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AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL DIG AROUND THE RING

By Richard Philpott

A modest proposal for an alternative ring adornment to be worn as a symbol of totemic power in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, with historical and mythological justifications.

THE POWER OF THE RING

In British, Anglo-Saxon and, one presumes, Viking-Danish society, similar rights and rituals of battle and surrender and defeat existed. The most valuable object belonging to any warrior (and by extension Lord or god) is the great torque (or torc), a ring worn around the neck [Above]. Smaller torques may be worn on wrists or ankles. A breath-taking collection of these can be seen in the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin if anyone needs convincing of their extraordinary impact as symbols of power.

Similar rites over the battlefield were respected by both victors and losers, with the former having the right to recover bodies and weapons etc. from both

parties, and some treasures being returned by a warlord to his overlord as a kind of death duty ("heriot") since the 'war gear' (here-geatu) issued by a Lord to his retainers might be claimed back by him on their death or retirement. Similar battlefield rights and rituals continued through the Roman era when war goods continued to be taken from defeated Celtic warriors and even adopted by Roman soldiers for whom it was produced in Roman workshops, and thereafter into the Middle Ages and on into chivalric codes. The Valkyrie gathering of dead heroes to reinforce the power of lordship follows a long trail and provides a resonant narrative that would have been familiar to many earlier cultures.

Furthermore, Beowulf makes clear that a warrior is identified by his wealth, which he wears or carries with him at all times and that his most valued possession is his Ring which if scavenged from the battlefield would necessarily then be surrendered to the Lord who in turn distributed spoils as politically expedient to his power as the beahgyfa ('ring-giver').

DIFFICULTIES WITH THE FINGER RING

It seems to me that many Ring productions suffer from a dramaturgical and design 'tectonic fault' in deciding how that most crucial element, the ring itself, should be represented. Frankly, it rarely has the impact of a symbol of power such as is felt when looking at a brilliant, intricate, weighty, golden torque, self-evidently a symbol of enormous and indisputable power - although great acting such as that of John Tomlinson can certainly imbue the object with dramatic power. However, a merely brilliantine ring (Bayreuth Centennial) or an oversized armband with attached ring (Copenhagen) fail to fully impress, though the latter is arguably closer to the Viking / Norse inspiration, whilst the full-hand knuckle-duster of the Kupfer Ring verges on the ridiculous. It could of course be argued that diminishing the object of the ring itself, rather than allowing such a large and obvious manifestation of power on stage, more firmly locates the power of the drama in the dramatis personae than in the props but I fear this won't hold in the light of the ash tree, Wotan's spear, Notung etc. being more tangible manifestations of their inspiration than mere props and rarely diminished in stature merely to serve an elevated Personen-regie. Furthermore, if staging is to respect the semiotics of representation, surely the depiction of the ring itself deserves and demands serious attention, reflecting the structural integrity of the signs that intricately layer the text and the leitmotiv-score. It is widely known how thoroughly disappointed Wagner himself was with the Bayreuth staging in his lifetime and yet few productions seem to even attempt the cross-discipline rigour that is surely required in a Gesamtkunstwerk for which the author certainly provided a sufficiently integrated music-drama structure in word and music to require similar



resented are potentially enormous.

Beyond the immediate Norse sagas which give rise to Wagner's text, it may be of interest to look a little further back in time to explore the power of the torque ring in human culture.

The presence of the torque in Iron Age Europe is well-attested. These torques, or twisted rings, generally worn around the neck but also made for the arm and wrist are most frequently demonstrations of the owners wealth and power, made from gold, though bronze and silver examples also survive. Whilst many were continually worn by their owners as demonstrations of status, others were impractical for adornment and existed primarily or entirely as symbols of power and sometimes existed purely for the payment of tribute, another resonance with Wagner's critique of capitalism at the heart of his text. Finger rings in the Iron Age Celtic and Viking cultures are, by comparison, slight and uncommon and can hold little interest for the Wagnerian archaeologist.

[Top left above] Interestingly, Siegfried holds the ring, more authentically depicted as a torque in Fritz Lang's 1924 epic 'Die Nibelungen – Part One: Siegfried'. Lang largely disliked Wagner's hijack of the Nibelungenlied,



[Bottom left above] Anne Evans sports a large pugilistic knuckle-duster in Kupfer's Ring, Bayreuth, 1992.

