

Nancy L. Wicker

*Public and private expression of religious syncretism in Viking-Age Scandinavian art*

The study of religious syncretism through artistic expression often has been reduced to tracing visual “influences” in one direction or another; however, syncretism is not a one-way street. In this paper, I will focus on evidence of public and private art—with and without runes—at different scales that may reveal the meeting of belief systems in Scandinavia during the gradual expansion of Christianity into the polytheistic North.

The overtly visible monument of the Jelling stone with its runic inscription that attests to Christian beliefs is one of most straightforward examples of the public testimony of conversion and acceptance of Christianity. Simultaneously, its sculptural carvings exhibit a syncretic relationship of figural art with long-embraced norms of animal-style art in the North. Nevertheless, such evidence of monarchs and members of the highest levels of society who publicly converted and accepted Christianity does not indicate how conversion occurred at various societal levels including individual, non-elite actors.

Large-scale art that displays syncretism amidst conversion includes architectural structures and publicly visible runestones. Special-use buildings such as at Gamla Uppsala and Uppåkra may have been “cult” structures that reflected contact with or knowledge of Christian churches and expressed a collective adaptation of built structures to internal changes. Syncretism also is demonstrated by the custom of raising runestones with distinctly Christian inscriptions within an environment of animal-style art. Runestones as public art were placed in conspicuous locations along roads and marked places where it was safe to ford rivers. The portrayal of recognizable Christian subjects and personages along with animal art on some runestones, such as in the Nativity scene on the Dynna stone, is less common than runestone figures depicted solely in traditional animal-style, yet these examples may present artistic expressions of negotiated syncretic beliefs

The small-scale art of pendants worn suspended around the neck were much less visible than runestones, especially since they could be hidden from public scrutiny or recognition under articles of clothing. Thor’s hammers may have developed only in a milieu in which Christian crosses were worn. Both crosses and hammer pendants may reflect individual, personally held beliefs rather than communal values. Such pendants—whether considered pagan amulets or holy symbols—are known from mortuary remains, sacrificial deposits, casual losses in settlements, and production debris from workshops. Found above and below ground, these articles may disclose how beliefs could be expressed. Their use in burials seems to reflect the choice of the deceased or of the survivors who buried the dead. Similarly, the concealment of small sculptural images (so-called “pocket gods”) on one’s person may divulge private choices that reflect belief systems that developed in the context of Christian use of relics and icons. Overall, syncretism is visible at different scales, both large and small from public architecture and runestones to private manifestations of jewelry and three-dimensional figurines.