

In my End is my Beginning

Dialectical Images in Times of Crisis

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Paganism and Christianity in Thirteenth-Century Sweden The Skog Tapestry as a Testimony of the Conversion Process

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Abstract The Skog tapestry was found in 1912 in the church of Skog in Sweden's Hälsingland region and is dated to the second half of the thirteenth century. The technique and the tapestry format are rooted in the pre-Christian culture of Scandinavia, as can be observed when confronting the object with other specimens found in Överhogdal and Oseberg. On the other hand, the figurative content is a testimony of Sweden's Christianization process. This textile object works as a synthesis of the pagan past and the Christian present, inserting the new religious teachings into an already existing system of artistic practices.

Keywords Skog tapestry. Pagan Scandinavia. Christianisation of Scandinavia. Textiles. Thirteenth century.

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The accusation of overly imaginative theorising is perhaps vertiginously close. Fully aware of this but simultaneously convinced that it is necessary to present new hypotheses in a discussion that shall bear fruit, I take the risk... and continue. (Axel-Nilsson 1952, 23; Author's transl.)

1 Introduction: A Brief Overview of the Christianisation of Sweden

Scandinavia was one of the last regions of Europe to accept Christianity and enter the broader European cultural framework tied to these beliefs. There are countless works devoted to studying this phenomenon. For this, only the main lines of its development will be given here, with the sole intention of putting the object of this study, the Skog tapestry, in its historical context.

The acceptance of Christianity in Sweden was not a straightforward or immediate event but rather a gradual process that unfolded over time. The first tentative steps by Western European missionaries to establish contact with the Norse population in this territory can be dated to the ninth century, when there is evidence of a missionary expedition to Birka, an important trading centre on the shore of Lake Mälaren (Brink 2004, 172; Winroth 2012, 103). However, about a century later, the Christian community established there seemed to have been reabsorbed by the pagan majority (110). Even though the bishopric of Hamburg-Bremen advocated the right to convert Scandinavia (Sawyer 1988, 46; Winroth 2012, 107-8), Christian impulses reached the area from a vast array of places located in what is now Great Britain and Germany (Sawyer 1988, 56-7; Lagerlöf 2005, 140). Furthermore, there are indications that a part of today's Swedish territory, the island of Gotland, first could have received Christian impulses from Byzantine and Slavic territories. (145).

The Norse religious views presented a loose structure, with no officially appointed clergy or missionary programme (DuBois 1999, 42; Winroth 2012, 146; Sundquist 2024, 356); even the use of the term 'religion' to indicate this set of practices and beliefs is problematic (Andrén, Jennbert, Raudvere 2006, 12; Sundquist 2024, 26-30). The polytheistic nature of the Norse pantheon allowed the insertion of foreign entities and divinities without any particular resistance. This is how Christ was first incorporated into the religious practices of the Scandinavian population as *Vite Krist*, whose nature of glorious and powerful king had only a few elements in common with the evangelical Jesus (Melnikova 2011, 101-2). Thus, it is impossible to indicate a specific date for the shift in cult practices that occurred in Sweden, for it was a gradual phenomenon that could be considered completed only in 1164 with the institution of the diocese of Uppsala

(Sawyer 1988, 49; Winroth 2012, 104; Sundquist 2024, 358). This allowed for a period in which the two ways of life co-existed and were even practised by the same people, as evidenced by several episodes registered in some of the Icelandic sagas and documented by archaeological finds (DuBois 1999, 60; Melnikova 2011, 105).

2 The Skog Tapestry

In 1912, the then-student Erik Salvén was tasked with visiting several churches in Northern Sweden and compiling inventories of their liturgical possessions in the perspective of an exhibition of ecclesiastical art in Hudiksvall in 1913. When he visited the church of Skog in Hälsingland, he gained access to all items except the bridal crown, which the church steward deemed useless to show him, stating that it was exactly like many others. Salvén did not desist and asked a local school child to get the key to the box where it was stored. The bridal crown was wrapped up in a piece of cloth, which later proved to be much more interesting than the object it was supposed to protect (Tornehed 1996, 58-9). The textile at hand, now housed at the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm with inventory number 15275, is a tapestry woven in the *soumak* technique, which had been widespread in Scandinavia since the Migration period, only to disappear in the fourteenth century [fig. 1]. Thus, the tapestry is woven and not embroidered (Sylwan 1921, 220).

