

# BIRDS AS COMPANIONS OF GERMANIC GODS AND HEROES

by

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*“Many the signs,  
if men but knew,  
That are good for the swinging of swords;  
It is well, methinks,  
if the warrior meets  
A raven black on his road.”*  
(Reginmál 20, Poetic Edda) (1)

An inquiry into the faunal element in the spiritual culture of the inhabitants of the Roman Age *Germania Libera* and those of Viking Age Scandinavia is essential for our understanding of the historical processes which were taking place on our continent in the 1st Millennium A.D. Unlike investigations of the ‘animalist’ ornament which have given rise to an ample and ever growing literature (basic bibliography in Karlsson L., 1983, pp. 190–192), the study of typology, functions and symbolism of birds in the pagan Germanic mythology and art seems to have provoked little interest of contemporary scholars. In the course of the last two decades, only two Russian articles have treated principles of bird iconography and attribution (Kulakov, 1988; Eniosova, 1994). Both articles seem, however, just preliminary works.

At the outset of the 3rd Millennium, A. A. Chlevov, a disciple of the outstanding historian of the North G. S. Levedev, discussed this problem in a chapter entitled ‘Image of the Bird in the Art of the North’ which is a part of his first monograph (Chlevov, 2002,

pp. 208–220). Although treating the Old Germanic period of the Scandinavian history from a culturological, rather than a historical or archaeological, viewpoint, the young Saint Petersburg colleague has nevertheless made several interesting observations on the birds’ role in the North Germanic spiritual culture. The author distinguishes four iconographical types of bird imagery for the 8th–10th cc.:

1. Birds in pairs, including the pagan canon ‘Odin and the Ravens’;
2. A bird thrusting its talons into its prey;
3. A bird with spread wings;
4. A bird with wings kept together behind its back, which “decorates the crest of the warriors helmet” (Chlevov, 2002, p. 210).

Further, A.A. Chlevov proposes a classification of birds in the Germanic mythology and archaeology, including also types with minimum attestation in texts and artifacts. The classification is as follows:

## A. *Predatory birds*

- A1. Eagles as objects of transmutation for gods (Odin) and giants (Suttungr, Tjazi), as symbolization of a part of space (Greisvegr in the north, Iggdrasil on top of an ash tree), as dwellers of the world revived after the *Ragnarök*.
- A2. Falcons as objects of transmutation for Freya and Loki.
- A3. Odin’s ravens, companions, informers and envoys, Hugin and Munin.
- A4. Owls as objects of sacrifice in the burial site Ven-

1. Quotations, here and in the following, are taken from: The Poetic Edda; Translated from the Icelandic with an introduction and notes by Henry Adams Bellows. New York: Amer.-Scandinavian. Foundation, 1923.

del III. However, the Roman Age Germanic people believed an encounter with an awl to be a sign of evil (Bobovich, 1969, p. 435).

B. *Non-predatory and/or domestic birds*

- B1. The rooster in two aspects: the quite positive “cock fair and red” Gollikanbi и “the rust-red bird at the bars of Hel” (Völuspá 42–43), while it is clear from Ibn Fadlan’s testimony that a rooster and a hen were sacrificed in their second, “dark”, aspect during a Rus merchant’s funeral ceremony.
- B2. Geese, ducks (and the crane) as a sacrifice in the burial site Vendel III, geese/swans as objects of transmutation for the Valkyries and Völund.
- B3. The sparrow as envoy of Konung Dag Dyggvasson from the Inglinga-saga. This shows “the bird’s status as a species and its functions having been lowered” in the mythological hierarchy Gods → Heroes/Konungar (Chlevov, 2002, p. 215).

The overwhelming majority of bird images known to us represents birds from section A. A.A. Chlevov, following G.F. Korzhuhina, rightly identifies Odin’s ravens with images showing a pair of birds accompanying a warrior (type 1 of images), even when some features of this species are missing, and the White-tail Eagle (or the kite) with type 2 images. Part of type 3 images (figures of birds as plates on Vendel Age shields) are identified by A.A. Chlevov (whereby he follows B. Ambrosiani) as eagles. As distinctive features he regards the characteristic Γ-like beak and a “swallows’ tail” (Chlevov, 2002, p. 218), which in fact better correspond to the Red Kite, common in the South of Scandinavia. Images of a bird with “half-spread wings and head turned aside” which are allegedly the source of the Rurik dynasty signs, show, according to the Saint Petersburg colleague, “a representative of diurnal predators, most probably a falcon, swooping on its prey” (Chlevov, 2002, p. 219). Such images, found mainly on headstall pendants of Prussian retainers’ horses of the 10th–11th cc., were previously interpreted as “eagles” (Kulakov V.I., 1987, S. 62) or “ravens” (Kulakov, 1988, pp. 115, 116). The typology of bird imagery and classification of birds’ occurrences in the Germanic mythology set forth by

Chlevov enable us to undertake, on a new scientific level, an interpretation of the bird imagery in the spiritual culture of the dwellers of the Germanic *Barbaricum*.

