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“Unpractical objects”? The concept of the King’s Gifts in the Old
Norse World

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Introduction

The subject of this paper is material culture, more precisely objects. Objects from daily utensils to priceless presents are an inalienable part of society, sometimes more important than we – contemporary spectators – would expect. Traveling by airplane or a cart, sending messages on smart-phone or by a courier, or washing our clothes in a machine instead of with our hands in a river, will all determine our life in time and space, limit and judge our appearance and the meanings that are forwarded to the social audience. Our activities are intricately interwoven with objects, whatever the times we live in. Interaction between humans and things are going to be the theme of this paper, in a more remote past, namely the Viking Age. One of the modes of exchanging things with a certain purpose was (and still is) through the giving of gifts. The question of how people and objects, objects and society and people and society interacted through gift-giving and changed each other on a physical, mental and social level will be addressed. With particular focus on the *King's Gifts* (presents from a ruler), the double aim of this survey is to demonstrate that objects could be handled in a way different from what their original production would indicate and on the other hand, that alongside interactions, they were used as a channel of communication in the Middle Ages.

However, for this examination first I have to introduce the tools I am going to work with, the anthropological and sociological theories which the investigation is based on. The theoretical approach to material culture developed two basic lines of thought in the last decades that I will present here: firstly that objects can acquire human characteristics (1) and that they are essential part of the society itself (2).

(1) The first theory is the so-called “*objects' biographies*”, which goes back to the anthropologist Igor Kopytoff. According to him, objects have a biography just as humans, with the periods of birth, death and several other individual events that took place between these two (Kopytoff, 1986). Objects therefore have a *life*, which makes them comparable to humans in the sense of being informative factors about the social. Instead of looking at the material culture as a bunch of functional items only interesting as illustrators of social actions (giving additional information about function, dating and style but leaving alone their social importance), analysis has shifted to a view of objects as principles that accumulate “*life histories*” – tied up with humans – and thus inform and change each other with human lives (Gosden-Yvonne, 1999).

However, the production, exchange, consumption and annihilation of an object cannot be seen separately but as a whole process. They cannot just change appearance and value through times, but accumulate *(hi)stories* of different periods with various meanings and become significant through the events and persons which they have been connected to (Kopytoff, op.cit.). Here is an example from the Viking Age: a piece of raw copper melted into a beautiful trefoil brooch in a Frankish workshop, sold in a market and then carried by an Icelandic traveller back home to his daughter and afterwards buried in her grave, dug up centuries later and finally resting in a museum. It has changes shape, price, meaning and function throughout its “*life*”. The various alterations on it and the different owners all added further to its own *biography*, melting into itself several memories of the past (Pétursdóttir, 2007:65).

In connection with this, not just the feelings of the current owner are decisive, but the society’s cultural response to the object’s life as well. The cultural comprehension makes objects human and fundamental elements of the society. Just as we have feelings about humans and non-human creatures, we have the same type of emotions towards things:

“We have similar biographical expectations to things. To us, a biography of a painting by Renoir, that ends up in an incinerator is as tragic, in its way, as the biography of a person who ends up murdered. That is obvious. But there are other events in the biography of objects that convey more subtle meanings. What of a Renoir ending up in a private and inaccessible collection? Of one lying neglected in a museum basement? How should we feel about yet another Renoir leaving France for the United States? Or for Nigeria? The cultural responses to such biographical details reveal a tangled mass of aesthetic, historical and even political judgements and of convictions and values that shaped our attitudes towards objects labelled ‘art’.” (Kopytoff, op.cit: 67)

The stress can be shifted from the accumulated “*lives*” of a particular object, to how a certain object can contain segments of *human lives*. Janet Hoskins who investigated Indonesian societies, met with the phenomenon of receiving short replies from people about their own lives but when she asked them about unique objects in their possession, they revealed mass details about the people’s biographies (Hoskins, 1998). After examination, she claimed that objects can turn into containers of self-definition through preserving memories, thereby they help to re-experience and augment the people’ lives (Hoskins, *ibid.*). Thus, the person’s biography and the object’s biography are glued together, supplementing each other to a whole.

Extreme instance of the humanly treated things is when we *personify objects*. Giving name to artefacts is one of the tools to individualise and singularize them. The word sword points to

a whole class of artefacts while the name *Excalibur* has no meaning but a reference to a particular item (Rogan, 1990:58). To give the thing a name is in any case to give it life, according to Rogan, since artefacts apart from some modern ones (like ships for instance) are not named in their time of production (so they did not live before):

“Named rifles often belonged to well-known hunters, and many of them are associated with dramatic episodes. Many rifles were named probably at a late stage, when they demonstrated their quality – or their owners’ hunting luck.” (Rogan, op.cit:53)

Like ordinary objects which gain meaning through events connected to it; a shirt worn for the last time by a dead man, a plate which food was consumed from at a wedding, a glass broken at the hearing of shocking news and so on. Thus, it is not the physical characteristics of objects that make them biographical, but the meanings imputed to them as significant personal possessions (Hoskins, 1998:195).

A biography of an object labelled with a name, however, is just as extraordinary as the life of an outstanding person. If the trefoil brooch I mentioned earlier is just a simple object (comparable with a simpleton’s life), then the sword *Excalibur* is thought to be measured with a king’s life. The comparison can be carried through not only by assessing the fame of an individual but by attributing certain elements of human nature to the object: will, power and personality.

Personification of objects through naming is well-known from Old Norse culture. It is enough to think about the renowned blades from the saga literature like *Tyrfingr*, *Gramr*, *Grásíða* etc. or the ship of Óláfr Tryggvason, *Ormr inn langi* (*The Long Serpent*). All of them can also be seen as having a will of their own, at least some kind of agency (see: Torfing, 2012:2-4). They are immensely frequent in the whole corpus of Old Norse literature. In the *fornaldarsögur* for instance, consisting of 34 sagas and *þaettir*, there are 54 named artefacts, roughly one and a half per text (Torfing, ibid:1).

Thus, I assert that naming objects was a clear cultural practice in the Old Norse world and the producers of these literary accounts were aware of the fact that objects have own life and can be handled like humans, while some humans on the other hand (outlaws, slaves, women at betrothing) were regarded more like objects (Rogan, op.cit; Kopytoff, op.cit.). In this context, let us turn now to the second conception I propose: how objects behave within a social framework.

(2) Societies either in the past or today are formed by dynamic networks between human and non-human beings. The former scientific approach to this topic regarded the term “*society and social relations*” as phrases which are intangible (even hardly imaginable) and as substances which hold together the people in general, like an invisible “*air-made*” web. Contrary to this, newer approaches handle society as a tangible phenomenon, consisting of not only human and non-human beings but objects too (Appadurai, 1986; Latour 2005; Olsen, 2010). One of these theories is the *Actor-Network-Theory (ANT)* system founded by Bruno Latour, which states that material culture is also an actor in social relations just as humans themselves are. In our society mobile phones, sewers, public transportation, or just the infrastructure in general are just as decisive elements in the construction of the society as humans, the fauna and the flora (Latour, *ibid.*, Olsen, *ibid.*).

Despite the fact that they do not have intentions, objects can have agency and are able to incite humans for feelings and action, changing the current social stability (Serres, 1982; Hoskins, 1998, 2006). Latour draws an excellent example of this in another book where he is talking about a loaded gun in the bottom of a locked chest and the same gun held by an angry citizen on the street (Latour, 1999). Just as the angry citizen is different with and without the gun, so the relation between the actors (gun and citizen) effect and change their social relations to each other and their social relations towards the society in a broader sense also, since the citizen with the gun becomes a real threat to other people. This theory is not applicable merely to modern societies but as we will see to archaic ones too.

