

Iron Age keys, locks, and chests.

*Exploring locking practices and social identities at Birka,
Helgö, Lovö, Sanda, and Vallhagar.*

Emma Nordström

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Abstract

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The use of keys, locks, and chests in the Scandinavian Iron Age is a subject overshadowed by the assumed connection between keys and the housewife with her administrative role on the farm. The key is sometimes even seen as the very symbol of this role. The present thesis instead focuses on locking practices, to which locks and chests also naturally belong. This includes assessing, but also looking beyond, the role of the housewife in order to broaden the analysis and explore which roles or social identities may be connected with these. This is achieved through studying keys, locks, and chests and their contexts, and by considering what their presence could imply in terms of control, access, private property, responsibility, accountability, trust, mobility, and social status. The study also includes exploring which types of structures or objects were locked, as well as some of the symbology connected with keys, locks, and chests. The theoretical framework used is based on ideas involving social identities, structure, agency, and practice, and the idea that material culture is polysemous – that its meanings can vary depending on its particular social history, the position of specific social agents, and the contexts in which it was used.

The first part of the thesis provides a background to the subject and the theoretical framework, followed by a section dealing with medieval sources, in the form of Old Norse literature and medieval laws, mentioning keys, locks, or chests. Since the assumed connection between keys and the housewife is heavily based on a narrow selection of these medieval sources, it was necessary to include and evaluate these. However, a wider selection of texts was also included to give a fuller account of the contexts in which these objects occur. The third part of the thesis deals with the previously excavated archaeological material from Birka, Helgö, Lovö, Sanda, and Vallhagar, which includes both settlements and graves. While the settlements mostly gave information that can relate to locking practices, the graves provided clues concerning the individuals who were involved in these.

Some of the more important points of the thesis, as discussed in the fourth and final part, are that the very presence of keys, locks, and chests on the settlement sites demonstrate that some form of restricted access and control was in place. This indicates that there was some form of social differentiation or inequality where some had access to things and/or spaces that others did not. It also suggests the presence of private property. Additionally, the locking device facilitated the mobility of people by taking over the role of physically guarding property. The results also point to a connection with travelling and trading, and to inheritance and the right of occupancy. When it comes to the graves, the results show a varied picture and that the individuals buried with keys, locks, or chests were not a homogenous group. Most of these graves did however contain costly grave goods. Placing a key, lock, or chest in the grave was a rare practice, suggesting a rather exclusive or special expression.

This study shows that there was variation and complexity in locking practices and the individuals who were involved. Focusing on the connection with the role of the housewife is greatly limiting for the analysis and does nothing to increase our knowledge of Iron Age society. The hope is that this study can lead to more nuanced interpretations of keys, locks, and chests in the future.

Keywords: locking practices, social identities, keys, locks, chests, settlements, graves, Birka, Helgö, Lovö, Sanda, Vallhagar, Iron Age, Viking Age, Old Norse literature, medieval law.