeland. © Kulturhistorisk museum, Universitetet i Oslo.



(Olsen 1960:6, however cf. Hines forthcoming). This agrees with the word 'brising' that can be translated as 'ember' or 'glowing fire' (a word still in use in modern Norwegian 'nynorsk'). Furthermore, it is also interesting that one of the goddess Freyja's nicknames means 'protector' (Steinsland 2005:162).

Freyja was the most important goddess in Scandinavia before Christianization, and the cult and worship of this goddess was associated with the uppermost strata of Norse society (Steinsland 2005:156–163). This agrees with the contexts of the relief and disc-on-bow brooches, which have been found in aristocratic graves. Moreover, Freyja means 'mistress' or 'lady of the house': a name that links her to the role implied through weaving-battens and keys found in combination with the great ornate brooches, mentioned above. Another of Freyja's nicknames can be translated 'linen' (Steinsland 2005:158), which implies a connection with weaving equipment like spindle whorls and weaving-battens. Furthermore, keys are also associated with this goddess (Kristoffersen 2000b:137–139). Freyja was the goddess of love and fertility, but she also had an important function on the uppermost level of society through being involved in the

initiation rites of the rulers/governing powers (Steinsland 2005:156–163). However, Freyja possessed another important quality/aspect in that she played a central part in rituals relating to the knowledge of the origin and lineages of the royal dynasties (Näsström 1995). On this basis it has been argued that Freyja functioned as an administrator or manager of collective memory for the ruling families, and that the women who inherited brooches such as disc-on-bow brooches, not only inherited the brooches, but that the brooches functioned as a mnemonic device transferring the family histories about heroes and heroines of the past, and the myths of the family origins from generation to generation (Glørstad & Røstad 2015).

To be able to prove that the family descended from the gods, i.e. was of divine origin was paramount in Norse society in order to legitimize the position and power of the family, since divine ancestry was part of the justification for the ruling families' power and position (Steinsland 2012:82, 85). Because of this the Early Medieval aristocracy claimed to descend from the gods. In *Håleygjatal* two of the most important lineages in Norway, the *Ynglingas* and *Ladejarlsætten* (the lineage/

family of the earl of Lade) are traced to the god Frey and the giantess/jotunn Gerd and to Odin and the giantess/jotunn Skadi respectively. Gold foil figures are said to depict (such) divine ancestors of important/central leading families. To add honor and glory to the family name, it was also vital to have heroes and heroines as ancestors (Steinsland 2005:155, 2012:82–87). The renowned family lineages and myths of origin were therefore the kinds of knowledge it was of the utmost importance to keep alive and pass on to the next generation in order to maintain and support the leading position of the family within Early Medieval society.

CHARISMATIC BROOCHES

Both in Norse written sources and in the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, it appears that objects regarded to be of divine origin, or which had belonged to a special person, for instance one of the heroes or heroines of the past, and were inherited, were not only ascribed particular value in Early Medieval society, but were also believed to have special properties and abilities (Burström 2015:28). Some objects of this kind carried personal names and seem

to have been perceived as individuals, like *Brísingamen*. Objects with personal names usually played a significant role in the connection between humans and gods, and they often functioned as personal attributes like *Brísingamen* and Thor's hammer *Mjolne*. These objects were not only perceived to possess certain qualities, they were attributed human agency and capabilities, in that they could make things or events change (Burström 2015:41). All these ascribed properties rendered such objects not only useful, but also awe inspiring and desirable.

Thus great ornamental brooches probably had a *charismatic* quality: the capacity to arouse awe and reverence (Immergut & Kosut 2014:273 with reference to Miyahara 1983:373). Their charisma was created by their individual biography and history as heirlooms (Gosden & Marshall 1999; Hedeager 2011:138; Kristoffersen 2015:398), by their association with heroic ancestors, and also by the stories or myths surrounding them as symbols or tokens of the goddess Freyja and her legendary jewel *Brísingamen*. Also the restrictedness and exclusiveness of these brooches both in their use and in their aristocratic context added value to them as charismatic

Figure 34. Relief brooch from Fonnås in Rendalen (C8154). Photo: Eirik I. Johnsen.
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objects. One obvious distinguishing characteristic of many of the brooches in question is their size: some of the relief brooches measure more than 20 cm and some of the disc-on-bow brooches are over 30 cm in length. Their size indicates that they were not used as everyday objects, but worn only on special occasions (Glørstad & Røstad 2015; Imer 2015:118; Magnus 1999a:164, 2001:292; Stenberg 2008:27). In accordance with this, it has been argued that disc-on-bow brooches were used in rituals concerning the divine origin and the lineages of the aristocratic families to which they belonged (Glørstad & Røstad 2015).

