A response on gripping beasts to Domeij Lundborg et al
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As stated in my 2009 conference paper, it rested on a survey of over four hundred artifacts featuring the Gripping Beast motif and kept in collections in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, and England—the largest survey of its kind to date. The aim of this rather brief communication was to share the results of my survey work, and contextualize how the results fit or challenged some of the existing research and ideas surrounding the motif in question. I reject the charge of plagiarism and welcome the opportunity to correct Domeij Lundborg et al.’s (2012) misrepresentations of the scholarship in my paper.

Plagiarism?
Neiß’s accusation of plagiarism is chronologically impossible and presents both an idea I do not endorse and an argument he does not make. In November of 2007 at the University of Iceland, prior to my ability to even access Neiß’s work, I presented on and submitted a paper containing my interpretation of the Gripping Beast as a protective motif with possible connections to Nordic guardian spirits—fylgja being noted as a specific example of such spirits (cf. Turville-Petre 1964, p. 230). In that work (Roy 2007), as is my position to date, I disagree with calling the Gripping Beast an example of a fylgja or any named guardian entity, because we simply do not have such evidence. In Neiß’s 2007 article, which I cite, the argument wanders from Óðinn to shamanism to fylgja in the context of a split soul, before pivoting towards an interpretation of the motif as a chimera. It is unclear to me how his one mention of the fylgja—which as he acknowledges himself does not fit the undefined species of the Gripping Beast, because fylgjur were protective animals of a defined animal type (horses, cattle, sheep, etc.)—would even apply to Óðinn. Neiß states, “With regard to its representations in Animal Art, I would rather suggest the Gripping Beast to be a kind of chimera, which unites the characteristics of different animals” (p. 87). With Neiß’s own words, “I find it doubtful that we can determine the Gripping Beast zoologically, . . .”. I do not know how or why I could suggest that Neiß argues the Gripping Beast to be an example of a fylgja.

Note that the term fylgja is not associated with major Norse gods, but with man—associated with afterbirth and serving as a protective spirit accompanying individuals throughout life (described in the very work Neiß cites: Hastrup 1985, p. 152). Furthermore, a “mythological” interpretation of the Gripping Beast is precisely what I argue against since my survey research does not offer any connections to Óðinn or other mytho-
logical gods. In discussing the Gripping Beast as an apotropaic or protective spirit entity in relation to the human realm, the term I employ, “liminal,” accurately addresses the guardian spirit association.

*Misrepresented Arguments*

Regarding other misrepresentations of my arguments, I would recommend the “serious criticism against her peers” alleged by the authors in their reply not to be taken too seriously, since I am simply drawing attention to the fact that “the issue of subjectivity plagues any attempt at understanding and interpreting another culture’s art,” (p. 825). Nowhere do I suggest that this situation does not apply to my work as well. I do propose an approach that attempts to examine the entire Gripping Beast phenomenon (covering the geographic and temporal range) and carefully consider both qualitative and quantitative data—as a way to focus the limitless spectrum of interpretive possibilities. My use of the phrase “material culture perspective” is intended to emphasize the focus on the material culture record—including careful object analysis as well as considerations of human engagement with the artifacts.

In the reply, my quantitative findings—such as the Gripping Beast artifacts found in pagan regions and settlements abroad—are criticized for not acknowledging singular exceptions, such as the Lindau gospel cover. I do not find this exception to offer a substantive challenge to the overwhelming geographic and temporal data of the other 400+ artifacts. Likewise, my qualitative work on amulets is criticized on the basis of not supporting quantitative data. While my survey only includes ten examples of amulets, I would argue that it is important to explore the motif’s use as an amulet through careful qualitative descriptions—each amulet represents an important “data point” on the motif’s spectrum of use and function. Specifically, I note such evidence as a cord running through an amulet’s mouth, damage inflicted on the mouths of two other amulets—and one in particular, an amulet of a jet, described by Haakon Shetelig (1944, p. 12), provides evidence of being concealed in a soft pouch. The reply criticizes, “Though founded on only one highly uncertain context, Roy then applies her hypothesis to the entire corpus of gripping-beast art,” which is a distortion of the evidence and my use of it. First, in addition to Shetelig’s observations, I personally inspected and photographed the wear patterns on this amulet at the Bergen Museum, which reveal polishing that obscured details along all edges of the object yet the preservation of sharply defined details such as clenched teeth on flat and recessed regions—evidence that supports gradual wear through repeated rubbing against a soft enclosure (a photo is included in my paper). Second, this is only one of over a dozen quantitative and qualitative survey findings that contributed to my hypothesis. I argue that both qualitative and quantitative work from this survey contribute valuable puzzle pieces in constructing a more complete picture of how this motif was employed.

