

From Dragon to Hare – Animals for Pendants and Animals for Art in Late Iron Age Estonia (9th–13th Centuries)

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the diversity of animal species used in animal representations during the Late Iron Age in Estonia (9th–13th centuries). Pendants made of animal teeth and bones are compared with animal representations in form of/on other objects. It is first demonstrated that animal representations are above all related to the nobility of the period. It also appears that, despite some coincidences, the animal species selected for tooth or bone pendant production and animals used in art are significantly different. This brings us to a variety of possibilities why some particular species or individuals were valued and selected for pendant production or artistic representation.

KEYWORDS

Animal representation / archaeology of art / pendants / tooth pendants / archaeology of the Eastern Baltic

Introduction

The representation of animals in archaeological finds is an underrepresented field of study in Estonia and in the eastern Baltic in general (e. g. Iršēnas 2009). This has led to the impression that animal representations are either missing or are just a marginal research subject. Moreover, existing studies have often focused on a particular animal, while other species have usually attracted only sporadic interest. For instance, the bear is usually the most favoured and diversely studied one (e. g. Asplund 2005; Helskog 2012; Kirkinen 2017; Grimm 2023), although it is not the most commonly represented creature. Studies on how the representations of different animal species associate with each other are rare (e. g. Jonuks/Ranamäe 2018; Schmölcke et al. 2017), although these could change our perception about the semantics of animal representation.

The purpose of this contribution is not to go deeply into the representations of a specific animal spe-

cies. Instead, my interest is in analysing which species occur in animal representations in general and how different animal species interact on the symbolic level. The source material varies from animal representations on objects of art to a vast category of pendants made of animal parts. The latter category is broad and includes bones, teeth, and claws, whose context suggests that they probably once had a deeper symbolic meaning than being the mere leftovers from meals or from the processing of animal carcasses. My aim is to demonstrate that animal representation is a vast category and there cannot be a single dominant interpretation. Rather, animals have acted simultaneously in many discourses in past societies, they have been symbols of moral values, social classes, vernacular activities, etc.; thus the interpretation of Late Iron Age animal representation is heavily context-based and can also be controversial.

Identification of Species

Identifying the species of an animal representation is essential for further interpretations – but this is often complicated, which is demonstrated below. When interpreting zooarchaeological material, archaeologists with a modern education who are also highly competent in biology tend to ascribe identifications that emanate from their own worldview, thus reaching rational and well-proved results. Zooarchaeological methods are used not only to identify osseous collections but also to interpret human-animal relationships, animal husbandry and human society in a broader perspective (see e. g. Russell 2012 and references therein). Based on rational zooarchaeology, it is often assumed that past people approached and organised nature similarly to modern biological approaches, and thus the species used in art should also be identified accordingly. Such an interpretation represents the modern and rational world view, taking »our« biological approach back to the prehistoric past without asking »whether «our« understanding of »nature« is necessarily that of past populations?» (Insoll 2007, 99). Such scientific and rational interpretations direct the identifications to species that exist in our world(view) but exclude creatures that do not, such as dragons or other mythological beasts (see Jonuks 2021 in more detail). The vernacular taxonomies, which also served as a background for producing animal representations in different archaeological periods, were based on different grounds than scientific taxonomy. For instance, according to the scientific taxonomy there are two species of snakes in the eastern Baltic – a poisonous viper (*Vipera berus*) and the harmless grass-snake (*Natrix natrix*) – and in addition the slow worm (*Anguis fragilis*), a legless lizard. Despite the differences in appearance, all three species are understood as a single kind of dangerous snake in folk biology and are subsequently killed (Loorits 1941, 197). Analogously, Bo Jensen (2010, 172) has suggested a similar approach to the snake in the Viking Age – based on linguistic and literary sources, it was demonstrated that the »snake« was an indeterminate denominator, signifying worms, snakes and dragons – all animals with a long and serpentine body, and differences of particular species were important only in certain contexts. Thus, rational zooarchaeology is justified for studying osseous material, but the interpretation of art and symbolic objects assumes that the worldviews, moral values, and vernacular taxonomies of past people are also considered.

The previous example does not mean that the prehistoric taxonomies do not have anything in common with our way of structuring nature. The large mammals in particular are usually safely recognisable in art. In some cases, a distinctive feature has been added to emphasise certain qualities, such as a row of notches on Magdalenian reindeer images to mark the spotted coat of female animals (Castelli 2019). Such marking suggests that for the producer and for the audience the specific identification of the animals was important, and the gender of this species was recognisable. Analogously, animals could have been marked by some details that were known in a past cultural context but are difficult to understand today, leaving the identification of many species in archaeological art unsolved. Such details, which will be labelled in the following as *identifiable features*, also have an essential position in this study.

