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THE PRE-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS OF THE NORTH PROJECT AND ITS ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOURCES DATABASE

Abstract: This paper presents the latest advancements of an ongoing interdisciplinary project entitled 'Pre-Christian Religions of the North' (PCRN) which aims at reevaluating previous understandings of pre-Christian beliefs in early medieval Northern Europe. The project will result in the production of a range of new academic handbooks supplemented by an online database comprising relevant textual and archaeological sources. The PCRN initiative gathers scholars from Europe, Australia and the USA. The core of the project comprises three strands 1. Sources, 2. Histories and Structures, 3. Research and Reception. The present paper discusses the latest work implemented within the framework of the 'Sources' strand and in particular the ongoing process of expanding its open access database of archaeological finds.

Keywords: pre-Christian religions of the North, Norse mythology, Viking Age, archaeology, internet database

Introduction and background. The Pre-Christian Religions of the North project

The current Digital Age and the importance of online communication encourages contemporary scholars to develop new ways of presenting and disseminating their research results. This paper discusses the latest developments within an ongoing international collaborative project entitled 'Pre-Christian Religions of the North' (PCRN) with a particular focus on the process of creating and expanding its open access database of archaeological materials[1].

The Pre-Christian Religions of the North (PCRN) project is a cutting-edge interdisciplinary initiative concerned with pre-Christian beliefs and ritual practices in Northern Europe in the period before and during the arrival of Christianity. The project was initiated in 2000 by Dr Jónas Kristjánsson (former director of the Árni Magnússon Institute of Icelandic Studies and a member of the board of Snorrastofa – Medieval and Cultural Centre in Reykholt, Iceland) and now involves the input of more than fifty leading scholars around the world[2]. The major aim of the PCRN project is to produce an up-to-date series of compendia, articles and various other resources (both online and in print) for researchers, teachers and students of the early Middle Ages in Northern Europe. The planned compendia will cover themes such as the history and structures of pre-Christian religions, archaeology of Viking Age religious practices and include an extensive examination of the reception of this material from the early medieval period to the present day.

In general the PCRN project comprises three strands, each of which is led by a group of dedicated and internationally-recognized experts in the field of Old Norse studies and Viking Age research, assisted by students and postdoctoral researchers. The three strands include:

- Strand 1: Sources
- Strand 2: Histories and Structures
- Strand 3: Research and Reception

Each of the three strands incorporates a number of subprojects which are orchestrated by small groups of scholars.

[1] The latest work on the PCRN database, conducted by the author of the present paper in collaboration with Professor Rudolf Simek and Dr Tarrin Wills, was made possible thanks to a generous postdoctoral grant from the DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst) which funded a 4-month research stay (July-October 2014) at the Abteilung für Skandinavische Sprachen und Literaturen at the University of Bonn. At present Dr Leszek Gardeła is supported by the Foundation for Polish Science (FNP).

[2] Over the last several years scholars from the following research institutions have played an active role in the PCRN project: The University of Aberdeen (UK), The Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, Reykjavík (Iceland), The University of Bonn (Germany), The University of California, Berkeley (USA), The University of Durham (UK), The University of Iceland, The Reykjavík Academy (Iceland), The University of Rzeszów (Poland), Snorrastofa – Medieval and Cultural Centre, Reykholt (Iceland), Stockholm University (Sweden), The University of Sydney (Australia), The University of Århus (Denmark).

