

A Lead Model and a Rediscovered Sword, both with Gripping Beast decoration

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TWO OBJECTS found in England are discussed with particular reference to their decoration, which is in early Viking style. Evidence is adduced for a mid 8th-century date for the emergence of this art style in Scandinavia and the historical implications of its appearance in England are considered.

In 1983 the British Museum acquired a small, flat lead-alloy object decorated in Gripping Beast style (Acc. no., Medieval and Later Antiquities 1983, 3-2, 1). It was found during dredging operations in the R. Ouse at Huntingdon, downstream of the town bridge, and presented by the finder, Mr G. S. Johnson. This outwardly rather insignificant object is of interest on two counts, its probable function as a model in a bronze-casting process and its style of decoration.

The Huntingdon Model (Fig. 1; Pl. 1)

The two fragments were found together and can be joined to form the greater part of an asymmetric oval mount pierced by three holes, two large and one small. The back is flat and smooth with irregular surface scratches and the front is decorated in relief with a network of highly stylised 'Gripping Beasts'. The clearest figure lies on its side above the break; it has a triangular head with circular face and two pigtails, an expanding body and two arms, one damaged, the other attached to an adjacent figure.

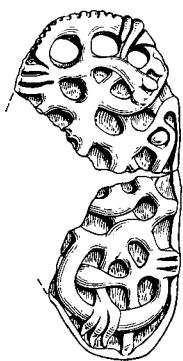


FIG. 1

Lead-alloy fragments from Huntingdon. Scale 1:1

The metal was analysed in the British Museum Research Laboratory and found to be an alloy of lead and tin (pewter). It was cast in a simple or open mould. Small lead-alloy mounts and brooches are known from Viking and late Saxon contexts¹ but the Huntingdon object does not appear to be a finished artefact and most likely represents an intermediate stage in a casting process, a model which was perhaps broken or for some other reason discarded or lost. There is an increasing amount of evidence for the use of lead rather than wax in the so-called 'lost-wax' method of casting² but if this object is an unused casting model, what artefact is likely to have been the intended end-product? The shape is unlike that of Anglo-Saxon or Viking strap-ends, nor does it comfortably combine with others to form the trefoil of a brooch. The design looks as though it could have been intended for piercing into openwork and the irregular oval is not unlike that of certain flat, openwork key handles³ but approximates even more closely to a flattened version of one half of a barrel-shaped key handle of Scandinavian type.⁴ The soft lead alloy could easily be curved, or dished, into the exact shape of such a half handle and used in the preparation of a two-part mould in the way described by Zachrisson for the Smiss key.⁵ Alternatively, two such lead-alloy pieces could be placed together in an investment mould and replaced by copper alloy in the so-called 'lost wax' method of casting.

Though there has been much debate about the origins of 'Gripping Beasts', the fully developed style is wholly Scandinavian and its identification on the Huntingdon model stimulated a search for reports of other objects from England with this form of early Viking decoration. Only one other is recorded, a sword from near Reading found in 1831 and published, with a drawing, by the Society of Antiquaries in 1867.⁶ The sword was found with the bones of a man and a horse and is likely to have been a Viking burial. Subsequently the sword was reported lost but happily, after spending 150 years safely in obscurity in private hands, its location is now known and it is periodically on loan to the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

The Reading Sword (Fig. 2; Pl. II)

The pommel is missing but both upper and lower guards are in good condition. They are hollow cast in copper alloy and inlaid with silver wire. The metal surfaces are much worn, one side rather more than the other.

The upper guard is oval, 78 mm long and 18 mm deep. Its upper and lower surfaces are undecorated. On the upper surface the top of the iron tang is clearly visible, filling a rectangle 28 mm × 17 mm. On either side of this, 40 mm apart, are holes penetrating the full depth of the guard, one of them filled with corroded iron. Beyond these are smaller holes, one iron-filled, which do not go through the whole guard. The larger holes are placed as one would expect for rivets attaching a pommel. If the pommel was of approximately the same length as the guard (as e.g. the Mannheim and Steinsvik swords),⁷ it may also have had locating lugs or rivets to engage with the smaller holes on the guard. However, these holes could have been for non-functional decorative rivets used with a pommel narrower than the guard.⁸ On both sides of the guard there is a panel of cast decoration described in the 1867 article as 'imperfectly executed figures of men and animals'. Though these lack grasping hands, they form a network of thin limbs and expanded bodies and are clearly identifiable as Gripping Beasts, some with triangular heads and pigtails. Above and below the panels, the bronze is inlaid with vertically-set fine silver wires.

