SMALL THINGS
WIDE HORIZONS

STUDIES IN HONOUR OF
BIRGITTA HÅRDH

Edited by

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ARCHAEOPRESS ARCHAEOLOGY
Contents

Tabula 7
Preface 9

SILVER
The background and the early history of the neck rings of the Glazov type (also called Permian) and the beginning of East-West connections in Early Medieval Northern Europe in the 8th and 9th centuries 13
Johan Callmer

The social weight of silver in the Íslendingasögur and the Viking Age hoards 20
Fredrik Ekengren & Maria Domeij Lundborg

100 Viking Age hoards of Bornholm 27
Status, challenges and perspectives
Gitte Tarnow Ingvarsdson & Finn Ole Sonne Nielsen

Hoard and sinuous snakes 35
Significance and meaning of ring ornaments in Early Viking Age hoards from Gotland
Christoph Kilger

At the end of the silver flow 43
Islamic dirhams in Sigtuna and the shrinking Viking network
Mats Roslund

COINS
Viking-Age coins found in Sweden 51
Kenneth Jonsson

The earliest coin hoard of Lund 58
Jens Christian Moesgaard

Nicholas of St. Albans, Anketil and Alfvini—three Danish moneyers of English origin from the 12th and 13th centuries 64
Jørgen Steen Jensen

Three Crowns—Coin motive and (trans-)national symbol 69
Cecilia von Heijne

TRINKETS
Buttons as brooches 77
Morten Axboe

Hand rings 82
Torsten Capelle

Gold in Guleboda 86
A Byzantine gold coin from southern Småland
Martin Hansson

A little piece of silver from the Romele ridge area 91
Bertil Helgesson

Two brooch-knobs and a handful of thoughts 97
Karen Høilund Nielsen

Notices on the Notitia 104
A comparison between heraldic insignia of late Roman military units as depicted in Notitia Dignitatum and certain patterns on Scandinavian Migration Period jewellery like wrist clasps and relief brooches
Jan Peder Lamm

Close to Asgard – between West and South 110
Lars Larsson

Shield-formed pendants and solar symbols of the Migration period 115
Bente Magnus

“Vikings in Bavaria” 121
An unpublished spännbuckla from Munich and its history
Sonja Marzinzik & Michaela Helmbrecht

A female statement of power? 126
Some reflections on the Viking Age Yelets-brooch
Michael Neiß

A Hind to your Health! 132
Alexandra Pesch
BURIALS
Small items and major conclusions 141
A discussion of the findings from Gullhögen, Old Uppsala
Birgit Arrhenius with contributions by Ingmar Jansson

Uncovering more Death 150
Some recent excavations of graves from the Early Iron Age in Scania
Tony Björk

Vester Galsted – an inhumation grave at P. Frey’s field 160
Per Ethelberg

Rune-stones and the localisation of graves 169
Burial customs in the Conversion period
Anne-Sofie Gräslund

Pigdirici (Western Ukraine) and Havor (Gotland, Sweden)—two grave finds connected with Byzantine Christianity 175
Michael Müller-Wille

Pot and amulet pendants in the early mediaeval grave 130 of Frankfurt-Harheim 182
Uta von Freeden

CENTRALITY
Small things and wide horizons from a Birka perspective 229
Björn Ambrosiani & Ingrid Gustin

 Detecting Vester Kærby 237
Problems associated with the interpretation of metal-detector finds from the plough soil
Mogens Bo Henriksen & Helle W. Horsnæs

Early medieval trading centres and transport systems between Dorestad, Ribe and Wolin 245
The latest results of the Priority Research Programme “Harbours from the Roman Iron Age to the Middle Ages”
Hauke Jöns

Quedlinburg before the Ottonian kings 253
Approaches towards an early topography of power
Babette Ludowici

