

Viking-Age Scandinavian art styles and their appearance in the British Isles

Part 1: Early Viking-Age art styles

by

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Scandinavian art of the Viking period (AD 850-1050) embraces a loose sequence of stylistic phases, grouped for convenience under the headings of Borre, Jelling, Mammen, Ringerike and Urnes. Despite considerable stylistic and chronological overlap, these styles may be separated and defined on the basis of formal design elements and reoccurring compositions. They appear throughout the Scandinavian homelands and colonies on monuments and artefacts in wood, bone and metal. In the British Isles, it is possible to identify distinct, Insular versions of Scandinavian motifs, along with expressions of 'pure' Viking ornament.

This datasheet identifies the salient features of early Viking-Age Scandinavian art styles. It assesses their chronology and evaluates their treatment in the British Isles. It is concerned principally with the animal and interlace styles of Borre and Jelling, current in the late ninth and tenth centuries, but also

considers contemporary vegetal and geometric motifs, related in different ways to the Borre style. The succeeding, late Viking Art styles are treated separately in Part 2. This datasheet, like the one that follows, is intended to provide an overarching review of the main styles of the period. Since manifestations of style vary according to artefact type, more detailed classifications should be sought in object-specific guides.

The Borre style

Stylistic features

In its Scandinavian homelands, the Borre style incorporates a range of zoomorphic and geometric motifs, several of which adorn a group of bronze harness mounts discovered in a ship grave from Borre, Vestfold, Norway, from which the style takes its name (Wilson 1995, fig. 55).

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A gripping beast, with an arched, interlacing body, angular, gripping paws, and a mask-like triangular face is diagnostic of the style. The beast occurs in full on gilt silver openwork pendants from the Vårby hoard, Sweden, and their parallels (Fig. 1), but isolated elements, including masks or gripping paws, are recurrent motifs within the canon of ninth and tenth-century Scandinavian art (*ibid.*, 89-90). A semi-naturalistic profiled animal with a backward-angled neck is also carried on the Borre mounts, but is otherwise uncommon.

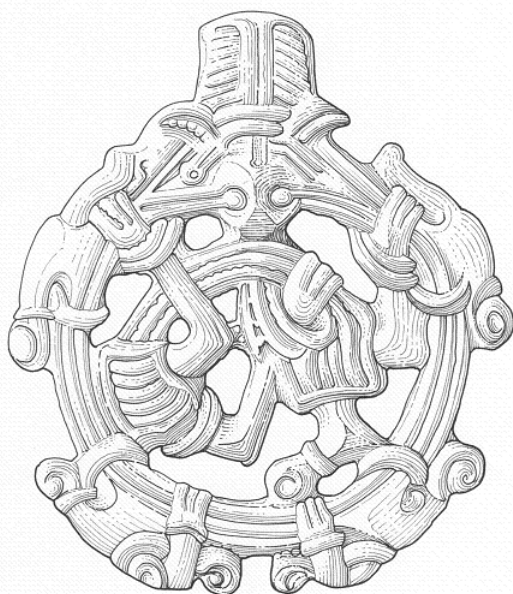


Figure 1 Gripping beast pendant, Vårby, Sweden (drawing by Nick Griffiths, after Wilson and Klindt-Jensen 1966, Pl. 32*b*). Max diameter: 33mm.

A further distinguishing Borre motif is the symmetrical, double contoured ring-chain. This composition consists of a chain of interlacing circles, divided by transverse bars and overlaid by lozenges (Fig. 2). Occasionally, the ring-chain terminates in a high-relief animal head, as on strap fittings from Borre and Gokstad, Norway (Wilson and Klindt-Jensen 1966, Pl. 30*b*). Ring-knot elements also occur in attenuated forms together with other Borre motifs. On disc

brooches of Petersen's Type 128, a trefoil feature delineated from the Borre ring-chain divides three Borre animal heads (Petersen 1928, fig. 128).

