CHARLOTTE HEDENSTIERNA-JONSON, MARIANNE VEDELER,
AND AMICA SUNDSTRÖM†

22. Sequins and Other 'Bling' in Viking Age Fashion

▼ **ABSTRACT** The textile material from Birka's graves is both well-known and often referenced. Not least, the cloth material in the burials has formed the basis for reconstructions of high-status fashion during the Viking Age. In addition to fine fabrics of high quality, these graves also include a variety of decorative elements interpreted as adornments consisting of glass and glittering stones that probably served as sequins. In some graves, they have been found as cut-glass pieces and loose stones, while in other graves they are still framed in a kind of passementerie work or as parts of embroidery. By considering these sequins and other 'bling' within their context, both in relation to the costume but also to other objects in the grave, we want to give a more nuanced picture of how decorative elements such as these may have been used and perceived in their time.

▼ **KEYWORDS** Viking Age, adornment, costume, embellishment, bling, charismatic objects

The textile material from the Viking Age town of Birka in present-day Sweden is both well-known and often referenced. Not least, the cloth material in the burials has formed the basis for reconstructions of high-status fashion during the Viking Age. In addition to fine fabrics of high quality, these graves also include a variety of decorative elements interpreted as adornments consisting of silk embellishments and metal thread passementeries, together with glass and glittering stones (mainly mica) that probably served as sequins; in other words 'bling'. Due to preservation factors, bling details may well be the only thing left of the costume as metal threads form a recurring element. This means that the function and meaning

Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson • (charlotte.hedenstierna-jonson@arkeologi.uu.se) Associate Professor in archaeology with main focus on martial society, material culture, and burials in the Viking Age. Uppsala University and Swedish History Museum
Marianne Vedeler • (marianne.vedeler@khm.uio.no) Professor in archaeology with particular focus on textiles, clothing, and accessories from the Iron age to the Middle Ages, Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.
Amica Sundström† • (amica.sundstrom@shm.se) Worked as senior curator of the textile collection at the Swedish History Museum, with particular in-depth knowledge of weaving and reconstruction of archaeological and historical textiles.

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of the decorations is not always so easy to decipher, but by considering bling in its context, we want to give a more nuanced picture of how decorative elements such as these may have been used and perceived in their time.

