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Traces of Germanic mythology
from the 6th-7th century
Carpathian Basin based on
archaeological finds

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In the 6th century AD, following the dissolution of Attila's Hunnic Empire, various Germanic factions and tribes inhabited the Carpathian Basin. The most numerous and politically significant of them were the Gepids and the Lombards (or Langobards). My goal in this paper is to discuss the mythological context of some of the ornaments and representations of figures found on archaeological finds from the 6th and 7th century Carpathian Basin associated with the Gepids and Lombards. This way I can hopefully shed some light on some of the aspects of Germanic mythology at that time, compared to the later written sources.

Lombards and Gepids

In this part I will talk about the mythological origins of these two Germanic peoples, which can hopefully give us some insights on their mythology. I'll also provide a brief historical overview of the Lombards and Gepids in the Carpathian Basin and discuss what the religion of these peoples was during the 6th and 7th centuries.

The mythical origins of the Lombards have been recorded in two early medieval texts. The first one, titled *Origo gentis Langobardorum* was written in the 7th century by an unknown author, the second, titled *Historia Langobardorum* (History of the Langobards) was written by the Benedictine monk Paul the Deacon in the 8th century. The two versions of the tale slightly differ from each other.¹ According to the *Historia Langobardorum*:

„The Winnili then, having departed from Scandinavia with their leaders Ibor and Aio, and coming into the region which is called Scoringa, settled there for some years. At that time Ambri and Assi, leaders of the Wandals, were coercing all the neighboring provinces by war. Already elated by many victories they sent messengers to the Winnili to tell them that they should either pay tribute to the Wandals or make ready for the struggles of war. Then Ibor and Aio, with the approval of their mother Gambara, determine that it is better to maintain liberty by arms than to stain it by the payment of tribute. They send word to the Wandals by messengers that they will rather fight than be slaves. The Winnili were then all in the flower of their youth, but were very few in number since they had been only the third part of one island of no great size.

¹ MARTIN 2000, p. 303-304.

At this point, the men of old tell a silly story that the Wandals coming to Godan (Wodan) besought him for victory over the Winnili and that he answered that he would give the victory to those whom he saw first at sunrise; that then Gambaro went to Frea (Freja) wife of Godan and asked for victory for the Winnili, and that Frea gave her counsel that the women of the Winnili should take down their hair and arrange it upon the face like a beard, and that in the early morning they should be present with their husbands and in like manner station themselves to be seen by Godan from the quarter in which he had been wont to look through his window toward the east. And so it was done. And when Godan saw them at sunrise he said: „Who are these long-beards?” And then Frea induced him to give the victory to those to whom he had given the name. And thus Godan gave the victory to the Winnili.”²

One of the few differences between the tale told in the *Historia* and the one in the *Origo* is that, in the *Origo* Frea turns around her husband's bed while he was still sleeping so that Godan would see the Winnils first when he awakes. The text also mentions that the new direction towards Godan was facing and the Winnils have lined up was to the east, so that the original direction towards the god is facing in the morning is to the west.³ While these texts do not tell us much about the pre-Christian Lombard religion, we can certainly assume that the god Godan (whom Paul also calls Wotan and is the ancient Germanic equivalent of Odin) played a significant part and was worshipped as a war god by the Lombards as well as by the Vandals. This could probably be the case even if this story was only invented shortly before the time that it was recorded, because it indicates that some memory of Wotan's attributes still lived on and could be used in the creation of such a myth. Another deity mentioned in the tale is Frea, who is called the wife of Godan, whereas in the later sources of Nordic mythology the wife of Odin is called Frigg. We can assume that Frea (Freja) is the correspondence of the Vanir god Freyja. It has been speculated before, that Frigg and Freyja, based on similarities of their attributes were once the same deity,⁴ so that could be a possible explanation as to why Frea is the wife of Godan in the origin myth of the Lombards.

According to archaeological evidence the Lombards originated from the territory around the mouth of the Elbe River. The first accounts of them were recorded by Strabo and

² Paul Diac, *Hist. Lang.* I, 7-8.

³ MARTIN 2000, p. 304., 308.

⁴ LINDOW 2001, p. 126.

