

Faces across the North Sea: Viking art in Norway and England, AD 700–1300

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The Institute of Archaeology has begun a programme of academic collaboration with the Institutt for Arkeologi og Kulturhistorie in Trondheim, Norway. One of the first initiatives to be taken is a comparative study of facial representation in Viking art. A member of the research team outlines the project.

A wide-ranging programme of collaboration has recently been initiated between the UCL Institute of Archaeology and our counterpart at the University of Science and Technology at Trondheim. In addition to exchanges of students and staff, and cooperation in teaching programmes, several joint research projects have been started. *Faces Across the North Sea* is the first of these ventures to attract financial support, in the form of grants from the Leverhulme Trust, the Research Council of Norway and the British Council. The project has been conceived as a multidisciplinary enterprise involving members of staff from both institutions with expertise in the sociology and anthropology of art, art history and the medieval archaeology of England and Norway, including Viking history and archaeology. The Institute team includes James Graham-Campbell, contributing expertise in Viking and medieval archaeology, Jeremy Tanner, contributing to the research design from a background in comparative sociology of art and art history, and Peter Ucko, adding his expertise in the anthropology of art and extensive experience researching facial representation in other cultural traditions.

Why faces?

Representations of the face offer a particularly promising focus for exploring the interrelations between biologically conditioned aspects of human behaviour, sociological factors that shape actions and the contexts in which they take place, and the different meanings attributed to apparently similar expressions in different cultures. Recent research in ethology and child-psychology has shown the extent to which human beings are “hard-wired” to respond to visual configurations that correspond, even approximately, to a human face, and in particular the important role played by facial signalling in processes of enculturation and socialization. However, these inbuilt potentialities are employed by different cultures in quite distinctive ways. Some cultures may repress certain forms of facial expression while encouraging or amplifying others. Furthermore, the occasions on which specific facial expressions are considered appropriate are almost always socially regulated.

The Viking art of Norway and England

offers a rich body of material for exploring the interrelations between biology, sociology and culture. Although the face is a relatively uncommon motif in early Viking art in Scandinavia, it is found on a wide range of objects, from miniature masks in jewellery and bone carvings, to heads carved fully in the round on, for example, the cart from the famous Oseberg ship burial (Fig. 1).¹ The Oseberg finds include faces in the context of elaborate multi-person narratives, both carved in wood and woven in tapestry (Fig. 2). In England, by contrast, there is a much more elaborate tradition of facial representation in the art of the Viking settlements, in part attributable to already established traditions of Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon monumental stone sculpture, which the incoming Vikings appropriated and further



Figure 1 Carved head on a wooden cart, part of the eighth to ninth century AD ship burial.

