

## Transforming Images: Exploring Powerful Children

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### Abstract

The perception of children as vulnerable, instead of powerful, beings is the opposite of what is found to be the case in the historic evidence. The paper investigates the relationship between ideology and material culture by examining some attitudes towards children found in Scandinavian traditions, which have been connected with archaeological finds. This concerns the area of the Norse Sagas and the comparative studies of religion, folk medicine and folklore in relationship to the tradition of burial alive in the Nordic regions. In relation to children's access to origin of a cosmological order it looks into the Norwegian Odal law of the firstborn and pre-Christian practices concerning the treatment of children.

*Keywords:* ICONOGRAPHY, COSMOLOGY, BURIAL, SACRIFICE, INFANTICIDE, DEAD-CHILD BEING

### Introduction

Among the Bangwa of West Africa children are designated as *witches* by the use of a powerful metaphor (Bowie 2002, 227–30). Strictly speaking, according to the dictionary, a metaphor is the application of a name or description to something to which it is not literally applicable (*cf.* Thompson 1992). It is a figure of speech that goes further than a simile, either by saying that something is other than it could normally be called, or by suggesting that something appears, sounds, or behaves like something else (*cf.* Elliott 2001). By perceiving nature as dualistic, and referring humans to the dichotomy between body and spirit (*cf.* Wilkins 1924), with the identification or fusion of both (*cf.* New Encyclopaedia Britannica 1974), there is a transformation of the spiritual into a tangible expression of the physical, or the physicality of material culture embodied in what is spiritual, personified and symbolically given (*cf.* Wilkins 1924). The structural

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character of such metaphoric thinking demonstrates there is more to metaphors than the creation of powerful images from the phenomena of speech, sound, appearance and behaviour. There is also the matter of transforming structures in systems that are related to reality as compared to ideology. How can these transformative structures be explored as such in archaeology, and is this made possible in material culture by looking at the relationships that exist between children, power and metaphorical expressions?

As a method of archaeological interpretation the study of metaphorical thinking is closely linked to the study of iconography and allegory. This is a methodological approach that is well applied in art history. However, by perceiving material culture as meaningfully constituted, archaeology has rather preferred to talk about symbols (*cf.* Hodder 1982; Hodder 2005, 254–5). Lotte Hedeager (2000) has highlighted the existence of a close connection between the creation of myths and the creation of symbols/iconography in the social and political development of a warrior-elite ideology in the Nordic regions during the Migration Age and onwards. The depiction of a Nordic symbolic universe and a shared identity among the elite through the language of animal style, myths and iconography was complementary (Hedeager 2000). By the transformation of the physical into the spiritual, or *visa versa*, I will claim the structural character of metaphorical thinking should be applied as an analytical tool when examining archaeological material from the world of children (Lillehammer 2008a). This approach acknowledges humans as the creators of metaphorical expressions that are linked with iconography/symbols and myth, and considers a variety of those domains, which belong naturally to children and seem divided, to interrelate or join together reality or life worlds (Johansen 1996).

By representing a transformative process of contradiction the ambiguous relationship between life and death could influence conclusions drawn from the contextual analyses of burial evidence (Lillehammer 1996). Although many adults will presumably have influenced the characteristics of dead children, the information that can be gained from these remains is still important. If we define the term *power* to mean vigour and energy of body and spirit in being strong, violent or forceful with regard to influence, control and to command or dominate others or the environment (*cf.* Elliott 1992), then a powerful child is one who has much power and influence. Therefore, in order to counterbalance the widespread perception that children were vulnerable or helpless beings in need of special protection, in theory and practice we have to search the material remains for evidence of powerful children by changing the focal point of inference. The remains of flint objects in the graves of ancient children, for example, could be seen as *knives* rather than *amulets*. When considering the potential of children as active agents and the creators of future society (*cf.* Baxter 2005; Lillehammer 2000), it is necessary to examine the relationship between ideology and material culture in past societies.

