



HDK-Valand - Academy of Art and Design

Spring Semester 2024

Title: A Felted Fabulation of Volur

Author: Ann-Maj Risgaard-Nielsen

KHMX21 Master's Degree Project in Craft 2

MFA Programs in Crafts, Textile Art, 120 Credits

Tutor: Åsa Dybwad Norman

Examiner: Jennifer Forsberg

Opponent: Caroline Malmström

Supervisors in writing: Jessica Hemmings and Magnus Haglund

Abstract

In a composition of sculptures and smaller artifacts, this project seeks to explore the speculative growth of the Nordic Sorceress, The Fyrkat Volva, with the organic aesthetics and water-based methods of the technique, Nuno felting. The project deals with Nordic femininity and magic by exploring the historical knowledge drawn from the grave of The Fyrkat Volva. The technique, Nuno felting, functions as a speculative tool to explore the past, present and future of The Fyrkat Volva. The sculptures are accompanied by a speculative fabulated text drawing on the artist's own thoughts on growing up in the area of the grave.

Keywords

Fyrkat, leather, Nuno felting, Nordic sorceress, silk, Speculative Everything, Speculative Fabulation, Viking Age, volva, water-based practices, and wool.

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Critical Writing (Part A)

Supervisor: Jessica Hemmings

Old Norse texts portray the volur as liminal characters, who possess abilities far surpassing those of ordinary humans, and who perform various ritualized acts, allowing them to see into the past, predict the future, and manipulate the world around them Sophie Bønding (2023).

I explore the evolutionary growth of the Nordic sorceress (the volva/volur plural) communicating its shapes and surfaces using Nuno Felting. My practical process results in body-sized textile sculptures. I saw the moving line of water connecting me and the volur, and wanted to explore how the creature of volur could rise once again from a speculative fabulation of curled wool transformed under the water surface. The aesthetic of Nuno Felted textiles reminds me of growth or decay and my interest in the volva is to suggest an evolutionary development of the character. I find that the two complement each other. In this text, I present the underlying thoughts about my practical work. When trying to collect thoughts and pinpoint the essentials in my current work, I end up with three piles of knowledge. I call them:

- *The Relational Water*, which is about water-based wool practices.
- *The Beings Who Wander Between A Dream And The Past*, which deals with historical research as material.
- Growing (Hi)Story, which refers back to Speculative Fabulation and other thoughts on building worlds by fabulating (Haraway, 2016).

In the following, I will guide you through the lines of arguments.

The Relational Water

In their poem, "Soft Weapons", the writer then known as Léa Rivière believes the river to be not only water but instead to include everything that it is in contact with and which feeds off it. They picture it as a collective organism and a common identity.

They say that the river is not just water, or rocks, or trees, or fish, insects, birds but always only a composition of all those things and still other bodies, a torrent of relations, formed, deformed, informed. In the sense that they are a part of it. Some say that they are the river, even when they are far from it. They end up with the same name. Just as the trees that grow there is still the river whatever the water narrows to an unattainable thread or whatever their roots have submerged in its flood (Rivière, 2017).

Like in my work, the river in Soft Weapons carries memories as a life witness throughout years, even centuries. It combines living beings as well as it entangles stubborn curled hair, cut from local sheep, into new bodies, into new creatures. Their poem got stuck in my head as I kept felting. It was in the back of my head as well when I listened to Peter Pentz explaining how volur was driven into the waters of the shallow part of the sea, that streams through Jutland from west to east, where I grew up (Pentz, 2023).

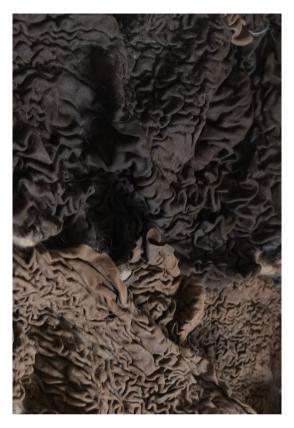


FIG 1 Process picture from *Shadows in the Soil* (2023).

