

# A Picture Programme in Eastern Central Sweden ca. AD 800?

BY JOHAN CALLMER

## Abstract

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Regional production of bronze jewellery (occasionally silver) in Eastern Scandinavia dated to around AD 800 exhibits an unusual coherence with regard to technique, design and ornamentation. The items produced are equal-armed brooches, profile quadruped brooches, oval brooches, ornamental pins and pendants. Together these different forms account for the major part of a full female dress jewellery set. The ornamentation in many respects is very consistent and binds the forms closely together. The intriguing combination of Christian and pre-Christian motifs could be interpreted as evidence of various aspects of various aspects of a single syncretistic world view. This concerns the craftsmen but perhaps not the consumers. The button-on-bow brooches and the armllets of the period may have other connotations.

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Ornamental metalwork of the Early Medieval Period has been used very differently as archaeological source material through time. Of course ornamental metalwork was a backbone of early archaeologists' efforts to date archaeological finds and find contexts and to classify the material in terms of geographical groups. Scholars added some cultural-historical aspects during the first half of the 20th century. However, further elaboration of the questions how and why the ornaments were produced came only very slowly, notwithstanding the widening of the source basis with such outstanding material as the huge numbers of mould fragments from the 6th century recovered by the Helgö excavations. Without disregarding the value of the important work done by A. Lundström (1972), K. Lamm (1972) and R. Blidmo (1982), the questions of how and why the Helgö material was produced remain unsatisfactorily treated.

Parallel to the archaeological research on ornamental metalwork, an art-historical tradi-

tion concerned with early medieval metalwork developed in the 19th century. Characteristic of this approach has been the very selective treatment of the source material and also the vague interest in questions of the production and the function of the artefacts. The positive impact of this art-historical tradition lies in the iconological approach of this discipline pioneered by Warburg and Panofsky (1970).

In studies of the ornamental metalwork of the Early Middle Ages, however, the archaeological and the art-historical traditions are sometimes combined and blended in the work of the same person. Good examples are Shetelig (1920), Brøndsted (1924), Wilson and Klindt-Jensen (1966). However, the majority of studies of ornamentation published in Northern Europe mainly have an art-historical approach, although iconology seldom stands at the centre of interest. In my opinion the impact of the art-historical tradition of research in many ways has been negative. Especially the selective approach has

been disastrous. The same selection of objects runs through from the 19th and the early 20th century until today. There is also a huge problem of comparability. How can the wood carvings of Oseberg really be compared with the miniscule details on cast metalwork like the Broa mounts? Another problem with the art-historical approach is the anticipation of a strong continuity. The early medieval animal ornamentation has been considered as one strong continuous art style. A closer scrutiny of the changes in ornamentation makes it clear that this idea can be challenged and that this continuity is strongly overstated. I think the material used for this contribution gives an example of this problem.

The strong criticism against the main art-historical approach does not mean that we find it of no importance to integrate aspects of this approach into a broader and more general approach. In my opinion there cannot be a purely archaeological approach or a purely art-historical one. The ideal approach combines the basic archaeological questions of when, how and why the ornamented artefacts were produced and consumed with iconographic analysis. There have also been attempts to link studies of ornamentation to semiology in art history. This type of studies is also known, for instance, from North American archaeology (Muller 1979). This is a valuable addition to a canon for the combined analysis of ornamentation.

The study of a set of designs – in my opinion a picture programme – ca. AD 800 will be used as an example of the development of a combined method of analysis. On what grounds have we the right to talk about a picture programme when we deal with ornaments on bronze artefacts used as dress accessories in a more or less preliterate culture? The producers of ornamental metalwork were of course craftsmen, but they also constituted a small group which between themselves developed a specific approach to religion and

mythology. Through exchange of ideas this approach was not a fixed one but underwent change. Change could be radical, like the later conversion to Christianity, but we think that change in the pre-Christian period was rather an additive process.

