

# The Foliate Mask in Vernacular Material Culture from Medieval to Modern Norway

Karen V. Lykke

Centre for Development and the Environment  
University of Oslo  
[k.v.lykke@sum.uio.no](mailto:k.v.lykke@sum.uio.no)

Ane Ohrvik

University of Oslo  
[ane.ohrvik@ikos.uio.no](mailto:ane.ohrvik@ikos.uio.no)

## Abstract

In this article, we explore the contexts and appearances of what we argue is a Norwegian version of the Green Man – the Glibb – in vernacular settings. We also discuss the figure's possible meanings in Norwegian secular culture. Most of the objects are part of the digital artifact collection called DigitaltMuseum (Digital Museum), which is a common database for Norwegian and Swedish museums and collections. Our collection and analysis of this material provides an initial step toward documenting the figure's appearances and uses beyond the ecclesial material culture; however, it does not represent an exhaustive list of sources. We investigate the appearance of this particular 'Green Man' figure, discussing its material form and iconographical features and analysing their placement and occurrence. We argue that the Glibb's ambiguous and flexible imagery are also flexible *symbols*. Over the centuries, these symbols can enter into new constellations and interpretations of meaning with each new generation that continues to use their material forms.

## Keywords

Glibb, Green Man, Norway/Norwegian, material culture, liminal, symbolism, cultural history

## Introduction

One of the most common encounters Norwegians have with a green character is through Henrik Ibsen's play *Peer Gynt* (1876), which Edward Grieg subsequently made into a musical suite. The play and its characters have become part of Norway's mnemonic heritage. One of these characters is the green-clad daughter of the king of trolls – a character conjured out of Peer's imagination – who represents all that is lustful and evil in Peer. Contrary to the descriptions in Norwegian legends of fairies dressed in blue or grey clothing, Ibsen took some liberties by dressing otherworldly spirits in green. Others have taken similar liberties during the last century. Several scholars have claimed that Lady Raglan was following a dead end when she coined the term 'the Green Man', arguing that she also took liberties because she was too heavily influenced by the anthropologist James Frazer (Frazer 1906–1915, Raglan 1939, Centerwell 1997, Hutton 2022). As argued in this volume's introduction, the Green Man is a concept that assembles many ideas, cultural expressions and iconographies into a single symbolic image (see, for instance, Matthews 2004). Its history is both deep and

nebulous. Today, the Green Man lives on in human hearts and minds in many places – and even in many continents.

One idea proposed as a possible link to the roots of the Green Man is that he stems from Norse mythology. For example, authors such as John Matthews and William Anderson (1990) have linked Lady Raglan's idea of the Green Man to the figure Mimir. In Norse mythology, Mimir is the god who guarded the well by the tree of knowledge, and the god to whom Odin sacrificed an eye to access this knowledge. But the myth has been expanded beyond anything we can read in the Norse mythological sources. According to this (invented) modern myth, Odin carried Mimir's head with him and prevented it from decaying by wrapping it in herbs and foliage (Matthews 2004). However, establishing a link from Norse mythology to northern European ecclesial church buildings where foliate icons were displayed requires a speculative mindset, a creative interpretation of the sources and an enthusiastic audience. If the origin of the foliate mask is to be found in Norse mythology, why are there so few examples of such masks in Norway? Furthermore, the term 'Green Man' (Grønn mann) is unknown in the Norwegian language (unless one is referring to fantastical extra-terrestrial beings). Nevertheless, this does not mean that the quest for a Norwegian Green Man is entirely futile. One may allow for a certain degree of speculation and guesswork when addressing a conundrum like this one.

When seeking 'Green Man' figures in secular rather than religious settings, the figure can be found in at least three different categories of material objects in a Norwegian context. We will explore these three contexts and appearances as well as the figure's possible meanings in Norwegian secular culture. Most of the objects are part of the digital artifact collection called DigitaltMuseum (Digital Museum) which is a common database for Norwegian and Swedish museums and collections. As our effort represents the first attempt to systematize and investigate this ornamental figure in a Norwegian context, our collection of material should be considered an initial step toward documenting the figure's appearances and use rather than an exhaustive list of sources. We now turn to investigate the appearance of supposed Green Man figures, their material forms and iconographical features, and their placement and occurrence. We argue that historically, the symbol of the foliate head in a Norwegian secular context has had a predominantly protective function in the contexts in which it appears.