While osseous material is usually safely identified, it is important to consider that zoological observations have rarely been the purpose of animal representations in prehistoric art. Animals have often been symbols that signify certain ideological, moral or ethical values of human society. The best-known example is the lion, which has been used commonly as a symbol of nobility, even in regions where lions never existed. For instance, the Great Beast in Scandinavian Viking Age ornamentation is a highly stylised quadruped, whose mane-like feature suggests it is a lion (Jennbert 2011, 211). The species has never existed in Scandinavia and the purpose of this imported cultural indicator in art is to signal nobility and not the lion's biological habitat. As an analogy, the descriptions of animals in medieval bestiaries were rather an allegory of human society with a wider purpose of demonstrating human domination over other creatures (Pluskowski 2010). Looking outside Europe, we can find various ways to organise and interpret creatures. For instance, the motives underlying animal classification in China »were not primarily zoological but figured within a larger project to explain the structures of the cosmos as a whole« (Sterckx 2005, 29). Thus, animal representations should not be taken as an accurate copy of the organic world; they have their own purposes, depending on what the particular animal symbolised or meant in this particular society and its culture (Jonuks 2021).

Animal Representations

In terms of animal representations, specific periods can be found in Estonian history. As expected, animals and birds played an important role in the worldview of Stone Age hunters and fishermen, as demonstrated by various figurines and pendants. Representations of animals disappeared after the Late Neolithic (c. 3200 BC), when a new worldview, where social relations were more emphasized than references to animals and nature, became dominant (in more detail: Jonuks 2023). The situation changed in the Viking Age when animal representations appeared again and remained on the scene until the early 13th century. After this, Estonia officially became part of Catholic Europe and local animal representations ceased. This makes the Late Iron Age (c. 9th–13th centuries AD) a specific period, and this contribution focuses on these centuries. As many sites, where animal representations are collected, were occupied over a longer period, an exact dating of many objects is not available. Thus, the dynamism of animal representation within this period is not addressed here; it is limited to a general notion that the highest peak of animal art probably belongs to

the 12th–13th centuries, as is also the case with other pendants and artwork (in more detail: Kurisoo 2021).

Even though the following objects represent different categories, such as artwork and pendants, there are some significant similarities. Most of the objects, nearly two thirds, have been collected from central hillforts and settlements (Jonuks/Rannamäe 2018, 170; Kurisoo 2021, 197 tab. 5, 1) commonly associated with the higher ranks of society. Even though these sites have been most extensively excavated, the density of animal representations is clearly higher there than in peripheral settlements or hillforts. Thus, the first conclusion suggests that animal representations are more distinctive for the nobility of these past societies. Only a quarter of the objects have been found in graves, mostly in burials of women. In some cases, this has been a reason to suggest a special connection between female and animal (e.g. Asplund 2005). However, all kinds of objects, and especially ornamental objects, are more common in female burials; so the animal representations, which have often been a decoration or part of it, suit this pattern well (fig. 1).

