

The destiny of Alexander's ascension scene in Viking Age European applied art

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Viking Age; Khazar Kaganate; Alexander; symbolism; pendants

The subject of a Hero's flight toward Heaven with 'captive' birds was very popular in the Medieval monumental and decorative art. The interpretation of this subject in West European art is practically unequivocal and is reported in a number of articles (e.g. Strzygowsky 1910; Arne 1914; Bank 1940; Lundstrom 1961; Darkevich 1975). The main human figure is clearly attributed as Alexander the Great, so the subject is interpreted as the illustration to the 'Alexander's deeds' novel written by the author named as pseudo-Callisthenes in the first half of the third century (Grabar'-Passek 1966, 175). The episode in question is related to the time when Alexander the Great in his eastern campaign imagined himself at the end of the World. Domestic white large birds fed by game were inhabitants of this land. Alexander the Great separated two such birds and ordered not to feed them for three days, then he attached the hungry birds to a kind of basket made of bull's skin. He took a spear with a piece of horse liver on its end and settled in the basket. The birds momentarily took to their wings, trying to reach the bait and ascended with the basket and its passenger (Bank 1940, 185).

In contrast to the interpretation of the images on West European objects the attribution of pendants found in Eastern and Northern Europe is disputable. Some authors interpreted the main human figure as Odin who is accompanied by Munin and Khugin ravens (Korzukhina 1977, 160), the same subject is attributed to the strike-a lights with bronze openwork handles from the Kama river basin. The similar image is related by other scholars to Aliassir Khalif (Arne 1914, 165), or Alexander the Great ascending toward Heaven (Lundstrom 1961; Golubeva 1964). We should not

be surprised by the difference of viewpoints as the history of the world's cultures includes a number of persons trying to undertake a flight with the help of birds (Kava-Usa, the hero of Avesta, Akir the Wise known in Judaea as early as the first half of the first millennium BC). According to G. Millet, who studied the subject of Alexander's ascension, the former was comprised of Eastern myths existing before and within the epoch of Alexander the Great (Bank 1940, 187).

The origin of pendants in question is also a topic of discussion. The Swedish scholars relate them to East European ones (Arne 1914, 165; Lundstrom 1961, 195; Jansson 1989, 43–45), whereas G. Korzukhina basing the interpretation of the human figure as Odin is in doubt of their 'Oriental' origin (Korzukhina 1977, 160), G. Novikova who studied the Scandinavian amulets, is also seeing the pendants as Varangian (Novikova 1988, 73).

Two objects which were never studied in terms of their pictorial subject can serve as a ground of new discussion on the 'Hero's flights in the Heaven' image. Firstly, it is a unique pendant-like mount found in the 10th century mound near Yaroslavl'city (Upper Volga): Timerevo, 459 mound, M. Fechner excavation, 1977. This necropolis is related to so called 'retinue culture' monuments i. e. ancient Rus' state formation epoch (late 9th–early 11th centuries) and contains compound ethnic materials including the Scandinavian antiquities.

The described mount originally served as a belt decoration, as on its backside the traces of four rivets are clearly observed, but later a suspension loop made of silver strip (fig. 1,1) was riveted to this mount, so that it had become one of three neck ring pendants. The pictorial subject decoration on the belt mount from the

ancient Rus' territory is a unique event, as the majority of mounts are decorated with the floristic or geometric ornament.

The picture on our mount is rather schematic, yet its idea is quite understandable: the human is in the centre, the birds are surrounding his figure. Evidently it presents also the ascension of a Hero toward Heaven with the help of two 'captive' birds. The human figure is very schematic, only its head with two circle-'eyes' is clearly expressed. Below the human we see a basket (?) which is supported by birds holding the strops is their beaks. It is worth while to point out that the schematism of the picture is so high, that one can imagine that the oval hole could be interpreted as a basket and beaks are touching the spear ends which are clutched in human hands, the latter being stretched across. The bodies and wings of both birds are shown without any accentuation of details, their strong legs are 'set up' on the oval hole in the lower part of the mount. Within both lower angles of a mount two "mushroom-like" figures are settled. The picture as a whole is framed with a poorly refined beaded border. Our second object is a beautiful belt set fashioned of gilt bronze from Verkhneye Saltovo near Kharkov, the latter being the monument which gave its name to the so-called Saltovo-Majatskaya culture as a state culture of the Khazar Kaganate. It is comprised of two series of mounts (Pletneva 1967, 150). The first series (fig. 1,2) are decorated with the picture of two birds of prey surrounding the human face. Evidently, such a subject could be also included in the range of objects expressing the Hero's ascension. The second series of mounts (fig. 1,3) present a bird of prey tearing a kind of herbivorous animal, perhaps a hare or a roe. The manner to portray birds with long feathers on their wings and tails as parallel lines as well as the 'tearing action' as itself are rarely observed on the East European objects of applied art dated to the 8th–9th centuries (Veimarn/Aibabin 1993, 33; Khalikova 1976, 163; Kozlovs'ka 1928, 450) and are generally associated with Khazar Kaganate antiquities (Gavritukhin Oblomsky, 1996, 134–136). Thus, evidently the ascribed belt set cannot be related to imported materials being an object of Khazar antiquities.