[Left] The torque-like Ring in Sergei Eisenstein's innovative 1940 Bolshoi production of *Die Walküre*, Moscow

But let us look further back and see how close we come to the era the gods.

ASIA

The Vedas of the pre-Hindu Indus culture evoke Mithra as the god of faithfulness and contracts whilst the Rig Veda adds the attribute of morning/dawn. These core attributes might well resonate with audiences of the Ring and certainly look forwards to the Viking and Celtic myths that directly inspired it. And, as we shall see later, Zoroastrianism builds on these roots and depicts them in the Faravahar.

The Vedics' language of Sanskrit follows similar paths, being strikingly similar to the Avesta of Zoroaster which combines Indic and Iranian languages with the Indo-Iranian family being related to the Andronovo culture, which we shall soon see is core to Central Asian cultures, and descended from the hypothetical Proto-Indo-European (PIE) urlanguage, which emerged in 4500 BC. Indo-Aryan and Iranian languages split in c. 1800 BC following the paths of two Andronovo groups, one into Bactria and Pamirs (mythical homeland of the Aryans) and the other onto the Iranian plateau, where we shall later find the Medes and Persians adopt the Zoroastrian 'religious' innovation of Ahura Mazda.

In this model we might see the spread of cultural myth and language resultant upon migrations from the Central Asian steppe between the Deniepe, northern Caucasus and the Urals, both eastwards and westwards. Whilst it is unknown why non-PIE people adopted immigrant languages we might assume that this results from the prestige and dominance of:

- a) their technologies (in horse management innovations such as the bridle, bit, etc; the cursive composite bow, the lightweight spoked wheel, rapidly-deployed nomadic housing and, crucially, metalworking)
- b) economic wealth (probably including the earliest production of silk, and again, metalworking) and...
- c) social organisation (both nomadic herding and sedentary agrarian with large cities, some with sophisticated 'plumbing' and other hygienic systems that would not be matched for many centuries.)

Some very interesting research relating early language to metalworking has been carried out by Srinii Kalyanaraman to decode the orthographic form hieroglyphs of the Indus Script of the Vedas, suggesting that bronze torcs of the third millennium BC are the signifiers for furnace workers and iron smiths:

"I suggest that all the anthropomorphs and rings (torcs) are orthographic form hieroglyphs of Indus Script to signify metalwork dharma samjñā 'signifiers of responsibilities (in guild - as artisans/seafaring merchants) or professional call-

ing cards'. Karā n. pl. wristlets, bangles Rebus: khār 'blacksmith, iron worker'."

"It is submitted, that the anthropomorphs of Copper Hoard Culture are a reinforcement of the Indus Script decipherent as metalwork cataloguing in Prakṛtam (Indian sprachbund), a cipher system mentioned by Vatsyayana as mlechchita vikalpa 'lit.cipher of mlechcha/meluhha, 'copper workers')"

"The torcs signify: Hieroglyph: bārī , 'small ear-ring': H. bālā m. 'bracelet' (→ S. ḥālo m. 'bracelet worn by Hindus'), bālī, bārī f. 'small ear – ring', OMārw. bālī f.; G. vāj m. ' wire ', pl. ' ear ornament made of gold wire '; M. vājā m. ' ring ', vājī f. ' nose – ring '.(CDIAL 11573) Rebus: bārī 'merchant' vāḍhī, bari, barea 'merchant' bārakaśa 'seafaring vessel'".

It seems likely that the Vedic anthropomorphs (with variant Indus Script Hyper-texts/hieroglyphs) using torques as signifiers of metalworkers (and seafaring merchants) existed also in Europe.

Srini Kalyanaraman further associates the Vedic hieroglyph with seals of the Indus civilisations of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa and with later Roman depictions of Kernunnos / Cernunnos (also a smelter and a seafaring merchant).

