Own and be owned

Archaeological approaches to the concept of possession

PAG – Postdoctoral Archaeological Group
Alison Klevnäs & Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson (Eds)

## Contents

**Preface**
*Alison Klevnäs & Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson*

**Introduction: the nature of belongings**
*Alison Klevnäs*

**Things of quality: possessions and animated objects in the Scandinavian Viking Age**
*Nanouschka Myrberg Burström*

**The skin I live in. The materiality of body imagery**
*Fredrik Fahlander*

**To own and be owned: the warriors of Birka’s garrison**
*Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson*

**The propriety of decorative luxury possessions. Reflections on the occurrence of kalathiskos dancers and pyrrhic dancers in Roman visual culture**
*Julia Habetzeder*

**Hijacked by the Bronze Age discourse? A discussion of rock art and ownership**
*Per Nilsson*

**Capturing images: knowledge, ownership and the materiality of cave art**
*Magnus Ljunge*

**Give and take: grave goods and grave robbery in the early middle ages**
*Alison Klevnäs*

**Possession through deposition: the 'ownership' of coins in contemporary British coin-trees**
*Ceri Houlbrook*

**Possession, property or ownership?**
*Chris Gosden*

**About the authors**
Possession! This ambiguous word, capturing at the same time our material belongings, our dominion over them, and the inverted power they exercise over us. This multifaceted relation is exquisitely captured by J.R.R. Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings* in the unforgettable figure of the creature Gollum, enslaved by his desire for a beautiful and powerful ring with an agenda entirely of its own. Gradually the ring and his yearning for it deprive him of his human qualities. The process is sustained by the fact that it came wrongfully into his possession after he murdered its previous owner to get it. This he seems not to remember or care about, only anxious that it should remain in his possession (Tolkien 2005:52–57). “*Where iss it, where iss it: my Precious, my Precious? It’s ours, it is, and we wants it. The thieves, the thieves, the filthy little thieves. Where are they with my Precious?*” (Tolkien 2005:613).

By taking objects into possession, object meanings become an intrinsic part of the owner. Whether they are things of distinct appearance and quality (cf. Jones 2005) or everyday and mundane objects (cf. Lemonnier 2012), material possessions will possess their owners or caretakers in ways that are more subtle than the straightforward dominion executed over them. The practical care and the emotional engagement oscillate between domination and submission. From a practical point of view: maintenance, lubricants, safe-deposits, the quest for a parking space, continuous investments. From an emotional: sentimental values, vanity, satisfaction, dissatisfaction,
OWN AND BE OWNED

identification. Many (most?) objects we own or possess form part of our self-understanding whether we select them or they come into our life in other, sometimes haphazard, ways. In different ways, choosing, being presented with, and possessing objects does make those objects part of humans’ lives and of their ongoing recreation of their image of the self. Objects, in particular owned and possessed ones, are also objects of human self-imagination (cf. Belk et al. 1988), which in a sense is part of what enables them to possess their owners.

Possessing and owning are of course two different things, the latter term having deeper legal implications and describing a stronger bond created through a formal and societally recognized transaction (buying, inheriting, gift-giving, etc.). One may own something that is temporarily out of one’s possession but will still hold rights over it. One may possess something that is just for loan or stolen. One may attach strings to something in one’s possession and work hard with its daily care, but still never be recognized as its owner. Albeit a somewhat crude distinction to make, one could perhaps say that while owning is about rights, possession is about physical realities.

This distinction, needless to say, is not so clear-cut in reality. Both laws/ethical codes and popular morality normally express understanding for manifold unclear instances. Sometimes, a possessor will even be considered a rightful owner and ownership will be transferred. This is, however, something that has to be satisfactorily agreed upon by the parties or established by a third party, not something that possessors can decide themselves. What constitutes valid grounds for claiming rights over an object will vary between times and cultures. Different organizations of society, notions of value, and more, will of course affect the understanding of the concept of ownership itself and whether it is applicable or not.

While archaeological scholarship in general is careful to observe and consider differences between cultures, societies and categories, the concept of ‘ownership’ is often treated as self-explanatory, as in the use of a label such as ‘personal belongings’ in relation to grave-goods. The last years have seen a recurrent discussion about the nature of relations between humans and objects (e.g. Meskell 2004; Gosden 2005; Allerton 2007; Witmore 2007; Webmoor & Witmore 2008; Martindale 2009; Hicks 2010; Olsen 2010; Hodder 2012; Olsen et al. 2012) and between buried bodies and buried objects (e.g. Barrett 1991; Härke 1997; Parker Pearson 1999; Brück 2004;
King 2004). Even so, there remains much to consider when it comes to the nature of object ownership and possession, which are similar to, but not quite the same as, ‘power exertion’. Owning or possessing things is not only different in regards to the ways in which they may be used or altered, but also when it comes to discarding, dismembering and depositing. I suggest that the more precise nature of specific human-object ownership will affect how the process of ending the human-object relation is designed. Thus those final stages of the relation, as it meets the archaeologist, may provide understandings of the nature of ownership, possession and the power of and over things.