## **Research Context and Concepts**

The imagery of the mysterious man-like figure has probably moved across many cultures, including from Vedic to Roman, from Vedic to Viking, and from Germanic and Roman to Christian via Celtic. Moreover, its meaning has probably been reinvented and adapted by each and every culture along its journey. Mercia MacDermott convincingly argues that the oldest iconography of the foliate mask can be found in Vedic culture, and that it might very well have travelled from north to west with the Viking trade routes (MacDermot 2006: 187). The existence of such a trade route has been proven by the British archeologist Cath Jarman (2021). As for the Roman to Celtic transfer, the historian Simon Schama has explained how in about the year 500 CE, the Celts in the area near modern-day Trier, Germany moved a 100 CE foliate mask from a Roman temple ruin into the choir of the Trier cathedral (Schama 1995: 218). It is the oldest foliate mask known to have been placed in a Christian building.

Although Christians have been notorious for borrowing and adjusting heathen mythology and adapting it to express their own teaching, including in their churches (Negus 2005: 75; Gröninger 2017), the symbolic meaning of the foliate masks as it was understood in the past remains unclear. We can make qualified interpretations based on the image itself and what we know about its history, placement, and use and therefore also its function. Elsewhere

in this volume, Kjartan Hauglid discusses the occurrences of what he labels the ‘foliate head’ in Norwegian medieval religious iconography. Although the foliate head has been subject to some attention in art historical studies of iconography during this period, little attention has been given to its presence in a secular context in later medieval and early modern Norway. The common notion, albeit undocumented, has been that there are few foliate heads to be found in secular settings after the Norwegian Stave churches were built in the medieval period and, moreover, that the splendid ornamentation one can find in such churches belonged to a different style of art and tradition altogether. According to this notion, these foliate heads are therefore not representative of the iconography of the foliate mask.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it is possible that the foliate heads appearing in religious contexts actually did influence the reappearance of these masks on secular buildings in the later Middle Ages, perhaps even with a similar function and meaning.

There is a long tradition within cultural history and anthropology of tracing various traditions and the mythological or spiritual reasoning behind them. For example, the German folklorist Wilhelm Mannhardt (1831–1880), who significantly influenced the famous and infamous Scottish anthropologist James Frazer, explored the continuity of animistic beliefs in Northern Europe (Lid 1931: 21). Mannhardt established how most creation myths take trees as a starting point, asserting that Yggdrasil, the world tree in Norse mythology, is but one of many examples (Mannhardt 1868; Schama 1995; Porteous 1996). While Mannhardt and Frazer were later subject to widespread critique, among the very first to systematically address the weaknesses in their perspectives was the Swedish folklorist Carl Wilhelm von Sydow (von Sydow 1934). One of Frazer’s arguments which is hard to reject, even after decades of critical attempts, has been that continuity of practice can run deep and that trees are often part of such longstanding practices.

The Maypole used for ritual celebrations during May Day or around midsummer in Europe and beyond is an example of this, as is the Christmas tree, which is brought into the home at Christmas time in many countries. There are additional contemporary examples of the power of greenery. In Norway, a new house or building is still celebrated using foliage: as soon as the roof is finished, the house is decorated with a small tree or a wreath and a party is thrown for the builders. Many Norwegians consider it bad luck to forget or ignore this tradition. If the homeowner-to-be forgets to celebrate the builders with cake and a party, the builders, who are familiar with this tradition, may very well hoist a life-size ragdoll up the building and let it dangle in the wind, signifying that the house will be cursed rather than blessed. To be sure, this does not mean that all traditions are traceable to an archetype such as a tree or a creation myth, and such a query would be far too complex to answer without taking a problematic Frazerian approach. Instead, what we explore in this article is the following question.