As I said above, in Old Norse literature, heroic weapons are notorious examples of objects being actors in the formulation of the plot (Torfing, *op.cit.*). However, they can have an important influence not solely for their power as tools of violence, but sometimes for an unexpected reason as well: their social importance. During this survey, I will shed light on the fact that objects are not always handled according to their primary role - hence the term “*unpractical*” in the title - and function as symbols rather than actual tools of violence. Inspired by the *ANT*, instead of following only the human characters, I will also track objects as potential actors through the different scenes in some of the Icelandic Family Sagas with particular interest in two swords called ‘*Konungsnautr*’ (the *King’s Gift*) in *Laxdæla saga*. These objects are not involved in violent actions, unlike other named weapons in the same saga, but can be seen as mediators within social relations. Other instances from *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* or *Haralds saga hárfagra* will strengthen the idea that *Laxdæla saga* is not the only example where symbolic artefacts are actors. An axe

used against oxen, swords which do not kill or a cloak which is never worn all testify that “*unpractically*” handled objects had unique significance in the Old Norse world.

As we are dealing with objects, it is essential to be aware of the physical nature of these artefacts, thus the mentioned literary sources will be investigated alongside archaeological evidence from Viking Age Iceland and some of the saga episodes in the light of archaeological theories. This interdisciplinary research, grounded on historical, anthropological and archaeological evidence, aims to develop our understanding about how objects were handled and opens up the possibility that by following actors we can better perceive the function of material culture in Viking societies.

However, before we can begin to scrutinize the role of the *King's Gift* in the selected sources, we have to show how the gift-giving process as a whole worked during the Viking Age.

Gift-giving in the Viking Age

In this part, I am planning to introduce the possible modes of exchanging goods in Viking Age societies and argue for the immense importance of giving as a prominent mode of investing objects with meaning and life. After that, the various types of gift-giving will construct the framework of this chapter in order to illustrate the possible situations where objects with a social message could occur. I will expound on a special type of the phenomenon, the so-called *King's Gift*, which will be under focus in the rest of the thesis. At the end of the chapter, a general evaluation of the object's role in these scenes will follow.

Talking about the Icelandic economy in Medieval Iceland, William Ian Miller reduces the types of transactions to three categories: "*rán*" (hostile taking), *payment* and *gift*. He distinguishes the groups by the modes in which the goods are exchanged (Miller, 1986; 1990). During the "*rán*" or justified expropriation, the plundered goods are not redeemed with compensation so the parties leave the event unequally, and that inequality is never going to be balanced.

On the contrary, when a purchase occurs, the participants come out of the transaction without debts to each other:

"In the buy-sell mode of transfer, the amount of return and the time and place of payment were bargained over and specified...Once the debt was discharged, there was nothing in the transaction that bound the parties to continue dealing with each other." (Miller, 1990: 82)

Just like in our modern society, we buy a television at the store when commodities are exchanged (an object for money) and the partners put an equal, standard value to the transaction after which the relationship between the parties is ended. Nobody wins, nobody loses.

Nevertheless, gifting is a different technique since the amount of return together with the place and time is always left indefinite, thereby altering the balance between the two sides. Since the famous French scholar Marcel Mauss, we know that there are no free gifts in the world and archaic societies are also not exempt from this (Mauss, 1990). In gift-giving, one of the parties only *gets* and therefore feels himself obligated to return the favour in some way (Mauss, *ibid.*; Samson, 1991). Gosden summarizes the distinction between the two modes of exchange:

“Commodities are supposed to be alienable, so that they can be transacted without leaving any lasting relationship between giver and receiver. By contrast, gifts always maintain some link to the person or people who first made them and the people who have subsequently transacted them. The movement of gifts sets up a dense skein of ties between people, which can be unravelled only by the return of gifts.” (Gosden, 1999: 173)

That all of the criteria - amount, time, place - rests in the debtor’s hand to manipulate only means that through this, he will be able to redefine the relationship between him and the giver (Miller, op.cit.). A social dimension is added to the transaction since the amount, place and time of the compensation will adjust the connection between giver and receiver. If one of my friends from his journey in the exotic Indonesia, brings me a local rarity object as a present my response to this favour will determine our friendship on different levels. There is a huge difference whether I reject the gift, repay it with a similar item later on or just buy a beer for him casually in a pub afterwards. Similar to this, status, prestige and social behaviour were represented in gift-giving among the Vikings too.

*“With weapons and cloth one should gladden one’s friends
that is quite clear of itself;
those who give and receive stay longest friends,
if things last and all is well.” (Hávamál, 41.)*

The selected stanzas of *Hávamál*, possibly one of the oldest of the Old Norse eddic poems, presents gift-giving as an essential element of maintaining social relationships in the Viking Age. The wisdom of the “*High One*” (Óðinn himself) also recites that gift-giving by its very nature is, as stated above, a mutual process and:

*“To his friend a man must be a friend,
and repay gift for gift;” (Hávamál, 42.)*

Handing over of a gift will imply the giving of a new gift, *quid pro quo*. Especially when the counter-gift exceeds the value of the first and the former giver (who is now the receiver) feels the obligation to balance the bill. Thus, the flow of gifts causes a concentric array of never ending actions. This makes it clear what *Hávamál* means by “*give and receive*” and “*repay gift with gift*”: it is shaping an originally voluntary event into a social obligation (Mauss, op.cit.; Vestergaard, 1991) and establishing a form of regular converse between the

principles that has to be maintained on one way or another. The cycling of gifts therefore, is actually none other than communication, the assurance of social contact. As I referred to Latour in the beginning of the introduction, society is not static, it is held together by an array of dynamic networks formed by human and non-human interactions (Latour, 2005). The gift-giving process in archaic societies is a crucial factor in these interactions: without the donor or the receiver, no communication would exist and without the objects there would be no channel to speak through to each other. The cluster of relations, i.e. the donor, the receiver, the object and the phenomenon of giving as a whole, is the sum of society (Mauss, *op.cit.*; Serres, 1982:225).

However, communication always has a purpose which can be very variable and thus in Viking societies the same can be said about gift-giving.

Based on anthropological studies and the saga literature, I have identified and gathered the most frequent occurrences of gift-giving. Though the sagas were written a few centuries later than the actions they describe, they contain an immense amount of information about gift-giving in the period in which they are set. After the end of the Icelandic Commonwealth period (c. 930-1262/64), society started changing due to the introduction of Norwegian law codes and administrative system. The new order relied on the king's command and his that of his officers, diminishing thereby the original voluntary and reciprocal relationship between chieftains and farmers, since the chieftains did not need their followers to the same extent to obtain power. Consequently, as Jón Viðar Sigurðsson claims, the former principles of authority namely feasting and gift exchange, which maintained the reciprocity, started to fade out from the Icelandic social behaviour after the fall of the Free State (Sigurðsson, 2007). However, the procedure of gift exchange and the social networks established by it are described the best in the saga literature. The Icelandic Family Sagas depict a society based on reciprocity, undoubtedly mirroring the time of writing (13th century onwards). Nevertheless, despite the ongoing changes just described, they might reflect the time of actions (the so-called Saga Age) too, since the basic founding principles of the society had not been altered. A comparison between the Icelandic Family Sagas and the Contemporary Sagas indeed suggests, that likely the same social order existed in Saga Age Iceland and in the 13th century (Þorláksson, 1994), even though this has not been studied specifically for gift-giving. Nevertheless, the detailed passages of the sagas about exchanging objects and the gift-giving system describe a society based on mutual and reciprocal relations and it is not necessary to

assume that this had changed much by the time *Laxdæla saga* and the other major family sagas were written.