Tacitus.⁵ They departed from their homeland around the end of the 4th century AD. From there they migrated to Bohemia, Moravia, Noricum and finally arrived in Pannonia around 526 at the time of the death of Theoderich the Great. During their time in Pannonia they came into close contact with the Gepids inhabiting the eastern half of the Carpathian Basin, which even led to war on some occasions. The Lombards remained in the western part of the Carpathian Basin until 568, one year after the nomadic Avars crushed the Kingdom of the Gepids and settled in their territory. This newfound neighboring presence of the Avars proved to be much more dangerous for the Lombards than their previous neighbors, so they eventually left Pannonia and moved on to settle in Northern Italy.⁶

We know that the Lombards converted to the Catholic faith gradually during the 7th century, during their occupation of Italy. The question of their faith before converting to Catholicism however has caused some debate among historians. For a long time the consensus was, that the Lombards came in touch with the Arian Christianity (a Late Antique teaching of Christianity denying the deity of Christ⁷) and began to convert to it at the end of the 5th century, during their time in Noricum, which was previously ruled by the Rugi who were already following Arianism. However we have no historical sources whatsoever from the 5th or 6th centuries identifying the Lombards to be Arians. Even the Catholic bishop, Gregory of Tours, one of the most important historians of that time, who was a devoted anti-Arian and always recorded Arianism amongst other groups, didn't mention that the Lombards were Arians. During their invasion of Italy, the Lombards were instead called pagans and idol worshippers by Pope Pelagius II and Pope Gregory I.⁸ We also have reports from Italy at around the turn of the 6th and 7th centuries of pagan practices among the Lombards, like praying at sacred trees, participating in ritual feasts or sacrificing to idols with the head of she-goats.⁹ Archaeological records of funerary customs (people being buried with grave goods or the occasional cremation of the dead) also support the view of them following their pagan ways in the 6th century.¹⁰ In light of this data it seems safe to assume that the majority

⁵ BÓNA 1974, p. 17., MARTIN 2000, p. 310.

⁶ BÓNA 1974, p. 19-25., 85-87., 91.

⁷ GALLINA 1999, p. 98.

⁸ FANNING 1981, p. 241-244., 257., 258.

⁹ BÓNA 1974, p. 79., FANNING 1981, p. 243.

¹⁰ BÓNA 1974, p. 79.

of the Lombards living in Pannonia in the 6th century were still following the Germanic paganism.

Of the Gepids' myths or history we have much less information, as we don't know any sources written by themselves surviving to this day. Any sources telling us about the Gepids were written by Lombard, Gothic or Roman authors.¹¹ The mythical origin of the Gepids is only mentioned in the Gothic historian's, Jordanes work, *De origine actibusque Getarum* (The Origin and Deeds of the Goths) in a mocking manner:

„You surely remember that in the beginning I said the Goths went forth from the bosom of the island of Scandza with Berig, their king, sailing in only three ships toward the hither shore of Ocean, namely to Gothiscandza. One of these three ships proved to be slower than the others, as is usually the case, and thus is said to have given the tribe their name, for in their language gepanta means slow. Hence it came to pass that gradually and by corruption the name Gepidae was coined for them by way of reproach. For undoubtedly they too trace their origin from the stock of the Goths, but because, as I have said, gepanta means something slow and stolid, the word Gepidae arose as a gratuitous name of reproach. I do not believe this is very far wrong, for they are slow of thought and too sluggish for quick movement of their bodies.”¹²

Unfortunately this tale doesn't tell us anything about the beliefs of the Gepids. The only thing in this text that could probably refer to the Germanic pagan cosmology is the appearance of the number three (the three ships of Berig), of which we know that it had great significance in later Norse mythology also. However, based on the fact that the Gepids are closely related to the Goths,¹³ we can assume that their religion was similar to an extent. Of the Gothic paganism we have more information to what we can – with some caution – relate in discussing the Gepids' beliefs. For both of the major factions of the Goths, the worship of ancestors and forefathers was a significant element in their religion. They were deified and regarded as demigods. The Tervings (Visigoths) often sang songs praising their forefathers at the start of a battle. According to Jordanes some of the ancestors of the Amali dynasty who

¹¹ BÓNA 1974, p. 13.

¹² Jord. Get. XVII, 94-95.