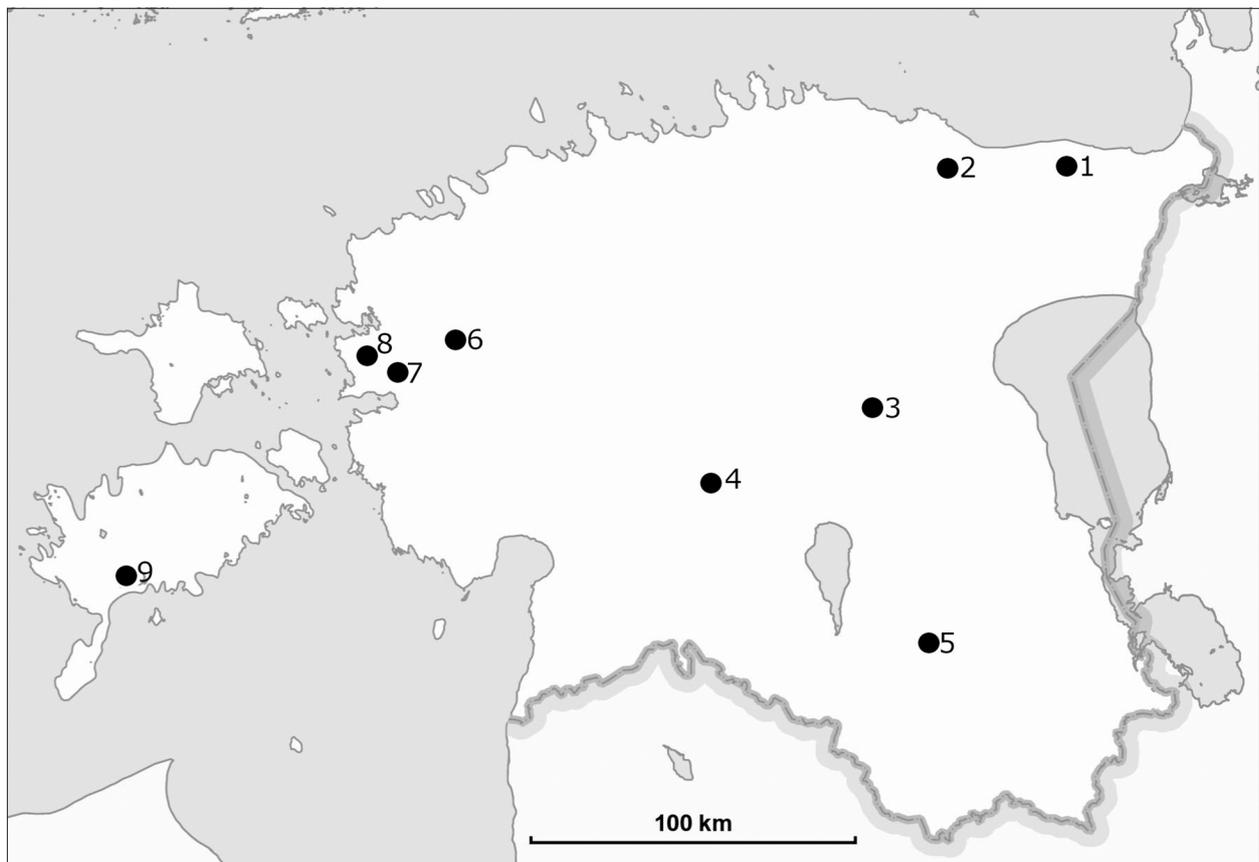


Fig. 1 Map of Estonia with sites mentioned in the text. 1 Kukruse cemetery. – 2 Pada settlement site. – 3 Saduküla settlement site. – 4 Lõhavere hillfort. – 5 Otepää hillfort. – 6 Maidla cemetery. – 7 Ehmja cemetery. – 8 Kolu cemetery. – 9 Mullutu harbour site. – (Map T. Jonuks).

Animals for Pendants

A comprehensive overview of tooth and bone pendants in Estonia from the Early Mesolithic to the Middle Ages has been published elsewhere (Jonuks/Rannamäe 2018) and will be only briefly addressed here. Among the 213 examples from the 9th–13th centuries, 18 different species were identified providing raw material for tooth and bone pendants. Many of them are represented with just a single or a few examples, while four species were clearly more popular than others – pig/wild boar, bear, beaver and dog (tab. 1). Such a wide selection of animal species does not support the popular interpretation that pendants can generally be associated with animals that were worshipped or that they all mark a bond between an animal and a hunter. Hunting was not an important part of the economy during the Late Iron Age, and those game animals that are more numerous in osseous collections, such as elk or roe deer, are not represented as pendants at all. Economy does not in general seem to have been an important argument in selecting animals for pendants – cattle breeding played the major role in the supply of meat (and all other animal products) in the Late Iron Age, but only one pendant is made of a cattle tooth and another one of a horse tooth. Domestic animals, except dog and pig, are also little represented in the symbolic culture during the Late Iron Age in Estonia. The scarcity of representations of domestic animals in Estonia is especially significant when considering the importance of horse burials in a circum-Baltic context. The horse is represented most vividly in the burial customs on the southern coast of the Baltic Sea and Scandinavia (e. g. Bliujienė et al. 2017; Gardela/Kajkowski 2023). In Estonia, on the other hand, the horse and horse harness are only rarely represented in graves. The only example of a (partial) horse burial comes from the 12th–13th-centuries inhumation cemetery in Kukruse, where a horse skull had been buried separately in between inhumations. The only animal that was buried together with humans in Estonia was the dog (Mägi et al. 1998). Dog burials are known from Saaremaa island and western Estonia, where the dog has been cremated either on the same pyre with humans or in some cases on a separate pyre (Mägi et al. 1998). Such a symbolic value ascribed to the dog corresponds well with the high number of dog tooth pendants found across Estonia.