Feasting

One of the most widespread forms of gift-giving was simply providing hospitality by serving food and drinks during a feast (*'veizla'*). According to Hayden, a feast is an unusual meal shared on an unusual occasion (Hayden, 2001). However, Viking Age feasting was a much more common event than to be reduced to special occasions or simply to a unique menu (Byock, 2001). Feasts were held at funerals (*'erfi'*), weddings or heathen rituals organized around the public consumption of food but always in connection with social activities (Zori and others, 2013). Alliances were established, friendships were strengthened, women were betrothed or feuds have risen during these gatherings. Thus, the offering of provision as free gifts to the guests, served the role to secure the face-to-face contact between people and by organizing a feast, the space was constructed where social actions could take place. The double goal of entertainment and ensuring contact were interwoven and manifested in the feast.

However, not only consumable but ordinary objects were also exchanged at these occasions. At the end of the event, when the arrangements have been concluded, guests departed with tangible presents. The expression: *"leysa men ut med giöfum"* (*"sending away the guests with gifts"*) was a *terminus technicus* in saga literature suggesting it to be a general custom (Gurevich, 1982; Miller 1990). Alongside pledges performed at the agreements, a timeless and portable form of warrant was required. I assume therefore, that gifts were essential to provide a physical proof of the bounded settlements. Ergo relationships were sealed by oaths and objects, making the latter actors and inevitable parts of the socially constructed bonds.

Though performed at different sites like hills, meadows, groves and springs, the most common place to "gift" the pagan gods and spirits was the *'blótveizlur'*, the sacrificial feast (Hultgård, 2008). The kings and chieftains as cult leaders lead these animal or - as some of the written sources (Ibn Fadlan, Adam of Bremen) suggest – even human sacrifices to please the gods (Sundquist, 2008). Enhancing their prestige by contacting supernatural powers, the cult leaders obviously gained political influence. By the lack of sources, the operation of sacrifices

(‘*blót*’, ‘*hlutta*’) remains obscure, however, the swearing of heathen oaths sealed by blood on particular objects is probable (Bray, 2004; Stein-Wilckshuis, 2002:163-164).

After the discussion of the features of feasting, we have to turn towards the diverse intentions and relations that characterised these “*social receptions*”.

The easiest version is when the parties were peers and their familiarity was without doubt. Scholars used to refer to this kind of feasts as “*entrepreneurial*”, highlighting the aim of the host to enhance alliances on personal, political or commercial spheres (Zori et al., op.cit.). We know countless examples of this from the sagas like this passage from *Brennu-Njáls saga* where the bond between Hǫskuldr Þráinsson and Njáll is expressed:

“So fervent was their friendship that they invited each other to a feast every autumn and exchanged generous gifts. This went on for a long time.” (Njáls saga, Ch. 97.)

The second possibility is when though the relationship is amicable among the parties, however, there is a gap in social status between them. In the literature it is often characterised as a “*patron-role*” feast:

“Patron-role feasts, by contrast, are not reciprocal, but instead generate and legitimise asymmetrical social relationships. In traditional societies, hosting lavish feasts is often an obligation of institutionalised leaders. The hosts maintain social inequalities by the same operative principle of reciprocal obligation, but the social relations remain continually inequitable, because in-kind reciprocation between chieftain and subordinate supporters is neither expected nor possible. While also serving to promote feelings of solidarity among social groups and/or ease the friction between leaders and supporters, patron-role feasts have the potential to institutionalise inequality and obligations of political support. (Zori et al., 2013: 152)

By attending a *goði*’s¹ feast, a free farmer publicly accepted his influence over him and reaffirmed the subservient *goði-þingmenn*² relationship between them (Byock, 2001). Gift-

¹ The chieftains called *goðar* (sing. *goði*) were the cream of Icelandic society often referred to as „*big-menn*” in scholarly literature. Unlike their counterparts in medieval Europe, the *goðar* had no real military power until the 13th century. Their power based on the political office called *goðorð*, which constituted a symbiosis between *goði* and his *þingmenn** (followers). For political representation at the assemblies, the *þingmenn* offered their services to the *goði*. However, in contrast to the similar feudal system in the continent, the *goði-þingmenn* relationship was not bounded by geographical boundaries and depended on mutual favours. (Byock, 2001)

² The Icelandic free farmers were called *þingmenn* if they sought the help of a chieftain and became their followers. Though everybody had political rights, the legal and efficacious representation of an individual at the assemblies depended on the number of followers that he could exhibit. By following a chieftain, *þingmenn* gained protection in legal and physical level as well. (Byock, ibid.)

giving provided the leader personal authority and influence, as he could not demonstrate his wealth without distributing it. Thereby he was extending the scope of his own power by giving gifts to different followers (Gurevich, op.cit.).

However, besides peaceful and good-tempered links, we have instance for *acts of hostility* happening at feasts. This can happen among characters of the same social rank, like in *Laxdæla saga*, when precious treasures of Kjartan's household are stolen by Bolli's kinsmen (*Laxdæla saga*, Ch. 46.) or among characters of different status like in *Hreiðars þáttr*, where Hreiðarr questioned the king's masculinity with a finely fabricated sculpture:

"He put it on the table before him, and it was a pig made of gilded silver...He picked it up and took all even closer look at the handiwork. He saw that there were teats on it and that it was a sow. He realized that it had been made as a mockery and threw it down, saying, 'Go to the devil! Up and kill him!'" (Hreiðars Þáttr i Morkinskinna, Ch.24)

Mockery was phrased also by giving cognomens as gifts (Samson, 1991:91).

It was a special kind of insult if somebody tried to surpass the others in generosity, inviting more guests to a feast than the one he visited before or served dishes with higher pomp. Competition of this kind detected elsewhere too - like among primitive Indians of the Pacific Shores of North America - and labelled as '*potlach*' (Mauss, op.cit.). During '*potlach*' rival tribes tried to overcome the other by extreme hospitality, giving generous gifts and holding magnificent feasts. Forcing a debt upon an opponent by generosity was a well-known form of political strategy in Medieval Europe also (Curta, 2013). Interestingly, instead of trying to destroy the opponent's food supply as the men of today would do, they handed over and exhausted their own possessions (Gurevich, op.cit.). This underlying struggle was based on the ancient custom I have addressed in the beginning: though a gift is apparently voluntary, truly it is strictly compulsory and has to be compensated by (at least) equal value. The one who fails to fulfil his duty by repaying the gift becomes dependent on the donor leaving the triumph to the latter. In the light of this, it becomes understandable why king Haraldr Hárfagra felt himself humiliated when his retainer Þórolfr brought almost twice as many followers to a feast as the king himself (*Egils saga*, Ch. 11.). By surpassing the king's prestige and organizing a bigger feast than anybody else, Þórolfr challenged the king and committed '*potlach*'.

Besides the obvious holidays like Yule-time, Viking Age feasts occurred at random occasions as well, organized by social purposes. During these usual gatherings, the social nexus between hosts and guests was renegotiated according to the manifold roles of the event (“*entrepreneurial / patron-role*”). At these negotiations, gift-giving and therefore objects had multiple roles. As their primary function, the food and drinks evidently meant to satisfy material needs and the gifts distributed at the time of parting could be useful in everyday life. However, more importantly (but by not all means transcendent to the first one) they had a symbolic function as well. The provided provisions secured that the partners had face-to-face contact in a geographically unfavourable social space (long distances between communities), whereas the parting presents served to seal the social setup that was concluded. Although the events usually took place in an atmosphere of familiarity and peacefulness, aggressiveness was not unprecedented. The participants operated with objects to overcome each other either by refusing to “*give or receive*” (unfriendly leavetakings without gifts) or by surpassing the other in generosity forcing him to debt (*‘potlach’*). No matter how we look at it, material culture was a central figure in the line of social events and objects were regarded as actors with distinguished role in human relationships.