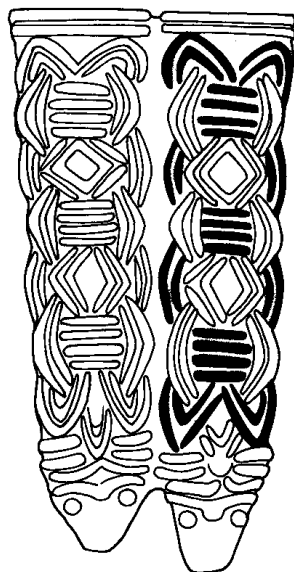


Figure 2 Borre mounts with ring-chain motif (drawing by Nick Griffiths, after Wilson 1995, fig. 56. Original © E Wilson). Max length: 60mm.

In the British Isles

The Borre style was a truly popular art style, appearing on precious and base metal objects throughout Scandinavia and its colonies. In the British Isles, and particularly England, it appears in a wider variety of forms and media, having been taken up by craftsmen trained in Insular traditions (Richardson 1993). In stone sculpture, among other media, the Borre ring-chain appears in a modified version, as a rib of truncated triangles flanked by side loops (Fig. 3). This so-called 'vertebral ring-chain' motif and its variants occur on sculpture from North Yorkshire, Northumbria, the Isle of Man and Cumbria, including on the Gosforth Cross (Bailey 1980, 54-5, 217-8, figs. 23, 60a, b, e). It is identified as a distinct Insular version of the Scandinavian ring-chain (Bailey 1980, 54-6; Richardson 1993, 34, 180).

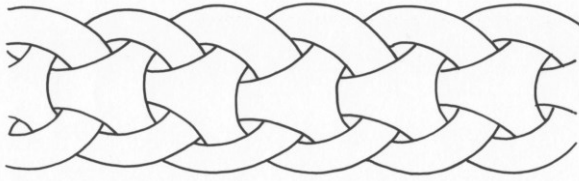


Figure 3 Vertebral ring-chain motif from the Gosforth Cross, Cumbria (drawing by Nick Griffiths, after Bailey 1980, fig. 3). Depicted horizontally, rather than vertically (as on the Gosforth cross, for example) Not to scale.

It was once proposed that the appearance of the Borre style in the British Isles was largely restricted to the ring-chain (Wilson 1976). This view can no longer be upheld, in light of the wide repertoire of Borre-style motifs, both zoomorphic and geometric, now represented in the Insular corpus (Paterson 2002, 267). In rare instances, full and classic Borre-style gripping beasts are encountered, as on a silver openwork pendant from Little Snoring, Norfolk (*ibid.* fig. 1; Norfolk HER 2157). This item forms a counterpart to the Vårby pendants and was almost certainly imported from Scandinavia. Isolated zoomorphic features such as face masks and gripping paws also populate interlace compositions, as encountered on trefoil (Fig. 4), disc, equal-armed and oval brooches and strap-ends.

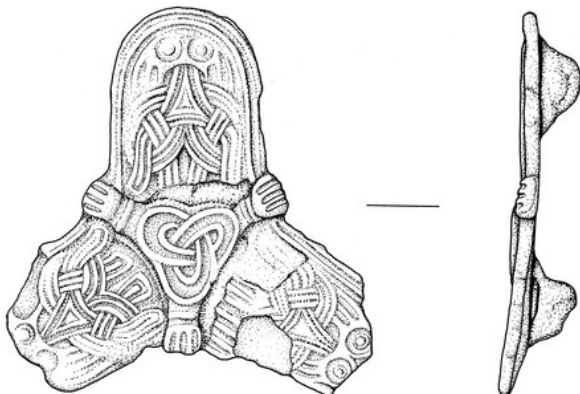


Figure 4 Trefoil Brooch from Bures Hamlet, Essex (PAS 'Find-ID' SF-EB5262) Drawing by Donna Wreathall, reproduced by kind permission of Suffolk County Council. Width across lower arms 49mm.

A highly standardized interlacing tendril motif is also attributable to the Borre style. The interweaving tendrils of this motif, which adorns a prolific series of Anglo-Scandinavian disc brooches (Fig. 5), recall the loops formed by ribbon-shaped Borre-style gripping beasts (Wilson 1976, 504-6).