Above all the brooches' personal charisma may have been created by their innate quality as objects that were animated and *alive*: the effect created by shadow and light reflected on the gilded, shining surface of the brooches, causing the animals in the ornamentation to come alive (Kristoffersen 2015:398); the shape of the brooches, resembling flying eagles, beasts or dragons (Burström 2015:40; Magnus 1999a:figure 2); the flaming gold and the red garnets glowing like embers or coal (Arrhenius 1962); and last but not least the fact that many of the brooches outlived their owners as heirlooms

(Burström 2015:32; Glørstad & Røstad 2015). Thus through their materiality, decoration and contextual meaning, these brooches were perceived to be animated, and all these factors contributed to the overall charismatic effect and impact that these brooches had on their contemporaries (Garrow & Gosden 2012:42). Moreover, some brooches might have been perceived as individuals with a voice of their own, expressed in runic inscriptions like 'ek erilar' (above) or 'Merila made me' (relief brooch from Ethelhem, Gotland) (Burström 2015:41).

Even though relief and disc-on-bow brooches have been found mainly in graves, both types belong to a group of brooches that also were systematically disposed of in ways other than through burials, i.e. in hoards or so-called 'middle brooch depositions' (Burström 2015:36–40; cf. also Fallgren & Ljungkvist 2016; Hedeager 1991; Hines 1989; Kristoffersen 2015:392; Magnus 2001:282–283; Røstad 2016:391–392). The brooches may occur alone in these depositions, but are also associated with other types of jewelry or objects (Figure 34).

Several of the brooches found in hoards are, however, like their counterparts from burials, characterized by wear (Carlsen 2001:116; Fallgren & Ljungkvist 2016:697;



Røstad 2016:96; Vennersdorf *et al.* 2006:177). Nevertheless there are exceptions since at least one relief brooch was deposited in mint condition (Kristoffersen 2015:392). This suggests that their function previous to disposal was the same as the brooches that were found in graves, i.e. heirlooms and family treasures. The middle brooch depositions have been interpreted as sacrificial offerings (Hedeager 1991:205), but also as compensational burials or metaphorical graves (Burström 2015:37; Hines 1989:198–199, 1993:91). Furthermore, it has been suggested that as special kinds of ‘graves’, these depositions represented a social role connected to specific objects, such as the brooches. The middle brooch depositions have also been interpreted as the burial of particular objects with special inherent qualities: a way of disposing of potentially dangerous or uncontrollable items (Burström 2015:37). Exceptional situations may also have led to exceptional forms of offerings – offerings of otherwise inalienable objects (Hedeager 2011:170, 173; Weiner 1992). One such situation might have been the solar eclipse in 536–537 and the following disastrous events, which are documented in written and archaeological sources (Axboe 1999; Gräslund & Price 2012).

Thus to conclude, through depositional treatment and context, quality, ornamentation and genealogy these great ornamental brooches were distinguished and set apart from other types of jewelry and artefacts (Burström 2015:32–33), and treated as bearers of exceptional powers.

CHANGING TIMES – EVOLVING TRADITIONS

So far I have stressed the signs of permanence and continuation in the traditions surrounding the great ornamental brooches throughout the Migration and Merovingian Periods. However, some significant *changes* also took place during this several hundred year long tradition. Subtle alterations can be discerned over time in both the context and use, as well as in the production of the brooches. One example is the gradual change from smaller to larger brooches in the course of both the Migration and the following Merovingian Period. At the beginning of both of these periods the brooches started out as quite small, but increased in size towards the end of each period. The relief brooches reached their

greatest size in the latest phase of the Migration Period, *phase D2b* (Kristoffersen 2015:391; Meyer 1935:101–102), while the disc-on-bow brooches were at their absolute largest in the late 8th century or around AD 800, around the beginning of the Viking Age (Gjessing 1934:140–142; Glørstad & Røstad 2015:181, 186; Stenberg 2008:5).

Deposition patterns also varied during the two periods, moreover chronological and regional variations existed in relation to which deposition practices dominated, i.e. burials or hoards. Hoarding of relief brooches was for example more frequent in southern and eastern Scandinavia than in Norway in the first two phases of the Migration Period, while some brooches from the latest phase were deposited in hoards in Norway as well (Kristoffersen 2015:392; Røstad 2016:215–216). On the islands of Öland, Gotland and Bornholm in southeast Scandinavia, relief brooches were deposited systematically in houses centrally placed within forts, in a way that indicates an intentional ritual practice (Fallgren & Ljungkvist 2016:693–697). The disc-on-bow brooches seem to be restricted mainly to graves in Norway and mainland Sweden, although quite a few finds lack documentation of the find context. Two mainland Swedish

finds probably represented hoards: one find that contained both relief and disc-on-bow brooches from Hade in Gästrikland (Magnus 1999b), and a find of a disc-on-bow brooch in association with a snake figure from Ösby in Uppland (Lamm 1986). On the other hand, on Gotland disc-on-bow brooches were more occasionally deposited in hoards (Burstöm 2015:38; Stenberg 2008:5, 11), and a disc-on-bow brooch was also found in what appears to be a ritual deposition at Smørenge on Bornholm, although this deposition probably took place as late as the 10th century (Jørgensen 2009:347–349; Vennersdorf *et al.* 2006:180).

