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Figureheads and Symbolism Between the Medieval and the Modern: The ship *Griffin* or *Gribshunden*, one of the last Sea Serpents?

Niklas Eriksson

The *Griffin* or, as it was sometimes called, *Gribshunden* (griffin hound) was a ship that belonged to the Danish–Norwegian King Hans. The ship sank in 1495 and was one of the largest and most modern warships of its day. In 2015 a peculiar figurehead carving was raised from the wreck. It is shaped like a beast swallowing a man screaming in agony. The question is, what this sculpture is meant to symbolize? This article aims to shed light on the enquiry through placing the sculpture in a wider chronological context. Against the background of a general overview, from the dragon heads of the late Iron Age to early modern figureheads, it is argued that the sculpture raised from the *Griffin* was carved in a period when figureheads did not relate to the ship's name or owner, but that the monstrous head is an expression of the spirit or character of the vessel.

Key words: *Griffin*, *Gribshunden*, figurehead, medieval, sculpture, Baltic Sea, Sweden, Denmark, naval architecture

The beast grins like an angry dog with a frilly nose and exposed teeth, while it swallows a screaming man. This peculiar sculpture is carved into the end of a massive beam of oak that was salvaged from the late medieval shipwreck *Griffin* or *Gribshunden* (which literary means 'griffin hound') in 2015. It was originally placed protruding above the ship's stem, forming a support for the forecastle. It was thus placed in a position that corresponds to later figureheads (figure 1). One wonders what is actually depicted, but also how the it relates to the name of the ship or if it perhaps relates to its owner.

Not much is known regarding the symbolism of late medieval figureheads. Compared to the iconic dragon heads associated with Viking Age ships or the lavishly decorated ships of the early modern period, medieval ship ornamentation and decoration has received limited scholarly attention. There are probably several reasons for this, but a contributing factor is likely the lack of preserved examples. The sculpture salvaged from the *Gribshunden* wreck is the only one of its kind. Medieval images of large ships found in churches, manuscripts and other documents, reveal that it was very common to have this carved motif on the bow.

The aim of this article is to shed light on this question through placing the carving from the *Gribshunden* in a wider chronological context, describing how motifs of ships's figureheads changed from the Viking Age to early modern times. The reason

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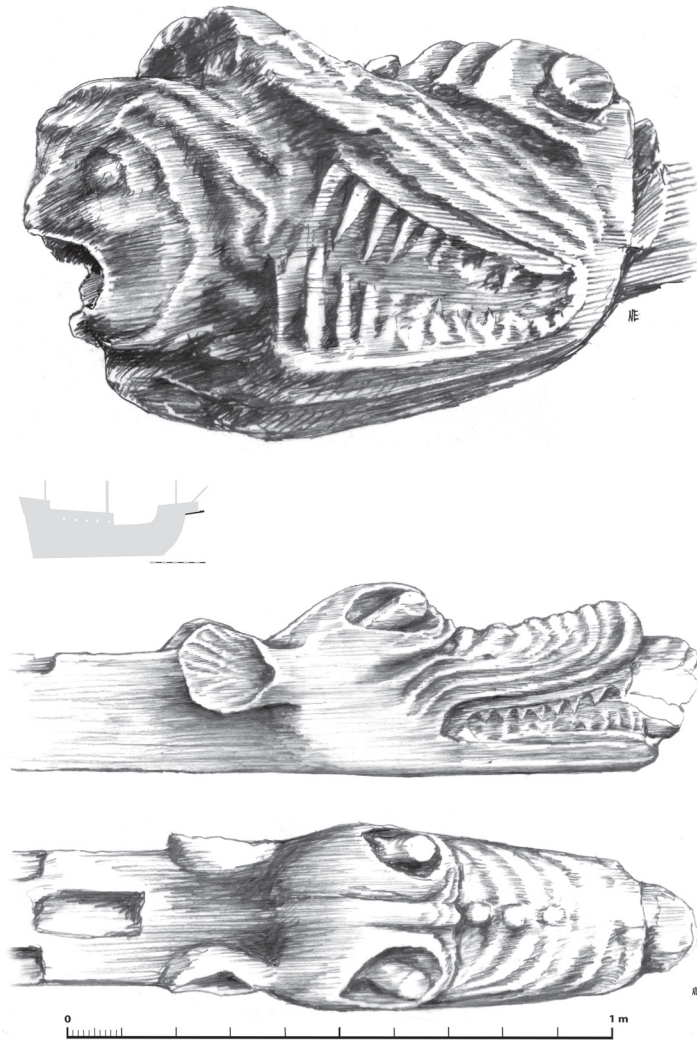


Figure 1 Top, the figurehead of 'Gribshunden', a human, screaming in agony, is trapped in the jaws of the beast; below, the figurehead seen from the side and from above (Author's drawings)

I have chosen to describe the outlines of figurehead motifs over such a long period of time is to clarify and highlight a significant shift that takes place towards the end of the middle ages. While the Viking Age figureheads are carved to make the whole ship appear as a kind of animal or fantasy beast, the late medieval figureheads, like the one salvaged from *Gribshunden*, had no direct connection to the name of the ship. They ended up there more or less by habit or custom and are not connected to the ship's name (though there are exceptions). These late medieval figureheads also contrast to the early modern ones, which and rather connote the ship's owner, the king or the nation.