An intriguing source for our enquiry of the Green Man (or Maiden, as we will see) is the Norwegian ethnologist Nils Lid (1890 – 1958). Lid dug deep into the archives and early descriptions of the indigenous Sami population and discovered Sigvard Kildal’s accounts of a ‘Green Maiden’, or ‘*Rana Neid*’ in indigenous Saami (Lid 1928: 135). This maiden represented the ‘*blenen*’ – the natural power that allowed greenery and foliage to reappear every year. There are also plenty of animistic relics in Norwegian folk culture. For instance, there was, both in Norway and elsewhere, a belief in the strong protective power of the evergreen trees and plants (Storaker 1928: 42). Evergreen branches symbolize the continuity

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Architect Alveva Hohler during a conversation with the authors in 2021, her mother, Erle Hohler (1937–2019), advanced this argument. Hohler was an archeologist, art historian, and the Keeper of the Medieval Department at the University Museum of National Antiquities in Oslo.

of life. Even today, graves are ritually covered in spruce or fir branches and wreaths at Christmas time, which is conveniently celebrated two days after Solstice. Other examples of the power of evergreens are abundant. Juniper branches were cut up and strewn across the floor to cleanse a house of unwanted spirits and to freshen the air. Juniper smoke was used for the same purpose. Both utensils and human hair were cleaned in juniper draught, and juniper could heal the body both inside and out (Storaker 1928: 42). These are but a few of many examples of how the evergreen in nature was perceived to provide both protective remedy and healing. Such beliefs persist today.

Thus far, we have employed the concepts of ‘Green Man’, ‘foliate head’, and ‘mask’ interchangeably. However, Lady Ragland’s conceptual introduction of ‘The Green Man’ in 1939 was never established as a term among Norwegian art historians nor in Norwegian popular culture. Moreover, although there are examples of foliate or disgorging heads in mediaeval churches and on some vernacular buildings and objects, the head or mask is usually referred to as a ‘man’s head’ or a ‘glibb’. A glibb is a Norwegian word for a mask of humanoid or beast-like shape. It is often foliate; branches, leaves or petals can adorn its face, grow out of its mouth, ears, nose, or eyes, or indeed cover the whole face. These leaves or branches can be symmetrical or asymmetrical. A mask *without* foliage is also referred to as a glibb. In the following – and at the risk of critique from art historians – we take the liberty of using the term ‘glibb’ to describe Norwegian ornamental masks with petals, leaves, stems or branches that are used as decoration or decorative protection on secular objects. We deploy this term not to classify or trace the iconography of this figure but because we wish to explore how and why these decorative elements appear as they do.

### **The Glibb as Material Culture**

In seeking the glibb on secular rather than religious objects, we will turn to explore how it is typically connected to at least three important categories of material culture. The use of glibbs or foliate masks on secular material objects is – to put it mildly – an understudied subject in the Norwegian context. The examples we provide are highly variable both in size and function. Moreover, they span over several centuries yet (as we argue) have important traits in common. We begin our investigation where glibbs are easiest to spot: on buildings.

The Norwegian Folk Museum in Oslo is the largest cultural history museum in Norway. It has assembled a diverse collection of vernacular heritage, building culture and rural artifacts from the Medieval, Early Modern, and Modern periods since its establishment in 1894. As an open-air museum, visitors can observe the so-called Tveito-loft from Telemark County in southeast Norway, a beautiful two-story, log-notched farmhouse building – a so-called ‘loft’ or storage house – dated to 1300. This building has a glibb placed at the top of its Romanesque doorway, where its mouth disgorges symmetric branches – foliate scrolls that adorn the head on both sides (see Figure 1 and 2).

Another example of the use of glibbs from the same period is found on the so-called Vangestad-loft in Numedal dated to c. 1300–1350.. On the first-floor portal, which serves as an entrance to a sleeping chamber, a humanoid mask is placed above a Romanesque doorway, surrounded by meandering snakes closing in on each of its sides (Meyer 1932: 12). It is most probable that these glibbs, along with the rest of the ornamental wood carvings, are among the original elements of the houses and can be dated to the buildings’ construction. Their origin, therefore, is close in time to when ‘foliate heads’ appeared as decorations in Norwegian stave churches (see Hauglid’s article in this issue). Nevertheless, they have moved in both time and space from a religious to a vernacular context, finding a new location on top of the doorways of storage houses. These are far from the only examples of glibbs placed above the doorways

of old Norwegian lofts, and the few additional references testify to a relatively common use in Norway.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the examples uncovered so far indicate the use of glibbs as ornaments on lofts in the Medieval rather than the Early Modern period.

**[Insert Figure 1 & 2 Near Here]**

Figure 1: Carved Glibb on the top of the entry of the Tveito-loft from Telemark, a storehouse in wood from c. 1300. Photo by Sjur Fedje, 1969. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en>.