Tacit relates us of Germanic soothsaying practices based on birds’ voice and flight as early as in the 1st c. A.D. These divinations were administered by tribal priests or heads of families (Tacit, 1969, p. 357). The identity of these, surely sacred, birds is not immediately clear from the text. It can, however, be clarified with the help of the images from the Vendel Age Gotland steles. The Tängelgård stone shows, in the upper frieze (Fig. 1), a man watching the flight of an unproportionally huge predatory bird; then a vulture preying upon a male corpse; beneath, a bird, with head extended forth, soaring over a horse, the latter ready for immolation, judging by the gestures of a man in front of it. On the lower frieze, the horse is shown already sacrificed, its hide being held upright on wooden (?) supports. All these scenes of a cult ceremony are suggestive of a particular importance of predatory birds (most probably, eagles and ravens) in the Germanic cult (at least in the 8th c. Scandinavia). Sacrifice sites in the North of Europe could be frequented by White-tail Eagles, Golden Eagles, kites, and, possibly, Black vultures and Griffon Vultures. Birds played an important role in the Germanic magical practices. The importance of raven’s flesh in delivering might to a warrior is known from the “Fragment of Sigurd’s Song” (Brot af Sigurdarkviðu, verse 4).

A spread, in the 5th c. A.D., of numerous single and twin fibulae in the form of a predatory bird (front and side view), with a sickle-like beak and with the wings spread or folded, in Western Germania, chiefly among the Franks and the Alamanns (Thiry G., 1939, Taf. 22), is nowadays believed to have resulted from a powerful influence of Roman traditions. By pinning up their overwear with such clasps, the Germanic people, the crushers of the Roman *superbia*, were, already as early as in Attila’s time, beginning their *imitatio Imperii*, a mental process which reached its climax under Charlemagne and was completed in 962 by the rise of the 1st German Empire. The 5th c. A.D. Danube Goths introduced the image of a predatory bird with spread wings and a sickle-like beak extended along the figure’s vertical axis. This image was mainly

utilized in women's fibulae with a polychrome ornament. Though remarkably at odds with the existent predatory bird species, these artifacts of Barbarian art are, as convincingly shown by Günther Haseloff's study of Pannonic material, genetically connected with the Roman eagle canon symbolizing the Empire's military and civil authority. This image was previously regarded as borrowed from the ancient Black sea cities (Holmqvist W., 1961, p. 92). As early as mid-6th c., women's clasps of the Gothic and Gepid origin were decorated with "eagle" heads (Fig. 2,4) already bearing little resemblance of their prototypes in the actual world (Haseloff G., 1990, S. 29–32). Thus, the Germanic dwellers of the former West (Hyperborean) Roman Empire adopt a simplified image of Jupiter's winged envoy as a sign of their (at least, potential) social status as the bearers of the "imperial" idea and manifesting their (desired) social superiority. According to some scholars, however, this phenomenon is related to totemic beliefs of the Germanic people at the time of the rise of the first Barbarian states (Drjahlov, 1999, p. 49).

The above-mentioned sickle-like beaks are found with the griffons surrounding the "Sun god" on belt tips of provincial *Kerbschnitt* style artifacts. The archetypes of these beings were the Griffon Vultures, which still nest in the Balkans and Iberian peninsula and which until recently inhabited the Alps, Upper Rhine, the Tatras and the Apennines. Not only did compositions in the above-mentioned style provoke the rise of the 1st Common Germanic "animalist" style (Haseloff G., 1973, S. 441, 442), but they also promoted the formation of Variant 1 of the Odin canon (the Lord of the gods and the ravens with their beaks symmetrically lowered toward his shoulders – Kulakov, 1995, p. 67–70).

While the continental Germanic tribes took advantage of the Roman heritage, "... the North was largely left to its own devices as early as at the final stage of the Great migration" (Chlevov, 2002, p. 281). This hindered the spread and survival of the Roman legacy among the last pagan Germanic peoples. This is reflected, in particular, in their bird imagery. While in the mountainous South Europe the Germanic people could encounter several large species of eagles and vultures (the Golden, Imperial and White-tail Eagles, Black and Griffon Vultures), in Scandinavia and in