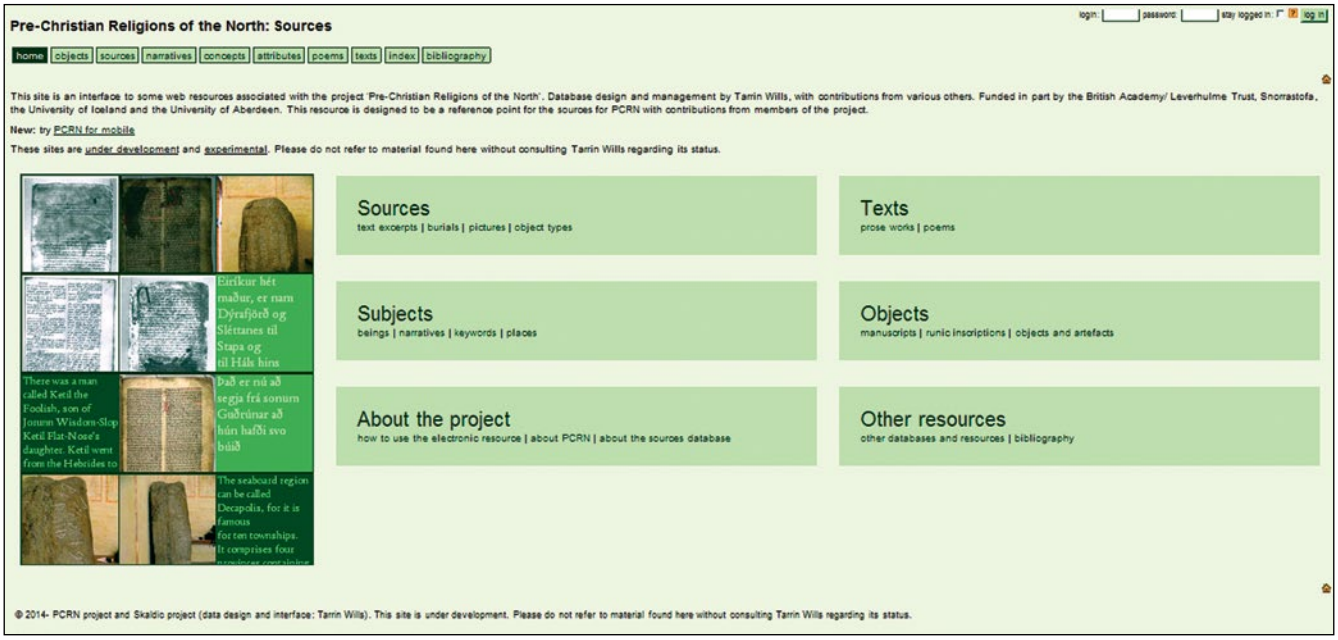

Fig. 1. The interface of the PCRN 'Sources' database.

The groups and their members meet at regular seminars, workshops and conferences where the latest developments of the ongoing project(s) are presented and discussed. One of the most recent PCRN seminars, organized in 2012, took place at the University of Bonn and was hosted by Professor Rudolf Simek. The seminar was entitled 'Old Norse Mythology in the Digital Age' and it attracted considerable interest of international academics and non-professional enthusiasts of Viking and Old Norse studies. Observing its rapid development over the last several years it is envisaged that the PCRN project will leave a long-standing legacy of international and interdisciplinary scholarship of highest quality.

More information about the various strands of the project can be found online at www.abdn.ac.uk/pcrn and in the recently published article by Tarrin Wills[3]. Further sections of this paper will mainly concentrate on discussing the latest developments within the 'Sources' strand of the Pre-Christian Religions of the North project.

The 'Sources' strand of the Pre-Christian Religions of the North project

The 'Sources' strand is an innovative undertaking in the studies of pre-Christian systems of belief as it involves a detailed exploration and collation of all extant textual sources (e.g. Old Norse sagas, skaldic poetry, Latin, Anglo-Saxon and Arabic texts etc.) and a vast corpus of archaeological materials related to the religious practices of the peoples of Northern Europe.

In the near future, the assembled data will be summarized in two printed compendia, the first one devoted to textual sources and the second concentrating on archaeological materials[4]. The planned compendia will include descriptions and overviews of relevant evidence for pre-Christian beliefs and ritual practices, which will be presented in an accessible way (i.e. free from academic jargon), thereby enabling various scholars and students to access and understand different categories of data from outside their main research specialisms.

Moreover, the data itself (in the form of editions, translations, site plans, maps, photographs, 3D scans, videos and artistic reconstructions) will be presented in full in an online open access database available through the medium of the internet to interested groups and individuals anywhere in the world (Fig. 1). The database will also provide extensive primary and secondary bibliographies. The ultimate goal of the PCRN initiative is to make the study of the pre-Christian religions of Northern Europe more accessible and easier to pursue than ever before.

For a long time there has been a serious divide between various disciplines (e.g. history, religious studies, archaeology and philology) involved in Viking Age research. Scholars were often confined to using sources only from their own narrow area of expertise and had restricted access to materials from other fields of study. Philologists or historians of religion, for example, rarely used archaeological evidence in their discussions and often referred to already well-known finds (some of which were discovered as early as the 19th century) ignoring or simply being unaware of the

[3] Wills 2013.