Three lines of thought underpin this paper: firstly, that objects are used in human self-imagination and to construct identity and personas, constituting the individual and her or his societal roles. Secondly, the multiple facets of those individuals and artefacts we investigate as archaeologists: identity is not singular and fixed, nor ‘renegotiated’ in a linear way, but consists at any given time of several, parallel, and converging identities which constantly relate to each other and negotiate precedence. Thirdly, that certain objects stand out and are perceived as a kind of persons themselves, which calls for their proper treatment in ‘death’ as well as in ‘life’. Different types of objects form part of different human roles, but the nature of the possession and ownership of those objects are an important part of that construct. Possibly, the nature of possession and ownership also plays an important part in the ways objects may be disposed of.

**Things of quality and anima**

Objects’ agencies and abilities to affect, i.e. their capacity to possess, largely depend on their material qualities and life histories, including the social networks they were involved in over time (see e.g. Joy 2009:540–543; Lund 2009:103–109; Burström 2014:3–4 for summaries of literature on this topic). Objects in different temporal and geographical contexts were also perceived of as being animated and as subjects, as demonstrated not least by ethnographical and social-anthropological studies as well as by early literature. Apparently, such conceptions get attached to certain objects, or categories of objects, partly due to similar reasons as their general agency depend on, but largely and more outspokenly relating to their particular and distinctive material qualities. This is another piece of understanding
that adds to the reasons why seemingly similar objects were used and disposed of in different ways. To put it simply: the nature of the object is an essential part of how it may be owned and possessed, and thus used and parted from (see e.g. Weiner 1992 for a general discussion on this), and the specific material qualities are essential parts of the object’s nature.

There are several things to indicate that perceptions like these, appreciating life histories and individual qualities, and literally or metaphorically perceiving objects as animated, were present also in a Viking-Age Scandinavian context, and I will here give a few examples to sustain this suggestion. The idea of animated objects may be reflected in the ornamentation of the many Viking-Age artefacts which are shaped like animals or human masks (Androshchuk 2014:202; cf. Pearce 2013). Another example is the type name ‘knarr’ (cf. OE cnearr), used for a category of Viking ships, which refers to the sound created by the moving ship due to its particular construction (Svenska Akademiens Ordbok, entry ‘knorr’). The idea of animated objects also results through three types of textual sources: the personal names of objects, referred to in the sagas and medieval poetry, the way some of these objects are described as behaving, and statements attributed to or inscribed on certain artefacts themselves.

In the Old Norse texts, mythological/sacred and historical/profane, personal names are given to certain types of objects in particular, like weapons (including armour), jewellery and ships, but also to seemingly more mundane artefacts like cauldrons (Zachrisson 1998:32; Lund 2009:95, 103–104). Cloaks may also receive individual names (Tsigaridas Glørstad 2010:200), their names referring to their owner or to the former owner when used as a gift. Judging from Old Norse mythology and poetry, there are specific ideas behind what could, and should, be named: natural but culturally apprehended features like rivers, lakes and hills; culturally defined spaces like dwelling places and regions; domesticated animals, in mythology particularly if they have special functions or capacities (like the nutritious pig Sæhrímnir and great animal enemies like the wolf Fenrir); and certain types of objects. These are objects which are involved in special relations with humans and gods, often functioning as personal attributes, in the manner of Odin’s spear Gungnir or Freyr’s ship Skíðblaðnir.

Named objects are objects with certain qualities that make them appear as animated or purposeful: the swiftness and precision of a
spear or a ship, which may seem to move without human intervention or resist human directions; the resistance to blows, heat and decay of a well-forged sword and of a precious-metal object, which may survive both hardships and humans; and the beautiful glow of metals and gems which may be found and refined, but not created, by humans. Thus they are closely entangled with but also transcend humans. Such objects appear to have not just qualities but capacities, which are not only useful and awe-inspiring but utterly desirable: to have them on one’s side could make all the difference in a society where skill and luck in battle, sea-faring and socio-economic transactions were fundamental to a good reputation and to survival.