[Left: Impression of the Pashupati (Lord of Animals in Sanskrit) seal from Mohenjo-daro, Indus valley Civilization, 2500-1500 BC. A possible representation of a "proto-Shiva" figure showing three faces, possibly of the four-headed Brahma with the fourth head hiding behind. (Chhatrapati

Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (ex Prince of Wales Museum), Mumbai, India)

[Right] The famous Gundestrup cauldron shows Kernunnos holding a torc in his right hand and "The hood of a snake held on the left hand signifies: kulA 'hood of snake' rebus: kolhe 'smelter' kol 'working in iron' kolle 'blacksmith'." The Lord of the Animals on the Gundestrup Cauldron, usually assumed to be Cernunnos. Silver, Celtic late La Tène period



or early Roman Iron Age, National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen. Cernunnos wears a torque and holds another in his right hand. The snake in his left may signify metalworking. Since it remains always on the earth and sheds it's skin annually in order to grow, the serpent (aka worm/dragon) is also frequently associated with rebirth and with the earth spirit until it becomes dialectically appropriated by early Christians and prominent Celtic Earth spirit sites are turned into places holy to the Archangel Michael, the dragon-slayer (viz Mont Saint Michel, St Michael's Mount, Skellig Michael, Glastonbury Tor etc). These sites have been shown to have extraordinary geographical connections and reveal the presence of leys between them. We will see further associations with Earth and Animal spirits a little later, but for the present we will restrain this article from wandering into Fafner's lair.

It will be common knowledge to many Wagnerians that the importance of the smith in transforming the horde/Rheingold into an object of power is far from being a mere Nordic myth but extends worldwide as the Neolithic revolution leaps into metalworking and the smith becomes venerated as an individual of fearful genius, wielding unparalleled knowledge, power and, indeed, unprecedented magic. This importance of metalwork and the power it represents and transfers socially, is vital to this argument for the torque carrying more significance in the dramaturgy of The Ring, than the lowly and insignificant finger ring.

Closer to home, it is likely that important recent European discoveries also point to the all-important power of metal working:

- a) the Amesbury Archer (discovered in 2002) is among the earliest gold workers to have existed in Britain (2300 BC), buried with great honour at the time of the erection of the great trilithons at Stonehenge, together with his metalworking tools, including a kind of portable anvil and three copper knives, which can only have had a ceremonial or status function.
- b) Ötzi (discovered in the Alps in 1991) with a rare and valuable copper axe. He was either a metal worker traveling across the alps (much as the Amesbury Archer once travelled to Britain from his home in Central Europe, possibly on pilgrimage to Stonehenge), or that he was a chieftain holding the axe as a status symbol much as Vikings did later, and was himself sacrificed on that Alpine pass c 3300 BC. Either way, copper particles and arsenic were found in Ötzi's hair which is generally considered proof of his metalworking.

Both the Archer and Ötzi suffered almost continuously from osteopathic illnesses so undertaking these gruelling journeys would have been unusually painful for them.

The Amesbury Archer and with the young man found with him, possibly his son, both also had gold earrings /hair tresses, rings so rare that only half a dozen have ever been found in Britain. Additionally, Ötzi is the oldest tattooed human mummy yet discovered, an art that continued to be widely practised in Central Asia in subsequent millennia and probably by the Rus Vikings (below). All these factors mark out these metal workers as extraordinarily exceptional and venerated men.

Cernunnos also has stag's antlers, representing the tree of life (annual rebirth/growth), a deer motif crucial throughout Central Asian cultures and as Yggdrasil in Nordic cultures (Ash Tree in Wagner; the court of the gods in the Prose Edda) with roots that extend to Jötunheimr, the home of the fearful giants

(Riesenheim) and to Niflheim, a place shrouded in primordial darkness, cold, mist, and ice (Nibelheim). After the apocalyptic Ragnarok, the Doom of the Gods (Götterdämmerung), the world tree, though badly shaken, also becomes the source of new life (the purified Ring returns to the Rhein). Cernunnos is known in Britain by many names and faces: Kern the Mighty, The Horned One, The Antlered One, Herne the Hunter, Lord of animals, The Stag King, and The Winter Lord and, by extension, The Green Man, Jack in the Green.



Interestingly, he can also be depicted with a torque around each antler as in this carving [Left] on the Pillar of the Boatmen (Gallo-Roman, 1st century A. Musée national du Moyen Âge, Paris, France)

CENTRAL ASIA

Preceding the Vikings, the richness of the torque as a symbol of social status and structural purpose within social codes, and its considerable importance over millennia, add further weight to its vitality as an archetype which Wagner himself might well have been delighted with in the context to his great dramatic project.

