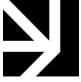

Frog

THE ÅLANDIC CLAY PAW RITE, THE QUESTION OF SEALS, AND CONVENTIONS OF INTERPRETATION

Abstract
In her recent survey of evidence of the so-called clay-paw rite on the Åland Islands, Kristin Ilves (2019) advances a new interpretation connecting it with the seal. Ilves valuably draws attention to the problem that interpretations of mysterious phenomena in the archaeological record easily get propagated as part of the research discourse. As a consequence, researchers' discussions of the Ålandic clay paws establish conventional limits to how the source evidence is viewed. She breaks from these conventions by interpreting the clay paw rite in accordance with a current trend that has evolved out of ecocriticism, in which relationships between humans and their ecological environment are brought into sharp focus. Her approach raises methodological issues and leads to additional questions about researchers' a priori assumptions concerning the rite and its interpretation. The present discussion considers some issues with the ecology-centred approach and comments on aspects of the argument for the seal interpretation. It then critically assesses associations of the rite with animal totemism or shamanism, considered in relation to the context of the rite within the broader funeral ritual.

Keywords: cultural contextualisation, ecocriticism, animal symbolism, Iron-Age ritual, Scandinavian religion

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In the last number of this journal, Kristin Ilves (2019) presents a valuable and much-needed survey of evidence of the so-called clay paw rite on the Åland Islands. The clay paw rite is a practice which developed on the Åland Islands in the wake of immigration following the 536–7 AD climate event. This process resulted in the Åland Islands becoming, from the perspective of the archaeological record, Scandinavian, whereas the islands had previously belonged to the cultural sphere of Southwest Finland. The rite is a uniquely Ålandic development that spread around the beginning of the Viking Age (AD 800–1050) to trading settlements along the Volga River deep in the Jaroslavl' Oblast (Fig. 1), where it was then adapted into and spread through the local Meryan culture (speakers of a Uralic language, historically related to, but independent of, the Finnic language family). Ilves provides a fresh and comprehensive review of evidence for the rite on the Åland Islands that will be a valuable resource for future research. She raises an important issue that analytical discussion of the clay paws has gradually narrowed from asking *what animal* is behind the rite to *which of two animals, bear or beaver*, is behind it. Hers is a valid criticism, and I have also been guilty of approaching interpretation as a *which of two* question (Frog 2014: 379–98). Ilves characterizes interpretations linked to both animals as 'strained' and as 'earlier confusion', asserting that 'discussion is at an impasse' (2019: 33), caught in an 'argumentative, unsolvable loop' (2019: 48). She proposes a new interpretation of the clay paws as representing seal paws, linking them to animals that held a significant position

Figure 1. Geographical distribution of clay paw finds, following Callmer 1994: 14, Fig. 1. Solid circles indicate early Viking-Age trading settlements where the clay paw rite became established; dashed circles indicate approximate areas of concentrated finds; stars indicate isolated examples of clay paw burials outside of the main areas.

in the subsistence strategies of people immigrating to the islands in the 6th century. Her argument brings up a number of methodological issues, variously explicit and implicit, that warrant opening here.

The present article extends and develops my earlier study of the clay paw rite, which assessed the relative probability of the bear and beaver as referents for the clay paws. I previously showed that, whatever its economic importance, the

Figure 2. Clay paw ÅM 306:19, illustrating the 'classic' type of clay paw with splayed digits and also the fragility of these low-fired objects. (Photos: Veronica Lindholm, 2020. Åland Museum, reproduced with permission.)

Figure 3. Clay paw ÅM 125:4 as an example of the 'classic' splayed type on which the digits are formed only as stubs. (Photos: Veronica Lindholm 2020. Åland Museum, reproduced with permission.)

Figure 4. Clay paw ÅM 380:24 on which the fifth digit is opposed to the other four like an exaggerated dewclaw or stub of a thumb. (Photos: Veronica Lindholm 2020. Åland Museum, reproduced with permission.)

beaver does not receive cultural attention in either Scandinavian or Finnic traditions, leaving it devoid of symbolic significance. (Frog 2014: 384–6.) In contrast, the bear receives tremendous attention cross-culturally; it is linked to ritual and belief traditions and holds a position among the most symbolically significant animals in Scandinavian, Finnic, and Sámi cultures (2014: 386–95). Contextualised in cultures of the Baltic Sea region, nothing suggests that the beaver would be significant to Ålanders in a way relevant to the funerary rite, in sharp contrast to the bear. The seal is considered here against the background of that study with additional assessment of the relationship of the rite to the broader funeral context.

Ilves' central issue with earlier interpretations is that both bear and beaver are absent from the local ecology. She takes the position that the clay paws must be contextualised in relation to Ålanders' local environment and livelihoods during the period when the rite emerged in order to be understood. Her approach follows a trend that has evolved from ecocriticism and which brings into focus the relationship of humans to their ecological environment. This type of approach is not without its methodological hazards. Ilves makes an admirable effort to reinforce her interpretation with comparative evidence from medieval Scandinavian sagas and mythology as well as traditions about seals in the Baltic Sea region, to which I offer a few comments concerning nuances for consideration. Just as Ilves focuses on how the history of discussion has gradually narrowed to two conventional interpretations of the animal behind the rite, these discussions have also evolved conventional interpretations of the rite's significance, which equally deserve critical assessment.

Figure 5. Clay paw ÅM 404:190 on which the fifth digit is opposed and formed as though it might grip like a human thumb. (Photos: Veronica Lindholm 2020. Åland Museum, reproduced with permission.)

Figure 6. Clay paw ÅM 124:85 on which the four digits are grouped and extended like fingers with the fifth in a position opposed like a thumb potentially pointed in line with the other digits. (Photo: Veronica Lindholm 2020. Åland Museum, reproduced with permission.)

CLAY PAWS AND THE EVOLUTION OF DISCUSSION

The clay paw rite is characterised by a small, rough, animal-paw-like clay object found in connection with a cremation burial (see also Callmer 1994: 14, 17). The low-fire clay objects are five or more centimetres in length with the largest about fourteen centimetres (Ilves 2019: 34; cf. Callmer 1994: 17). The basic form has five or four digits, formed as short stubs or points, and one better-preserved example has six; the digits extend from, or are splayed around, a broader, often rounded centre like a paw or palm which often has a tapering or narrower extension like a wrist of leg, as seen in Figs. 2 and 3 (Callmer 1994: 16–17; Ilves 2019: 34). When the corpus of 119 Ålandic clay paws is considered in overview, '[b]ased on the shaping of the documented clay paw material, it is clear that the primary focus was not on the imitation itself, but on the mediation of the concept' (Ilves 2019: 41). The form points toward an animal paw with five digits. Beyond that, however, anatomical accuracy does not work as a criterion to distinguish which animal is the referent.