### Powerful Children: Access to Origins

The study of metaphorical expressions could potentially open avenues which would enable the exploration of evidence related to the legitimisation and empowerment

of children. The child witches of the Bangwa illustrate the problems involved with perceiving children as vulnerable rather than powerful beings. These child witches belong to a patrilineal society, but one in which sons do not know for certain who will inherit rights and powers after their father's death. In these matters the father does not trust his sons, and the successor is not known until after the father's death. Half brothers of the same father, but with different mothers, are among those feared the most as witches, because of the insecurity of succession. Social tensions or competition for access to food resources seem to fall to them in the compounds. Children of the same mother and kin related through the mother form a solidarity group, and rarely if ever accuse one another of witchcraft (cf. Bowie 2002, 227).

Children are seen as possible Bangwa witches on the inside of the family house. As sons do not know who will inherit from the father, these half brothers are placed on the far side of the axis of power in relation to the access to family origin. Mary Helms (1998, 15) has highlighted the importance of the recognition of origins in regulating and encouraging order in time and space, between here-and-now and there-and-then, and between the family house and the structure of cosmos. Scandinavian historical and folklore records provide information that could be used as models for examining the perceptions of children both on the inside and outside of a house or home; i.e. a distinctive entity defining, protecting and sustaining its members, both as a group and in the aggregate, and a link to the cosmological outside and the expression of Others, including affines and ancestors (Helms 1998, 19).

Archaeological finds from Scandinavia and northern Germany have been linked with traditional myths and folklore. Skeletal remains of children have been discovered at ordinary as well as unusual places both within and outside houses in settlements, or in burials, ditches, wells, hollows and bogs (cf. Bantelman 1955, 47, 97; Hauge 1965; Lillehammer 2008b; Lindquist 1981; Nørlund 1948, 264). A scenic depiction on a carved stone from Gotland, Sweden, has been interpreted as representing the Norse myth of child sacrifice (Lindquist 1941, plates 139, 140; 1942, 24, plate 311) (Figure 1). Due to the dispersed character of these finds the archaeological evidence could refer to realms representing a diversity of cosmological orders. In order to search for powerful children on the inside or outside of a house two studies will now be carried out.

### Children on the Inside of a House

Deposits of axes in late antique child burials of the fifth century AD in northern Gaul have brought forward interpretations which suggest that weaponry may have had different functions and a variety of symbolic meanings (Theuws and Alkemade 2000). An important question to these relationships is why weapons are deposited in children's burials, and reasons to explain this situation have been sought. The small size of these axes, however, would tend to suggest that the use of these objects as weapons is unlikely to have been possible.

As such, the inclusion of axes in the graves of children does not appear to be referring to a past reality, but rather to positions and values in the future. The buried axe represents both a warrior idiom of aristocratic power and an agrarian idiom for the reoccupation and claiming of lands in parts of northern Gaul, which had been gradu-



Figure 1: The sacrifice of King Nedrod's sons (see the arrow) depicted on a carved stone of AD tenth century date from Gotland, Sweden (after Lindquist 1941, plate 139).

ally depopulated from the beginning of the third century onwards. As the burial ritual is a new type in this area, the young persons accorded these exceptional burials can be considered to have been *exchanged* with the ancestral world by representing the aristocratic capacity of providing protection (Theuws and Alkemade 2000, 458–61). As such, in relation to axes in child burials another question could be posed – were these graves representative of powerful children?

When discussing the representation of weapons in child burials it is necessary to make reference to the formation of a political mentality at the end of the Early Iron Age and the use of rituals among the elite during a period of political transformation in Scandinavia. During the Migration period (AD 400–560/70) an ideological articulation of common cultural codes developed among the Germanic warrior elite. A close connection existed between the creations of myth and the symbols or iconography in the animal style used by the warrior elite, which persisted in the Nordic regions until the end of the Viking period as a result of the introduction of Christianity (Hedeager 1998). The ideology behind these cultural codes is well represented in the literature of the Norse Sagas (Hodne 2003, 12–16).