[4] A publication contract for the printed volumes has already been signed with Brepols – a well-known publisher of scholarship on the Middle Ages. A range of separate, overview articles summarizing the preliminary results of the PCRN project will be published in the nearest future in international peer-reviewed journals.

most recent excavation results. The PCRN 'Sources' strand and its constantly developing database seeks to bridge this gap between different academic disciplines and become an open access resource which will dramatically raise the awareness of latest advancements within various fields of Old Norse and Viking studies.

At present, the 'Sources' strand of the Pre-Christian Religions of the North project is orchestrated by a textual scholar and expert in Old Norse written material (Professor John McKinnell, University of Durham) and an archaeologist specializing in Iron Age Northern Europe (Professor Neil Price, University of Uppsala). They are assisted by a group of collaborators and specialists including, among others, Professor Rudolf Simek (University of Bonn), Professor Terry Gunnell (University of Iceland), Dr Tarrin Wills (University of Aberdeen), Dr Leszek Gardeła (University of Rzeszów) and Dr Ben Raffield (Simon Fraser University).

Recent work on the PCRN archaeological sources database

Although many handbooks on Old Norse religion have been published to date[5] most of them focused predominantly on the textual materials such as sagas, poetry, Medieval chronicles or runic inscriptions. In such handbooks the archaeological evidence for pre-Christian religions has usually been presented in a highly selective and fragmentary way, without providing enough detail or context that would enable more sophisticated interpretations. As mentioned above, there has been a tendency to constantly reproduce the same facts and images of already well-known artifacts, and neglecting the ever-growing corpus of new archaeological evidence, often much better preserved and more precisely documented than the older finds so eagerly published.

The the PCRN project, and especially its 'Sources' strand, seeks to make considerable improvements in the dissemination of knowledge on Viking Age material culture and open up new research possibilities for various scholars and non-academics. As mentioned above, an integral component of the 'Sources' stand is the online database of textual and archaeological sources (www.abdn.ac.uk/pcrn). The textual section of the database has been under development for some time now (and is still expanding as we speak), but until recently works on the archaeological section have remained dormant. In 2014, thanks to funding from the DAAD, I was able to initiate a special 4-month 'Pilot Project' entitled 'The Pre-Christian Religions of the North in an Archaeological Perspective'. The major aim of this project was to develop and test new methods of presenting archaeological material associated with pre-Christian beliefs in an online database. The 'Pilot Project' consisted of three subsequent research steps:

- **Step 1:** Critical selection of relevant material for the database
- **Step 2:** Detailed description of the chosen finds and acquisition of images
- **Step 3:** Inclusion of the archaeological material in the database

The first step involved a library-based study and selection of relevant archaeological finds which have been published in different kinds of academic works (site reports, journals and edited volumes). In this endeavor I referred to numerous archaeological publications (mainly from Scandinavia, Germany, UK and the United States) which contain detailed descriptions, images and critical discussions of finds and places commonly believed to be associated with the sphere of Old Norse beliefs (e.g. portable objects, graves, cult sites etc.). Due to various limitations a full list of the surveyed academic literature is impossible to provide here, but nonetheless it is worth mentioning some of the most recent overview works from the rapidly developing sub-field which could be labelled as 'the archaeology of Old Norse religion' – among them are certainly the important studies of scholars such as Anders Andrén[6], Lotte Hedeager[7], Michaela Helmbrecht[8], Neil Price[9], Jörn Staecker[10] and others. Although different categories of material evidence can be regarded as being associated with the sphere of pre-Christian beliefs, at the present stage of developing the PCRN archaeological sources database particular attention has concentrated on the discoveries of small and portable objects such as amulets and anthropomorphic figures.

In addition to selecting a range of well-known archaeological finds (especially from Denmark, Sweden and Norway) for inclusion in the online database, during the discussed 'Pilot Project' a choice was made to add a number of new and previously unknown materials from Poland – a largely disregarded area which is only recently receiving increased academic attention in Viking studies[11]. This decision resulted in including in the database a wide range of amulet finds discovered in the important port of trade in Truso (currently Janów Pomorski in Poland)[12].

[5] See, for example, Ellis 1943; Ellis Davidson 1990; de Vries 1957; Turville-Petre 1975; Boyer 1986; Słupecki 1998; Słupecki 2003; Dubois 1999; Lindow 2001; Orchard 2002; Simek 2003; Simek 2004; Simek 2005; Simek 2006; Steinsland 2005; Ström 2005; Tolley 2009.