‘Konungsnautr’ (King’s Gift)

A subservient relationship was constituted by gift exchange when chieftains re-affirmed their relations with their *þingmenn* or retainers, or else when the king himself awarded somebody for his services. This award, often labelled with the property name “*Konungsnautr*”³ in the sagas, literally means “*the gift given by the king*” (Zoëga, 2004:309). Despite the fact that it seems to be a reward, its obvious goal is to denote a new type of dependence of the receiver towards the donor.

When Kjartan Ólafsson accepts Christianity from Óláfr Tryggvason and in return receives a robe and a sword, his companions are not delighted (*Laxdæla saga*, Ch. 40). By giving in to the king’s insistence, Kjartan formally becomes the subaltern of the king. In addition, the gift has not been repaid. In the circulation of gift-bestowal we have already discussed the consequences of uncompensated donations; the receiver falls into the debt of the donor. The *Konungsnautr* is a specific issue, as a vassal relationship is sanctioned here; the debtor is transformed into the liegemen of the giver. Though it lacks the formal characteristics of an

³ Or somebody’s –“*nautr*” with a name prefix like *Haraldsnautr*, *Håkonsnautr* and so forth.

“*oath of fidelity*” in feudal Europe (oath on a relic, touching hands and the kiss – for this see: Bloch, 2002; Le Goff, 2003), the situation strikingly reminds us of the institution of vassalage which derives from the German tradition of pledging loyalty. The only concrete example in the Icelandic Family Sagas, where an „*oath of fidelity*” as an expression is in *Grettis saga*, however, the later literary accounts like the *Sturlunga* compilation also exclude the proper description of it. The saga writers frequently intentionally leave details obscure, which does not mean that they are irrelevant, rather that they seem so obvious to contemporaries that the writers feel they don’t need to remind their readers of them. That these literary considerations do not shed light on this practice just underpins the idea about the importance of orality in Icelandic society. Spoken words were just enough to seal an agreement with witnesses confirming it (Cattaneo, 2010). As I have suggested formerly, objects as actors could be proper witnesses to these types of human actions.

Another instance of neglected ritual details of retainer relationship occurs in *Harald saga Hárfagra*. Æthelstān the king of England sends an emissary to the court of King Haraldr along with a heavily ornamented sword and a message:

“‘*Here is the sword which King Æthelstān asks you to receive from him.*’ Then the king took hold of the haft, whereupon the messenger said, ‘*Now you seized the sword in the fashion our king desired you would, and now you shall be his liegemen since you seized hold of his sword.*’” (*Haralds saga Hárfagra*, Ch.38.)

Though this formula describes a competition for higher status between two lords, the general bestowing of a *King’s Gift* refers to the retainer-overlord relationship when the former willingly steps into service (demonstrated by Kjartan’s case).

However, just as loyalty was required from the retainers, generosity was from the ruler. The followers had to be rewarded and fed properly at all times. When Þórofr’s ship, in *Egils saga*, with valuable cargo is confiscated by the king and his incomes are reduced, he still insists on maintaining the same style of living as before:

“*He had no fewer men with him than the previous winter – rather more, in fact – and he was more extravagant in feasts and invitations to his friends. He spent all the winter at home.*” (*Egils saga*, Ch. 18)

The slightest depreciation of his reputation would cause disgrace to the chieftain, who could not afford it as he was dependent on his followers in political struggles. If Þórolfr would cut down the costs of living, his retainers might have left him for the king. Thus, a king must have been even more generous when he let people depart with gifts. As Gurevich highlights, the Kings' Sagas are full of stories about successful kings who are generous in matter of feasts and gifts. While tight-fisted kings were compared with simple peasants, under the rule of a munificent king, peace reigned, cattle were bred and harvest was fine. Such a king was called '*ársæll*', "*favourable in abundance and harvest*", indicating that to be generous is not a mere moral duty but also the possession of certain magical power (Gurevich, op.cit:185).

Concerning the physical nature of the *King's Gift*, besides the copious meals at feasts and generous donations in provision to the people, it was a precious object often inlaid with gold or silver. It could frequently be an arm-ring (e.g. *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds*), a ship (e.g. *Auðunar þáttur vestfirzka*), a cloak (e.g. *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*) or a weapon (e.g. *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*), mostly a sword (e.g. *Laxdæla saga*). Sometimes it appears as a unique object; for example a harp which strings are made from gold and silver (*Víglundar saga*). However, as I will argue for in the case-study I have chosen - *Laxdæla saga* - the physical representation of these objects are only relevant for the fact that they can be detected by human eyes. That is because they are very rarely handled as their practical use would indicate. Even more important is that they are appraised with certain social-, magical-, or religious powers and therefore are able to act like humans and alter the current social stability.

The *King's Gift* is a symbol, but by its very nature of being on display physically, acts like any of the characters in the plot.

Objects in the process

Gift-giving was of vast importance for ensuring social contact among the Scandinavian types of exchange, since *rán* destroyed social bonds, while *purchase* for goods was regarded disgracefully and often taken offensively according to the literary records. You would engage in buying and selling with somebody who was distant from you: in a spatial sense (a foreign merchant) or in social terms (a beggar or peddler) but not with somebody who is part of the community and whom you can still border on in the future.⁴ Hence, the parties did not bargain over the price at all in the saga scenes of purchase but immediately switched to another mode

⁴ This distinction can also be seen when people who live far away receive harsh treatment. Ireland, Man, the Hebrides, for example seem to exist only for plundering according to the sagas (Samson, 1991:94).

of exchange: gift or *rán* (Miller, 1986:46-47). Nevertheless, *rán* was a dangerous dealing so gifting remained the central option of exchange and in the same time, the maintainer of social order or peace inside the community (e.g. *Laxdæla saga*, Ch.16). Rejecting a gift was a great insult and often led to feud (Byock, 1993:272-275). However, *giving* gifts could be just as aggressive as *rán*. By handing out derisive presents or by employing the “*debt-inflicting strategy*” (*‘potlach’*), gift-giving could be easily transformed to violence, thereby blurring the distinction between generosity and cruelty only slightly different. Gift-giving and hostile taking went hand-in-hand, being alternate manifestations of power in the Old Norse World and in contemporary Europe (Curta, 2006).

While talking about the different modes of gifting the striking question: ‘Why were the receivers compelled to return gifts if there was no existing authority what would force them to do so?’ remained unanswered. In agreement with others (Mauss, op.cit; Gurevich, op.cit; Fichtner, op.cit), I claim that a certain magical-religious power was hidden in the objects according to fetishist (folk) beliefs. Mauss calls this ‘*hau*’, an invisible spirituality of the giver which was attached to the artefact and that needs to be returned. The only possible way to restore comes through a bestowal of another object. Defaulting to return the ‘*hau*’ would be “*dangerous even mortal, as it exerts magical and religious hold over you*” (Mauss, ibid:11-13). As we could see, among the Vikings, equalization was not performed solely by objects but through service as well. Thus, the magical power resided in artefacts in a somewhat different way from ‘*hau*’, though the nature of the obscure obligation to return can be adopted.

