The find of an East European sword quillon in a barrow in Visękiskës, Anykščiai district, Lithuania
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The find of an East European sword quillon in a barrow in Visetiškės, Anykščiai district, Lithuania

By Vytautas Kazakevičius


The excavation of the Visetiškės group of barrows in Anykščiai distr., northeastern Lithuania, between 1985 and 1988, exposed an isolated fragment of a sword quillon in barrow 12. It was decorated with intertwined lines, using the technique of blackening. Instances of analogous ornaments are known from the sword hilts found in Lithuania (Palanga, grave 285), Sweden (Kungs Husby stray find) and Ukraine (Kijev). The author suggests that the fragment of the Visetiškės sword quillon may have been manufactured in Kijevan Rus in the second half of the 10th c. or the first half of the 11th c.

Vytautas Kazakevičius, Višuliskių, 45–56, 2056 Vilnius, Lithuania.

From 1985 to 1988 an expedition held under the auspices of the Archaeological Department of the Lithuanian Academy of Science’s Institute of Lithuanian History excavated a group of barrows in the village of Visetiškės, near Svédasai in Anykščiai district (Fig. 1). The expedition excavated 15 preserved barrows located 5 km west of Svédasai and 1 km north of the highway Utena-Kupiskis, on the eastern side of the road to Jotkemys, about 200 m west of the right bank of the Jara river. The excavations yielded 54 inhumation and 2 cremation graves from the 4th–5th to the 12th century (Kazakevičius 1986, pp. 56–57; 1988, pp. 50–55; 1990, pp. 49–52).

During the investigations of barrow No 12 an isolated fragment of a sword’s quillon decorated with intertwined lines was found (Fig. 2). This artefact differs from other objects discovered in this group of barrows. Undoubtedly, it is not of local make. The aim of this article is to answer the questions of whence and when this sword reached Visetiškės.

The fragment of the sword quillon measures 7 by 2.1 cm; it is quadrangular with a slanting end, and hollow. The form suggests that the quillons were originally slightly bent downwards. They can be ascribed to the swords of type T or Z (according to J. Petersen’s classification, Petersen 1919). The quillons are made of a white metal which consists
of copper, tin and zinc. Due to the large amount of tin, this alloy should be considered as bronze, despite its white colour.

The ornamentation techniques are of interest as well. The method of blackening with copper alloys containing large quantities of sulphur and small amounts of lead, calcium, tin and zinc was employed. Thus, copper sulphides Cu₂S, CuS or their alloys were used. The colours range from blueish to black. This corresponds to the Visétiskės quillon’s ornament colour, which is black. The following ornamentation technique was applied: the pattern in the quillon was etched with an acid, and a mixture of copper powder and sulphur was rubbed (impressed) into it. The artefact was then heated, and burnished. The data on the X-ray electron-sounding microanalysis are enclosed. (Tables 1–2.)

The most interesting and important part of the Visétiskės sword quillon, pointing to its origin, is the ornament. It consists of double intertwined lines—a motif of plaiting, which occupies all of the quillons’ surface on either side (Fig. 3). Such ornamental motifs are not characteristic of Baltic artefacts; they have not been reported on the weapons manufactured by local armourers. Similar motifs of intertwined lines, often imitating different body parts of various animals, were widespread in Scandinavia starting from the Great Migration period onwards. Very sophisticated forms thereof remained in fashion until the Early Middle Ages (Salin 1904; Erä-Esko 1965). Such decoration can also be found on sword quillons from the Vendel and the Viking periods (Arwidsson 1977; 1954; Müller-Wille 1973, pp. 47–89).

The so-called Mammen style, prevailing in the West and South of Scandinavia shows the closest similarities to the ornament of the Visétiskės sword quillons (Müller-Wille 1978,

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**Table 1.**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Quillon</th>
<th>Concentration mass % (×100 %)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cu</td>
<td>0.69600 0.69230 0.83575</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zn</td>
<td>0.07200 0.07191 0.08355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ag</td>
<td>0.00000 0.00000 0.00000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sn</td>
<td>0.11000 0.12399 0.08069</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total sum = 0.8882</td>
<td>Iteration number = 4</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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**Table 2.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quillon’s ornament</th>
<th>Concentration mass % (×100 %)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cu</td>
<td>0.49900 0.49430 0.98753</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zn</td>
<td>0.00200 0.00201 0.00386</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ag</td>
<td>0.00000 0.00000 0.00000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sn</td>
<td>0.00700 0.00799 0.00860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total sum = 0.5043</td>
<td>Iteration number = 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The ornament on sword quillons from Hedmark and Miklebost in Norway can serve as examples of the style (Müller-Wille 1978, Abb. 10: 4, 5). Plaited bronze wires from Birka, Sweden, graves No 524, 542, 644 (Geijer 1938, Taf. 27: 2, 3, 4) are related to the Visëtiškës ornament too. A nearly identical ornament is engraved on a bone plate from Jomala-Södersunda, Åland (Finland) (Kivikoski 1973, Taf. 68: 611). The decoration of the sword quillons from Nordmark, Sweden (SHM 17546) is also very similar. It is of no use to cite other similar or related motifs found on various artefacts in different countries as there is analogical decoration. First of all a part of a sword with a bronze hilt found in Palanga (west Lithuania), grave No 285 has to be mentioned (Fig. 4). The hilt is 16.5 cm long with a 6.9×4.8×3.2 cm sized pommel and 10.4 cm long and 2 cm wide quillons. Only 8 cm of the blade remains. Its width is 4.4 cm. The pommel is in one piece with three distinct parts. The lower part of the pommel is slightly bent upwards while the quillons are bent down. Some investigators attribute such swords to a variety of type T (Zak, p. 318), others to the “local” A type (Kirpitchnikov 1961, p. 197; 1966, pp. 35–36, 84–85). Regina Volkaité-Kulikauskienė, who has published a sword found in Palanga considers it intermediate between types T and Z (Volkaité-Kulikauskienė 1964, p. 212). On the sword-hilt the motif of plaiting prevails, while the lower part of the pommel is decorated with the ornament identical to that on the Visëtiškës sword quillons.

