

## A RUNIC INSCRIPTION ON THE LONGER GOLDEN HORN

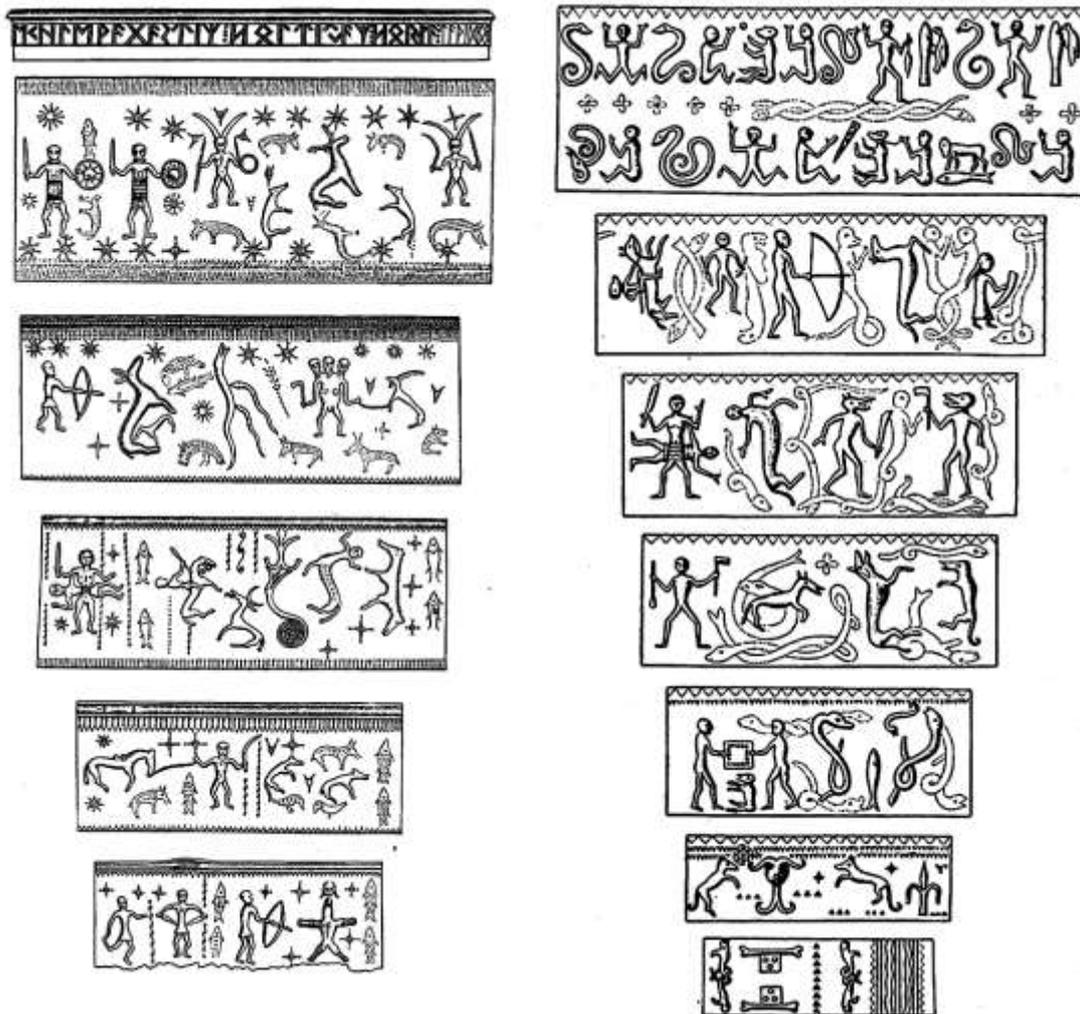
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The two golden horns, believed to have been smithed around 450 A.D., were discovered in the earth of southern Jutland, in 1639 and 1734, within a few meters' distance of each other, and are, consequently, often considered as a pair, created at the same time and by the same goldsmith. Thus Erik Moltke, one-time leader of the Runologist Section of the National Museum of Denmark, and a man who liked to express himself categorically, states that they 'undoubtedly constitute an original pair' (*Runes and Their Origin*. The National Museum of Denmark 1985, p. 81). The horns do, however, show considerable differences, and Johannes Brøndsted, a more sober scholar, in his book, *Guldhornene* [The Golden Horns] (Nationalmuseet 1954, s. 63-65), suggests that the figures riveted on to the long horn are a later addition, made in an attempt to improve the originally sparsely decorated horn, so that the two horns would form a more equal pair.