An object could be magical by obtaining a *personality* through name giving (examples mentioned in the introduction) and/or by the belief that it possessed *supernatural skills*, like the sword *Kvernbítr* (*Quernbiter*), which “*cleft a millstone to its center*” (*Harald saga Hárfagra*, Ch. 40) or *Skofnung* in *Kormáks saga* which required special skills to exert (*Kormáks saga*, Ch. 9).

Obviously not every object had supernatural attributes. In spite of this, every gift had to be compensated. It confirms the assumption that naming artefacts was a generally common cultural practice, and the medieval authors fictionalized the representation of objects for artistic reasons in order to mask a real societal entity (Rogan, op.cit:48-49). Thus, artefacts without personality or remarkable power nevertheless had magic properties in a social sense. This is often referred to as the ‘*success*’ or ‘*luck*’ of the donor, which in a similar way like the ‘*hau*’ was incorporated in the bestowed object (Gurevich, op.cit). I interpret the Norse

concept of luck as a type of social magic since it is not the form of luck we are aware of today. Contrary to our perception of luck, the pagan mode of thought about it differed as being not unpredictable and fickle but an inherent quality residing in a man's personality and/or lineage (Sommer, 2007). Instead of being considered as an outsider guardian spirit, luck is a skill which can be acquired (Fichtner, 1979) and included in a person or in an object (Sommer, op.cit:287). It is similar to money in commoditized societies, which circulates from one people to the other and makes us different but we are not able to explain why (Serres, op.cit).

The religious dimension of gift exchange can be grasped via heathen worship. The pagan vows taken at special occasions, the sacrifice to the gods and consumption of horse flesh at feasts, all testify the close connection between gifts and sacrality. In addition, a distinguished segment of the religion-gift exchange interaction is the so-called "*rites of passage*" formulated by Arnold von Gennep (Hultgård, 2008). The *rites of passage* is not else than a series of rituals that marks a person's transition from one status to the other. In tribal societies like the German ones, a child had to face different trials to reach adulthood. As pointed out by Fichtner (1979), in Scandinavian society, becoming a man was a hard road which was learned through lessons in physical prowess and mental skills. The milestones were also related to the gifting process as a whole. By acquiring the very important ability to understand the operation of gift exchange and thereby making decisions individually, someone could finally be regarded as a grown-up (Fichtner, 1979; also in *Gautreks saga* see: Vestergaard, 1991:99-100).

Since the social connotations have been studied earlier, a summary is sufficient here. The socio-magical-religious dimensions of gift-giving interwoven with the physical and symbolic forms of meanings and objects, are all included in the table below (*Table 1*).

Table 1. Dimensions of gift-giving

	Social	Magical	Religious
Physical	Provision (meat and beer)	Objects with mighty abilities	Horse flesh
	Practical objects (rife utensils)	Grave-robbery	Sacrifice to the gods
Symbolic	Subordination (retainer/Þingmenn; vassal; insult)	Personality of objects	Use in the afterlife “Rites of passage”
	Friendship	Obligation to return	Pagan oaths
		King’s generosity	

During a gift exchange, the object was a sign that combines tangible and invisible substances (Curta, 2006: 679). My hypothesis is that in the Viking Age, the invisible (symbolic or allegoric) attribution of a gifted object dominated. In *Gautreks saga*, Ref gets valuable treasures from several kings but without even considering whether to keep them, passes them on to the next king. A golden ring, two dogs with gold halters, an extraordinary helmet and a coat of mail all meant nothing to him and as it turns out afterwards, he exchanged everything to serve in the vanguard on king Olaf’s ship (Vestergaard, op.cit). While not denying the possibility of objects being used according to their original function after the bestowing, I assert that mostly the type of the artefact was irrelevant on a practical sense and only significant for the fact that it is represented as physical evidence.

In the following pages, I will investigate how particular objects behaved in these above mentioned highly formal situations and were able to alter social conditions in an unexpected way.

‘Konungsnautr’ in Laxdæla saga. A case-study

The source

Laxdæla saga is one of the most well composed among the Icelandic family sagas. Though it was probably written between 1250 and 1270, the saga contains a vast amount of information about the period it describes: 890-1030. Unfolding a district's life for a few generations from the settlement, the saga provides us with relatively long term structures in the society that is depicted. The story-line is divided into three sections by fierce conflicts between half- or foster-brothers: Hǫskuldr – Hrútr; Þorleikr – Óláfr pái; Kjartan – Bolli. Regarding the original story's chronology, I am going to track two particular swords' lives throughout the different scenes.

However, even at the start we should bear in mind that the events are only relevant to the action of this saga, since the swords exist before the events. When the swords enter the scene, they already have a history (a life) that we know nothing at all about. This is also true after the saga ends, since the swords can be used again in the future. Therefore the stories of *King's Gifts* in *Laxdæla saga* are only fragments of the biographies of these objects, which means that they can alter social relations over a longer period than some of the humans.

Since the *King's Gifts* are never involved in violent actions at all, I assert that in strict terms they are not weapons but symbols and mediators within social relationships. On the other hand, their physical absence would totally alter the saga plot and therefore it is fair to claim that proper social communication was impossible without special objects, which we can therefore also call *actors*.

King's Gift 1

(1) The first occurrence of the sword is in chapter 13. The protagonist of the first part of the saga Hǫskuldr Dala-Kolsson travels to Norway in order to purchase wood. When Hǫskuldr asks king Hákon Haraldsson (AD 920-961) to provide him with the material, he is told to go to Vík, where he must serve as the king's man before receiving the supply of building timber. After an unspecified time, Hǫskuldr intends to return to Iceland in spite of the king's insistence to keep him there, as he has proved to be one of his best men. When they part ways, the king presents him with a gift in the following manner:

“Konungr dró gullhring af hendi sér, þann er vá mörk, ok gaf Hǫskuldi, ok sverð gaf hann honum annan grip, þat er til kom hálf mörk gulls. Hǫskuldr þakkaði konungi gjafarnar ok þann allan sóma, er hann hafði fram lagit.” (Kap. 13)

[„The king drew a gold ring, which weighed a full mark, from his arm and presented it to Hoskuld along with another treasure, a sword on which was worth half a mark of gold. Hoskuld thanked the king for his gifts, and for all the honour he had shown him.” (Ch. 13)]

There are no free gifts. The king is aware that they will never meet again: *“I suspect that this will be the last time you sail from Norway under my rule” (Ch.13)*, yet he hands out these precious gifts without possibility of compensation. What is his motivation to do so? The thing is that Hǫskuldr has already accomplished his part of the exchange by serving as the king’s retainer in Vík. Thus, the king cannot let Hǫskuldr depart without a counter-gift if he wants to avoid subordination. In the light of this, the king’s offering has the purpose of cancelling the outstanding social debt, to wipe the slate clean (see also other instances: Samson, 1991:90).

Let us take a closer look at the gift itself, concentrating on the sword because it is relevant to this study. We meet the sword in a clearly peaceful situation. No violence is mentioned at all, the power of the sword as a fighting instrument is also lacking. No violence is mentioned, and it is even not suggested. We can clearly feel that the king’s intention is not to give Hǫskuldr a deadly weapon to kill his enemies or conquer lands but something else. The king tries to express his friendship and high esteem to Hǫskuldr through the precious items, particularly the sword, but on the other hand he recreates the subservient tie between them. The discussion about the sword’s role in vassal relationships is addressed in the previous chapters. In this case, the king is re-constructing the ruler-retainer bond by offering the sword, which is not important as a fighting equipment but as a symbolic representation of the contract between the parties.