Since we are dealing with an essentially preliterate society, we must enter the discussion of the ideas of these producers and their ornamental expression mainly through the material culture. Motifs are central to these questions. There are so far no artists' motif collections from Northern Europe, but we have reason to suppose that they lingered on from Antiquity in the Mediterranean culture. It is not unlikely, however, that sets of fine drawings or pattern carvings were used also further north. Somewhat later finds from Ireland seem to confirm this. For Northern Europe we must apply a different way of thinking and argue inductively. In favourable circumstances we can observe that certain distinct figures and motifs are connected to special objects – as stated, mostly dress accessories of various kinds – and sometimes to special positions on these objects. We also have the possibility to calculate the frequency of distinct motifs. These observed regularities form the basis for the assumption that we have to do with something we could call a picture programme. We shall see whether it is possible to assemble a convincing set of positive arguments.

I have chosen a material dating to around AD 800 and predominantly from finds in the five Swedish provinces of Gästrikland, Uppland, Västmanland, Södermanland and Närke. The now Finnish province of Åland must also be included in this region (Fig. 1). In the provinces of Östergötland, Småland and Öland and Blekinge some finds with very similar but often slightly different ornaments were made, but until further studies have been carried out we contend that the six provinces of Eastern Central Sweden and westernmost Finland no doubt form a core area for a dis-