Rather than claiming to provide a definitive answer to the question of what the salvaged figurehead actually depicts, this paper argues that the sculpture was carved

in a period when figureheads did not relate to the ship's name or to its owner. The *Griffin* or *Gribshunden* most likely had sculptures, ornaments or painted motifs that fulfilled such a purpose, though these were placed on other parts of the ship's exterior. Before sketching this development, it is necessary to say something about *Gribshunden* and the wreck.

The 'Gribshunden' wreck

The wreck was discovered by recreational divers in the 1960s but it was not until 2000 that archaeologists were made aware that it could date to the Middle Ages. The first archaeological surveys were conducted by the Kalmar County Museum between 2000 and 2012, and found that it consisted of a large, carvel-built and heavily armed ship of late medieval origin. Dendochronological analysis indicated that the wood was felled after 1483 and was cut in present-day north-eastern France.¹

The description led historian Dr Ingvar Sjöblom to the conclusion that it must be the remains of the *Griffin*, also called *Gribshunden*,² the flagship of King Hans (1455–1513) of Denmark–Norway. The ship was lost in this area in 1495 while at anchor in a natural harbour on the island of Stora Ekön, in the southern Baltic Sea. The area belonged to Denmark until 1658, when it was conquered by Sweden. Denmark, Norway and Sweden were united in the Kalmar Union in 1397, but relations between the three countries were complicated, with several uprisings.³ When the ship sank it was heading for the Swedish town of Kalmar, where King Hans was to meet the Swedish nobleman Sten Sture the Elder (about 1440–1503), regent of Sweden, to discuss King Hans's ambition to be elected as king of Sweden.

In 2013 the wreck site was surveyed again, as part of a research project at Södertörn University.⁴ The investigations showed that most of the hull structure was preserved under sediment and that the ship turned out to be very large by late medieval standards, measuring between 30 to 32 metres from stem to sternpost.⁵ It was during these surveys that the grinning monster sculpture was discovered and lifted.⁶

Medieval warfare at sea relied heavily on boarding, where fighting vessels sailed up alongside one another so that men could get onboard and fight in close combat. The height of the vessels was of tactical importance and high castles were erected fore and aft. The position of the beam in which the carved figurehead was discovered, as well as notches for fitting other constructional elements, reveal that it originally supported the forecastle construction (figure 2). The beam rested on top of the stem and the monster head protruded as the outermost feature of the forecastle, similar to later figureheads.

1 Einarsson and Wallbom, *Marinarkeologisk besiktning och provtagning*; Einarsson and Wallbom, *Fortsatta marinarkeologiska undersökningar*; Einarsson and Gainsford, *Rapport om 2006 års marinarkeologiska undersökningar*; Einarsson, *Rapport om hydroakustisk kartering*; Linderson, *Dendrokronologisk analys*.

2 Sjöblom, 'Identifiering och historiskt sammanhang', 33–49; Sjöblom, 'Unionskrig oh maktkamp: Gribshunden i källorna', 40–54.

3 See Larsson, *Kalmarunionens tid*, for an overview.

4 The project was entitled *Ships at War: Early modern maritime battlefields in the Baltic*.

5 Eriksson, 'Skeppsarkeologisk analys', 27; Eriksson, '*Gribshunden*: medeltidens modernaste skepp', 38–9.

6 Rönnby, *Gribshunden* (1495).

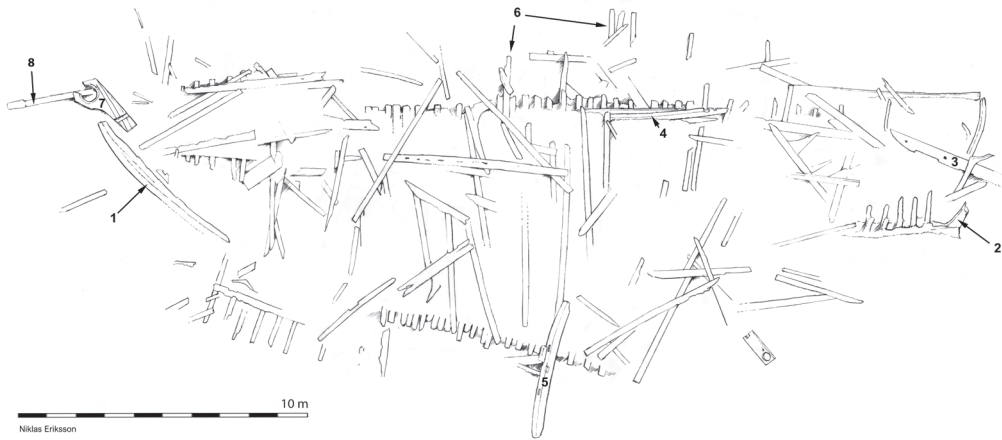


Figure 2 Preliminary plan of the wreck site. 1, stem; 2, sternpost; 3, rudder; 4, shelf-clamp; 5, bitt-beam; 6, top-timbers from sterncastle; 7, hawse-timber; 8, figurehead. (Author's drawing)