Formal variation in the clay paws and material objects is quite fluid. This is unsurprising in light of their rough production, but it remains noteworthy because it points to a conventional local interpretation (Frog 2014: 382–3). In other words, the objects appear formed to mediate the same thing rather than mediating different things that should be distinguished. Alongside the flat, splayed paw forms, several examples, like those of ÅM 380:24 (Fig. 4) and ÅM 404:190 (Fig. 5), present the fifth digit in a position opposed to the other four. The position is comparable to a dewclaw on a dog or other animal, but its form is extended, suggesting a hand-like ability to grip with the single paw. Taken as anatomically accurate, an opposed thumb would exclude even the most favoured animals through which the objects have been interpreted, but it points to imagining an anthropomorphic aspect to what the paws represent. Some examples are strongly reminiscent of a human hand, for example through the grouping of finger-like digits relative to the opposed digit on ÅM 124:85 (Fig. 6) or the thumb-like quality of the single digit preserved on ÅM 780:101 (Fig. 7). These variations in form point to imagining an underlying

Figure 7. Clay paw ÅM 780:101 on which the fifth digit appears formed like a human thumb on an open hand although the other digits are not preserved. (Photo: Veronica Lindholm 2020. Åland Museum, reproduced with permission.)

anthropomorphic identity to the animal in question (cf. Viveiros de Castro 1998).

In the rite, the clay paw is placed usually on or near the urn (Ilves 2019: 34) in a burial otherwise of Scandinavian character (see also Callmer 1994: 16–7). The paws' low-fire production from untempered clay leaves them brittle; most examples are broken, and it can be difficult to distinguish whether clay fragments found in a burial reflect a clay paw (Callmer 1994: 17). The objects are never found outside of burial contexts and appear produced specifically for the rite (Kivikoski 1965: 28–9), although their circumstances of production are otherwise unknown. No exemplar practice has been identified of which the Ålandic ritual is an adaptation. Ålandic Iron-Age culture disappears in the 11th century; whatever may have happened in that period, the islands were resettled through immigration from Sweden in the expansion of the Christian Swedish realm from the 12th century (Sjöstrand 2014). The rite may thus have had up to about five centuries of continued practice, which makes it look remarkably stable in spite of the rough and varied form of individual clay paws.

The rite exhibits a clear regional concentration in the areas of Saltvik, Finström, and Jomala although examples are found more or less throughout Åland (Callmer 1994: 20–6; Ilves 2019: 38–9; on regional variation in Ålandic culture, see also Heininen et al. 2014). Initial carbon dating points to greater prominence of the rite in the first centuries following the settlement, prior to the Viking Age (Ilves 2019: 43–4), a period to which the isolated example of a clay paw found in Södermanland, Sweden, also seems to belong (Kivikoski 1934: 390 and fig. 12 on 387; see also Callmer 1994: 17). At the beginning of the Viking Age, the clay paw rite was carried along the Eastern Route to the trading settlement Timerëvo on the Volga in what would become the Jaroslavl' Oblast; it spread through trading settlements of the area and was assimilated by local Merya populations, among which it continued to spread until it disappeared in transitions to inhumation practices linked to religious change in the 11th century (Callmer 1994: 30–40; see also Duczko 2004: 193–9; on scattered examples elsewhere in Russia and the Ukraine, see Callmer 1994: 36–7).

The first observation of a clay paw is from 1901, shown in Fig. 8. The object was initially interpreted as a human foot, although the interpretation quickly shifted to a bear paw as more were documented (see Ilves 2019: 38). It was normal for the time to form such interpretations without critical discussion. The bear likely seemed the 'logical' referent of the clay paw because it was already recognised as a symbolically significant animal with a special status in the Baltic Sea region. Ella Kivikoski (1934: 390–1) brought the clay paws into research focus and considered several possible interpretations for the various paws. Johan Callmer (1994) observes that she was particularly impacted by the work of Marija Vasil'evna Fekhner on the corresponding objects

Figure 8. The first documented clay paw, KM 3986:31, found in 1901 in excavations led by Alfred Hackman. (Photo: Esa Suominen 1984. Finnish Heritage Agency, Arkeologian kuvakokoelmat, CC BY 4.0.)

in the Jaroslavl' Oblast. Although not excluding the possible bear interpretation, Fekhner's zoological examination led to the view that the majority of the artefacts represent beaver paws; she linked this to osteological evidence suggesting the importance of the beaver and stressed the paws' magical and ritual significance (cited from Callmer 1994: 15; cf. Ilves 2019: 40). At that time, many more clay paws had been found in Russia than on the Åland Islands and it had not yet been determined that clay paws begin appearing only centuries later in Russia, so transposing the connection made between clay paws and beavers from Russia to Åland did not seem as problematic as it does today.

Through Kivikoski (1965: 30–1), the beaver and bear were established as the primary interpretations. My impression is that the *which of two* interpretive frame became reified through the essential study of Callmer (1994). Callmer's study both became a cornerstone for subsequent scholarship and stimulated interest in the practice while maintaining the *which of two* paradigm (see also Ilves 2019: 38, 40). There have been few concentrated studies since Callmer's. Ilse Tarsala (1998) accepted the *which of two* model; I took it as a basis in my earlier study (Frog 2014); and Ilves (2019) extends it to a *which of three* question. No one has rejected the paradigm and reassessed interpretation from the ground up with a review of different animals with five-digit paws.

NATURE VERSUS CULTURE

The ecology-driven approach

Ilves' argument for the seal-paw interpretation is built on the presence of seals in the Ålandic ecology and their significance for subsistence strategies when the Late-Iron-Age Ålandic society emerged. Her criticism of earlier interpretations is built on an assumption about the relationship between symbols and human interaction with the ecological environment, according to which the clay paw should refer to an animal present in the Ålandic ecology and prominent for the local population. Bear- and beaver-paw interpretations become problematic because these animals were absent from the local ecology. A framework that requires ecological presence for relevance allows these alternatives to be dismissed without further consideration: they fail to meet a necessary criterion. The possibility that Ålanders maintained long-distance hunting practices (Callmer 1994: 28, 30; Frog 2014: 388–9) and evidence of bears in Åland's archaeological record (e.g. Gustavsson et al. 2014: 165) are not concerns because the ecology-driven framework correlates the symbolic significance of an animal with immediate presence and centrality to people's lives, particularly in the wake of the 6th-century immigration connected to threats to welfare and livelihood in the wake of the AD 536–7 climate event.

Ilves (2019: 41) focuses exclusively on the Ålandic rite. She dismisses the spread of the rite to Central Russia, where there are no seals, by proposing that 'the meaning changed'. The ecology-driven interpretation seems to require the change to be in the interpretation of the animal behind the clay paws. Ilves (2019: 33, 47) identifies the clay paws with animal totemism, in which case exchanging the seal for another animal would mean changing a collective totemic identity. However, a different totemic identity would be expected to be reflected in a competing rather than the same emblem. The flourishing of the rite among Meryans in a complete absence of seals seems to be inconsistent with the premise on which the seal-paw interpretation is

built. Ecocritical interpretation offers a valuable tool that can present new ways of looking at and understanding past societies and their practices, but, as with any trending concept, it is easy to get caught up by it, and it is important to weigh the interpretations produced by the interpretive lens against a full range of factors. Treating human interaction with the local ecology as an exclusive driving factor for meaningfulness neglects the factor of culture. The question of what happens to culture transposed into a different ecological environment with an immigrant population can be considered against evidence of Icelandic traditions as an analogous case.