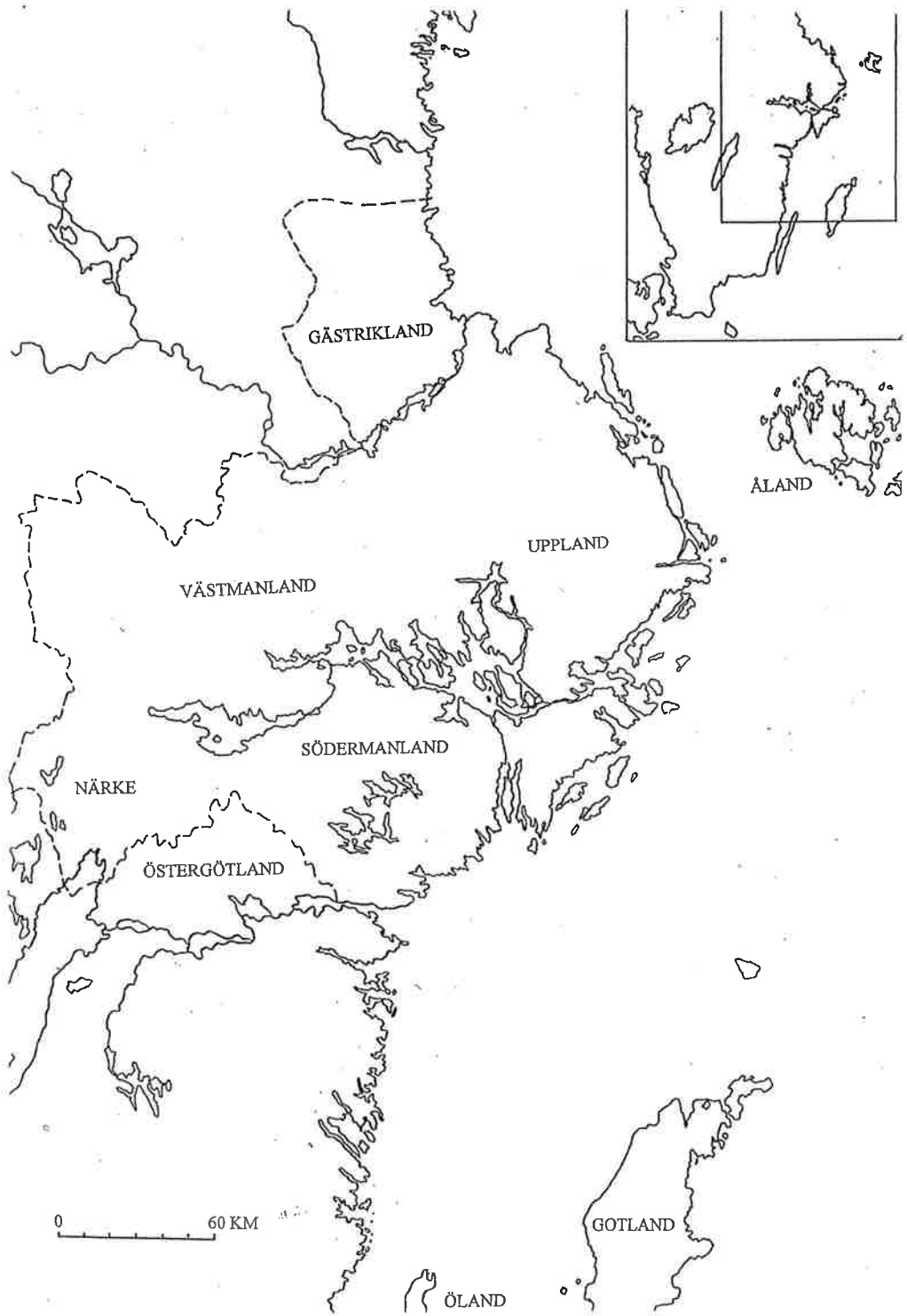


Fig. 1. The main distribution area of the East Scandinavian ornamental metalwork ca. AD 800.

tinct ornamental school. Further away from the core area almost no finds have been made. A few finds from Östergötland and Öland have however been included.

All finds from the six provinces in public collections have been studied for this investigation. Thanks to extraordinary excavation activity, especially in the region of Stockholm and along major corridors of infrastructure around Lake Mälaren and along the major approaches to this metropolitan region, a very rich body of material is available. This does not mean, however, that we can be sure that all types and variants are now known to us. On the contrary, although some series of very similar objects have turned, up new excavations constantly reveal new types and variants. This means that our knowledge is incomplete. A general calculation, however, suggests that we know quite a lot.

The fact that the majority of our finds stem from cremation graves typical of Eastern Central Sweden makes it clear that we very seldom meet complete sets of ornamental metalwork; instead occasional inhumation graves show the full dress. Almost all the objects treated here come from dress for the female gender. The masculine side can be disregarded here. In fact, there is some evidence of sword hilts with ornaments but they are very few and may belong to the very beginning of the phase. A complete set of female dress accessories (Fig. 2) consists of a number of different brooches including button-on-bow, oval, equal-armed and profile animal brooches. Heavy dress pins crowned with *ronde-bosse* (plastic) figures are also typical of this phase. In addition to the brooches and the pins there are very often pendants, and in the early part of this phase finds also of bead spacers typical of the eighth century turn up. The bead spacers have no further continuity and are completely gone after AD 800.

The remaining category among the dress accessories in metal to mention is the armlets.

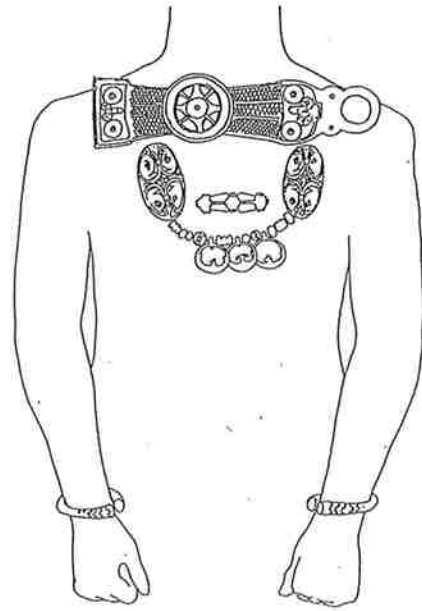


Fig. 2. A complete set of female dress ornaments in Eastern Central Sweden ca. AD 800.

In this phase there is a transformation from armlets with widening terminals to armlets with a broad and thick centre and with tapering ends. Armlets follow quite different principles of ornamentation and only very seldom carry significant animal ornament. In another paper I have shown that the decoration of the armlets is connected with patterns found in the Migration Period, forming a singular revival of the ornamentation of the days of old (2006). Dress accessories also include combs and beads but they are very different from the ornamental metalwork and are consequently of little interest here.

Let us now have a look at the different categories of ornamental metalwork, starting with the button-on-bow brooches (Fig. 3). With their very big size and their inlays of garnets they make up the dominant form. They have an average length of 25–30 cm and some late types of the first half of the 9th century probably reached even larger sizes. As I have pointed out in another connection, the but-



Fig. 3. Button on bow fibula typical of Eastern Scandinavia ca. AD 800.