Figure 2: Carved glibb – a close up by the authors.

The Norwegian inland climate is cold and dry. As prestigious buildings like stave churches and beautiful log-notch or stave-constructed farm buildings were built using high quality and resin-rich pine, this climate and the high-quality building materials have allowed some of these wooden buildings to exist for a millennium. Vernacular lofts were two- and sometimes even three-story buildings. They were often used to accommodate visitors during summer (they had no fireplace) and to store everything of value on the farm, such as cereals, fine clothing, linen, woven tapestries and blankets, pelts and everything else that needed to be protected from the greedy teeth of mice and rats. Lofts were prestigious buildings, as their size signalled the wealth of their owners – a large loft indicated that its owner had a large quantity of cereals and other valuables. Because of this, they were the most adorned buildings on a farm. Lofts were often decorated with wood carvings, and their various doors and timbered doorways were often embellished with protective symbols such as the cross, the compass rosette, the whirl, and concentric circles – motifs with both Pagan and Christian histories (Reuterswård 1986: 121). As such, the glibb was part of an ornamental system of symbols with various forms and functions. We will presently discuss the glibb's role in more detail.

The second category of material objects in which the glibb is embedded is sledges used for transport in winter. Among the many surviving Early Modern pointed sledges in Norway, a common decorative element is a glibb on the sledge's pointed tip (see Figure 3). Altogether, 27 glibbs have been documented at the DigitaltMuseum as parts of sledges or as detached front parts of sledges. Although only a few have a provenance record that can establish their date with confidence, most were carved as part of wooden sledges in a Late Baroque style, providing strong evidence that they were made in the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> The sledges stem from various areas in the southern parts of Norway. The glibbs that adorn them were individually carved but share common features, such as foliate branches or stems sprouting out of the ears, mouth, and nose; those with their paint intact have strong colours such as dark red, green, blue, and black (see Figure 4). Like the bow of a Viking ship, which might be adorned with a terrifying dragon to plough through the waves, a pointed sledge could have a foliate mask ploughing through the icy cold midwinter.

**[Insert Figures 3, and 4 Near Here]**

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<sup>2</sup> Two other examples of the use of glibbs on dwelling houses is mentioned in Berge (1920: 102) and Meyer (1932: 12).

<sup>3</sup> See <https://digitaltmuseum.Ano/search/?q=Glibb> (downloaded 5 October 2022).

Figure 3: Pointed sledge with Glibb from the 1700s from Gudbrandsdalen. Photo by Anne-Lise Reinsfelt/ Norsk Folkemuseum <https://digitaltmuseum.no/011023122135/slede>

Figure 4: Glibb mask from a pointed sledge from Buskerud, unknown dating. Photo by Norsk Folkemuseum: <https://digitaltmuseum.no/011023142916/glibb>

The sledge was the most important means of transport in the Early Modern Norwegian farming society. According to Fartein Valen-Sendstad, it was common for a farm to have as many as 20 sledges (Valen-Sendstad 1964: 154). This would vary with social and economic conditions – small peasant farms would have fewer sledges, while affluent farms could have as many as 40. Most of the sledges were carpentered with little adornment. They were made for use in agricultural and arboreal activities, such as transporting wood or hay. Winter was the best time of the year for transport, as frozen rivers made excellent highways, and it was easier to slide heavy objects on ice and snow than to pull them over the ground. When ice covered rivers and lakes and snow covered the forest paths ridden on horseback during summer and spring, it was easier for people to move about as well. Unlike heavy-duty utility sledges or even sledges made to carry several people, pointed sledges were special. A pointed sledge was for the use of one person and would run smoothly behind a horse or pony, traversing the mid-winter snow. It was an object of both transport and status, and most often it transported the male head of the farm (Bjørkvik et al. 1986). Pointed sledges were usually made by professional sledge makers and were richly adorned. They would carry their driver to visits and parties, as midwinter was a festive season. While spring, summer, and autumn all had peak times for labour, winter was quiet; days were short, and evenings were filled with less urgent tasks that could be done in poor lighting indoors. In cold, snow-rich places like Glomdalen in south-eastern Norway, the pointed sledge was in continuous use from at least the 1600s. Perhaps surprisingly for some readers, it was still in use until the car became an accessible mode of winter transport (Sørensen 1988: 40).