The Norse poem *Rígstula*, placed originally in Norway, Iceland, Ireland or the Western Isles (Steinsland 2005, 384), deals with a myth about the creation of four social classes by a god – thralls (slaves), farmers, earls and kings (Steinsland 2005, 49, 384). In the poem, children are presented as active agents. The educative ideals of Norse society are the learning of scores associated with the relevant labour tasks of the classes – children of thralls learn to make fences, fertilise fields, tend pigs, herd goats and dig turf; farmers' children are taught to tame oxen, build wooden houses and hay barns, make carts and ploughs, as well as to do the ploughing, while earls' children learn to take care of and use arms, tame and ride horses, breed dogs and swim. Above them all, kings' children learn the cultural secrets of society – the art of runes, how to save lives, how to calm the sea, ways of extinguishing fire and how to understand birds (cf. Mortensson-Egnund 1961, 83–8).

As such, the Norse ideals of children according to social class stress the value of children's vitality and make divisions between children with and without weaponry. In particular, children's powerful potentiality and vitality are closely linked with their social connections in representing society's future (cf. Lillehammer 2000, 19). In the sagas, children's behaviour is centred on a masculine world of warriors. The narratives deal with children learning to understand the codes of the warrior elite which focus on the ideals of honour, balance, justice and revenge. In particular the accomplishments of boys aged between three years and twelve to fifteen years are mentioned – the killing of adults by sword or axe, fights with other boys and, in the commitment of these deeds, the importance of displaying vigour and energy in controlling and balancing the mind and body. In the process of making warriors the hardship the boys have to endure to become heroes represents the capacity and quality of adult expectations of a powerful person in society (cf. Hodne 2003).

Within the cultural codes of the *Rígstula* poem a stratified society is represented in which the social skills of the children of peasants, earls and kings appear to correspond with archaeological finds in Scandinavia. In Norwegian archaeological studies of Late Iron Age weaponry the placing of weapons in burials has been connected with the oldest

Medieval law and its commandment of free men to meet fully equipped with weaponry at the regional courts. The results of these studies indicate a correlation between the combinations of weaponry types found in Late Iron Age burials (AD 560/70–1030) with the weaponry sets of the peasants and gentry required by law (cf. Hofseth 1982, 115; Solberg 2000, 268). Strong links between graves with weaponry, social class, ownership, rights to land and resources, and the inheritance requirements of the Odal law have been suggested (Iversen 1997, 32–4; 2004, 66–71; Skre 1998, 199–203). Medieval law required the inheritance of land and portable objects to be shared equally between sons and daughters. The relationship between land claims and social status referred to the 'five generations' rule of the Odal. This Odal rule represented the ancestor line of the family, and it was based on prehistoric burial practice. The ancestral rights of the Odal to land and family title were evidenced by the primary burial of the mound representing the first settler who had cleared the land and established a farm (cf. Iversen 2004). The legal instructions of Odal rule therefore refer to a pre-house origin of the founding ancestors (Helms 1998, 131). According to Helms (1998, 130) the chiefly lineage could be conjoined with the first-principle origin related to firstborns, and occasionally lastborns. Firstborns may provide cosmological connections by the quality of primacy attributed to their birth since their arrival heralds for their parents, as a reproductive couple, the initiation of connections with the fertile universe that hopefully will yield additional children (Helms 1998, 8). In Norse society the first-principles of conduct within the society were to be strictly maintained. Based on genealogy the Odal rule represented the family right of the first-born son to inherit land and property.

The study of Iron Age burial practice in Scandinavia has indicated that all members of a family were not provided with a proper mound burial (Iversen 2004, 72–4). The analyses of relationships between farm dwelling, cemetery and burial indicate also that mounds were erected at intervals with regard to generations (Baudou 1989, 40), or to the division of inheritance (Skre 1998, 208). Archaeological evidence of this practice was discovered in a burial mound from the Early Iron Age at Salte, Rogaland, in south-west Norway (Møllerop 1954). The mound was erected in two main phases, separated by an interval of some 400 to 500 years (AD first century to sixth century) (Figure 2). Altogether some fourteen deposits were discovered in the mound, of which twelve were burials – eleven cremations and one inhumation. The main primary burial was a cremation grave. The inhumation burial, which was the last grave to be deposited in the mound, had been disturbed and mostly robbed of its contents prior to the archaeological excavation, and the rest of the graves were found not to have contained weaponry. Two of the secondary burials were those of children – a newborn infant and a ten to twelve year old child. It is probable that male and female heads of the family (Solberg 1985, 24), or those related to this peasant family of free landowners, were buried in the mound.