The relationship between Uppåkra and Lund—a status update 261
Ing-Marie Nilsson

The Trelleborg constructors 267
Anders Ödman

TRANSFORMATIONS
From replica to relic—Gokstad goes abroad 275
Bodil Petersson

Monumental make over? 281
Remains of a long dolmen close to the ship-setting Ale’s stones.
Bengt Söderberg & Björn Wallebom

Vikings and the Western Frontier 289
Jes Wienberg

DUST
Dust to dust 297
A short story of no-thing and every-thing
Jarl Nordbladh

List of contributors 301

FARMS AND FIELDS
What did the Wells conceal? 211
Hvissinge Vest – a Village from the Germanic Iron Age
Linda Boye

Medicinal herbs—useful and fatal 218
Early traces of medicinal plants in Europe
Ulla Lund Hansen

DUST
Dust to dust 297
A short story of no-thing and every-thing
Jarl Nordbladh

List of contributors 301

Birgitta Hårdh—a Bibliography 303
Tabula Gratulatoria

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Preface

The 16th of August 2015 is Professor Birgitta Hårdh’s 70th birthday. At the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History in Lund, an editorial group was set up for the publication of a Festschrift in her honour.

For several decades Birgitta has been an important staff member and researcher at the Department. Her doctoral dissertation was based on Viking Age silver deposits in southernmost Sweden. This is a field that she later developed in several national and international publications. As a result she is regarded as one of the leading experts on the Northern European Viking Age, engaged in diverse research projects both in Sweden and internationally, and she is a vital collaborator in various networks specializing in the Viking Age.

Through time, Birgitta has extended her research to comprise other periods in the Iron Age. This is particularly clear in her research on the major site of Uppåkra outside Lund. Here she has devoted articles to a detailed treatment of the finds from the Late Iron Age. She has also edited several of the volumes in the series Uppåkrastudier, with both national and international contributions.

Another special field examined by Birgitta Hårdh is the megalithic graves in south-west Scania. Both find material from individual sites and broader perspectives on the Middle Neolithic have been covered in these studies.

Besides doing research, Birgitta Hårdh has for several decades been a lecturer and professor, with long experience of teaching students and supervising doctoral candidates in the subject. She has also been director of studies and served on a number of committees in the Faculty of Arts and Theology.

A feature common to all Birgitta Hårdh’s research is that she has been able, through analysis of a body of finds, to broaden the perspective, not least geographically through her profound knowledge of phenomena in Northern Europe and indeed all of Europe. This book has been given the title Small Things – Wide Horizons, which is a good summary of Birgitta’s research hitherto.

Thanks to the large network of contacts to which Birgitta Hårdh belongs, the call for papers for this Festschrift met a great response. A total of forty titles were submitted to the proposed volume.

Through this Festschrift we wish to thank and honour Professor Birgitta Hårdh as a fine colleague and an excellent scholar. We all look forward to coming years and many more important contributions to archaeological research.

Lars Larsson, Fredrik Ekengren, Bertil Helgesson, Bengt Söderberg
Birgitta Härde
A female statement of power?

Some reflections on the Viking Age Yelets-brooch

Michael Neiß

Abstract:

Prehistoric pictures are a special sort of source material. Pictures are not random products—they were created to convey messages. This statement applies especially to the oral culture of the Viking Age. However, Viking Age pictures rarely occur as independent monuments. More often, they appear as animal art on metal artefacts. The starting point for my reflections is the grandiose brooch from Yelets, Russia. Here, we find an anthropomorphic figure with a bird-like body, possibly linking the object to the princely House of Rurik. Being a female dress adornment, we might ask whether it represents the might of the dynasty or the power of an individual female known from written sources.