The grip. The exposed part of the tang is 89 mm long and tapers from 22 mm to 15 mm in width. It is said to have been covered in ivory which crumbled away on exposure to the air. No trace now remains of any handgrip material.

The lower guard, similar to the upper, is an oval 90 mm long and 19 mm in depth. On its upper surface, surrounding the tang, is a cast, beaded collar. The surface on either side of this is decorated with dot and circle ornament. On the lower surface of the guard, framing the

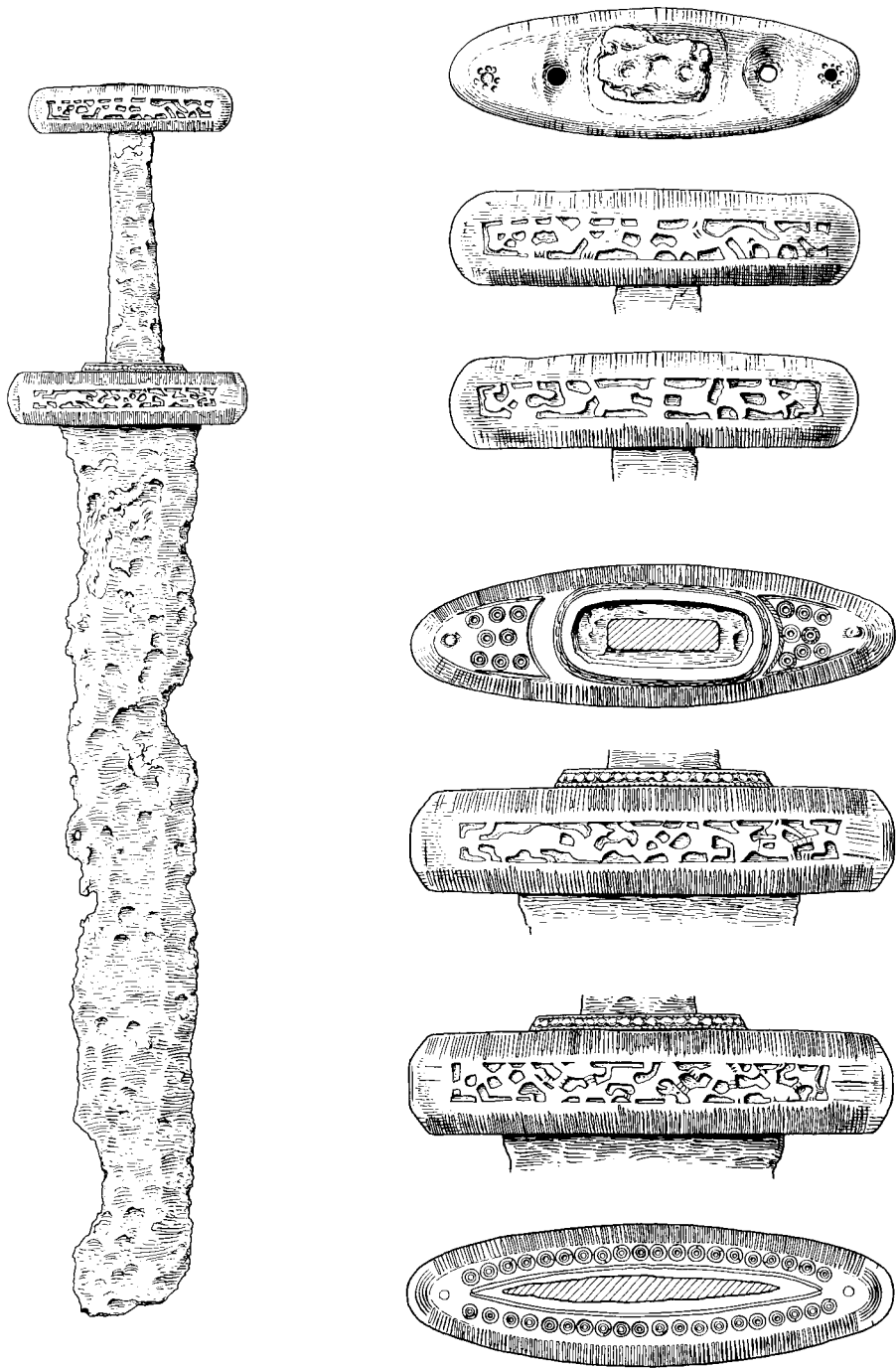


FIG. 2

Sword found in Reading in 1831, with details of the copper-alloy guards. Scale 1:3; details 2:3

sword blade, is a single inlaid silver wire within a line of dots in circles. Silver inlay remains in the circles but the dots are simple depressions in the bronze. A pair of small iron rivets 75 mm apart go through from top to bottom of the guard. There is no sign of a junction in the highly polished surface and the rivets were almost certainly non-functional like the false iron rivets on the silver guard of the sword from Holbaek, Denmark, illustrated by Behmer.⁹ The sides, like those of the upper guard, are decorated with panels of Gripping Beasts and inlaid vertical silver wires; a few horizontal grooves for inlay can be seen at the outer edges.

The blade, now truncated, damaged and pitted from corrosion, is double-edged with a maximum preserved length of 338 mm and width of 54 mm. Pattern welding, visible near the top of the blade, shows up very clearly on a radiograph as a herringbone pattern extending for almost the full width of the blade, leaving only the edges clear. Lower down the blade, radiography has shown a further small area of similar pattern welding.

The Reading sword with its hollow-cast bronze guards has no close parallels. On the evidence of the 1867 published drawing and account, Professor V. I. Evison dated it to the early part of the 9th century and grouped it with the Mannheim and Palace of Westminster swords because of the oval plan of the guards, the horizontal fields of decoration and the arrangement of the inlaid wires.¹⁰ Technically, however, the Reading sword differs fundamentally from the others in Evison's group, all of which have iron guards into which copper-alloy plates of silver or copper wire may be inlaid.

