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Borre style metalwork in the material culture of the Birka warriors

An apotropaic symbol

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The use of the Borre style in the dress and equipment of the Viking Period warriors at Birka is presented and discussed. The absence of Borre style metalwork on blade weapons evokes thoughts on the symbolic meaning of the style within a martial society. An apotropaic symbolic role for the style is suggested.

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Borre was the great Viking Period art style, comprehensive both in content and in geographical distribution. It is believed to have been in use from about AD 830 or 850 to the end of Birka's floruit about AD 975. The Borre style was one of the most vigorous Viking Period styles. It was the most widely spread of the Scandinavian ones and flourished during the period in which the Scandinavians expanded their territory greatly. Borre was the main Scandinavian contribution to the collective of style and form that could be seen at Eastern trading posts in the 10th century. This paper will focus on Borre style metalwork connected to warriors, starting from finds made at Birka's Garrison. A main theme is the plainness of the era's offensive weapons in contrast to the often elaborately decorated costume and other equipment. As the Borre style was used to decorate a wide selection of artefacts, its absence from blade weapons is surprising and suggests that it has something to do with the symbolic meaning of the Borre style.

The Borre style

According to David Wilson (1995, p. 91 f; 2001) the Borre style originated on precious metal. The decoration with transverse lines frequently occurring on copper alloy originally imitated filigree work. Actual filigree technique was also used but on a limited number of objects. Wilson maintains that Birka was the main centre of manufacture and states that several casting moulds displaying the Borre style were found during the 1990s excavations in the Black Earth (finds as yet not published). Birka constituted a milieu where there was a market for high quality products as well as more common artefacts, and where there is archaeological evidence of manufacture. It may be daring to regard Birka as the main centre of manufacture, but the style had an established position and developed further in the hands of Birka's craftsmen.

Wilson gives a comprehensive account of the Scandinavian origin of the Borre style. It is however important to emphasise that the Borre style was not limited to Scandinavia. It should be regarded as a product of its time, rooted in

Scandinavian as well as Continental and Insular stylistic traditions.

In the wide framework that constituted the Borre style there was room for non-Scandinavian motifs, e.g. ringed pins with Celtic ornamentation and trefoil brooches with foliage ornamentation. This may be an indication of Borre as mainly a fashionable style, widely spread and accepted in Scandinavia during the middle Viking Period. The style became universal and was therefore not, in contrast to certain other Scandinavian styles, limited to one category of objects, one geographical region or a certain manufacturer or commissioner. The Borre style represented the last period of pagan Scandinavian art. With Christianity came Romanesque art and its influence over Scandinavian styles, anticipated in the Ringerike style and clearly visible in the Urnes style.

The Borre style flourished when the Viking expansion culminated and Scandinavians enlarged their territories. Westbound Vikings conquered more and more of the British Isles and northern France, and in the East Scandinavians dominated the important trade routes along Volga and Dnepr, extending to Byzantium and the Caliphate. This was probably the main cause of the extensive geographical distribution of the Borre style. Borre constitutes the Scandinavian contribution to the mix of stylistic expressions found at trading posts along the eastern Viking routes.

The Borre style was used on a wide array of Viking Period artefacts. The majority of Borre-decorated objects at Birka were trefoil brooches and pendants usually linked to female dress. Tortoise brooches are one of the more frequent find classes from Birka. Among these only a small number are decorated in the Borre style, characteristic of Birka's late phase. "In jewellery the Borre style [...] is principally confined to new forms of jewellery" (Jansson 1985, p. 230). According to Birgit Maixner (2004, p. 88), the style was primarily used on personal objects. One category of objects on which the Borre style was used only very rarely is weapons. Though frequent enough on equipment connected to the warrior, such as shield mounts, sword chapes etc., the style rarely occurs on of



Fig. 1. Hilt and pommel of a Petersen D-type sword from a burial at Gnëzdovo, Smolensk (Road from the Varangians to the Greeks 1996, p. 8 fig. 64). This is one of the very few instances of Borre style on an offensive weapon.

fensive weapons (cf. Skibsted Klæsøe 1999, p. 118). But there are exceptions. A hilt and pommel of a Petersen D-type sword from a burial at Gnezdovo, Smolensk, is decorated in openwork Borre style (fig. 1; *Road from the Varangians to the Greeks* 1996, p. 8 fig. 64).