The closer you look at the reproductions of the horns (the originals no longer exist), the more clearly you see the differences. They certainly don't make a convincing pair. The shorter horn was, when weighed, found to be heavier than the longer horn. It was simply of much better quality. Furthermore, the curving of the horns differs considerably and the quality and the nature of the decorations are far from the equivalent.

The short horn has been signed, and its creator has any reason to be proud of his work. Hlewagastir, as he calls himself, must have been one of the best goldsmiths of his time, and he must have worked at one of the biggest and richest courts. We don't know which, but the royal court in Gudme, on the island of Funen, with its extensive metalsmith activity and its incredible richness of gold is a good guess. The inscription is far from a discrete signature; the man knew his own worth. The chief who received the horn must - if he was able to read - have found the self-conscious text outrightly presumptuous. The explanation may very well be that Lægæst made the horn for himself, and that he held a double position as both a goldsmith and a chief, or as goldsmith and priest.

The inscription tells that he made *the horn* - singular. That doesn't rule out that he made the other horn as well - or even more horns - but the differences between the decorations make it seem doubtful that the horns are the work of the same man. It is not only because different copyists have left us with drawings of different quality that the images on the long horn look stiff and weak by comparison. The friezes on the short horn are composed in a much more lively fashion. Its creator is simply a much better artist than the one who decorated the long horn.



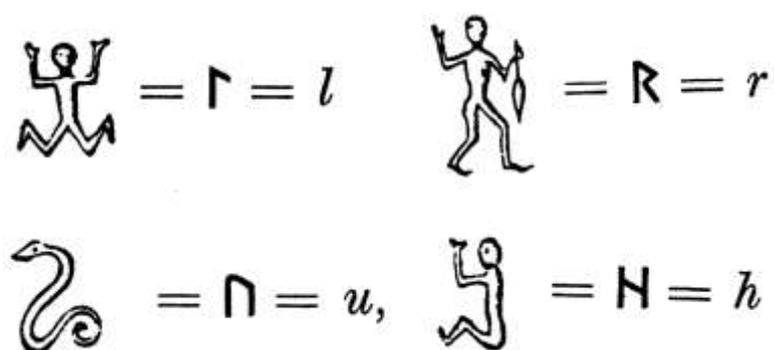
*The picture rings of the two horns unfolded.*

Another evident feature you notice when comparing the horns is the difference between the decorations that have been punched in. On the short horn these decorations are obviously made with the sole purpose of filling out the empty space between the figures that have been riveted on, and which form the main decoration. The punched-in figures on the long horn form a separate and highly remarkable decoration of winding, snake-like double-creatures. The decoration as a whole is asymmetrical and leaves quite a lot of space open, so that one may get the idea that the artist has not had the chance to finish his work. Only later, someone with little regard to the ground decoration has covered the horn with riveted-on figures, using the motif world of the short horn as a model (with only a single, small riveted-on figure made in the style of intertwined double-creatures). Whoever made this later work can hardly be the same as the one who made the snake-decorations; the clash between the two layers of decoration is simply too pronounced. In several places, the riveted-on figures are placed directly upon those that have been punched in. No artist would show such disrespect for his own work. Thus we can conclude not only that the same person has not decorated the two horns, but also that two different artists must have made the two types of decoration on the long horn.