My excitement with the technique of deliberately shrinking wool is found in a curiosity about the properties of the wool. In this Nuno Felting wool entangles itself and becomes a textile surface shaped by the conditions of the water it is processed in. The moving water becomes a tool for binding the wool and letting it grow into a shape.



FIG 2 Process picture from *Growing out of the soil* (2023)

In Nuno Felting the textile attached to the loose wool shows the new tension in the wool after it is shrunk and creates a movement. A movement of becoming. By that, I mean quite literally that the fabric looks like it is in motion, evolving or growing.

In an interview by Textile Arts Center with Gabriella Loeb, she talks about movement and growth in her degree work, "One Who Once Was", from Konstfack 2014. Loeb explains she strives to construct a sense of movement in her pieces, which often leads to the final expression that oscillates between friction and release (Tesch, 2019). I read her work as a snapshot of growth or decay. The task I have given myself is to explore the development of the volur visually, and I have looked for inspiration in Loebs work.



FIG 3
Gabrielle Loeb - *One who once was* (2014)154x165x94cm. Toile, resin, acrylic, metal.

The Beings Who Wander Between A Dream And The Past

In my work, the technique and material function to investigate the shared past in the Nordic region of Europe, and my focus is the volva. I understand my practical works as speculative subspecies evolved from the volur, drawn from knowledge found in archaeological findings. The volur could predict the future, look into the past, and move between different realities. Furthermore, some were also shapeshifters.

The historical testimonies in my project are particularly a grave of one of the last volur, found in the Northern part of Jutland, and the research articles about the findings in that grave. The researchers want to emphasize magic as a fundamental condition for people living in the Viking Age. Their research is based on graves, like the volva grave at Fyrkat, where grave goods are compared with other significant graves in the Nordic region. They also look at places of sacrifice and engraved stones at political assembly spots (Pentz, 2023) (Grundvad, 2023).



FIG 4 Field trip to Aggersborg (2024).

Meriç Algüns work from the exhibition "A Glossary of Distance and Desire" 2023 at Magasin III shows a way of including other research fields in her art practice. She composes geological material, sound, advertisement photography, poems, and literature into a new language (Ringstedt, 2023). I read her installations as a different reality: By including other research fields in her artwork she delivers several sets of knowledge systems. I seek to find the same liberating space of collecting from other fields to examine already validated material, break it up, and construct it into my version of history.



FIG 5 Meriç Algün - *A Glossary of Distance and Desire* (2023) fossils, pictures, books, pages from dictionaries and sound.

In Pernille Kjær's video piece "Spring", exhibited at Kirsten Kjærs Museum (2023) she explores mythical creatures in the everyday context of today. She lets us explore her relationship to the mythical creatures that have stayed with us, from a time when the absorbing darkness in the evening let the minds of humans wander and search for creatures that were living their lives in the same surroundings as us, but hiding. To have a roommate, in the shape of a small elf, like it is presented in "Spring", led me to think about how I can explore the völva as a creature that is still close to my reality but might be hidden as something different from the human she used to be.

Looking at Pernille Kjær and Meriç Algüns work have helped me broaden my view on how I can take creatures from the past, question them, and set them free to get lost in the future of another person's imagination.



FIG 6 Pernille Kjær - *Spring* (2023) Animated Video.

Growing (Hi)Story

For this last portion of thoughts, I want to return to Peter Pentz and his statements about volur and water. At this stage in my process I realize that as well as the volur that has sunk into the water or decayed, a condition for its relevance in this project is that it can also rise and move into anotherness. Donna Haraway, drawing on Martha Kenny's ideas about speculative fabulation, explains it as the fabulation of stories that arises from everyday life and imagination into wild facts (Martha Kenny quoted by Haraway, 2016).