The style in which the beast is carved, with the rippled nose and teeth, is reminiscent of medieval stone carvings found in churches on fonts and on the base of columns. As with the monster salvaged from *Gribshunden*, these sculptures often include a lost sinner in the mouth of some beast. The salvaged sculpture also brings to mind the dragon figureheads from the Viking Age. There is thus every reason to look more closely at these symbols and how they related to the names of ships.

Figureheads in Old Norse literature

It is common to regard ships and boats almost as living beings. To place a head on the bow and a tail on the stern, so that the ship's hull resembles the swimming body of an animal, is a custom that has a very long history and continuity. The ships depicted in Scandinavia's rock carvings dating from the Bronze Age are well known, and there are several anthropological examples of this phenomenon that can be observed in various parts of the world.⁷ There are also several archaeological examples.⁸

Viking Age figureheads are sometimes described as magical. According to the *Landnámabók*, an Icelandic text describing the settlement of Iceland by the Vikings, these frightening figureheads should be removed when approaching land in order to not upset the spirits on the land.⁹ *Heimskringla*, the king's saga written by Snorre Sturlason in the thirteenth century, provides some clues, not only regarding the motifs of the figureheads but also how they affected the visual impression of the ship as well as how people in those times thought of and associated with its appearance. The ship with which Olav Tryggvasson (king of Norway from 955–1000) conquered Raud den ramme was likened to a serpent.

7 Falk, *Fornnordisk sjöfart*, 53, 65; McNiven, 'Torres Strait Canoes'; Stammers, *Figureheads and Ship Carvings*, 5–12; Fahlander, 'Fantastic Beings'.

8 British Museum, nos 1967,1001.1 and 1938,0202.1; also see Kalmring and Holmquist, 'The Gleaming Mane of the Serpent', 749.

9 Strinnholm, *Svenska folkets historia*, 568; Kalmring and Holmquist, 'The Gleaming Mane of the Serpent', 749.

On the bow was a serpent's head and on the stern a hook shaped like the tail of a fish, and the tail, neck and stem were gilded. The king called the ship *Serpent*, for when the sails were unfurled they became the wings of a dragon.¹⁰

Later Olav Tryggvasson ordered a larger ship built, which was also named *Serpent*. As it was larger, it was named *Long Serpent* while the precursor's name changed to *Short Serpent*. With a gilded head on the bow and an equally gilded tail on the stern the ship resembled a swimming serpent.¹¹

Another Norwegian king, Olav Haraldsson, who is better known as Olav den helige or St Olav, ruled between 1015 and 1028 and had a ship called *Visund*, a word which is roughly equivalent to wisent (the aurochs or European bison). On the bow of the *Visund* was a buffalo head.¹² The ship outlasted St Olav and was inherited by his son Magnus. In his saga it is described how the *Visund*, just like *Long Serpent*, had a tail on the stern and that both necks were gilded. As well as *Visund*, Olav had a ship called *Karlshaufdi*, 'Karl's head' or 'man's head', as it had a figurehead shaped like a king's head. Olav had carved this figure himself, and it was reused on later ships.¹³

Some of the ships mentioned in *Heimskringla* were thus embellished in a way that made them appear as living creatures, preferably serpents or dragons. A frequently used synonym for warship was dragon or serpent, an attribute that was thus underlined by the sculptured ornaments on the bow and stern.

Dragons, griffins and other mythological fantasy beasts borrow body parts from several different species and unite them irrespective of the size of the donor animal. Birds' claws, fish scales, lizards' bodies and bat wings are joined to form horrible hybrid creatures. The combination of dragon or serpent and ship form another hybrid, lying between fantasy beast and a human-made machine. The dragon ship almost forms a sort of creature in its own right, where the hull is the body and the carved sculpture on the bow the head.

It should be noted, however, that far from all ships had figureheads that could be associated with the ship's name. Some ships had several heads and some had heads on both stem and stern.¹⁴

Olav and Harald's sailing race

Imagined creatures, as well as animals in general, are ascribed with different characteristic qualities. This practice was already well established in the Middle Ages, something which is illustrated through the many bestiaries which describe the character of different animals and beasts.¹⁵

The names of the ships mentioned in Old Norse literature are entangled with what may be regarded as the personality of the ship's name-giving animal. The ship's name spills over into how the ship behaves on the waves. This phenomenon is illustrated by a well-known episode in the legend of Olav Haraldsson when he was to sail a race

10 Author's translation from Snorre Sturlasson, *Olav den heliges saga*, 270–2.

11 Sturlasson, *Norges kungasagor*, vol. 1, 365–7.

12 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 321–5.