¹³ B. TÓTH 1999, p. 13.

committed heroic deeds were called *Ansis* (Aesir).¹⁴ We know as well, that the Goths had a god of war, the analogy of Ares-Mars who was also a divine forefather. His original name could be close to 'Teiws', a name derived from the runic alphabet. Another god was associated with the sky and thunder, mentioned as Jupiter, probably called *Faírguneis* in the gothic tongue.¹⁵ This gothic name corresponds with the Norse gods Fjörgynn and Fjörgyn.¹⁶ The latter, an Earth goddess, being mentioned as the mother of Thor in *Völuspá*, could be associated with the god of thunder.¹⁷ Based on the notion that the name Fjörgynn has the same origin as the name Perun and Perkunas, the Slavic and Baltic storm gods, it has been theorised that Fjörgynn was originally the father of Thor ('Thunder'), and has been once the main Germanic storm god. Thor, as a thundering son of the storm god is similar to the sons of Uranos; Brontes, Steropes and Arges.¹⁸ Lastly, we know of an Ansic forefather called *Gaut*, who, in Scandinavia became one of the names of Odin, but only in the time after the fall of the Gothic rule of Italy. Herwig Wolfram's opinion is that Gaut and Odin were initially separate gods, so on that basis we can rule out the worship of Odin among the Goths.¹⁹

Just like the Goths, the Gepids were also an East Germanic tribe. Their origins can be traced back to Wielbark culture, an Iron Age archaeological complex, starting from the 1st century AD, situated around the mouth of the river Vistula. The first appearance of them in written history is from around the second half of the 3rd century, although in the work of Jordanes, written centuries later.²⁰ They've settled the eastern part of the Carpathian Basin (Transylvania and the Great Hungarian Plain east from the river Tisza) during the 4th century. After the arrival of the Huns in the late 4th century the Gepids became a part of the Hunnic Empire. Their king, Ardaric was one of the most important lieutenants of Attila, and after the Hunnic ruler's death, was one of the lead figures in the revolt against Attila's successors and the collapse of the Hunnic Empire. During the century after the end of the Hunnic rule the

¹⁴ CHRISTENSEN 2002, p. 126., WOLFRAM 1990, p. 106.

¹⁵ WOLFRAM 1990, p. 109., WEST 2007, p. 241.

¹⁶ GRIMM 1854, p. 837.

¹⁷ LINDOW 2001, p. 117.

¹⁸ WEST 2007, p. 241., 242., 250.

¹⁹ WOLFRAM 1990, p. 110-111.

²⁰ B. TÓTH 1999, p. 13-14., 16.

Gepids came into confrontation with the rulers of Pannonia multiple times, first the Ostrogoths and then the Lombards.²¹ One of the more significant battles between the Gepids and the Lombards in the year 552 was called the battle of Asfeld, speculated to be named after the Aesir gods.²² The fall of the Kingdom of the Gepids started after the death of Byzantine Emperor Justinian the Great in 565. His successor, Justin II allied with the Gepids against the Lombards, who in return sought help from the Avar khagan Bayan, whose people were living in the steppes east from the Carpathian Basin. Eventually, at the time of the Avars' invasion in 567, the Gepids were left without the help of the Byzantine forces, because their king Kunimund was reluctant to return the occupied Roman city of Sirmium to their southern neighbors, so Bayan could achieve victory over them with ease.²³ Although after the year 568 the Carpathian Basin came under the rule of the Avars, according to archaeological evidence there were still Germanic groups living in the basin during the 7th century. This would serve as proof that the conquered Gepids, and possibly other smaller Germanic groups (maybe even some Lombardic remnants) were assimilated into the Avar Khaganate and were serving as auxiliary forces.²⁴

The religion of the Gepids during the 6th and 7th centuries is also a matter of great debate. Among the East Germanic tribes Arianism started to spread as early as during the 3rd century. The scholar Procopius of Caesarea reported from the 6th century, that the Goths, the Vandals and the Gepids were following the teachings of Arius. One of the territories of the Kingdom of the Gepids that was most probably a center for Arianism was the city of Sirmium in Pannonia Secunda, close to the Byzantine border. Here the Gepids even establish an Arian diocese in 536. Despite the written sources however the vast majority of Gepid graves tell us of pagan burial customs. This can mean that acceptance of Arianism was only for a small portion of the society, mainly the aristocracy, and even for them it was more of a political statement or adjusting to the Roman way of life, rather than the changing of their personal beliefs. While some of the Gepidic aristocracy adopted Christianity, the common people were following their traditional religion and remained this way under the rule of the Avars also.²⁵

²¹ BÓNA 1974, p. 14-17.

²² GALLINA 1999, p. 98.

²³ BÓNA 1974, p. 81-84.

²⁴ SZENTPÉTERI 2009, p. 235.

²⁵ GALLINA 1999, p. 98-99., 101., 104.