How much time the long horn has remained in its original condition before the second layer of decoration was added cannot be said with any certainty. Recent years' excavations have, however, made it possible to date approximately the punched-in decorations, since scabards and other army equipment sacrificed in Illerup Moor, in Jutland, have been brought to the light of day, bearing ornaments closely related to the snake-creatures of the long horn. (See pictures in *Sejrens triumf* (The Triumph of Victory), published by The National Museum of Denmark in 2003, pp. 273, 275, 287 and 290). Those findings do not contribute much to our understanding of the snake-creatures as such, but the similarities are so obvious that we may conclude that the ground decoration on the long horn was made in the fifth century and that the horn as such was manufactured at approximately the same time as the short horn. The raw, undecorated horns may have come from the same workshop, but not necessarily. We do not know how common the use of golden drinking-horns was, but any chief who saw such an exclusive horn must definitely have wanted a similar one for himself. Perhaps it is more likely that many more horns existed than the two we know of. Whatever the case may be, at a certain time the two horns came in the same chief's possession, and he had the longer horn re-decorated to make a more matching pair of them.

In 1969 the German author Willy Hartner published a book, *Die Goldhörner von Gallehus* (The Golden Horns from Gallehus) (Franz Steiner Verlag, Wiesbaden), in which he claimed that even the long horn carried an inscription, as the two upper lines of figures could be read as a secret text, written in the oldest runic alphabet, the elder futhark. That does not seem unlikely, since the figures on the upper ring of the horn diverge from the other riveted-on figures in that they are placed in two rows, which resemble writing, and in that many of them are repeated, as the case would be if they formed a text. If you ignore the snakes, which I, contrary to Hartner, don't find it possible to read as runes, there is actually only one of the fifteen figures which occurs only once. Five figures occur twice, and one no less than four times. And Hartner is definitely right in seeing a remarkable likeness between one of the sitting figures and the **p**-rune of the elder futhark.

But no matter how extensive the studies that lie behind Hartner's book, a quick look at a few of his rune identifications is enough to discard his work completely.



*A selection of Hartner's deeply unsatisfactory identifications.*

Furthermore, Hartner is fully aware (p. 10) that the (for his reading so important) **p**-rune isn't known from any other inscriptions with the elder futhark than its occurrence in mere repetitions of the alphabet. Nor have the many findings of runic inscriptions in recent years provided us with any examples of actual use of the p-rune; therefore we can probably conclude that very shortly after the construction of the futhark the rune was found to be superfluous, and, as such, never found practical use in Scandinavia. Already on the Vadstena bracteate, once considered as contemporary with the golden horns, but now dated to the last part of the sixth century, it has been replaced with a **b**-rune.

The **p**-rune did, however, find an active existence in the Anglo-saxon runic alphabet, and if you dare compare the horn figures with this alphabet as it looked around 800 A.D., you get a much more satisfactory deciphering - as seen below. In each instance, there is a distinct similarity between rune and figure. You even get a good explanation of why one of the sitting figures has been depicted with four limbs compared to the other ones' two. Two of the runes are reversed, but there is nothing unusual about that. Mirroring of runes was often used to indicate that a line should be read in the opposite direction - from right to left - but spontaneous mirroring of single runes also occurs, and in the present case, the mirroring can be explained by the artist's wish to make small groups of figures.



*The text frieze of the longer horn, read as an Anglo-saxon rune inscription. The A- and O-runes are mirrored.*

But what does it mean? Although unable to read Anglo-saxon, I will, nevertheless, try to add a few commentaries to the text. It consists of fifteen characters and makes use of only seven different runes, with a small, but still significant overweight of vowels. In other words, it is a very condensed message, and if you are to make sense of it, you have to look upon each character as an abbreviation - something that is far from unknown in runic inscriptions. Each rune must stand for a

word or a syllable. One must also keep in mind that certain of the runes may stand for their name-words; i.e. that they express a certain thing or concept, like gold, gift or cattle. The text does not seem to imitate the artist's signature of the shorter horn, but the repetitions indicate that we may be dealing with some kind of verse.