If the sword is not a piece of fighting equipment here as its primary function would suggest than someone can argue for its economic value as the motivation of the exchange, since there is *“half a mark of gold”* on it. But as anthropological and archaeological researches propose, the precious metals during the Viking Age were not accumulated by simple greed (Thurberg, 1988:319; Gurevich, op.cit), but because they were attributed some kind of blessing, the success or, as is frequently called in the sagas, the luck of the donor (Gurevich, ibid.; about

luck see: Fichtner, op.cit.). Like in the poem of Beowulf, the hoarding of treasure always brought shame on a leader, while the generous distribution of it to the deserving warriors was always graceful (Silber, 1977). Thus the receiver's intent had to be somewhat similar.

(2) This is illustrated in the second scene under study. Hǫskuldr who is very fond of his bastard son Óláfr pái, on his deathbed bequeaths the sword to Óláfr instead of his two legal sons and “*þar með giptu sína þeira frænda*” (kap.26). The English translation: “*wishing him all his own good fortune and that of his kinsmen*” (Ch. 26), does not do justice to the hidden meaning, i.e. that the good fortune is included in the object itself. The expression *þar með* is of crucial importance and the sentence should be translated as: „*therewith*” his good luck and their kinsmen's. The objects (the ring and the sword) possess magical power in a social sense, ‘*success*’ or ‘*good luck*’ which was accumulated in them due to the previous owners. The name, in my opinion, also indicates this; the term “*-nautr*” namely (beside gift) has another meaning as well: partner or companion (Pétursdóttir, 2007:61). The *King's Gift* is also the *King's Companion*, thus, an object apparelled with personality (which in itself makes it magical on a way). Furthermore, it is always going to be the *King's Gift* no matter what happens with it or who owns it, indicating that the king's power or personality still resides in it (Miller, 2007:17).

Therefore, Hǫskuldr tries to bequeath his own good luck to Óláfr, but this would involve the fortune of king Hákon also as the first owner of the *King's Gifts*. The power which rests in the objects, accumulated by a king and a powerful chieftain should make Óláfr a different person and so it does. Apparelling Óláfr with the family's most powerful and precious objects, Hǫskuldr formally imparts the inheritance to him. The sword becomes now a channel for Hǫskuldr to communicate and by this act he attempts to integrate the bastard Óláfr into the family legally. Leaving out his two legal sons from the transaction, the old chieftain declares that he wants Óláfr to be the head of the family.

The *King's Gift* does not occur in an aggressive context. The intention of Hǫskuldr is not that “you'll get this sword Óláfr to overpower all your enemies” but to give Óláfr a noble identity. By controlling the gifts, Óláfr becomes officially part of the kinship and in addition its magical essence makes him the leader of the kin. The sword *Konungsnautr* is therefore not notable as a weapon but as a symbol of kinship ties and identity, highlighting also the fact that Óláfr now has a physical proof of the agreement and is now able to declare his identity to society by displaying the objects.

As was seen in the analysis of the first episode, financial reasons are not to be discounted. Perhaps Óláfr only insists on keeping the treasures because they are precious. The fact that he gets another sword from another king, which is valuable too, casts a different light on Óláfr's attitude. King Mýrkjartan, king of Ireland, gives a "gold-bedecked" sword to him (Ch. 21), which Óláfr does not even attempt to keep. He just simply passes on it as a gift to Egill Skallagrímsson (Ch. 23). If it was the simple economic value that prompted Óláfr to keep *Konungsnautr* than he would have kept *Mýrkjartansnautr* too. However, as I demonstrated the hidden powers make the two swords distinct.

(3) The oldest brother, Þorleikr is angry of course, for he was left out from the most precious part of the inheritance which should have been his by right. That a bastard preceded him is disgraceful and it means that he has lost his prominent place on the hierarchy ladder. Óláfr feels, he has to compensate his brother for the gifts which legally belong to him. If he wants to keep the *King's Gifts* and "therewith" the chieftaincy, he has to step down a bit in hierarchy. Thus he approaches Þorleikr with a proposal:

"...veit ek, at þér mislíkar, er ek tók við gripum þeim, er faðir minn gaf mér á deyjanda degi; nú ef þú þykkisk af þessu vanhaldinn, þá vil ek þat vinna til heils hugar þíns, at fóstura son þinn, ok er sá kallaðr æ minni maðr, er qðrum fóstrar barn. Þorleikr tekur þessu vel ok sagði, sem satt er, at þetta er sæmiliga boðit." (kap. 27)

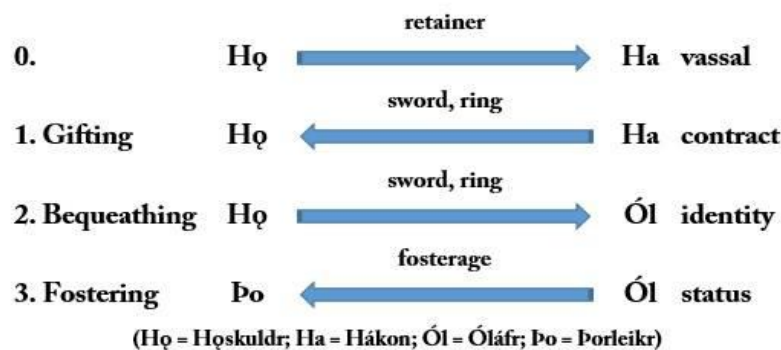
"I know you resented my accepting the gifts from our father on his deathbed and if you still feel yourself hard done by, I would like to make it up to you by fostering your son, as he who raises the child of another is always considered as the lesser of the two. Thorleik was pleased by the offer, and agreed that it did him great honour." (Ch. 27)

Fosterage as a mode of payment is frequent as has already been stated. The sword is not important to Þorleikr again as a mighty weapon. Why would he accept something peaceful if he is in lack of an offensive force? The sword together with the ring is still the symbol of status, high esteem, identity, whatever; its significance derives from the persons and events it was related to, from which none is violent. The circulation of the objects and their connotations are summarized in Table 2.

We can imagine all of these episodes with and without the bestowed objects. Hǫskuldr with the sword is the retainer of king Hákon and the latter is not in his debtor, whereas

without the objects we could not say the same. The same is applicable for Óláfr, who with the sword is a chieftain, without it only a bastard. I have shown that the *King's Gift* (here the sword) is an actor in the saga in important scenes, where its absence or presence can change the plot radically. However, it acts in an unexpected way and not as a tool of violence since no killing or other violent connotations can be discerned. The *King's Gift* is the device of ensuring social contact and establishing social links between the actors in the saga.

Table 2. The *King's Gift(s)* 1.



King's Gift 2

(1) The pattern of the *King Gift 2's* investigation will be familiar but it adds further contour to the discussion. As it can be expected the second sword occurs in a gift-giving scene (very similar to the one with Hqskuldr), where Kjartan our new protagonist receives it from Óláfr Tryggvason, king of Norway, as a parting gift for being his retainer. And the king spoke:

„Hér er sverð, Kjartan, er þú skalt þiggja af mér at skilnaði okkrum; láttu þér vápn þetta fylgjusamt vera, því at ek vænti þess, at þú verðir eigi vápnbitinn maðr, ef þú berr þetta sverð.’ Þat var inn virðuligsti gripr ok búit mjök.” (kap. 43)

[„This sword, Kjartan, I wish to give you as a parting gift. May you carry it with you always, and I predict that no weapon will wound you while you bear it.’ The sword was very precious and highly decorated.”] (Ch. 43)

The vassal-ruler relation in an identical “*debt sweep away*” situation has been studied above. However, this scene has further interesting aspects which will add to the discussion. For the first time there is an evocation of violence in relation to the *King's Gift*, when the king

predicts that Kjartan will not be a “*vápnbitinn maðr*”, if he carries the sword. It seems at first glance that the king addresses the sword’s excellent fighting quality but in my opinion the text does not say this explicitly. There is no suggestion about killing people, the sword this time is a defensive tool which only secures that Kjartan is not going to get wounds but says nothing about whether he will be able to cause injuries. A sword as a defensive weapon is not the original role of the object. Therefore the whole passage should be read figuratively. The king expresses that no harm will come to Kjartan if he bears the gift but not merely on a physical sense but in every respect. The sword possesses a hidden power and the *good luck* and *success* of the king will prevent any unfortunate happenings. Thus, it is regarded as a token of magical protection in addition to the more obvious symbolic prestige and signs status.