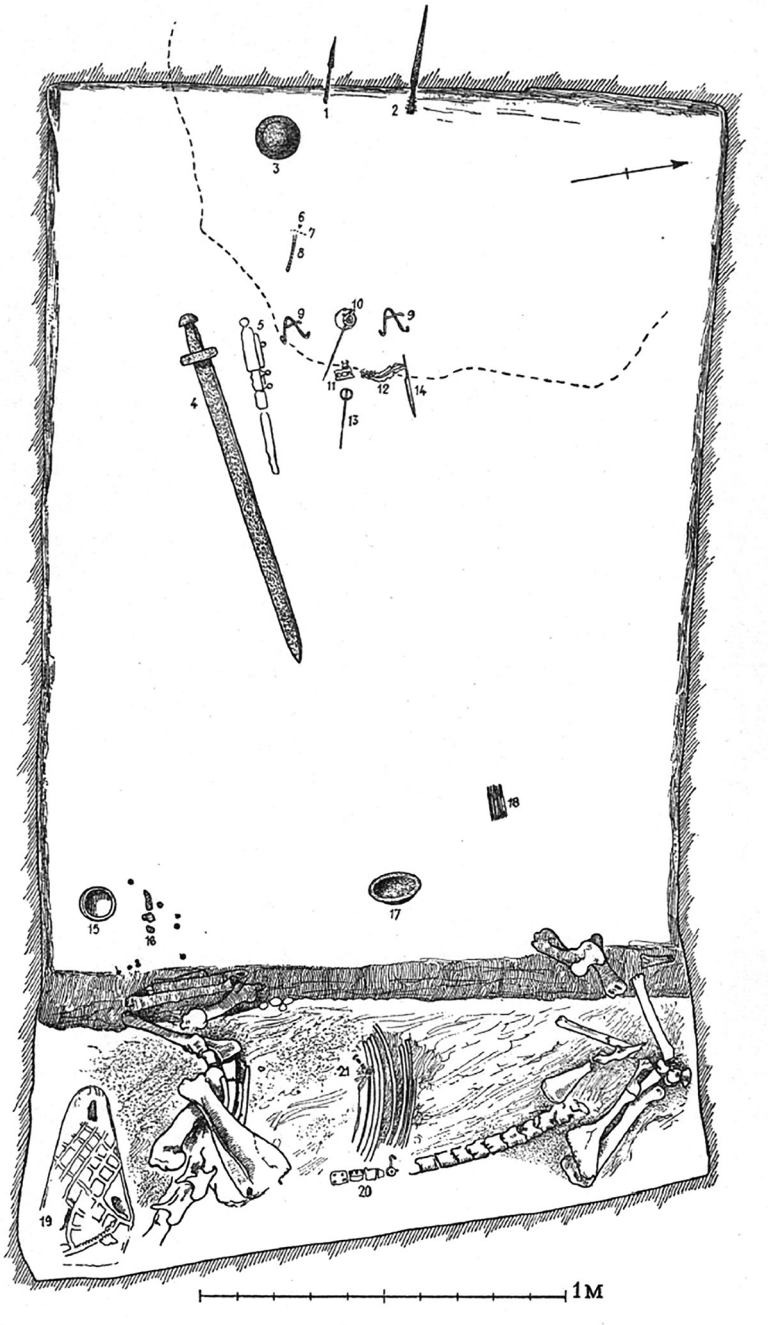

Figure 22.1. Plan of chamber burial Bj832 by Harald Olsson, based on the original field documentation. The drawing accompanied the initial publication of the burial. (Arbman 1943, 303.)

Glass Sequins and their Contexts

Despite constituting the main focus of this study, sequins are a somewhat overlooked category of embellishments. In some graves, they have been found as cut-glass pieces and loose stones, while in other graves they are framed in a kind of passementerie work or as parts of embroideries. Other types of decorations have often been given more attention, such as tablet-woven bands of silk and metal thread, passementeries and appliqués of silk. Embellishments of all types often occurred together and could either be sewn-on or suspended, or a combination of both. While embroideries, silk appliqués, and woven bands usually are examples of the former, beads, sequin pendants, and decorative knotwork were attached suspended. Intricate passementerie braid work, silk fabric, or textile cords could be used as borders or end pieces, characterized by the lack of support fabric behind the decoration, something that also affects the interpretation of the garment.

Whereas pieces of mica were identified as the equivalent of sequins (Geijer 1938, 107), the pieces of clear cut-glass from Birka's burials were initially recorded either as mirrors or unspecified lead foil, *Bleifolie* (Arbman 1937, 61–62). It was only in the later systematic examination of different object categories from the graves that Jan Peder Lamm (1984) identified parts of the glass material as sequins. In contrast to the mica material, the glass fragments do not appear as clearly in connection with embroideries and passementerie work. Instead, they have been found scattered in the area around the deceased's head, at their waist, or at their feet. So far, mirror glass has been identified in eleven of Birka's over-1200 investigated graves (Lamm 1984, table 25:1). Of these, five are archaeologically assessed as female graves, one is a child's grave, and four are double graves where the objects suggest that the buried were a man and a woman. The remaining grave, long considered to be the only male exception, now needs to be revised as the skeleton in the grave has been genetically determined as female (Hedenstierna-Jonson and others 2017; Price and others 2019, supplementary material, 4; for a reconstruction of the clothing see Wåhlander and others 2020). Mirror glass could thus have been a feature particular of female dress. The spatial distribution of this material in the graves suggests that the sequins were not necessarily linked to a specific type of clothing detail, but could have adorned everything from headdresses to footside borders. An interesting comparison can be found in a tomb in tenth-century Kyiv. Here, a woman was buried in a chamber grave of a similar type to those in Birka, and among her grave goods were objects from Slavonic regions, Byzantium, and Scandinavia. A little to the side of the woman was a group of objects, consisting of a wooden box, a bowl,

a pair of scissors, and tweezers. Among the objects was also a set of twenty-seven small pieces of cut glass in different colours (blue, brown, and yellow), intended to be sewn onto clothing. Their placement in the chamber, however, indicates that they are the remains of a richly decorated piece of cloth placed in the grave as part of the burial goods (Ivakin 2005, 2007).