The current length of the item is 175 cm, although a tear on the right side indicates that it was initially longer, probably around 192 cm (Salvén 1923, 23-4; Sylwan 1949, 331; Tornehed 1996, 60).¹ The width varies between 38 cm on the extremities and 35 cm at the centre; the difference seems original and not the result of wear and tear. The upper part is sewn together with a piece of coarse linen cloth that served to attach the whole piece to the walls of a building (Franzén, Nockert 1992, 31). The format of the tapestry leads us to identify it as a *borði*, a type of weaving mentioned in medieval sources, primarily Icelandic church inventories and sagas. These textiles were decorated with images and were usually hung inside buildings, specifically churches. Like the most common textile category of the *refil*, *borði* specimens were probably not stand-alone pieces but were

¹ It was hypothesised that the missing length on the right end of the cloth housed additional figures, which could have helped determine the overall meaning of the depiction. In particular, it has been proposed that the three main gods of the Norse pantheon were depicted here (Lindqvist 1951, 184; Sundquist 1977, 89). On the contrary, it has been thoroughly demonstrated how the missing piece would have been only around 16 cm long, just enough to complete the interrupted figures along the tear and house a decorative band (Franzén, Nockert 1992, 54).



Figure 1 Skog tapestry, Middle-second half of the thirteenth century. Wool and linen threads, soumak technique, 175 × 35-38 cm. Stockholm, Statens Historiska Museum, CC BY 4.0. Photo by Ola Myrin

accompanied by similar ones meant to be hung simultaneously along the internal walls of a religious or secular building (Franzén, Nockert 1992, 90-2). Thus, it could be argued that the Skog tapestry was originally part of a larger decorative project.

Passing on to the tapestry's figurative decoration, the cloth's centre is occupied by a section of a wooden church and a bell tower, which takes up the width of the entire object. Both buildings house a series of stylised persons. Several are depicted while pulling the chords that ring the bells on the upper part of both architectonic structures. The identification of the building at the centre as a wooden church, whose identification is rendered possible mainly thanks to the cross on top of the bell tower and the dragon-head terminations applied on the upper part of both buildings (Salvén 1923, 65). Even today, this kind of decoration can be seen on the exterior of several surviving stave churches of the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Norway. These elements were part of the standard sculptural decorative repertoire of wooden churches, especially in the Scandinavian Early Middle Ages (Salvén 1923, 60; Sundquist 1977, 86). The Christian sanctuary depicted on the Skog tapestry, besides being surrounded by several persons, who mostly gather where the entrance to the building should be, seems to be attacked by two flocks of beasts of uncertain nature – most of them probably lions – and horse riders, who appear to be going towards the church in two superimposed rows coming from both sides. The 'expedition' gives the impression of being led by a figure depicted at the head of the lower row on the left of the church, characterised by three heads [fig. 2]. The left end of the representation is occupied by three anthropomorphic figures that stretch for the entire width of the cloth; they are standing on a podium and are holding weapons, of which the only recognisable ones are an axe and possibly a hammer. Following the

**Figure 2**

Skog tapestry, detail of the three-headed figure. Middle-second half of the thirteenth century. Wool and linen threads, soumak technique, 175 × 35-38 cm. Stockholm, Statens Historiska Museum, CC BY 4.0. Photo by Gabriel Hildebrand

horror vacui principle, all the resulting spaces are filled with several animals, either birds or mammals. Decorative geometric bands mark the borders of the tapestry (Salvén 1923, 124; Axel-Nilsson 1952, 10).