Finds bearing bird shapes

From the archaeological record of the both the Lombards and the Gepids, the finds bearing bird shapes are fairly common. These items are usually brooches and belt buckles (FIG. 1).²⁶ The small bird shaped brooches are also frequent finds in western Merovingian period Germanic like Frankish and Alemannic sites.²⁷ A significant portion of the items from the Carpathian Basin are expensive jewels found in the graves of wealthy Gepidic women.²⁸ One of the most important of these finds are two eagle figures found in the Gepidic royal graves at Apahida, Romania in 1969, dating to the end of the 5th century. The birds have almandine inlay, and were probably decorating the horse harness of the high ranking dead buried there.²⁹ Parallels of the Apahida ornamental birds are known from other western late 5th to 6th century Germanic sites, for example from Visigothic Hispania (FIG. 2).³⁰ Concerning the birds in Germanic mythology the first species that would come to our mind is the raven, the companions (*fylgjur*) of Odin,³¹ but the birds depicted on these finds are clearly of a different species, their beaks have a curved shape reminding us of a stronger bird of prey like the eagle or the hawk.

From later sources of Nordic mythology we have some texts mentioning eagles and hawks. In the Eddas the eagles appear as animal shapes that usually the giants assume. One of them is Hræsvelg, mentioned in *Vafthrúdnismál* and in *Gylfaginning*. The wind originates from him as he sits at the end of the heaven in a shape of an eagle and flaps his wings. Another giant is Thjazi, told to us in *Skáldskaparmál*, who is in the form of an eagle when he abducts Loki and forces him to bring him Idun's apples. Lastly there is the giant Suttung whom we meet in *Hávamál* and *Skáldskaparmál*. In this story Odin steals the mead of poetry from Suttung and tries to escape in a form of an eagle, which form the giant also assumes and

²⁶ BÓNA 1974, p. 50., 51., MÜLLER 2003, p. 299.

²⁷ RÁCZ 2011, p. 165.

²⁸ NAGY 1993, p. 35.

²⁹ CSEH 1993, p. 40., 41.

³⁰ RIPOLL 2000, p. 188-190.

³¹ HEDEAGER 2011, p. 82., 86-88.

pursues the god.³² As we can see from this last tale, not only giants take on the forms of eagles, but Odin does it also one time. This could mean that Odin was once associated with the eagle as well. In any case, if the eagle would have been an animal mainly tied to creatures of chaos like the giants in the earlier stages of Germanic mythology, then its symbols most probably wouldn't have been part of the clothing in the Merovingian era.

Another eagle appearing in *Grímnismál* and *Gylfaginning* is an unnamed but wise being who resides at the top of Yggdrasil and shares insults with the dragon Nídhögg living below the world tree, with the squirrel named Ratatosk carrying their words. Although these words of malice attest a negative attribute to him, the wise eagle could well be the opposite of the beast of chaos in the deep. The hawks appearing in the Eddas can be associated with more positive roles. Hawks appear in the *Grímnismál* when the poem is listing the best of mainly good things in the world, like Sleipnir of horses, Bifröst of bridges, Bragi of skalds and Hábrók of hawks. Vedrfölnir is another hawk mentioned by Snorri Sturulson in *Gylfaginning*. Apparently Vedrfölnir sits between the eyes of the wise eagle at the branches of the world tree. John Lindow speculates that the function of this hawk is similar to that of Odin's ravens, who fly off gathering knowledge for their master, who, in the case of Vedrfölnir, would be the wise eagle. In *Hervarar saga ok Heidreks konungs* Odin also puts on the form of a hawk and flies off, after King Heidrek sees through his disguise of Gestumblindi, the mysterious guest who puts the king to a riddle trial.³³ Based on these examples from the Eddas, the only god we can really associate the eagles and the hawks with is Odin, as he is the Aesir who assumes their forms. In addition the great wisdom that the eagle in the branches of Yggdrasil possesses is also an Odinic attribute. In case of the Lombards at the 6th and 7th centuries, wearing items that are decorated with these birds of prey that were assumably symbolising their god Odin (Godan), who gave them their victory over the Vandals in the past would seem a likely scenario. However if we turn to the Gepids and assume that their religion was similar to the that of Goth's, outlined by Herwig Wolfram, then the eagle or hawk motif representing Odin would be more problematic. In addressing this question we should look at other mythologies that could have had influence over the Gepidic religion.

According to Herwig Wolfram, the Gothic deity, Faírguneis could also have been called Jupiter after a time. One evidence for this would be the rich Gothic hoard from

³² LINDOW 2001, p.1 81., 182., 284., 287.

³³ LINDOW 2001, p. 134., 140., 239., 259., 312., 321.