Stylistic elements

The basic elements of the Borre style are gripping beasts, ribbons and masks of animals and people (most recently discussed in Maixner 2004). Frequently depicted animals are cats and bat-like creatures with rounded ears. The gripping beast is one of the older and most fascinating features of Viking Period art. Johannes Brøndsted (1924, p. 169) described them as "coarse, solid, muscular animal forms with strong grip-

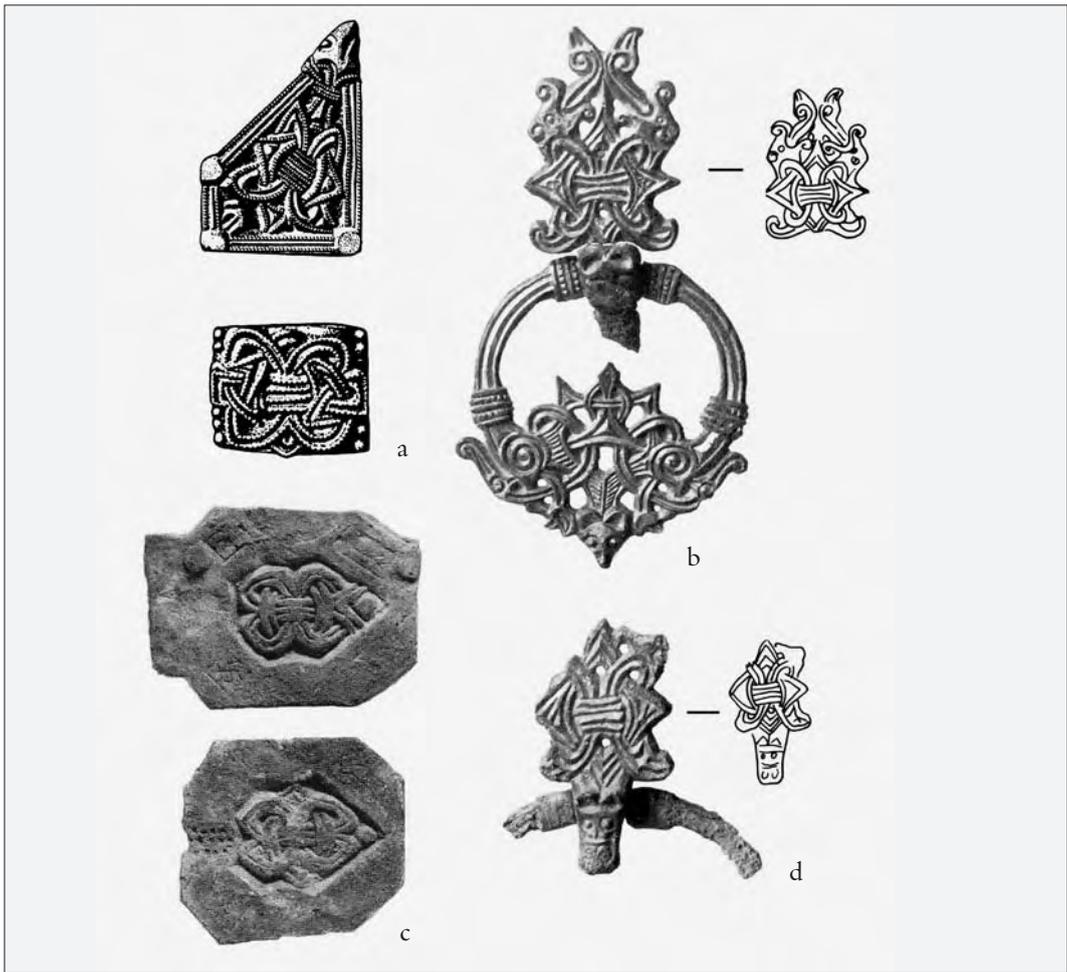


Fig. 2. The addressed pair of pretzel knots, a recurrent motif in Borre style art. a) Borre in Vestfold, Norway (Wilson 1995, p. 88). b) Birka grave Bj 643 (Arbman 1940, Taf. 42:1). c) Hässelby in Uppland (Duczko 1989, p. 190). d) Birka grave Bj 524 (Arbman 1940, Taf 42:1).

