

A VIKING-AGE HARNESS-BOW FRAGMENT FROM CLIFFE, N. YORKSHIRE (Fig. 5)

Part of a gilt copper-alloy mount from a Viking-age harness-bow of Scandinavian type was found, in 1997, by Mr M. Tate in a field at Cliffe, near Selby, N. Yorkshire.¹ This is of particular interest in that it is the first example of such a reins-guide to have been found in Britain or Ireland, although there is a complete example of this particular type, from Gotland, on display in the British Museum.² These guides were mounted on wooden bows for use in harness, with withers and breast straps, on horses pulling wagons; they have been found both singly and in pairs.³

The Cliffe fragment (length: 50 mm) consists of about one third of such a mount which would have been of semi-circular form, with two circular perforations for the pair of reins, surrounded by openwork ornament in the 9th-/10th-century Borre style of Viking art (Fig. 5). It is missing the attachment lug which would have formed its terminal and is also damaged on its lower edge. The surviving ornament consists of an animal-mask, placed centrally above the perforation, with prominent eyes and the corroded remains of projecting ears, to one side of which extends a snake-like body consisting of a single strand of interlace, with a median line, and ending in a tail which touches the edge of the perforation. The ornament on the opposite side is similar in design, although not identical, but it is less well preserved, with the face-mask having corroded away to just a low knob. The ridge is transversely ribbed, as on the Gotlandic example in the British Museum.

This is a basic example of a standard type of harness-bow mount, the most elaborate of which are embellished with tinned and niello-inlaid details, as on the pair from Birka grave 750.⁴ Recent discussion of the Birka examples by Märta Strömberg has highlighted

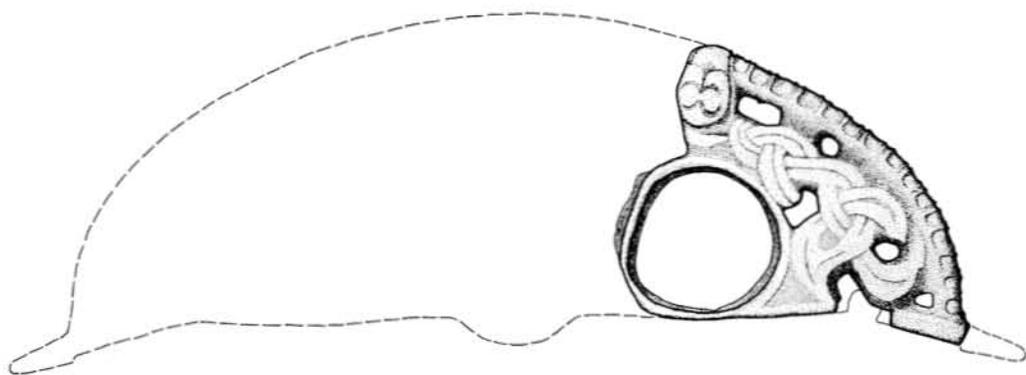


FIG. 5
Cliffe, N. Yorkshire: Harness-bow fragment (1:1)

¹ I am most grateful to Dr Elizabeth Hartley of the Yorkshire Museum for bringing this mount (accession number YORYM 1998.694) to my attention and for providing the drawing for publication.

² *MLA* 1921, 11-1, 282; D. Kidd and L. Thunmark-Nylén, 'James Curle of Melrose and his collection of Gotlandic antiquities', *Fornvännen*, 85 (1990), fig. 4.

³ M. Müller-Wille, 'Das Krummsiel von Elstrup (Alsen)', *Acta Archaeologica*, 45 (1974), 144-54; U. Näsman, 'Mammen 1871', in M. Iversen (ed.), *Mammen. Grav, kunst og samfund i vikingetid* (Højbjerg, 1991), 221-22, fig. 5.

⁴ H. Arbman, *Birka I. Die Gräber* (Uppsala, 1940), Taf. 32, 1; J. Graham-Campbell, *Viking Artefacts: A Select Catalogue* (London, 1980), no. 296.

their primarily Swedish distribution,⁵ although a few such mounts have been found in Norway, mostly in Trøndelag, which Jan Petersen attributed to Swedish influence.⁶ This factor presumably explains why the Cliffe example is the first to have been found in the Viking West.⁷

JAMES GRAHAM-CAMPBELL

⁵ M. Strömberg, 'Kumtbesläge', in G. Arwidsson (ed.), *Birka II:2. Systematische Analysen der Gräberfunde* (Stockholm, 1986), 143–46; the Cliffe fragment belongs to her 'Gruppe B'.

⁶ J. Petersen, *Vikingetidens redskaper* (Oslo, 1951), 39–42, fig. 38.

⁷ Harness-bow mounts from Denmark have only a single perforation; opp. cit. in note 3.