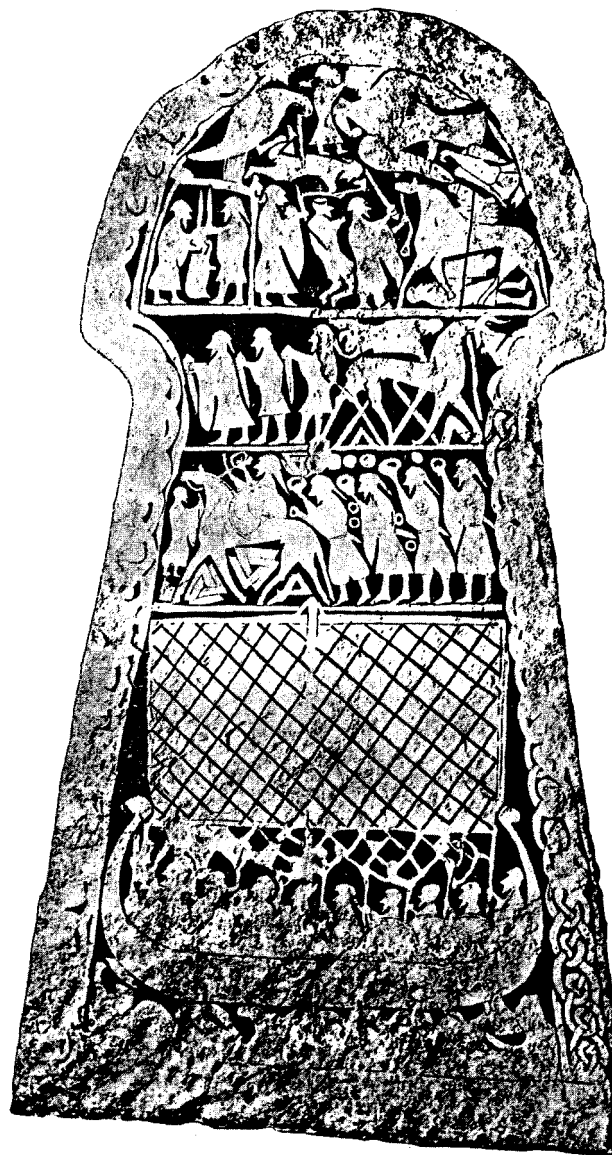
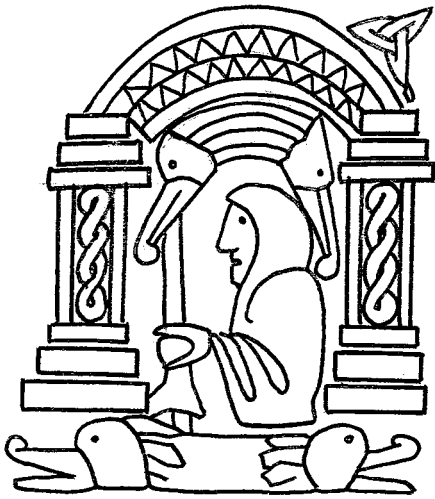


Fig. 1. Stone stele VIII c. from Tängelgård (Ksp. Lärbro, Gotland, Sweden). Nilén E., Lamm J.P., 1991, p. 67.

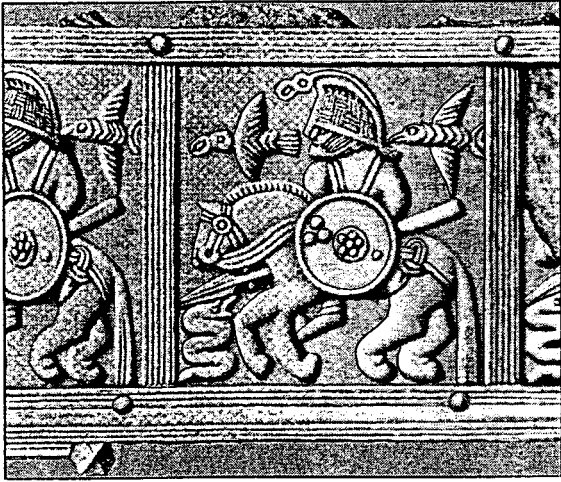
the Baltic coastal area these birds' variety was limited to the White-tail Eagle and the Golden eagle. The unproportional sickle-like "eagle" beaks occur ever more rarely since the mid-6th c. Contrary to that, birds of the canon "Odin and ravens" regain their natural extended beaks. Tips of the beaks, however, remain slightly curved. This is not surprising: the artist could render the raven's bulkier upper part of the