The next category of glibb objects we found is more curious and difficult to detect – unless you know what to look for. Before buttons were used to close shirts and blouses to keep the body covered from exposure, brooches did this job in Norway. An ancient kind of brooch is the so-called ‘hornring’, which can be dated at least back to Early Medieval times, if not earlier. A common decorative feature on these objects are tiny masks – in particular, small heads adorned with leaves or petals. Hornrings decorated in this manner are called ‘glibb-sølje’. Due to scarce provenance records, these brooches are notoriously difficult to date, and their origins are difficult to determine. The oldest examples are from the Late Medieval period, while the majority of hornrings stem from the Early Modern period. They are still made by traditional silversmiths (see Figure 6).<sup>4</sup> The tiny faces are sometimes placed around the whole ring of the brooch, like flower petals; in other cases, a single mask can guard the top of the brooch. Alternatively, a set of three masks can be placed on the top half of the ring mirroring another three masks on the bottom, totalling six. The brooch size limits their detailing, and while some of them are just tiny faces, some are also adorned with haloes. More significantly, small, cup-like leaves can also be attached to the ring itself, making a small jingling sound when the bearer moves.

**[Insert Figure 5 and 6 Near Here]**

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<sup>4</sup> In *Digitalt Museum* there are numerous examples of these brooches, see <https://digitaltmuseum.no/search/?q=Glibb> (downloaded 5 October 2022).

Figure 5: Brooch with Glibbs in silver from Setesdal. Photo by Anne-Lise Reinsfelt/ Norsk Folkemuseum: <https://digitaltmuseum.no/011023127868/hornring>

Figure 6: Glibbsølje with leaves from Bergen from 1796. Photo by Norsk Folkemuseum: <https://digitaltmuseum.no/011023129070/solje-glibbsolje-med-lov>

## The Glibb as a Threshold Symbol

The Swedish art historian Petra Gröminger (2017: 173) explains how the door or portal in churches is the most obvious border between the church and the world beyond, as well as its most vulnerable place. This portal, therefore, might have needed extra protection against evil, and the entrance, doors, and portals of churches have very often been embellished with apotropaic symbols. Indeed, the doors symbolized the boundary between the holy and the profane, providing an entrance for common men and women into the sanctified space of the church. Gröminger quotes Nordanskog (2006: 70) that there could not ‘be too many apotropaic symbols’ (Gröminger 2017: 173).

Other liminal spaces where the foliate mask appears – and which also function as border-markers – are the Church’s font and capitals. The font held the holy water separate from the church room itself, and it was the center of the ritual of baptism through which a person became a member of Christ’s congregation. The capital held the roof of the church itself, which was the church’s upper limit to the outside world and the boundary between that which carries the weight and the weight that is upheld (Gröminger 2017: 183). Gröminger’s study of the Green Man in Swedish churches, art and culture also identified the foliate mask as a keystone in Uppsala cathedral. Apparently, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the foliate mask wandered from the sacred to the profane in Sweden, decorating cupboards and cabinets in aristocratic castles. Their origin, however, was probably German rather than Swedish (Gröminger 2017: 492).

The symbolism of the glibb has changed during different historical periods in Norway and elsewhere, which reflects the ways that the meaning-making processes of symbols are continually tied to the social contexts during which they are constructed (Gröminger 2018: 177). Cultural historians explain the transfer of images or symbols from church architecture to vernacular architecture or objects as a way of transferring status from one sphere to the next. In Norway, the aristocracy was almost nonexistent in the Middle Ages; by comparison, the independent yeoman farmers were powerful, and some of them were also affluent. The dwelling house ‘Grøslistova’, which has been moved to the Norwegian Folk Museum, provides an important example. The house contains a bed decorated with beautifully crafted old pews. The wealthy farmer who owned the house had built a new church, and the church’s most beautifully decorated pieces were incorporated into the farmhouse interior. To transfer objects or symbols from a church to the home in this manner indicates a form of social superiority; copying the material adornment of the most powerful, wealthy, and learned institution could have been a way to demonstrate a superior status to one’s neighbors.

Churches were also embellished with several other significant and decorative symbols, including geometric ones such as the whirl, concentric circles and rosettes as well as more figurative representations from biblical stories. But why would the artists (or those commissioning their work) choose to transfer the figurative image of a glibb? In particular,

why would they want to replicate an intimidating gargoyle-like image and place it on their storehouse? Was it to indicate social superiority, or could the glibb have other additional functions and meanings? The same questions arise about the placement of glibbs on sledges and brooches.