Iceland as a counter-example

Iceland was settled rapidly from the end of the 9th century, predominantly but not exclusively from Norway. The potential multi-ethnic makeup of Ålandic society warrants mentioning that the settlement of Iceland also included a sizable Celtic population that was culturally and linguistically assimilated across the centuries (Gísli Sigurðsson 1988). The result was a distinct culture and identity of Scandinavian character. The official Christianisation of Iceland occurred in AD 1000, followed by the development of vernacular writing in the 12th century, with a boom of vernacular writing in the 13th, which produced a remarkable saga literature as well as the majority of what is known of non-Christian Scandinavian mythology. The immigration process was driven by political conflicts rather than a climate event, but Iceland is removed from the rest of Scandinavia by days of sea travel and the written sources reflect traditions more than three centuries after the initial settlement. The geographical and temporal distance between the Icelandic data and the place from which Icelanders emigrated are thus both considerably greater than those of Ålanders and the emergence of the clay paw rite.

The largest indigenous land mammal of Iceland was the arctic fox while seals and whales inhabited local shores and waters. Nevertheless, wolves, bears, and other animals not locally present were prominent in Icelanders' imaginations and narrative worlds. Icelandic mythology maintained wolves as the dogs of Odin and as agents of the eschatology that kill Odin and consume the sun and moon (Lindow 2001: 111–4, 120, 139, 163–4, 273, also 222), not to mention their unwavering position in Icelanders' ways of imagining and talking about outlaws (Ahola 2014a: 87–8, 310–1, 349–50). In Old Norse, *fylgja* (pl. *fylgjur*) refers to a supernatural agent that embodies a person's luck or fate. The *fylgjur* of powerful men were often identified as bears, whereas *fylgjur* of hostile people would appear as wolves (Turville-Petre 1964: 229). Numerous Icelandic sagas describe heroes' encounters with bears or on bear hunts, although the encounters are not in Iceland (e.g. in *Grettis saga* 21, *Finnboga saga* 11, *Færeyinga saga* 12, *Víga-Glúms saga* 3, *Hrólfs saga kraka* 27, etc.). The saga literature presents numerous examples of sorcerers who take animal forms to travel, attack people or ships, or to battle with one another (Boberg 1966: 55–6). A number of cases associate these transformations with travel by sea and sea battles (see Boberg 1966: 59 and works there cited). The most prominent sea animal in these transformations is the whale, although a walrus and swordfish also appear. The transformations are into larger and potentially more threatening animals, which do not include seals. The animals most central to medieval Icelandic sources reflect the animals that were established in traditions carried by the settlers rather than those of the local ecology.

Consideration can be extended to Scandinavian mythology of cosmological scope. The Viking Age is characterised by seafaring mobility, yet seafaring is almost completely absent from the rich body of stories and poems about gods.[1] Gods are never described as travelling anywhere by boat, unless they are in a story about human heroes or otherwise represented in the human world. Sea animals besides the World Serpent are almost entirely absent from stories about gods (connected only with fishing). The only example of transformation into a sea animal (leaving aside a salmon in a river) is in an obscure mythological narrative referred to in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* where the gods Heimdallr and Loki are said to have fought in the form of seals (*Skáldskaparmál* 16). The cosmological acts of seafaring are by giants, fleeing the flood of creation and sailing the apocalyptic flood to the battle of *ragna rǫk* (e.g. *Edda*, *Gylfaginning* 7, 51). Icelandic mythology and

belief traditions reflected in sagas do exhibit some ecology-driven changes occurring between the 9th-century immigration and the main 13th-century written sources (e.g. Egeler 2017: 68), but the ecology-driven premise does not generally hold for Iceland.

Finno-Karelian kalevalaic mythology as a counter-example

Kalevalaic mythology, or the mythology of so-called Kalevala-meter poetry, was recorded in Finnish, Karelian and Izhorian mainly during the 19th and early 20th centuries. As I have discussed elsewhere (Frog 2012, 2013), the mythology was comprehensively restructured in connection with the assimilation of Scandinavian ritual technologies and associated mythology (see also Siikala 2002). The development seems to have occurred before North Finnic's spread in the 8th century but did not occur in traditions of Estonia or Livonia, so appears to postdate the transition to the common language phase of Late Proto-Finnic in ca. AD 200. It is tempting to associate the development with the cultural changes in the 6th century, after which the culture of Southwest Finland became distinct from that in Estonia.

Kalevalaic mythology had disappeared from most western regions of Finland by the 19th century and was predominantly documented in inland forested regions of Russian Karelia. Nevertheless, the mythological epics continued to describe a seafaring milieu of masted ships and viking raids (Ahola 2014b: 363–4). The world of mythic events and actors remained rooted in the milieu where the mythology seems to have taken shape rather than reflecting the spidery lakes, rivers, and inland routes through swamp and forest of the societies where the mythology was sung and in ritual use for generations.

People import culture

Culture often maintains mythic symbols through transposition into new ecological environments rather than immediately restructuring and reinterpreting its symbolic worlds to reflect the local ecology. The significance and role of an animal in livelihoods and economy thus do not automatically make it prominent in mythology and as a mythic symbol. Otherwise, the mythology of Iceland would be rich in sheep, fish, and birds' eggs. The clay paw rite seems to have emerged within the first century of immigration to the Åland Islands. The inherited culture of the population must therefore be taken into account when considering the symbolic significance of the animal behind the rite. Seals may have become more prominent in Ålandic than Icelandic legends of sorcery, for example, but Ålandic traditions cannot be assumed to have abruptly focused only on animals present in the ecology while other animals that had been significant in immigrants' homelands were displaced.

TRIANGULATING ÅLANDIC MYTHOLOGY

The details of Ålandic mythology are beyond reconstruction, but a frame of reference can be triangulated from probabilities of what was carried with the spread of Scandinavian culture and its interactions in cultural encounters. There are no vernacular written sources of mythology from medieval Sweden comparable to those of Iceland, yet a broad range of comparative evidence points to frameworks of mythology and religious ideas generally shared across Scandinavian cultural areas, with regional variation occurring within that framework (Schjødt 2009; Nordberg 2012: 132–6). Much of the variation in practices reflected in the archaeological record (e.g. Price 2010) likely reflects diverse ways of engaging with those common frameworks rather than different religions *per se* (Nordberg 2012: 135). This view reflects the more general rule of thumb that variation in traditions linked to beliefs and understandings about the world is *variation-of* – i.e. 'new' traditions emerge on the basis of those already available in a society, whether inherited or introduced from outside. Hence Anna-Leena Siikala's (2012: 19) comparison of mythic symbols to 'a kaleidoscope, in perpetual motion'.