13 *Ibid.*, 63–7.

14 See discussion in Falk, *Fornnordisk sjöfart*, 53.

15 Eriksson, *Bestiarium*.



Figure 3 St Olav and his brother Harald Hårdråde's sailing race aboard the ships 'Taurus' and 'Serpent', as depicted by Albertus Pictor in Ösmo church; even if the event took place in the eleventh century the style of the depicted ships is late fifteenth-century, contemporary with the artist as well as the 'Gribshunden' (Author's photo)

against his half-brother, Harald Hårdråde, to the town of Trondheim. The winner would become king of Norway. Olav loaned Harald his fast ship *Serpent*, while he would sail the much slower *Taurus*. In an old Norwegian ballad Olav says to his half-brother, 'If you use *Serpent* the happy, I will use *Taurus* the lazy.'¹⁶ Miraculously Olav arrived at Trondheim before his half-brother, despite the fact that he had the slower ship.

The legend of St Olav became very popular in Scandinavia and the sailing race is a recurring motif in many different contexts, not least in paintings on church ceilings and altar pieces.¹⁷ A fine example is found in the church at Ösmo, some miles south of Stockholm in Sweden. It was painted by Albertus Pictor (Albert the Painter) in the last decades of the fifteenth century (figure 3). Albertus died in 1509, which means that the painting should be regarded as being contemporary with King Hans's ship *Gribshunden* and the salvaged figurehead.

Even if the very productive Albertus Pictor depicted scenes from the Bible or narratives of saints – events that took place a long time ago – the artefacts and the material culture in these scenes are contemporary with Albertus himself. The ships depicted in the scene of St Olav's sailing race are no exception. With stern rudder, stern castles and fighting tops in their masts, they reveal the characteristics of late medieval ships. Through the figureheads, there is no question which ship is the fast *Serpent* and which is the slow *Taurus*. But as Olav and Harald are travelling aboard medieval vessels, with square sterns, both ships lack fishtails like the ships described by Snorre Sturlusson. The serpent and bull symbolism is limited to the forward portion of the ship, which is a sign that a change in the symbolic embellishment of ships' exteriors was underway.

Dragons without names

There are several images as well as some preserved models showing late medieval and early modern vessels with carved dragons heads. How these carved figureheads

¹⁶ Author's translation from 'Saint Olav's Racing Sail', v. 10. The original reads, 'Saa tag du *Ormen* hin glade, og jeg tager *Oxen* hin lade.' Text online at www.bokselskap.no/boker/legendeballadar/tsb_b_12_sanktolav.

¹⁷ Lidén, *Sankt Olavs seglats*.



Figure 4 On the the Schlüsselfeld model, made in 1503, the dragon is on its way out of the ship and the stern lacks all forms of dragon-like ornament (Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg, HG2146, Leihgabe der Johann Carl von Schlüsselfelder)

relate to the ships' names is not clear. Perhaps there is a conflict of tradition here. Medieval ships were often named after saints or biblical persons. Raphael, the Virgin Mary or Jesus were seldom depicted as dragons. With this in mind, there is reason to question whether the sculpture recovered from *Gribshunden* has anything to do with the ship's name, especially as it hardly resembles a Griffin.

Yet there is another more functional aspect to the shift in the relationship between the figurehead and the ship's name. Unlike the double-ended hulls of the Viking Age, late medieval ships lacked the architectural features to form the appearance of a serpent's tail. Judging from images and models, the monstrous elements were successively reduced and pushed towards the forward end of the ship. Such an arrangement is revealed in, for instance, the Catalan Mataró model as well as several preserved gilded centre pieces that were produced around 1500 (figure 4).¹⁸

There is no doubt that there were several different ways to think of ships as more or less animated or living animals or fantasy beasts in the Middle Ages, but alas the sources that describe this are scarce. However, there are a few illustrations that might depict some sort of ship-being or personality. The Louvre in Paris has a collection of drawings called the Codex Vallardi. They were drawn by Antonio di Pucci Pisanello

18 De Meer, 'The Mataró-model'; Springmann, 'The Schlüsselfeld ship model'; British Museum no. AF 3059 is another example.