A number of Anglo-saxon words and names begin with **ea**, but no Old Norse words do. Furthermore, a number of dissyllabic Anglo-saxon words (including both male and female names) consist of syllables beginning with **ea** and **w**, so a likely guess is that the text is built up from syllable abbreviations. The juxtaposition **ea****w** thus reveals that not only is the text written with Anglo-saxon runes, it is also written in the Anglo-saxon language and, furthermore, we may conclude that the upper line is to be read from left to right - even though we still have no clue as to where the line begins and ends. It may be worth mentioning that the juxtaposition, **ea****w**, also occurs in *The Husband's Message*, an Anglo-saxon text which includes a runic riddle that, it seems to me, never has found a proper solution.

No Old Norse names or words begin with **p**. In Anglo-saxon, **p** does occur as the first letter in certain words, but the only names beginning with **p** are the strange names of the three generations of Mercian kings, Pybba, Penda and Peada, from the sixth and seventh century. Their family tree, which traces their ancestry back to Odin himself, is quoted in the Anglo-saxon Chronicle and contains names that definitely reveal them to be of Norse ancestry. Could the horns have been theirs? No. On the coins with runic inscriptions issued by King Peada (the youngest of the three and the only one to become Christian), his name is spelled **Pada**, which shows that, at his time, the **ea**-rune had not yet been invented. Its appearance is usually dated to the end of the eighth century, and thus this late addition to the runic alphabet forms a *terminus post quem* for the dating of the horn inscription.

There is a small mythological sequence woven into the lower line (dealt with later in detail), which is to be read from the right. Together with the prevalence of left-facing figures (five left-facing, one right-facing, and one symmetrical, along with two left-facing snakes against one right-facing), this may indicate, that this line is to be read from right to left (still without us knowing where the line starts or ends). The whole text is then a *boustrophedon*-construction. It may seem odd that the group of three sitting figures, basically identical, in the upper and lower line should be read in opposite directions, but since the two figures which form the **p**- and **a**-runes are mirrorings of each other, the result may, though slightly paradoxically, end up as the same: **poa**. Furthermore, one must notice that until the direction of the lower line has been fully established, it remains open whether the two single, seated figures, are to be read as **a**'s or **p**'s. That the **g**-rune is separated with a snake from the group of sitting figures in the upper line, but not in the lower, may simply be explained as the artist's not quite successful solution to the space problem he faced because of the lower line, due to the curving of the horn, being shorter than the upper. (In the drawing reproduced in this article, the copyist has exaggerated the width of the cross-shaped figure and one of the snakes in the lower line

to make the lines - incorrectly - appear as the same length). Rune-carvers have often been seen to use various more or less successful ways of compressing the runes in order to deal with space problems given by the material. That may also explain Lægæst's use of different type width in the shorter horn's inscription.

What is left now is to explain why the **st**-rune occurs together with the group on the lower line, but not on the upper.

The conclusion then is that the upper line, with **a** and **o** reversed, should be read:

**G : POA : EAW : EAW**

whereas there are two possible readings of the lower line: either from the left, with **a** and **o** reversed:

**A : G [:] POAST : A**

or from the right, with **a** and **p** reversed:

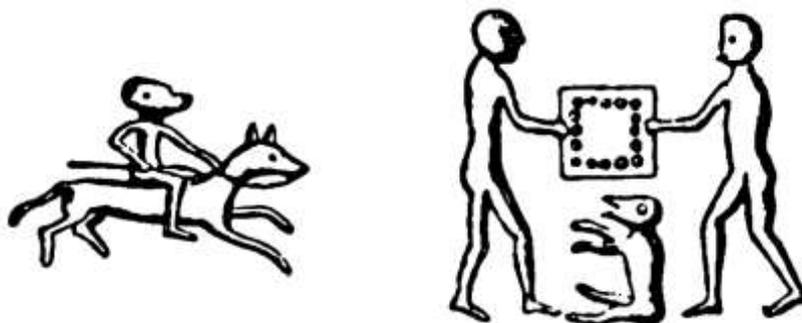
**P : STPOA [:] G : P**

There are some slight variations between the figures which I don't think are of any importance to the reading. Some may be explained as copying errors when the drawings of the horns were made, others as due to simple wear. One of the two basically identical birds that are eating a fish (the motif is taken from a punched-in figure on the shorter horn) has legs, the other not. The legs may have been made from a thin gold thread, which has fallen off. The same may be the case with the rope or chain, with which one figure in the lower row holds another, and which is not found in the similar depiction in the upper row. A cross-shaped human appears in both rows; in the lower, he is missing a hand, which may indicate that he is a depiction of the one-handed god, Tyr, but the hand may also simply have been broken off. Between two of the sitting figures in the lower row is an oblong object, which may be understood as a fishing net; between the two similar figures in the upper row is something that looks like a ball; it may, however, be the traces of a rivet which previously held a similar object, now lost, as the one in the lower row. One of the two wandering or dancing men in the upper row is holding a spear, the other not; a spear may simply have fallen off. Finally, one should mention, that other engravings than the one I use in this article show an oval figure above the one-handed figure. No one has been able to explain the figure, but it is placed so much above the line that it hardly can be of any importance to the reading of the text.



*Denmark's first cartoon strip is found on the longer golden horn. It contains three episodes which - because the figures also form a runic text - are not arranged completely correctly. Loke is transforming himself into a salmon, is caught in a net, and put in chains. To the left, the god Tyr.*

As mentioned, the artist amused himself by weaving a mythological tale into the lower row. The animal-like, and perhaps deformed man, who has been placed on top of a fish, must be Loke, the trickster of Norse mythology, who tries to escape from the punishment of the other gods by transforming himself into a salmon. To the left, the artist has succeeded in condensing two episodes into one by showing the same figure being caught in a fishing-net and being held in chains. Nothing has been done to apply individual features to the two other men in the group (either Thor and Kvaser or two depictions of Thor); most likely, the artist didn't take his cartoon-like tale too seriously. To the left of the group, a person with one hand is seen. The artist, in his eagerness to condense, may have wished to include the god Tyr, even though he doesn't really belong in the story. The chained figure hereby also alludes to the Fenris-wolf, Loke's son, who ate Tyr's hand when he found himself irredeemably chained by a magic rope. The confusion of the two tales may be seen as an indication that the artist, as an Anglo-saxon, was not fully familiar with the Norse myths. We may allow ourselves to take this whole mythological element as an innocent joke which has no importance to the reading of the runic text. The eerie, animal-like manikin, which we have identified as Loke, however, has held a particular significance to the creator of the decoration, since he lets him occur again in two other places on the horn; in one picture-ring, he is seen riding a horse; in another, he watches two men playing *hneftafl*, the Viking board game. He does not appear on the shorter horn



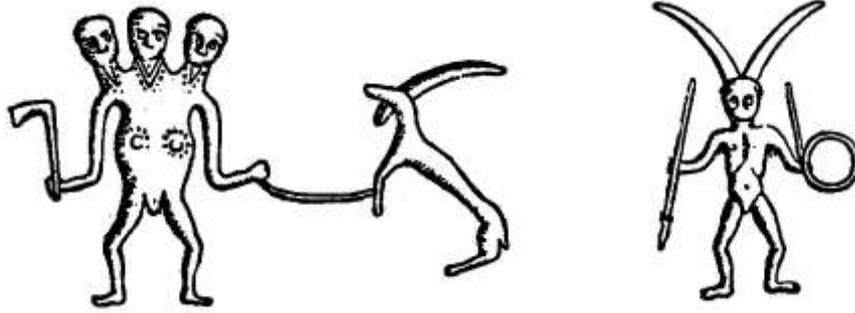
Loke is a peculiar figure to choose as a main character; he is definitely not one who brings good luck, and there is nothing in the myths about him that has survived to the present day that can throw any light over the two episodes. Furthermore, regarding his looks, the Norwegian poet, Snorre, who