While a description of the materiality of the glibb in Norway in a non-religious or secular context is interesting, it sheds little light on what such figures represent in a society influenced by beliefs in spiritual beings, both within the church and throughout everyday life. Moreover, observing the glibb in secular contexts in the later Medieval and Early Modern periods does not exclude a possible religious meaning, as religious symbols (such as crosses) were commonly used outside of the church. However, a direct religious link does not seem to fit all the (secular) contexts in which glibb icons appear.

Whether a glibb was situated above a door, on a shirt or on the tip of a sledge, we argue that its placement is highly significant. These three places are all thresholds. They signify a boundary between inside and outside, inwards and outwards, the known and unknown and the familiar and unfamiliar. The farmer knows what is inside his storehouse door, but may not know what is outside. Behind the door of the storehouse, on the first floor, one would find the farm's valuables. The store could include an entire year's valuable supply of cereals baked into stacks of hard, crisp bread, cured meats and cheeses, and the highly valuable seed that would be sown the following growing season. On the second floor of the storehouse, the family would store its material fortune, including clothing, linens, furs, tapestries, blankets, and rugs. Finally, the family itself would reside behind the door of the dwelling house. The glibb was placed between them and whoever, or whatever, was outside.

In the same way, a shirt has an inside and an outside – an inside facing the body of its wearer and an outside facing the other. The hornring brooches adorned with a glibb might not look very intimidating – in fact, the tiny masks would be difficult to detect at all, particularly if large leaves jingled out of the middle of the glibb's small face. One could even argue that unless the brooch was taken off or studied in an offensively close manner with little regard for its wearer's personal space, the glibb's presence was hidden. It is likely that only the brooch's wearer, the person who gave them the brooch or people intimate to the wearer knew that the glibb(s) adorned the silver used for closure, providing both a decoration and serving as a jingling guardian between the body and the world beyond.

Likewise, the sledge traverses the unknown outside, with its bow speedily ploughing through the cold winter air. In this case, too, the glibb's positioning is significant. It was not placed at the back of the sledge, where it would be easy to see if one cast a glance toward the driver as the sledge passed. Rather, it points towards the backside of the horse. Its driver is protected on the inside of the sledge, remaining behind the safe shield of the glibb's beastly face as the sledge enters what was (at least sometimes) an unfamiliar and unknown forest.

Bear in mind, however, that on vernacular buildings, the glibb is positioned over the door rather than on the door itself. A door is a physical barrier that could keep an unwanted person away from the farm's valuables. Lofts or storehouses were often raised on four stubby pillars to ensure air circulation, but this also created a certain vulnerability, as a burglar could easily creep underneath and drill a hole in the floor to empty the grain tub. To deter such theft, another physical barrier could be found on some farms: the grain tub would be positioned on a large slate that was impossible to drill through. This might sound curious and anecdotal, but the 1276 Magnus Lagabøters law even gives a farmer the right to kill a person attempting such an abominable theft.

Physical barriers deterred more than just dishonest people. To keep dangerous animals like wolves and bears away, domesticated animals would be fenced and locked in. In the mountains, shepherds would have small huts in which they could hide to protect themselves, and they carried a long shepherd's horn [lur] that they could sound to warn the farm of



dangerous animals. And when the sledge ploughed through forests and icy waters in midwinter, it was speed, weapons, dogs with spiky harnesses, and a grinning glibb that would fend off wolves. However, the glibb was a protective symbol that probably pointed toward spiritual and magical dangers in addition to tangible physical ones.