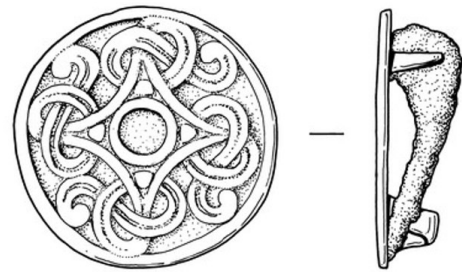


Figure 5 Mould Disc brooch with Borre-style interlace motif, Little Wilbraham, Cambridgeshire (PAS 'Find-ID' SF-B20403) Drawing by Donna Wreathall, reproduced by kind permission of Suffolk County Council. Diameter: 29.4mm.

Chronology

The Borre style was current in Scandinavia from the late ninth to the late tenth century. This timeframe is supported by dendrochronological information obtained from sites with diagnostically Borre-style material (such as Gokstad (900-905), Tune (905-910), Borre itself (c900), Fyrkat (980) and Trelleborg (980/1)) in addition to coin-dated hoards (Bonde and Christiansen 1993; Christensen and Bonde 1991; Wilson 1995, 107-11). In the British Isles, the style is likely to have emerged with Scandinavian activity and settlement from the late ninth century. It continued in use in Insular contexts throughout the tenth century, as supported by excavated material from Dublin, York and Norwich (Richardson 1993).

The Terslev Style

The Terslev style is named after the ornament featured on silver brooches discovered in a hoard from Terslev, Zealand, Denmark (Friis Johansen 1912). It consists of three or four symmetrically placed volutes, which, when bound by a closed ring, create a ring-knot motif related to the Borre style (Paterson 2002, 270). The style includes a range of complex, closed circuit knot designs built around this basic pattern, recently classified by Kleingärtner (2007, 59-65, figs. 8-13). Evidence from coin-dated hoards indicates that Terslev compositions had an extensive life span in Scandinavia, stretching from the early tenth century well into the eleventh century, with a peak in the decades 950-60 (*ibid.* 60, Tab. 38-39).

In its original Scandinavian form, Terslev ornament was applied in filigree and granulation to ornate gold and silver jewellery. In both Scandinavia and England, the style also occurs on cast copper-alloy brooches and pendants: so-called Terslev 'imitations'. The growing corpus of such finds recovered in England includes probable imports (Fig. 6) in addition to locally-produced Anglo-Scandinavian variants, such as the silver pendants associated with a female burial from Saffron Walden, Essex (Paterson 2002, 271-2, fig. 5).

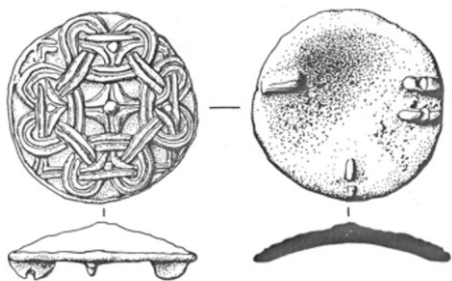


Figure 6 Terslev-style disc brooch, Thurlton, Norfolk (Norfolk HER 19353, drawn by Sue White, reproduced by kind permission of Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service). Diameter: 25.5mm.

Classical and derivative Terslev compositions occasionally appear in other media, including on stone sculpture: on a cross-head from St

Mary Castlegate, York, and a hogback from Gosforth, Cumbria, for instance, as well as on woodcarving (Wenham et al., 1987, 156-8, fig. 38, 48-49; Lang 1984, 134, fig. 10c, d; Lang 1988, fig. 12b).

Plant ornament

In addition to animal art styles, the repertoire of Viking-Age Scandinavian ornament includes two independent vegetal motifs: a stylised vine scroll and a more naturalistic acanthus. These plant motifs are not indigenous to Scandinavia, but were adopted from English and Continental sources and subsequently modified. In Scandinavia, western spiral motifs influenced some geometric compositions in the Borre style, with which plant motifs were contemporary and often intermixed (Fuglesang 1982, 154). Both plant styles were also applied to trefoil brooches, themselves modelled on imported western (Carolingian) trefoil-shaped mounts.

It is on such objects that Scandinavian-modified vegetal styles appear in the British Isles. A well-known example from Lakenheath Warren, Suffolk, carries tiers of vine scroll in alternating directions (Fig. 7). In common with other plant-ornamented trefoils, it also features elements in the Borre style: three isolated heads mark the corners of the central trefoil.