Sequins and Other Bling, the Example of Birka Grave Bj 832

A burial not noted in Lamm's study, but which contains a highly interesting collection of textile material, including sequins and other types of decorations, is Birka burial Bj 832 (Fig. 22.1). The grave, following the typical chamber burial practice, was located in a part of the burial ground containing some of Birka's most extensively furnished and well-known burials (area 1C, see Gräslund 1980). There are no preserved remains of the skeleton, but based on the grave goods and costume-related jewellery, the interred is assumed to be male. The grave goods include a sword, fighting knife, two shields and arrow heads, as well as a pair of scissors and the remains of a small wooden casket with simple iron mounts. A fragment of a Samanid dirhem provides an approximate dating to *c.* 900 CE. On a ledge at the foot end of the grave, a horse had been placed, richly equipped with, among other things, an elaborate headstall of leather, decorated with numerous bronze fittings (Arbman 1943, 303–04; Arwidsson 1986, 137–38).

However, it is the costume and its decorations that are of particular interest here. Fragments of textile, passementeries, and other decorations were located in the middle of the head end of the chamber, together with two ringed pins. One of the pins is of silver, richly decorated and of a type reminiscent of Insular material but unique in execution (Duczko 1984). The second pin is of a more ordinary bronze type, and smaller in size (Graham-Campbell 1984, 36). According to the burial plan (Fig. 22.1), two A-shaped passementerie decorations in silver wire were placed on each side of the silver pin. They are preserved in lumps that also contain fragments of silk tabby weave, and degraded wool fabric and wool fibre, that possibly represent remains of pile fabric. In her extensive work on the Birka textiles, Agnes Geijer (1938, 142–43) suggests that they constitute silver ornaments for the shoulders, but also declares that it is difficult to find a constructive explanation for them. In between the two ringed pins, there is an assortment of remarkable textile finds, in the catalogue briefly summarized as remains of silver bands with knot borders, other band remains, and fittings (Arbman 1943, 304). A more comprehensive report of the former is given by Geijer (1938, 120), who describes it as an end piece of a knotted border, embroidered with silver on fine taffeta silk (Fig. 22.2). The fragment, measuring 4 × 3 cm, is in a tightly woven

Figure 22.2. Textile fragment from Bj 832 with knotted border, embroidered with silver and inserted discs of mica on fine taffeta silk. (Photo by Ola Myrin, Swedish History Museum/SHM (CC BY).)

Figure 22.3. Embroidered deer in gold thread with silver passementeries, and fragmented embroidery in gold and mica pieces, and below loose sequins in mica and stone. (Photos by Ola Myrin, Swedish History Museum/SHM (CC BY).)

silk tabby. The fabric is double, and the passementerie edging, made of silver wire wrapped around a core, has been attached between the two layers. Both sides of the fabric are decorated with interlaces of fine double silver wire, forming a pattern of round arches, in which small discs of mica have been inserted.