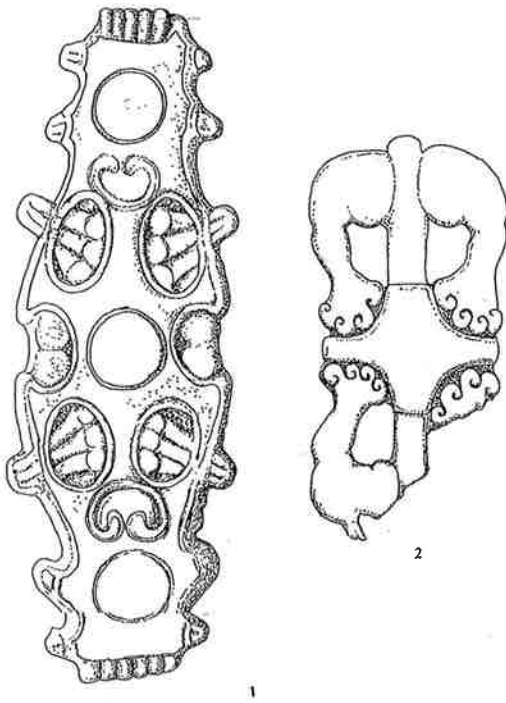


Fig. 4. Two examples of equal-armed brooches.

ton-on-bow brooches typical of Eastern Central Sweden ca. AD 800 lack animal ornamentation. We should mention here that the very fragmentary state of the finds often makes a full reconstruction difficult. The decoration is normally exclusively a rhomboid grid pattern, which on closer inspection proves to be a variant of interlace. A few examples of button-on-bow brooches with animal ornamentation on the trapezoid fields on the bow occur, but they are in my opinion southern imports. A small number of brooches of the regional type have small ornamental fields with abstract sign-like patterns. The bird's heads on both sides of the footplate are so rudimentary that stylized heads is a euphemism. The decorative element that is most conspicuous on the button-on-bow brooches is the phi sign, frequently displayed on both the foot and the head plate. This sign can be interpreted as a strong symbol of fertility and reproduction. Of the dress accessories treated here, the button-on-bow brooches stand rather in a class of their own, and it is somewhat problematic to state that the same artisans behind the other items produced them.

The second type of brooch is the equal-armed brooch (Fig. 4). These are much smaller than the button-on-bow brooches and only reach 6–7 cm in length. About two dozen brooches of this type are known from Eastern Central Sweden. The vast majority of these brooches have a strictly symmetrical decoration. Very often the design shows a central cross which guides the formation of the decorative pattern. The most common design features four identical extremities. The feet are mostly clawed paws or pennant-like flaps. Characteristic of the majority of these brooches is also the lack of a head or heads. The majority of the brooches thus feature partitioned bodies without heads. A few examples, however, have lateral heads in profile projection. The beheaded animal is a well-known motif in the ornamentation from some other categories of

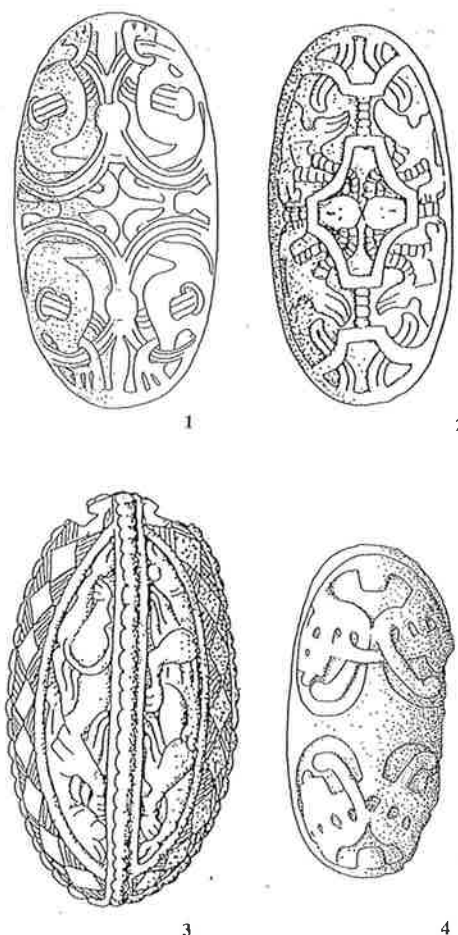


Fig. 5. Four examples of oval brooches.

brooches and from ornamental pins from this region and from Gotland. The logical complement to the beheaded body is the severed head. It occurs on an equal-armed brooch from Ärla in the province of Södermanland.