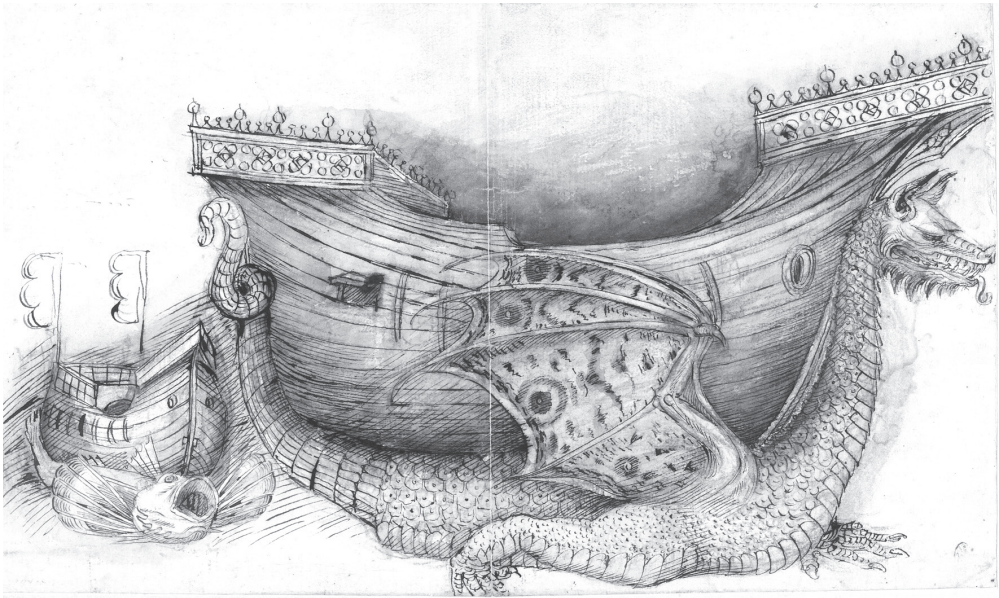


Figure 5 Drawing by Antonio di Pucci Pisanello of a ship being carried by a large fish (left); the larger ship is carried by a dragon, but note that the ship is depicted without a dragon figurehead, which was more or less mandatory in the fourteenth century (Musée du Louvre, Codex Vallardi no. 2289)

(born before 1395–1455) and include many drawings of ships, of which several are carried by some sort of animal or beast. Usually they are carried by dragons, but in one instance a ship is carried by a large fish (figure 5). Unfortunately there are no notes or comments that reveal what Pisanello thought about these motifs, but it appears that he saw some sort of connection between the beast that carried the ship on its back and the figurehead. The argument for this is that the ships that are carried by beasts are depicted without figureheads. In the collection of drawings there are also some more naturalistic sketches of ships, which are depicted with the usual dragon figureheads. My interpretation is that Pisanello regarded the figureheads as expressions of these ship-carrying spirits, a kind of materialization of the spirit that lived within the ship.

When the creatures crawl out of the ship

In the sixteenth century there is a clear trend in ship decoration, where the motifs of the figureheads are separated from the hull. The so-called Anthony Roll, compiled by Anthony Anthony in the 1540s sheds some light on this development. Anthony worked in the administration of Henry VIII's navy and the Anthony Roll is an illustrated list of the king's ships. It contains images of 58 ships together with information regarding the size of crews, number of guns and other similar information. The images of the ships consist of individual portraits. Even if they are far from realistic, they are drawn to reveal some characteristic features and details. The rigs, gunport arrangements and fore- and stern castles are all individually depicted.

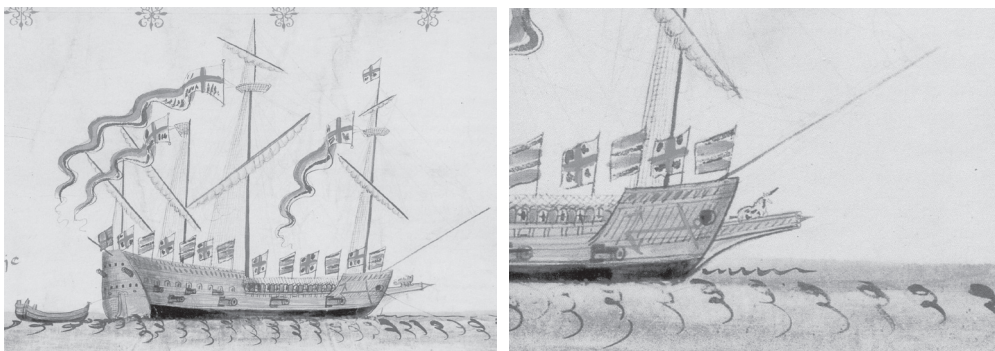


Figure 6 The galleasses 'Salamander' (left) and 'Unicorn' (detail, right) as depicted in the Anthony Roll. Note how the lizard and the unicorn are depicted in full body on top of the ram in the bow. The eponymous creatures have thus crawled out of the ships. (Wikimedia Commons)

Four of the ships are shown with some form of figurehead that relates to their name. The largest ship, *Harry Grace à Dieu*, is depicted with a royal crown on the outermost end of the long bowsprit.¹⁹ Among the large ships is the *Mary Rose*, built in 1510 and lost in 1545, soon after it was depicted in the Anthony Roll. On the outermost end of the forecastle there is a red rose, which not only relates to the ship's name but also to the Tudor dynasty.