[6] Andrén 1993; Andrén 2007; but see also Andrén et al. 2004; Andrén et al. 2006; Andrén and Carelli 2006.

[7] Hedeager 2011.

[8] Helmbrecht 2011.

[9] Price 2002; Price 2005; Price 2006; Price 2008a; Price 2008b; Price 2015.

[10] Staecker 1999a; Staecker 1999b.

[11] Duczko 2000; Duczko 2011; Moździoch et al. 2013; Gardeła 2015a.

[12] On Truso see, for example, Jagodziński 2010; Jagodziński 2015 with further references.

Fig. 2. Selection of Thor's hammers from Truso (Janów Pomorski, Poland). Collections of Archaeological and Historical Museum in Elbląg. Note that the necklace with glass beads and Thor's hammers has been assembled for exhibition purposes only and the particular finds come from various contexts. Photos by L. Gardeła.

In the near future more special finds from other sites in the area of Poland (such as the port of trade in Wolin[13]) will also be added to the PCRN database. It is noteworthy that the Viking Age amulets from Truso were made from various materials including iron, silver, copper alloys and amber and represent types which have parallels in Sweden, Denmark and the British Isles. Within the corpus of Scandinavian amulets from Truso are, for example, different variants of Thor's hammers (Fig. 2), miniature figures (all representing female characters), miniature weapons (axes, spears, shields), but also a range of other unique objects with possible magic characteristics (e.g. a miniature copper alloy staff or a special multi-part object comprising two bronze strap distributors and a silver ring). Their different types and physical characteristics allowed to test and develop various ways of presenting them online.

During the second and third stage of the 'Pilot Project' each of the selected finds has been carefully described. The

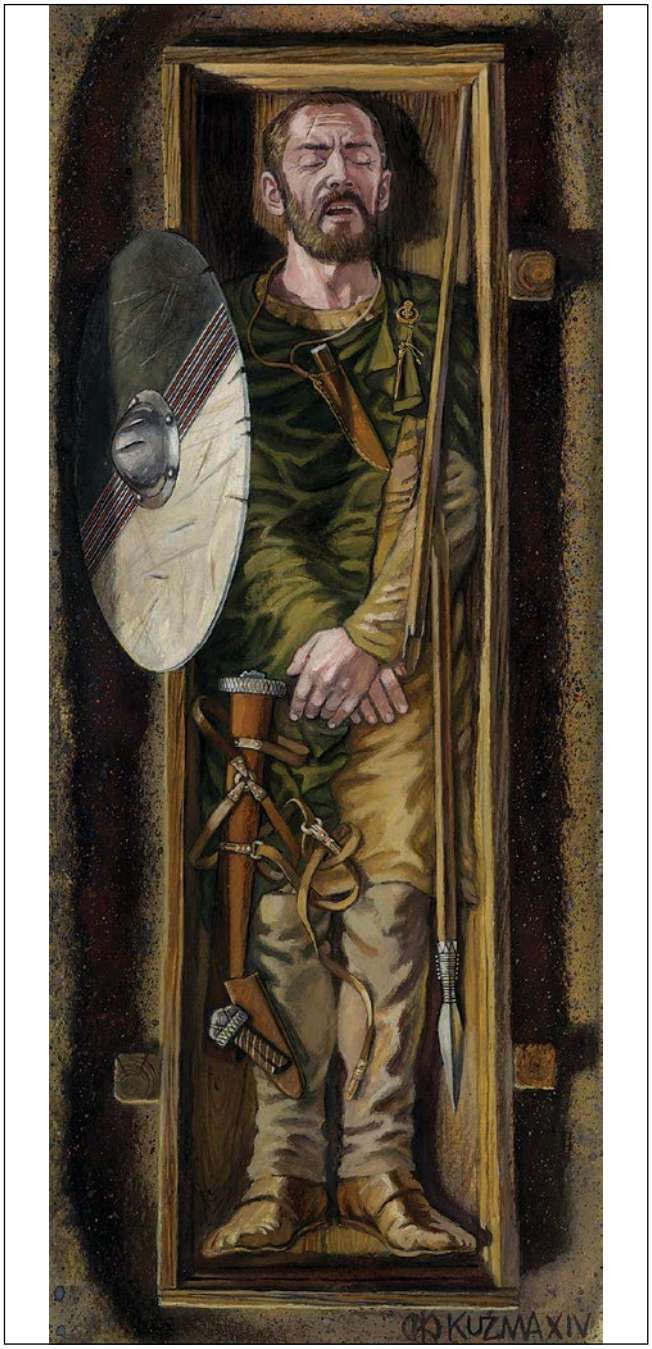

Fig. 3. Artistic reconstruction of the Ballateare grave from the Isle of Man. Painting by M. Kuźma. © L. Gardeła and M. Kuźma.