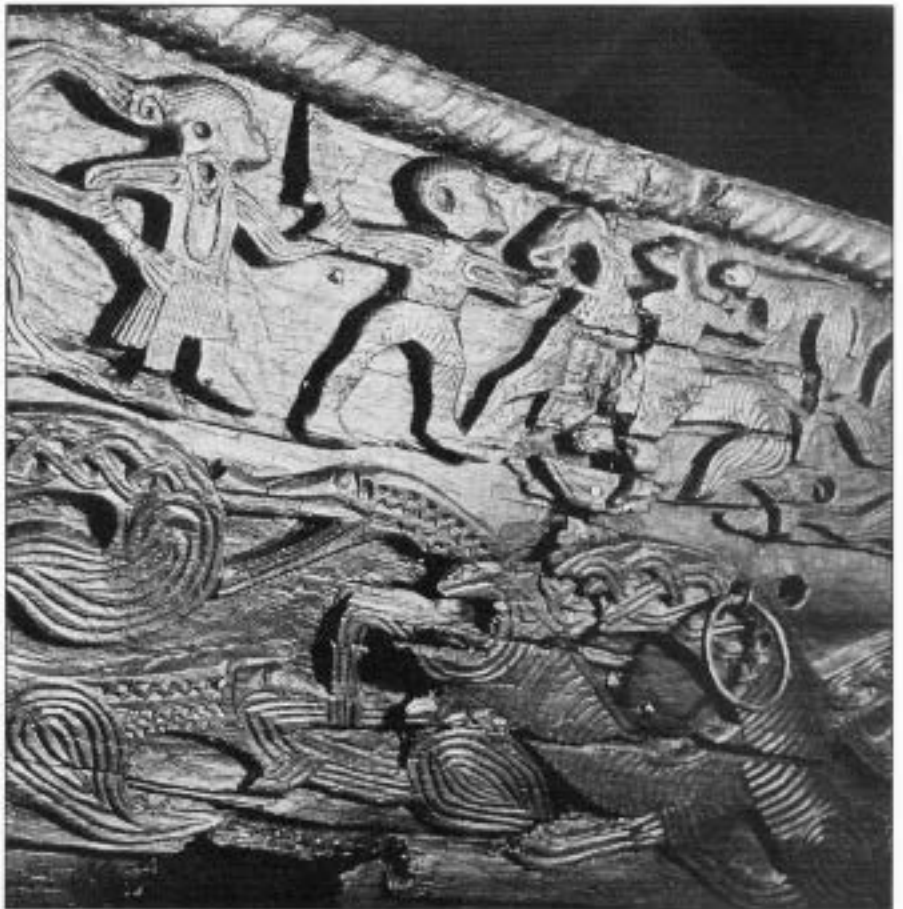


Figure 2 Relief carving on the Oseberg ship-burial cart, showing human figures in a narrative (reproduced, with permission, from Wilson & Klindt-Jensen 1966, pl.10b).



Figure 3 Relief carving of a warrior on a stone cross from the ninth- to tenth-century AD site of Middleton, England.

developed for their own purposes (Fig. 3). The imported tradition of Viking facial representation may have been further modified as a result of the adoption of Christianity by the Viking settlers, and the radical changes in conceptions of personhood that this entailed. The Vikings in their turn informed Christianity with their own cultural preconceptions and expressive style, perhaps



Figure 4 (above) Silver crucifix from Trondheim, tenth century AD (reproduced, with permission, from Wilson & Klindt-Jensen 1966, Pl. 64b).

Figure 5 (right) Detail from the carved prow of the Oseberg ship, eighth to ninth century AD (reproduced, with permission, from Wilson & Klindt-Jensen 1966, fig. 16).

traditional iconography, an archaeology of contextual meanings, and comparative analysis of cultural sequences – in order to disentangle some of the more important factors that shape changes in patterns of facial symbolism.

Facial iconography

Iconographically, the first task we face is to identify the range of schemes or types in the representation of human faces. This is by no means a simple task. For example, how is one to interpret the bearded figures on the prow and stern posts of the Oseberg ship, apparently human down to the waist, but with monstrous extremities? How should we understand the distinction between bearded figures and the beardless



ones (whose lower parts are somewhat more human)? How also to make sense of the range of gestures they make in pointing to their heads and fondling their beards (Fig. 5)? Conversely, animal faces, such as that of an owl on a capital from the early Romanesque Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim, may be humanized by the addition of a nose in place of the expected beak (Fig. 6). Such patterns at the very least indicate rather more fluid boundaries around the “natural” human face than we normally countenance in contemporary Western culture, with its very strong polarity between human and animal.

Among the more definitively human faces, there are also interesting patterns of variation in the treatment of hair, eyes, ears and facial hair such as beards and moustaches. This is true even within quite restricted series of representations, as on the corbels from Trondheim Cathedral (Fig. 7) – treatment of the eyes (incised versus gouged irises), mouth turned up or down at corners, presence or absence of facial hair and the style in which it is rep-



Figure 6 Owl's head on a stone capital in Nidaros Cathedral, Trondheim, c. AD 1120.