There are also noticeable fluctuations in the number of finds containing brooches throughout the period of use. While there is a steady increase in finds throughout the 5th and first half of the 6th centuries culminating in the last phase of the Migration Period (Røstad 2016:209, 220), a sharp decline in finds is evident from the beginning of the Merovingian Period. Moreover, during the transition between the two periods disc-on-bow brooches of so called ‘prototypes’ reveal an experimentation with form, shape and decorative style which seems to reflect a more open attitude towards how such

brooches should look, and perhaps also some uncertainty in relation to the direction in which great ornate brooches should evolve (Figure 35, see also Vedeler this volume, figure 1). Although it was short lived, this experimental phase might indeed represent an actual break in continuity in the brooch tradition.

Another evolving aspect of the brooch tradition is the use of only parts or fragments of brooches, for instance animal and human masks from terminal lobes or feet of relief brooches or parts of bows from disc-on-bow brooches. This is a phenomenon apparent both in the Migration and Merovingian Periods, but it is especially noticeable in certain Viking Age burials (Magnus 2009:236–237; Glørstad & Røstad 2015:192–193, 204–207) where it may be understood to be connected to the Viking Age praxis of reusing insular object parts as brooches (Glørstad & Røstad 2015:192–193, 204–207)¹¹.

Although the roots of the brooch tradition can be traced back to Roman Period brooches, such as rosette fibulas, the use/wear in Roman times differs from later

periods. While in the Migration and Merovingian Periods brooches were worn at the throat, the rosette fibulas of the Roman Period were fastened at the shoulder (Przybyła 2015:figure 20). As stated above, the art styles applied as decoration on the brooches also evolved, although the persistence in the use of animal styles may be taken as a sign of continuity. In addition to the changes in meaning of the runic inscriptions found on the brooches from the Roman, Migration and Merovingian Periods, another alteration concerning these inscriptions also took place. In the Roman and Migration Periods runic inscriptions are found almost exclusively on rosette fibulas and relief brooches respectively, while in the Merovingian Period and Viking Age they are also found on other brooch types, in addition to the disc-on-bow brooch (Imer 2007:220, table 4.14, 2015:62, table 3.7, 85, 123).

The tradition surrounding the great ornamental brooches was thus continually changing, but the shift may have happened gradually, and was perhaps not discernible to the people living at the time. According to Andrew Jones (2007:87) a key aspect of tradition is precisely this ‘[...] process of changing while staying

¹¹ Cf. Glørstad and Røstad 2015 for the meaning of the tradition and changes in meaning in the late Merovingian Period and early Viking Age.



Figure 35. 'Prototype' of disc-on-bow brooch from Gjukastein in Voss (B664). Photo: Svein Skare.
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the same'. Although there might actually have been a temporary breach of tradition reflected in, among other things, the 'experimental' phase during the transition between the two periods, this may have been disguised through the reinvention of the tradition. The tradition surrounding the use of great ornamental brooches was connected to the uppermost tier of Early Medieval society, the aristocracy, and the maintenance and continual reinvention of the tradition (Arwill-Nordbladh 2013:416; Hobsbawm 1983; Jones 2007) show that this tier survived the otherwise turbulent transition between the Migration and Merovingian Periods. However, this does not necessarily imply that the aristocracy in the two periods shared the same lineages and genealogies.

The presumably temporary break in tradition, reflected in the short lived 'experimental' phase during the transition between the two periods, indicates a need for 'novelty to dress up as antiquity' (Hobsbawm 1983:5), which may indeed imply the emergence and establishment of a new elite class. Nevertheless, the enduring tradition surrounding the use of these ornamental brooches must be seen in connection with the brooches' charismatic qualities, as well as the function that the women who owned them and the brooches themselves had in Early Medieval society – a function that was intrinsically linked to a religious and social institution relating to the goddess Freyja.

CONCLUSION: TRADITION AS 'THE ILLUSION OF PERMANENCE'

The tradition of the great ornamental brooches thus gives the illusion of continuation and permanence of a central institution in Early Medieval society, an institution that was directly related to the uppermost tier of society, the leading aristocratic families, and which functioned as a means for the elite to retain their position as rulers. During the transition between the Migration and Merovingian Periods, several changes occurred and society underwent major alterations. The great ornamental brooches represented an old time-authenticated tradition at this stage, and a possible

appropriation of these particular kinds of brooches by a new elite class would therefore have represented an appropriation of the past (confer Martin 2015:189). Old as well as new ruling families may have used this as a means of (re)establishing themselves in leading positions, by obtaining brooches and keeping the tradition alive. New ruling families may thus have established themselves and old ones may have disappeared, but the changes and replacements were veiled behind a façade of continuity – through the maintenance of an ancient and seemingly immortal and imperishable institution reflected in the tradition surrounding the great ornamental bow brooches.