ping-paws or gripping-feet, with which they hold on tight to each other or clutch the frame of the ornament [...] and with their heads always set full face". This motif was described by Brøndsted (1924, p. 167) as being "radically free from tradition". The origin of the gripping beasts has been the subject of much discussion and has been linked to both Carolingian and Anglo-Saxon art. Sophus Müller (1880; cf. Fuglesang 1992), who first defined the motif, called it the "Nordic-Carolingian lion", revealing his view of its origin. Wilson (2001, p. 144) emphasises the

differences between the Scandinavian gripping beast and the Insular or Continental gripping beast, and maintains that there were two separate traditions, one native Scandinavian and one firmly seated Christian tradition. When used as an element of the Borre style, the gripping beast has been "tamed", with its body placed symmetrically using the spine as an axis (cf. Fuglesang 2001, p. 160; Francheschi et al. 2005, p. 40 f).

The knots and ribbons, another of the style's basic elements, show several similarities to tex-

tile work, mainly the craft of *passementerie* (cf. Maixner 2004, p. 21). The use of *passementerie* in the dress has many obscure points that are open to discussion, but there is a possible connection between textile dress decoration and strap ends and other decorative metalwork used in the dress. Both *passementerie* and Borre style metalwork should most likely be seen as parts of a rank-indicating symbolic language. The study of *passementerie* might be an entrance into the difficult world of the Borre style. The wide variety of Borre style motifs includes a certain degree of formalisation, especially concerning knots and ribbon designs. One type of knot (fig. 2) appears recurrently in the eponymous finds from Borre in Vestfold, in the material from Birka's Garrison and ringed pins from Birka and ancient Rus'. Such knots, characterised by Signe Horn Fuglesang (1991, p. 98) as "an addorsed pair of pretzel knots", are also known from Continental and Insular art (cf. Duczko 1989). The third basic element of the style – masks of animals and people – is rooted in earlier Norse art (cf. Arwidsson 1963). Typical is a triangular face with large bulging eyes. The ears are usually rounded and placed above the eyes, enhancing the triangular outline of the mask.

The Borre style in Birka's Garrison

The archaeological material from Birka's Garrison represents a working environment with a distinct functional dimension. This makes it particularly suitable for comparison with other archaeological contexts such as burials and settlements (Kitzler 1997; Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. 1998; Holmquist Olausson & Kitzler Åhfeldt 2002). The finds from the Garrison are rich and include many different object types, including prestige pieces as well as everyday gear. They provide insight into the material culture of the Birka warrior and his profession. Different kinds of arms and armour constitute a major group of artefacts. One might speak of the panoply of the garrison warrior.

Decorated objects are few, especially when compared to the Birka graves. This can partly be explained by the fact that most of the finds are utility objects and not display pieces of the kind found in the graves. Although Borre is the only

true Scandinavian style found in this context, the objects decorated in this style are surprisingly few in comparison to those decorated in foreign styles. Most of the decorated metalwork is related to the warrior's dress. The Garrison offers a unique material of copper alloy mounts and fittings from belts, pouches, footwear and other equipment. Most of these mounts are decorated in a so-called Oriental style with palmettos and scrollwork of a post-Sassanian character (cf. Arne 1911; 1914; Hedenstierna-Jonson & Holmquist Olausson in print). Nevertheless there are four mounts decorated in Borre style, two of them quadrangular and two tiny strap ends.

Weaponry – plain and operational

As stated above, the most comprehensive group of finds from Birka's Garrison consists of weaponry. Among the finds are offensive weapons such as swords (fragments), seaxes, axe heads, spearheads, and arrowheads. The defensive weapons are shields, ring mail, lamellar armour and possibly part of a helmet. The weapons are generally plain, without any cast or inlaid decoration. They are by and large simple and operational, but a few decorative mounts for warrior equipment have been found.

Among the more spectacular finds are mounts from the case of an Eastern type composite bow, decorated in Oriental style, and fittings from a possible helmet depicting parading birds flanking a tree in a compositional form and with a stylistic expression originating from Byzantium (Holmquist Olausson & Petrovski in print). The Borre style decorated items related to weaponry are two shield handle mounts (fig. 3) and a sword chape (fig. 4). The former are decorated in a schematised Borre style with sharp relief, produced locally in Birka's workshops (Jakobsson 1996). The latter belongs to a small group of sword chapes combining Borre style decoration with a possible Christian motif – the Crucifixion (Hedenstierna-Jonson 2002). This type's geographical distribution is wide but very distinct with a possible origin in the Danish state. The chape had been deposited without a sword by a post in the so-called warriors' hall in the Garrison area.