The most favoured animal for tooth pendants, however, is without doubt the pig. It is difficult to distinguish between the tusks of domesticated pig and wild boar, and thus the identification of more than half of the pendants remains unclear. This

Species	Number of cases
dom. Horse (<i>Equus caballus</i>)	1
Dog (<i>Canis lupus familiaris</i>)	20
Wolf (<i>Canis lupus</i>)	5
Dog/wolf	5
Fox (<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>)	3
Lynx (<i>Lynx lynx</i>)	3
Carnivore	2
Bear (<i>Ursus arctos</i>)	27
Wild boar (<i>Sus scrofa</i>)	1
Pig (<i>Sus scrofa dom.</i>)	21
Wild boar/pig	35
Mustelid	1
Pine marten/western polecat (<i>Martes martes/ Mustela putorius</i>)	1
Otter (<i>Lutra lutra</i>)	6
Beaver (<i>Castor fiber</i>)	26
Hare (<i>Lepus timidus</i>)	5
Cattle (<i>Bos taurus</i>)	1
Seal (Phocidae)	4
Chicken (<i>Gallus gallus dom.</i>)	4
Osprey (<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>)	1
White-tailed eagle (<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>)	3
White-tailed eagle/golden eagle (<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>)	1
Sturgeon (<i>Acipenser sturio</i>)	1
Unidentified	36

Tab. 1 Animal species materials of which were used for the production of pendants during the Late Iron Age in Estonia. – (Data after Jonuks/Rannamäe 2018).

makes it difficult to interpret the meaning of the pendants and the symbolic semantics of the animals. It is possible that the reason why pig tusks are so favoured is partly because these are so large and eye-catching, making them desirable for decoration.

However, tusks might be associated directly or indirectly with wild boars and with the dangerous hunting of this prestigious game. For this reason,

the tusk of a domestic pig may also have served as a symbol of the wild boar.

The third most popular species, the bear, is also associated with dangerous game hunting. There are apparently a number of interpretations concerning the religious and magical semantics of bear teeth and claws used for pendants (see various contributions in Grimm 2023). The distribution of bear tooth pendants, however, seems to support the interpretations associated with power and rank rather than magical connotations, as the majority of bear tooth pendants were found in central hillforts or settlements, and in burial cases they are always associated with wealthy female burials. A comparison between Estonia and Livonia, the two neighbouring regions with a similar material culture and position during the Late Iron Age, demonstrates the difference in the value assigned to bear tooth pendants well. Altogether 29 pendants made of brown bear teeth have been collected from Late Iron Age Estonia on the whole, compared to 122 examples from just the lower reaches of the River Daugava in Livonia (Kurisoo 2021, tab. 3, 1). Such a high number of objects from a limited area raises the hypothesis that these bear teeth could have been trade objects and had been imported into Livonia from other regions.

Surprisingly high is the number of pendants made from beaver astragali (Luik 2010a). In Estonia, these have been found only in the south-eastern part of the country, following the broader tradition of using beaver astragali for pendants in the eastern Baltic and north-western Russia. The lack of beaver astragali in other parts of Estonia is still notable, as the teeth and astragali of other furred animals (hare, pine marten, otter) were used for pendants. It is possible that, for some reason, beavers did not then inhabit the northern and western Estonian rivers (Paaver 1965, 62), although they do so now.

Fur animals are usually represented as bone pendants, but an exceptional example – a unique crossguard from Courland in Latvia – shows hares. The crossguard depicts an anthropomorphic figure standing between two hare figures, both at the size of the human. Romanesque influence is seen in this design (Tomsons 2018, 98) but the repeated hare figure suggests that small animals could also represent broader semantics. Possibly the hare served as a symbolic animal of a person or a family, analogously to a Western coat of arms.

The other animal species – wolf, fox, lynx, seal – are represented by only single examples of pendants. Such a long list indicates that instead of drawing on a common narrative, such as a myth, the choice of these animals for pendants may have instead been individually context-based. The best example of this

is a large, pierced sturgeon scale from the Pada Viking Age settlement. Instead of a cultic or religious reason to turn a piece of a fish into a pendant, it seems that it was used as a token to celebrate a successful hunt for a unique prey. Possibly, such vernacular and contextual reasons may have been behind the decisions to choose the teeth of other animals for pendants, too.