My practical research stands in the middle of a network of archeological and historical facts. As an artist, I have allowed myself to fabulate in the blind spots that were given to me by these other research fields. This is not the same as saying that I am presenting a lie but more like presenting what design researcher Anthony Dunne, 2023 would call a possible future for volur. By including the thought of a possible future, I aimed to invite her presence into people's minds in the time to come.

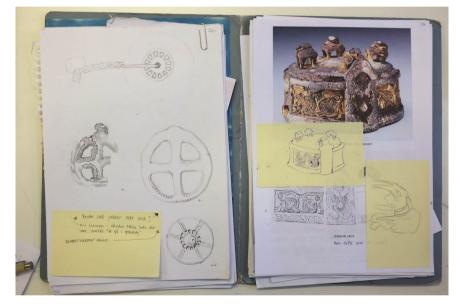


FIG 7 Work process with the artefacts in the grave of the volva from Fyrkat (2023)

Researchers working with the Viking Age believe, based on archeological findings and written sources, that magic played a more significant role in society (Price, 2023). When diving into all the research about the minds of Viking Age people it is often depicted how society was carved in a different way than today (Bønding, 2023). For my artistic development the most important difference from today is

FIG 8

Grave goods (2024)

Wool, leather, silk and hemp tread.
(50x45x3cm)

how magic played a greater role - the society simply relied more on magic. By realising that, my practise opened up and I have come to understand that my fabulation on the volva and her possible future should be coloured by the fact that she originates from a magical past. I wish to highlight the signs of magic found in the volva grave and let them play a role in my work with the wool in the studio. In the her



FIG 9 *Grave goods* (2024) Wool and silk. (48x45x15cm)

grave several indications of her as a practitioner of magic has been found. Pendants and amulets, a veil and white face paint, hallucinogenic henbane seeds all to help enter other realities and a staff that refers back to her status in society as a woman who performs magic (Bønding, 2023)(Gunnell, 2023).

This last pile of knowledge, I have scraped together on the floor of my studio, surrounded by sunken clouds of wool and bags of textiles. This has allowed my research study to include the imagination and likewise three different reasons for it. The subspecies of the volva takes shape in the movement of the wool as a method of creating possible shapes and roles for her to take. It allows her the possibility of shape-shifting through time and my work is based on the thoughts of letting stories grow from the mind and let the inner world take up more space.

Conclusion

My intension with this work was to explore the evolutionary growth of the volur, focusing on the Fyrkat volva. With this text, I have presented the thoughts my work stand upon. I wanted to offer myself an opportunity to generate a speculative or magical component of my textile sculptures and reflect on how we can both understand our past but also alter our customs in the future depending on our imagination. The magical component in my working process has loosened up my restrictions on what my work can be. By letting myself get lost in the magic of imagining I have felt more playful and free. Small hints have been left in the textile work for the spectator to draw lines from the Viking Age, meeting them in the gallery space but also suggesting a motion into the future. The hints consists of interpretations of the mentioned objects found in the grave telling about her magical past. I want the spectator to follow the road of the volur, as her existence has transformed throughout time, and open up a conversation of what role they wish for her magic to take in their life further on.



Free Writing (Part B)

Supervisor: Magnus Haglund

Intention

My intention with the work has changed over time and has turned into a wish to acknowledge female history.

My vision has been to speculate on how the strings of Nordic femininity have been leading through time and what shapes and intentions it has manifested. My materials are wool and textiles, drawn into shapes by Nuno felting.

The aesthetics of Nuno felting communicates growth. This inherent quality is used to explore the evolutionary development through time of the nordic sorceress, the Fyrkat volva, found in the grave at the fortress. I am interested in how her character has transformed through time.

This final section of the text consist of three parts. The first part dive into the processes of making, water being the agent. The second part is a fabulation on the Fyrkat volva through time. The fabulation is told through my point of view and my connection to the place and history. It shift in times, from the distant past, near past, present and into the future. Lastly I present a symbolic vocabulary of the Fyrkat volva.