The third brooch type to mention is the oval brooch (Fig. 5). We are chronologically in a pre-cosmopolitan phase when long series of identical brooches of early Berdal type and Petersen 25 and 27 have not yet started to be produced. That the wide networks of the Viking Period were beginning to function is evidenced, however, by identical objects turning up in Central Norway and Bornholm. Also in Eastern Central Sweden a few oval brooches,

which in my opinion are imports from Southern Scandinavia, turn up. Here, however, I am only concerned with brooches of types which are exclusively found in Eastern Central Sweden and in the immediate neighbourhood. There are fourteen finds of regional types of oval brooches. Probably dating to before AD 800, undecorated oval brooches and oval brooches with decoration only of lines and bull's eyes make up a third of the finds. The remaining ten finds have a symmetrical division into two or four fields of decoration. In the latter case the fields are often rounded or oval. The ornamentation in the fields features identical or very similar figures. There are compact quadruped animals in profile projection. The head of the beast is rather small, the mouth moderate and the eyes big and bulging. There may be a tuft or crest. The bows and the thighs are pronounced and "beefy". The other category found regularly on the oval brooches is birds with curved necks. In some cases it is very obvious that the birds are meant to be of the Anatidae family. One oval brooch features a different, rather sign-like decoration. The details are not quite clear but the dominant element is a slightly bent and at one end distinctly curved rod or staff.

The last brooch type to be considered here is the profile quadruped brooch (Fig. 6). The animal rendered is the compact animal. There are three finds of this type. On the specimen depicted here the animal has a pair of wings on the back.

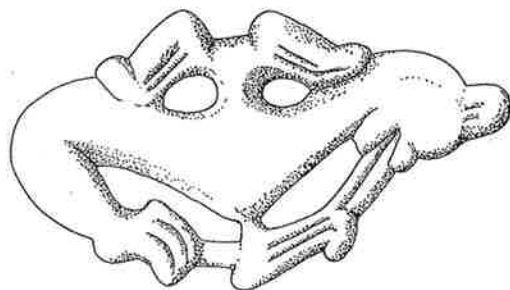


Fig. 6. A profile quadruped brooch.

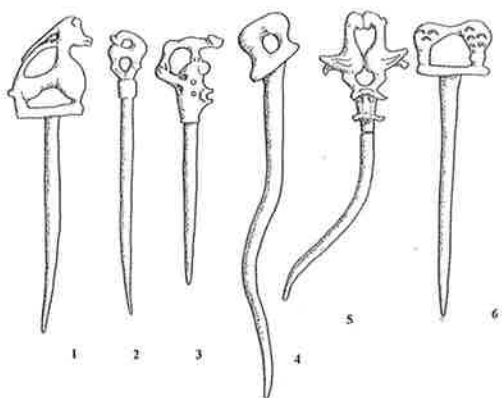


Fig. 7. Six ornamental dress pins with four different motifs.

Now we proceed from the brooches and consider some other categories of dress ornaments. We have a group of eight rather heavy ornamental dress pins (Fig. 7). The terminals have decorations in the form of single or double plastic representations of animals. The compact animal, as already mentioned, dominates. It appears with or without head and also the head is displayed separately. Six pins feature these variations of the compact animal theme. In addition there is also one pin with a pair of affronté birds (rather of the Anatidae type).

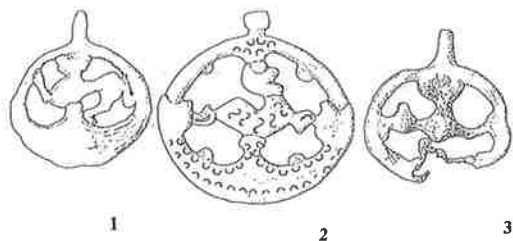


Fig. 8. Three pendants featuring the compact animal.