Pietroassa, Romania, dated to the 4th century. The treasure consist a golden bracelet bearing a runic inscription, which reads 'GUTANIOWI HAILAG'. One of the many possible interpretations of this script would be „Holy to the Jupiter of the Goths”. According to Augustine, in 405, before the invasion of Italy, the chieftain of the Ostrogoths offered human sacrifices to Jupiter. Wolfram's opinion is that this could have been more than the *interpretation Romana* at work here.³⁴ While it is doubtful that the Gothic Jupiter and the Roman Jupiter were fully identical, it could be that these two deities shared more attributes than the thunder god worshipped in Viking age Scandinavia and the king of the gods of the antique Roman pantheon. One of these features could be the eagle as a sacred bird. The eagle was a sacred animal not only for Jupiter and Zeus, but can also be associated with other Indo-European storm gods, like the Slavic Perun and the Vedic Indra. Perun takes on the form of an eagle and swoops down from the top of a tree to fight the god of the underworld, Veles, who has the shape of a snake.³⁵ This could also be a good parallel for the verbal hostility between Nídhögg and the wise eagle at the top of Yggdrasil. In the Vedic tale similar to the story of how Odin stole the mead of poetry, the divine liquid called Soma is brought to the storm god, Indra by an eagle, assuming that he had command over eagles.³⁶

If the Goths and the Gepids did worship Faírguneis/Jupiter, this old Germanic storm god, who shared the attribute of association with eagles with other Indo-European storm gods, then it is possible that their personal ornaments representing birds of prey are symbols of him.

In the discussion of the bird of prey motifs, we should not exclude the influence from other non-Indo-European cultures and mythologies either. The eagle and the falcon were also significant animals in Hunnic material culture, as it often appears on gold fittings. Furthermore, the bird of prey always had a strong presence in the steppe Nomadic shamanistic religions. Therefore there is the possibility that some Germanic peoples, especially the Gepids, who lived under Hunnic reign for almost a century, adopted features of Hunnic ideology and worldview and incorporated them into their own cosmology.³⁷ This would mean that some motifs, like the eagles, that are considered to be representations of Indo-European myths are actually the reflections of an eastern shamanistic tradition.

³⁴ WOLFRAM 1990, p. 109., 110.

³⁵ LYLE 2009, p. 149.

³⁶ WEST 2007, p. 158., 159., 244.

³⁷ HEDEAGER 2011, p. 195., 196.

Bracteates

Germanic bracteates are round, thin precious metal medallions mostly made of gold, decorated with mythological iconography from the 5th and 6th centuries. They were very likely worn as amulets around the neck. These items were mainly present in Southern Scandinavia, although they have been also found throughout Europe from England to the Ukraine. Germanic bracteates were originally made as copies of the 4th century Roman emperor medallions, given as diplomatic gift to barbarian chieftains. They replaced the Roman iconography with their own, and instead of Latin inscriptions, runic scripts were drawn on the copies. The figures portrayed on them represent mythological stories that have been already lost to us.³⁸

At least two of these items were found at around Debrecen, Hungary, dating to the early 6th century (FIG. 3). The finds can be linked to the Gepids. The pictures on the two bracteates are the same, it shows a human head, wearing some kind of headdress, an animal that resembles a horse with bull horns or maybe a stag, symbols of swastika and a runic inscription.³⁹ Four other pieces has been found in burial of a woman (grave nr. 21) of the Pannonian Lombard cemetery of Várpalota, Hungary (FIG. 4). The items were worn as part of a necklace alongside with beads.⁴⁰ On one of them we can see a person with a bird headdress sitting on a throne. Besides him are two animals, a wolf, that is biting his right hand and a bird of prey. The three other medallions represent stylized birds of prey.⁴¹

The scene we see on the finds from Debrecen has its exact parallels from other bracteates found in Denmark, for example from Kølby and Kjøllegård, Bornholm, these are called Type C bracteates (FIG. 5). On these parallels we can see that the headdress worn by the human figure looks like a bird. It could be symbolising the being's shape shifting ability. On one bracteata from Skrydstrup we can see the same figure standing with a wolf, a deer, a bird and two snakes (FIG. 6). This figure is thought to be the representation Odin, as a

³⁸ TÓTH 1993, p. 40., HEDEAGER 2011, p. 55.

³⁹ GALLINA 1999, p. 97., TÓTH 1993, p. 40.

⁴⁰ WERNER 1962, p. 33., TAF. 7, 6-9.