Temporally, the 6th-century immigration is closer to the common Northwest Germanic language period, which ended around AD 200 or a bit earlier, than to 13th-century Iceland, so it might be closer to the common heritage shared by speakers of Old Norse, Old English, Old Frisian, and Old Saxon. Nevertheless, the mythology and mytho-heroic traditions documented in 13th-century Iceland generally correspond

to the images and motifs reflected on the coin-like Migration Period bracteates (mainly 5th and 6th century), artefacts characterized by depictions of mythic agents, motifs, and events, from which maritime scenes are absent, although a ship may be in the background of IK 64 and on IK 65 (Hauck et al. 1985–9).[2] Scandinavian models for the impacts on North Finnic religion can be assumed to have arrived from groups in Sweden, yet they are recognizable through correspondence to mythology and conceptions documented much later in Iceland. The seafaring adventures of kalevalaic mythology also draw on Scandinavia models, but they correspond to story patterns in mytho-heroic sagas (Frog 2012: 237–8). Finno-Karelian cultures treated gods, mythic heroes, and powerful sorcerers as a single category (Frog 2020), so the assimilation of seafaring story patterns in kalevalaic mythology most likely reflects the assimilation of traditions through the Finnic category rather than a pre-Viking-Age identification of gods like Thor or Odin with seafaring adventures. Scandinavian mythology of different places and times was not identical to that of 13th-century Iceland. The Icelandic sources seem to present manifestations (and manipulations) of the shared framework of mythology and religious ideas – a snapshot of a view through the kaleidoscope – while, at the level of broad strokes, it appears generally representative. Developments from the end of the Migration Period and thereafter may not have been carried to the Åland Islands, but the organisation of the relationship of Odin and Thor or their equivalents (cf. Frog 2013) or whether a two-and-a-half year winter (*fimbulvetr*) was added to the eschatology following the AD 536–7 climate event (Gräslund 2007; Gräslund & Price 2012; but cf. Nordvig & Riede 2018) are not relevant to questions of the potential significance of a particular animal reflected in the clay paw rite.

Generally speaking, there is no reason to believe that the Scandinavian mythology carried to the Åland Islands reflected a maritime culture any more than that of Iceland.[3] The society emerged as the new Scandinavian cultural frontier that became a contact zone with North Finnic (Ahola et al. 2014: 250). Scandinavian impacts on North Finnic cultures offer potential indicators of the mythology carried to the Åland Islands, and it is possible that maritime features of North Finnic mythology flowed back into Ålandic traditions. Looking across Scandinavian and Finnic traditions enables perspectives on what is probable for mythology in Ålandic societies.

It is tempting to also consider influence from the indigenous population of a mobile culture on the islands. However, Scandinavian cultures generally exhibit a polarised ethnocentric ideology, excluding influences from cultures seen as ‘other’, while Scandinavian populations might assimilate to cultures seen as commensurate. Indigenous groups on the Åland Islands would have been seen as *Finnar*, the Old Norse category for mobile groups of the North, such as Sámi speakers. *Finnar* were regarded as fundamentally and supernaturally other. This ideology of exclusion is built into the Scandinavian impacts on North Finnic religion, impacts that displaced inherited shamanism among North Finnic speakers, where they seem to have produced a more polarised ideology of otherness than in Scandinavian language environments (Frog 2013). Impacts of the indigenous population are thus hypothetically possible (Nordberg 2012: 126, but see also 146n.28), but the extreme polarisation observed in North Finnic cultures, which were, as the ethnonym implies, initially identified as *Finnar*, makes such influence seem highly improbable.

CONSIDERING THE SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE OF SEALS

To support her proposal that seals could have been symbolically significant and thus the referent of the clay paw rite, Ilves (2019) offers comparative evidence from two cases in the archaeological record. She also acknowledges that immigrants to the Åland Islands arrived with knowledge of seals that likely extended into connections with magic and the supernatural, which she addresses through comparison with examples from Icelandic sagas and later folklore of the Baltic Sea region, focusing on supernatural associations.

Archaeological comparisons

Ilves (2019: 46) begins comparisons with Neolithic clay figures interpreted as seals found

on the Åland Islands. Neither Indo-European nor Uralic cultures were yet in the Baltic Sea region at that time and there is no reason to consider a continuity in Neolithic seal traditions into the Iron Age. The example only offers analogical support that seals could be symbolically significant in a culture in which seals are prominent.

Ilves' (2019: 45–6) other archaeological example is an apparent deposition of an unburned seal paw. The deposition is at the edge of a cooking pit about 100 metres from a cemetery with clay paw burials; it is dated to sometime during the 7th to the 9th century. The example is chronologically relevant, but it is based on only three formal features – deposition$_1$ of a {seal$_2$} paw$_3$ (placing the second feature in curly brackets as dependent on an interpretation of the clay paws). Contextual differences of a cooking pit and cremation burial do not point to equivalent functions of the depositions, nor does the cooking-pit deposition connect with interpretations of the clay paw as, for example, a totemic emblem (cf. Ilves 2019: 33, 47). In addition, the contemporary clay paw rite had already established the use of replicas rather than organic animal parts. More generally, the claim that this is 'indicative of specialized depositional practices involving seal paws' (Ilves 2019: 45) is not warranted by the data: a single example gives no indication that the same or a similar action was repeated. Comparison is dependent on an interpretation of the clay paws as seal paws and offers no independent support for that interpretation.

A third material example might also be mentioned: the medieval relic of the Virgin Mary's hand at the church of Skivarp is the hind appendage of a seal (Grimberg 1916: 316–7),[4] although the origin of the bones is probably incidental.

Medieval written sources

The battle of two gods as seals mentioned above is obscure and peripheral in the sources, but points to the potential for seals to be significant and linked to transformations of anthropomorphic beings in Scandinavian mythology. There otherwise seem to be only three medieval sagas where seals appear in connection with the supernatural: in hauntings connected with drowned men, where they pose a threat to the living (*Eyrbyggja saga* 53), as an agent or omen before a sailing accident in which all are drowned (*Laxdæla saga* 18), and in a haunting connected with a neglected or abandoned baby that becomes a seal-headed monster (*Guðmundar saga* B35–6, etc.; see also Krappe 1944; Cormack 2018; af Klintberg 2018). All three support supernatural associations of the seal and associations with death. The relation of beings in seal-form to the living society should also be considered: all are threatening and dangerous, pointing to seals as a sort of demonic image without evidence of neutral or positive connotations, in contrast to the appearance of *fylgjur* of important people as bears (*fylgjur* never appear as seals).

Seals primarily appear in medieval sources as a form of non-threatening game and as an economic resource (also in laws: e.g. Larson 1935: 102, 104, 397). In sagas, the appendages of the seal foreboding death are mentioned (*Laxdæla saga* 18), but the seal's head is a distinct symbol in hauntings, underscored by the word *selshǫfuð* 'seal's head' only being found in prose in those contexts and as a ball in a game among giants in the otherworld (ONP: *s.v.* 'selshǫfuð'). Sea people are mentioned in the medieval sources but never in connection to seal forms.[5] *Selr* 'seal' also appears as a mythological giant's name (Lind 1905: 871), which suggests negative connotations, but *selr* is also found in a very few examples as or in a byname, although most of these may reflect Celtic influence.[6]

Later folklore

The so-called seal-maiden legends describe a maiden who removes her seal-form and is captured by a man who keeps her until she recovers her form and returns to the sea (Christiansen 1958: 75). Seal-maiden legends appear to reflect an Insular Celtic adaptation of the so-called swan-maiden traditions found across Northern Eurasia, where the woman is identified with some type of migratory waterfowl (e.g. Hatto 1961). On the islands, the woman may leave children behind when returning to the sea and kin groups get traced from them (Darwin 2019: 352–69). The specifically seal-formed maiden is particularly characteristic of Scots language areas and islands of the North Atlantic to which Old Norse spread in the Viking Age, whereas traditions of Ireland use a term for mermaid but sometimes

identify descendants with seal-related features (Darwin 2019: 75–6). Seal-maiden legends seem to have spread from Scotland through the North Atlantic islands to Scandinavia (Darwin 2019: 172), where they remain relatively rare (Darwin 2019: 109 and cf. 289), without even an entry in Bengt af Klintberg's thorough *Types of the Swedish Folk Legend* (2010; see also Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 2003: 102–4). This tradition would not have reached the Åland Islands with the 6th-century immigration.