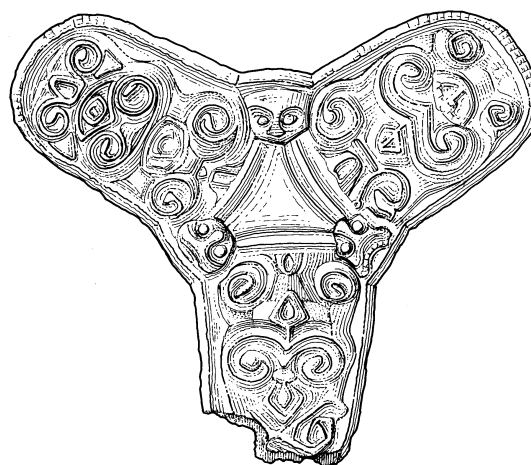


Figure 7 Trefoil Brooch from Lakenheath Warren, Suffolk (Cambridge Museum of Ethnography and History 1902.35, drawing by Nick Griffiths, from a photograph by the author). Length between arm terminals: 62mm, arm width: 22mm.

Vegetal ornament appears in a highly debased form on a group of small trefoil brooches (Fig. 8). These items, with counterparts in southern Scandinavia, bear a motif comprised of a central stem and transverse branches, often referred to as a 'fir-tree' pattern.

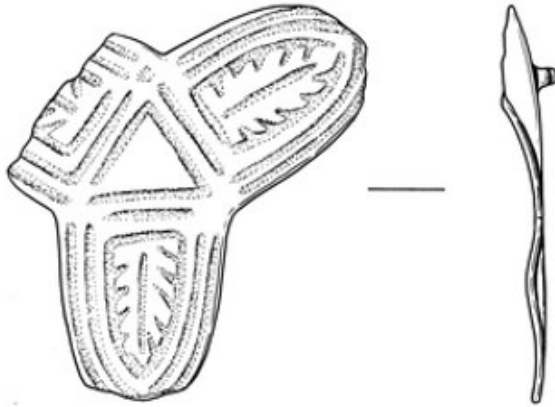


Figure 8 Trefoil Brooch from Long Melford, Suffolk (PAS 'Find-ID' SF-C7C9B1) Drawing by Donna Wreathall, reproduced by kind permission of Suffolk County Council. Length between arm terminals: 40mm, arm width: 16mm.

The Jelling style

Stylistic features

The Scandinavian Jelling style is, like the Borre style, artistically eclectic. It is identified with a number of motifs found at the royal complex of Jelling, Denmark, including vegetal scrolls (carried on woodcarvings) and profiled, ribbon-shaped animals (depicted on the side of a silver cup) (Fig. 9; see also Fuglesang 1982, figs. 29, 34). The animals, in their disciplined, interlocking pose, comprise the style's chief expression. They have double-contoured, billeted bodies, spiral hips and two-toed feet. Their heads are distinguished by a round eye, an open jaw with a bulbous upper lip, and a neck or ear lappet (a pigtail-like feature), which interlaces with the body (Wilson 1995, 116).

In Scandinavia, the 'pure' Jelling style, as it appears on a horse collar from Mammen,

Denmark, for example, is not especially common (Fuglesang 1982, 163, fig. 30). The style occurs more frequently in combination with the Borre style, with which it was partly contemporaneous. In this fused form, Jelling-style profiled beasts may be arranged in arched, looping layouts reminiscent of Borre-style interlace. It is in such formats that Jelling-style beasts most frequently occur in metalwork, including on a range of brooch types recovered from the site of Hedeby, Schleswig-Holstein (Capelle 1968, Abb. 4, Taf. 12).

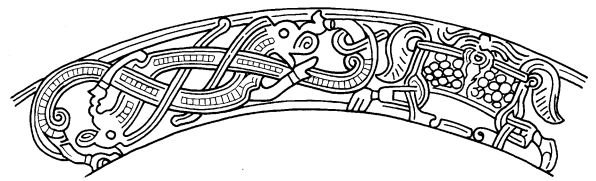


Figure 9 Jelling ornament on a silver cup from Jelling, Denmark (Drawing by Nick Griffiths, after Wilson 1995, fig. 96. Original © E Wilson). Length (upper band): 146mm, length (lower band): 116mm.