in the thirteenth century took upon him to retell the ancient heathen myths, clearly states that Loke was regarded as handsome. Although we today look at things with different eyes than people did in antiquity, it is hard to believe that the artist meant this abnormal figure with its misplaced head to be handsome. My guess is that the manikin cannot unambiguously be identified as Loke, but that he is meant as a caricature of a contemporary person, perhaps a man with a bodily defect like the 300-year later Erling Skakke with his twisted neck. We cannot possibly know who he may have been, and we cannot guess what the horseman scene and the board game scene refer to, but we can see that, in the runic sequence, the artist has amused himself by comparing this person - in an unkindly manner of course - to Loke.

It is important to make clear that we do not look at the pictures on the horns with the same eyes as did the artist and his age. The weapon dancers found on the shorter horn look funny to us; they definitely did not to the pre-Vikings. The horn-bearer on the shorter horn resembles a dwarf to us but is not necessarily meant as one by the artist, who was completely without our knowledge of perspective and proportion. The winding figures on the longer horn look ghostlike and ethereal to us; they were probably merely meant to be decorative. Therefore, one must be cautious in interpreting the manikin as a caricature, but if the artist's idea indeed was to mock a contemporary person, one must also have in mind that the whole idea of making a secret runic inscription may be to conceal an audacious mockery.

Can any differences be pointed out between the rest of the illustrative material on the two horns to indicate that an interval of perhaps 350 years separate the time of their decoration? Perhaps so. The riveted-on figures of the longer horn are, to a certain degree, copied from those on the shorter horn. The fact that one of the most striking figures has been left out on the longer horn - namely the three-headed god, whose attributes - a hammer and a goat - reveal him to be an early depiction of Thor\* - can best be explained by the fact that, around the year 800, people no longer supported the conception of this god being three-headed. (A few other tricephalic idols have been found in Denmark, but none of them with attributes to identify them as early Thor depictions).

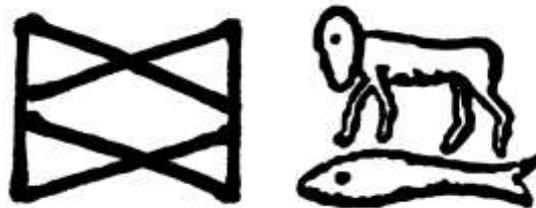
Likewise, the exclusion of the two warriors or weapon-dancers with longhorned helmets which appear on the upper ring of the shorter horn and whose exact meaning, despite the existence of several similar depictions (including one in the Sutton Hoo burial), remain a mystery (we don't even know if they are meant to represent humans or gods), may be explained by a seeming change in the use of these images from Iron age to Viking age, which Michaela Helmbrecht points out in her article, *Om hjelmer med horn og Odins krigere* (On Helmets with Horns and Odin's Warriors), in the book, *Kult, guld og makt* (Cult, Gold and Power), Göteborg 2007, pp. 149 ff. There she asserts that the weapon dancers, who, in the pre-Viking age, appeared as a motif on male cult objects only, in the Viking age itself are found exclusively on female cult objects and in female burials. If she is right, this may explain why these remarkable figures have not been transferred to the longer golden horn.



*Thor with three heads, plus one of the two long-horned weapon dancers from the shorter horn.*

The golden horns are unique and there seems to be no archaeological or written material that can be claimed to relate to them or even to throw some light upon their meaning. Still, it may be possible to make a more precise dating of when the horn was redecorated, plus an exact localization of where it happened. It seems that an Anglo-saxon goldsmith was working for a Danish chief, but there is also the possibility that the artist could have been Frisian.