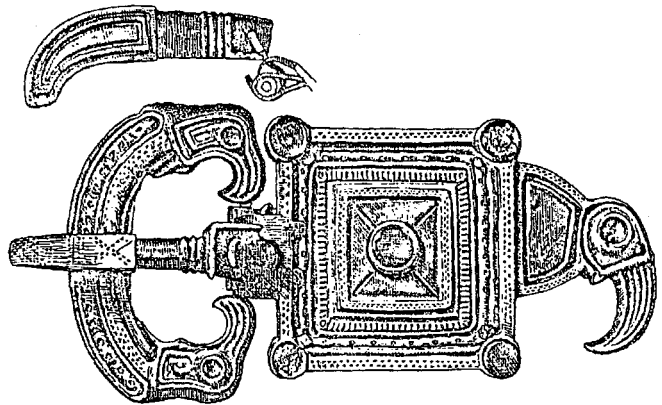
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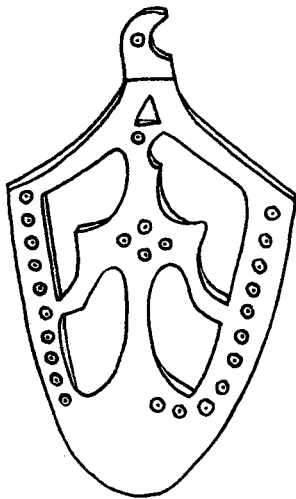
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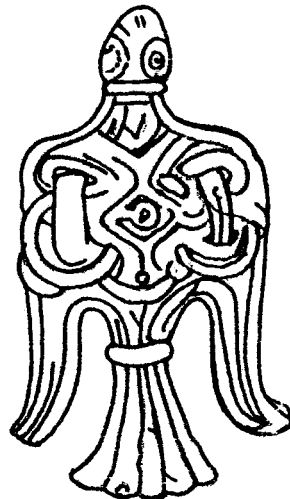
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beak (which is longer than the lower part of its beak) with a slight convolution at the tip. This is exemplified by Odin's "pagan icon" on one of the plates of the *Franks Casket* (Fig. 2,1), showing simplified images of the ravens Hugin and Munin over, and the wolves Geri and Freki (*a propos*, with heads resembling ducks'), beneath the Lord of the Slain. Equally far from the features of their species are the undoubtedly identifiable ravens on the images of Variant 2 of the Odin canon (Fig. 2,2) of the Viking Age. This trait of the Scandinavian art baffled A.A. Chlevov when he attempted to interpret the exterior of birds whose heads crown a warrior's (Odin's?) helmet on one type of Vendel shield plates, and made him follow B. Ambrosiani in the erroneous conclusion that "... the eagle and the raven have an equal claim to the status of 'Odin's bird'" (Chlevov, 2002, p. 219). This opinion, failing to distinguish between the role of the magical companions-envoys (ravens) and that of an ordinary, for the myth, means of transportation (eagle), is open to doubt. It cannot be doubted, however, that sacralisation of the Golden Eagle (whose English name alone is suggestive of its impressive exterior) was at least partly due to the natural properties of this bird inhabiting all areas of Europe, from the tundra to the steppes. Mature eagles have golden feathers at the napes of their heads. These feathers literally shining in the rays of the sun when the bird flies, which produces the effect of a halo or crown over the bird's head. Europe's ancient dwellers might regard this as a weighty argument for a divine or at least royal status of these birds. The Swedish name for the Golden Eagle is *Kungsörn* (i.e., the royal, the konung's eagle – sic!).

It is precisely the ravens (Fig. 2,3) who, judging by the epic strophe chosen as an epigraph for this article, were to accompany fortunate warriors in the battle (Korsuchina, 1976, p. 138). Vendel art objects, as well as Ostgoths' *Adlersfibeln* ("eagle fibulas"), show winged predators (not eagles anymore, but definitely ravens)

flying, with beaks extended forward (Arwidsson, 1977, Abb. 115). The same iconography recurs in the raven images found on Scandinavian coins in the 10th and the beginning of the 11th cc. (Graham-Campbell, Kidd, 1980, pl. 57,c). They show the silhouette of a flying raven whose shape is similar to that of the bird images on Vendel I shield plates. All images accentuate a long and bulky lower part of the beak, provided, for further impressiveness, with a small hook at the tip. The "ex-eagles" are shown in pairs on Gepid clasp frames of the 6th c. (Fig. 2,4), which may be a Barbarian replica to the ancient tradition of *apotropeion* belts (Haseloff, 1973, S. 442) modified by adding Germanic characters, i.e. the magical companions of the head of the Germanic pantheon. Finally, a new form of double-sided objects with twin bird figures appears (one bird on each side of the artifact) in the 9th c. These are sheath tips of the "Swedish-Varangian group" (Paulsen P., 1953, S. 22). Here, too, the birds portrayed are identifiable as ravens. Anna Stalsberg, however, interprets these as figures of hunting birds, namely, falcons (Stalsberg, 1981, p. 47). Previously, a direct connection of the sheath tip imagery with Vikings' military magic was demonstrated (Eniosova, 1994, p. 108; Kulakov, Iov, 2001, p. 82). Indirect evidence for this may be found in the *kenningar* of the skaldic poetry: Odin is the "trier of ravens", the sword is "Odin's fire" (Prosaic Edda, 1970, p. 107, 153). Sacred ravens accompanied the sword in the warrior's hand and gave him victory in the combat. Twin bronze clasps in the form of birds with beaks extended forward, used as hooks for fixing shoe straps and/or windings on a man's foot (Fig. 2,6), may have been charged with similar magical functions. Such clasps are rather uniform and known not only in Scandinavia but also in East Europe (Fechner, 1963, Fig 7,3) and Great Poland (Nadolski, 1979, ryc. 18).