Figure 7 Faces on stone corbels in Nidaros Cathedral, Trondheim, c. 1120.

resented. What remains to be seen is the extent to which these variations represent free artistic expression, or whether we can recognize recurrent iconographic types that signify distinctive roles or differences in status within Viking society, or perhaps certain dimensions of ethnic or religious identity. In parallel with the iconographic analysis, our colleagues in Norway will collect data from Old Norse verse and the medieval sagas that may help us to interpret the faces.

Of particular interest is a series of wooden and stone relief carvings with representations of mythological narratives, most of which, paradoxically, owe their existence to the desire on the part of newly converted Vikings to produce suitable monumental art to embellish churches and churchyards in both England and Norway (Fig. 8). They include faces of distinct individuals engaged in various actions, and they offer the possibility of discerning how different characters are delineated and made recognizable in terms of their facial characteristics. Indeed, some are identifiable as characters known from the Norse myths. We also intend to analyze the ways in which, for example, variations in the representation of profile and frontal faces are used, either to draw viewers into the narrative or to articulate the relationships between participants within the narrative in terms of the direction of their gaze, interlocking with or averted from their comrades and opponents. For example, why, in early Viking narrative art in particular, are the heads of all actors tilted back at an angle to produce an elevated gaze averted from other participants in the scene (see Fig. 1)?

Faces in context

We shall also investigate the particular material contexts in which faces are placed. What kinds of artefact are typically decorated with faces? Where are faces placed on such objects, and how do faces serve to draw attention either to particular parts of large objects, such as wagons, or to the parts of the body that a face on a piece of jewellery may embellish? How may the rows of monumental carved wooden human, animal and part-human/part-animal heads, surrounding the wall of the nave immediately beneath the roof timbers on early Norwegian stave churches, have shaped worshippers' experience of the liturgy and their understanding of the power of the Christian Church (Fig. 10)?



Figure 8 Carved wooden portals that narrate a dragon-killing episode, from a stave church at Hylestad, Norway, c. AD 1150–1200 (reproduced, with permission, from Bailey 1980, fig. 18).