I am misquoted and accused of being inaccurate in my discussion of connections between art and major Norse gods. I make no mention of a “mythological trend” but specifically note “a more recent wave of scholarship exploring the potential connections between Viking art motifs and pagan gods.” This is surely an accurate assessment, given the increased number of publications exploring these connections in the last several decades.

I object to the authors’ description of my approach as “Material Culture Studies” as this represents a diverse field of scholarship including varying approaches and theories, not a singular method. I make particular use of Jules David Prown’s (1982, p. 3) analytical framework, which calls for scholars to “read” artifacts as primary sources, in part through analyzing sensory evidence. My paper does not offer a cultural interpretation as put forth in the reply’s counterargument—such as a word for a fifth type of taste sensation. I am not arguing that different cultures frame sensory experience in the same way or use the same words. Rather the type of sensory evidence I examine in this paper is biological and includes consideration of human physiological abilities and limitations—specifically, human vision. My survey found the Gripping Beast motif to measure, on average, only about two centimeters and there are many instances of poorly defined motifs on artifacts. The human physiological
ability to perceive defined spectra and degrees of acuity with regard to vision, sound, smell, and other sensory types represents a valid and useful set of considerations to inform our thoughts on the practical and daily interactions with historic objects. Human vision cannot differentiate a two centimeter figure at more than a few meters, let alone one poorly defined, poorly lit, or in motion. Given this observation, I argue that it is unlikely that such a small motif would be used for a conspicuous function. Therefore, it would be difficult to argue that the Gripping Beast motif, as found on extant objects, was intended as a readily recognizable badge of cult, clan or social affiliation. Determining friend or foe by approaching within an arm’s length to inspect a diminutive motif would be a dangerous and unlikely proposition.

Along the same lines, the authors’ support for theories of “reading” these complex designs as coded narratives is likewise problematic based on the awkward (if not impossible) physical stance one would have to assume in order to read a narrative off a three-dimensional object usually employed as a garment fastener on a person’s chest. Such difficulties would only be increased by the common occurrence, especially in lower-quality artifacts, of slightly abstracted or indistinguishable features. I would caution that a garment fastener with intricate designs not be confused with the features and functions of the reply’s suggested parallel—a book.

Far from “reinventing the definition of the Gripping Beast,” my survey results only challenge the following three relatively minor points from a paragraph definition of the motif:

1. Style. I do not claim that my observation of varied representations of the Gripping Beast is “original” in the extensive style vs. motif debate. My observation of considerable changes in composition and appearance over two centuries is clearly stated as a finding of my survey.

2. “Muscular” features. I note that clearly defined or identifiable “muscles” are not identified in my survey. Likewise “fat” implied in the authors’ use of the adjective “chubby” would be equally unsupported in such stylized forms.

3. Pop-eyed or bulging eyes. My paper reported that survey results did not support the commonly used “bulging” adjective. Since the publication of this paper, I have been able to quantitatively support my finding by measuring the surface area of the eye and the surface area of the head—revealing an average ratio of roughly 1/5 which corresponds to the picture of the tenth-century Vårby pendant (SHM 4515). Figures with closed and recessed eyes further speak against the author’s claim of a “pop-eye” characteristic.