database entries include detailed information about dating, material, measurements, technique of production and context of each object. New high-resolution photographs of each artefact have also been acquired[14] and added to

[13] Viking Age Wolin has been extensively discussed in academic literature. Major overviews include, for example, Filipowiak and Gundlach 1992; Filipowiak and Konopka 2008; Morawiec 2009; Stanisławski and Filipowiak 2013; Stanisławski and Filipowiak 2014.

[14] The study of Scandinavian amulets from Viking Age Poland was possible thanks to a generous grant from the Viking Society for Northern Research (2013-2014) and additional funding from Fundacja Rzeszowskiego Ośrodka Archeologicznego and the Institute of Archaeology at the University of Rzeszów (2014-2015). The results of this research have recently been published in several articles and in a special monograph – see Gardeła 2014a; Gardeła 2015b; Gardeła 2015c; Gardeła in press.

the database. The overarching concern was to prepare the database entries for each find in a way that would be easy to understand by the educated public, but which at the same time would satisfy the demands of professional scholars. In some instances attempts have also been made to link the archaeological materials with relevant Old Norse textual sources and other medieval written accounts.

In addition to portable finds (i.e. amulets and other small objects), 10 very detailed descriptions of important Viking Age graves from a range of locations in early medieval Europe (British Isles, Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) have also been added to the database. Each of the graves has been carefully discussed with in-depth information about its external and internal structure, contents (i.e. grave goods), dating and wider context. Moreover, the relevant database entries have also been supplemented by full colour artistic reconstructions created by the Polish illustrator Mirosław Kuźma[15]. The inclusion of artistic reconstructions in the PCRN database plays a very important role in demonstrating how the graves may have looked at the time of burial (see Fig. 3). The illustrations are based on a careful analysis of different kinds of documentation (grave plans, photographs and specialist studies of particular objects as well as anthropological and paleopathological analyses of the osteological materials) and museum-based studies conducted in the course of my previous projects[16]. Prepared with care and academic scrutiny, but also supplemented by critical descriptions, they become a valuable visual medium for presenting the past to specialists and non-professional enthusiasts of the Viking Age[17].

Overall, the 'Pilot Project' proved to be crucial for the development of the PCRN 'Sources' database and for identifying further research themes and trajectories. Although it has been completed successfully and all the initial goals have been met, it is clear that the database still requires further intensive work and refinement. Various advancements must certainly be made with regard to presenting the archaeological material not only with the use of static images (drawings or photographs), but also in the form of videos and 3D scans. Some potential perspectives for future developments are presented in more detail below.

Possibilities for future developments

As highlighted above, the 'Pilot Project' enabled for a successful start of the archaeological database of the PCRN 'Sources' strand and opened exciting perspectives for its further development. Among other things it allowed to identify new and visually attractive possibilities for presenting the archaeological material online. These methods have the capacity to draw the attention not only of academics, but also non-professional audiences interested in Viking and Old Norse studies.

In result of recent discussions with other members of the PCRN project we have realized that a number of further innovative improvements could be made in the forthcoming years. The implementation of these improvements will allow for dynamic development of the whole PCRN project and at the same time lead to wider dissemination of its results.

It is envisaged that in the nearest future more entries will be added to the database, covering other areas associated with the broadly understood sphere of pre-Christian beliefs. At present the majority of finds included in the PCRN 'Sources' database comprise small portable finds (e.g. amulets and figurines). It is now vital to expand their range and add objects and structures that correspond with the following categories (originally identified by Neil Price):

- Sacred architecture (e.g. buildings and cult sites, sanctuaries, platforms and stone settings etc.)
- Mortuary behaviour (e.g. ship and boat burials, chamber graves, animal offerings, human offerings, 'deviant burials', disturbed and re-used graves etc.)
- The material culture of religious practice (e.g. neck-rings, masks, staffs of metal and wood, charms, special dress, *guldgubbar*/gold foils, bracteates etc.)