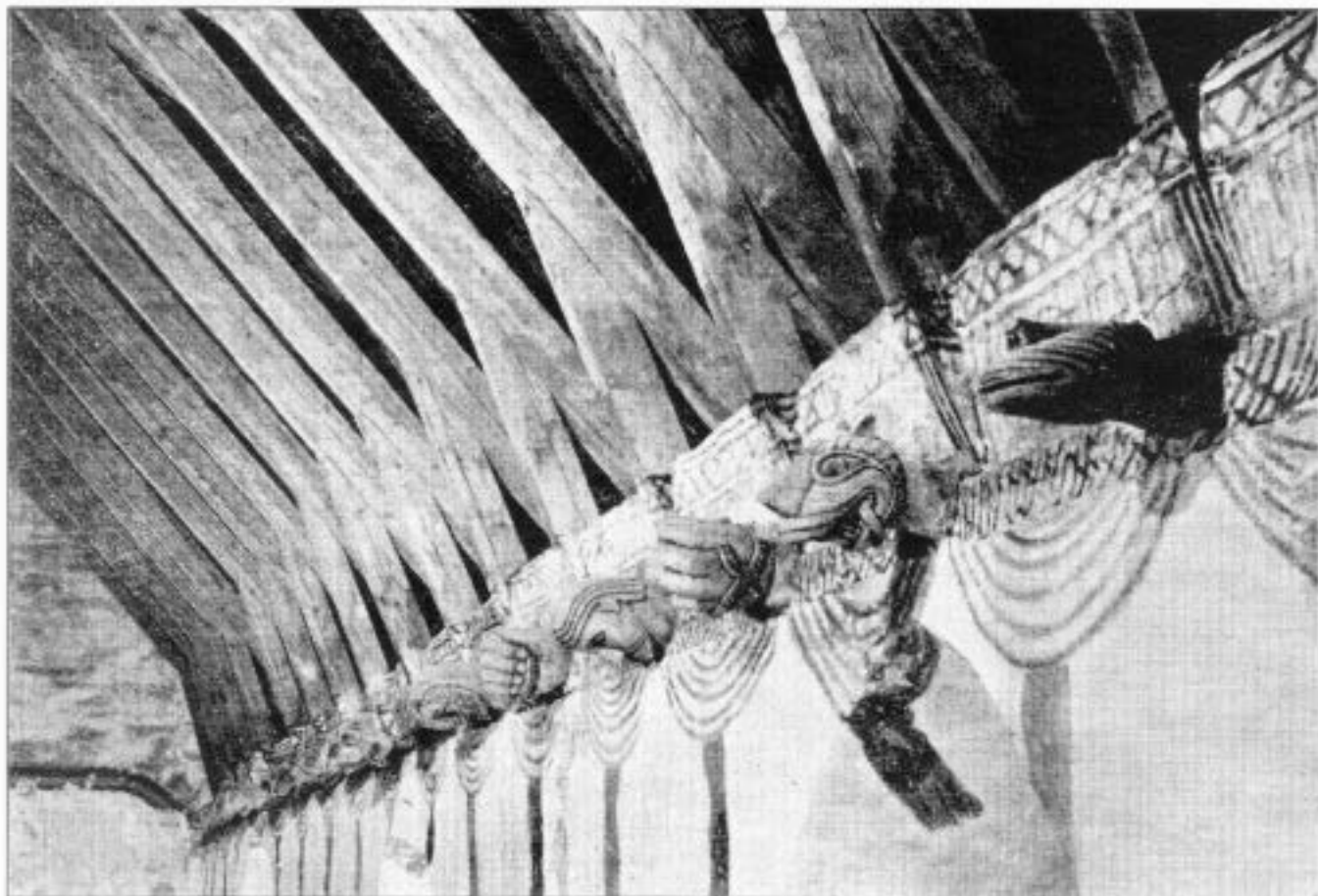


Figure 9 Carved wooden animal heads and human heads and hands, along the north side of the roof of the nave of a stave church at Værnes, Norway, c. AD 1150 (reproduced, with permission, from Blindheim 1956, fig. 33).

From interpretation to explanation

As well as developing contextual interpretations of facial symbolism in Viking culture, we hope to go beyond traditional art-historical approaches to this material and propose explanations of change in patterns of facial symbolism. We will compare the development of facial repertoires in art, and the ways they are employed in particular artefactual and architectural contexts over time in two different regions of the Viking world. We hope that this will enable us to disentangle the differing roles of existing craft traditions of material representation, structures of patronage, and the spatial relations of major centres of display or production, in relation to the main social and cultural changes that influenced patterns of visual representation such as facial symbolism.

The development of monumental traditions of facial representation by the Vikings in their English settlements will allow us to investigate how already-existing traditions of sculptural design in England transformed a facial iconography that had been developed originally for small portable objects. Conversely, when Norway itself was converted to Christianity, a sudden demand for architectural sculpture in wood and soft stones, required for the decoration

of new churches, may have promoted the reproduction and monumentalization of indigenous traditions of facial representation independently from, and sometimes at odds with, the newly imported and politically dominant Christian culture from western Europe.

It is intended that the first stage of the project, concentrating on material from England and Norway, should be completed by the end of 2001, with the publication of a fully illustrated monograph, and also the creation of a selection of casts and reproductions of some of the more striking examples of Viking faces. If this initial venture proves fruitful, we hope to extend our investigations to Vikings throughout the Scandinavian world and as far afield as Russia and Iceland.

Note

1. Many excellent illustrations of Viking art can be found in the following books: R. N. Bailey, *Viking Age sculpture* (London: Collins, 1980); M. Blindheim, *Norwegian Romanesque decorative sculpture, 1090–1210* (London: Tiranti, 1956); D. M. Wilson & O. Klindt-Jensen, *Viking art* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966).