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The Hvoshcheva sword

An example of contacts between Britain and Scandinavia in the Late Viking Period

By Fedir Androschchuk

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This paper concerns a sword from the Late Viking Period found near Hvoshcheva village in the Ukraine. It is a common view that this sword is a specimen of local production reflecting manifold cultural and technical influences: West European (technique of inscription), Scandinavian (decoration) and local (Cyrillic letters and shape of the pommel). The author suggests that the decoration on the guards of the sword is common for specimens decorated in the Ringerike style, while the palmetto motif of the grip is a characteristic feature of Irish art in the late 11th and early 12th centuries. Similar decoration is found on the grave slab from St. Paul's Cathedral in London, a weather vane from Heggen church in Norway and a bronze crucifix from Clonmacnoise in Ireland. It is stressed that the sword hilt from Hvoshcheva is made in the same way as that of the sword from Dybäck in Scania, formerly a part of Denmark. However, the type of the Hvoshcheva sword corresponds with late specimens of Late Anglo-Saxons swords (Petersen type L). The conclusion is that the hilt of the sword from Ukraine was produced in a Danish context in Britain or in a part of present-day Sweden influenced by Denmark.

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In the late 19th century a sword from the Late Viking Period was found near Hvoshcheva village in the Ukraine (Titkov 1999, p. 60). It was a stray find and there is no detailed evidence concerning the circumstances of discovery. Because of its hilt decoration, which has been associated with the style of decoration of the Swedish rune stones, the sword was seen simply as proof of the Scandinavian production of Viking Period swords in Ancient Rus (Arne 1914, p. 57, fig. 42). Later A.N. Kirpichnikov discovered traces of an inscription on the blade of the sword which he interpreted as the name of a Slavonic smith ("Ljudota/Ljudosha

smith") who forged the sword. It is also claimed that the sword is a specimen of local production which reflects manifold cultural and technical influences: West European (the technique of the inscription), Scandinavian (decoration) and local (Cyrillic letters and the shape of the pommel) (Kirpichnikov 1966, p. 37 ff, pl. 13-15; Kirpichnikov 1970, p. 66 ff, figs. 6-7).

Probably because of its evident exclusiveness, the hilt of the sword has never been studied. Its typology and decoration has not been extensively analysed. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is a contextual analysis of the type and decorative style of the sword. This paper is



Fig. 1. Sword from Hvoshcheva in Ukraine (after A.N. Kirpichnikov). – Svärd från Hvoshcheva i Ukraina.

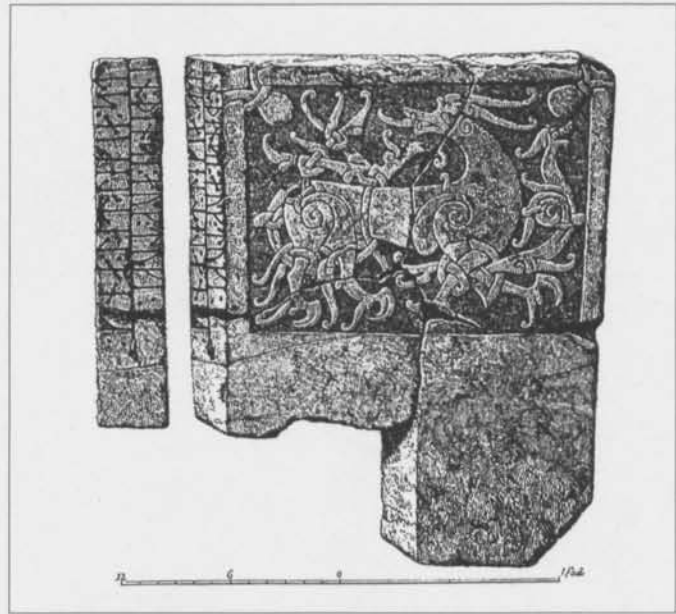
part of the author's project "Viking Period Swords of Scandinavia and Eastern Europe. An analysis of the Swedish sword finds and related studies" in collaboration with the Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm and the Department of Archaeology, University of Stockholm. The project has been funded by the Swedish Institute and the Berit Wallenberg Foundation.