In addition to remains of common mammals, chicken bones and eagle claws were also used. Pendants made of white-tailed and/or golden eagle claws, together with those of osprey, have been found across the country in settlement sites and as grave goods. Pendants made of chicken bones were only discovered in two central hillforts, Lõhavere and Otepää. The example from the latter site is a tarsometatarsus with a spur, thus probably from a male individual (Jonuks/Rannamäe 2018, 174).

The deeper semantic meaning ascribed to tooth pendants is demonstrated by bronze copies or objects depicting natural teeth/bone pendants. These bronze imitations occur as single unique finds across the eastern Baltic. Some of these are such accurate copies that it seems that a natural tooth or a bone has been used as a model. An exact bronze replica of an eagle claw has been found in the Maidla stone grave in Estonia (Mandel 2003, 206 fig. 105, 2), and another one is known from the Livonian area in Latvia (Kurisoo 2021, 52). Two bronze objects from Latvia accurately represent beaver astragali (Luik 2010a, 49) and another depicts a bear claw (Spirģis 2008, 206 fig. 105, 2). A special category of bronze tooth pendants has been mostly found in south-west Finland and to a lesser extent at sites along the lower reaches of the River Daugava; a few examples are also known from Estonia and Scandinavia (see Asplund 2005 in more detail). These finds are commonly interpreted as bear teeth representations (Asplund 2005 and references therein), although the bronze objects share little, if any, similarities with the actual teeth. As the items seem not to copy the teeth of any real animal, it has been suggested that such bronze objects, originally showing a glittering golden colour, may have represented the teeth of an animal whose parts were desirable but not available, such as a dragon or an oversized snake (see Jonuks 2017 in more detail).

The symbolic usage of animals is not limited to bone and teeth only. The red-painted egg found between the legs of a 12th–13th-century female inhumation in Kukruse is a good example of this. It possibly symbolised the Christian idea of the resurrection of the soul and body adopted by the late pagan society in Estonia (in more detail Jonuks et al. 2018). Animal symbolism is perhaps also represented in the usage of feathers, fur, etc. which do not preserve well (see

Kirkinen et al. 2020). Thus, while interpreting the use of animal body parts for decoration, symbolic or

religious purposes, the missing material also needs to be considered.

Animals for Art

The other kind of animal representations are images on pendants or as a decoration on or in the form of various other objects. Here, the media seem to have been of lesser importance, as the same animal species can be represented on various objects of different material. As the focus of this article is on animal species, the animal-style ornament is excluded. There are a number of 10th–12th-centuries weapons and belt details whose decorations include an animal. Often these depictions are highly stylised and thus the speculations about the species of the animal are complex. Nevertheless, the snake/dragon and wolf or lion figure as the main species in interpreting the ornamentation (see in more detail Jets 2012).

The best example of varied representations is the snake. These animals with a vermicular body are depicted on different kinds of objects, such as pendants, brooches, combs, and arm and finger rings. The bodies of the creatures displayed are long and serpentine, indicative of snakes, but with heads that vary. The objects are often highly stylised, and there are only rarely identifiable features to suggest the exact species, although the animal was known to the craftsman and the audience. Snakes were probably depicted quite often, but in some cases the snout and »antlers« suggest that the beast in question really is a dragon (Iršēnas 2009, 126). Dragon images were known at the time in the eastern Baltic, as demonstrated by a figure from Ikškile, Latvia, which clearly represents a dragon and not a snake (Jonuks 2017). Considering that the stylistic differences between worms, snakes and dragons could have been vague (Jensen 2010, 172), the modern question of the exact species can even be irrelevant. All snake-like figures could have been perceived similarly, although with differences in nuances, which may have become essential in particular contexts (fig. 2).

Interpretations based on modern taxonomy are also challenged by two staff heads, one cast in bronze from the Kolu stone grave and another carved out of antler from Lõhavere hillfort. Identifiable by a massive beak, they both seemingly depict a bird of prey (Mandel 2003, 64; Luik 2010b and references therein). However, such interpretations ignore that both figures have ears and the one from Kolu has teeth marked on the beak. Such details instead allow the interpretation of both figures as griffins, which had already since the Bronze Age been depicted as



Fig. 2 The curved bow of a penannular brooch from the 12th century resembles the serpentine body of a snake. The opened jaws and displayed tongue suggest the animal is dangerous, while the upward spikes above the eyes indicate this not to be an ordinary snake but its mythical brother, the dragon. – Penannular brooch from Saduküla, south Estonia (archaeological collection at Tallinn University, AI 2618). – (Photo T. Jonuks).

eagle-headed figures with ears in the Mediterranean and the Near East (Kuehn 2011). Similar figures were spread more broadly across the eastern Baltic during the 11th–12th centuries; they are interpreted as the handles or heads of symbolic staffs, and were possibly used as leaders' or chiefs' ensigns (fig. 3; in more detail see Jonuks 2024).