When discussing the dress code of the Viking Age lady, archaeologists usually differentiate between dress adornments with different functions. Most essential were two oval brooches, which held the inner garment together. In addition, we sometimes find a third brooch that might be either circular, three foiled or equal armed. Due to their three-dimensional character, these brooches are best likened to interactive sculptures that change shape as the viewer changes perspective. In reference to their dramatic shape, archaeologists sometimes referred to them—rather anachronistically—as baroque shaped brooches (Capelle 1962). To judge from grave finds, this third brooch served to pin the woman’s outer garment together (perhaps in the form of a shawl or a cloak; cf. Jansson 1984, 75). Therefore, it should have been relatively easy for the bearer to take off her third brooch and to pass it around for closer inspection. Interestingly, it is mainly the third brooches that tend to develop ambiguous pictures, while oval brooches do not seem to undergo the same type of baroquisation (except of some subtypes of type P 51; cf. Jansson 1985, 70 f., Fig. 54, 55). Furthermore, specimens of silver remain an absolute exception (e.g. Eilbracht 1999, Katalog 313–14, Tafel 18). The reason might be that oval brooches were essential for pinning together the inner garment. As a result, they were less suited as a pawn in the social game. This phenomenon has an interesting forerunner in the increasing dimensions of Vendel Age disc-on-bow brooches, resulting in completely unmanageable sizes. Baroquisation can, thus, be taken as an indicator of a shift from the mundane into the cultic sphere (cf. Arrhenius 1962, 93, 96 f.). The transboundary nature of baroque shaped brooches also manifests itself in the fact that round brooches, on occasion, integrate features from other brooch types (e.g. Neiß 2012, Fig. 3). One may, therefore, ask whether they were produced primarily to serve practical or other purposes.

The following discussion is about a famous equal armed brooch that was found in Yelets (Fig. 1–3). In ancient times this was deep within Pecheneg territory. The Pechenegs were a Turkish speaking people and in constant struggle with the Kiev-Rus. Mårten Stenberger (1959, 95) considered the brooch to be a product of Central Sweden, while Holger Arbman declared it to be one of Ancient Rus (1960, 120; supported by Duczko 2004, 185 f.). By this, both happened to overlook the niello pattern on the reverse side of the brooch (Fig. 2). On Gotland, the same pattern occurs both on more (Cat. 6, 10 & 2) and on less famous jewellery (e.g. Thunmark-Nylén 1998, Tafel 8.2, 168.1, 163.6), suggesting a common workshop tradition. Niello blackening requires much practice. Therefore, the gradual advancement of niello in Gotlandic products might mirror the advancing skills of a single workshop—if not of a single individual. If this was the case, the Yelets brooch should be counted amongst the latter workshop products as vast areas of the relief décor have been replaced with niello (cf. Thunmark-Nylén 2006, 393, 419). As to the dating, the Klinta brooch seems to be a reasonably good parallel (Cat. 6). Here, Lena Thunmark-Nylén identified clues that point to the late 900s. After that, the brooch had been in use during the 1000s (i.e. Period VIII:3; 2006, 62 f., 86 f., 683, 692). At Yelets, we also find a combination of wear and repair that suggests extended use.

It would take volumes to describe all motifs in the Yelets-brooch. Instead, I will restrict myself to one design (Fig. 3) that has been strangely overlooked by the scientific community (cf. Neiß 2005, Neiß et al. 2012). It will be referred to as the chimera, as it combines a trident, resembling a bird, with an anthropomorphic head crowned by a Napoleon-like headgear. To proceed from the general to the specific, interspecies crossovers constitute a generic phenomenon within Viking Age art, whereas chimeras with Napoleon-like headgear are especially frequent on Gotland (e.g. Thunmark-Nylén 1998, Tafel 2, 8 a–e). The closest parallels to the Yelets tridents however, originate from Russia. Many occurred in contexts that suggest a function as princely emblems (Edberg 2001, 6; Duczko 2004, 228 ff.; Beleckij 2011, 44). Yet, our oldest example of a Rurikid emblem comes from Gotland, more specifically in the shape of a bident that had been carved into an Arabic coin from 878/879 (Cat. 3; Melnikova 1996, 73; Duczko 2004, 230 f., 233 f.). The Gotlandic bident associates to
A female statement of power?