The sword is kept at the National Historical Museum in Kiev (B-2714). The following measurements have been recorded: total length 85.7 cm, length of the blade 67.9 cm, width of the blade 4.9–3.8 cm, length of hilt 17.8 cm.

The bronze hilt is composed of five basic parts: a triangular pommel, a curved upper guard, a grip, a curved lower guard and the base of the lower guard (fig. 1).

The decorative style of the Hvoshcheva sword is not, in fact, typical for Swedish rune-stones from the Late Viking Period. A great beast with two paws, tail (and wing?) is depicted on both sides of the pommel. The beast's head with a large almond-shaped eye and gapping jaws is turned back. On the other side of the pommel the depiction of the beast is more schematic. It consists only of a paw and tendrils like twigs, probably a careless or schematic depiction of

Fig. 2. Graveslab from St. Paul's Churchyard, London (after S. Lindqvist). — Gravsten från St. Paul's kyrkogård, London.



an intertwined snake. On both sides of the upper guard, and on the lower guard with its base, snakes with gaping jaws are visible. This decoration, depicting a great beast together with an intertwined snake with almond-shaped eyes, is more common for specimens decorated in the Ringerike style (Fuglesang 1979). Similar decoration is found on the grave slab from St. Paul's Churchyard in London (fig. 2; Lindqvist 1915, pp. 75–80). The runic inscription on the stone provides evidence that Scandinavians commissioned it. Wilson & Klindt-Jensen (1966, pp. 135–136, pl. XVIIIa) suggest that a craftsman of Swedish origin carved it. Indeed, the decoration on two Swedish weather vanes from Källunge on Gotland (fig. 3) and Söderala in Hälsingland could be quoted as parallels to the English stone (Fuglesang 1979, no. 43; Graham-Campbell 1980, p. 80, no. 284). However, a more closely related object is another weather vane originating from Heggen church, Modum, Buskerud in Norway (fig. 4; Fuglesang 1979, no. 42; Graham-Campbell 1980, pp. 79–80, no. 283). Two lion-like figures have been engraved here beside a cast bronze figure of a great beast of the same design. One of the engraved figures is smaller with its head

turned back. Its snout is not as elongated as that of the beasts on the St. Paul's Cathedral stone and the pommel of the Hvoshcheva sword. Besides, another important feature—an intertwined snake—is missing. For this reason I wish to suggest that the decoration on the grave slab from St. Paul's Cathedral is more closely related to the motif on the pommel of the Hvoshcheva sword.

The grave slab is dated to the Late Viking Period. However, its motif, a great beast entwined with a snake, indubitably originates from a scene on the famous rune stone at Jelling in Denmark (Wilson & Klindt-Jensen 1966, pl. 35–136; Graham-Campbell 1980, pp. 146–147). An important innovation in the Ringerike style is the appearance of a bird figure in the composition. There are good examples in two runic carvings from Södermanland of the scene where Sigurd slays the dragon in the *Völsunga/Nibelungen* saga (fig. 5; Sö 327, Sö 101 according to Brate & Wessen 1933, pp. 306–311, pl. 166; 1936, p. 388). It is also important that both carvings depict swords of the type that we are dealing with here. The same motif with, the addition of bird figures, can be seen on sword hilts from Vrångabäck and Dy-



Fig. 3. Weather-vane from Källunge parish, Gotland, Sweden (after D. Wilson & O. Jensen). – Vindflöjel från Källunge sn., Gotland.

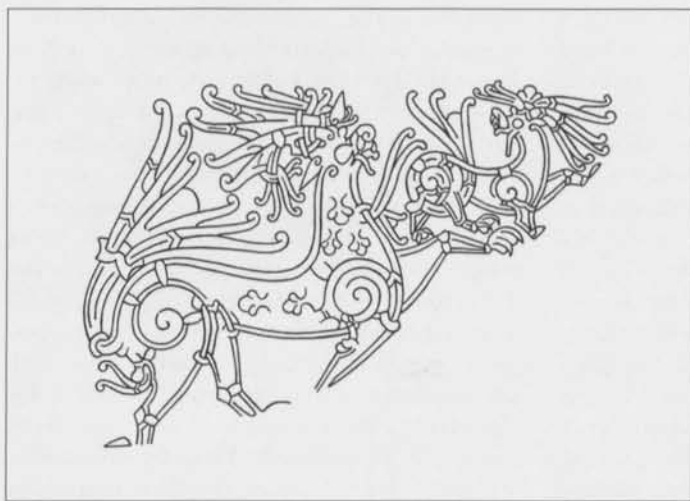


Fig. 4. Decoration on weather vane from Heggen church, Modum, Buskerud, Norway (after D. Wilson & O. Jensen). – Vindflöjel från Heggens kyrka, Modum, Buskerud.