Relational Water II

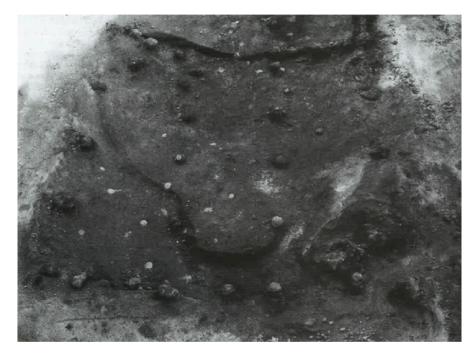


FIG 15 Scan from "The Nordic Sorceress"

The sculptural intention came from a picture of the excavation of the Fyrkat Volva. A shadow or change in the color of the soil, at the borders of her human body.

I have collected cow skin from the cellar at my old school, thanking the janitor so much it got awkward. The skin was, as I recalled it, from a former project, soft and adaptable. I sew the fluffy carted light brown wool on the inner sider of the skin. The sewing continued all day, long lines of tread sectioning the skin. The softness of the materials, the skin and the hair prolonged as I dipped it in hot water. It collapsed and got heavy. It soaked all the water it could muster from the bath. Greedy, expelling a soft brownness instead. My hands got absorbed into the wetness and my arms followed along with my impatience and sweat. The wool and skin melted together into one material, shrinked from the warmth and motion in the water. Dripping, I carried the heavy bodies of material to the washing machine. I pressed the button and an intimidating centrifuge drained the tense textile from its creator. I sat on the floor looking out for it through the window of the machine. It bipped and was done. Out fell rigid pieces of skin. They had shifted hierarchal order: The skin is the outer layer, the wool the inner. Their rigidness has decided on a form for it to take and dried up completely during the next days. Like crackled ground on a field of grass in one of those dry summers. The absence of water.



FIG 16 Scan from "The Nordic Sorceress"

The movement of the project was tapped from the picture above. A midway cast of her excavation next to her copper bowl. "An intension to rise" crystallizes in my mind. She rises in wet woven and carted wool. My methods are a series of traditional habits, as are hers. As Neil Price explains in his text *Tro og Ritual*, the religion of her kind must be understood on a broader scale, as habits that were considered relevant to perform and as interactions more than repetitions. As is the felting, it varies depending on wool quality, water, heat and the intension of the doer. The two sculptures has grown next to each other in waves from stillness to movement.



FIG 17 Process picture, winter 2024

The smells have merged with the water and support each other in their insistence and eagerness to become common beings. They fill the room with scent and make it impossible to drift away as I start draping the new being. The colored net moves underneath like an analogue version of a digital 3D drawing program into a shape, the bent squares telling about the shape of the body.

The embroidery draws a line for the spectator to follow into the work.



FIG 18 Development of material choices, spring 2024



FIG 19 Development of building sculpture, spring 2024



FIG 21 Development in compositions, spring 2024



FIG 20 Development in embroidery, spring 2024

A Fabulation of the Fyrkat Volva

We are walking alongside the edge of the road. The wind from the sea rolls in over us and surrounds us with sticky drops of frozen water.

"I don't remember what house it was..."

I look down at the woman next to me. Beat by how she always manages to leave out the other person from the conversation until she is well into it.

"Can you recall if it is on this side of the road or the other?"

"On the seaside, I think..."

She continues the conversation silently and I look at the sea. We struggle our way up the road that bends into a small parking lot.

"You were just born," she says as the landscape caps at the top of the hill, and the perfect circular berm lies stretched at our feet and towards the shore.

The conversation dies out and I leave her to study the signs as I enter the berm. In here the wind quiets down. Now I can hear her mumbling comments on the historical details written and I feel the room the berm and the quiet wind creates.