⁴¹ TÓTH 1993, p. 40.

powerful magician embarked on a mystical journey accompanied by animals. Thus it would be representing the shamanistic aspects of the god.⁴²

In the discussion of the bracteata from Debrecen I should also address the problem of the swastika. Some other C-type finds also bear the swastika symbol, while some of them don't. The swastika was a common symbol among the various Germanic groups. According to Ellis Davidson the symbol is associated with fire, and could be connected with the Bronze Age sun wheel, however her primary suggestion is that the swastika was a symbol of Thor, as it also could represent thunder.⁴³ Martin Lichtfield West also suggests that the depiction of the swastika in the Iron Age likely implies a solar representation; its rotary movement would support this idea. On earlier archaeological examples, like spindle-whorls from Troy II, swastikas appear in association with many-legged animals. As parallels, West mentions Slavic folk tales of an eight legged horse drawing the sun through the sky. If we think of a many-legged animal in the Germanic mythology, Sleipnir comes to mind, however in the Eddic sources it isn't associated with the sun.⁴⁴ In light of these observations, it seems possible that the bracteates in the 5th and 6th centuries were originally representing a Germanic sun god. Johan Adetorp already suggested before, that the Type C bracteates were sun amulets.⁴⁵ Some of the Roman medallions that the bracteates are originally based on depict Sol Invictus, the sun god.⁴⁶ This could also support the idea, that the Germanic people adopting this type of artefacts filled them with images representing their equivalent of the sun god. Ultimately we could argue on the notion that these jewels are symbols of the sun because they are round and made of gold.

But who could this Germanic sun god be? In the later sources of Nordic mythology, there are mentions of Sól, the Sun, but it is rarely personified. One instance is in *Gylfaginning*, which tells us the story of Mundilfæri, a man, who had two children so fair that he named them Máni and Sól (Moon and Sun). The gods punished Mundilfæri for his pride, and placed his children in the heaven to serve as the celestial bodies. It is also mentioned, that two horses, Árvak and Alsvin draw the carriage of the Sun, and Sól drives these animals.

⁴² HEDEAGER 2011, p. 70., 71., 74., 75.

⁴³ ELLIS DAVIDSON 1964, p. 83.

⁴⁴ WEST 2007, p. 203., 205.

⁴⁵ WICKER 2010, p. 3.

⁴⁶ ALDRETE – ALDRETE 2012, p. 82., 83.

Here, the grammatical gender of Sól is female.⁴⁷ In the Second Merseburg Charm there is a mention of a female deity called Sunna, believed to be the sun goddess.⁴⁸ In some cases it is hard to tell the gender of the figure on the bracteates, but it is commonly perceived to be male, thus contradicting the idea that it is the representation of Sól/Sunna. In earlier sources there are also some accounts of Germanic peoples worshipping the sun as a deity. Julius Caesar in *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* tells us that the Germans class the Sun, Vulcan and the Moon as gods. Tacitus in *Annales* writes of a German noble, Boiocalus who invoked the Sun. Perhaps Caesar mentioning the Sun as Vulcan would mean that for a certain period of time the sun god was male. Again, the fact that in the Northern European Indo-European languages the name of the Sun is mostly feminine could speak against this.⁴⁹ A male deity however, that can be associated with the sun is the Vanir god of fertility, Frey, as in *Gylfaginning* he is told to be ruling over sunshine.⁵⁰

If we look at the picture on the bracteata from Várpalota it seems less likely that it represents a sun god, because of the absence of the swastika and the horse-like animal. The person wearing a birdlike headdress sitting on the throne besides a wolf and a bird of prey would rather remind us of Odin. In case the wolf is biting the figure's hand, it could be one of the first depictions of Tyr's sacrifice, although it is also thought to be feeding the wolf.⁵¹

Based on the similar headdress, we can assume that the god we see on the different types of bracteates is the same. On the parallels we can clearly see that the headdress resembles some kind of strong bird of prey.⁵² Perhaps it is the same deity that the bird shaped brooches represents, Fjörgynn/Faírguneis, who was presumably an earlier god of storm, sky, and fertility; attributes that Thor was known of in later periods.⁵³

Germanic Animal Style

⁴⁷ LINDOW 2001, p. 278., 279.

⁴⁸ ELLIS DAVIDSON 1964, p. 183.

⁴⁹ WEST 2007, p. 195-197.

⁵⁰ LINDOW 2001, p. 121.

⁵¹ TÓTH 1993, p. 40.

⁵² HEDEAGER 2011, p. 74., 87.

⁵³ ELLIS DAVIDSON 1964, p. 85-87.