The wreck of the *Mary Rose* was excavated and raised in 1982. When archaeological surveys of the site were resumed in 2003 parts of the forecastle was observed, among these a 130-centimetre long 'lollypop-shaped' timber. It has been interpreted as a Tudor rose, a discovery that fits well with the way in which the name symbol was depicted in the Anthony Roll.²⁰

The Anthony Roll also shows the smaller fighting galleasses *Salamander* and *Unicorn* (figure 6). The *Salamander* was originally built in France but was given to the Scots. The vessel was later taken as a prize by the English, together with the *Unicorn*, in 1544.²¹ Drawing on the way that figureheads were described in, for instance *Heimskringla*, and the way that medieval ships are depicted on church walls and in manuscripts – and not least with the grinning monster salvaged from *Gribsbunden* – one would guess that the *Salamander* and *Unicorn* would be depicted, respectively, with a head of a lizard and a white unicorn in the bow. Instead, both galleasses have a green salamander and a white unicorn depicted in whole-body, balancing on the protruding ram. It is as if the spirit of the ship has crawled out of its own skin and left the hull. From the mid-sixteenth century, monsters or animal heads became more and more rare and none of the ships in the Anthony Roll have such figureheads.

In connection with this shift in figurehead motifs there is a general relocation of sculpted symbols on the exterior of ships, which opened up a new repertoire of motifs. Ship's names were still expressed through sculpted or painted symbols, though when the architecture of the hull changed, the symbol expressing the ship's

19 Knighton and Loades, *The Anthony Roll*; Pulvertaft, 'The Figurehead/Badge of the Mary Rose', 331–35.

20 Pulvertaft, 'The Figurehead/Badge of the Mary Rose', 331–5.

21 Laughton, *Old Ship Figure-heads*, 66; Bennel, 'The Oared Vessels', 37.

name moved from the figurehead on the bow to the transom on the stern.²² For instance, the Swedish King Gustav in 1559 ordered that he

would like to see the large carvel, that we call *Elefanten* [Elephant], be decorated and with all fittings ready as soon as possible, and it would not be unpleasant for us, if you would paint upon it an elephant, the grandest that the painter is able to.²³

The symbolic and stylistic changes that appear in early modern ship architecture occurred alongside the introduction of larger purpose-built warships and permanent naval organizations all over Europe.²⁴ As mentioned earlier, the *Griffin* or *Gribshunden* was an unusually large ship by late fifteenth-century standards. Compared to the large ships built in the following century, however, King Hans's flagship was rather small. The Swedish warship *Mars* is renowned for being one of the largest ships in the world when it sank in 1564, nearly 80 years after *Gribshunden*. Archaeological surveys of the *Mars* wreck site reveal that the ship originally measured around 44 metres from stem to sternpost.²⁵

Floating palaces

In the seventeenth century the sailing warship attained its more or less final form, with three masts and rows of muzzle-loaded guns in ports along the sides of the hull. This basic design would endure until the mid-nineteenth century, when sailing warships were gradually replaced by steam-driven iron vessels. From the seventeenth century the source material is rich with images, models and written descriptions of sculpted motifs. Moreover, wrecks such as the *Vasa*, *Kronan* and *Riksäppet* provide valuable insights into the motifs in the embellishment of early modern ships.²⁶

From the time when the symbol that communicated the ship's name was moved from the bow to the transom, most European warships had lion figureheads. However, there are exceptions. In Sweden, Denmark, England and France, the largest and most prestigious ships had individual motifs that expressed clever and well thought-through symbolic messages that glorified the nation, the ruling dynasty and their political ambitions.²⁷

James VI and I's ship the *Prince Royal*, launched in 1610, may serve as an example. In contrast to medieval ships or the large vessels built during the sixteenth century, the *Prince Royal* was to a large extent decorated with carvings and sculptures which divided the hull's sides into fields. These fields were filled with heraldry, fantasy sea monsters and arrangements of muskets, spears, shields and ensigns that were painted or carved in shallow relief. The prince indicated by the ship's name was Henry, who was intended to inherit the throne and whose initials HP, for Henricus Princeps, are found in various places in the exterior. *Prince Royal's* figurehead actually includes a dragon, but in contrast to the Viking or medieval figureheads it is merely a part of a larger motif where a dragon is killed by St George, the national saint of England.

