

Viking ‘amulet factory’ discovery forces rethink of enigmatic artifacts

10 mm



Figurine motifs from Ribe, Denmark reveal a variety of designs were manufactured at the site. Museum of Southwest Jutland, CC-BY-S

Archaeologists long assumed Valkyrie figurines represented Norse mythical beings. A new study of how and where they were made challenges that.

Mysterious, ancient female figurines have been found by the dozens all over Denmark, and as far afield as England and Russia: inch-long bronze depictions of long-haired women, often wearing crested helmets and long dresses, and armed with shields and swords. The small amulets date back more than a thousand years, to the height of the Viking Age.

But because Viking women weren't typically buried with weapons—unlike their male counterparts—researchers reached into sagas and mythology to explain the armed female figurines and concluded that they represented Valkyries, the mythical warrior women ancient Scandinavians thought were responsible for transporting slain warriors to the afterlife.

“The images had always been understood in terms of what we know of Norse mythology,” says Pieterjan Deckers, an archaeologist at the Free University of Brussels.

In a paper published today in the journal *Medieval Archaeology*, however, Deckers and his co-authors argue that the “Valkyrie” pendants represent actual women who played a central role in Viking festivals or ceremonies. Furthermore, they propose the armed female figurines are part of a larger set of ritual objects that suggest gender roles in Viking-era Europe may have been more complex than previously thought.

Viking ‘assembly line’

The key to the latest research was the 2017 discovery of what seemed to be a jewelry workshop dating back to the early ninth century—near the dawn of the Viking Age—at a trading outpost called Ribe on Denmark’s western coast.



Archaeologists from Aarhus University found over 7,000 fingernail-size clay fragments in and around the small workshop. Painstakingly piecing the fragments together, the team realized they had evidence of a Viking-era assembly line: Artisans would carve a single figurine, then press each side into clay to make two-sided molds. Melted bronze was poured into the clay molds, which were broken and discarded after the metal cooled.

“Using one model, you can make hundreds of [figurine] copies,” says Soeren Sindbaek, an archaeologist at Aarhus University and co-author of the study.

To figure out what sort of objects the workshop was casting, researchers used scanners originally designed for dental implants to create 3D computer models of the shattered clay molds, then digitally reassembled the pieces. With a copy of the mold, they could then reconstruct the amulets they produced.

“They’re creating an image of an artifact that does not actually exist out of scattered puzzle pieces,” says National Museum of Denmark archaeologist Leszek Gardela, who was not involved with the research. “It’s quite innovative.”

Ritual warriors

One of the reconstructed molds was for mass-producing the familiar “Valkyrie” pendants. But the more molds the researchers reassembled, the more they began to doubt the idea that the figurines represented mythical Valkyries: The workshop was churning out not just figurines of women carrying weapons and shields, but also

depictions of men tugging their hair as well as other, more everyday objects, including wheels, horses, and other non-mythological imagery.

All of the figurine examples produced at the Ribe factory can also be found on one of the rare visual representations that has survived from the Viking Age: Known as the Oseberg Tapestry, the 1,200-year-old embroidered cloth depicts a ritual procession involving wheeled carts, horses, women carrying weapons, and people wearing horned helmets or animal costumes. Many of the tapestry's images are a match for the Ribe molds.

"I'm sure this is what the small amulets are showing," says Sindbaek. "We've got exactly the same range."

Taken as a set, the amulets manufactured at Ribe might provide a new look into a ceremony that had special meaning for people in Viking Age Scandinavia. "Women were really prominent in these rituals," Sindbaek says. "Of course they would be—in the home setting, they were central characters."

What the "Valkyrie" figurines and scenes from the Oseberg tapestry don't depict, Sindbaek says, are women who served as warriors in real life. Although women were known to fight in the Viking Age, and women were very occasionally buried with swords and other weapons, the design of the female figurines from Ribe and elsewhere suggests something else is going on: The women are depicted holding shields and swords, but also wearing antiquated helmets and long dresses.

"It's not showing us combat—you couldn't go into battle in a dress with a long train," Sindbaek says. "Female warriors were a thing, but that's not what they're showing us in these amulets."

Instead, the researchers say, the amulets may depict a space where traditional Viking gender roles melted away. "What the pendants are showing is ambiguity," says Aarhus University archaeologist Sarah Croix, a co-author of the paper. "You have female individuals bearing weapons, and a male pulling his hair, which is a female gesture."

Colleagues say that's a refreshing change from some recent scholarship that narrowly focuses on warrior women in the Viking Age. "They steer away from a simplistic interpretation of women and weapons, where they're all Valkyries and warriors, and argue for something else," Gardela says. "It's good to remember there's no one fixed way of interpreting this material."

For Croix, who spent a decade working at Ribe and masterminded the scanning and 3D reconstruction of the clay fragments, the pendants add a layer of complexity to our view of the Viking era—and show that today's discussions and debates about gender and identity are nothing new.

"It's an important reminder that we can't assume ideas about gender roles are fixed or permanent," Croix says. "Male and female roles have been changing and differ from one culture to another."

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