Another sword with the quillons decorated with the same ornament as that from Visëtiškës has been found in Kijev, Ukraine (Fig. 5). The Russian arms specialist Anatolij Kirpitchnikov, who ascribed it together with three more swords to the same “local” type A, points out that they were manufactured by Russian armours (Kirpitchnikov 1961, p. 192). He considers them to have greatly influenced the production of such swords all over Europe. However, he mentions only two swords which may have been copied from South Russian swords. They are from Užava, Latvia and Vanaj Kirstula, Finland (Kirpitchnikov 1961, p. 192).

One more instance of the analogous ornament etched on a sword’s quillons (SHM 31603) comes from Kungs Husby, Sweden, brought to my attention by Dr. Jan Peder Lamm, (Fig. 6). It is a pity that only a small, accidentally found, fragment of the sword quillons remains.

Thus, the vast territory of Europe—the Baltic, Germanic and Slavonic lands (Lithuania, Sweden, and Ukraine) yield identically decorated sword hilts.

Two alternative methods can be applied to solve the problem of their origin: (1) the analysis of the hilt manufacture techniques, (2) the

Fig. 4. A sword hilt from Palanga, Lithuania, grave No 285. – Svärdshjalt från Palanga.
Fig. 5. A sword hilt from Kijev, the Ukraine. – Svärdsfäste från Kiev.

Fig. 6. Drawing of the fragment from Kungs Husby, Uppland, Sweden. Statens historiska museum. SHM 31603. Drawing by Bengt Händel – Teckning av fragmentet från Kungs Husby i Uppland.

analysis of the ornament’s origin. However, it should be emphasized that the first method cannot be applied in the case of the Visétiškės sword quillons, as only a fragment has been found and no analysis has been made of the metal composition of other sword hilts or their parts. Thus the second alternative must be chosen to determine the sword’s origin.

As I have mentioned already the motifs of intertwined lines were widespread in Scandinavia. However, they appeared as a result of the development of the animal ornament of the Salin style which can be associated with the Visétiškės ornament. The Mammen style is much closer. On the other hand, palmettos and intertwined lines were frequent in decoration in Kijev Rus and other Slavonic lands. Most probably, this was the influence of Byzantium which had rooted deeply into the mental and material culture of the Slavs.

The main problem concerns to which world—Germanic or Slavonic—does the Visétiškės sword quillon belong.

In this case, it should be admitted that Kirpitchnikov is right in considering that the swords of “local” type A were manufactured by Russian armourers (Kirpitchnikov 1966, p. 36). His opinion is shared by Volkaité-Kulkauskienė (1964, p. 213) and Wanda Sarnowska (1955, p. 318). Thus it is possible that the Visétiškės sword quillons were made in the Slavic lands.

Now the chronology has to be discussed. The Visétiškės sword quillon was found isolated. Other graves in the same barrow No 12 did not contain accurately dated artefacts. An accidentally found fragment of a bronze torque with three cones on one of the ends, bronze penannular brooches with multangular and poppy ends, spiral and stripped bracelets, bronze bells and other artefacts are dated to the 10th–11th century. The Palanga sword can clearly be dated to the 11th century according to the grave in which it has been found. The sword from Kijev is dated around
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1000 by Kirpitchnikov (Kirkovitchnikov 1966, p. 84).

In the late 10th or the early 11th century a sword made in Kievian Rus had been brought to Visetiskes where under unknown circumstances it had been broken and a fragment of its quillons had found its way into the barrow, and 1000 years later was found by archaeologists.

References

Ett svärdshjalt av östlig typ funnet i en gravhög i Visetiškės i distriktet Anykščiai, Litauen

Åren 1985–1988 undersöktes några gravhögar vid Visetiškės i distriktet Anykščiai i Litauen. (Fig. 1.1.) I hög 12 påträffades utan klart fyndssammanhang ett fragment av ett svärdshjalt ornerat med ett snoddmonster (Fig. 2). Hjälten måste vara ett importerat föremål. Dess proveniens är en öppen fråga som jag försökt utreda. Fragmentet som består av en legering av koppar, tenn och zink är 7 cm långt och 2,5 cm brett. Förrummet med den monterlagda snodden är hjälten ornerat med niello (jfr analysen i tabell 1 och 2).

Av formen att döma är hjälten av Petersens typ T eller Z. Endast med hjälp av dekoren finns det förutsättningar att bedöma var det kan ha tillverkats. Visserligen förekom liknande ornament i Skandinavien från folkvandringstiden till in i medeltiden men inte bara där utan också på slaviskt område och då med bakgrund i bysantinsk konststil. Förutom i Litauen har man hittat hjält med fullständigt likartat ornamentik i Ukraina. Jag känner till följande paralleller: en från grav 285 i Palanga (Litauen) (Fig. 4), en från Kiev (Fig. 5) och en från Kungs Husby socken i Uppland (Fig. 6). Sålunda förekommer analoga ornam­ment spridda över ett mycket vidsträckt om­råde med från väster räknat skandinavisk, li­tauisk och slavisk befolkning.

Det är vanskligt att datera och proveniens­bestämma hjälten från Visetiškės eftersom det får betraktas som ett lösfynd men jämförelse­materialet antyder att det kommit till Litauen någon gång mellan 950 och 1050 e.Kr. från ruserna i Kiev. Samma förhållande gäller i så fall också för det i Sverige funna hjältet.