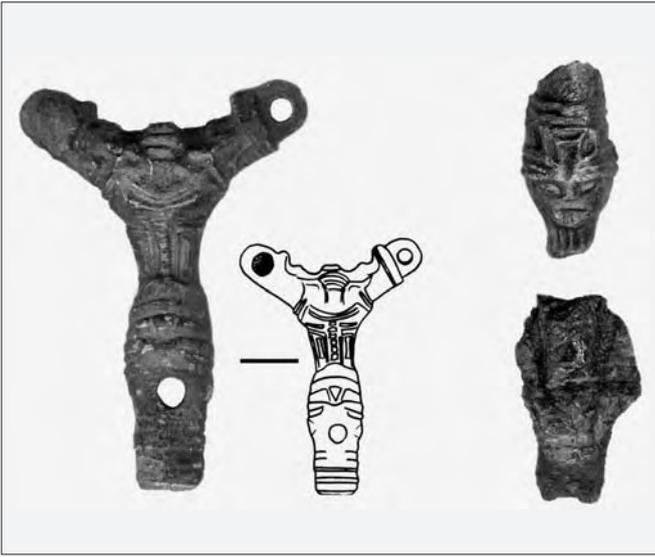


Fig. 3. Shield handle mounts from Birka's Garrison.



Fig. 4. Sword chape from Birka's Garrison. The motif is a Borre style Crucifixion.

Passementerie, Oriental dress and Byzantine influences

Four Borre style copper alloy mounts (fig. 5) are possibly related to the dress. They have typical motifs with knotwork, braids and animals. One of the quadrangular mounts shows a pair of adorsed pretzel knots. The other is but a fragment but reveals the rear end of a typical Borre animal seen from the side (cf. Wilson 2001, p. 145). The strap ends are unusually small, but have the characteristic plait ending in an animal head seen from above. One of the strap ends and the quadrangular mount with knotwork are gilded. An additional Borre style object related to the dress is the ring of a ringed pin (fig. 6).

The rope, ribbon, knot and interlace were without doubt central motifs in Norse stylistic tradition, as apparent in the Borre style. There is an interesting similarity between the ribbon and knot-based designs of the Borre style complex and passementerie found in several Birka graves. Granted that the design of the ribbons and knots allude to filigree work, there is also a possibility that they are meant to imitate the structure of the silver wire used in passemen-

terie. There are for instance distinct similarities between the interlace on strap ends and passementerie from Bj 524, Bj 944 and Bj 1040 (fig. 7). There is also another connection between passementerie and metalwork in a small number of Byzantine belt buckles decorated with interlace closely resembling the passementerie found in Birka (Stephens Crawford 1990; Schulze-Dörrlamm 2002). These buckles, though dated to the 6th and 7th centuries, show an established symbolic language where ribbons and knots in the form of passementerie have a given place. The correlation between passementerie from Birka graves Bj 520 and Bj 1125 and that of Byzantine ceremonial dress (fig. 8) has been pointed out by Inga Hägg (1983).

Passementerie was part of the Oriental dress of which there are several examples in Birka. According to Hägg (2003, p. 18), only 10 out of 50 male burials with preserved textiles at Birka contain no traces of Oriental dress fashion. The Oriental dress consisted of a caftan, often with prestigious ornaments, such as silver and gold passementerie on silk. In some cases a textile girdle, often of silk, held the caftan together.



Fig. 5. Borre style bronze mounts and strap ends from Birka's Garrison.

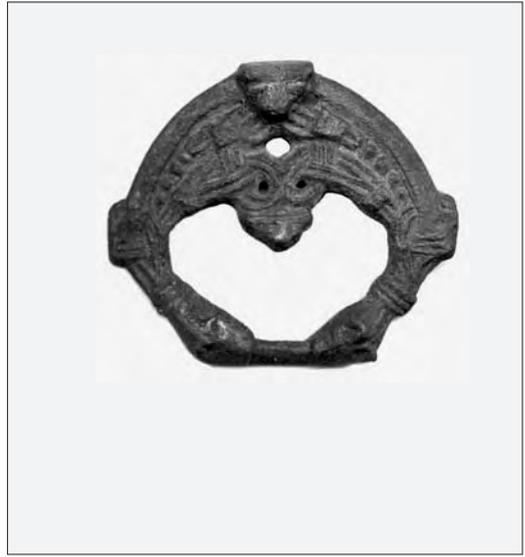


Fig. 6. A ring from a ringed pin, found at Birka's Garrison.