FIG 10 Photo of Aggersborg, winter 2024

Aggersborg is the largest Viking Age fortress in Denmark. Harald Blåtand ruled as king of Denmark and traveled from fortress to fortress to demonstrate his power. Today the most significant sign of that historical period is this 240-meter-long circled berm that used to function as a part of the fortifications. Back then, there were four great gates at each "corner" of the circle interconnected by two main roads forming a cross. The circle was filled with low, wooden longhouses with pillars holding up the softly shaped roofs. Back then the forest were stretched out between the circle and the fjord. What we know about that time today is mainly about the men who held powerful positions. The rest is left for us to imagine.

The possible past I just got introduced to by my mother echoes in my ears and I fabulate a memory of a younger me. I am running across the grass circle and running in between the crowd on the streets. I run through time and slide down on the ground next to a half-open door. My left ear catches the sounds from inside the longhouse.

The shadowy room is paled by the smoke from the fireplace. A man coughs a dense and hairy cough when the smoke drapes around him and he impatiently tries to untangle himself from it. The woman arrived this morning at the fortress in the tail of the man.

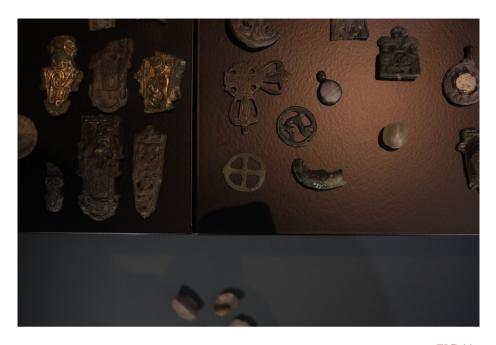


FIG 11 Photo of amulets and pendant at the National museum of Denmark, winter 2024

She pulls the smoke in towards her and frees him from his struggles. She shapes the smoke as strings of grayness into a braid and it finds its way to the chimney. The room brightens up and a hushed conversation shapes the formation of the people in the room. My ear stretches as far as it goes inside the room without entering. The three men are the noisy ones standing up and gesticulating while the woman sits rank, listening. Her eyes wander calmly between the men's gestures and the fireplace. They were traveling from one man's argument to another, as they met a

child's spying eyes. An impossible smile to analyze. Her eyes flicker and close before she takes the word from the debating men. I recognize the small, narrow body that sits down next to me. He whispers something that I know he just made up. I smile and look at him. What is next, we watch together.

We sit still flooded by her sound and movement as she forms her hands in a small circle leading the smoke through it. Her hum is low and introvert as she lets a pendant drop from one of her fingers into the circle. The small duck feet on the pendant waddle in the smoke surrounding it.

After a while she lays the pendant on the ground to lift a small braided grass lid from the opening of a copper bowl. Two of her long fingers dig into the bowl and fish up a roundish shadow. She looks at the man she arrived with and he scowls back. She nods and he reluctantly opens his mouth. She tilts the shadow into it and he closes his eyes and breath while his lips encloses it.

In the fifties a grave was discovered at the fortress of Fyrkat in the North Jutland. It contained the remains of a woman from the Viking Age in a blue dress and a veil. Her belt was full of tools to predict futures, travel through time and worlds and shift in shapes. She held a position of importance in the society and is believed to have traveled around the land with the leaders of the people. Traces of her presence have been found in some of the other four fortresses' Nonnebakken, Trelleborg, Borgring and Aggersborg.



FIG 12 Sketch, winter 2024

After he has been through a series of traditional habits he spits out the shadow and she gathers her tools to enter the sunny streets. We crawl along the wall as to not get seen as they swipe out of the house leaving the wind to unsettle the soil.

A soft roundness that would fit perfectly into my hand falls out of her wide pockets as they turn a corner. It separates from its shadow as it falls to the ground and my eyes lay hold on it as I sprint across the road and pick it up—a tightly felted universe with bits of porous mouse skeleton parts. The shape tells a story of being formed in a tube in hiccups and spat out by an owl from a tree in a blue hour. What is left of hair and skeleton of a little body is now tightly protected in my hand and I make a promise never to let go of it as easily as its former protector just did.