The originally South Germanic *Reginismál*, part of the Sigurd/Siegfried cycle, shows affinity of symboli-

Fig. 2. Ravens in German iconography VI–X c: 1 – cella with Odin icon on Franks Casket, Northumberland, beg. VIII c.; 2 – bronze tip of fire-steel beg. IX c. from Malo-Anikovskoe cemetery (upper r. Kama); 3 – fragment of plate's belt of bronze helmet VII c. from burial site Vendel I; 4 – bronze fibulae VI c. from burial site 368 cemetery Kosewo, woj. Mazursko-Warmińskie, Poland; 5 – bronze tip of sheath X c. from cemetery Rjevskoe (Slavsk dist., Kaliningrad reg.), 6 – bronze belt tips X c. from Svarta Jorden (Björko, Sweden). Fig. 2,1 – Kulakov, 1995, fig. 1,3; Fig. 2,2 – ibidem, fig. 2,1; Fig. 2,3 – Khlevov, 2002, p. 120; Fig. 2,4 – Kulakov, 2002, fig. 4,12; Fig. 2,5 – Kulakov, 1988, fig. 3,2; Fig. 2,6 – Ambrosiani B., Erikson B.G., 1993, p. 5.

cal (and magical?) functions of the eagle and the raven for the Germanic warrior:

*“Now the bloody eagle with biting sword  
Is carved on the back of Sigmund’s killer;  
Few were more fierce in fight than his son,  
Who reddened the earth and gladdened the ravens.”*  
(Reginismál 26).

Snorri Sturluson, the representative of a later Scandinavian tradition, shows in his *kennningar* a functional similarity of the eagle and the raven as birds accompanying the warrior in his perious life (and death). (Prosaic Edda, 1970, p. 165). One of Odin’s names (“The Lord of the Slain”) suggests that recurrent mentioning of birds of both species together marks the true warrior’s “best journey” to the Valhall, to his ultimate and eternal konung Odin. It can be supposed that the rise of an eagle/raven composite image characterizing the true warrior’s wisdom and nobility can date back to the Vendel time. This image was frequently placed on konungs’ banners of different Viking troops (including that of Ragnar Lodbrok in the beginning of the 9 c. – Kulakov, 1989, p. 67). Linguistic data confirm affinity of the eagle and the raven, as the sacred birds of Valhall, in the cult (Gamkrelidze, Ivanov, 1984, p. 540). They are, however, not on the par as Odin’s companions (see above).