Such objects may, due to their qualities and to their connotations with mythological counterparts, have been particularly useful in gift-giving alliances (Varenius 1992:32–34; Zachrisson 1998:31–32; Tsigaridas Glørstad 2010:199–204). They are also important to social relations like inheritance and other family bonds. Importantly, they are things of quality (cf. Gosden 2004:35-38), in a double sense. Their material qualities distinguish them as groups of artefacts, while the superb quality of individual specimens within those groups elevates those particular items to uniqueness and individuality by being named. There are many examples of the evaluating comments that are made about gifts in the medieval texts (e.g. ships being swift, magnificent, ‘good’, well-built) which underline the importance of quality and technical perfection. The quality of the ship (or any other gift) reflects its capacities as well as the technical skill and prestige of the artisan, but also the social position and assets of the owner as well as the item’s potential within gift-giving (Varenius 1992:33–34).

The characteristics of a Thing (as opposed to a mere Object) are captured by Gosden through a distinction between [things of] ‘quality’ and ‘quantifiable’ [objects] (Gosden 2004:37; cf. the distinction between alienable and inalienable possessions made in Weiner 1992). As opposed to objects, things of quality are perceived as embedded in social and sacred relations with humans and with the powers of the universe. Their formal qualities are important, since their value derives from their effect on the senses (Gosden 2004:36–37). Jones (2005:199) refers to Gosden’s ‘things of quality’ as being efficacious, their impact and value resulting from their formal qualities, the effect these have on humans’ senses, and how this is understood. I find the concept of Things of Quality useful and to the point in the context
of the present paper and will attempt to apply it in the Scandinavian Late Iron Age–Viking Age context. I would however like to diverge from it on one point. According to Gosden’s distinction ‘Things form assemblages and are used as groups, rather than as individualised objects’ (2004:37). The kind of high-quality, distinguished and efficacious objects dealt with here are arguably not only, or even mainly, consumed as a group, but rather they are individualized, and thus celebrated and used.

Apart from material and formal qualities, one further aspect may be regarded as a superb quality of an object: its history and former social relations. To have belonged to someone special, to derive from the gods or from an ancient hero, to be inherited or retrieved from a grave, adds significantly to an object’s quality and to its capacities. Sometimes this is just briefly referred to in order to point out what kind of power the item holds, like the ‘old’ or ‘ancient’ sword Hrunting in the Anglo-Saxon epos Beowulf (Beowulf, 1457), while sometimes there are entire adventures spun around the reception or retrieval of it (e.g. Saga af Hákoní herðibreið, Ch. 20). Androshchuk (2014) quotes several instances of Anglo-Saxon wills from the tenth and early eleventh centuries, where swords and other weaponry are bequeathed. In one of those (AD c. 1015, by Æthelstan Ætheling, son of king Æthelred II) eleven swords are listed, of which five are described by physical traits like ‘pitted hilt’ and similar, three are identified by such physical traits but also as having belonged to or being made by a named person, while one is identified as once belonging to King Offa (ruling AD 757–796) and needing no further specification than that. King Offa’s 250-year-old sword (whether it was indeed his sword is of course not possible to establish, but that is what was believed) was granted to Æthelstan’s brother, who was soon to become King of England himself, and it may thus be regarded a family heirloom of particular importance to royal power (cf. Tollerton 2011:194–195; Androshchuk 2014:195–196).

To be a rightful owner of and to treat a thing of quality correctly is fundamental to success. See, as an example, the Old Norse Kormáks Saga (Ch. 8–9), where Kormák ‘borrows’ the distinguished sword Skofnung from a reluctant neighbour, but not being its proper owner and ignoring how to use it in the proper way, he has no success in using it. Taking treasures or things of quality into possession may lend great honour, but is risky. The transaction must be correct, like
an inheritance or a gift, or problems will certainly arise. Kormákr’s borrowing of the sword is one example of this, as is the unlawful retrieval of a treasure in *Beowulf* which brings misery and havoc not only upon the anonymous retriever but over the whole community, and in the end causes the death of the eponymous hero (*Beowulf*, in particular 2222-2311, 2755-2800). The two examples are among many medieval ones that testify to the perception that things may actually resist humans and demand respectful treatment, even voicing loudly their dissatisfaction like the sword Skofnung (*Kormáks Saga* Ch. 9).

Although the examples reach us through poetry and literature they could only have made sense in their original context if those perceptions were recognized by writer/storyteller and audience. It should, however, be remembered that the literary texts which mention object names were in most cases written down in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and do not themselves prove the use of such names in earlier periods. This applies to the Old Norse literature as well as to other well-known examples such as the *Nibelungenlied*, *Chanson de Roland* and *Morte d’Arthur*, including an Irish early twelfth-century list of named weapons and their owners which is part of the heroic poem *Scéla Conchoboir maic Nessa* (cf. Pearce 2013:57). As far as I am aware, the slightly earlier Anglo-Saxon wills mentioned above do not provide names of objects, just descriptions, genealogies and provenances. Thus it is, for the early medieval period, of interest to look for the instances of objects actually inscribed with names, and what those may add to the understanding of the ‘animated objects’.