The next find I'm going to discuss is decorated with the so called Germanic Animal Style, which is a common artistic style used among the Germanic peoples in the Early Middle Ages. The Germanic Animal Style first appeared during the second half of the 5th century in Southern Scandinavia and spread throughout the continent. Its development had influences from other artistic styles like the Late-Roman chip-carving style or the Eurasian Nomadic animal art. While the style mostly represents wild animals, there are some examples of depicting humans and hybrids, but only in its earlier stages. It was also a formal language for the various Germanic groups that has been understood from the British Isles to the Carpathian Basin.⁵⁴ For the elite it was a crucial part of their material identity.⁵⁵ Just like with the bird shaped brooches, it has been speculated, that the animals depicted – being companions to pagan deities – are attributes of certain gods or meant to portray totemistic ancestors that eventually became heraldic symbols for different tribes. According to István Bóna, these figures initially symbolized origin myths or other religious tales, although after a time they became more stylized and simpler and by the 6th century they gradually lost their meaning and only had decorative functions.⁵⁶ On the contrary, it is possible that the people using the Animal Style ornamentation in the 6th and 7th centuries still knew at least some meaning of the motifs. This coincides with the fact that among the Germanic factions who adopted Christianity, Animal Style is rarely used or not at all. Karen Høilund Nielsen points out, that during the 7th century the usage of the style was also a political choice in cases when the Roman and the Germanic traditions were pitted against each other.⁵⁷

The belt buckle from Kölked-Feketekapu B

The cemetery of Kölked-Feketekapu B, dated to the second half of the 6th and the beginning of the 7th century is located in Southern Hungary, on the bank of the Danube River. According to Attila Kiss, this Southeastern Pannonian cemetery was one of the

⁵⁴ AMENT – WILSON 2005, p. 586-588., BÓNA 1974, p. 52.

⁵⁵ HEDEAGER 2011, p. 61.

⁵⁶ BÓNA 1974, p. 52., GALLINA 1999, p. 96., 97.

⁵⁷ NIELSEN 1997, p. 142., 143., 145.

evidences of Germanic peoples living under the Avar Khaganate. His theory is that after the fall of the Kingdom of the Gepids, the Gepids were forced to settle sporadically throughout the Khaganate to help them assimilate into the Avar population.⁵⁸

One of the few rich graves found in the cemetery is the grave of a woman marked number 85th. Among her funerary finds there were, for example glass and amber beads, a golden and a silver finger-ring, a so called Cividale type gilded gold brooch, studs made of silver and bronze and a spool made of mountain crystal. From the viewpoint of our topic, the most important item was a gilded gold belt buckle made from bronze (FIG. 7), situated between the 3rd and the 4th vertebrae. The find was decorated with figures in the Germanic Animal Style phase I. On its central part we can see the upper body of a male warrior, holding two swords pointed towards the sky. Around his neck there is a snake, which is biting into his left arm (FIG. 8). On his sides there are profiles of two human heads. Above him, there is an animal fight scene depicted with two wolves.⁵⁹

On the interpretation of the depiction on the belt buckle, Attila Kiss compared the warrior figure to the later description and characteristics of the gods Odin, Thor, and Tyr. Although in the Eddic sources the snake, interpreted as the Midgard Serpent cannot be associated with Tyr, based on the swords, the wolves and the biting of the hand, Kiss's opinion is that this figure is most likely the representation of the god of war.⁶⁰ Supporting this theory, is that presumably the worship of Tyr/Tiwaz was more significant during the Germanic Iron Age.⁶¹ A good parallel of the snake fighting scene is depicted on the helmet plate of Vendel grave 1 from the 7th century (FIG. 9). Here a mounted warrior wearing a helmet decorated with a bird and accompanied by two birds charge a snake.⁶² There is also a 10th century Old English written source similar to this scene, called the *Nine Herbs Charm*. In this poem Odin slays a serpent who attacked a man with nine twigs. The twigs here could mean twigs carved with runes, or actual weapons.⁶³ Respectively the rider on the Vendel

⁵⁸ SZENTPÉTERI 2009, p. 235., 236.

⁵⁹ KISS 2001, p. 29-37., 293.

⁶⁰ KISS 2001, p. 298-303.

⁶¹ ELLIS DAVIDSON 1964, p. 163., KISS 2001, p. 300.

⁶² HEDEAGER 2011, p. 223.

⁶³ OLSEN 2007, p. 24., 25.

helmet plate is considered to be Odin,⁶⁴ although we can't really say that about the warrior on the Kölked-Feketekapu belt buckle.