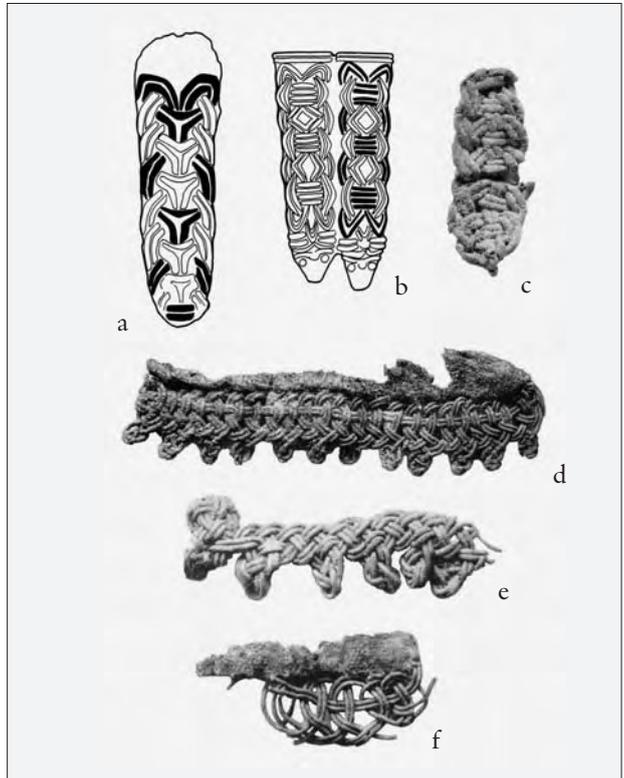


Fig. 7. Interlace ornamentation compared with passementerie. a-b) Strap ends from Sandvor in Rogaland and Borre in Vestfold, Norway (Duczko 1985:82f). Passementerie from Birka graves. c) Bj1040. d) Bj944. e-f) Bj524 (Geijer 1938 Taf 28:3-4 & Taf 35:3,5).



Fig. 8. Passementerie from Birka grave Bj 520 (Geijer 1938, Taf 28:2) compared to Byzantine belt buckles from the 6th and 7th centuries (Stephens Crawford 1990, fig. 582; Schulze-Dörrlamm 2002, p. 215) and with passementerie knots and pendants from Sitten, Switzerland (Hägg 1983, p. 213).

The girdles were occasionally trimmed with passementerie. The caftan is strongly associated with Turkic nomads and the Islamic area. The Oriental dress in Birka should thus most likely be seen as a product of contacts with the Eastern mounted tribes. The closest parallels to the Birka dress are, not surprisingly, found in the ancient Russian area and in the emerging Kievan state. Passementerie like that from Birka's graves has been found in burials in Ancient Russia (cf. Jansson 1988; Shepard 1995; Hedea-gger Krag 2004).

Although the closest parallels are found in Kievan Rus' and the steppes north of the Black Sea, Byzantine influences must also be considered. There are traces of Byzantine influence in the Birka material, especially at the Garrison. The mounts from a possible helmet have clear Byzantine connotations as have three Byzantine copper coins struck for Emperor Theophilos (reigned AD 829–842). In this context it may not be surprising that Anna Muthesius (2004, p. 297 f) inquires: "Could the Birka tunics, with their elaborate border decoration, represent the nearest thing one has to a Byzantine military tunic?" Muthesius continues: "What cannot be denied is that the Vikings would have been in no doubt

about what Byzantine dress did look like by the tenth to the eleventh centuries".