**Objects with names**

Several artefacts have been found over the years that are inscribed with personal names. These inscriptions are mainly limited to artefacts in enduring material such as stone and metal, although examples in bone and wood exist, and on portable objects mainly appearing on weaponry and jewellery. We cannot know if other types of artefacts, in more perishable materials, were sometimes inscribed as well, but it is at least clear that not all artefacts in enduring materials were. While most inscribed names refer to a deceased person or their relatives (like on the Viking-Age rune-stones), to gods, or to
the rune-carver, artisan or workshop (like the so-called ULFBERTH-swords are thought to do, the name inscribed on the sword blade; cf. e.g. Peirce & Oakeshott 2002:7–9), there are a few inscribed objects that seem to refer to themselves by ‘capacity names’, or by explaining their human relations. Examples of the former include spearheads (raunijaR, ‘the tester’ from Øvre Stabu in Norway, second century AD; gaois, ‘the screamer’ from Mos on Gotland in Eastern Scandinavia; third century AD, cf. Krause & Jankuhn 1966:75–76, 80–81), and brooches (ek unwodz, ‘me, the one without rage’ (the calm), from Gårdlösa, southern Scandinavia, AD c. 300, cf. Imer 2011:21). Many of these instances precede the Viking Age and the Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon literature, which makes it quite possible that they tell of similar conceptions regarding animated objects, but the two cannot be directly connected. There are, however, some cases of name inscriptions from the Vendel and Viking periods as well, which strengthen the possibilities of a similar idea behind them, though these inscriptions differ from the older ones in character as will be described below.

Objects referring to themselves include the many instances of ‘made me’ and ‘owned me’-inscriptions like mk mrla wrtaa, ‘Merila made me’ (Etelhem brooch, SHM 1261, fifth century, cf. Krause & Jankuhn 1966:39–40); aumuter : gehemik : aslikærnik, ‘Auðmundr made me, Ásleikr owns me’ (Korsoygarden sword, Norway, Viking Age); or auþi risti runaR auir - - byþnuyaR, ‘Auði cut the runes… Bøðny’ (interpreted as ‘on Bøðny’s brooch) (Tyrvalds brooch, SHM 13208, Viking Age, cf. Snaedal Brink 1986) (fig. 1). Similar, but slightly different, is the inscription on the Anglo-Saxon ‘Alfred Jewel’: +AELFRED MEC HEHT GEWYRCAN, ‘Alfred ordered me to be made’ (Keynes & Lapidge 1983:203–206) which points more overtly at a commissioner than at an artisan. These are statements declaring the object’s relation to and dependence on humans. The names stated are human personal names rather than object ‘capacity’ names. In these inscriptions, ownership and dependence is fundamental, but they also seem to express some of the previously existing ideas of object-human relations and object genealogy as a quality in itself.

Judging from Androshchuk’s new corpus of Viking swords (2014) no Viking swords found in Sweden carry names on the blade (although many decorative details and a few illegible inscriptions are to be found there; cf. Androshchuk 2014:177–181, Ch. XI Catalogue),
apart from the ULFBERTH and the similar INGELRI-inscriptions (e.g. INGELRIIMECIT, Lat. Ingelri me fecit, ‘Ingelri made me’) and a few other variations of those (cf. list in Peirce & Oakeshott 2002:8–9). Importantly, swords found in other areas, like one from Ballinderry in Ireland, may carry one name on the blade and another on the hilt (Peirce & Oakeshott 2002:63–65; Androshchuk 2014:179). While there is a well-established consensus that inscriptions on the blade normally refer to the smith or workshop, the hilt inscriptions could possibly refer to the jeweller, the owner or to the sword itself, but there is for now no way of settling this matter. It should however be underlined that writing in letters is not the only way an object could be recognized or named, e.g. ornamental details like shapes, metals and colours may be put to active use for such purposes (cf. Freya’s Brisingamen, ‘the flaming brooch’, further discussed below, or the iconography of Early Modern ship adornment, see Eriksson 2014).
Pearce argues in regard to Early Iron Age swords and spearheads that anthropomorphic ornamentation and punch-marks may have been used to convey the idea of weapon personhood and identity or of it being spirited (Pearce 2013:57–65).

From the present evidence of artefacts and text sources emerges the image of an existing concept in the medieval period (and perhaps earlier than that) of animated objects. In particular we may catch glimpses of unique, supra-human things of certain qualities, which may work as agents and who are of great importance in mythology (judging from sagas and poetry) as well as being of great consequence in real life (judging also from wills). In particular, the quality of having a genealogy and life history (belonging to someone, being old) appears as the most important and earliest documented expression of what sustained this agency. Still, it is important not to make any direct association between the state of being a Thing of Quality with a specific name in the texts, and real artefacts inscribed with names. Many deposited objects of the types that possibly had a name are not inscribed with any such thing, which underlines that the name and the writing of it are two separate issues. Find circumstances and artefacts themselves do not confirm a practice of giving things personal names, only the practices of depositing certain categories of objects, and conceptions of animated objects in general (owns me, made me).