In close proximity to the elaborately decorated fragment, there were two pieces of embroidery in gold thread, embellished with sequins (Fig. 22.3). The best preserved of the two is in the shape of a backwards facing deer, standing on a passementerie interlace of silver thread. The motif is most likely a symbol of Christ, and the pure heart of the deer/Christ is marked in the embroidery with an inlaid small piece of shimmering white quartz. The other one is fragmentary, possibly a deer or other animal, but it also includes sequins. In addition, there are a number of loose sequins of different shapes, in mica or glass, as well as two small stones in red and blue. The deer has been sewn onto a tabby woven silk fabric, which continues on both sides of the passementerie interlace. The embroidery has a close parallel in another Birka grave (Bj 735), where two similar deer in silver thread have been sewn onto either side of a composite samitum silk fabric (Geijer 1938, 118; Arbman 1943, 256–57). Like their gold counterpart, the hearts of the silver deer are marked by sequins. The fabric ends just after the deer, making it look like a small pillow, but it is likely that the fabric has continued and is actually the end piece of something hanging. In both graves, the double-sided embroidered decoration was found in the area of the upper body. Therefore, it was probably not attached to a belt, as previously suggested, but could rather have been suspended from some sort of headgear or be part of the closing device on e.g., a caftan (cf. Geijer 1938, 167; Larsson 2007, 102).

Burial Bj 832 contains a separate concentration of passementerie knot braids and four glass beads, which may represent the remains of some kind of headgear, as it is located 'above' what is perceived as the area of the shoulders and breast. Finally, there is a single square-shaped knotted interlace of silver wire decorating the sheath of the fighting knife, located on the right-hand side of the interred. To reconstruct the outfit based on the remains in the grave is difficult. The exact stratigraphy of the finds is not known, but the concentrated distribution of dress-related finds, together with a knife to one side and to the other, a sword and fighting knife, likely suspended from a belt or such, may indicate that the deceased was buried in a seated position (e.g. Robbins 2004). There is little fabric preserved, which makes it difficult to get an idea of the actual design of the garments. It may tentatively be suggested that the buried man was dressed in an open caftan of woollen fabric with decorations on the shoulders and upper chest. He wore a headgear of silk, decorated with appliques and beads, and with hanging silk bands adorned at the ends with metal thread embroidery and sequins. Whatever the design of the costume, the presence of silk, the abundant decorations and the impressive headdress show that it must have been eye-catching and truly spectacular.

Charismatic Bling Objects and Small Tools of Power

What function might the sequins and other 'bling' in Viking-Age Fashion have had, in addition to looking good? The first that comes to mind is the display of social status and power. It can be argued that social identity is shaped in relation to larger social and cultural constructions (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). Hence, our sense of belonging also acts as a factor of political power (Hedeager 2000; Pohl 1998; Røstad 2016). During the Viking Age, political constellations shaped larger administrative units in Scandinavia. Growing mobility, the development of trade networks, and urban development were potentially creating opportunities for the formation of new regional identities and thereby possibly also for new political constellations. The people living in Scandinavia were experiencing cultural meetings across ethnic and religious borders. In continental Europe, precious stones and metals were used as decoration on vestments as well as on reliquaries and books. They were not only decorative but also loaded with symbolic meaning. The use of sequins and other 'bling' in Viking-Age Birka can be seen as a parallel to the symbolic use of beads, pearls, and precious stones sewn onto later medieval symbolic clothing in medieval Europe, where each stone and colour referred to religious as well as magical connotations. Lavishly decorated vestments from the thirteenth century have even been seen as political tools and instruments of reform (Miller 2014, 9; Nødseth 2018, 200). We do not argue that the decorations on clothing from Birka was part of the same visual symbolic language that later spread throughout Europe during the medieval period.