Scholars have always agreed on the overall Christian character of the depiction and its general meaning of a struggle between Good, represented by the church and people inside it, and the forces of Evil incarnated in the horde of beasts and horse riders led by the three-headed figure.² The scholarly debate actually focuses on two main themes: the dating of the tapestry and the identity of the three figures on the left end of the representation, although never questioning its general meaning of a struggle between Good and Evil. As for the first matter, the archaic appearance of the figures, together with the general sense of the depiction, led some to believe it to be a product of the middle of the eleventh century or the beginning of the twelfth, the years marked by the conversion of Sweden to Christianity.³ The dating was first moved to the thirteenth century by Agnes Branting and Andreas Lindblom (1928, 13-14), who confronted the headdresses of the three figures on the left with helmets from that time.⁴ For several decades, dating fluctuated between the

² Salvén 1923, 103-8; Anjou 1935, 257; Sylwan 1949, 332; Sundquist 1977, 86; 1978, 33; Franzén, Nockert 1992, 53.

³ Ekhoﬀ 1914-16, 349; Salvén 1923, 145; Thordeman 1948, 131; Sylwan 1949, 339; Lindqvist 1951, 184.

⁴ Erik Salvén later agreed with this dating (1944, 242). Branting and Lindblom's argument regarding the shape of the helmet was disproven by Bengt Thordeman (1948, 125-7), who stated that it was also widespread in earlier periods in Northern Europe and Scandinavia.

middle of the eleventh century and the end of the thirteenth century.⁵ A final word on the matter was put by Anne Marie Franzén and Margareta Nockert (1992, 101-2), who provided a radiocarbon dating of the object, carried through by The Swedberg Laboratory in Uppsala, giving the result of 1245-90 CE for the linen samples and 1275-1395 CE for the wool. Thus, the period in which the weaving of the tapestry most likely took place is the second half of the thirteenth century. As for the three anthropomorphic figures on the left, their identity is still a matter of discussion, and this question will be tackled further below.⁶

The Skog tapestry is an extremely rare specimen, with possible parallels identifiable only in three of the Överhogdal tapestries, specifically I A, II, and III, dated to the beginning of the eleventh century (Tornehed 1996, 58), and a textile fragment found in the Oseberg burial mound in Norway, dated to the ninth century (Graham-Campbell 2021, 56-8). All these weavings are realised in the *soumak* technique and show a similar iconographic scheme, with a scene of bigger proportions in the centre flanked on either side by several superimposed rows of smaller figures (Hougen 1940, 90). Although the content of both these examples still has to be established with certainty, it is clear that at least the Oseberg fragment originates in a pagan context. In contrast, there are still some doubts about the content of those found in Överhogdal (Franzén, Nockert 1992, 34). Thus, relying on them to understand better the meaning behind the figures on the Skog tapestry is nearly impossible. The comparison with these weavings only helps to ascertain the longevity of the *soumak* technique in the area and the conservatism of the iconographical schemes employed. Considering the dating of the item to the thirteenth century, it can be observed how weaving patterns and iconographical conventions seem to maintain a greater deal of conservatism compared to other figurative mediums, such as painting, since the figurative scheme of the Skog tapestry was kept intact for at least four centuries, apparently untouched by the developments that occurred in other media, which in the second half of the thirteenth century were already entirely lined up with the Gothic style widespread in the whole Europe (Hougen 1940, 98).

5 An intermediate position was taken by Bengt Thordeman (1948, 127) and Göran Axel-Nilsson (1952, 13).

6 The iconographic models behind the animals in the procession, the church, the decorative bands, and the clothes have been explored in depth primarily by Erik Salvén (1923, 86-104). Therefore, they will not be taken into consideration in the present study.