Might the Vikings' pantheon have been influenced by their raids, settlements and slave trading in what is now Russia, a country whose name may even de-

rive from the Slavic 'rus' (red) name for the Vikings themselves? As they navigated the rivers all the way to the Bosphorus in search of plunder and slaves, the multitude of massive kurgans (burial barrows) in the landscape and along river banks would have made a lasting impression of the immense wealth that had once existed in the region and may have encountered Scythian (from 700 BC) Samatian and Saka torques and even treasures from earlier Chalcolithic and Bronze Age cultures that spawned them, spreading from the east of the Urals and Caspian: the Afanasievo (3300 - 2350 BC), Okunev (1400-1750 BC), the Andronovo (1750-1400 BC) and the cultures of the Volga, Don and Dnieper to the west of the Urals, the (eg Samara from 5000 BC, Usatovo from 3300 BC).



[Left top and middle] Gold Torc terminating in Scythian Horsemen, and detail, Greek workmanship, executed for the Scythians, 4th century B.C. Crimea, near Kerch, Kul Oba kurgan. Excavated 1830. (Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, KO 17).

According to Herodotus, the highest Scythian deity was Tabiti, god of the hearth, whom we may assume to be a fire god, who also has a preeminent role in Central Asian burial practices which require purification by fire, whilst Api(Gaia) is the mother of all life and is sometimes represented with serpentine legs and/or legs which have plant motifs. Mime's dependence on Loge is of course central to any ability to forge a ring or Tarnhelm, whilst the mother goddess' association with the serpent and plant life makes her crucially part of the World Ash, Tree of Life.



In the early historical period the vital presence of torques is recorded in the Apadana Staircase at Persepolis (Lydians and Scythians etc) and in the Oxus treasure of the Achaemenids (8th-4thC BC), whose style much influenced that of the Seleucids and Bactrians and including the elaborate gold work of the Sarmatians (5thC BC).

[Left] Gold model chariot, the occupants wearing torques, Oxus treasure from the region of Takht-i Kuvad, Tadjikistan, Achaemenid Persian, 5th-4th century BC. British Museum (1897.1231.7).



[Left] Detail of the above Sarmatian Gold and Turquoise torque of the princess of Kobiakovo, Don valley. 1st- 2nd Century AD, showing a bearded man cross-legged on a carpet with sword and a pot. (Kurgan 10 of the Kobiakov sepulture.)



It is also interesting to note that, returning to our opening consideration of the gathering and sharing of battlefield goods by the victors, Scythian warriors were united in blood brotherhoods (drinking a mix of their blood with wine in front of witnesses) and also delivered the relics of battle to their lords for the distribution of honour, each being judged by the number of heads decapitated from their enemies.

NEAR EAST

The potency of the Cimmericians, Scythians and Sarmatians entering into the Near East from Central Asia may also be traced in presence of the torque. Most notably, these appear in the near-picture book record left us by Darius at Behistun and by Cyrus at Persepolis.



[Left top] The Behistun Inscription of Darius the Great (reigned 522–486 BC) in which he claims legitimate descent from Cyrus the Great and Cambyses II and his rightful inheritance of the Achmaeinid Empire and the just defeat of rebellions imposters. In Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian scripts, Darius shows his defeated enemies brought before him, including various kings of Central Asia, arrayed under the Zoroastrian symbol of the Faravahar (see below), which bestows on him the legitimacy of deity Ahura Mazda, often concomitant with the much earlier Vedic (see above) sun deity Mithra.

Some of the same subject peoples appear on the Apadana Stairs of the Achmaeinid ceremonial capital, believed to have been founded by Cyrus at Persepolis [Middle Left].

[Left below] The stairs to the Apadana Palace begun in 581 BC, show Saka (Sacaë) in pointed caps (as appear also on the inscription at Bisutun) carrying torques of tribute to the King of Kings.



[Right] Syrians (or Lydians) also bring arm torques of gold in tribute: These torques existed solely for the purpose of tribute and were almost certainly never worn. They existed, as mentioned earlier, as a form of taxation.

The Roman Mithra of Sol Invicta is likely to have had origins in the sun and light deities of the dominant Central Asian cultures of Afanasievo, Okunev and Andronovo and the later fire temples of Bactria. The cult of Mithra later overwhelmed the divinity of Ahura Mazda under the reign of Artaxerxes (404-358BC) but was never directly associated with the sun in Zoroastrian scripture, despite the eliding of the two subsequently. Interestingly, for the purposes of our interest here in Loge and Mime (occasionally sung by the same performer, it may be noted), Ahura Mazda's son Atisho is later represented in the form



of Hephaistos, the Greek god of fire and metallurgy.