A Scandinavian horse and an Eastern warrior

A trapezoid Borre style mount (fig. 9) found in the hall building in Birka's Garrison is generally considered to be a part of a bridle. It has counterparts from wealthy graves in the Lake Mälaren area and on Gotland, where a distinct feature is the combination of Eastern dress and Scandinavian horse gear. An example is provided by the Skopintull barrow at Hovgården on Adelsö, the island closest to Birka/Björkö, a part of the Viking Period central-place complex. A large number of copper alloy mounts have been found in the barrow, many with close parallels from the Garrison. The mounts related to the dress are generally decorated in Oriental style while the mounts from the bridle have Borre style ornamentation. The situation is similar in a wealthy burial from Antuna in Ed parish, Uppland (Andersson 1994), and in Birka grave Bj 496. Parallels to the trapezoid mount as well as the Borre style bridles have also been found in Ancient Rus', e.g. an extraordinary snaffle-bit in gilded bronze with a three-part mouth-piece found in 1969 in a hoard in Supruty, Tuls-kaja in the Schekinskiji region near Murom

(Road from the Varangians to the Greeks 1996, p. 74 fig. 599).

Plain weapons and decorated equipment

Maria Domeij (2004; 2005) has presented an interesting interpretation of the ideological framework and background to the various style elements in Norse art, claiming a link between warfare and art. She suggests that “the cognitive meanings of the ornamentation may have been tightly knit to an ideology of honour and warfare”. Domeij develops the contextual reading presented by Anders Andrén (2000, p. 10) in connection with the reading of rune stones. Andrén emphasised the importance of visual literacy in the understanding of the interplay of image and text. Though the Borre style objects do not carry any text, the visual literacy was nevertheless equally important in the understanding of the symbolic value of the objects. Another perspective on the relationship between images and texts is that of how images, texts and words are constructed. This implies that “different styles of animal art may be regarded as analogous to poetic metres like *Dróttkvætt* and *Fornyrðislag*” (Andrén 2000, p. 26), and also has “the same social connotations as some of the poetic metres”.

Emphasising the important role of binding in Norse society and the link between binding and death, Domeij suggests that Norse animal art should be understood as a materialised modification of the poetic metaphors of battle. The gripping beasts become less deviant from Norse stylistic tradition when studied in the light of the dismembered and bound animals frequently depicted in earlier Norse art, both used, according to Domeij (2004), as metaphors for fighting and slaying in war. With this apparent connection to martial life the absence of the Borre style on blade weapons is even more interesting.

The warrior equipment from Birka's Garrison includes utility weapons and everyday objects, primarily made for use, not display. The weaponry was operational, the types are simple yet effective and the complete set gives an impression of professionalism. Though present on weaponry, e.g. mounts for shield handles and sword sheathes, no offensive weapons are deco-



Fig. 9. A Borre style bridle mount from Birka's Garrison.

rated in the Borre style, nor in any other style. There has clearly been a significant difference between weapons actually used in battle and weapons that were mainly for display, as in a burial context (cf. Le Jan 2000, p. 290 f). The two categories served different functions and were thus designed in slightly different ways. This was not an innovation of the Viking Period, but it probably became more widely spread as the specialised professional warrior became more established during this period. Great changes took place in warfare and martial society during the Viking Period. Even if the actual differences are difficult to identify, the increasing degree of professionalism and the increasing scale of warfare were two main factors (cf. Hedenstierna-Jonson 2006).

Professionalism implies a certain amount of standardisation in weapons and equipment, and also that weaponry was provided by kings or chieftains. This would have had consequences for the design of the weapons and the composition of weapon systems carried by the warriors.

As suggested by Domeij, Viking Period stylistic expressions may have constituted an intricate web of metaphor and associations. Possibly the explanation for the Borre style's absence from offensive weapons should be sought in these associations. The professional warrior would have been equipped in a rational and efficient way, with arms and armour optimised for continuous warfare. This seems to be the overall image given by the equipment from Birka's Garrison.

Yet the Garrison also displays a strong presence of religion and there is no indication of a decrease in the use of religious symbols among the specialised warriors, rather the reverse. Many decorated weapons are known from the Viking Period, e.g. sword hilts and the sockets of spearheads. The styles used are Mammen, Jellinge, Ringerike and Urnes, some of which coexisted with the Borre style in the later 10th century (Mägi-Loûgas 1993; Skibstedt Klæsø 2002, p. 87). Why, then, is the Borre style not seen on these weapons? The answer probably lies in the intrinsic meaning of the style. Its significance was somehow not compatible with bladed weapons. Therefore we need to return to the basic elements of the Borre style and their symbolic meaning.