The last category to be presented here is that of mostly round or oval pelta-shaped pendants. It is the most numerous category of all from this phase. It is not unusual that more than one type of pendant occurs in the

same jewellery set. About 70 finds are known and the number of pendants is more than a hundred. In addition to these round and oval pelta-shaped pendants there are a number of related pendants with slightly different shapes. Of these different, not very numerous pendants, only the cruciform pendants will be mentioned briefly below.

The motif canon of the pendants closely follows the motifs we have already become familiar with. The majority of the pendants is featuring animal ornamentation with complete bodies. The compact animal in profile projection is the most common motif (Fig. 8). Seventeen slightly different variants of this theme are known. The shape of the animal is always the same, with very muscular thighs and bows and the head has a moderately small mouth but very big eyes. The posture is impressive and the animal is often rendered in dynamic motion.

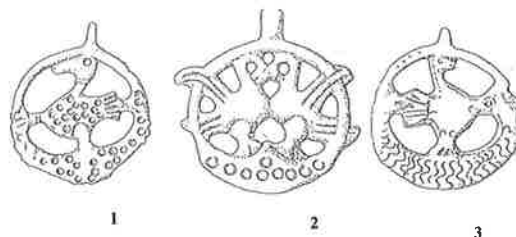


Fig. 9. Three pendants with the bird motif.

The other frequent animal motif is the bird motif (Fig. 9). Most often we meet two identical affronté birds in profile projection. However, single birds are also quite common. As with the other bird motifs we have encountered above, we can conclude that in not one single case is a bird of prey depicted – as is so common in earlier Scandinavian and Continental ornamentation. Birds of prey are still frequently used in ornamentation in the middle of the 8th century. A zoological classification of our birds on the pendants often tends to the Anatidae group as already stressed.

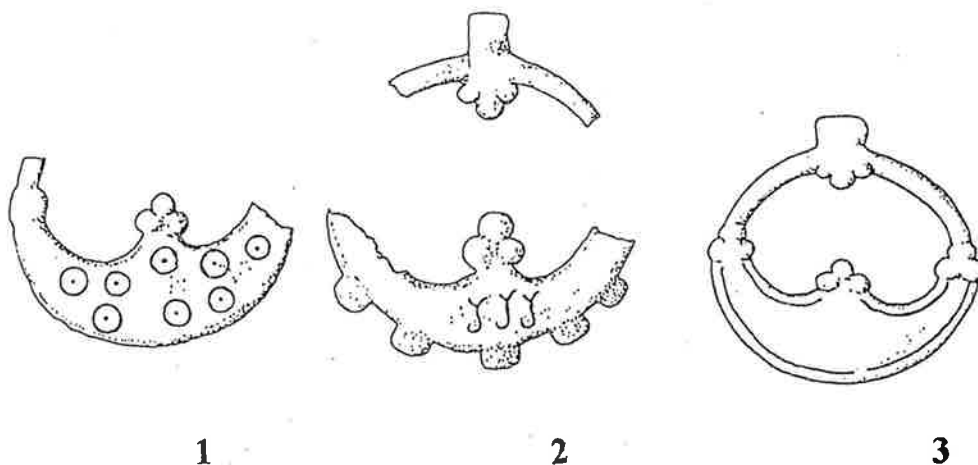


Fig. 10. Three pendants with the very stereotyped three buds motif.

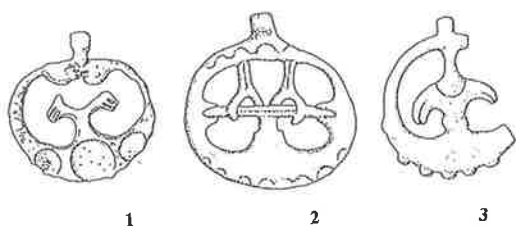


Fig. 11. Three pendants with the pair of feet or footprints motif.

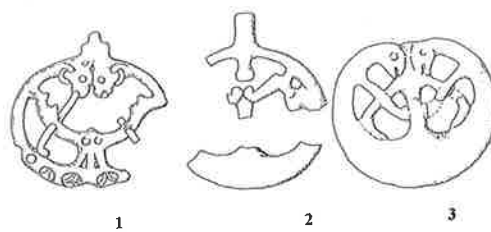


Fig. 12. Three pendants with the rod motif.