He pointed to a pendant from Chilovo (Fig. 4; Paulsen 1953, 173; cf. Balodis 1948, 360). This is quite remarkable, as Chilovo features the Yelets design—at least by half. The main difference would be the anthropomorphic head, crowned with a Napoleon-like headgear that seems to associate to the Gotlandic gripping beast. It may be more than mere coincidence that Gotland also holds a strong tradition of chimeras! Meanwhile, the meaning behind this blend of motifs remains obscure (cf. Thunmark-Nylén 2006, 400). In Viking Age art, it was not entirely unusual to mix the volucrine with the anthropomorphic. Our most famous examples occur on a Gotlandic picture stone (Cat. 1) and the Birka sword scabbard (Cat. 11). Some researchers associated these with themes from Norse mythology, such as Óðinn’s transformations (Ambrosiani 2001b, 12, 21; Nylén & Lamm 1978, 49–52) and Wayland’s flying machine (Lindqvist et al. 1941, 95; Oehrl 2009, 553). Meanwhile, folklore motifs from other nearby parts of Europe, like the prince who turned into a falcon, have been widely overlooked (cf. Aleksandr Nikoláevič Afanás’ev’s

As mentioned before, the Yelets-brooch belongs to the female sphere. Therefore, one might ask whether women in Ancient Rus used personal emblems, and under what conditions. Peter Paulsen made mention of tales, according to which princess Olga made use of emblems. As a parallel, he pointed to a pendant from Chilovo (Fig. 4; Paulsen 1953, 173; cf. Balodis 1948, 360). This is quite remarkable, as Chilovo features the Yelets design—at least by half. The main difference would be the anthropomorphic head, crowned with a Napoleon-like headgear that seems to associate to the Gotlandic gripping beast. It may be more than mere coincidence that Gotland also holds a strong tradition of chimeras! Meanwhile, the meaning behind this blend of motifs remains obscure (cf. Thunmark-Nylén 2006, 400). In Viking Age art, it was not entirely unusual to mix the volucrine with the anthropomorphic. Our most famous examples occur on a Gotlandic picture stone (Cat. 1) and the Birka sword scabbard (Cat. 11). Some researchers associated these with themes from Norse mythology, such as Óðinn’s transformations (Ambrosiani 2001b, 12, 21; Nylén & Lamm 1978, 49–52) and Wayland’s flying machine (Lindqvist et al. 1941, 95; Oehrl 2009, 553). Meanwhile, folklore motifs from other nearby parts of Europe, like the prince who turned into a falcon, have been widely overlooked (cf. Aleksandr Nikoláevič Afanás’ev’s
Russian Folklore Archive). Others have been inclined to regard the Napoleon-like headgear of the chimera as a gender label (two braids = female, Helmbrrecht 2011, 211; cf. Cat. 5). If that had been true, the Yelets-figure would corroborate Björn Ambrosiani’s theory that the Rurikid emblem alluded to Frigg and Freya and their ability to turn into falcons (2001, 21). In fact, it does not require much imagination to see why these goddesses would have been ideal role models for a leading female like Olga of Kiev (cf. the following: Simek 1993, 90 f., 93 f.; Kristoffersen & Lindstrøm 1997, 198 f. with references; Arrhenius 2009 on Freya’s jewels). But before getting carried away by lofty hypotheses, we have to overcome some problems in regard to source criticism: First, gender determinations from animal art are notoriously precarious. There are no guarantees that prehistoric gender categories would match our modern notions (Back Danielsson 2007). Second, we do not know whether the hair style was intended to indicate gender. Alternatively, one might speculate that the human hairstyle was meant to accentuate the chimera’s human qualities. Third, motif identifications based on reconstructed life-world phenomena (such as the Viking period dress) have little validity compared to parallels that stand on firm archaeological ground (cf. about methodology: Neiß 2011; Neiß 2012). Therefore, some caution seems advisable when it comes to mythological interpretations that are founded on a reconstructed female hair style which happens to be more or less hypothetical in the first place.