Borre style symbolism

Starting with the gripping beasts, we are dealing with one of the most discussed motifs of the Viking Period. When entering the scene about AD 800 this motif was a departure from Norse stylistic tradition, but when depicted on the objects from the Garrison the beasts had an almost two centuries old tradition. With their triangular or pear-shaped heads and goggling eyes, the gripping beasts deviated from the general form in which animals had been represented. Instead of the traditional ribbon- or s-shaped bodies with heads seen in profile and elongated extremities, the gripping beast's body is stout, the head presented en face and the extremities are usually just paws.

Continuing with the Borre style's intricate interlace, knots and ribbons, there are at least two different sides to these elements. Rooted in Norse tradition, interlace had been used in connection with various motifs, both as a way of

presentation and as a representation of the Norse skaldic verse and artistic values in general. The interlace and knotwork may be seen as an embodiment of Norse thought. It was used in combination with human figures, possibly interpreting scenes from mythology, e.g. Odin's self-sacrifice. Then, with the introduction of Christianity, the new god was depicted in a manner that correlated with the established symbolic language. Crucifixes show the figure of Christ tied to the cross and often bound to the framework with additional interlace (Fuglesang 1981; Hedeager 1997; Hedenstierna-Jonson 1998; 2002).

Masks with human or animal features constitute the third basic element of the Borre style. According to Greta Arwidsson (1963, p. 163, 184), the most frequent use of human masks can be found in earlier Norse art of the 7th and 8th centuries. The incorporation of masks in the Borre style thus constitutes a continuation of an old motif and might indicate a return to old values concerning the masks' meaning.

In earlier material, the staring eyes in combination with dismembered bodies and ambiguous compositions have been interpreted as symbols of Odin in his capacity as sorcerer or shaman. The dismembered bodies of animals and the split representation of faces have been interpreted as symbolising ecstatic states and Odin's ability to transform into animals (Magnus 1995; Hedeager 1997; Hedenstierna-Jonson 1998). In Classical Greece the apotropaic mask or apotropaion, a mask or head of the gorgon Medusa, was widespread. It was commonly used on warriors' equipment, mainly shields and body armour (cf. Frothingham 1911; Phillis Howe 1954; Arwidsson 1963, p. 170; Wilk 2000, p. 145 ff). Tania Dickinson (2005) has presented an interpretation of Migration Period imagery on Anglo-Saxon shields, deducing apotropaic qualities. The possible apotropaic nature of Norse animal art has been discussed by Siv Kristoffersen (1995, p. 11). She suggests that the animals' strength and ability to watch over the individual was transferred through the decorative designs to the decorated object and thus to the possessor. In the apotropaic symbol resided the ability to frighten off evil and to protect the holder of the *apotropaion* (cf. Marinatos 2000, chapter 3).

To frighten or to maim?

The elements of the Borre style suggests an interpretation of the style as being apotropaic in meaning and function, at least when used on military equipment. This would account for the reluctance to use the style on offensive weaponry. There are sword chapes decorated in the Borre style, and when used on shields the Borre style metalwork was visible only to their carriers. There are exceptions – sword hilts have been found that display Borre style ornament. Still the use of the style on blade weapons is extremely rare. Notably the decoration of the Gnezdovo (fig. 1) sword shows no staring eyes or faces, only S-shaped animal bodies and gripping paws.

The interpretation of some elements of the compositions as symbols of Odin may seem inconsistent with the fact that these symbols were not used on offensive weapons. But the Borre style's elements appear to refer to Odin as shape-shifting sorcerer and shaman, not as warrior. This was an ambiguous role related to female principles with which Old Norse male society was not entirely comfortable. Odin thus has a rightful place in the symbolism of a decorative style used for protection, while the force of the active blade should apparently not be obstructed or reduced in any way. The blade was not primarily meant to frighten off enemies, but to destroy them.

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Summary

The Borre style, the great art style of the Viking Period, is found on a wide array of objects in an extensive geographical area. The near absence of the style from blade weapons therefore begs the question of the symbolic meaning of the Borre style in connection to martial material culture. The Borre style is discussed on the basis of the symbolic meaning of its basic elements: gripping

beasts, knotwork and masks. The style's absence from blade weapons suggests that the Borre style functioned as an *apotropaion* in connection with martial material culture, protecting an object's possessor and frightening enemies. The Borre style was used to decorate defensive weapons such as shields or the offensive weapon in rest, as on sword chapes.