Moreover, in the process of expanding the database, it would be valuable to explore new ways of presenting complex archaeological materials in a digital form. In contrast to traditional forms of publishing archaeological finds (i.e. in print form), the PCRN 'Sources' database has absolutely no restrictions as to the number, resolution or quality of imagery attached to the relevant entries. So far, while assembling the database, we have focused on presenting the archaeological objects in a relatively traditional way, mainly by adding photographs of their reverse and obverse. In case of more complex archaeological materials it would be valuable to add multi-angle photographs and assemble them on high-resolution and full colour plates. This procedure could allow the users of the database to zoom-in and examine particular details of the objects more closely and from various perspectives. One example of how such plates could look like is provided below (Fig. 4).

In addition to presenting the archaeological finds in a static way through the use of colour multi-angle photographs, plates and artistic reconstructions, it is also necessary to find and test ways of demonstrating this material in a more dynamic manner which meets the expectations of modern audience – for example through the use of high-resolution videos. It is worth highlighting that in recent years there have already been some attempts at taking

[15] A full portfolio of Mirosław Kuźma can be accessed online at www.miroslawkuzma.pl. On the ongoing collaboration between archaeologists and Mirosław Kuźma see also: Gardeła and Kuźma 2012; Gardeła and Kajkowski 2015.

[16] See, for example, Gardeła 2012; Gardeła 2013a; Gardeła 2013b; Gardeła 2014b.

[17] The value of artistic reconstructions in academic studies on early medieval archaeology has recently been discussed by Williams 2009.