Petersen's classification of Viking swords¹¹ does not include any with the hollow cast bronze guards of the Reading type but swords with guards of this construction, shape and proportions form a group within Behmer's final phase of type VI Merovingian swords¹² and a special category amongst Salmo's late Merovingian forms.¹³ A notable feature of these swords is that the guards are totally undecorated though pommel and grip may carry elaborate ornament. The Reading sword thus seems to be a special type related to the Behmer type VI and Salmo groups but differing from all the others in having cast-in decoration and inlaid wires on both guards. Another piece which should be considered here is a bronze sword-guard found in the river at Halland, Falkenberg, Sweden. It has panels of cast animal ornament on both sides and, though the treatment is more plastic than on the Reading sword, the arrangement in slightly sunken horizontal fields is closely similar. On one side the animals have cat-like faces and bodies like coiled springs, on the other the creatures are less well-defined. This sword-guard was considered by Arbman to be a Carolingian import¹⁴ but the closest relatives of the little cats are to be found on oval brooches of Petersen's Berdal type, such as that from Tissø, Sjaelland, Denmark, which are indubitably Scandinavian objects.¹⁵ On the other hand, Carolingian contexts do not provide any close parallels.

Gripping Beasts appear only rarely on swords. Apart from the Halland guard and the Reading sword, there are only two examples; one from Holbaek, Denmark has panels of animal ornament on its silver pommel¹⁶ and the other, from Steinsvik in northern Norway, carries vertical panels of Gripping Beasts and silver and copper wire inlaid into the iron pommel and guards.¹⁷ In 1964, Marstrander suggested that there was 'no reasonable doubt that the Steinsvik sword was imported from the West'¹⁸ and Arbman considered that the Holbaek sword was an import and the ornament 'like English figures'.¹⁹ Here again there seems to be a strong case for seeing both as Scandinavian products, the one being typologically a Petersen Special

type 1 which he saw as pre-Viking, dated to around 800; the other belonging to Behmer's type VI of the later 8th century, for which all the cited examples have a Scandinavian provenance with a predominantly eastern distribution.

