

# AHIS 330: MEDIEVAL AESTHETICS

Spring 2025

Section 11930R

Tuesday/Thursday 9:30-10:50 AM (DMC 202)

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*The Hårby Valkyrie, height: 3.4 cm, gilded silver with niello, ca. 9<sup>th</sup> century CE. National Museum of Denmark.*

The early Middle Ages has long been described as the “death of the figurine.” The disappearance from art and ritual of sculptural traditions practiced in the Roman empire emblemized the crisis into which figural art was plunged by the collapse of the empire’s western half and the rise of Christianity, with its proscription on graven images. But, thanks to widespread shifts in archaeological practice—especially the rise of amateur metal detecting—we now know that the early-medieval period was populated with a vast range of toys, puppets, models, votives, and other small sculptures of the human form. This class takes stock of a newly figural medieval world. We will begin by testing conceptual approaches to the premodern figurine, drawing on comparative cases from Ancient Greece, Preclassic Mesoamerica, and Qin Dynasty China. Exploring the rich legacy of the ancient world’s depictive and aniconic traditions, we will then critically examine disciplinary narratives that frame the rise of the medieval as a retreat into abstraction. The second half of the class will be devoted to early-medieval figurines themselves, many only recently recovered. Key issues include gender, scale, historiography, ritual, the somatic aesthetics of miniature embodiment, and the question of whether a small sculpture can be monumental in its form or effects. Above all, moving from the problem of what a figurine *is* to investigating what a figurine *does*, we’ll ask how the history and study of medieval art might be transformed by the resurgence of their tiny bodies.



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