The statements about being ‘owned’ or ‘made’ by someone could express continued attention being paid to artefact genealogies and provenance, possibly recreating in life some of the mythological understanding. But inscribed personal names cannot be ascertained to refer to the object on which they are found - if that were the case many more instances might also be expected. The ‘capacity names’ of the older period exemplified above could also be suitable for a warrior, god or ritual specialist (someone using, protecting, guiding or initiating the weapon) rather than for the artefact. Furthermore, the literary evidence for object names belongs in general to texts from or postdating the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and thus to a more full-blown poetic tradition. This, however, does not mean that artefacts from preceding periods could not be perceived of, and treated as, Things of Quality, with names or without. There are other ways of distinguishing artefacts than names, as exemplified by Æthelstan Ætheling’s eleven bequeathed swords. Quality, genealogy
and ornamentation are some of those; depositional treatment and context may be others.

**Brooches as personal signifiers, persons and personas**

The Scandinavian female brooch from the Late Iron Age to Viking Age is an artefact type to bring to the fore in this discussion. Brooches were used by women to fasten different components of the dress. One small brooch was worn by the neck to fasten the blouse or shirt worn closest to the body. This modest brooch was often made like a little cast round disc or ring, and similar types were used all over Scandinavia. Two larger brooches were worn on each side of the chest to fasten the brace skirt (fig. 2). These ‘side brooches’ come in particular and distinct shapes and are often of more advanced craftsmanship than the blouse clasp, e.g. cast cores being covered with ornamental shells of precious metal. The shape of side brooches is also interesting from aspects other than their primary function. They seem to vary in shape not only due to chronology but in particular out of *regional preferences*. For example, the women on the island Gotland use ‘animal head’ side brooches (cf. Carlsson 1983; Thunmark-Nylén 1998, Vol. II, Taf. 1–30) while most other Scandinavian or Scandinavized areas would use ‘oval’ (‘tortoise’) side brooches (cf. Jansson 1985). Also, the brooches can be used to buckle only the variation of dress or skirt used in the respective areas. While the individual types changed slightly during their long-lasting use in their respective regions, those distinct groups of brooches were maintained, so as to suggest some kind of ethnic relevance.

Instead, the middle brooches, which held together the cloak or outer garment (fig. 2), were cross-cultural from an ethnic/geographical point of view, and appear to have sprung more out of distinct *social* contexts. This seems likely because of the often superior quality and design of the middle brooches, although there are certainly variations of side brooches of distinguished craftsmanship as well. The social background of the middle brooches also becomes evident through the fact that the middle brooches do not adhere to the same geographical boundaries as do the side brooches, e.g. ‘disc-on-bow’ middle brooches are a prominent category on Gotland as well as in other Scandinavian areas (c.f. Thunmark-Nylén 1998, Vol. II, Taf.
Fig. 2. General illustration of female costume and brooch arrangement. The trefoil middle brooch (left) is used to clasp the outer cloak while the oval side brooches and the small round brooch (right) hold the brace skirt and blouse underneath. This example is based on the combination of brooches found in grave 968 at Birka, Sweden (SHM 34000 Bj968; cf. Arbman 1940, 1943). The reconstruction of the dress is from the same grave (cf. Geijer 1938; Hägg 1974). (Drawing by Mats Vänehem.)
31–52, Vol. III:1, 51–63; Stenberg 2007, 2008) (fig. 3), despite the fact that Gotlandic women simultaneously also used another particular type of middle brooch, ‘box’ brooches (c.f. Thunmark-Nylén 1998, Vol. II, Taf. 53–72) (fig. 1). The two types of brooches were thus used in the same area but are mutually exclusive in finds (Thunmark-Nylén 1998, Vol. III:1, 21).

Box brooches and disc-on-bow brooches belong to the same distinct craft tradition. They were produced with similar techniques and ornamental details like almandine inlays and gilding, sometimes even by the same craftperson, as demonstrated by Thunmark-Nylén (Thunmark-Nylén 1983:124–125). This underlines their parallel use which in its turn indicates that they were commissioned for different users or functions.