Fig. 5. Representation of sword on a carving of the scene where Sigurd slays the dragon in the Niebelungen Saga, Jäder parish Södermanland in Sweden. – Avbildning av svärd på Sigurdsristning, Jäders sn., Södermanland.

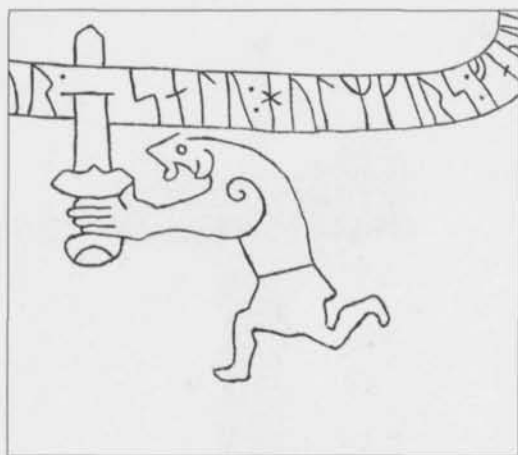
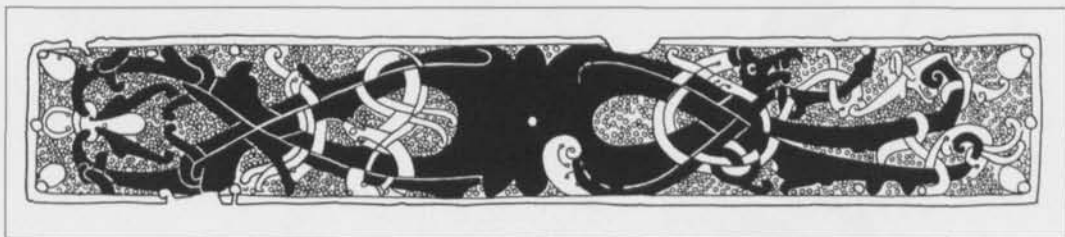


Fig. 6. Bronze plate from Winchester Cathedral in England (after B. Kjølbye-Biddle). – Bronsplåt från katedralen i Winchester.



bäck in Scania, Sweden, which are decorated in the Winchester style and will be discussed below. The popularity of the scene in Scandinavia in the Late Viking Period might be explained by close contacts between Denmark and Britain, and the earliest specimens were probably produced in a Danish setting in Britain. In this context, a bronze plate with an engraved great beast and snake from Winchester Cathedral should be mentioned (fig. 6). The plate is dated to the mid-11th century and interpreted as an Anglo-Saxon imitation of the Ringerike style or as a specimen of Scandinavian production. It is interesting to note that the plate was found near the Old Minster and could be interpreted as an evidence of such contacts, as the Danish King Canute, his Queen Emma and their sons were buried in the Old Minster (Kjølbye-Biddle 1984, pp. 307–314).

Kirpichnikov (1966, pp. 41, 84, no. 87) could not find a Scandinavian parallel to the sword type from Hvoshcheva. His claim that it was of Scandinavian-Baltic type has more to do

with the decoration of the sword than its overall type.

In my opinion the hilt of the Hvoshcheva sword is made in the same way as that of the sword found at Dybäck, Ö. Vemmenhög parish, Scania (SHM 4515) in Sweden (figs. 7; Strömberg 1961, pp. 138–140, pl. 65:2; Graham-Campbell 1980, pp. 70–71, no. 250). The pommel is missing from the Dybäck sword, but the upwardly curved upper guard, the grip twined with gold wire, the lower guard and its base survive. All parts of this hilt are cast in silver and embellished with engraving and punch work. Two antithetical birds with open beaks, closed wings, two-toed feet and squared-off tails are visible on the upper guard. A beast with raised paws intertwined with a snake is depicted between the birds. The snake is biting one of the birds. On each of the edges of the downwardly curved lower guard a fantastic beast facing upwards flanks a scene of two birds and a snake fighting. The base of the lower guard is embellished with four heads of fantastic animals linked