We will never know with certainty why these farmers wished to adorn the openings of their houses with an intimidating mask disgorging foliage. Mercia MacDermott argues that 'the frequent occurrence of heads over or flanking domestic doorways or windows suggest that people have regarded them as auspicious or protective, as well as decorative'. If we look the word 'glibb' up in an old Norwegian dictionary, the noun is explained as 'someone who laughs at and mocks everything' (Aasen 1873: 249). Therefore, we have a laughing, mocking, yet protective image depicting the ambiguous figure of a human yet non-human foliate being. Norwegian folklore from the Early Modern and Modern periods is filled with legends and personal narratives of a nature inhabited by supernatural beings from which people protected themselves. Many of them belonged to *Huldrefolket*, etymologically translated as 'hidden people'. Mermaids and sea monsters inhabited the sea and posed a danger to seamen and others travelling by boat, while *Nøkken* were male figures who could lure people into lakes and drown them. Similarly, *Fossegrimen* lurked near unruly rivers and would enchant people with their violin playing. *Huldra*, who often appeared in the shape of a beautiful woman, were especially dangerous to men, as they could lure them into the mountain and force them to stay as part of the hulder family. Closer to the farm, *Nissen* could make noise and be unruly if the people did not treat them or the horses well. In addition to *Huldrefolket*, beliefs about ghosts and witches consistently precipitated uneasiness and fear about dangers related to people's limited resources and their physical and mental health.

Nevertheless, most of these supernatural beings were ambiguous because they usually represented a threat in cases where people violated social norms (c. Stattin 1992). According to folk beliefs, some supernatural forces became especially active during specific periods of the year, such as the time surrounding Christmas. Along with other Christian holidays such as Easter and Midsummer or St. Johns Eve, these periods were magically potent and demanded specific protective measures. First and foremost, beliefs in a nature inhabited by supernatural beings regulated people's life in specific ways. Specific tasks determined by the seasons, such as the harvest in the fall and the making of Christmas beer, needed to be completed by a specific time. Failing to do so would mean risking punishment by supernatural entities, who could ruin the cereals and spoil the beer. In similar ways, people's movements were regulated by unwritten rules regarding when it would be safe or dangerous to move beyond the boundaries of the farm. The farm represented a haven, marking the border between the safe and familiar and a dangerous unknown. This physical regulation was assisted by social norms and notions of time that, taken together, constituted a set of regulations regarding who moved where and when. According to popular belief, children and young people were especially vulnerable to the dangers lurking in nature. In particular, they were vulnerable to becoming lost and disoriented or being abducted and taken into the mountain by some supernatural entity, thereby being lost to their family for a period or even, perhaps, forever.

There are numerous examples of ways in which people protected themselves and their households from dangers, regardless of whether the dangers were the uncanny inhabited nature of supernatural beings, the vengeful neighbour witch or the sometimes-grumpy spirits who shared space on the farm with the humans. Whether in the form of tar crosses painted over doors, carved illustrations on amulets, silver jewellery carried around the neck or magical letters and signs written on pieces of paper carried on the body, these protective measures were commonly applied in Norwegian traditions for centuries.

In folk belief, a brooch (or indeed anything) made of silver had a special protective quality and could shield its user from evil. Interestingly, in Norwegian folk belief, silver had a

double role: it would both shield against evil magic and was magic in its own right. There are many stories of family silver, such as bridal crowns and brooches, being lured away from, or donated by, the fairy people. In short, everyday life was influenced by such spiritual perceptions, and finding a balance between respecting the unknown dangers and ignoring them was likely highly important. In this context, we argue that the glibb has served as an important threshold figure, thereby remaining both nebulous and poignant at the same time. It is nebulous because it is placed betwixt and between categories such as places, people and objects. Meanwhile, it is poignantly placed in plain sight as a symbol that can convey meaning. As such, it is flexible.

### **The Glibb as a Flexible Symbol**

Perhaps the classics of anthropology can guide the way. According to Sherry Ortner, ‘establishing certain symbols as “core” or “key” to a cultural system (...) involves analysing the system (or domains thereof) for its underlying elements – cognitive distinctions, value orientations, etc. – then looking about in the culture for some figure or image which seems to formulate, in relatively pure form, the underlying orientations exposed in the analysis’ (Ortner 1973: 1338). Another approach is to observe ‘something which seems to be an object of cultural interest and analyse it for its meanings’ (Ortner 1973: 1339). Glibbs are depicted in carvings or silverwork in Norwegian material culture over no less than a millennium. They thus fall into Ortner’s category of a ‘thing’ that has been of cultural interest to people for so long it is hard to fathom.