The occurrence of primary and secondary graves in burial mounds is well represented in Scandinavia. In an Early Iron Age mound at Døsen, Hordaland, in western Norway the earliest deposit in the centre of a burial mound contained the remains of a boy's grave in a small cist situated near the secondary grave of a woman in a large cist (Shetelig 1912, 139–49, figs. 331–5). In particular, the Odal rule with regard to the first-principle origin (Helms 1998, 8, 131) of the first-born's rights to have primary

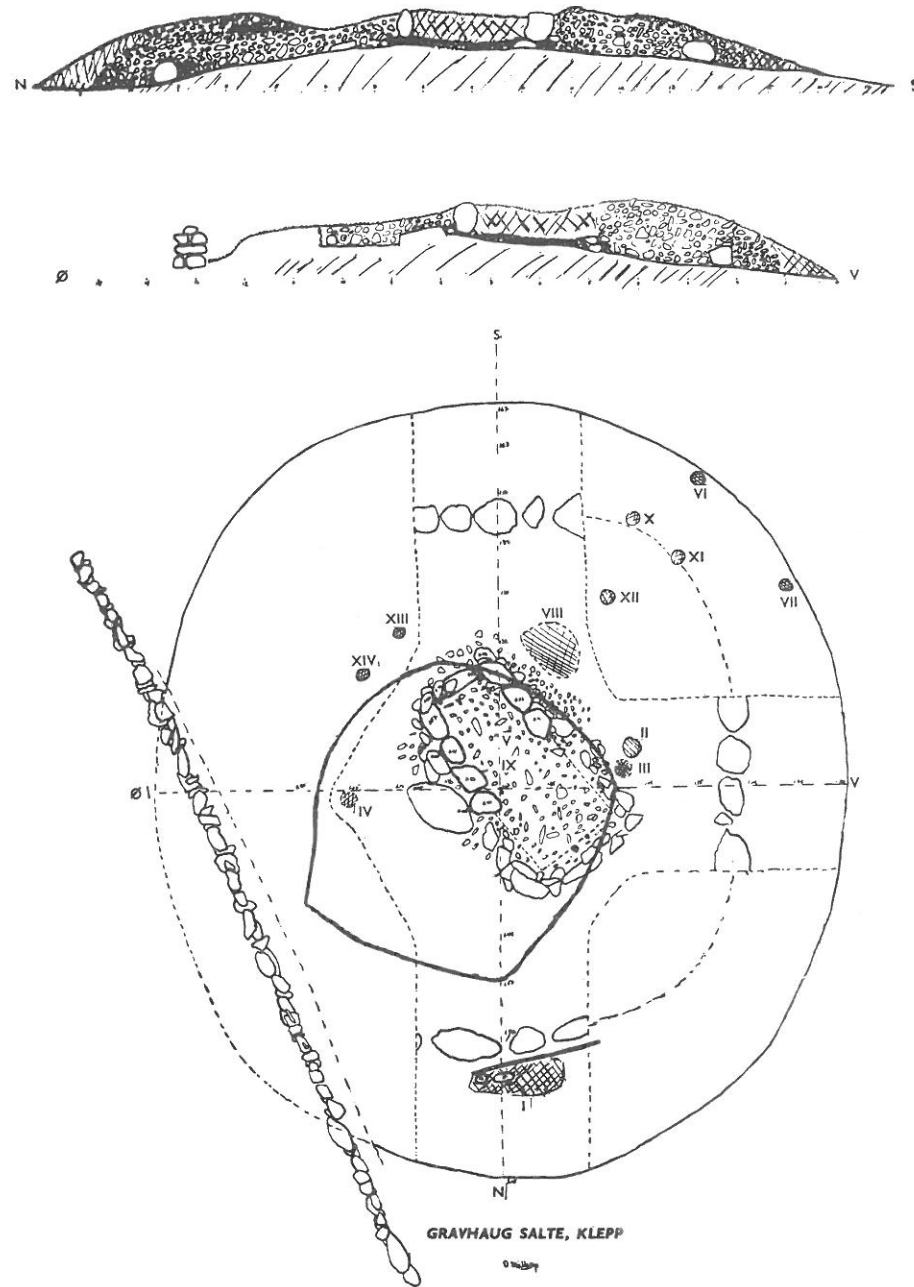


Figure 2: Excavation plan and sections of a burial mound at Salte, Rogaland, Norway, that had been disturbed by treasure hunting in the nineteenth century. A total of twelve cremation burials of children and adults (females and males) which dated to c. AD 0–400/575 were recovered (after Møllerup 1954, fig. 6).

access to the family land and property could be interpreted as suggesting that the primary and secondary burials of children represent powerful children. The burials of dead firstborns represent a transformation of primary sources and the embodiment of cosmological powers between this world and the fundamental creativity of cosmos (cf. Helms 1998, 78). As these children belonged to the family line of an ancestral house, they were instruments of regeneration and symbols of continuation, the powerful links to those essential life forces that sustained the entire family.

### Children on the Outside of the House

References to sacrifice and magic within North European folklore suggests the existence of traditional practices that involved the burial alive of children (Hauge 1965). The customs and usage of these practices overlap, but sacrifice largely involved a little girl, or sometimes two young children, a boy and a girl, in order to stop the spread of a plague. Linked with the tradition is the custom of capturing a child alive and then letting it die while tied to a tree. In many records the demon of the plague was the personification of a wandering boy or girl who had been caught and buried alive in the earth.

The burial of children while still alive is associated with ideas of magical import. From a magical point of view it is essential that the child preserves her/his vital force, or to succumb – while still alive. In some cases children were buried alive on the parish boundary or within the churchyard, but they were also walled in or deposited in a bog. Often the legends do not mention the places of deposition in the landscape. The practice is known from a Danish lawsuit of AD 1604, and in Sweden the practice was still being undertaken during the nineteenth century. The custom is mentioned in old Medieval laws, but as the rite of child sacrifice is known from Norse mythology its origin would appear to be pre-Christian. The sacrifice was undertaken to ward off, or provide a gift to, supernatural beings that were believed to have the power to stop disease and death among people and cattle. Some records indicate a belief in the transformation of the sacrificed children into magical guardian spirits who protected the entrance to the house. These beliefs are also associated with tales about the guardian spirits of animals and hidden treasures (Hauge 1965).