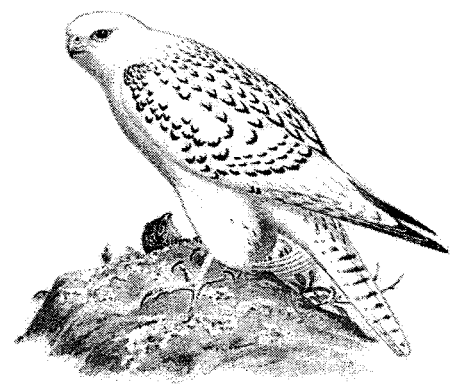
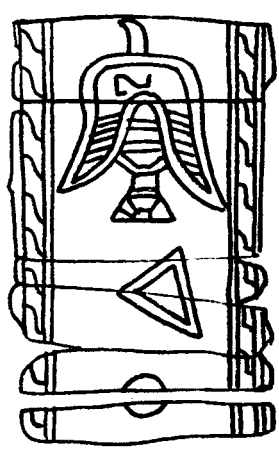
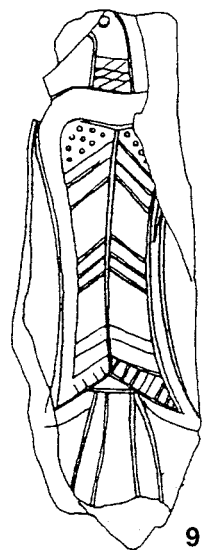
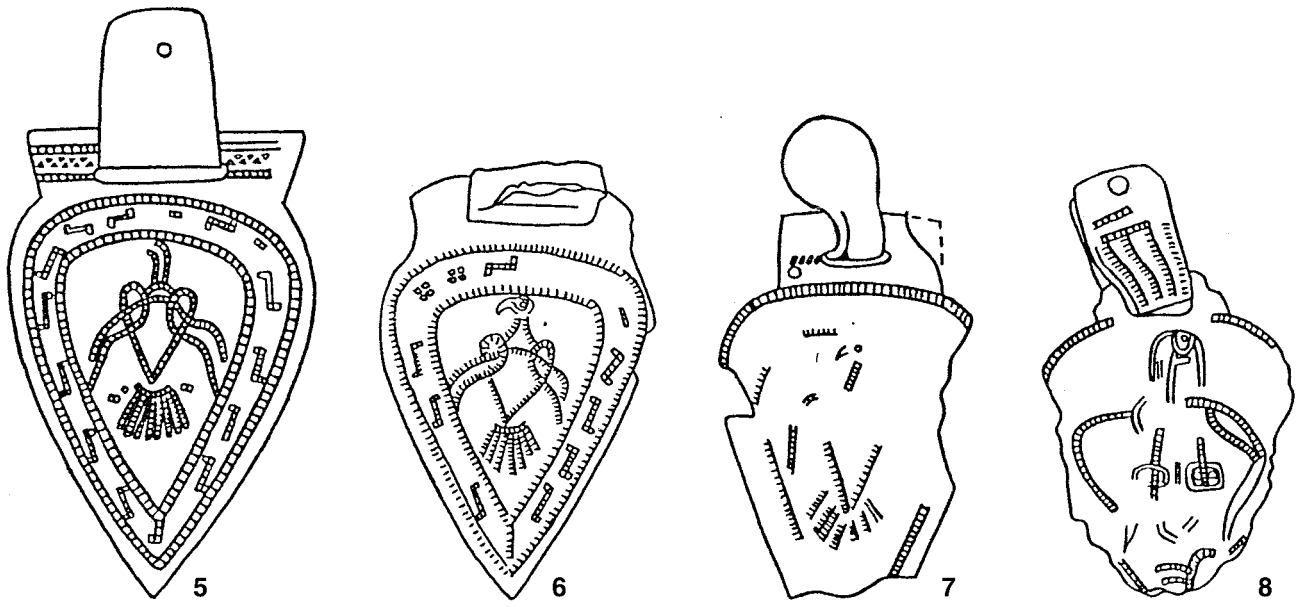
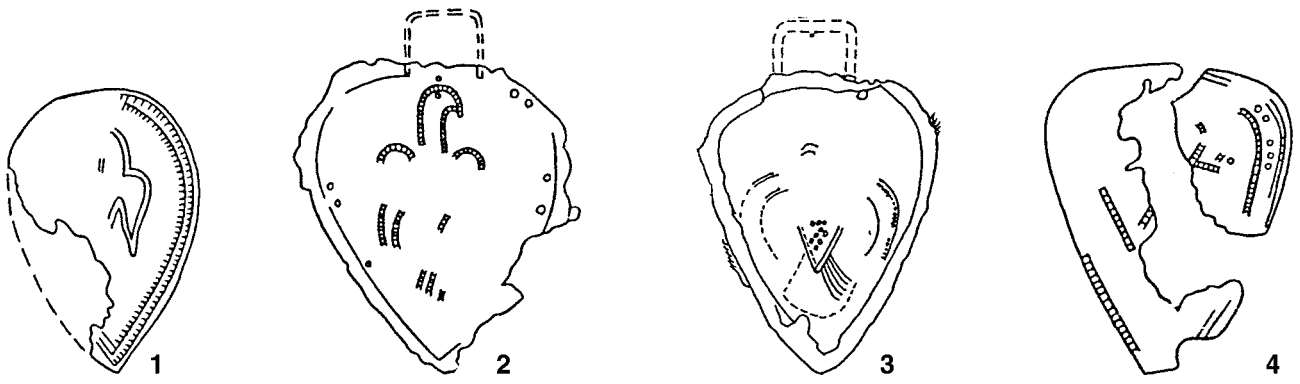
There is, however, another iconographical type of predatory bird in the art (not solely Germanic, but international) of the Viking Age. As fine as the Vendel ravens, bird figures of this type (chiefly on pendants from Prussian horse equipment – Fig. 3,1–8) are peculiar in having heads with exquisite hook-like beaks not extended forward, but turned heraldically to the right. A.A. Chlevov identifies these figures, previously interpreted as “eagles” or “ravens”, as “falcons” (see above).

Since 1997, excavations of a retinue burial ground at Yrzekapinis (Zelenogradsk district of Kaliningrad region) resulted in the discovery of over a dozen of

whole and fragmented shield-like pendants (moulded of bronze on a wax model and covered with pressed silver foil) from horse headstalls of Sambian retainers of the 10th–11th cc. This set of object with bird images and its variation has allowed a more precise dating of each burial site (Kulakov, 1992, pp. 139–142). These standard artifacts have been proved to be the earliest military emblems in the mediaeval Europe, in effect, coats of arms, indicating the social status of the person possessing a horse with such a pendant (Kulakov, 1988, p. 108). During a 2002 excavation of burial site Do-375 (3rd quarter of the 9 c.) of the Dollkeim cemetery, a fragmented horn cheekpiece was found. It shows the back view of a bird with folded wings (Fig. 3,9). A similar bird occurs on a wooden cylinder from the proto-urban settling Wolin (Fig. 3,10). This cylinder was part of a merchandize pack (tally of the prince’s tribute/tax official and a lock – Janin, 1982, p. 152). On both artifacts, the identity of birds is further indicated by oblique stripes (particularly coloured feathers) on the wings.