Another potential Olga-attribution referred to coins that render what seems to be a hooded falcon. This association was based partly on her alleged delight in falconry and partly on what seems to be a Greek cross on top of the hood—which could allude to Olga’s conversion in late life (Lindberger 2001, 62, 70; Cat. 4). Roman Kovalev offered a somewhat different explanation: In our written sources Olga associates herself remarkably often with different birds, including the falcon. This might reflect her deep involvement in the cult of Freya. Thus, Olga could have been serving as a religious leader even before her conversion, i.e. within a state cult that revolved around Freya’s Slavonic counterpart (2012, 491, 495, 497, 508, 510 f., 515 f.). In 2008, a silver pendant featuring an identical hood (Fig. 5) was found in a chamber grave at Pskov. It also contained a coin pendant (953/954), dating the burial between 960 and the early 970s. Was the deceased, hence, a local representative of the Grand prince—i.e. Svyatoslav or Yaropolk (cf. Beleckij 2011, 47, with the following: Rispling 1987; Lindberger 2001; Kovalev 2012, 482 f.)? In my view, the use of a Greek cross should contradict this idea insofar as it seems incompatible with the traditional view of the Grand prince as a stubborn heathen (cf. Nestor et al., Primary Chronicle, 6456–6463). The reverse side of the Pskov pendant binds a bident to a key-like motif. Sergej Vasil’evič Beleckij suggested it to be a forerunner to the Vladimir trident, as his mother Malusha served as a householder to Olga (kliuchnitsa, literally ‘key bearer’). That seems compatible with the old idea that Vladimir needed to add an extra tag to his bident, in reference to his low birth (Edberg 2001, 7, cf. the following: Duczko 2004, 232, Beleckij 2011, 44 ff., cf. Nestor et al., Primary Chronicle, 6486–6488). According to Kovalev, the trident should have emerged after 970, when Svyatoslav created his sons princes (2012, 471 f.). After Vladimir’s rise to power, the trident was handed down to his descendants, who created new versions of their own (Edberg 2001, 6 ff.; cf. Bjeletskij 1998, 200 ff.). Here, one might ask why Vladimir would have been eager to advertise his maternal pedigree. According to Kovalev, it would make more sense if the Pskov bident symbolised the title held by Svyatoslav, while the key—being an established symbol of female authority—referred to Olga’s regency. As a possible parallel to the motif combination at Pskov, he referred to the Kiev seal (see above), which combines Svyatoslav’s bident to a Greek cross, presumably representing the converted Olga. He also put the Pskov pendant in connection to some administrative reforms which Olga implemented.

Fig. 6. Sable chape from the wooden sarcophagus inside the Church of the Tithes (Catalogue No 12). After Paulsen 1953.
in 947 within her personal realm, turning the man in the Pskov grave into a tax collector. As a consequence, the two sides of the pendant would mirror Olga’s two roles, i.e. as regent of Kiev and as a regional princess. However, some question marks remain before Kovalev’s theory can even be regarded as the definitive one: To begin with, there is his claim that the key-symbol was unique to Pskov (2012, 465). This might be challenged by the potential key on the Chilovo pendant (Fig. 4). Assuming my reading is correct (cf. Arbman 1940, Tafel 275 f.), one might also ask why the Chilovo key—presuming it to be a symbol of female guardianship—occurs without direct attachment to a male emblem. Second, Kovalev tried to exclude Olga from the use of tridents on the grounds that we do not know of any other princesses that used them. This might not hold for source critical reasons, as most personal attributions only happen to be qualified guesses. In fact, there seem to be plenty of unattributed emblems left for all the princesses in Rus! And finally, why should Olga have found it necessary at all to restrict herself to the use of exactly three emblems? According to Nestor’s Primary Chronicle (6476), Svjatoslav went on campaign in 968, leaving Vladimir in the care of his mother. Thus, it seems advisable to keep all options open and to allow for the possibility that Vladimir’s emblem was somehow inspired by Olga (cf. Beleckij 2011, 47).