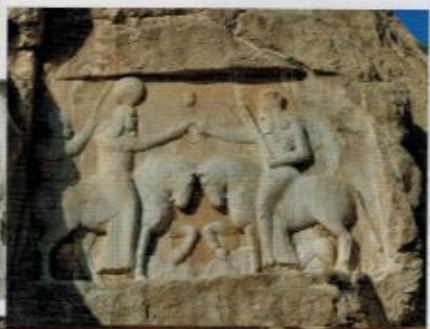
[Above] Mithradates II, the greatest of Parthian kings, named after Mithras, wearing a torque, as was typical of all rulers on Parthian coins. On the reverse an archer sits on an omphalos (the centre of the world).

Above the eastern door of Persepolis is the Faravahar, symbol created by Medes and Persians to represent the radically new monotheistic and centralised state religion derived from the teachings of Zoroaster [Next page top].

The Faravahar represents a guardian angel and the soul's higher self and may be broken down into the constituent parts of Zoroastrianism: the human figure in the centre connects the adherent to the Spirit and the three rows of out-



stretched wings represent good thoughts, good words, and good deeds whilst the lower part symbolizes incorrect thoughts, words, and deeds. The loops falling either side of the central ring (and tail) represent the good to which we should orient ourselves (left) and the evil (right) that we should turn our backs on. The central circle itself symbolizes the eternity of the Spirit whilst the hand gesturing upwards points to the path of true knowledge whilst the other hand holds a ring (torque?) representing commitment to Ahura Mazda, loyalty to Zoroastrian principles which cannot be broken when pursuing goodness and forsaking evil. And, of course, we might amuse ourselves with ruminations over 'Nietsche contra Wagner' and its reflections on 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra'.



[Left top] Ahura Mazda confers lordship on King Ardashir I (224/6-241 CE), founder of the Sassanian dynasty of Persia via (called farshiang), by handing him the ring-torque of power, Naqsh-e Rostam, Iran. In similar reliefs on the site, Mithras is also in attendance.

In earlier Near Eastern civilisations we find a similarly-depicted goddess, Ishtar, worshipped by the Akkadians, Babylonians, and Assyrians but originally Inanna, an ancient Mesopotamian goddess from the Uruk era of Sumer, (c 4000 – 3100 BC) associated with sex, war, justice, and political power, like Wotan, but who is also the Mistress of animals, much as Cernunnos is Lord of

the Animals in Celtic culture [Bottom Left].

The form of the Faravahar itself has maintained a fascination as a token of iconic power through to the modern ages of Napoleon and Hitler and now adorns the Bentley car.

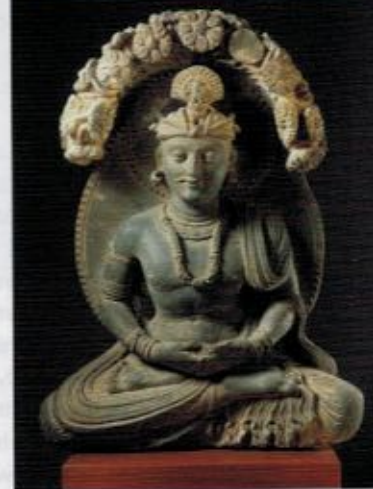
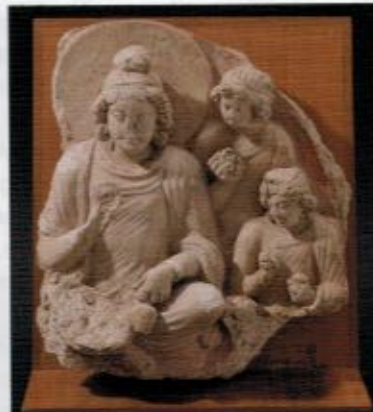
Zoroastrian rites of purity focused most famously on fire worship and recall the Scythian god Tabiti, noted above. To what degree Scythian entry to the Near East and their return to Pontic area north of the Black Sea represents cross fertilisation is unclear. What we can affirm however, is that much of the Scythian culture which concerns us here and which travelled into the Near East (and back) was already present in antecedent Central Asian cultures ; much as the Iranian language itself, spoken by Scythians, sprang from the ur-languages of that region, a cauldron containing the origins of all the elements discussed in this paper, which I hope will fascinate the Wagnerian: the torque, its association with fire and metalworking and the representation of the Earth spirit.