That the middle brooches in general are special social appurtenances also results from some of their shapes. For example, the ‘trefoil’ middle brooches (cf. Maixner 2005) (fig. 2), again used over most of
the Scandinavian cultural area, originated in details from Carolingian sword-belts which were adapted for use as brooches in Scandinavia and eventually produced in Scandinavia itself as brooches proper. These brooches are but one example of the material culture of the Continental elite of the pre-Viking and Viking ages that was used, reused and reproduced in the Scandinavian area. Of particular interest here is the clear connection between the brooch type and a certain (warrior elite) stratum of society. Furthermore, the social distinction of middle brooches is demonstrated by some of their material qualities like their occasionally being produced in mega-sizes, quite unfit for any normal use. This is mainly the case for disc-on-bow and box brooches but it highlights how all middle brooches were worn in a distinctive position, uncovered by other garments and suitable for display, where complex or slightly awkward shapes like pointed ends, high profiles or abnormal dimensions did not hinder their use but rather enhance it.

Dress components such as the brooches, we may assume, were in the past as today a means of conveying a particular image of the person and connected with how the individual is situated socially and culturally. They thus play parts in creating a public persona (cf. Devlin 2007:24–25, 36–37; Tsigaridas Glørstad 2010:171–172). The middle brooches were meant to be seen, holding a cloak, coat or similar, not attached to the brace skirt underneath. As a parallel one may look at male cloaks and associated penannular brooches from the same time and area. Those are discussed by Tsigaridas Glørstad (2010) to the effect that they, apart from the obvious practical uses, also formed an important part of the social role of the elite male (Tsigaridas Glørstad 2010:181–183, 2012:43–45). Archaeological finds demonstrate the connection between male cloaks, penannular brooches, and an idealized, aristocratic male role or persona (Tsigaridas Glørstad 2010:157, 205–206). A prestigious cloak of good fabric, in beautiful colours or set with gems, was also a valuable gift and created a strong and formal bond between the donor and the recipient (Tsigaridas Glørstad 2010:190–196, 199–204).

Finally, there is a difference in how side and middle brooches are deposited. The main contexts in which they are found archaeologically are in graves, where they were deposited as parts of the dress worn by the deceased person, or in separate depositions without human bodies. Such ‘bodiless’ depositions may consist of single brooches
or of several combined objects (hoards). The important difference between the two categories of brooches is that while both side and middle brooches may be included in graves, only middle brooches will appear in separate depositions (single or combined).

The prehistoric and medieval depositions of single or multiple objects are in themselves traces of a very particular way of disposing of things which has been variously interpreted by scholars as an act of renouncing or of hiding, of offering or of saving. The depositions demonstrate a great variety when looked upon as one category, but on closer inspection some recurrent patterns or themes may be distinguished through the similar composition of the included material, making the depositions appear as ‘fixed sets’ (Hårdh 1996; Spangen 2005; Lund 2006; Kilger 2008; Myrberg 2009a, b; Tsigaridas Glørstad 2010:166) and centring on different themes. One Viking-Age theme is characterized by the inclusion of a female middle brooch, accompanied by certain selected items from a certain range of artefacts. Other themes centre on male penannular brooches, Christian iconography, or are played out as amassed and mutilated pieces.

The middle-brooch depositions form one distinct category of ‘set’ or ‘treasure’ which has to some extent been observed (Thunmark-Nylén 1998, Vol. III:2, 456–458; Kilger 2008; Myrberg 2009a, b) and discussed in terms of female treasures and metaphorical graves where the different components are used to set a tableau. A general (conceptual) connection between women and ‘treasures’ during the Viking Age emerges from mythological poems, while these real-life thematically constructed depositions indicate a more precise reason than a general ‘savings’ for some ‘hoards’ to be buried. I have previously (Myrberg 2009a, b) suggested that such depositions may represent metaphorical graves for humans which for some reason cannot be buried with the full range of their belongings. I here wish to continue that line of thought by suggesting that those ‘graves’ are rather meant for the human’s persona or role, connected with a particular range of objects: Things of Quality, such as the brooches. The components of a deposition of this kind are always picked from a certain range of objects, but the precise composition may vary apart from the inclusion of a high-quality middle brooch, which thus appears as vital for the arrangement. Indeed, the depositional ‘grave’ could accordingly aim to bury the Thing itself, since it cannot for some reason be buried with the human who used it in life.
Lund (2009:104–105) points out that the same categories of objects as are personified and animated in the Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon texts are also found archaeologically in ritual depositions. She suggests that the depositions could actually be the proper way of handling objects with a complex social biography, if their history and their previous relations make them inalienable and thus not possible to destroy (Lund 2010:50–51, cf. Weiner 1992:210). Taking Things of Quality out of circulation by depositing them would thus be a way of neutralizing them, or dealing with special situations in which they play a role, which is something different than their being offerings. In analogy with Lund’s reasoning, we might investigate which particular things, not only categories, are found in depositions. Swords, ships, brooches, and perhaps also domesticated animals are the most prominent categories named in mythology as pointed out above. Although not inscribed with names, they may well have had them, but since this cannot be proved it will not lead us far to speculate in what those names could have been or implied. Instead we shall look at buried items like the middle brooches out from the concept of Things of Quality, singled out by their shape, quality, material and ornamentation, and consider whether this may add to our understanding of the roles they played.