The agency of what we might call 'charismatic objects' depends on culture-specific cosmological ideas (Vedeler 2018, 9). However, the symbolic system displayed in the lapidaries of medieval scholars like Marbod (*c.* 1035–1087) and Albertus Magnus (*c.* 1200–1280) was based on a way of thinking that was already developed in antiquity, the animated cosmos. In his book *Mineralia* or the *Book of Minerals*, Albertus Magnus explains the virtues and powers of precious stones, minerals, metals, and pearls. Like many other less-known lapidaries, his work is founded on classical works like Pliny's *Natural History* and Aristotle's *Lapidarium* (Magnus 1967, 253–71). During the Viking Age, people like Jabir ibn Hayyan advanced the same idea of an animated cosmos, where volatile substances are 'spirits' and metals are 'bodies', in a world where planets influence the 'growing' of metals and their individual powers and properties (Wyckoff 1967, 280). Ibn Hayyan was connected with the court of Harun al-Rashid in Baghdad during the tenth century, at a time when the city was a renowned trading centre, as well as a centre of science and culture. Luxury goods from a large Persian area, including Baghdad, was exported to Scandinavia in the ninth and tenth centuries (Vedeler 2014). It is not unlikely that some ideas and ways of thinking were accompanying the thin stream of luxury goods to the northern areas (Hedenstierna-Jonson 2023, cf. the ideas put forth by Hägg 1984). According to Max Weber, the idea of objectified charisma is thriving in a belief system where spirits, gods, and demons control the world. In this way of thinking, a form of magical, transcendental, or religious power endowed with volition can enter a concrete object and become the source of awe (Weber 1968, 1136; Spencer 1973, 341). The idea of magical powers lingering in physical objects is displayed in the many medieval histories of powerful swords as well as the display of broken swords in a number of Viking graves (Aannestad 2018). If the sequins and stones of the Birka graves were seen as charismatic objects, then they were probably also functioned as a tool of power.

Bling as a Real Asset

Dress can be seen as a map of supra-regional and regional identity markers, as well as a marker of social status and gender. It could, however, also be used for real asset management, as it still is in many parts of the world. A typical example can be found in Zanzibar, where jewellery is a gender marker, a marker of status as well as a stable and durable value. A safety deposit box, if you like (Larsen 2015). In a time when monetary institutions did not exist, there would be an even greater need for using the body as a bank box. In Viking-Age Scandinavia, valuables in the form of silver, jewellery, and silk were probably worn on the body for safeguarding. Ibn Fadlan has an illuminating story of this in his famous account of a meeting with people with a Nordic background in the trading station of Bulghar. This is how he described the women:

> I saw the Rusiya when they came hither on their trading voyages and had encamped by the river Itil. […]. Each of the women has fastened upon the two breasts a brooch of iron, silver, copper, or gold, in weight and value according to the wealth of her husband. […]. Around the neck the women wear rings of gold and silver. The man, if he possesses ten thousand dirhams, has a neck ring made for his wife. […]. And so his wife receives another neck ring with the addition of each ten thousand dirhams (Frye 2005, 63).

Seen with the eyes of a researcher today, it is tempting to see the two brooches on the breasts as oval brooches

and the neck rings as variations of the forged and sometimes twisted arm- and neck rings preserved in Scandinavia from the ninth and tenth centuries. Ibn Fadlan only mentions a few of the many jewellery types that we know existed at this time. His main concern, however, seems to be the way jewellery is used as real assets worn on the body and kept safe by women.

Why Is This Important?

At first glance, sequins and other 'bling' decoration in graves from the Viking Age may seem insignificant and unimportant. Often seen as pure decorations, and not worth a deeper research effort, they are simply listed among the other archaeological remains. But small things often carry secrets about their owners and wearers, and they are, in effect, an expression of the time, the society, and the people who used and adorned themselves with them. In this article we look at the contexts of some of Birka's most famous graves and how these small objects fit into a wider context.

Elaborate necklaces of numerous beads and pendants found in Viking Age graves undoubtedly functioned both as charismatic objects and real assets. We argue that this was also the case for the silk decorations, passementeries, and sequins used to embellish the costume. The sewn-on decorations were integral parts of the deceased's clothing and conveyed messages about status, gender, affiliation, etc. To identify their function, a careful and systematic examination of the individual graves in which they were found is needed. By carefully examining the details, and at the same time exploring their wider context, there is potential for new insights into status, gender, and social interactions. Sequins and other bling were much more than mere decorative features, and may even have had a deeper meaning connected to cosmology and contemporary symbolic systems.

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This short study is inspired by Eva Andersson Strand's work (e.g. Andersson Strand and Mannering 2014; Andersson Strand 2020), where archaeological textiles are treated as parts of a larger context. Through this approach, grave textiles are considered together with the grave's other features, objects and practices and interpreted as part of a larger whole. The study has been carried out with the support of the Viking Phenomenon research project (VR 2015–00466).

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