2.1 Open Questions on the Nature of the Tapestry

Even though the iconographic content of tapestries such as those found in Överhogdal and Oseberg is still partly a matter of debate, it could be safe to assume their narrative character. Even the most famous figurative textile of the Middle Ages, the Bayeux embroidery, is known to be a long narrative strip (Barral i Altet 2009, 202-6; Tornehed 1996, 61). Therefore, it should be suspected that the figural content of the Skog tapestry is also of narrative character and should not be considered as a standalone depiction of purely symbolic value. The representation on the tapestry of a generic conflict between Good and Evil (Thordeman 1930, 5; Tornehed 1996, 61) or the victory of Christianity over Old Norse beliefs⁷ seems to require a theoretical reflection that belongs more to the present times than to the thirteenth century, especially in a society that became a steady presence in Christian Europe not even a century earlier, as postulated by Göran Axel-Nilsson (1952, 8). It seems more credible that these concepts are vehiculated by a concrete event, possibly related to the story of a specific ecclesiastical seat, which would have been of particular significance for thirteenth-century Swedish Christians (Branting, Lindblom 1928, 14; Thordeman 1930, 1930, 5; Axel-Nilsson 1952, 8).⁸ In this sense, it is interesting to keep in mind that figurative textiles in a primarily oral society such as pagan Scandinavia served the purpose of recalling important events and even functioned as a mnemonical trace for narrative poetry (Sylwan 1949, 343; Norrman 2005, 139). This argument is corroborated by the fact that a *borði*, like a *refil*, as already anticipated, was probably not supposed to be a standalone piece; instead, it should have been an element of a series of similar items destined to be displayed together (Axel-Nilsson 1952, 26; Franzén, Nockert 1992, 90-2). Since it is generally accepted that the Skog tapestry was hung inside a church (Ekhoﬀ 1914-16, 349; Salvén 1923, 139), with its original length of almost two meters, it is indeed not long enough to cover the whole perimeter of the nave. This leads to the hypothesis that this tapestry could constitute the initial piece of a series (Salvén 1923, 24; Axel-Nilsson 1952, 26).

On the subject matter, it must also be pointed out that, when the tapestry was found, it was clear that it had not been initially realised for the church in Skog since its foundation was first mentioned

⁷ Anjou 1935, 257; Thordeman 1948, 123; Sylwan 1949, 330; Lindqvist 1951, 184; Axel-Nilsson 1952, 184; Sundquist 1977, 86; 1978, 33; Franzén, Nockert 1992, 54; Tornehed 1996, 60.

⁸ It seems too risky to completely agree with Göran Axel-Nilsson (1952, 24-7), who sees in the Skog tapestry the first episode of a cycle narrating the life of Saint Erik, for the evidence is too scarce. However, interpreting the Skog tapestry as the first item in a narrative cycle is worthy of consideration.

in 1312 (Salvén 1923, 139-40; Axel-Nilsson 1952, 13). Even though there is not enough evidence to support it fully, the original production of the tapestry could have taken place in an environment near the bishopric seat of Uppsala since the church of Skog was located in the territory of that diocese (Anjou 1935, 262; Sylwan 1949, 339; Axel-Nilsson 1952, 13). Indeed, during the Middle Ages, it was not uncommon for peripheral churches to acquire older liturgical furnishings crafted initially for more central locations when the latter received a newer and more up-to-date decoration.

Even though the tapestry was radiocarbon dated to the second half of the thirteenth century, the archaic character of the figures is evident. The shape of the church, in particular, recalls much earlier models. It is easy to recognise the presence of a *stavkirke*, a stave church of the single-nave type, which was the most common in Northern and Central Europe immediately after the conversion to Christianity (Salvén 1923, 66-7; Ahrens 2001, 215-20). These churches are characterised by a very minimal layout, with a rectangular nave flanked by a smaller, almost cubical space serving as a choir. In this case, the design of the structure is embellished by the presence of what has been recognised by Nils-Arvid Bringéus (1958, 30) as a liturgical bell, which appeared in Sweden only in the thirteenth century.⁹ In the same century, when the tapestry was weaved, more elaborate and expensive stone churches were already starting to replace these wooden religious buildings in almost all regions of Sweden (Ahrens 1981, 42; Lagerlöf 1985, 237; Brink 2004, 172). Although wooden churches continued to enjoy some fortune in Sweden throughout the centuries, especially in isolated and forested areas, the choice of representing a *stavkirke* with this kind of architectonic decoration could also be a deliberate tentative to allude to an earlier time, such as the moment of the initial Christianization of the land, when buildings of this type made their first appearance in Scandinavia.¹⁰ As for the wooden bell tower, although there is no surviving example this ancient in Sweden, they probably were also commonly found, at least in the most important churches, as testified by the surviving bell tower of the Borgund church in Norway (Ahrens 1981, 74).