The mount-pendant from Timerevo could be associated with both mount set series of the Verkhneye Saltovo belt, but the first series is

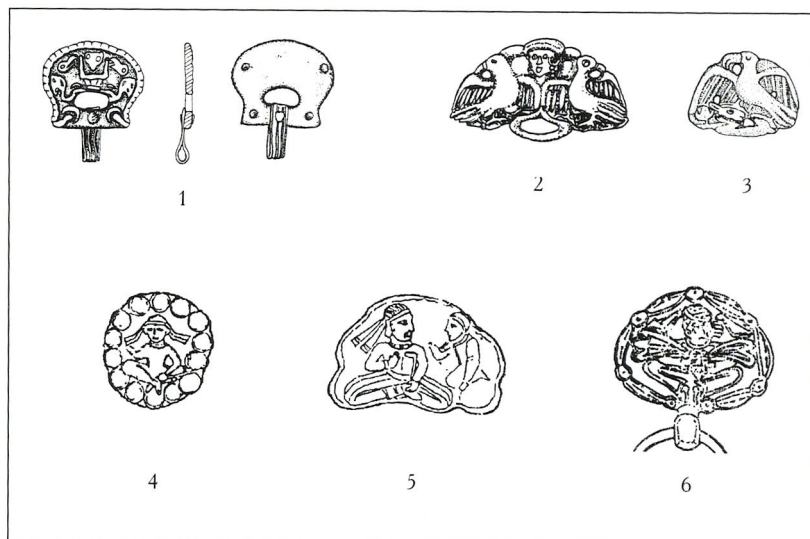


Figure 1.

compared in terms of picture idea, whereas the second series only in terms of picture details. A lotus image could be traced at the mount of the second series (fig. 1,3). This small detail is extremely peculiar, as just such a type of trefoil lotus is a distinctive feature of Khazar art. The same lotus of more schematic shape could be also found within the lower angles of the Timerevo mount. This detail could be concerned as a specific 'stamp' indicating the object to be associated with the applied art of the Khazar Kaganate. Thus, the Timerevo belt mount should be clearly attributed to Khazar antiquities.

It was mentioned above that the East and Northern European antiquities are known to include number of decorations with 'Hero's ascension toward Heaven with the help of birds' image. The belt set of Verkhneye Saltovo and the mount-pendant of Timerevo as the members of Khazar art objects help us to find additional features in the whole scheme of the abundance of the named image subject.

Two trends in the iconography of our image subject could be easily distinguished. The first trend is presented by quite realistic bird pictures with diverse feather outlines, between the bird bodies a human face is pictured (mount of the Verkhneye Saltovo belt, fig. 2,3; pendants from the Kursk district, from the Suzdal' mound, from Birka 762 grave, fig. 2,1). Supposedly, the Kama river strike-a-lights (Golubeva 1964) with human image in bird surrounding (fig. 2,2) could also be attributed to objects under the influence of the Khazar antiquities, excluding the interpretation of the central human figure as Odin.