A car passes by out on the road. I stand up to see who it is. A neighbor from further down the street. An older lady. The grown-up talks about her because she feeds wild animals in her garden. They worry it will attract rats and mice. My feet lift me from my thoughts towards the fjord in soft leaps over the mono cultured fields. The little ball clutched in my hand.

In the shallow water of the coast lies a body. Long, soft, and grainy. It rises and lowers with the water. The riffled brows continue and draw two lines over the face and lift the mouth from the water's surface whenever its mind wanders off. It opens its mouth and the tongue slips out. I open my hand and look at the felted ball before I place it on its

tongue. It swallows with a cluck. My shaking head wraps me out of my thoughts and I stand up again. The narrow boy hits the water with a stick further down the shore. I find my way back to the berm.



FIG 13 Sketch, winter 2024

The berm has turned into a lake of rain water and the former gate openings are now the exit of four streams, soaking the fields in the four corners of the world. Around the lake people wander restlessly. Their reflections fall into the lake and they scout for their future in its depths.



FIG 14 Aggersborg church, winter 2024

A long white shadow twist around it self on the bottom with a full mouth. The shore is once again a quiet enemy to keep an eye on, predicted to get closer every year.

The wind has cooled her down and she has found shelter in the church. Two large rune stones stand on the side of the entrance mixing times. I take my mother's little hand and warm it in mine. We sit on the bench while her hand loosens up from the cold grip and my eyes wander toward her in the silence.

We follow the road back. The freezing drops melt down our cheeks and land in our scarves. We see the boy with the stick. His hair has darkened and the beard grows thickly on his jaw. He stops at our side, we get into the car and he drives us home.

A Volur Vocabulary

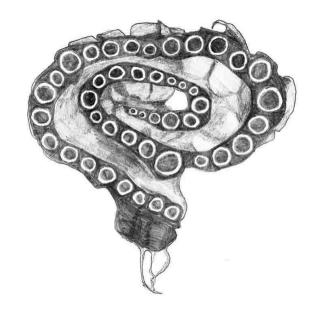
In the next section, I have collected a symbolic vocabulary of the Fyrkat Volva. It consists of smaller bodies of meaning associated with the fabulated life of the Fyrkat Volva. The intention is to build a foundation for a richer aesthetic vocabulary to communicate about her and her form through time.

While the backdrop of the vocabulary is archaeological studies in objects of magic, I discovered my intention for making them was more personal: Each small body functioned as a pause from the protracted process the other two textiles sculptures required.