⁹ Claus Ahrens (2001, 254) has evidenced how structures of this kind were far more common than what can be deduced from the surviving material, even though it is not sure if they were always used as bell towers.

¹⁰ It has also been suggested that this tapestry could be a copy of a previous, more ancient one, hence the archaic-looking figures (Axel-Nilsson 1952, 13).

2.2 The Problem of the Three Figures

The three figures occupying the tapestry on the left end constitute the focal point of the scholarly debate surrounding the object [fig. 3]. The main interpretations that have arisen over the years are five: the Three Wise Men (Salvén 1923), Saint Olof of Norway together with Saints Cosmas and Damianos (Collin 1923), the Holy Trinity (Lindqvist 1951), the three main gods of the Old Norse pantheon (Odin, Thor and Freyr)¹¹ and finally the three national saints of the Scandinavian countries (Saint Olof of Norway, Saint Erik of Sweden and Saint Knut of Denmark).¹² The last two interpretations gained greater favour, with the latter being the one generally accepted today.

While the lack of satisfying iconographical parallels and written sources allows for every interpretation to be plausible, it may be helpful to point out some problems that could emerge when considering these three figures as Christian saints. Firstly, they lack almost every common attribute associated with this iconographical category. Trusting the radiocarbon dating, the tapestry was woven in the second half of the thirteenth century, a period in which Christianity was already well established in Sweden and iconographical schemes were past the experimentation and adaptation to the new culture typical of the conversion period. In that time frame, the pictorial and sculptural decoration of Scandinavian churches was no different from that of any other European region, including the conventional representation of saints (Nisbeth 1986, 9). The first element that catches the eye is the lack of haloes surrounding the heads of the figures: arguably, if the intention was to represent holy men, the halo should have been the first element for rendering them immediately recognisable to the eye of the worshipper.

On the extreme left, one of the figures holds an axe in his left hand, admittedly a common attribute associated with Saint Olof of Norway (Collin 1923, 56). However, it is rather difficult to interpret the other objects the figures hold, as the hypothetical Saint Olof also seems to carry either a bow or a shield (Salvén 1923, 90-1). The central figure has an item recognised as a hammer or a cross in his right hand (Salvén 1923, 91; Franzén, Nockert 1992, 56). As for this last interpretation, while its shape resembles that of the cross on the top of the bell tower, the weaver made sure to distinguish between the central pole and the horizontal element by changing colours. Thus, it seems more probable that this is another weapon, possibly a hammer (Anjou 1935, 259). As for the other objects held by the figures,

¹¹ Anjou 1935; Thordeman 1948; Sylwan 1949; Axel-Nilsson 1952.

¹² Branting, Lindblom 1928; Salvén 1944; Franzén, Nockert 1992. Due to space limitations, only the primary contributions will be included.



Figure 3
Skog tapestry, detail of the three figures on the left. Middle-second half of the thirteenth century. Wool and linen threads, soumak technique, 175 × 35-38 cm. Stockholm, Statens Historiska Museum, CC BY 4.0. Photo by Gabriel Hildebrand

the state of the weaving is too degraded to allow any plausible hypothesis. Even Anne Marie Franzén and Margareta Nockert (1992, 59), the last ones to propose a Christian interpretation of these figures, pointed out how the only character that could be safely identified is Saint Olof of Norway, thanks to the axe held in his hand. Still, regarding the other two figures, the two authors admitted the possibility of different saintly identities because of the lack of unequivocal attributes.