An example to sustain the argument readily presents itself in the disc-on-bow brooches, characteristic not only for their high level of craftsmanship, but also by their sometimes super-human size and by their garnet or almandine decoration (fig. 3). It should be underlined that this type of middle brooch does not in general appear in combined depositions, but as single depositions, often in contexts like small cairns or stone rows. This holds true for the oversized ones in particular. They are put forward here not as being typical for the combined ‘set’ depositions, but as an opening to understand the functions of middle brooches. It should also be underlined again that middle brooches do get buried in human graves as well, but the phenomenon investigated here is the habit of depositing them separately since it demands different explanations and may indicate something that the graves do not about the function of middle brooches.

Arrhenius discusses the use of almandines in cloisonné technique decorations, a typical trait of the Continental jewellery of the Merovingian and Carolingian periods (roughly corresponding with
the Migration, Vendel and Viking periods in Scandinavia) (Arrhenius 1962). Specifically, she notes the gem’s red colour and glow, and the mythology connected with it, as major factors for its popularity (Arrhenius 1962:87–90). Arrhenius suggests, based on Viking-Age imagery such as a silver pendant from Aska in Eastern Sweden and several gold foil images, that the mythical Brisingamen (brisinga men, ‘the flaming (glowing) neck-jewel’) mentioned as belonging to the goddess Freya in Trymskvida, was a disc-on-bow brooch (Arrhenius 1962:91–93, 96). The deep red almandines would account for the epithet ‘flaming’, ‘glowing’. She also points out that such brooches are sometimes oversized and that some of them seem to have been used for a very long time, judging from several instances of mending. It is suggested that brooches of this type were in general not to be worn on a daily basis and that the oversized brooches may have been used by priestesses or idols or, rather, may have been worshipped in their own right as symbols of the goddess, in analogy with miniatures of e.g. Thor’s hammers (Arrhenius 1962:93–97).

The real disc-on-bow brooches are thus found archaeologically but also appear in artefact/visual renderings such as miniature gold foils and large picture stones. Such imagery has the capacity of capturing the mythological dimensions of the world while at the same time rendering and conveying worldly perceptions of the shape of the transcendental. As far as I am aware, no other types of female middle brooch were rendered visually in the same way as the disc-on-bow brooches, which underlines that they are slightly different and perhaps more ‘divine’ than other types. But allowing for the thought that the disc-on-bow brooches may be real-life renderings of a goddess’ jewel, or that the images of goddesses are designed to look like real-life women of a certain kind (of ancient noble family, a soothsayer, and so on), i.e. of a role more than an individual, we could try out the thought that other middle brooches also had similar connotations and functions.

From the above, we may conclude that the depositional context of the middle or cloak brooches single them out as particular items, not only because of their high level of craftsmanship or beauty, nor because of their inclusion in high-status graves, but because they are found independently as central elements of recurrent repertoires in hoards, where they seem to recreate parts of the dress of an
individual that was not buried with them. The repetitiveness of the combinations, the characteristic shapes, and the high value of the objects suggest that we might regard them in terms of insignia for ‘social roles’. The single depositions of over-sized brooches in particular further suggest that such items may have been connected with statues of gods or worshipped themselves as ritual paraphernalia or as personas embodying the divine.

As suggested by Arrhenius, the disc-on-bow brooches may have been associated with heat, love, kingship, and inextinguishable light emitted from the almandines they were decorated with. It could be noted that the shape and ornamentation of the brooch makes it look like a dragon, a mythological creature described in poetry as flying and spitting fire, and the almandines underline this likeness (fig. 3). An essential feature of those brooches would thus be their capacities, based in their formal and material qualities. The trefoil brooches, with their origin in the Continental warrior class, are easy to regard from a similar point of view, and similar arguments may be made for all different types of middle brooches. Even without discussing detailed ornamentation or iconography we may conclude that already their overall shape, size, colour and material build up an agency which is based in their qualities and perceived capacities.