The remaining motifs on the pelta-shaped pendants have a distinctively sign-like quality. In another study of this ornamentation I have named them: three buds, feet and rods. The three buds sign may indeed be closely related to the phi sign already mentioned in connection with the button-on-bow brooch (Fig. 10). Another close connection may be the triquetra so familiar in earlier and in later ornamentation. The three buds sign is always located in the very centre of the ornamental field. It is also most striking that the sign always remains very simple and abstract, which also goes for the phi sign. Most often the three buds sign occurs without being combined with other motifs. In some cases it occurs in combination with the second most numerous sign-like motif: the feet motif.

As I have argued earlier (2006), the flap-like oblong shapes with two or three trailing

tips should be interpreted as a pair of feet or the traces of these feet (Fig. 11). This symbol should be connected to a supernatural potent being, the rendering of which was taboo. In my opinion during the late pre-Christian period gods and several other important powers of the world of religion and magic were not depicted except in very special circumstances. Mostly the feet motif is found separately without other symbols involved.

The last sign-like motif is the most diffuse of the three. I have called it the rod symbol (Fig. 12). It is a slightly curved rod with one end bent round. It is occasionally found also on other artefacts such as oval brooches. Sometimes the rods turn into snakelike animals and sometimes beasts bite the rods. There is another frequent element used as decoration on bronze jewellery, which in my opinion might also have a connection. I am referring here



	button-on-bow brooch	profile quadruped brooch	oval brooch	equal armed brooch	pin	pendant
phi sign(s)	X					
compact animal(s)		X	X		X	X
bird(s)			X		X	X
part(s) of butchered body				X		
beheaded animal				X	X	
head				X	X	
three buds						X
feet						X
rod(s)			X			X

Fig. 13. The relationship between artefact forms and motifs in Eastern Central Sweden ca. AD 800.

to the lambda-shaped stamp very frequently used on the pelta-shaped pendants but also frequently found on other types of jewellery dating to ca. AD 800.

We have now become acquainted with the majority of motifs on all bronze jewellery produced and consumed in Eastern Central Sweden ca. AD 800. I think that we can maintain

that the artisans dominating the production of bronze jewellery had developed a very distinct set of motifs, which turn up on all their products. The regularity with which these motifs occur justifies us in calling this a very special regional canon of motifs, different from what we find in other parts of Northern Europe (Fig. 13).