Fig. 7. Sword from Dybäck, Västra Vemmenhög parish, Scania in Sweden (photo ATA). – Svärd från Dybäck, Västra Vemmenhög sn., Skåne.

together with beaded ribbons. The upper face of the lower guard and the lower face of its base are adorned with a tendril motif. It should be mentioned that the style of the lower guard base is different in decoration from that of both guards. The animal heads with circular eyes and short massive snouts as well as beaded ribbons have close parallels in Danish art going back to the Mammen and Hiddensee styles of the late 10th century (Duczko 1995, p. 644 ff).

The pommel of the sword from Dybäck is missing but it indubitably looked like another one from Vrångabäck, Sövde parish, Scania (fig. 8; Strömberg 1961, pl. 65) which is also cast in silver and has a base that curves upwards. A three-lobed pommel shaped like an eagle head is fitted into the upper guard with two rivets. From the motif and technique of de-

scription it is evident that both hilts were the product of the same artisan.

Already Brøndsted (1924, pp. 267–268, fig. 192) suggested that the decoration of the sword from Dybäck is an example of a Scandinavian imitation of the southern British animal style. Now it is generally accepted that the decoration of both swords from Scania corresponds to typical specimens of the British Winchester style (Graham-Campbell 1980, pp. 71).

The decoration of the Hvoshcheva sword's grip is executed in a different style. Both faces of the grip are subdivided by a double zigzag ribbon into six triangles with schematic palmettos inside. This pattern is similar to the "running tendril" which was popular in Romanesque art. For example, such a motif can be seen on the bronze grip of a sword from



Fig. 8. Pommel from Vrångabäck, Sövde parish, Scania, Sweden (photo ATA). – Svärdsknapp från Vrångabäck, Sövde sn., Skåne.



Fig. 9. Bronze crucifix from Clonmacnoise, Co. Offlaly, Ireland (after F. Henry). – Bronskrucifix från Clonmacnoise, Co. Offlaly.

Kiviniemi, Sakkola in Karelia (Nordman 1931, pp. 180–201, 199, 200, fig. 35). However, the palmettos of the Hvoshcheva grip have no direct parallels with the exception of a similar one on the bronze crucifix from Clonmacnoise, Co. Offlaly in Ireland (fig. 9; Henry 1967, p. 161, pl.8). It has been claimed that palmettos like those on the specimen from Clonmacnoise were a characteristic feature of Irish art in the late 11th and early 12th centuries (*Treasures of Ireland*, pp. 166–167, no. 78, pl. 175). This dating of Irish decoration, and the different decorative styles involved, suggest that the parts of the Hvoshcheva hilt were made at different times. First, in the mid-11th century, the pommel and guards were made. Then, in the early 12th century, the grip was made. It is interesting to note that both stages of the hilt composition were clearly related to the British Isles where the sword probably came from. Regarding the origin of the Hvoshcheva sword, one more British trait should be mentioned. Triangular pommels with upwardly curved upper guards are characteris-

tic of swords of Petersen's (1919) type L that were common in Britain during the Viking Period. However, the composite downward curved lower guard of the Hvoshcheva sword is a feature of Petersen's type Z (Wilson 1965, pp. 32–54; Evison 1967, 160–186; Fuglesang 1980). Thus, the Hvoshcheva sword is in my opinion one of the latest specimens of type L, and has absorbed traits of other contemporary sword types.

The cast silver hilts of the swords from Vrångabäck and Dybäck were found in Scania, formerly a part of Denmark, and were indubitably related to royal settings. The parts of the Hvoshcheva hilt were cast in bronze. There are only two parallels—bases of lower guards from Gotland (Go, Vall parish, SHM 14065; SHM 2976:210, Thunmark-Nylén 1998, Taf. 231:5) decorated in a primitive Borre style which probably links them to swords of Petersen's type Z. Nevertheless, as shown above, the hilt of the Hvoshcheva sword was produced in a Danish context in Britain or possibly in a part of present-day Sweden influenced by Denmark.