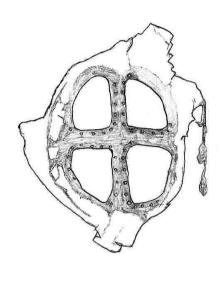
Disorder, decay



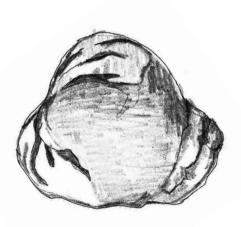
Soft, realities, observation



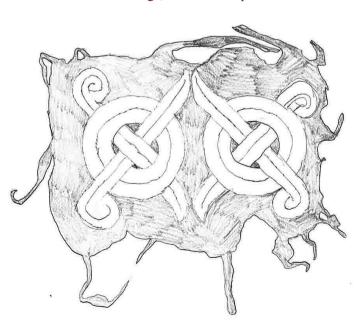
Femininity, magic, life, metal



Hidden, futures



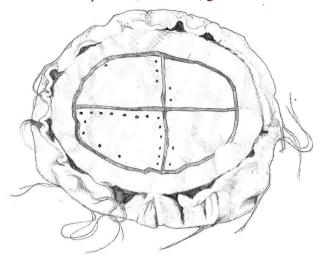
Meetings, the distance past



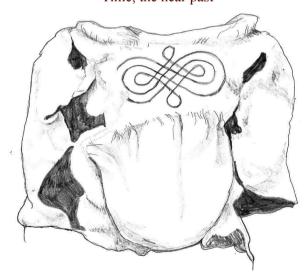
Entering, newness, two-sided



expansion, evolution, growth



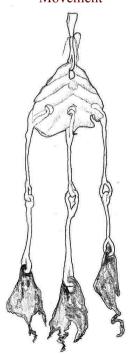
Time, the near past



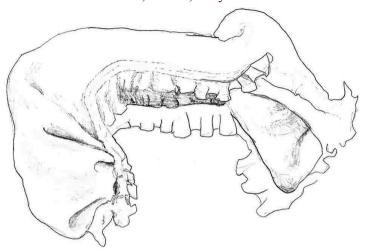
Cry, crumble



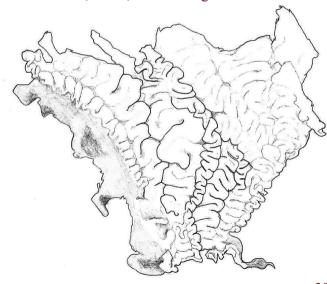
Movement



Water, human, body



Soil, traces, move through worlds



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List of Illustrations

FIG 1

Process picture from *Shadows in the Soil* - Ann-Maj Risgaard-Nielsen (author)

Photo credits: Ann-Maj Risgaard-Nielsen.

FIG 2

Process picture from Growing out of the soil - Ann-Maj

Risgaard-Nielsen (author)

Photo credits: Ann-Maj Risgaard-Nielsen.

FIG 3

Gabrielle Loeb - One who once was

The image is used with courtesy from Gabrielle Loeb. The image is also to be found on Loebs website, (see reference list).

FIG 4

Field trip to Fyrkat, Hobro (2024).

Photo credits: Ann-Maj Risgaard-Nielsen.

FIG 5

Meriç Algün - A Glossary of Distance and Desire

The image is used with courtesy from Algün. The image is also to be found on Magasin III's website. (see reference list).

Photo credits: Jean-Baptiste Béranger

FIG 6

Pernille Kjær - Spring

The image is used with courtesy from Kjær. The image is also to be found on Magasin III's website. (see reference list).

Photo credits: Pernille Kjær

FIG 7

Process picture from *Grave goods* - Ann-Maj Risgaard-Nielsen (author)

Photo credits: Ann-Maj Risgaard-Nielsen.

FIG 8

Ann-Maj Risgaard-Nielsen (author) - Grave goods

Photo credits: Ann-Maj Risgaard-Nielsen.

FIG 9

Ann-Maj Risgaard-Nielsen (author) - Grave goods

Photo credits: Ann-Maj Risgaard-Nielsen.

FIG 10

Photo of Aggersborg, winter 2024

Photo credits: Ann-Maj Risgaard-Nielsen.

FIG 11

Photo of amulets and pendant at the National museum of

Denmark, winter 2024

Photo credits: Ann-Maj Risgaard-Nielsen.

FIG 12

Sketch, winter 2024

Photo credits: Ann-Maj Risgaard-Nielsen.

FIG 13

Sketch, winter 2024

Photo credits: Ann-Maj Risgaard-Nielsen.

FIG 14

Photo from Aggersborg church, winter 2024

Photo credits: Ann-Maj Risgaard-Nielsen.

FIG 15

Scan from The Nordic Sorceress

Photo credits: Ann-Maj Risgaard-Nielsen.

FIG 16

Scan from "The Nordic Sorceress"

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Process picture, winter 2024

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Development of material choices, spring 2024

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Development of building sculpture, spring 2024

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FIG 20

Development in embroidery, spring 2024

Photo credits: Ann-Maj Risgaard-Nielsen.

FIG 21

Development in compositions, spring 2024

Photo credits: Ann-Maj Risgaard-Nielsen.