The origin of seals from human beings found in the Baltic Sea region identifies them with Pharaoh's army drowned in the Red Sea (Loorits 1935; Puhvel 1963; Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 2003: 157; af Klintberg 2010: 321–2). Traditions of Pharaoh's drowned soldiers (or children) becoming half human and half fish are widely found through eastern Europe; transformation into seals appears as a variation on the northern end of the Baltic Sea region that accounts for seals as calling *Pharaoh! Pharaoh!* (Loorits 1935). Seals do not otherwise seem significant to belief traditions in the region. *Types of the Swedish Folk Legend* indexes no other legends under 'seal' (af Klintberg 2010: 498, type R63). It is the only tradition in which seals are prominent in Oskar Loorits' 1,786-page compendium on Estonian folk beliefs (Loorits 1949–57 II: 256–61). Loorits observes that seals are not otherwise prominent (1949–57 II: 207), noting some practices connected with seal hunting introduced with medieval Swedish immigration (1949–57 I: 240; III: 366–7 and n. 72) and two traditions where seals may appear in variations (1949–57 I: 305, II: 271). Seals seem still less culturally significant in North Finnic areas, where the legend of Pharaoh's soldiers predominantly explains the calls of waterfowl or gulls rather than of seals (Aarne 1912: 15; Loorits 1935: 19–26; SKS KRA, Syntytarut, Lintujen synty, Faraon lapset), with remarkably little evidence of traditions surrounding the animal (cf. eleven items under SKS KRA Eläinperinne, Luonnoneläimet, Hylje, most concerned with uses of seal fat, etc.). I have otherwise found two examples of a seal skull used in a ritual (SKVR I4, #1494, IX4, #1179), while localized traditions of seals in incantations are linked to an ailment called 'seals' (e.g. SKVR III3, #4469, IV3, #4384; see also SKVR, runotyyppi "Hylkeen synty"). Loorits (1935: 8–9) identifies two examples of the origin of seals from Pharaoh's children in Sámi cultures, with a third about someone protecting himself from harm after killing a seal; I have not tried to survey seals in Sámi traditions, and note only that a relatively recent cultural encyclopaedia of the Sámi includes no entry connected with seals as it does with bears (Kulonen et al. 2005: 33–5) or reindeer (Kulonen et al. 2005: 295–333). The innovation of identifying Pharaoh's drowned army as the origin of seals connects with the sagas' linkage of seals with victims of drowning, and, as in hauntings, the identification of seals with Pharaoh characterizes them as adversaries of living (Christian) societies. However, the legend's Christian background indicates that it could not have arrived before the Viking Age.

Some later Icelandic folklore presents cases of seals as monstrous in what seem to be continuities of ideas in the medieval sources (Loorits 1935: 4; Cormak 2018: 87–96; as a form taken by the Devil: Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 2003: 285). Generally, however, there is a lack of evidence for the symbolic prominence of seals in either Scandinavian or Finnic cultures outside of the two main legend traditions above.

Perspectives on seals

Medieval sources and later folklore support the hypothesis that seals could have supernatural connotations and interpretations for Iron-Age Ålanders. Identifying seals as animal-formed people is concentrated in two legend traditions that seem to have arrived in the Baltic Sea region centuries after Scandinavian immigration to the Åland Islands. Later folklore includes stories that characterize sea-people as living in the form of seals (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 2003: 294) and of seals kidnapping and impregnating women (Loorits 1935: 14–15; Cormak 2018), but these appear to be tightly connected to, and extensions of, the two main legend traditions. The lack of evidence for the mythic significance of seals independent of these legend traditions does not support a greater significance of seals in the Migration Period. The significance of animals may change across the centuries, as I have previously argued for the bear in Scandinavian cultures (Frog 2014: 389–95), but this leaves traces of that earlier significance, like legends

of a child born of a human-bear union or a hero being suckled by a bear (af Klintberg 2010: 316, 453; see also Frog 2014: 392–3). In contrast, the very few stories of human-seal unions are characterized by deformity (Loorits 1935: 15) or monstrousness (Cormak 2018). Moreover, the prominence of seals in Ålandic subsistence strategies may have decreased rather than increased their anthropomorphisation – i.e. attributing personhood to a basic food resource. Legends of seals as people of Pharaoh made eating them potentially equivalent to cannibalism and thus controversial (Loorits 1935: 9, 16, 18–9, 48, 51, cf. 25). An independent emergence of a seal-maiden or similar tradition in Iron-Age Åland is hypothetically possible, but no evidence points in that direction and it seems highly improbable.

DID SEALS HAVE 'PAWS'?

The clay paws point specifically to the paw of the animal in question as a powerful symbol and presumably as a symbol of power. The use of an animal paw as a symbol (distinct from its tracks) tends to get taken for granted as self-evident in the clay paw rite, yet it is not common and requires consideration. Astragalus (anklebone) pendants of furbearers (though not the whole foot), especially of beavers, seem to have been worn by people in Estonia as well as Finland and Latvia (Tvauri 2012: 155–6), but these appear linked to social status and there is no reason to consider them magical or emblems of a hypothetical beaver cult (Jonuks 2005: 48–9). In contrast, the bear paw has special symbolic significance on a widespread basis across Northern Eurasia (Mathieu 1984: 9–10). It is designated by special avoidance terms in Finnic and some other Uralic languages so as to avoid naming it directly (Honko 1993: 120–1). In Old Norse, the special term *hrammr* 'bear paw' both suggests similar ideas (see Frog 2014: 394 and works there cited) and points to a distinctive symbolic significance of the bear paw even if that significance remains obscure (cf. *Grettis saga* 21). When the bear paw holds a distinct symbolic significance on both sides of the Baltic Sea, a similar status is probable on the Åland Islands. No other animal's paw seems to hold a corresponding status.

In contrast to other animals, only the claws of a seal's front paw are visible through the skin, hence colloquial English use of *flipper* rather than *paw* when talking about seals.[7] The clay paws commonly present their digits as splayed, in many cases around a paw-like centre, as seen in the examples above. However rough the representation and their fluid variation into more anthropomorphic forms, these objects might not be consistent with ways Ålanders thought about seals' appendages any more than they seem to represent a human foot. The language situation on the Åland Islands in the Late Iron Age is unknown. The material culture and burial practices suggest that Scandinavian language was dominant although multilingualism was likely prevalent (Ahola et al. 2014). In Old Norse, seals' forepaws are not described with words like *fótr* 'foot', let alone with words like *hǫnd* 'hand', *krumma* 'mit' or *lámr* 'hand, mit'. Instead, it is called a *hreifi* 'wrist' (also used metonymically to include a hand) or *sundhreifi* 'swimming-wrist' (ONP: *s.vv.*). In one case, a seal is described with the adjective *fitjaskammr* 'short-flippered', *fit* being a word for either a flipper or an aquatic bird's webbed foot (see ONP: *s.v.*), comparable to Finnish *räpylä*, also used of seals. The Borgarþing Christian Law also refers to children being born with a seal's paws (alongside a dog's head) as a deformity warranting killing the child, linking it to something monstrous (see also Loorits 1935: 19); the term used is *sels veifar* 'flapping things of a seal' (Lawing 2013: 142–3). The vocabulary used does not point to seals' appendages being imagined as the sort of animals' feet that the clay paws appear to represent.