A second parallel to the Yelets-brooch trident comes from Kiev. During the demolition of the Church of the Tithes, archaeologists rescued the remains of a wooden sarcophagus in the western part of the nave, containing a saber-like weapon. Alongside with a crowning bird head, the scabbard had a silver chape with niello, featuring a trident identical to Yelets (Fig. 6; Cat. 12; Paulsen 1953, 82 f.). Mikhail Konstantinovič Karger (1940) attributed the grave to Rostislav I (1110–1167). This theory is still relevant insofar, as the church served for princely burials at least until the end of the 1000s. As to the rest, Karger’s attribution founds on much involved substantial guesswork, as he tried to correlate the number of existing sarcophagi with written information about church burials (1940, 17 f.; cf. Korzuhina 1950, 69 f.). Compared to that, Gali Fedorovna Korzuhina’s analysis of grave goods seems more reliable, dating the weapon to first half of the 1000s—more specifically, to the reign of Yaroslav (c. 978–1054) which began in 1019. Korzuhina sought to support her interpretation by parallels from Vienna (i.e. a sable with different variations of the same trident, Cat.14) and Turaida (i.e. a chape with a similar production technique, but a differing middle tag on the trident, Cat.13; 1950, 84). More recently, Fedir Androshchuk et al. (1996) suggested that the wooden sarcophagus had been erected outside the western church wall during the early 1000s. Even though their C14 dates might be questioned, recent excavations delivered alternative proof in favor of their dating: First, the ambulatory had already been completed during the late 900s. Second, the bottom level of the wooden sarcophagus corresponds with the inside stone sarcophagi, whereas the ‘pre-Christian’ tombs outside the building sub-pass the church foundations (kind information by Denis Jolshin 2014). Our final piece of the Yelets puzzle emerged during a recent post-survey of the Tithes materials, i.e. as two brick tiles, one featuring a trident, the other a triquetra (Jolshin 2012). This finding points towards the possibility that the Rurikid trident and the triquetra motif, as seen on the Yelets brooch (Fig. 1), could be connected in a higher sense as well. Finally, we should mention that elements of the Yelets-design also appear in courtly fabrics of Sasanian style. Interestingly, woven silk fragments of the same type were also sewn into the famous Scandinavian dress that was recently found in a chamber grave at Pskov (Cat. 15)—i.e. yet another aristocratic milieu from Viking Age Russia!

The above discussion produced plenty of circumstantial evidence to conclude that the Yelets brooch was made for a woman with close ties to the Rurikids, possibly during the second half of the 900s or the early 1000s. As Nancy Wicker stressed, ancient concepts of personhood were such that the actions of an upper class female fell back on her entire clan. Thus, we should perceive the mere act of commissioning that sumptuous brooch as a statement of might and power. Special consideration should also be given to the role of women in the building of alliances, as well as the function of female heirlooms within the social interplay (cf. 2012, 899 f.). In fact, Yelets displays signs of wear and repair that might indicate that it had been passed down to later generations. As Viking Age craftspeople were able to travel considerable distances (Callmer 2002), there would have been no need for our female patron to seek out the gold smith. Having said that, we should neither exclude the possibility of a precious gift bestowed upon her, either by one individual or by several people. To mention an interesting parallel from Iceland, where the national assembly commissioned a valuable silver brooch in honor of their greatest skald (Snorre Sturlason, Sagan af Haraldi konungi gráfeld, chap. 16, see Finnur Jónsson 1911, 104). Recalling the Gotlandic details of the Yelets brooch, it would be tempting to speculate on a diplomatic gift. And yet, I do not claim that the Rurikid emblem derived from Gotland. Neither do I assert that our brooch was made on behalf of Olga, by the Gotlandic althing or, for that matter, during Vladimir’s exile. Nonetheless, it seems to me that all clues combined—i.e. material value, craftsmanship and décor—point towards a princely item. Provided, the time had become ripe to use animal art as personal or proto-heraldic emblems (cf. Kleingärtner 2007, 214 about the Hiddesee-style in Denmark), it seems a fair assumption that the Yelets-brooch was designed with reference to the same person as the Chilovo pendant and the Kiev chape. We will probably never know how this princely item ended up on Pecheneg territory. Those who wish to speculate further on the subject may turn to Nestor’s Primary Chronicle, as it contains plenty of skirmishes, wars and alliances between Kievan and Pechenegs that might illustrate a change of ownership.