Interestingly, Central Asian culture mixes once again with Indian characteristics as Buddhism spreads along the Silk Roads and establishes itself in many trading centres (eg. the spectacular monastic cave complexes of Longmen near Louyang and Magao near Dunhuang) serving powerful local monasteries as Buddhist teaching reached China.

Worthy of special note is the Gandharan cultural mix of Iranian, Greek and Kushan influences from Northern Indian in early depictions of the Buddha Shakyamuni, Buddha Maitreya and bodhisattvas which many even show the object of veneration wearing a Saka-Scythian torque of the types illustrated above. As the Gandharan style travelled east it established the dominant form of Buddhist sculpture in China.

[Right top] Bodhisattva Maitreya (Future Buddha) and Attendants Central Asian , 4th century CE or later, Tash Khurgan, Afghanistan (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, USA).

[Right bottom] Siddhartha Meditating Below the Jambu Tree Gandhara, Pakistan, 3rd century CE (The Nor-





ton Simon Foundation, Pasadena, CA, USA).

Today, the torque is still worn as a display of wealth in a badge of high consumer chic (power?), the Cartier "Just un clou" bracelet [Left] (although 'Just a Nail' clearly it isn't!)

A LAST WORD ABOUT LOGE

As I have sought to demonstrate above, the role of metallurgy and the Smith is critical to the ring, Der Ring and torques and the place of these in our common cultural histories reaching back into myth, so essential to the conception of Wagner's work. In a final gesture, I would like add a plea for the centrality of fire in all of the above and in Wagner's conception, a centrality that often overlooked or diminished in importance.

Despite being a god, Wotan is incapable of forging the ring - even if he were capable of renouncing love and taking the gold from the Rhinemaidens. Only a master Smith can forge the Ring. Even Alberich needs Mime. And for this Mime needs Loge's fire, as is made explicit in Loge's return visit to Nibelheim in Das Rheingold, this time with Wotan in tow.

Yet the ability to exercise the power of the Ring passes on to no one throughout the tetralogy. It is only the Ring's curse that is transferred between characters. Siegfried and Brünnhilde are immune from the Ring's powerlust as they decline to perceive it as anything other than a symbol of their love, thereby running counter to the denunciation by which Alberich was able to retrieve the gold from the Rhine.

Furthermore, it is only Loge that instantly understands the depth of the curse and the delusion of those who would exercise its power, the vain tribe of gods in particular. His presence (often remote) is crucial to the development of the narrative from the start and even turns the narrative at many crucial points. It is Loge's fire, demanded by Brünnhilde, for example, that smooths the path of the gods to their downfall, providing both protection to Brünnhilde on her rock, and then breaching that protection via the Tarnhelm forged in his fire, until his presence finally consumes both Brünnhilde and Siegfried on their funeral pyre, destroying the Gibichung hall, Valhalla, the World Ash and everything else, ultimately returning the ring to the Rhine, cleansed and in readiness for the birth of a new world. As he bids his farewell to the gods in Rheingold, Loge foretells their downfall, withholding his freedom to acts he wishes, the

shape-shifting trickster (demi-god Loki, Puck, hare, coyote, Bugs Bunny):

"They are doomed to disaster, though they think they are invulnerable. I'm almost ashamed to have anything to do with them. Changing back to flickering flame is a tempting prospect indeed. Consuming those who tamed me instead of stupidly sharing their fate, however divine they may be. That might be the wisest course. I'll think it over. Who knows what I'll do?" (my emphasis)

In summary, the metal torque and the purifying nature of fire at the heart of Zoroastrianism were already present in many of the ancient Vedas, the kurgan burials of Central Asia, in representations of power from the Black Sea to Mongolia, long before sinking in Viking ship burials and cleansing of the accursed Ring at the end of Wagner's *Bühnenfestspiel*, in which that ring would perhaps be more powerfully, mythically, spiritually and historically represented as a torque, resonating through time and space, perhaps to the point where "time becomes space"? ■