Another anthropologist belonging to the classics is Mary Douglas, who delved into the liminal as a particularly interesting and important symbolic trait. She explained how liminal or deviant creatures defy immediate classification (Douglas 1975: 30). The glibb is an ambiguous and liminal image of a creature that is neither human nor monster, but both. The foliage or petals that surround his face make him a creature betwixt and between nature and culture. This ambiguity is important to note because, if we follow Douglas, it makes the glibb a particularly suitable symbol. In folk belief and in mythology, ambiguous plants, creatures, places, objects and times can all be considered magically superior to ordinary ones, thus deriving extraordinary symbolic properties. An example (which adorns the covers of the volumes in the 1976 edition of James Frazer’s 12-volume work *The Golden Bough*) is the mistletoe: it grows as a parasite on trees and thus mediates between heaven and earth. Even today, it is believed to have healing properties and is (albeit contestably) sold as a ‘natural’ remedy. In the same way, Norwegian folk belief held that a rowan tree growing out of the trunk of another tree had magical properties, as it came from neither the soil nor the sky (Storaker 1928: 46). Creatures like the bat provide another example; the bat flies like a bird but has the body of a mouse, defying both the categories of mice and birds. It is neither mouse nor bird, but as a flying mouse, it is regarded with suspicion and often given a frightening role. That it is nocturnal and active at dusk is itself liminal – dusk is neither day nor night and is a liminal time of the day. However, liminality also has a positive potential: it can heal, trigger a change in direction and bridge or mediate otherwise binary oppositions (Syse 2009: 165; 2013: 546). In short, the glibb fills all the criteria of being a highly suitable symbol, and perhaps due to its ambiguity, it could take on different forms of symbolism.

Although glibbs can be labelled liminal in anthropological terms – and, following Ortner, they can be considered things of cultural interest – the question remains: how can we analyse their meanings (Ortner 1973: 1339)? Is it possible to argue that they are meaningful as ambiguous creatures who can mediate the binary oppositions that are important to a given culture? Further, might this liminality in itself have been important within Norwegian culture? These images have certainly been longstanding objects of cultural interest due to the temporal

longevity and the heterogeneity of the material culture in which they are placed. As we have explained, all glibbs are threshold figures placed in an apotropaic fashion to protect somebody or something from someone or something. However, the meanings of all four of these pronouns have changed over the centuries. The content of the first pair of pronouns, ‘somebody or something’, has changed over time and with changes in the people or objects supposedly protected. The second pair, ‘someone or something’, have changed due to historical changes in the cultures of folk belief and of religious practice within the same periods. Thus, the perceived dangers have changed over the centuries.

What has remained *constant* over the examined centuries are the binary oppositions that exist on either side of the glibb: the inside versus the outside, the spiritual versus the material world, the safe versus the dangerous. The glibb’s concrete meanings are less understood, and like an analysis following anthropological fieldwork, surmising such meanings involves creativity and guesswork. Most probably, the meanings of the various glibbs have also changed over the centuries, making them receptacles of change in addition to their other roles. In other words, the meanings read into or out of the glibbs found on buildings from the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries are probably distinct from those of the Baroque sledges crafted during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Likewise, these meanings might also have differed when these images decorated sixteenth-century brooches, or when they are created and used in our own time.

According to the cultural historian Nils Lid, beliefs as cultural elements are more slippery to handle and can evade remembrance, unlike the actions that could be associated with them (Lid 1924: 125). For instance, the original reasons why bonfires were lit at midsummer or evergreen foliage was brought into homes in midwinter are no longer active, spiritual parts of Norwegian culture. The practices themselves, however, are maintained and given secondary explanations like ‘decorative’ or ‘traditional’. Lid’s research focussed on registering the beliefs, actions and material culture associated with such images in order to trace and potentially understand a past belief system. Indeed, if we explore the beliefs, actions and material culture of the glibb, we can find a continuum crossing a millennium for the placement of the imagery. Glibb brooches are still produced today and are still used to fasten the collar of a shirt or blouse. The ambiguity of the imagery is also stable, although the meanings associated with the action of placing the glibb to bridge two binaries is either lost, reinterpreted or filled with new meanings. We argue that the glibbs’ ambiguous and flexible imagery makes them flexible symbols. These symbols can enter into new constellations and interpretations of meaning with every new generation that continues to use their material forms over the centuries. It is this flexibility itself that has given longevity to the symbol, allowing the glibb to become a repository of different but obviously important things. No matter what glibb iconography has meant for each user of such imagery, glibbs’ liminality has made it easy for them to both carry and communicate new meanings.

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