(2) Afterwards Kjartan becomes an esteemed chieftain in Iceland. However, many are envious of him, even among his kinsmen. During a family feast his precious sword is stolen. Kjartan does not to create a scence, but he does however send his servants out to look for the thieves. One of them finds the robber and follows him into a marsh, where the thief discards the sword. After a bit of searching Án (the servant) touches the hilt of a sword in the bog but:

“Án vildi hafa til vitni með sér um þetta mál ok reið eptir Þórarni í Sælingsdalstungu, ok hann fór til með Áni at taka upp sverðit.” (kap. 46)

[“He wanted to have other people witness what he did and rode to Saelingsdalstunga, to have the farmer Thorarin accompany him to recover the sword.” (Ch. 46)]

Why would a servant need somebody to be a witness of the stolen object being found? Án is a respected member of Kjartan’s household and he should not be afraid of being incriminated with the theft, especially since the sword is found. The motivation what lies behind this is somewhat different. The witness calling phenomenon is a common custom regarding crimes among humans. The law book *Grágás* quotes the following instruction when a killing happens and witnesses should be called:

“He has to name men as witnesses to the wounds classed as mortal and show them the wounds. They do not have to testify how many there were. Men selected as mortal-wound witnesses are to be such as are not disqualified from serving on a panel of neighbour on grounds of connection with the principals in the case. But if men are not named as witnesses

to the wounds classed as mortal, then the neighbours have to decide both who are guilty of the mortal wounds and how many mortal wounds there are.” (Grágás, K:86)

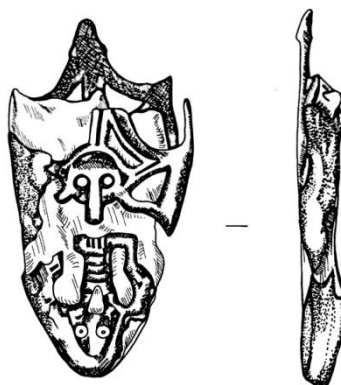
I propose that Án summoned the neighbour as a witness to a murder: *the murder of an object*. Archaeological investigations have shown out, that the Viking Age wetland depositions occurred with ritual purposes where metal hoards and precious objects have been sacrificed (Lund, 2008; 2014). To put something in a bog the intention was not to hide and use them later, since they were aware of the fact that objects erode very badly in water. By ritual performance, they intended to end the social life of the objects, probably with a purpose of gaining something in response, e.g. from the gods (Lund, 2014). Literally speaking a sacrifice is equal to killing. This information in itself confirms my theory about the objects’ real nature and human characteristics in the Old Norse world. They can die and need to be witnessed on the spot just like any other human beings. They are even changing the humans’ environment, when the landscape is named after them as here: “*Par heitir Sverðskelda síðan, er þeir Þórolfr hófðu fólgt konungsnaut*” (kap. 46) [*“The spot where Thorolf and his companions had hidden King’s Gift has been called Sverðskelda (Sword bog) ever since.” (Ch. 46)*].

Kjartan’s reaction also reinforces the idea of a *King’s Gift’s life*, and that it was never meant to be a real weapon: “*Kjartan valued the sword less highly than before.*” (Ch. 46) [„*Kjartan hafði jafnan minni mætur á sverðinu síðan en áður.*” (kap. 46)]. Why if it is just a killing tool? It was rested in the bog for a few hours maximum so it could be still powerful as a weapon (still sharp and able to kill) but Kjartan just did not value it anymore. In fact, he wrapped it in cloth and concealed on the bottom of a chest where it will rest until the end of the saga. Kjartan does not care about the sword as a weapon but as a symbol which was essential to maintain his social dominance. Therefore it was treated like a human, i.e. a prominent member of the household.

Anthropological studies stigmatize ceremonial *performance* as one of the leading acts of biographical objects (Gosden, 1999: 174-175). This has to do something with the sheath of the sword which was never found again and Kjartan therefore cannot perform with the sword in front of the audience. Anthropology differentiates between the so-called *pet names* and *public names* (Rogan, op.cit:54). The first one is a given name by the owner and unknown for the broader audience, like when we name a car “*Thunder*” or a goal kicking football shoe “*Cannon*”; while *public names* are generally famous. For the individualization of the latter, it

needs to have broadly known attributes in order to be recognizable for everybody. Referring again to archaeology, Hayeur-Smith in her book about jewellery in Viking Age Iceland claims that sword-chapes were just as significant devices of self-expression for men as was the jewellery for women (Hayeur-Smith, 2004). Thus, a finely made sword-chape like the one found at Ljárskógar could serve as a distinctive marker on a scabbard (*Image 2*).

Image 2. Sword-chape from Ljárskógar, Iceland.



Without the ornamented scabbard, an inevitable segment of the performance, Kjartan is not able to put the sword on display and thereby declare his status and prestige. Objects with a social significance are able to extend the individual's personhood beyond his body, like for example a personal totem which a refugee carries with himself from his country and therefore becomes the memento of his real identity (Parkin, 1999).⁵ The same is happening with Kjartan who is not the same person anymore, since with the loss of the sword and the scabbard, his social identity has been attacked and therewith part of his personality.

(3) At the final battle scene against his kinsmen, Kjartan dies, and the saga suggests to us that he was defeated because he had a bad sword, and that he "*hafði eigi konungsnaut*" (*kap. 49*) [*"was not bearing the one called King's Gift"* (*Ch. 49*)]. This should not to be understood in a practical way. The enemy outnumbers him anyway and he has no chance against them whether he is carrying the *King's Gift* or not. Furthermore he is using an awful blade which he needs to straighten several times during the fight. If the *King's Gift* was a real weapon why was he carrying this bad sword? The *King's Gift* rests at home in his chest though it was a better sword than the one he had with him. It seems more probable that he dies because he is not carrying the *good luck* and the *protection* what was incorporated in the sword.

⁵ The same happened with Óláfr pái when he acquired the *King's Gift 1*.

To draw an analogue, in *Völsunga saga*, after his sword was broken by Óðinn, „*King Sigmund's luck had turned and his losses were heavy.*” (*Völsunga saga*, Ch. 11) It is likely that it happened many times during a battle that a sword broke. Sigmundr is obviously not losing the fight because there is one less outstanding fighting equipment in his army, but because the gods have turned their back on him (the sword came from Óðinn himself). It is the same in Kjartan's case, but the blessing of the gods is replaceable with the king's.

In the introduction, I cited Latour's example about a loaded gun and an angry citizen, and how their social meaning is changed by their interaction. Similarly, Kjartan is simply not the same person anymore with or without the *King's Gift*. The loss of the sword is not so much that of a weapon but of an important conveyor of social meaning. Its significance can be measured by the very fact that it had a personality or part of a personality (in this case Kjartan's).