It has been ascertained that the images on the Prussian pendants, the Dollkeim cheekpiece and the Wolin wooden cylinder belong to the noblest predatory bird of the northern demisphere, the Gyr falcon (*Falco rusticolis* L.). This species is common in the Arctic coastal tundra areas. The colour of its feathers is individual and fluctuates from motley brown to white. Gyr falcons from North-West Asia, North America, Greenland and Iceland have mainly white feathers, but are not albinos (Cramp & Simmons, 1990). In their migrations, birds of this species, which nestle in Scandinavia, reached the South-East Baltic area, where they may have served as a model for artists catering to the needs of the local international retainers. Besides, Gyr falcons appeared on the south coast of the Baltic as hunting birds, being, alongside with walrus fangs and narwhal tusks, one of the most important Scandinavian import items. It should be borne in mind that a hunting (gyr-)falcon was an ex-

Fig. 3. Gyr falcons in the iconography of the Viking Age: whole and fragmented shield-like pendants (moulded of bronze on a wax model and covered with pressed silver foil) from horse headstalls from Yrzekapinis and Dollkeim/Kovrovo (Zelenogradsk dist., Kaliningrad reg.): 1 – Y-91; 2 – Y-97, about 950; 3 – Do-339, about 975; 4 – Y-82; 5 – Y-10, about 1000; 6 – Y-52, about 1000; 7 – Y-36; 8 – Y-65, about 1025; 9 – lower part of horny snaffle-bit from Do-375, about 975; 10 – scanning of picture on wooden cylinder from Wolin, Poland, X c.; 11 – the Gyr falcon. Fig. 3,1,2,4–8 – Kulakov, 1992, fig. 1–3; Fig. 3,3 – Kulakov, Kalashnikov 2002, fig. 3; Fig. 3,10 – Kulakov, 1988, fig. 6,14.



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cellent and expensive present well into modern times, marking, in particular, dynastical connections of the European royal families. The features of the falcon as a species: curved long, pointed wings, a short tail which is never longer than the wings, are clearly reflected on the artifacts represented in Fig. 3. All these are united by a common origin: troops of southern and south-eastern coasts of the Baltic. Even the whiteness of the gyrfalcon's feathers is aptly rendered by a silver covering of pendants and a fair colour of horn and wood. The cheekpiece and the cylinder tally additionally show the pattern of the bird's wings. This again confirms the correctness of our identification, as completely white gyrfalcons are rare. More common are birds with black spots on generally white feathers (Fig. 3,11), which is exactly what oblique stripes on the image represent. On the image, the bird is shown from behind, as the paws are not to be seen on the artifacts. This is exactly in this position, i.e. sitting on the owners glove, that the recipients must have seen the (gyr-)falcon. Under another interpretation, the image represents a Gyrfalcon on its prey, wings slightly spread to cover its booty and the turn of the head indicating the bird's control over the environment. Such an image is profoundly symbolical as a military emblem. Gyrfalcon images on details of horse equipment further emphasize the 'man – horse – (gyr-)falcon' triad. The gyrfalcon used to be Iceland's national emblem and, by the 18th c., had been included into the Danish royal emblem together with the emblems of other lands united under the Danish crown (Burkov, 2002, p. 65). By the royal decree of October 9, 1903 Iceland was given an emblem showing a silver "falcon" against a blue heraldic field. This figure symbolized the fact that "for a long time the best falcons for hunting had been exported from Iceland all around the world" (Hesmer, 1992, S. 70). However, the Icelandic nation discarded this fine symbol after gaining independence in 1918, probably feeling it as symbolising domination of the Kingdom of Denmark over the descendants of the Norse colonists.