The general scheme of the representation is divided into two main areas: the inside of the church and the outside world. The church constitutes a safe space for the worshippers, where they can find refuge from the evils outside, represented by a series of beasts and horse riders depicted while attacking the buildings from both sides (Salvén 1923, 97). Specifically, the left horde, guided by a three-headed creature, seems to spur directly from the three figures at the far left. The impression is that the outside world appears entirely dominated by evil forces. Three Christian saints at the far end of the scene, distant from the church, seem oddly placed, and their presence outside would be difficult to reconcile with the overall theme of the Christian sanctuary providing safety against evil forces.

Heading in the opposite direction and seeing the three major gods of the Norse pantheon in this triad of figures may not be entirely

correct either. The main element that led scholars toward this identification is the lack of an eye in one of the figures, which suggested an identification as Odin. Due to the supposed hammer held in one hand, the central figure was linked to Thor and the remaining one, by exclusion, to Freyr (Anjou 1935, 259-60; Sylwan 1949, 330; Axel-Nilsson 1952, 21). This interpretation greatly relies on the account written by Adam of Bremen regarding the heathen temple in Uppsala, where it was supposedly possible to find the three statues of the gods (Anjou 1935, 260-1; Sylwan 1949, 330; Axel-Nilsson 1952, 14). However, it was demonstrated by Margareta Franzén (1958, 195) that the lack of an eye in the left figure of the triad was not intentional, but was a result of the wear and tear suffered by the tapestry during the centuries. In this way, the main argument favouring their identification as heathen gods falls. Nonetheless, their position outside the church and the fact that they seem to be the origin of the horde of evil forces attacking the church could still be considered elements supporting their roots in a pagan context.

It might be possible to trace an alternative way to interpret this group of figures, by no means trying to substitute the previous theories, but only presenting a different point of view that could dialogue with the earlier readings of this object and hopefully get closer to a more in-depth understanding of it. It has already been pointed out how the models behind the three figures on the left could be found in wooden sculpture, serving as an interesting starting point for a new interpretation.¹³ The figures stand on a platform, making it evident that they should be interpreted as a whole (Anjou 1935, 262; Axel-Nilsson 1952, 22; Franzén, Nockert 1992, 54). Moreover, their appearance, although anthropomorphic, drastically differs from the other human representations found on the textile, especially regarding facial features.¹⁴ It could be argued, partly following the footprints of Sten Anjou (1935, 262), that this is not just a representation of three human-like figures but a statuary group of pagan nature. The primary indicator can be found in the shape of the faces, prior examples of which could be identified in the wooden idols of pagan times, whose memory might survive, for example, in a series of masks that decorate the interior of several wooden churches in Norway, such as those of the Borgund group (Blindheim 1965, 36-7; Bugge 1993, 54). These might be the last reflection of the tradition of the so-called 'pole gods' (Simek 1993, 258).¹⁵ Idols of this kind make an appearance in a passage of Ibn-Fadlan's account of his trip to the

¹³ Salvén 1923, 85; Anjou 1935, 262; Sylwan 1949, 345; Franzén, Nockert 1992, 60.

¹⁴ Erik Salvén (1923, 84-5) distinguished between three types of human representation in the tapestry. The three figures to the left pertain to the first type.

¹⁵ A comprehensive overview of this tradition can be found in Sanmark 2004, 153-71.

Volga Bulgars (Mackintosh-Smith et al. 2014, 154-5) and in stanza 49 of the *Hávámál*, a poem contained in the Poetic Edda, where it reads:

Váðir mínar
Gaf ek velli at
Tveim trémönnum;
Rekkar þat þóttusk,
Er þeir rift höfðu:
Neiss er nökkviðr halr.

My clothes
I gave them in a field to
Two wooden men;
Real persons they seemed
When they received the garbs:
A man is ashamed when naked. (Author's transl.)