King's Gift 3

Though it does not play as crucial a role, there is a third *King's Gift* in the *Laxdæla saga*, from the Irish king Mýrkjartan to Óláfr pái (Ch. 21). This time it is a spear, inlaid with gold like the others. Like the others it does not kill anybody, except in this case a ghost (Ch. 24). Killing somebody who is already dead is not really a big achievement from a weapon, unless we attribute this success to its magical power. Encounter with an undead is much more associated with supernatural powers than practical fighting abilities, thus the usage of the spear supports my theory of the “unpractical” object.

Legbiter

If somebody would still have doubts that the *King's Gift* is not a weapon, I would like to show how *Laxdæla saga* presents us with a pure tool of violence. The name *Legbiter* speaks for itself but let us see how the saga describes it:

“Þat var mikit vápn ok gott, tannhjolt at; ekki var þar borit silfr á, en brandrinn var hvass, ok beið hvergi ryð á. Þetta sverð kallaði hann Fótbit ok lét þat aldregi hendi firr ganga.” (kap. 29)

His [Geirmund] sword was a fine weapon, with a hilt of walrus ivory. It had no silver overlay, but the blade was sharp and without a spot of rust. He called the sword Leg-biter and never let it out of his sight.” (Ch. 29)

All practical features relevant to a good sword are addressed. It is made from walrus tooth, there are no unnecessary adornments on it (“*ekki var þar borit silfr á*”), it is always sharp “*without a spot of rust*” and finally it is always ready to kill as the owner Geirmundr never lets it out of his hands (“*lét þat aldregi hendi firr ganga*”). The name is also talkative. As the Norwegian anthropologist Rogan states:

“Nordic swords were named after former owners, after the smith, after general appearance, or ornamental details, or actual or desired qualities (swords that are lethal, make blood run, break settlements), after their sharpness, after dangerous animals, or after some abstract concepts (honour). Apparently, they were not named

when forged or taken in use, but only after having attracted attention because of their appearance or special characteristics, or after having been connected with special persons and events.” (Rogan, op.cit:53).

It is likely that *Legbiter* did not receive its name first and then start to chop off limbs, but the other way around. Thus, a name defines an object and it is immediately apparent what kind of function it has. *Legbiter*'s presentation is vastly different from that of the *King's Gift*. Its peaceful name indicates that its importance lies in its nature as a gift from a remarkable individual not in its fighting prowess. Unlike the *King's Gifts*, *Legbiter* is involved in quite a few fights throughout the saga, causing very serious wounds and putting several men to death (Ch. 49, Ch. 55). It also has a strong personality (for the effects of name giving see the chapter: Gift-giving in the Viking Age), which influences humans to action. At the final clash, Kjartan calls his kinsmen Bolli to fight but it seems like as he would address the sword *Legbiter*:

“Ok er þér nú þat vænst, at veita þóðrumhvárum ok reyna nú, hversu Fótbitr dugi.” (kap. 49)

“You’re going to have to decide whose side you’re on and then see what Leg-biter can do.” (Ch. 49)

After some hesitation, Bolli deals Kjartan his deathblow which will lead to a series of killings between kinsmen.

Edification of the King's Gift's examination

The investigation has brought us closer to two things: that objects are not always what they seem to be (*King's Gift* is a symbol not a weapon) and that some of them have the same level of importance as any human (possessing personality and/or supernatural powers). In addition, by their involvement in the gift-giving process, they determine social relations. The management of objects, humans and interactions are therefore a key to success in society.

It seems that the unfortunate happenings are all due to the mistreatment of the gift giving network. If somebody knows what and how to exchange - as Hǫskuldr, Óláfr pái or Ref (in *Gautreks saga*) – than he is able to maintain the social order. In *Laxdæla saga*, the Ósvífrs sons stole Kjartan's sword and thereby committed an illegal mode of exchange:

thievery. While taking property by pure force was allowed (*rán*), secret moves were always regarded as cowardice. The uncertainties created by an incorrect definition of an exchange or the secrecy of an action implied always caused tensions and could easily lead to offense (Miller, 1986:22). The Ósvífrssons created a feud among kinsmen and accordingly ended up murdered just like Bolli and Kjartan who got involved in this wrongly defined transaction.

Conclusion

After having examined object bestowal in ancient Scandinavia, we can conclude that objects had an inalienable role in social life. Gift-giving was a form of social communication, where the parties negotiated questions of status, wealth and prestige and were able to construct a social hierarchy either by force or words. In this process, objects had an essential importance as physical proof of the results of these talks. Given the huge geographical distances of the medieval North, objects must have been very significant for their symbolic meaning. In the case of Icelandic chieftaincy for instance, the *goði* was not surrounded by his followers - as the chieftaincy was not based on geographical units but rights over people – and the retainers in addition were free to choose which chieftain to follow. Therefore the gifts seem to have been even more important as a sign of belonging to someone (Pétursdóttir, 2007:61).

In this aspect, the primary function of the object was not necessarily relevant but could even be totally different from the expected one. In the literary sources, a cloak which is never worn (*Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*), a golden inlaid axe used against oxen (*Egils saga Skallagrímsonar*), swords which are not used to kill (*Laxdæla saga*) or other weapons representing the religion of the donor and receiver (*Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds*) are not unique instances of „unpracticality” with a symbolic social message. Archaeological evidence from the era very much reinforces the idea that what I call “unpracticality” of objects, and therefore their symbolism as opposed to their primary function, is present among many Viking Age graves’ goods (see. Pétursdóttir, op.cit).

Anyway, artefacts were active participants of these social happenings, which the written sources depict. We can observe that some objects possessed human characteristics and even were able to be an active participant in social relations. They could be named or could possess supernatural powers. The question is why was it necessary for the Scandinavians to bestow these features upon objects?

Rogan observed it as follows:

“Naming may be a way to admit and to express the vital importance of the artefact to the owner. He may owe his life to the object in a way (e.g. the excellent quality of a sword). The naming is an attempt to make this dependency a bit less insecure as a strategy to gain control over physical beings by symbolic acts.” (Rogan, op.cit: 55)

Secondly, being widely superstitious, medieval people needed explanations for certain obscure situations and to gain confidence by having particular equipment in a harsh world like that of Viking and medieval Scandinavia. The supernatural force attributed to objects was one of the instances. The “*good luck*” or “*success*”, which was gathered in a magical object by high-ranking owners, affected every segment of life from kinship ties to warfare but only in close interaction with humans, non-human beings and the nature. The “*actor objects*” without other actors (and without a space) would have been meaningless just like a ball on the ground without the players (Serres, op.cit:226-227). Through their interaction, society is built up and all of them: the nature, the actors and the actions are inevitable parts of the construction. Without any of them the fragile building of society would collapse. Networks that connect actor with actor, subject with object, object with subject, relation with object, relation with subject and so forth, are all interwoven and overlap each other in time and space. One of these inextricable networks was the gift giving in Viking Age societies where hidden meanings and emotions operated through objects (*Table 1*). Those who failed to understand this process (e.g. defining the transaction) ended up badly (the Ósvífrssons, Kjartan, Hallfreðr), while those who knew how to manage the system prevailed (Ref, Hqskuldr, Óláfr, Þórolfr) (*Table 2*; Vestergaard, 1991:99-100). Without gifts these *social* (Hqskuldr and the king, Óláfr and his brothers, Kjartan and Bolli) relations would have just been floating in the air. By understanding the nature of the objects given as gifts, we gain further knowledge about the world itself to which they belonged.

Hopefully, the approach attempted here, opens up the possibility of further research on the topic: by studying biographical objects, we will be able to remember or rather *re-member* a segment of Viking Age society.

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