The dating and internal chronology of the Gripping Beast style is clearly of the greatest importance in any discussion of the Reading sword and the Huntingdon lead fragments. The emergence of the style in Scandinavia is traditionally dated to the beginning of the 9th century but the elements which go to make up a Gripping Beast composition were already present in Scandinavian art well before 800 and it is not easy to say at what point a cat-like creature becomes a Gripping Beast. Cats with heads *en face* and paws grasping one another appear first on Berdal-type oval brooches.²⁰ Other Berdal-type brooches show naturalistically disposed quadrupeds in individual fields enclosed by borders or arches, a decorative arrangement which may well have been influenced by western European imports.²¹ Eventually, grasping animals and borders merge into the complex mesh-like arrangements found in fully developed Gripping Beast ornament and the creatures, both human and animal, become increasingly grotesque.

Fully developed Gripping Beast ornament clearly shows the influence of Style E and the interrelationship between the two styles has been demonstrated both by Shetelig and Klindt-Jensen.²² Within Style E itself, gripping paws make their appearance in place of the more usual leafy or flipper-like limbs.²³ The flat form of Gripping Beast decoration, like that on the Holbaek sword, has at least as much in common with the amorphous shapes of Style E as with compositions involving easily identifiable chunky Gripping Beasts. A single individual in this flat style occurs on an early oval brooch which is otherwise decorated with loose interlace motifs, a group of them lie along the mid-rib of an 8th-century small oval brooch from Rogaland and more fully developed but still flat figures ornament the oval brooch from Kätörp, Öland.²⁴ Gripping Beast style must be seen as a development within Scandinavia from elements already present and not as an importation from Carolingian or insular art.²⁵ The figures show no tendency to trail off into ribbons or knots and are quite unlike the fully profiled creatures of 8th- or 9th-century western Europe whose agile bodies are almost invariably involved with interlacing limbs and tails. Only the lion on the Breedon panel and the cat-like animals of the Brunswick casket and the Melsonby Cross share the frontal head pose which is so characteristic of Gripping Beasts; there is nothing which is suggestive of them in the 8th-century Irish or Hiberno-Saxon metalwork found in Norwegian burials in the late 8th/early 9th century.²⁶

Berdal-style oval brooch moulds have been excavated in Ribe from a layer where a scatter of coins (dated *c.* 720–800) suggest a mid 8th-century date for the early metalworking,²⁷ and we must therefore seek the origins of the cat-like creatures which decorate them nearly half a century earlier than the historically dated period of the Viking incursions into western Europe. The introduction of the cat, or lion, motif into Scandinavian art now seems to predate its appearance in Mercian sculpture (the Breedon lion and Melsonby Cross) and on the Brunswick casket.²⁸ It therefore becomes necessary to seek a common source of inspiration rather than to attempt to derive the Scandinavian beasts from western European prototypes.

The lions in various poses which feature on Byzantine textiles and the somewhat clumsier representations on 7th-century provincial metalwork²⁹ seem a likely origin for the motif. Contact between Ribe and Frisia in the mid 8th century has been demonstrated by the 30 Frisian sceattas found during Bencard's excavations in the 1970s.³⁰ From Frisia the routes were open for the interchange of goods and the passage of envoys through the kingdom of the Franks and northern Italy to the Adriatic. Pressures on the Byzantine Empire, both external and internal, need not have totally disrupted the flow of luxury goods and indeed the exiles from iconoclasm may well have made a positive contribution to the dissemination northwards of silks and embroideries carrying motifs such as the lion which were 'tainted' with Christian imagery. Once within Scandinavia the lion was transformed into a typically Viking caricature while in western Europe it was adapted for different tastes and illustrates different, often Christian, themes.

The ornament on the Reading sword is in a well-developed Gripping Beast style with the form of the figures subordinated to a mesh-like design. Its worn condition means that it is not possible to say whether the design, now flat, was originally more plastic. Typologically it seems that the hilt should be dated to the Merovingian/Viking transition period in the latter part of the 8th century and this agrees well with the date suggested above for the developed style of the ornament. A similar date, based on typological evidence, has been given for the Holbaek and Steinsvik swords.³¹ The Huntingdon lead model with its plastic openwork design of Gripping Beasts probably belongs somewhere in the early part of the 9th century.