A FABRICATED VERSUS ORGANIC PAW

The ecology-driven approach's priority of an animal's local presence raises the question of the motivation for fabricating a replica of its paw in clay. The fabrication of models of other objects can occur for a variety of reasons. Miniature amulets are widely found in the Viking Age, but the clay paws are clearly distinct from, for example, Thor's hammer rings and similar objects (Andersson 2005). The clay paws can also be contrasted with the Viking-Age bronze bear-tooth pendants of Southwest Finland, which

seem to have been used by living people and were made from a valued substance (Kivisalo 2008).[8] In a funerary ritual, replicas or items of inferior quality may be produced because they are not intended for reuse, whether they are to be destroyed or simply deposited in the grave. An animal paw, however, would presumably be disposable unless it were either completely unavailable or availability was extremely limited, especially if ritual significance kept the available objects in use. If the animal behind the rite was being locally consumed in any quantity, the availability and disposability of paws suggests that animal parts would be used rather than – or at least before – a cheap replica.

There is no evidence that the clay paw rite was preceded by a practice involving the organic paw of an animal. The lack of evidence might be owing to a combination of the problems of decomposition and overlooking evidence especially in early excavations (Ilves 2019: 47). If seal paws were abundantly available, the motivation for the fairly rapid transition to creating a rough clay replica for deposition is still opaque. The absence of the relevant animal from the local ecology, on the other hand, could provide motivation for producing a replica. In Finland and Karelia, bear paws were both preserved whole for ritual usage and their claws and other parts of the paws were also used as ritual objects, for example in healing (Siikala 2002: 250; Piludu 2019: 260–2, and cf. 244). A similar use of bear paws in the Åland Islands could account for the clay paw as a replica of a ritual object that could be permanently placed with the deceased's remains without requiring replacement (which might be an involved process including e.g. mummification). In this case, the clay paw rite might be connected with, for example, evidence of bears in burial practices of Sweden and Finland as often reflected through evidence of paws rather than a whole animal (see also Kirkinen 2017). Although this factor is by no means decisive, it can be correlated with others in order to assess the relative likelihood of alternative interpretations.

THE SPREAD OF THE RITE TO CENTRAL RUSSIA

The spread of the clay paw rite to Central Russia around the beginning of the Viking Age also requires consideration when attempting to interpret the animal behind the artefacts. Trading settlements such as Timerëvo were presumably formed predominantly by people of different Scandinavian as well as other backgrounds. They most likely included a disproportionate number of men, creating a demand for women from the local population or from slave trade. The rite became established in this environment and then crossed into local Meryan culture, where it continued to spread.

The significance of the rite would be affected by the different contexts as it became established first in the arena of multi-ethnic trading settlements, likely taking on new social dimensions, and then spread into and through local Meryan populations, where culturally distinct discourses surrounding particular animals and interaction with them were already established. Nevertheless, there is no reason to suspect that the clay paw began to refer to a different animal (see also Callmer 1994: 35–7; cf. Ilves 2019: 41). Assimilation of the rite would be predicated on meaningfulness in its established form, and it is highly improbable that the formal practice would be borrowed independent of the interpretation of the animal behind the clay paws. The rite seems to have become attached to different referents in the Jaroslavl' Oblast, reflected in alternative clay objects becoming used alongside paws, especially a clay ring but also additional forms that are difficult to interpret today (Callmer 1994: 34–40). Nevertheless, these innovations appear secondary to assimilating the clay paw rite itself.

The bear and beaver do not inhabit the immediate environment of the Åland Islands, but could still have relevance to people living outside of their immediate habitats (cf. Ilves 2019: 46–7). In contrast, seals were presumably beyond the experience of the overwhelming majority of local Meryan populations, who would learn of them only through people talking about them, comparable to fantastic animals. Knowledge of animals known only through imagination could certainly spread to the Meryans,

like knowledge of lions and elephants in medieval Northern Europe, but other animals like bear and beaver were locally familiar. Meryan culture was eclipsed by Russification before being documented, so beliefs and traditions related to beavers remain a mystery. As an Uralic-language culture, a form of bear ceremonialism among Meryans can be inferred as probable (cf. Honko 1993). The spread of the rite in connection with a 'foreign' aquatic animal known only through imagination seems improbable; it is far more likely that the animal referent of the clay paws was familiar to local Meryans. Although Meryan mythology, cosmology, and associated ritual practices would have been very different from those of Scandinavians, the bear can, on the basis of comparative evidence, be predicted to have held both powerful and positive symbolic significance. If the clay paw represented a bear paw with commensurate powerful and positive significance, the rite could be interpreted as relevant and meaningful through the lens of Meryan mythology – much as Thor's hammer amulets circulated cross-culturally in the North, presumably interpreted as meaningful in relation to the weapons of local thunder gods (Frog 2014).

INTERPRETATIONS OF THE RITE

Interpretations of the significance or purpose of the rite have been floated and recycled with even less critical discussion than questions about the animal that the clay paws reflect. The rite is often identified as having a magical function related to hunting (e.g. Callmer 1994: 42) or protection (e.g. Tomtlund 2014: 29), but this aspect is often left aside when trying to identify the animal behind the clay paws. Callmer (1994: 16) observes that '[a] totemistic connection is also agreed upon by most scholars, but the argumentation for it is vague.' More recently, Tarsala (1998: 118–9) brings into focus the complementary distribution between weapons and clay paws in graves, which she interprets as reflecting different beliefs about the otherworld. She proposes that the clay paws could represent shamanic helping spirits to guide the deceased to the otherworld, a line of interpretation that has found some appeal (e.g. Williams 2013: 203). Interpretations of the rite impact on the interpretations of the animal behind it because they become frames of reference for thinking about how and why such an animal would be meaningful. At the same time, animal totemism and shamanism are concepts that get treated as religious universals without assessing their relevance to the cultural context of Åland in the Late Iron Age.

Totemism

The term and concept *totem* derives from Ojibwe, a Native American language, and refers to a supernatural being, object, or symbol that is an emblem for a group, such as a kin group or clan. The concept does not graft well onto Old Norse culture. The images of *fylgjur* seem to reflect personal character rather than a kin group (Tolley 2009 I: 242). Use of words for animals as personal names like *Bjǫrn* 'Bear' (Lind 1905: 143–8; see e.g. Frog 2014: 385n.26) seems to be part of the naming system rather than indicating a special relationship to the animal shared by people of the same name. Supernatural qualities were conceived as inheritable like race (Frog 2019). The bear might be seen as a totem figure for *berserkr* warriors, yet their association with bears remains an etymological reconstruction from *berserkr*, which could mean either 'bear-shirt' or 'bare-shirt, shirtless' (Tolley 2009 I: 567–9). Forms of totemism can be found among Uralic peoples, as in Khanty phratries (Siikala 2012), but Finnic cultures do not present evidence of totemism (cf. Loorits 1949–57; Frog 2014). Although the term *totem* has been used in connection with Sámi groups, this has been considered problematic (Kulonen et al. 2005: 35), noting that bear ceremonialism cannot be generalised as an inherited practice of totemism. Orchestrating a funeral, wedding or other activity in connection with the slain bear is more widely oriented to maintaining good relations between humans and bears (see e.g. Honko 1993; Pentikäinen 2007; Frog 2014); it did not make practitioners 'bear people'. Comparative evidence from cultures of the Baltic Sea region does not exclude the possibility that the clay paws were connected with clan totemism, but it offers no support for such an interpretation and makes it seem unlikely.