Acknowledgements

Generous access to the original brooch was provided by Rafael Minasyan and Ecaterina A. Shablanina. I also thank Denis D. Jolshin (The State Hermitage Museum in St.
Petersburg) for information about his research on the Church of the Tithes and Michail Vasilev (The Archaeological Center of the Pskov Region) for information on the Pskov-pendant. The project was financially supported by The Helge Ax:son Johnson Foundation, The Swedish Institute, Svenska Formminnesföreningen and The Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities (Montelius travel grant).

Abbreviations

GE—The State Hermitage Museum (Государственный Эрмитаж), Saint Petersburg, Russia.

KhMW—Museum of Art History (Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien), Vienna, Austria.


Catalogue

1. Sword chape. Copper alloy. Sweden, Uppland, Adelsö, Björkö, ‘The Black Earth’ (Svarta jorden), Södra tomten (Ambrosiani 2001b, Fig. 1.2–1.3).

2. Box-shaped brooch. Copper-alloy with gilding, silver-plating with niello. Sweden, Gotland, Lye parish, Ljugarn (SHM 2829; Neîß 2010, Fig. 17b).

3. Coin. Silver. With a secondary bident carving. Sweden, Gotland, Tingstäde parish, presumed to originate from Austris, but actually found at Västris (SHM 8211; Neîß 2010, Fig. 17a).

4. Coin. Silver. With gilding and niello. Russia, Vorneoréégion (Воронежская область), Yelets (Esen; Fig. 1–3; GE 997-1; Stenberger 1959, Fig. 1–2; Armbn 1960, Fig. 2–6).


7. Equal armed brooch. Silver with gilding and niello. Russia, Vorneoregion (Воронежская область), Yelets (Esen; Fig. 1–3; GE 997-1; Stenberger 1959, Fig. 1–2; Armbn 1960, Fig. 2–6).


9. Pendant. Silver with niello. Russia, Pskov Region (Псковская область), Pskov (Псков), Chamber grave 3 (Larsson manuscript; including a reconstruction of the pattern).

10. Penannular brooch. Silver with gilding and niello. Sweden, Gotland, Lärbro parish, Hammars III (Lindqvist et al. 1941, Tafel 30; Ambrosiani 2001b, Fig. 1.4).

11. Picture stone. Sweden, Gotland, Lärbro parish, Hammars III (Lindqvist et al. 1941, Tafel 30; Ambrosiani 2001b, Fig. 1.4).

12. Sable chape. Silver with niello. Ukraine, Kiev, Church of the Tithes (Десятинна церква), the wooden sarcophagus (Fig. 6; Korzuhina 1950, рис. 1; Paulsen 1953, Abb. 104).

13. Sable chape. Silver with niello. Latvia, Livonia, Turaida, Kurgan no 22 (Korzuhina 1950, рис. 2; Paulsen 1953, Abb. 93–95).

14. Sable scabbard. Copper alloy with gilding(?). Austria, Vienna, “Säbel Karls des Großen” (KhMW SK-WSXIII-5; Korzuhina 1950, рис. 7; Paulsen 1953, Abb. 96).

15. Textile (from a female dress of Scandinavian type?). Woven silk. Russia, Pskov Region (Pсковская область), Pskov (Псков), Chamber grave 3 (Larsson manuscript; including a reconstruction of the pattern).

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