In the British Isles

In the British Isles, the Jelling style is usually associated with sculpture, until recently being rare in the medium of metalwork (Wilson and Klindt-Jensen 1964, 101-2). In sculpture, the style occurs in highly debased forms. A few competent Jelling compositions, close in style to the true Scandinavian style, are found on grave slabs and other sculpture from York, as well as on the Isle of Man (Bailey 1980, Pl. 9-11; Wilson 2008, fig. 27). More typical, however, are the highly debased creatures which appear on a group of carvings from East Yorkshire (Wilson and Klindt Jensen 1964, 103-4). This group includes two of the Middleton crosses, which feature broad, lumbering S-shaped creatures, far removed from the supple, ribbon-shaped animals of the classic Jelling style (Fig. 10; see Lang 1991, 181-83, Ills. 672, 674, 678, 680).

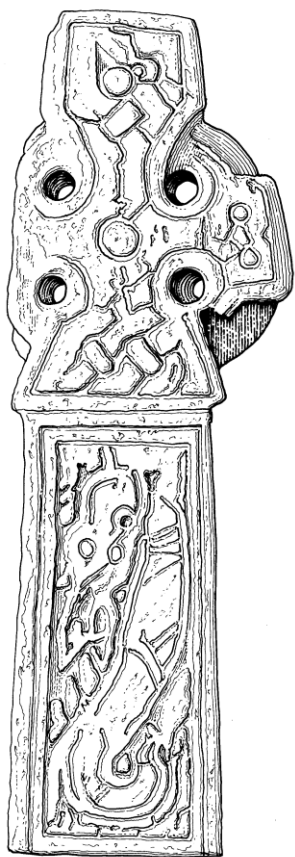


Figure 10 Middleton Cross, with Jelling-derived beast (Drawing by Nick Griffiths, with reference to Bailey 1980, Pl. 15) Not to scale.

The repertoire of Jelling motifs known from the British Isles has broadened significantly in recent years thanks to the increase in new finds recorded by such bodies as the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS; see www.finds.org.uk). The Insular corpus of Jelling metalwork now includes mounts, strap-fittings, buckles, pendants and brooches, encompassing both classical and derived motifs. Pure Jelling ornament is not yet known from the British Isles, but composite Borre/Jelling motifs appear on a range of brooch types, including a trefoil brooch from Alford, Lincolnshire (PAS 'Find-ID' NLM5243) and a double-plated disc brooch

series (Fig. 11; see Graham-Campbell 1985). Highly debased Borre/Jelling beasts appear on two lead-alloy discs from York, adding to the tally of derivative Jelling-style pieces known from the city (Roesdahl *et al.* 1981, YD12, YD13).

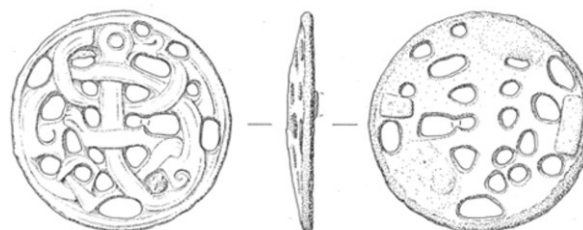


Figure 11 Openwork brooch plate in the composite Borre/ Jelling style, Hindringham, Norfolk (Norfolk HER 25071, drawn by Jason Gibbons, reproduced by kind permission of Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service). Diameter: 32mm.

Chronology

The presence of the Jelling style in the Gokstad ship burial (sealed 900-905), suggests a date in the late ninth century for the emergence of the style in Scandinavia. There, it experienced its floruit on items found in mid tenth-century hoards (Wilson 1995, 120). It is to this early / mid tenth-century date that most Insular finds can be assigned, including sculpture from York, dated by stratigraphy to this period (Graham-Campbell 1985; Bailey 1978, 173). The silver cup from Jelling with diagnostic ornament comes from a grave closed by 958-9, but hoard evidence indicates that the style continued to circulate into the last decades of the tenth century (Christiansen and Krogh 1987; Wilson 1995, 120).

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