The manner of death and post-mortem treatment of children who were accorded live burial can be similar to the type of death and post-death treatment of infants who were not deliberately sacrificed. This is particularly apparent when dealing with the practice of infanticide which involved the deliberate killing or abandonment of living newborn children in the landscape. The tradition of exposing children is believed to have a prehistoric origin (Lillehammer 2008b; Mundal 1989). In Nordic regions the dead-child beings were without social status among the living and the dead of the family. Their spirits and places of abandonment in the landscape were thought to have special powers and were usually feared by the living. A wide range of measures was taken, and rites were carried out, to remove the spiritual beings from their places in the environment. The designations or descriptions of the ghosts and their frequented places in the landscape are not literally applicable, but most of the applications are realistic, whereas the spiritual behaviours are in the manner of poltergeists (Pentikäinen 1968,

128). However, from an archaeological point of view the designations of dead-child beings could be interesting to examine within material culture. In the following study I will concentrate on the Nordic tradition of the *utbur* (cf. Lillehammer 2008b).

The dead-child *utbur* is a natural or forest spirit which appears at night, or in the evening, among the domains of the living and dead in the landscape – i.e. outside a house, yard or village, or in a forest, on a forest road, in a marsh or close to water (Pentikäinen 1968, 196, 199). It is probable the places of encounter represent the places where children were abandoned in the landscape. In general, the designations embody a variety of images from unchanging to shape-changing forms. With the exception of the invisible beings that only make noises, eleven different physical shapes ranging from a naked child to an animal are represented (Pentikäinen 1968, 200–1). When listing only the shape-changing images together with the places of encounter, a corresponding pattern emerges in the transformation of form from natural to supra-natural shape between metaphoric application and the places of encounter (Table 1). In order to search for links between metaphoric image, material culture and archaeological evidence, I will proceed by explaining the background for the animalistic images in the Nordic dead-child tradition.