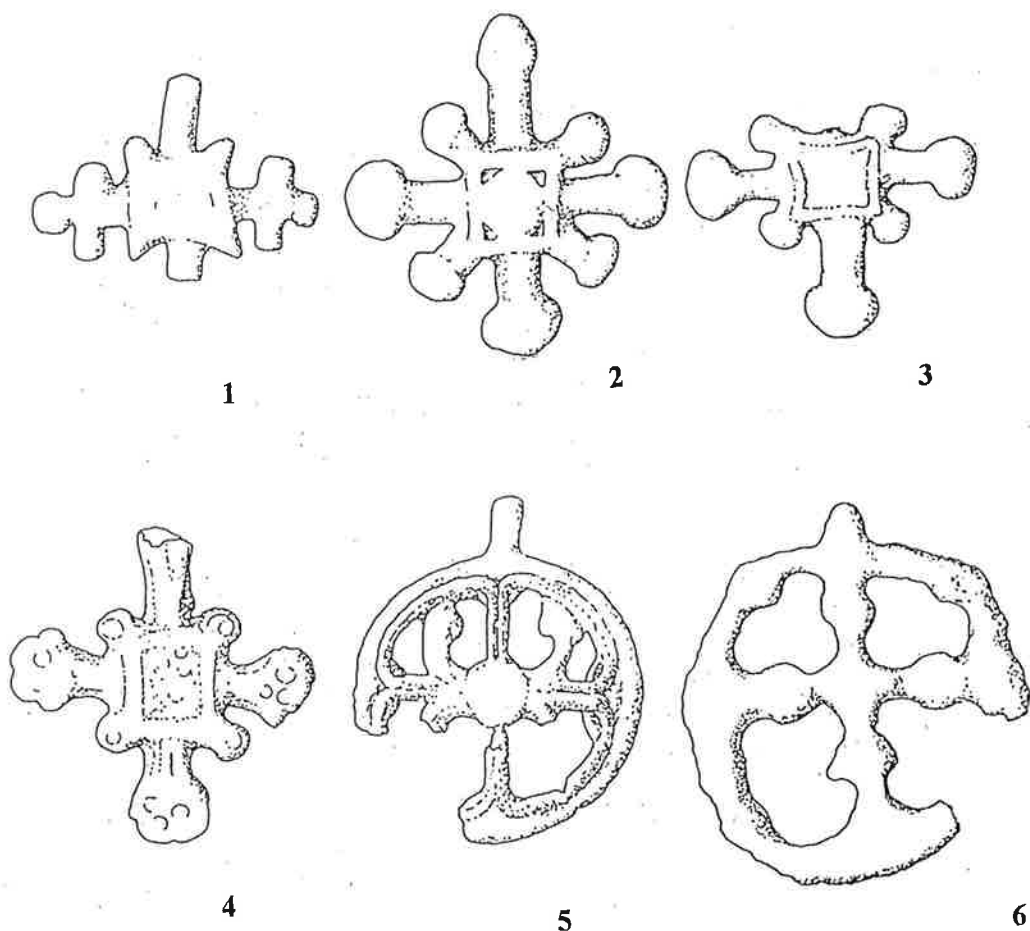


Fig. 14. Christian symbols on pendants in Eastern Central Sweden ca. AD 800.

There are nine different motifs. The different categories of dress accessories are quite firmly linked together by these motifs to form a homogeneous body. To this we may of course also add the style of design that is more or less unique in Scandinavia. We have noted some uncertainty in the case of the button-on-bow brooches. Do they really belong here? But the question must also be put: is it likely that there are there two contemporary groups of producers in Eastern Central Sweden one of which is exclusively specialized in the production of button-on-bow brooches?

Disregarding the problems of the button-on-bow brooches, the equal-armed brooches

are the most isolated ones but share with the ornamental pins the beheaded bodies, heads and beefy body parts. The compact animal and the birds link the oval brooches, the pins and the pendants very closely together. The pendants have the most varying ornamentation, including important sign-like motifs.

In another connection I have commented on the meaning of the different motifs. The main ideological content of the motifs is linked to powers of reproduction and fertility. A god or some other potent being plays a central role. I think the phi sign, the three buds sign and the foot sign can be related to this power. The birds and the compact ani-

mal have an ambiguous meaning. They might be closely related to this being, but they are also without doubt derived from a Christian iconographic canon.

The beheaded animal and the severed head are probably linked to some of the myths of the helpers of gods and men. In my opinion they belong to the pre-Christian religion. The close ties with Christianity are shown beyond doubt through the cruciform pendants (Fig. 14). They were almost certainly produced in the same contexts as the other categories of dress accessories treated here. The picture programme thus has one foot in the pre-Christian religion and the other in Christianity. However, we cannot maintain that there is evidence of a truly missionary style and picture programme. It is much more likely that the Christian elements occur here as parts of myths presenting Christianity as one potent religious and magic power among others. We must also consider the two different aspects of the producers and the consumers of these examples of ornamental metalwork. What has been said above mainly goes for the consumer aspect. In the milieu of the producers, however, Christianity may have been much more important. The cruciform pendants have such a strong message that I find it likely that there were Christians among the producers, perhaps a generation earlier than St. Ansgarius.

The pictorial art of the artisans of Eastern Central Sweden at the beginning of the Viking Period had developed a very specific canon of motifs and a very special design style. In my opinion these characteristics set this art apart from both earlier and later ornamental art. The conceptual framework of this art is very closely knit together. The elements of the framework include both traditional Old Norse religion and Christianity. The artisans were obviously highly motivated to share their ideas with the population of Eastern Central Sweden. In many ways their ideas make a complete break with earlier ornamental art.

The producers of this ornamental metalwork use a very limited set of motifs and design types. This could mean that we could call their ornamentation a picture programme. Information about these motifs and designs was probably kept as masterpieces or drawings to make certain that they did not change. After a generation or slightly more this group of artisans was replaced by other ones with a more cosmopolitan outlook, producing ornamental metalwork of the same types as all over Scandinavia.

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