While the griffins can be identified by their ears, the other »bird« images are more complicated. Based on morphological features, bird images are classified into different types, while the exact species depicted remain open (Kurisoo 2021, 98–102). Among the Estonian finds, we can discern two main types of bird figurines:

- 1) three-dimensional bird figurines carved of bone/antler or crafted in bronze with a large belly and often with an opened beak;

- 2) flat openwork bird figurines made of bronze sheet with accentuated claws, hooked beaks, and sometimes a comb.

Decoration of the first type, cast in copper alloy or carved out of bone/antler, is usually modest, and only one specimen from Otepää hillfort is richly decorated. This fine example is covered with dimples and a rhomboid pattern, possibly depicting plumage, although not identifiable with any actual bird species. Such bird figurines are spread across the east-

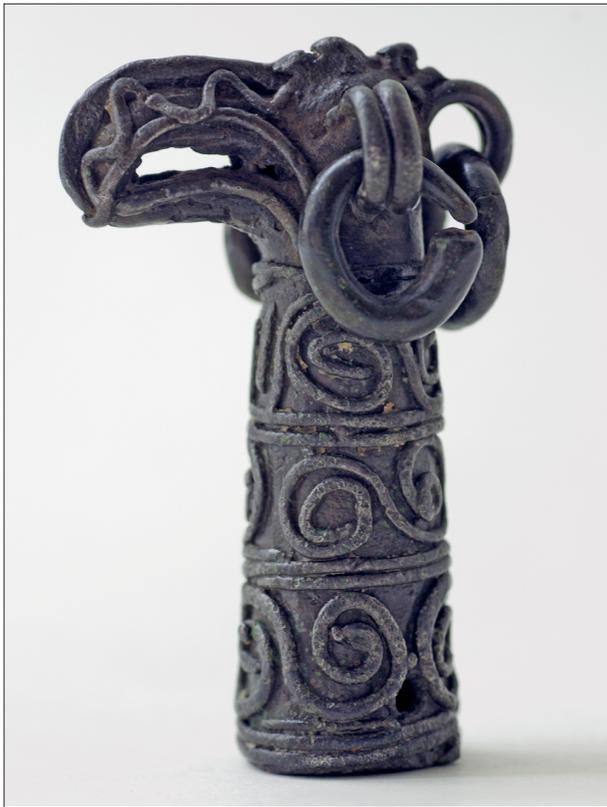


Fig. 3 The massive beak of this figure directs identifications towards the eagle, while the zig-zag pattern on the beak and the comb on the head may provide a more nuanced meaning. The circles on both sides, marking the ears, indicate that the animal may be a griffin or a local interpretation of it. – A 12th-century handle of a staff from the 8th–13th-centuries Kolu stone grave, western Estonia (archaeological collection at Läänemaa Museums, HM 8045: 68). – (Photo T. Jonuks).

ern Baltic and western Russia and date to the Viking Age (Kurisoo 2021, 99). As no actual bird species can be identified, it is possible that more than one served

as prototypes; thus these figurines are suggested to represent oscine birds. According to modern biology, the list of possible prototypes is long, but it is debatable whether people discerned different species during the Late Iron Age as we do. The most common interpretation associates the figurines with a Balto-Finnic creation myth, in which the world emerges from an egg of a small oscine bird (Valk 1993). However, the bird figurines are not spread exclusively within Balto-Finnic territories but are also found in the area of the Baltic and Slavic peoples in today's eastern Baltic states, north-west Russia, Belarus and northern Ukraine. The spread of Christianity and its tradition of wearing a cross as a religious symbol has been considered to be one of the reasons why the last pre-Christian centuries in the North witnessed such a rich and diverse tradition of wearing pendants (see in more detail Staecker 1999). Possibly, the oscine bird figurines were also inspired by Christian religious symbols, indicating local peoples' manifestation of their worldview and mythology. Similar bird figurines from the lower reaches of the River Daugava and in western Latvia have been interpreted as doves and associated directly with an early influence of Christian culture (fig. 4a; see Spirģis 2013).