22 Eriksson, *Urbanism Under Sail*, chapter 7.

23 Riksarkivet, *Riksregistraturet* 1559-06-01, fo. 77.

24 For instance, Glete, *Navies and Nations* and Glete, *Swedish Naval Administration*.

25 Eriksson, 'How Large was *Mars*?'.

26 Soop, *Flytande Palats*; Einarsson, *Regalskeppet Kronan*; Eriksson, *Riksäppet*.

27 Eriksson, 'Maktanspråk snidade i trä'.

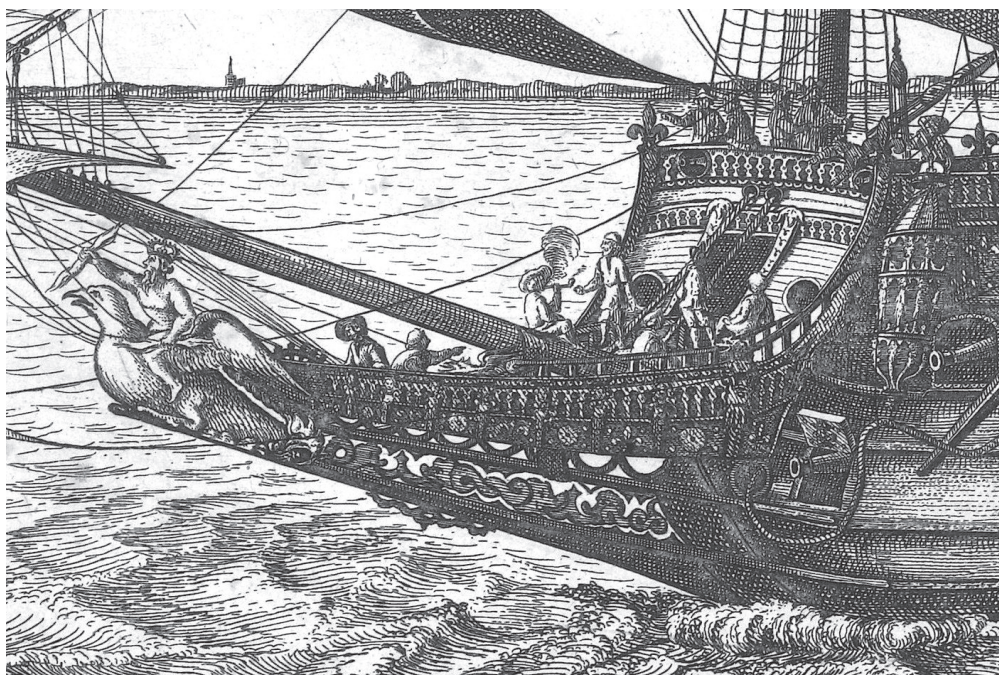


Figure 7 Early modern warships either had lion figureheads or motifs associated with the king and the nation. The example shown here is the French ship 'Saint Louis', with a figurehead depicting the roman god Jupiter riding an eagle with a torch in his hand. It represents the ship's owner, King Louis XIII, who was sometimes depicted as Jupiter. (Rijksmuseum/Amsterdam, edited by the author)

The figurehead thus relates to the nation rather than to the ship's name.²⁸

The ship that surpassed the *Prince Royal* was the *Sovereign of the Seas*, launched in 1637, and which is reputed to have been the most expensively decorated ship ever to have sailed. Most of the hull was covered with sculptures. In order to make the ship even more impressive all the carvings were gilded. The figurehead depicted King Edgar, who ruled from 959 to 975 and is argued to be the king who united England. With a sword in his hand King Edgar rides a horse trampling on the seven kings who Edgar had to overthrow before he could call himself 'Lord of the Four Seas', a title that also appealed to the ruling King Charles I's ambitions.²⁹

In the naval bases across the English Channel figureheads had symbols that worked in similar ways. The largest ships in the French navy had figureheads that related to the ruling king. Their largest ship, *La Couronne*, had a sculpted Hercules fighting the Hydra as a figurehead. The motifs were used to celebrate Louis XIII's victory over the Huguenots at La Rochelle in 1627.³⁰ Another of his vessels, *Saint Louis*, had a figurehead in the shape of the Roman god Jupiter (figure 7). Jupiter was not only the king of the gods, he was also the god of the sky. In the beakhead Jupiter is depicted with a crown on his head, riding an eagle with a flaming torch in his

28 Perrin (ed.), *The Autobiography of Phineas Pett*, 208–10; Laughton, *Old Ship Figure-heads*, 67

29 Redding, 'A Ship "For Which Great Neptune Raves" '.

30 Soop, *Regalskeppet Vasa, Skulpturer*, 23; Soop, *Flytande palats*, 67; Redding, 'A Ship "For Which Great Neptune Raves" ', 417.

hand.³¹ Again, the motif was intended to make the beholder associate it with Louis XIII, who on several occasions was portrayed as Jupiter, in Roman-inspired armour, an eagle and a torch.

Art historian Dr Hans Soop has suggested that the figurehead on the ship *Vasa*, that holds a shield with the Vasa family's coat-of-arms, was supposed to be associated with King Gustav Adolf, as the 'Lion from the North'.³² There are several other early modern examples of figureheads that aim to provide allegoric associations to the king or the nation.

Three phases in the development in figurehead motifs

The point I wish to make with this survey of figurehead motifs from the Viking Age to the seventeenth century is that changes in the motifs and the semiotics of figureheads occurred. In order to detail this development, it can be described as an evolution in three phases.