To possess, dispossess, and be possessed

Gosden and Marshall (1999) suggest that apart from situations of exchange (such as gifts or inheritances), other ceremonial acts and performances may also generate object biographies and alter object meanings (Gosden and Marshall 1999:174). Aspects of those performances may possibly be inferred from the object itself and its depositional and societal contexts (Joy 2009:544). The difference in depositional practices between side brooches – only in graves – and middle brooches – in graves and in depositions – indicate that they were not only used differently but also that they were part of different personas. Following Gosden (2005:197), the ‘crucial context for an object is other objects of the same style’ and ‘[i]f one is interested in how objects shape people and their social relations, then periods in which objects change their forms and types markedly and rapidly should be of considerable interest’. The parallel types of middle brooches, and the Viking-Age introduction of shapes and ornamental
elements transferred from other areas and contexts, are thus part of how the brooches should be understood. The different shapes in simultaneous use must have fulfilled different purposes. While the side brooches belonged intimately to a living, high-status woman, the middle brooch forms part of the official, mythological and divine aspects of femininity and of womanhood, thus transcending her as an individual. Following from this, I suggest that the different strategies in handling the different categories of brooches reflect different ways the brooches belonged to the woman: while a side brooch could be individually owned, the middle brooch formed part of a persona and was thus a transient and independent part of her that she might want (or be obliged) to pass on or part from under certain circumstances.

This paper has argued that certain objects may be regarded as individuals based on three aspects: having a name (e.g. in mythology and poetry), being bestowed a voice of their own (e.g. ‘made me’ inscriptions), and having agency (e.g. altering events, taking actions in mythology, having material qualities that evoke notions of life). In particular the paper applies the concept of Things of Quality, inspired by Gosden (2004), within the Scandinavian, Late Iron Age/ Viking Age context as a means to create an interpretational framework for middle brooches and middle-brooch depositions. Here, the concept has been applied quite literally, looking at objects of a particular and distinctly high-quality character, often with far-reaching connections outside the single body or local society. In so doing, it diverges from the definitions originally made by Gosden (2004:37), where ‘things of quality’ should be embedded in local relations and help to produce ‘individuals’ (cf. Fowler 2004, Ch. 2, 3), thus a concept closely relating to Weiner’s ‘inalienable objects’. Their opposites are the ‘quantifiable objects’ which may ‘be disembedded from immediate sets of social relations and can operate in a broad social universe’ and for which ‘time, effort and amount of raw materials expended in production become crucial to value’ (Gosden 2004:37). While using Gosden’s definitions mainly situates the middle brooches within the sphere of Things of Quality, the Scandinavian Things of Quality here discussed generally include these latter aspects of the ‘quantifiable objects’.

The sources indicate that in the Scandinavian LIA-Viking Age context value, material and invested effort, even an object’s existence within an agreed standard of worth, may not only be compatible with its being a Thing, but actually form part of the qualities that
own and be owned

 qualify it as a Thing and contribute to its agency. Some items, like the trefoil brooches, were introduced during the Viking Age and passed from a martial and male context to a female high-status dress feature; others, like the disc-on-bow brooches, have shapes and decorative applications that were already ancient in the Viking Age and allude to the past and the divine. Their agency is partly built on the beauty of their golden and almandine glow, on their associations with Continental kingship and aristocracy, and on the expensive and exquisite craftsmanship that can only be commissioned by someone with a deep purse. It is not by coincidence that words like ‘treasure’ or ‘precious’ are used both in a practical and metaphorical way. This said, I agree with Jones (2005) that ‘it is the quality of things and their treatment in practice which inform us about how they are used to create differing kinds of persons. While both things and objects can be exchanged, ‘things of quality’ are distinguished by the fact that they are efficacious, and that their value and efficacy is bound up in their formal qualities and the effect these have on the senses and how this is understood in its local context’ (Jones 2005:199). Thus, the material qualities of the brooches, their depositional patterns, and their mythological connections form the basis for an understanding of them as part of human roles or personas, or as personas in their own right.

Things of Quality may be possessed or even owned, but it is characteristic that they at heart belong to a larger context than the single individual. They belong to a social play of gender roles, display and prestige, bond-binding and transcendental communication. Their beauty, value and special moments oblige us to treat them well and to pass them on. Things of Quality are admirable and desirable because of their capacities: force-resistant, swift, magical, beautiful, valuable. Yet they tend to remain just out of our reach or, if we should get hold of them, they cannot be trusted to stay and obey. Unrequited desire creates the feeling of unquiet and restless want that we call ‘to be possessed’ and therefore they ultimately may own us as much as we may ever own them. Since only humans have feelings, our feelings for Things are not likely to ever be returned and entirely satisfied, no more than was Gollum’s yearning for his Precious ring.
Acknowledgements

The research for this paper was conducted within the post-doc project *Hoarding the Dead. Hoards as biographies from the Scandinavian late Iron Age*, sponsored by Stockholm University. I wish to thank Anders Andrén, Mats Burström and Anders Carlsson for valuable comments on a first draft of this paper. I also wish to thank Elisabeth Arwill-Nordbladh and other attendants for constructive comments when parts of the argument were first presented at the PAG ‘Gender’ workshop in 2010, and Chris Gosden and the other participants for their comments during the PAG ‘Possessions’ workshop in 2012.

References


SHM+no = inventory number in Statens Historiska Museum, Stockholm