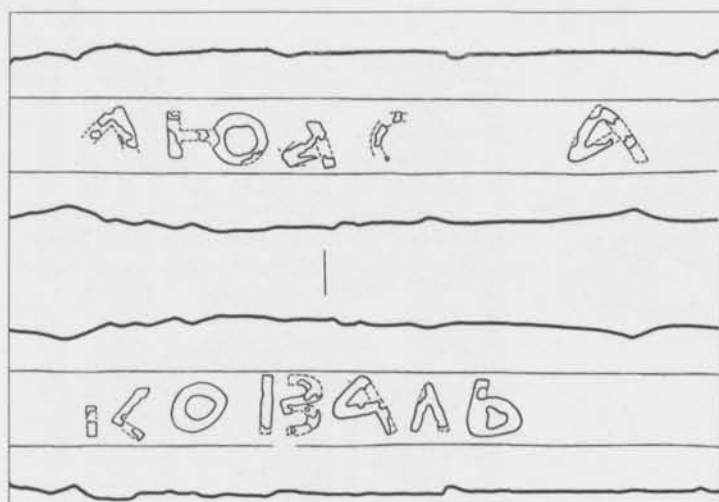


Fig. 10. "Cyrillic" inscription on the blade of the sword from Hvoshcheva (after A.N. Kirpichnikov). – »Kyrillisk» inskrift på bladet till svärdet från Hvoshcheva.

Thus, it is only the Cyrillic inscription (fig. 10) that suggests a Slavonic production for the Hvoshcheva sword. However, certain problems with its interpretation should be noted. Kirpichnikov points out that only two letters "IO" and "A" are legible on the blade of the sword. In 2001 I examined the sword twice and it was apparent that only a circle-shaped mark flanked by two vertical lines are to be observed. I also checked a sword (NMIUB-329) with another "Slavonic" inscription ("SLAV" according to Kirpichnikov). The blade of that sword is in an extremely poor condition, its surface full of cavities together with the remains of markings which Kirpichnikov has read as a Slavonic name. This, too, was in fact only a circle and zigzag-shaped marks.

To sum up, it should be admitted that the Slavonic inscriptions are more wishful thinking than fact. It is remarkable that both swords with "Slavonic" inscriptions are characterized by the same feature the poor condition of the inscription. Slavonic inscriptions may one day be found with the assistance of modern technology, but for the moment the Slavonic production of swords during the Viking Period still remains to be proven.

It is important to note that workshop marks such as "Ingelrii" or "Ulfberht" are not evidence that these swords were produced in West

Europe. Sword blades may have been exported, but hilts were manufactured by local smiths. This is shown by the find of five marked blades without hilts from Skärlov in Hulterstad parish, Öland, Sweden (SHM 3104) and also finds of separate pommels and guards in Hedeby (Geibig 1991) and Birka (SHM 5208:248, 5208:249, 5208:250, 5208:547, Fnr 21672, 25217, 30397, 43173, 43658). I have examined in detail c. 400 Swedish, 100 Norwegian, 30 Danish and 25 Icelandic hilts (my drawings of the Swedish swords are available at the Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm). I have concluded that the length of the tangs, the total length and the weight of the swords are different, and it should be evident that swords were not standardized products during the Viking Period. Each of them was forged for a customer. On the other hand, modern experimental production of pattern-welded blades and inscriptions has shown that it was not difficult for Scandinavian smiths to produce such swords (Andressen 1993, pp. 38–39). This supports the suggestion that Frankish swords were copied by Scandinavian smiths (Müller-Wille 1970, pp. 75; Stalsberg 1994, pp. 187–188). It is currently a common view that swords of the Viking Period were exported directly from West Europe and cannot be used to discuss contacts between Scan-

dinavia and Rus. If we make such an assumption, any sword with a marked or pattern-welded blade should be considered as an import. Only jewellery will be left to discuss. We would then come to untenable conclusions about mass migration from Sweden to Rus for women only.

Despite apparent similarities between swords from Western Europe, Scandinavia and Rus, there are clear similarities which unfortunately are only partly published. The frequency of the various sword types show clear regional peculiarities. Some types concentrate in Norway, others in Sweden and some in Denmark. The close correlation between the sets of sword types typical for various Scandinavian regions and other parts of Europe reflect interregional contacts, also indicated by written sources and imported goods (Androschchuk in press). The Hvoshcheva sword supports this view.

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