In the first phase the figurehead is a sculpted head which matches a corresponding ornament in the ship's stern. These decorations make the ship appear as an animal or a beast, a living creature, preferably a large serpent. The heads of these swimming creatures vary depending on the ship's character, or perhaps even personality. This form of embellishment was common in different parts of the world and over a long period of time. It is described in Old Norse literature and it is known that some of the ships that belonged to the Norwegian kings were embellished in this manner.

The second phase consists of the dragon heads that protruded from under the high forecastles that were introduced during the Middle Ages. The architecture of these ships differs substantially from Viking Age ships. They lack the sculptured tail and thus the animalistic expressions are limited to the forward end of the hull. The link between the ship's name and figurehead is occasionally represented during the high and late Middle Ages, for instance the many depictions of Saint Olav's sailing race. Yet that very motif should be regarded as an exception as it illustrates a story that took place centuries earlier. The way that the *Serpent* and *Taurus* are depicted by, for instance, Albertus Pictor should be regarded as anachronistic late medieval reconstructions.

It is, however, obvious that many large warships in medieval images have dragons or monster heads under the forecastle. Considering that large medieval ships were often named after saints and similar religious icons, these sculptures can hardly represent the ship's name. For instance, besides the *Gribshunden*, King Hans had ships named *Swan*, *David* and *Christoffer*; later he built the ships *Engelen* (Angel) and *Maria* – characters seldom depicted as dragons or monsters. The conclusion is thus that the sculpture salvaged from the wreck of the *Gribshunden* was carved in a period when the figurehead had lost its role of representing the ship's name. That the largest ships in this time were still built with monster figureheads appears to be a perfunctory or nostalgic reminiscence of older ships. Perhaps the idea of the ship as a living creature with a personality was still present. Pisanello's sketches might indicate this.

The names of high and late medieval vessels already suggest that they no longer resembled serpents. Whether this is a consequence of a changed worldview resulting

31 Soop, *Flytande palats*, 68.

32 Soop, *Regalskeppet Vasa, Skulpturer*, 127–8; Soop, *Flytande palats*, 80–1.

from the introduction of Christianity is a question that still needs to be researched, though there may also be functional or technical reasons behind this change. A long and slender Viking ship with a stem and stern which bend upwards actually resembles how one could imagine a large swimming serpent. The low and wide sail, placed on the single mast amidships, might actually appear as wings. During the Middle Ages the shape of large warships changed dramatically. Hulls were built shorter, wider and higher, with high fore- and stern castles, which completely altered the silhouette. Moreover, these chubby late medieval hulls were equipped with three masts – something that rendered the ‘wing-metaphor’ problematic. However, the dragon’s head was retained, perhaps due to a continuation of custom and practice, throughout the Middle Ages.

In the third, early modern, phase the figurehead became the centrepiece of the beakhead. The motif was not associated with the ship’s name, which was commonly presented on the transom on the stern. In the seventeenth century the medieval dragon’s head was replaced by lion figureheads, but the largest and most prestigious warships had motifs that alluded to the ruling royal dynasty and the nation. In some cases, there were also references to the ship’s name.

What does the figurehead from ‘Gribshunden’ mean?

Returning to the figurehead salvaged from the wreck, in most of the written sources King Hans’s ship is named *Griffin*. One source, however, mentions the ship with the peculiar name *Gribshunden*, griffin hound.³³ Today the ship is most commonly known under this name. A griffin is a hybrid that unites a lion and an eagle. The creature always consists of these two components even if the composition may vary. In the most common version, the griffin has the body of a lion and the head of an eagle.³⁴ The figurehead salvaged from the wreck does not in the way resemble how griffins are usually depicted. When the fabulous beasts of antiquity were reintroduced in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance they were sometimes adjusted to fit the ideals of Christianity. Depictions could in some cases be drawn from second- or third-hand information.³⁵ It has been suggested that this could be the reason why the salvaged figurehead looks nothing like a griffin.³⁶

As described above, early modern figureheads had motifs that related to the king or the nation, but it is difficult to interpret the salvaged sculpture in these terms. It appears more likely to adduce the motive to phase two mentioned above, where the figurehead motif is more or less perfunctorily reproduced.

It is very likely that the *Gribshunden* or *Griffin* had a painted or sculptured griffin somewhere on its exterior. However, if that were the case it was probably placed on the ship’s stern. Who knows, perhaps it is still preserved down there somewhere in the sediment? Perhaps further archaeological surveys may yet reveal an answer.

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33 Sjöblom, ‘Identifiering och historiskt sammanhang’, 40.

34 Eriksson, *Bestiarium*, 168; Lavér, *I gapet på Gribshunden*, 10.

35 Lavér, *I gapet på Gribshunden*, 3.

36 Eriksson, ‘Gribshunden: medeltidens modernaste skepp’, 11.

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