The rite itself does not seem to suggest totemism. The clay paws are small, inornate objects normally deposited on or near the urn

rather than in it, after which they were no longer visible. If the clay paw is interpreted as communicating identity, then it is necessary to ask: *To whom did it communicate?* The clay paws were not used outside of a funerary context: they were not worn, for instance, as emblems of social identity. The urn contains remains from the cremation, and the cremation presumably included everything imagined as accompanying the deceased to the otherworld or being used on the journey. The clay paw was not included with things on the pyre, which makes it unlikely that it was intended to communicate with agents in the otherworld (e.g. indicating that the arriving deceased was associated with a particular totem). The connection of the clay paw specifically to the deposition process, after which it becomes invisible in the burial, does not point to the paw symbol being oriented to communication.

If the clay paw represents a totem animal, then the Meryan innovations of a clay ring or other objects in the place of a paw are not comprehensible. A competing totemic identity would anticipate variation of the symbolic object to reflect the competing totem, such as of a split hoof or the webbed foot of a water bird.

Of course, animal totemism would make the particular animal of central symbolic significance to a group in diverse areas of social life. The clay paw rite would be only one of these and both an infrequent and very particular practice. Lack of evidence for such significance in Ålandic society leaves any connection of the clay paws with totemism a speculative conjecture based only on the clay paw rite itself.

Shamanism

The more recent suggestion that the paw could reflect a shamanic helping spirit to guide the deceased to the next world is ungrounded speculation. This interpretation applies the (usually vague) concept of shamanism to Ålandic society without considering whether it is culturally relevant, and then the beaver is considered through modern ideas of liminality in order to justify its suitability as a shamanic helping spirit. Scandinavian cultures do not seem to have maintained such forms of shamanism, which seem generally to have been viewed as marked by cultural otherness (Tolley 2009 I). Some Scandinavian magical practices seem to have been blurred with Sámi shamanism (Frog 2019: 279–84), so a shamanic interpretation is not impossible (Nordberg 2012: 126), but it is not very probable (Nordberg 2012: 146n.28), considering the polarised stance toward the *Finnar* and their magic. Neither Scandinavian nor Finnic cultures exhibit spirit-animal psychopomps. Moreover, the beaver was marginal to cultural symbolism (Frog 2014: 384–6). Conversely the seal as a spirit-agent's form was more likely conceived as hostile and dangerous. Movement between worlds would more likely be identified with an eagle, horse, or bee in either culture. The cultural context makes the interpretation of a shamanic helping spirit unlikely and, if the clay paw represented a helping spirit, neither a beaver nor seal seems probable.

The rite itself does not suggest the shamanic interpretation. Helping spirits are generally attached to a ritual specialist, who retains them after use: a symbol of a helping spirit would presumably remain with the performer rather than be deposited in the grave. Scandinavian funeral rituals also generally provide the deceased with everything needed on the journey to the otherworld and for continued life there as actual and complete objects. It is unclear why the animal guide would be supplied as a replica and represented only metonymically through one paw rather than as a whole animal. Finally, if the deceased's journey was linked to the cremation itself, as in ibn Fadlan's account of an elaborate Viking-Age cremation ritual (Tolley 2009 II: 85), and the animal was intended to guide or accompany the deceased on the journey to the otherworld, then the clay paw would be expected to have been on the funeral pyre and placed in the urn with the deceased rather than on or near it. The clay paw rite appears instead to follow rather than accompany the journey of the deceased. The shamanic interpretation appears inconsistent with both the cultural context and the rite.

Protection or sealing the burial

The placement of the clay paws seems more likely to reflect a functional role of the rite in connection with the deposition of remains in the burial process itself. Old Norse mythology presents diverse abodes of the dead (e.g. Ellis

1968), so the clay paw could indicate a different otherworld destination for the deceased from the dead of weapons graves (see also Tarsala 1998: 120–1). When the rite does not suggest a primary function of communicating the deceased's identity or a particular connection with the journey, the complementary distribution of graves with weapons and those with clay paws may point to the rite as a *consequence* of identity. In this case, the clay paw rite would be performed for the deceased because of who s/he was. This could be because that person's remains needed something that people with weapons did not, such as protection in the otherworld or protection from mound-breaking. Alternately, it could be because the rite was linked to supernatural agents or support to which that person had access but those in weapon graves did not. Rather than totemism, people engaged with Scandinavian gods through social relations (Sundqvist 2015: 87–90). They therefore relied on particular gods as opposed to others for aid in systems of reciprocity rather than relying on a pantheon, addressing each god according to its domain of activity (see also Gunnell 2015). Consequently, the clay paw rite could indicate the deceased's relation to a particular god. A third possibility is that the rite was to seal the grave from the threatening power of the dead (cf. *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* R3/H4), but this would not account for the complementary distribution with weapons graves (e.g. as less threatening).

The rite is characterised, not by an animal *per se*, but by its paw. In comparative evidence from adjacent cultures, only the bear paw stands out as significant in ritual and as a symbol of power. Ritual use of the bear's paw in Finno-Karelian traditions offers an analogy that could be relevant. However, Finno-Karelian religion was not structured by a social relation to one god as opposed to others (at least in the recorded traditions), so it does not help with the question of alignments with particular gods, let alone diverse abodes of the dead. Scandinavian gods do not generally exhibit connections with animals having five-digit paws, although both Thor and Odin are attributed with the byname *Bjǫrn* 'Bear' (de Vries 1956–7 I: 363). Models anticipating the rite have not been identified in Sweden, but the practice of placing the clay paw on or near the urn finds a parallel in the Viking-Age practice of placing so-called Thor's hammer rings on, in, or near a cremation urn. In both Sweden and the Åland Islands, evidence for use of these artefacts outside of the context is lacking (in contrast to so-called Thor's hammer pendants) and the Thor's hammer rings are in many cases deposited without having been on the pyre (Andersson 2005). The interpretation of these objects is no more transparent than is the clay paw rite, except that they can with a fair degree of certainty be identified with Thor (or equivalent thunder god). The hammer rings parallel the clay paws in usage that appears specifically linked to the deposition of the cremated remains following the cremation process. Thor's hammer amulets, both as independent pendants and on Thor's hammer rings, may be responses to the Christian cross, as may invoking Thor to 'sanctify' (*vigja*) runes, agents of illness, and so forth, some of which seem intended also to somehow seal or protect graves (e.g. Marold 1974). The material outcomes of the rites connected with Thor's hammer rings and clay paws are formally and contextually more or less the same, differing only in the amulet deposited. The rites might have been quite different, but, if they are related, the practice antedates the Thor's hammer amulets. Variations on the clay paw rite along the Volga, exchanging the paw for a ring, suggests a similar innovation with an alternative symbol replacing the paw, presumably for the same results. From this perspective, use of the animal's paw in the emergence of the Ålandic rite would parallel usage of Thor's hammer rings in the Viking Age. Rather than the practice with the Thor's hammer ring being an adaptation of the Ålandic practice, both could equally be variations of a rite that initially involved the deposition of something less enduring in the archaeological record.