The second main type of bird figurines, formed of flat copper-alloy latticework, is richly decorated with concentric rings and ribs and represents a clearly different species – the hooked beak and claws are more suggestive of predator birds, whereas the comb on some examples allows their identification as Galliformes (fig. 4b). In contrast to the previous type, this one has its main distribution area around the eastern Baltic only (in more detail: Kurisoo 2021). The rich decoration on and the careful polishing of



Fig. 4 A distinctive group of bird figurines with opened beak and large breast most likely depict oscine birds. **a** figurine from the 8th–13th-centuries Otepää hillfort, southern Estonia (archaeological collection at Tallinn University, AI 4036: I 536). – Other bird figurines are made of bronze sheet, depicting a bird with hooked claws and a comb on the head. The opened beak signals that the sound of the bird may have been important, suggesting its identification as a rooster. – **b** pendant from the 11th–13th-centuries Lõhavere hillfort, southern Estonia (archaeological collection at Tallinn University, AI 3578). – (Photos T. Jonuks).

many of these figurines suggest that they were not just ordinary adornments. The possible identification as Galliformes connects these figurines with a male chicken tarsometatarsus from Otepää hillfort that was used as a pendant. If this interpretation is correct, this might be a rare example of how the symbolic meaning of the same species has been expressed in different forms.

Among the other animals represented in artwork in the eastern Baltic and north-west Russia, horses are the most favoured ones, although the animal is not represented in such high numbers in Estonia. Horse-shaped pendants occur in the same types as are common in north-western Russia and represent broader traditions, which may, but not necessarily, be related to the Balto-Finnic peoples. The pendants are stylised pieces of art, which makes the species' identification complicated, and thus their interpretation as horses is rather a consensus among scholars (Kurisoo 2021, 104). The low number of horse images in Estonia, compared to north-western Russia and the areas of the Baltic peoples, is in accordance with the modest representation of the horse as a species in other symbolic contexts, such as grave goods.

Another category of animal representations includes a numerous collection of quadruped figurines, sometimes interpreted as horses, sometimes as dogs (see Jonuks/Kurisoo 2023 in more detail). This group of animal sculptures is part of a broad tradition, which ranges from the British Isles in the west to Russia in the east. As the weight of many of the objects is either 8 g or its coefficient, the figures

are interpreted as scale weights (Grinder-Hansen 1997). In many countries, the figures are identified as horses, and this is confirmed by some identifiable features, such as a mane or saddle. The Estonian figurines are somewhat different; they were at least partly produced on site and it is difficult to suggest a single animal species as their prototype. Instead, some figurines can be safely identified as horses, others seem rather to resemble a dog. It has recently been suggested that the actual species might not have been so important and could include both animals, the dog and the horse, but that the symbolism of domination, nobility, and aggressiveness, expressed by many details of the sculptures, was the crucial aspect (Jonuks/Kurisoo 2023). Most of the figures hold their tails and heads high, a clear sign of domination and watchfulness in zoosemiotics. The snout of almost all these figures is divided into three, representing open jaws and tongue, again a sign of an active and aggressive animal. Moreover, nearly half of the figures have a penis, a detail that was unnecessary for practical reasons and an extra effort for the craftsman. It is still debated why some weights were shaped in the form of an aggressive and domineering animal. Possibly the reason lies in the wider ideology of the period, which valued a wealthy, active and aggressive nobility. As the nobility was also involved in long-distance trade and contacts, the latter could be the reason why the fashion of shaping some weights in the form of a mighty horse or a dog spread and was reinterpreted across northern Europe (fig 5a-b).



Fig. 5 Some quadruped animal figurines can safely be recognised as horses. **a** figurine found at the 8th–12th-centuries Mullutu harbour site, Saaremaa island, western Estonia (archaeological collection at Saaremaa Museums, SM 10864: 27). – Others are more similar to dogs. – **b** figurine from the 10th–12th-centuries Ehmja stone grave, western Estonia (archaeological collection at Estonian History Museum, AM 554: 777). – (Photos T. Kurisoo/T. Jonuks).

Discussion and Conclusion – What is the Meaning of the Animals?

In previous research history, animals have often been analysed by species. By emphasizing a particular animal, it is easy to reach the conclusion that some creatures were possibly more important, worshipped or honoured for cultic purposes. Taking the entire corpus of animal representations of Late Iron Age Estonia into account, the claim that some species were worshipped does not apply. In fact, it is difficult to speculate about any animal cult during the Iron Age. Instead of religious aspects, animals may contribute to many other discourses of past societies, such as social systems, rank, moral values or aesthetics. For instance, it is intuitively rather expected to cast vermicular objects in the shape of snake, but this does not mean that the snake-shaped brooches were part of an Iron Age snake cult (see Charniauski, this volume).