As already evidenced, the tapestry was woven in the second half of the thirteenth century, a period in which these beliefs and cultic practices supposedly left space in favour of Christianity. Thus, it can be argued that the weaver might not have had direct knowledge of these cult objects, hence their ambiguous and imprecise depiction. This can also be due to their insertion in an overall Christian object, where it would have been out of place to represent them properly and unmistakably (Anjou 1935, 262; Sylwan 1949, 338). It may be hypothesised that the scope of the weaver was to hint at the existence of these cultic practices and to generically refer to pagan customs that were widespread in the region before the adoption of Christianity without further identification of the figures with specific Norse divinities. In this regard, it might be interesting to compare the three figures on the tapestry with an incision depicting a Samic cultic shrine documented by Samuel Rheen ([1671] 1897, 36), where three anthropomorphic idols with outstretched arms and weapons in their hands are positioned on an elevated podium surrounded by a forest.¹⁶ Regarding the last detail, the three figures on the tapestry also seem to be depicted in an outdoor setting, hinted by some schematic depictions of vegetation around them (Salvén 1923, 84-5). As for their headdresses, scholarship tried to prove their derivation from helmets or crowns. Neither explanation seems to be entirely satisfying, but further research is needed to shed more light on this detail.

16 Although Rheen's testimony is dated to 1671, it is not difficult to suppose that idols of this kind stayed the same for several centuries, if not millennia, since their appearance seems similar to specimens dating to the European Bronze and Iron Age.

3 Conclusion: The Tapestry as a Bridge Between Old Norse Religion and Christianity

Despite the break in cultic continuity in Scandinavia caused by the shift to Christianity, at moments slow and gradual, in others painful and brutal, objects such as the Skog tapestry mend the fracture between the pagan past and the Christian present. As already evidenced, the technique employed, the *soumak*, was widespread in Scandinavia since the Migration period and had been used for the textile specimens found in the Oseberg ship burial, dated to the ninth century, one of the most significant finds to our knowledge of Viking art (Graham-Campbell 2021, 56-8). Even the textile format, long and narrow, with two rows of figures interrupted in the middle by a larger representation that occupies both registers, dates back to conventions developed during pagan times (Salvén 1923, 24-8; Hougen 1940, 90). The adoption of Christianity brought numerous alterations in artistic practices, most notably the development of stone buildings and their pictorial and sculptural decoration, along with manuscripts and their related crafts (Bagge 2004, 356-7; Bolvig 2004). However, some artistic productions, such as weaving, maintained their peculiar characteristics for a long time. The technique and decorative schemes employed in this craft stabilised during pre-Christian times and then were lent to new Christian ideas and worship places.

In analysing the Skog tapestry, it could be interesting to incorporate the methodology and the reflections developed by Lilla Kopár in her study of Anglo-Scandinavian sculpture in England (2012, 137-52). That context presents several points of contact with the Scandinavian environment during the religious shift. Equally to the Skog tapestry, in this case, the symbolic models in place before Christianisation were too effective to be replaced by entirely new ones that had no connection with the previous cultural practices of the region (151). Thus, these concepts had to be reinterpreted and integrated into the new belief system and symbolic language (152). This can be seen especially in the three idols at the left end of the tapestry and in the horde of evil forces attacking the church, led by a three-headed creature, clearly of a malicious nature. Keeping these iconographic schemes and adapting their meaning to the new cultural climate allowed the creation of a bridge between pagan times and a new pan-Christian culture without stripping the local population of their cultural identity (156).

The Skog tapestry works, in fact, as a synthesis of the pagan past and the Christian present, inserting new Christian teachings and practices in an already existing system of beliefs, helping to overcome and comprehend the shift in cultic practices and beliefs by referencing cultural codes already familiar to the population. This works both in a practical sense, employing a technique typical of the

Viking period, and in a spiritual sense, synthesising in an image the struggle between the old Norse spiritual world and the new teaching from mainland Europe. In this sense, the Skog tapestry could be considered a 'dialectical image', as defined by Walter Benjamin (Pesky 2004), since the past and the then-present come together to gather significance one from the other, crystallising a moment of crisis in which the old way of life is dying, and a completely different one is born.

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