On a yew wand that was found in Westeremden in Groningen, and which dates to the late eighth century, there appears a variant of the **st**-rune, which even more closely resembles the man-upon-fish pictogram on the golden horn. R.W.V. Elliott mentions and depicts the rune in his book, *Runes* (Manchester University Press 1959, p. 73f). Below is my rendering:



Frisian was the ancient language most closely related to Anglo-saxon, and, at the same time, it was so reminiscent of Old Norse that a Dane and a Frisian must have been able to understand each other with little difficulty. If we imagine that the horn has been decorated by a Frisian goldsmith around the year 800, the man who ordered the decoration may very well have been the Danish king Godfred, who conquered Dorestad in the beginning of the ninth century, plundered the city and imposed heavy taxes upon its citizens. He died as early as 810, but the Danes kept plaguing Frisia throughout the century and constantly plundered it for its riches of gold and silver. The meeting between the Danish rulers and the famous Dorestad goldsmiths (who were entrusted to work for Charles the Great) led to the Frisian coin system being adopted by the Danes as the nation's first coin system. The Danish rulers may have forced some of the Frisian goldsmiths to work for them in Denmark. If king Godfred ordered the decoration of the longer horn, the **g**-rune in the inscription may just mean Godfred.



*The earliest Danish coins were copied from Frisian models and, in certain cases, possibly made by Frisian goldsmiths. An indication that they may have seen the golden horns is found on a Danish coin from the ninth century, which depicts a deer and a curled-up snake which kiss or stick their tongues out. The strange motif constellation is - as seen to the left - also found on the shorter golden horn. The goldsmith may have been inspired by seeing the horn. The importance of the animals sticking their tongues out remains unknown.*

In the beginning of the ninth century, both Frisians and Anglo-saxons had become christianized. The horn decorations are entirely heathen, so whoever made the decoration must have been forced to do so. Since he was probably aware that his employer was illiterate, we shouldn't rule out that the runic text is his own invention, a secret joke not meant to be understood by his employer.

Finally, one may ask if it is likely that the longer horn should have spent some 350 years with its punched-in decoration before someone got the idea of smartening it up in order to make it a more worthy companion piece to the shorter horn. The chief who owned such a wonderful piece of artwork must have regarded it as one of his most treasured possessions, so it would seem natural for him to wish to take it to his grave. In that case, the lifespan of the horns may have been only a few decades, perhaps even less. The way they were found - loosely covered with soil - may well indicate that a grave-robber had hidden them away without ever getting the chance to recover them. The conclusion is that we know absolutely nothing about what kind of life the two horns have led. We can only guess. Attractive as they were, they can hardly have avoided a dramatic fate. There is even a theory that the shortness and strong curving of the shorter horn is due to its having lost its two middle rings after suffering some kind of damage. (Incidentally, king Godfred is reported to have given two golden armrings to an Icelander by the name of Ræv [Fox]). The horns may have been used as gifts, or they may have been sold or stolen; there is also the possibility that they didn't belong to a chief at all, but were cult objects belonging to some kind of priesthood, unknown to us today. That might provide a better explanation of how they managed to survive for centuries. But this is wholly in the field of speculations. We know very little about the priesthoods of those times and virtually nothing about what kind of ritual objects they might have had.

Finally, I hope that an Anglo-saxon scholar will be able to establish a full text on the basis of my deciphering of the two lines of runes on the horn.

\* There has been a tendency among scholars to deny the existence on the horns of depictions of gods from the old Nordic pantheon. Thus Erik Moltke (*Runes and Their Origins*, p. 121), speaking of the gold bracteates, generally dated to around 500 A.D., states: "It is unrealistic to bring in Odin, Tyr and Thor, because we have no definitive evidence that these gods existed in Scandinavia in the Migration Age [...] It is equally pointless to try to identify any of the gods (?) figured on the golden horns." In his eagerness to produce categorical statements, Moltke forgets that he, in the very same book (p. 96), dates two spearheads from Illerup Moor, bearing the inscription *Ojingar*, to 200 A.D. *Ojingar* can hardly be anything else than an early form of *Odinkar*, a well-known Viking name, which is generally understood as 'Odin's man'.

*A Danish version of this article was published in Booktraders Julehæfte, 2008. The present English translation is previously unpublished.*