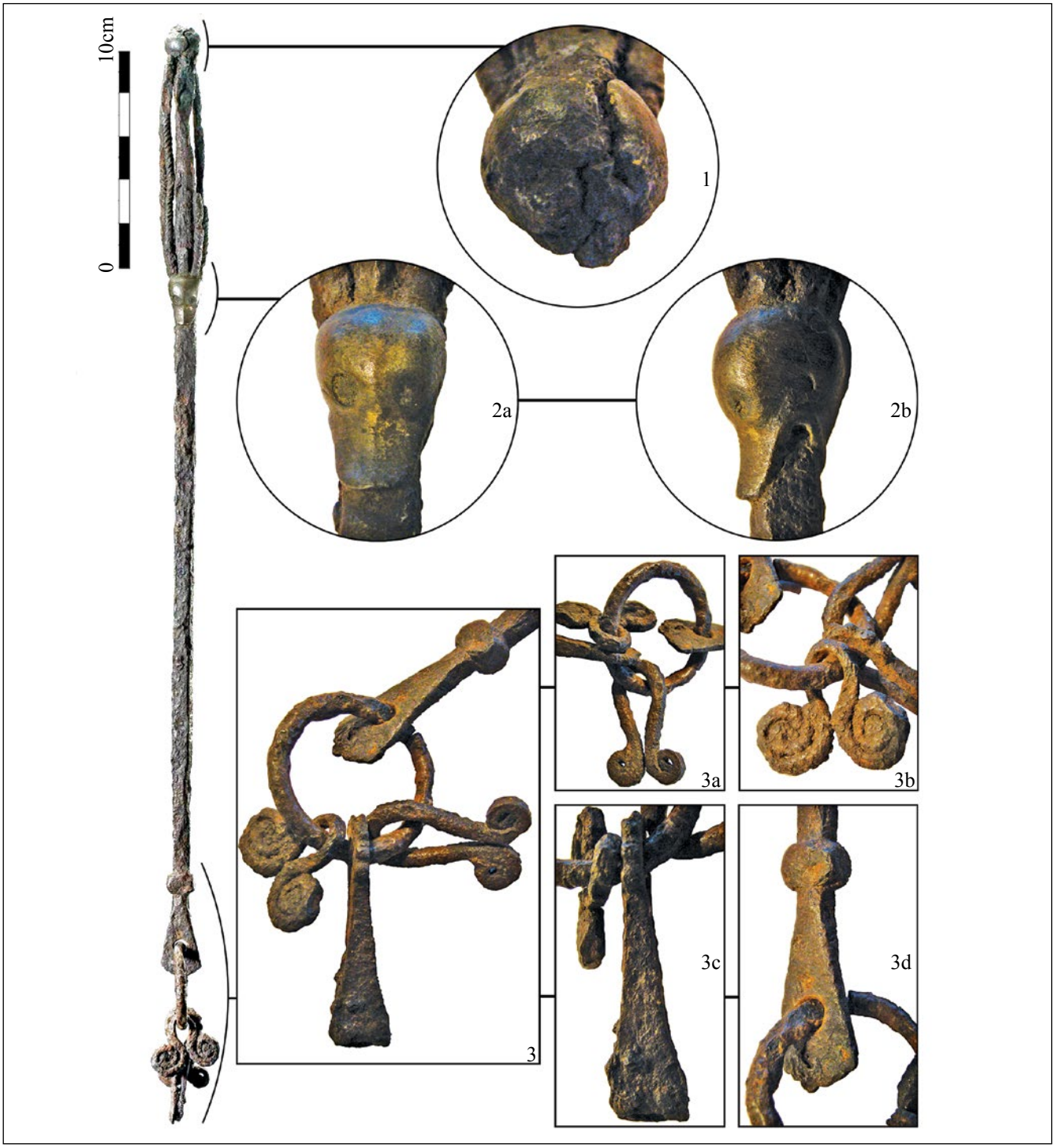

Fig. 4. Plate with details of a possible Viking Age staff of sorcery from Gävle (Gästrikland, Sweden). Collections of National Museum of Denmark. Photos by L. Gardeła.

RTI[18] photographs and 3D laser scans of various Viking Age artefacts which may hold symbolic meanings, for example oval brooches and equal armed brooches[19] or Gotlandic picture stones[20]. Therefore, during the next stages of developing the PCRN project we will try to gain access to such digital materials (by contacting their copyright owners and establishing collaborations with various academic

[18] According to Andreef and Potter (2014, 671): "RTI is a method that involves a static camera and a moving light source in order to digitally create a normal map – a colour coded image that can be used to digitally simulate the surface of the picture stones. It is essentially a more modern variant of the ranking light technique which produces an interactive picture in which the light can be moved dynamically on a computer".

[19] See, for example, Neiß 2007; Neiß 2009; Neiß 2010; Neiß 2011; Neiß 2012.

[20] See, for example, Oehrl 2012; Kitzler Åhfeldt 2013; Andreef and Potter 2014.

institutions and museums) and include them in the 'Sources' database. There is no doubt that this will allow to present archaeological heritage in a visually attractive and novel way thereby greatly increasing the academic and popular interest in the early medieval past.

Finally, it would also be valuable to pay more attention to disseminating and promoting Viking archaeology and the Pre-Christian Religions of the North project in various social media. This can be achieved by setting up special profiles of the PCRN project on internet sites such as Facebook and Twitter. By doing so it will be possible to raise public awareness of the Viking past and especially of different aspects associated with pre-Christian beliefs and ritual practices. Ideally, the Facebook and Twitter profiles would include regular updates on recent developments of the various strands of the PCRN project (not only the 'Sources' strand). As such they could become valuable panels for communication between interested academics and non-professional audience. By giving the visitors of the PCRN websites an opportunity to add comments or criticisms it would also be possible to make meaningful improvements to the whole project.

In conclusion it is certain that the PCRN 'Sources' database will continue to develop and expand, but it may still take several years before it becomes a major research resource. It is undoubted, however, that digitalizing the Viking Age material heritage concerned with pre-Christian religions has great potential and may lead to unravelling previously unknown and exciting aspects of the past.

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Streszczenie

Projekt Pre-Christian Religions of the North i jego archeologiczna baza danych

Artykuł prezentuje najnowsze wyniki badań prowadzonych w ramach interdyscyplinarnego projektu „Pre-Christian Religions of the North" (PCRN). Projekt ten ma na celu weryfikację dotychczasowych poglądów na temat przedchrześcijańskich wierzeń we wczesnośredniowiecznej Europie Północnej, przygotowanie szeregu nowych opracowań akademickich, jak również stworzenie internetowej bazy danych obejmującej źródła pisane i archeologiczne. W pracach PCRN uczestniczą badacze z Europy, Australii oraz USA. Zasadniczy trzon projektu tworzą trzy moduły: 1. Źródła (ang. *Sources*), 2. Historie i struktury (ang. *Histories and structures*), 3. Badania i ich recepcja (ang. *Research and reception*). W niniejszym artykule szczególną uwagę poświecono wynikom najnowszych prac przeprowadzonych w ramach modułu 'Źródła', a przede wszystkim archeologicznej bazie danych tworzonej na zasadach *open access* (pol. otwarty dostęp).