Perspectives on the rite

The interpretation of the clay paw as linked to totemism does not appear well grounded or culturally appropriate while the interpretation as representing a shamanic helping spirit remains unfounded speculation. Contextual factors of the clay paw and associated rite within the funeral and arrangement of the burial seem most likely to point toward a function specifically connected

with the deposition of the cremated remains. Usage in deposition with a cremation rather than inhumation burial significantly reduces the likelihood that the rite is connected with the journey of the deceased to the otherworld, since the journey more likely began with the cremation itself. Far more likely is that the rite seals or protects the grave in some way, and more likely securing the burial from later disturbance by the living than preventing the grave's disturbance of the living community. The Viking-Age variations in the clay objects used in Central Russia and the similar practices with Thor's hammer rings support a view of the paw as a symbol of power or agency that has efficacy in the rite.

Comparative evidence makes the bear paw a likely candidate as the referent while evidence for the power and efficacy of paws of other animals is generally lacking, although the unburned seal paw deposited by a cooking pit raises questions for future research. The contrast between clay-paw and weapon burials on the one hand and later equivalence with use of Thor's hammer rings on the other presents the tantalising possibility that the paw is associated with Thor or his Ålandic equivalent. This invites speculation that the bear paw might reflect the embodiment of personal strength and relate to the Germanic Bear's Son Tale (e.g. Panzer 1910), while weapon burials can be associated with Odin and Valhǫll or their Ålandic equivalents. Linking the paws to Thor through the parallel with Thor's hammer rings and strength as central to his identity (cf. Schjødt 2009: 17) is an uncertain conjecture based on central and fairly widely-attested attributes of the god. Linking the presence of weapons to Odin and Valhǫll, however, is weakly built on (a) Icelandic descriptions of what happens to people slain in battle, and (b) interpreting the complementary distribution of weapons and clay paws as reflecting competitive relations between Thor and Odin, also as found in Icelandic sources: this reduces to mere speculation when projected onto Iron-Age Ålandic society. Whatever the case, the connection of the clay paw with a particular god seems far more likely than with a totem animal, although the relation of the paw to the god or the god to the practice remains unclear.

CLOSING REMARKS

Through the history of discussing a particular phenomenon, preferred interpretations begin to develop and become so oft repeated that they get taken for granted without critical assessment. Ilves challenges the trend in current discussion to address the question of the animal referred to through the clay paw rite as *which of two* and argues for a third interpretation through an ecology-driven interpretation. Her approach resonates with current research trends and can seem compelling, yet it is ultimately based on taking the paired criteria of prominence in the local ecology and significance for human society as the only factors warranting consideration. Criteria that would make other interpretations more appealing are dismissed, which obviates weighing the new interpretation against the two preferred in earlier research. The premise of the ecology-driven approach is that local nature and human-nature interaction determine the symbolic significance of animals in a given culture. The analogous case of Icelandic traditions demonstrates that this premise is false. Ilves' interpretation thus becomes less straightforward as different factors are weighed, yet it does valuable work in reopening discussion to alternative possibilities. Bringing into focus interpretations of the rite itself leads to a critical reassessment of trends of viewing it through totemism or shamanism, resulting in a more careful look at its magical function in the context of the funerary drama.

The preceding discussion highlights the importance of trying to balance the range of evidence for the clay paw rite with the possible interpretations of the rite's animal referent, and also with interpretations of the rite itself and its significance. Each of these three points opens onto different types of data that can be challenging to navigate. The analogous case of Icelandic traditions makes clear that the animal behind the clay paws may be independent of immediate presence in the ecology or significance in the trade economy. None of the points considered for the seal decisively exclude the seal-paw interpretation, yet they all point away from it rather than toward it. Weighed against the beaver, however, the seal may easily seem the more plausible. Other animals with five-digit paws can

also be considered, such as the weasel or ermine, which has more supernatural connections than the beaver, although these are often negative, like being an agent of illness (e.g. Hako 1956). The Old Norse word *hreysikǫttr* 'ermine, weasel', literally 'den-cat' (ONP: *s.v.* 'hreysikǫttr', cf. *s.v.* 'hreysivisla'), also classes this as a subtype of cat. The otter, also with five-digit paws, is prominent in the beginning of a heroic epic cycle, set in motion when Loki kills a giant's son in the form of an otter (*Edda, Skáldskaparmál* 39; *Reginsmál, Vǫlsunga saga* 14). Although *Otr* 'Otter' is the victim's name, E. H. Lind (1905: 823–4) does not identify any other uses of this word as a personal name. Reviewing alternatives highlights the range of possible interpretations for the animal behind the clay paw rite, but none of these rival the cultural prominence and mythic significance of the bear, and only the bear's paw seems to be characterised by special and indeed supernatural significance that might be manipulated in a funerary ritual.

Of course, any interpretation of the animal and the rite remains conjecture. Some animals with five-digit paws might be considered as possible referents in more detail, and the present discussion may have overlooked potentially significant factors or alternative interpretations that should also be addressed. Ilves (2019: 47), however, makes the very important point that the question 'of the clay paw rite being preceded or complemented by the use of actual animal parts [....] has never been systematically addressed.' An investigation into this question and the associated question of whether forerunners of the rite with unburned animal paws may be found in pre-migration Sweden could shed significant new light on this practice which is both distinctive of the Åland Islands and arguably its most successful Iron-Age export.

NOTES

[1] The god Freyr (or in one source Odin) has a ship that he never uses; Thor goes fishing for the world-encircling serpent; giants survive the primal flood on a boat; and giants sail to the battle with the gods at the end of the world.

[2] Karl Hauck's pioneering interpretations of bracteate images are problematic and controversial, but the magical significance and mythic dimension of at least many images remain generally accepted. Many examples include distinctive and complex representations that clearly parallel events of later-documented mythological and mytho-heroic narratives, like the god slain by a plant-weapon, the god having his hand bitten off by a wolf, a complex of images paralleling later widespread iconography of the hero who eats the dragon's heart, and so on.

[3] Boat burials cannot be discussed here owing to limitations of space.

[4] I am thankful to Jan Storå for drawing this case to my attention.

[5] The closest link is in a story of a merman (*marmannill*) that is caught in a net and gives a prophesy about a boy Þórir in the boat; Þórir is wrapped up to his neck in a seal-skin bag at the time (*Landnámabók* S68).

[6] In a runic inscription from Ireland, *selshǫfuð* appears as a byname with the Irish name *Domnall* (IR1), where it likely translates an Old Irish byname; in annals, the expression *selbelgju synir* 'seal-skin's sons' refers to a woman as *selbelgja* 'sealskin' and might be related to a seal-woman tradition, while a priest *Þorkell* has either the byname *selr* 'seal' or *sels* 'of the seal' (Lind 1905: 871). The epithet of *Sel*-Þórir 'Seal-Þórir' relates to the story in note 5 above.

[7] I am thankful to Jan Storå for his comments on this issue.

[8] For a challenge to the interpretation of these objects as bear teeth, see Jonuks 2017.

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