In the Norse Sagas a child is mentioned in the shape-changing form of a polar bear (Kristoffersen 1995, 13). The reference is representative of the Norse beliefs in the many-featured embodiment of the human soul. A duality between human mind and alter ego operating on its own often materialised in the shape-changing form of an animal. Within the conceptual world of shape-changing the human mind played a non-ritualistic role in being uncontrollable, by representing a feeling or a shadow which could also appear in dreams. The role of the alter ego was to warn off coming events, such as danger and death, and its power was closely linked with ritual (Mundal 1974, 41–3). However, as demonstrated by the various ways that children were deposited as well as buried, there is a structural division between spheres of non-ritual and ritual that is crucial to the interpretation of the archaeological material.

Archaeological studies of decorative styles from the Iron Age and Early Medieval period indicate correspondence between the use of animalistic motifs and the type of animals found in Norse mythology, cosmology, cult, sagas and name giving (Smådahl 2005, 25–31, 146, table H). The motifs of birds of prey and fighting animals are distributed on fine metals of cultic regalia and splendour, whereas domesticated animals and forest birds and animals appear on everyday base metallic objects

Form of shape-change	Place of encounter
Gigantic size	Supra normal place
Brownie	Supra normal place
Flame	Place of encampment, watch fire
Sheep	Cattle shed, deserted farm
Bird	Forest, wilderness, lake, water, hill
Ptarmigan (wild mountain bird)	Forest, wilderness, lake, water, hill

Table 1: Shape-changing forms of the Nordic dead-child being and places of their encounter in the landscape.

(Smådahl 2005, 110–11). An example of the everyday level in the ritualistic sphere of burial is manifested in the form of a brooch which depicts a deer and a calf, found at the Kvasheim cemetery, Rogaland, and dated to c. AD 400. The brooch represents a metaphoric expression of access to origin and the regeneration of house and family (Figure 3). In the Nordic dead-child tradition animalistic shapes appear in the form of domesticated or wild animals of small size, such as sheep, birds or wild forest birds (cf. Table 1). As the animalistic images of the dead-child tradition represent non-ritualistic contexts, the *utbur* images could, however, indicate a function on the mundane level that corresponds with the places of encounter (cf. Table 1). The shape-changing images epitomise a spirituality that, when linked with the uncontrollable qualities of alter ego, is representing children out-of-house and those expelled from the social cycle of regeneration. As the living feared their places in the environment, apparently these children were not placed outside a cosmological order. The dead-child images were the metaphoric expressions of powerful children in an outside world (cf. Helms 1998, 41).



Figure 3: An animal brooch depicting a deer and calf recovered from a female inhumation burial in a long barrow dated to c. AD 400 from the cemetery of Kvasheim, Rogaland, Norway (after Lillehammer 1996, front cover, plate 4c).

## Conclusion

The search for powerful children from an archaeological perspective is an interdisciplinary challenge to the study of childhood and children in the past. In relation to material culture it is important to emphasise the disregard of modernity in acknowledging the manifold nature of spirituality in past societies. The discovery of archaeological evidence of the remains of children in houses, burials, bogs, ditches, hollows etc. represents the long-lived phenomena of cosmological orders. With regard to understanding and explaining the positive and negative attitudes attributed to ancient children we have to analyse to what extent social worth evidenced and regulated access to origins. The metaphoric approach to historical and folklore records have placed focus on how children were brought up, acted upon and manipulated by adults, both inside and outside the house, in order to maintain a balance in the structure of cosmic natural orders. By stressing the perspective of access to origins strong links between life, death and regeneration have been demonstrated. However, alive or dead, it is clear that ancient children played different powerful roles in past societies.

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