Additional mischaracterizations are presented regarding the body of the Gripping Beast figures. While I do note evidence of marked and distended chests, I do not declare “the mouth and the chest to be its most prominent features” nor “the swollen body as a main characteristic”, as the authors claim. This would seem to be a misrepresentation or miscomprehension of my statement, “The mouths or snouts of the motif are often found on the highest region of the artifact and sometime the body and limbs may also bulge from the surface” (p. 828). A quantitative analysis of my survey indicates a consistently closed mouth, and qualitative findings such as damage/contact to amulet mouths, cords through mouths, covered mouths, a Gripping Beast appearing in an animal figure’s mouth, examples of self-strangulation, in addition to literary evidence, reflect, I believe, the importance of the chest and mouth to the creators and owners of these figures. Such evidence supports my argument for viewing the motif as likely related to a protective spirit belief. Contrary to the authors’ assertion, I do provide an example of the distended chest in fig. 1, and while the authors’ suggestion that it represents the beast’s hips seems almost comical, readers are welcome to decide for themselves. I would add that my argument is more accurately characterized as suggesting users’ “beliefs” rather than their “religion,” as the authors assert in their reply. I note as well that the authors fail to acknowledge my citation of Stefan Brink’s (2001, p. 824) place name research regarding regional cults of major Norse gods.

Quality of Scholarship

Regarding criticisms of my scholarship that have not been addressed above, I would argue that acknowledging the opinion of scholars such as Signe Horn Fuglesang, who do not support a
symbolic interpretation of Viking period motifs, represents an important and valid issue to consider in the study of the Gripping Beast motif. While I appreciate the multiple suggestions for inclusion of scholars who support interpretation of symbolic meaning, my paper does not venture into broad elaboration on this topic and the point of this paragraph was to note that symbolic interpretation is not supported by all scholars.

While I regret that I did not explain the nuances of the authors’ arguments to their satisfaction; realistically, this was a twenty-minute conference paper, citing over thirty sources and having the primary objective of sharing my survey results. However, I am happy to address the criticisms raised here. In my paragraph briefly covering scholarly contributions to “possible connections between Viking art imagery and Eddic characters,” it only seemed appropriate to acknowledge Domeij Lundborg’s research on animal art in connection with war, violence, skaldic poetry and Egils saga (all topics commonly associated with Óðinn), and in the context of a culture transitioning from pagan to Christian religion. As I cited her work, readers are welcome to probe the nuances of her argument, but I certainly did not intend to be disingenuous in my reference, especially when Domeij Lundborg herself suggests that interpreting “images in terms of an ideology of honour would fit into a heathen context with warrior-deities, as well as into a Christian context” (2006, p. 43).

I would also like to clarify that nowhere do I suggest that Helmbrecht’s 2005 study is “superficial and limited.” I cite her survey in a passage addressing the general chronology of the Gripping Beast (consistent with the analysis of the motif as a pan-Nordic phenomenon in the rest of the paper): “Regarding chronology, Helmbrecht’s research revealed no recognizable chronological development in the Gripping Beast motif’s stylistic rendering.” Complaints for not expounding on her style groups represent one level of criticism, but accusations of misquotation seem rather exaggerated when her own summary of results specifically states the Gripping Beast did not feature “stylistically–chronological development”, and again in the conclusion, “The style groups are closely interlinked through numerous shared characteristics. A relative chronology in the sense of an internal style development is nevertheless not recognizable” (Helmbrecht 2005, pp. 268, 285). Including the adjective “early” would have been appropriate, but it should also be noted that brooch types included in Helmbrecht’s eighth and ninth century survey are also representative of artifacts attributed to the tenth century.

**Conclusion**

In response to the criticism for a “more cogent argumentation to safely rule out any connection between the Gripping Beast and the Old Norse pantheon”, I would take the opposite position that more substantial evidence than interesting conceptual and mythological connections are needed to establish a convincing association between Viking art motifs and the Norse pantheon. I agree that our knowledge is incomplete, but attempts can be made to explore the extensive physical evidence and artefact data that do exist for the Gripping Beast motif. My doctoral dissertation, submitted in June of 2011, expands upon these very issues and is publicly available via the ProQuest on-line repository (Roy 2011). While it is my university’s policy to make doctoral works publicly available through this repository, I do acknowledge that publication in that venue does not in itself immediately make a work known to all interested scholars.

I anticipate that archaeological and museum digitisation efforts will make even more information available to help provide a clearer picture of the motif features along with how, when, and where these artefacts were used. When they do, I look forward to new interpretations—even those that may challenge the work that I have presented to date.

**References**


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