The images of a falcon/raven were very prestigious for the Germanic peoples in the early Middle Ages, when the memory of Rome's imperial power (symbolized by the eagle) was still alive, and tribal migrations were spreading the cult of Odin (and the image of the

raven) who obtained the position of the head of the Germanic pantheon after the 3rd c. A.D. (Selizkij, 2002, pp. 44, 57). Thus, it is not surprising that the two images finally merge in a single heraldic figure symbolizing the might and power of the 1st German Empire which revived the splendour of the Roman state (Kulakov, 1997, p. 17). The (gyr-)falcon's position in the Scandinavian spiritual culture is a much more modest one. Like many other birds, it serves the gods as a vehicle when they put on its feathers to assume a falcon's shape (Freya, Loki in the story of the goddess Idunn abducted by the giant Tjazzi who had taken up the form of an eagle – Prosaic Edda, 1970, p. 99). The Sigurd story contains a parable about Randver, Ermunrekk/Germanarich's son, who demonstrated (too late, though) the necessity of being supported by the son to the old konung by means of his plucked falcon (Prosaic Edda, 1970, p. 140). Much later, in 12–13 cc., judging from Icelandic decorative art (e.g., the Ferretre church gate relief reflecting themes from the Sigurd cycle), the falcon invariably accompanies the northern knight on his way to exploits (Worsaae, 1859, p. 127, pl. 505). Evidently, the falcon's semantic value is considerably slighter than that of the uniform eagle/raven image, and is associated with secondary characters from the Asgard and, remarkably, also the Midgard. In the actual life, the (gyr-)falcon (only the latter and the peregrine falcon could be used as hunting birds in the North of Europe) was a practically obligatory attribute of a Scandinavian warrior of the Middle Iron Age. In the South-West Baltic it was an important status-defining accessory of a Prussian noble even in the mid-13th c. (Pashuto, 1959, p. 501). Most probably, the Prussian nobles' forefathers, too, had esteemed the white "falcon" (or, more precisely, – gyrfalcon, exported from Europe's Arctic areas, possibly from Iceland) as a symbolic bird emphasizing a high, even though not supreme, but at least independent and self-contained position of the Prussian (Sambia) and West-Slavonic (Wolin) troops within the Viking movement. It should not be forgotten that falconry was status-defining. Possession of a (gyr-) falcon is as significant of a high rank of a member of the Barbarian heroic society, as a suite of retainers or nobles, a crown, a golden bit or the "ring-giver" bracelets. On the Spong banner (Uppland, Sweden), even Thor the Thunderer rides



to his last battle on the day Ragnarök holding a bird on his left palm, and the contours of the bird resemble a (gyr-)falcon (Kulakov, 1989, Fig. 5,1).

After the above given analysis of the evidence of Germanic archeology and mythological tradition, it is possible to identify the species and functions of birds appearing on Germanic pagan images of the 5th–11th cc. by resorting to A. A. Chlevov's typological and textual "bird registers":

1. Birds in pairs – the pagan canon "Odin and the Ravens" (prophetic birds inform their lord of the events in the world – Fig. 2,2) and the warrior's companions in a war;
2. A bird grasping its prey (fish) with its talons, a rare theme for the Vendel Age, representing a White-tail Eagle (Havsörn, der Seeadler – "the sea eagle");
3. A bird with spread wings: with a sickle-like beak – the "barbarian" replica of the Roman eagle; in the Viking Age – a component of the unified symbolization of the warrior's fate, the eagle/raven; with head extended in the direction of the flight – the raven, the companion of a Vendel Age warrior; with head turned heraldically right, sharp curved wings – the gyrfalcon, a symbol of retainers (proliferation is limited to Amber Coast/Sambia, the 9th–11th cc.), but not of the konung. The figure of a vertically dissected and/or decapitated bird with spread wings is an attribute of the konung's sacred authority (symbolizing the sacrifice of a rooster), in Russia it became the source of the Rurik signs (Kulakov, 1988, p. 112).
4. A bird with wings behind its back "decorating the crest of the warrior's helmet" – the eagle/raven, a

composite image which replaced the imperial eagle of the Roman helmets. The latter had served as a prototype of the Scandinavian helmets of the middle Iron Age.

Thus, birds of prey played a significant role in the Germanic art of the 1st half of the 1st Millennium A.D., which is to be expected in a heroic society of Odin's and Thor's adepts. Images of domestic birds – geese/swans – are extremely rare (Auson casket), sheath tips and pendants of the 10th c. show roosters as objects of sacrifice. It is characteristic and significant that the iconographical types only partially correspond to the mythological classification of birds. The birds represented in the latter could be absent from the Germanic bestiary for reasons of cult and/or mentality. They could be tabooed and therefore excluded from imagery or shown in a sketchy manner (e.g. the not always easily discernible eagle/raven image associated with the warrior's fate and his journey to Valhall). The most clearly identifiable is the white gyrfalcon, whose images were spread locally in the South-West Baltic at the final stage of the Viking Age. The sambian troop, where Scandinavians may have constituted no majority, may have decided to find a substitute for the traditional eagle/raven as the warriors' companion. Thus, the Gyrfalcons in the Prussian art anticipated the idea reflected in a song of Russian soldiers from Potemkin's time: «Wzwejtēs' sokoly orlami, polno gore gorewat!» ("Soar, o falcons, like the eagles, grief and mourn you've had enough!"). Later on, these polar birds never failed to uphold their dignity, too, on the emblems of the Danish Kingdom and Iceland.

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