Among the animal representations of the Iron Age, three kinds of creatures can be discerned: furred animals, prestigious game species, and creatures associated with rank and moral norms. The first two kinds are represented as tooth and bone pendants, while the latter one appears in art and as animal-shaped figurines. Some pendants, especially those represented by few examples, are possibly associated with a memorable hunt, for instance the sturgeon scale or the single lynx canines. A good example of this is also a pierced seal canine found at Lõhavere hillfort, some 100 km from the sea. The association of tooth pendants and vernacular behaviour is also supported by their find contexts, as most of the objects were collected from the occupation layers of central hillforts and settlements. This suggests that the pendants were produced for a limited period, at a time when the event symbolised by the item was important. Only rarely do tooth and bone pendants occur in a grave inventory. Such a distribution suggests that pendants made of animal remains were usually more significant to persons during their lifetime and it was not necessary to give such pendants to the deceased (Luik 2010a, 50). An impressive exception is represented by a cenotaph in the late 12th/early 13th century cemetery at Kukruse – only a set of belt, knife and belt-bag was buried in an otherwise empty grave. This was a symbolic burial, presumably for a male person whose belt-bag originally also included an unmodified eagle claw. Possibly a personal amulet, it was buried in this case together with the rest of the objects the deceased (presumably) had in his belt-bag.

Looking at animal representations in different media, it is notable how clearly the species are divided. Animals who are well-represented in tooth

and bone pendants are not represented in art and vice versa. Out of the four main species used for pendants made of animal remains – dog, pig, bear, beaver – only the dog is probably represented in art, and there is also the unique evidence from western Estonia that a dog was buried deliberately. Pig, either domestic or wild, and bear do not occur in art at all, although these are the main animals represented among the tooth pendants. Also, the beaver, apparently an animal with highly symbolic semantics and represented by pendants made from beaver astragali in south-east Estonia and throughout a vast territory across Europe (Schmölcke et al. 2017), is not seen in art. Likewise, animals depicted in art are rare among the tooth and bone pendants. As an exception, we can find a match between the bronze lattice bird pendants, interpreted as raptors or roosters, and some eagle talons or rooster tarsometatarsi used for pendants. However, such congruities are rare. The most numerous represented animals in art – snakes and oscine birds – have no reference in osseous pendants at all. Also the horse, which is depicted to some extent in art, is represented among the animal pendants only in a single case. Moreover, a number of species used for tooth or bone pendants, from lynx to hare or fish, are represented with single examples only and their remains are possibly related to some unique event. Seemingly, the animal species selected for pendant production and animals represented in art had different background narratives, making interpretations about the past human-animal relationship diverse.

Apparently, the choice of animal species for art comes from ideology – a broad concept, comprising mythology, moral values, ranking systems and other valued qualities shared by the society. Besides mythology, moral values seem to have been even more important in animal art. The species chosen – dog/horse, rooster/raptor, snake/dragon – all refer to the ideology of nobles, valuing aggressiveness, power and dominance. All these qualities are well illustrated by the two griffin (or griffin-inspired) items, possibly from ceremonial staffs, which also symbolise dominance and (royal) power by aggressive and mythological beasts (Jonuks 2024). Part of this aristocratic lifestyle was also hunting, especially the organisation of communal hunting of large, dangerous, and prestigious game animals. This could be the background for an explanation of the popularity of bear canines and pig tusks being used for pendants. It is also connected with the selection of animals shown on objects of art – dragons/snakes, and possibly lions or wolves (Jets 2012), representing the ide-

ology and worldview of the Late Iron Age nobility. In real life, this ideology was reflected by the organisation of communal hunting events, as only the nobility had the ability, skills and power to mobilise others under one rulership (Poole 2013, 72). Thus, hunting became a symbol and metaphor for the nobility to unite and rule the rest of the society (Adams 2015, 22).

To conclude, animal representations were used in various discourses in Late Iron Age Estonia. Some of these were related to a particular animal and the hunting of it, others used animals as allegories and symbols, and some were possibly related to broader

narratives, such as a creation myth. None of these creatures, however, were worshipped, whereas all the examples seem to have had some association with rank. Nobility, together with the fitting lifestyle and visual display, seems to be the most crucial factor in interpreting animal representations – the find context, the quality of the work and the nature of the animal representation are all in some way related to it. This raises the question of the association of people of lower rank with animals. Or was the use of animal remains or depictions for symbolic purposes limited to the higher ranks only?

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