Do these two objects indicate a Viking presence well inland in England at this early date or were they already half a century or more old when brought by raider, trader or settler? But for these two exceptions, it is still true to say, with Wilson, 'The first Scandinavian style to appear in this country [England] was the Borre style'³² which gives a post-860 date for the advent of Scandinavian ornament and thus, by implication, of settlement, though coastal raids had of course been taking place well before this. The report that the bones of a man and a horse were found with the sword suggests that this was a pagan burial and the sword a Viking possession rather than an object obtained by trade, gift or theft and owned by a local Saxon. There seems therefore a strong case for postulating the presence of a Viking horseman in the Reading area at a date probably not much later than 800 (which would take account of the worn condition of the sword) and perhaps earlier. The existence of the lead model from Huntingdon could imply that there was a workshop for casting objects; perhaps keys, in Gripping Beast style somewhere in the vicinity of the find. However, the fact that the model had been pierced and was perhaps used secondarily as a pendant provides the alternative interpretation that it was picked up in a Scandinavian settlement and was lost in England considerably later than the early 9th-century date to which, on stylistic grounds, its manufacture must be ascribed.

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NOTES

¹ A. MacGregor, 'Industry and Commerce in Anglo-Scandinavian York', in R. A. Hall (ed.), *Viking Age York and the North* (London, Counc. Brit. Archaeol. Res. Rep. 27, 1978), 43; T. Capelle, *Der Metallschmuck von Halthabu* (Neumünster, 1968), 71; D. M. Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Ornamental Metalwork, 700-1100, in the British Museum* (London, 1962), nos. 11, 37, 39, 51-54, 88, 134 and 142; D. A. Hinton, *Anglo-Saxon Ornamental Metalwork 700-1100 in the Ashmolean Museum* (Oxford, 1974), no. 39.

² R. Christlein, 'Anzeichen von Fibelproduktion in der Völkerwanderungszeitlichen Siedlung Runder Berg bei Urach', *Archäologisches Korrespondenzblatt* I, (Mainz, 1971), 47-49; T. Capelle and H. Vierck, 'Weitere Modellen der Merowinger- und Wikingerzeit', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 9, (1975) 127-33; E. Foltz, 'Guss in Verlorener Form mit Bleimiddellen?', *Archäologisches Korrespondenzblatt*, 10 (1980), 345-49; C. Bonnet and M. Martin, 'Le modèle de plomb d'une fibule anglo-saxonne de Saint-Pierre à Genève', *Archäologie der Schweiz*, 5 no. 4 (1982), 210-24.

³ B. Almgren, *Bronssycklar och Djuvornamentik* (Uppsala, 1955), pl. 8, S.86; pl. 27, N. 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pl. 32.

⁵ I. Zachrisson, 'Smedsfyndet från Smis', *Tor*, 8 (1962), 201-28.

⁶ *Proc. Soc. Antiq.*, 2nd ser., III (1867), 461-63.

⁷ G. C. Dunning and V. I. Evison, 'The Palace of Westminster sword', *Archaeologia*, 98 (1961), 134, pl. 38

(Mannheim); *ibid.*, pl. 36; J. Graham-Campbell, *Viking Artefacts* (London, 1980), no. 245 (Steinsvik).

⁸ E. Behmer, *Das Zweischneidige Schwert der germanischen Völkerwanderungszeit* (Stockholm, 1939), 142.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 143, Taf. 53, 2.

¹⁰ Dunning and Evison, *op. cit.* in note 7, 135-36.

¹¹ J. Petersen, *De Norske Vikingsverd* (Kristiania, 1919).

¹² Behmer, *op. cit.* in note 8, 172-73, especially the sword from Ristimäki, Finland, pl. 54, 1.

¹³ H. Salmo, 'Die Waffen der Merowingerzeit in Finnland', *Finska Fornminnesföreningens Tidskrift*, 42 (1938), 98-100.

¹⁴ H. Arbman, *Schweden und das Karolingische Reich* (Stockholm, 1937), 130 and Taf. 41, Abb. 23.