In the discussion of this find we should consider the aforementioned ancestor worship of the Goths and supposedly of the Gepids. It is a possibility that the buckle is illustrating a legendary heroic deed of a common Germanic ancestor. For this we can draw the story of Sigurd Fafnesbane as a parallel.⁶⁵ In this case the Vendel and the Kölked depictions might be two separate versions of this same story. The representation of the two birds and the two wolves could even be signs of a divine aid from one of the gods.

Conclusion

As we can see there are many ways at interpreting the iconographic sources of Germanic mythology before the Viking Age. One thing that we should always keep in mind, is that myths and legends change with every telling, and are thus under constant development. Changes occur not even by temporal but even by territorial differences. Although the material culture of the different Germanic peoples in the Merovingian period was very similar, it is possible that each representation had its different meaning and a different tale attached to in the Carpathian Basin and in Southern Scandinavia. An example according to Lotte Hedeager, is that the Franks did not adopt the Germanic Animal Style, because they didn't have a Scandinavian origin myth, however they did use eagle shaped brooches.⁶⁶ This could of course mean that by the 6th and 7th centuries the eagle wasn't connected to any Germanic god whatsoever and was only worn because of fashion.

In light of my observations based on the few types of finds discussed we could assume that for both the Gepids and the Lombards in the 6th and 7th centuries the worship of a storm/sky god with fertility aspects, who might have been called Fjörgynn in Scandinavia, was significant. This god was probably associated with eagles and could even turn into one. After the 7th century its cult began to fade with the Christianisation of the Germanic peoples on the Continent and in Scandinavia its attributes shifted to his mythological son, Thor.

⁶⁴ HEDEAGER 2011, p. 223.

⁶⁵ ELLIS DAVIDSON 1964, p. 43., 44.

⁶⁶ HEDEAGER 2011, p. 56.

Respectively some of his other aspects, like transforming into an eagle became associated with Odin, whose significance was growing. Odin's cult was already somewhat strong among the Lombards. Among the Gepids, ancestor worship was also present based on the Kölked-Feketekapu belt buckle.

The question though which would come from this conclusion is that if this storm god was so significant, then why is there so few evidence of his worship in the written sources? To gain a more precise view on the possible beliefs and myths of these people, we would need a more thorough study, involving many more artefact types, parallels and written sources.

Interpreting iconographic representations on archaeological material is a territory on which a researcher should tread lightly and should regard each concept with caution, even if we have contemporaneous (or near contemporaneous) written sources at our disposal from the cultural area we study, however I think I have proposed some interesting ideas and pointed out things that are worth further discussing and debating.

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Illustrations



FIGURE 1: Bird shaped brooches from the Lombard cemetery of Vörs (MÜLLER 2003, based on 30. kép)



FIGURE 2: Visigothic bird shaped brooch from late 5th or early 6th century (RIPOLL 2000, based on FIG. 17.1)



FIGURE 3: Germanic bracteates found at Debrecen (GALLINA 1999, 4. kép)



FIGURE 4: One of the bracteates found at the Lombard cemetery of Várpalota (WERNER 1962, TAF. 7, 6)



FIGURE 5: Bracteates found at Kølby and Kjøllegård, Bornholm (HEDEAGER 2011, based on FIGURE 4.20)



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FIGURE 6: Bracteate found at Skrydstrup (HEDEAGER 2011, based on FIGURE 4.20)



FIGURE 8: Depiction of the warrior of the belt buckle of Kölked-Feketekapu B grave 85 (KISS 2001, Abb. 127)



FIGURE 7: Belt buckle of Kölked-Feketekapu B grave 85 (KISS 2001, based on Abb. 126)

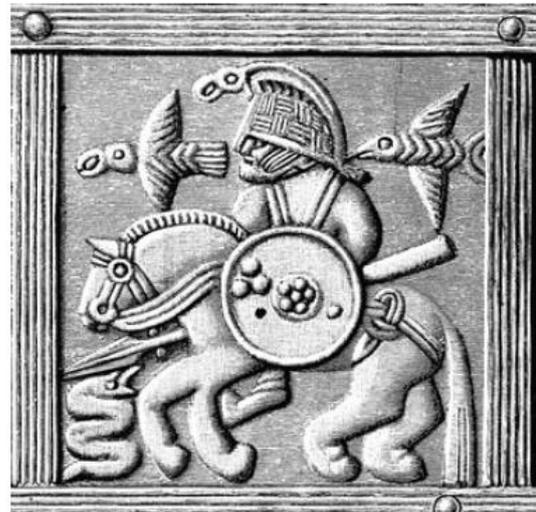


FIGURE 9: Helmet plate from Vendel grave 1 (HEDEAGER 2011, based on FIGURE 10.1)