¹⁵ The Tissø brooch is illustrated in S. Müller, *Ordnung af Danmarks Oldsager II* (Copenhagen, 1888-95); see also the Berdalstil figures in Capelle, *op. cit.* in note 1, Abb. 2.

¹⁶ Arbman, *op. cit.* in note 14, Taf. 42; Behmer, *op. cit.* in note 8, pl. 53, 2.

¹⁷ See note 7.

¹⁸ S. Marstrander, 'Om Grippedyrstilen og dens opphav', *Viking*, 28 (1964), 108.

¹⁹ Arbman, *op. cit.* in note 14, 130, Taf. 42 and Abb. 23.

²⁰ J. Petersen, *Vikingetidens Smykker*, (Stavanger, 1928), brooch from Hovindsholm, Norway, fig. 10.

²¹ Müller, *op. cit.* in note 15, pl. XXVIII, 596; Shetelig, 'Vestfoldskolen', *Osebergfundet*, III, Kristiania 1920, 257; E. Roesdahl, *Viking Age Denmark* (London, 1980), 188.

²² Shetelig, *op. cit.* in note 21, 256; O. Klindt-Jensen in D. M. Wilson and O. Klindt-Jensen, *Viking Art* (London, 1966), 83.

²³ Müller, *op. cit.* in note 15, no. 594; Graham-Campbell, *op. cit.* in note 7, no. 114.

²⁴ The oval brooch from Mindresunde (Petersen, *op. cit.* in note 20, fig. 11) which has a single animal centrally placed in the upper field is very closely related to the Birka grave 602 brooch: H. Arbman, *Birka I Die Graber*, (Uppsala, 1940), Taf. 58 no. 7, but here the Gripping Beast is replaced by simple crossed ribbons. For the other flat Gripping Beast compositions see Petersen, *op. cit.* in note 20, fig. 8 and J. Petersen, 'Eldre Vikingestil', *Nordisk Kultur*, xxvii (1931), fig. 8 (Kåtorp).

²⁵ Klindt-Jensen, *op. cit.* in note 21, 47. For the opposite view see Arbman, *op. cit.* in note 14; Marstrander, *op. cit.* in note 18; G. Haseloff, 'Zum Ursprung des nordischen Greiftierstils', *Festschrift Gustav Schwantes* (Neumünster, 1951), 202-12.

²⁶ E. Bakka, 'Some English decorated metal objects found in Norwegian Viking Graves', *Årbok for Universitetet i Bergen* (Bergen, Humanistisk serie 1, 1963), 4-65.

²⁷ H. B. Madsen, 'Metal casting', in M. Bencard (ed.), *Ribe Excavations 1970-76*, 2 (Esbjerg, 1984), 74 and 98; K. Bendixen, 'Sceattas and other coin finds', *ibid.*, 1 (1981), 76-79.

²⁸ R. Cramp, 'Schools of Merician sculpture', in A. Dornier (ed.), *Mercian Studies* (Leicester, 1977), 194 and 211.

²⁹ Art-historical parallels with Byzantine art have previously been suggested by J. Brøndsted, *Early English Ornament* (London, 1924) and by A-S Schotte, 'Kontinentala förstadier och paralleller till den s.k. nordisk-karolingiska stilen', *Fornvännen*, 30 (1935), 93-110. Buckles are illustrated in O. von Hessen, 'Byzantinische Schnallen aus Sardinien im Museo Archaeologico zu Turin', in G. Kossack and G. Ulbert (eds.), *Festschrift für Joachim Werner zum 65 Geburtstag II* (Munich, 1974), 545-57; also British Museum Medieval and Later Antiquities, 1983, 10-1, 12.

³⁰ Bendixen, *loc. cit.* in note 27.

³¹ Behmer, *op. cit.* in note 8, 173; Petersen, *op. cit.* in note 11, 65.

³² D. M. Wilson, 'The dating of Viking art in England', in J. Lang (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon and Viking Age Sculpture* (Oxford, Brit. Archaeol. Rep. Brit. Ser. 49, 1978), 135. The appearance of Style E ornament in the Outer Hebrides (Barra, now British Museum Medieval and Later Antiquities 1895, 6-13, 1 and 2) and the inference that there was settlement there in the early 9th century is not relevant to the appearance of early Viking styles in southern England.