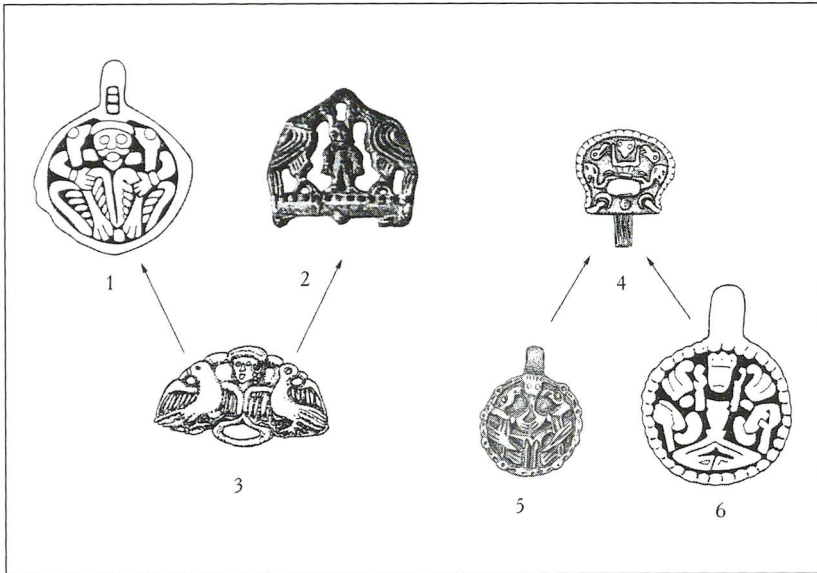


Figure 2. The second trend is characteristic of a high schematic manner of bird image, whereas the human body is completely expressed. The representative samples of the second trend are evidently the pendant from Birka 791 grave (fig. 2,6), the pendants from the hoard found in 1867 in Gnezdovo near Smolensk and from Sednevo of Tchernigov district (fig. 2,5), and the above described mount from Timerevo (fig. 2,4). The human on the Birka pendant is pictured in a rather characteristic pose, sitting with crossed legs. The similar poses of humans can be observed on the mounts belonging to the Saltovo (Khazar) culture as well as belt mounts from the river Ingul burials (fig. 1,6) (Bokiy/Pletneva 1988,104–105) and mount-amulets (fig. 2,4; 2,5) from Verkhneye Saltovo's recent excavations (Aksenov 2001, 139) being an additional argument of the Khazar origin of the material in question.

Thus, the pendants attribution could be concerned as indisputable. The interpretation of the image subject itself is more complicated. The Khazar appropriation of mounts and pendants cannot solve a problem of human figure nomination, nevertheless excluding its description as Odin.

The only way to find the sense of the image is to reveal the original source of the subject transferred to the applied Khazar art. The impulses of cultural influence on Kaganate art could be related to different centres. Thus the various interpretations are quite possible. If the Byzantine influence was predominant the central figure could be nominated as Alexander the Great. The 'Oriental' sources in a

broad sense are also admissible, so any of the above mentioned mythological persons could be taken as a prototype.

The extreme schematism of pendants and mount-pendant exclude the interpretation of the details, but the evident Saltovo culture appropriation of these objects enable to use the Verkhneye Saltovo belt set with their high quality appearance as the comparative analytical material.

These decorations also have few distinctively outlined details, yet the multiple-component pendant or temple-ring is a sample of the unilateral image of the human face (fig. 1,2). Such kinds of decoration could be indicative of the 'Oriental' prototype, e.g. the rider on the Iranian plate dated to the turn of the 7th–8th centuries and having a temple-ring with a pearl-like pendant (Darkevich 1976, 57). One more example is a portrait of an emperor pictured at the Eastern Iranian plate dated to the late 8th or the early 9th century (Darkevich 1976,40). This emperor has a temple-ring in his ear with the pivotal pendant, the latter being morphologically similar to the image on the Saltovo decoration.

The Oriental art presents different iconography of the 'ascension toward Heaven' subjects. Commonly we find the sole bird serving as a background of the human figure image (Lundstrom 1961, 196; Laszlo/Racz 1984). There is only one case of the picture expressing a human in the surrounding of two birds: I. Jansson (1989, 45) gives the image of the 10th century medalion with the portrait of some Oriental sovereign.

The second possible source of our subject is Byzantium. Several Byzantine versions of 'the Alexander the Great ascension' are known, the most early ones being dated to the 10th century. One of them is the embroidery from the Würzburg museum where the composition of the picture is near to the image in question: Alexander the Great is surrounded by two birds with spread wings and well defined feathers on wings and tail (Darkevich 1975, 155). The second image is observed on the lead seal but the compositional features are representing perfectly different traditional styles: Alexander is settled on the chariot being lifted not by birds but by griffins (Bank 1940, 182). However, this image is of special interest because of the important detail: the emperor's face is bordered by pendants, the

latter used as an imperial crown decoration. The analogous pendants are sometimes distinctly displayed on the Byzantine coins.

Thus, the comparative analysis of Byzantine and ‚Oriental‘ antiquities cannot be valid in the unambiguous attribution of the subject and the nomination of the human figure pictured on the Khazar antiquities. In any case it is interesting to examine the context of the pendant findings with the ascension images. Three of eight known pendants of such kind were found in Sweden: two were found in Birka, and one pendant is from Skaggesta (Arne 1914, 164). Two pendants from Eastern Europe are without any context, as a pendant from Kursk district is related to an occasional finding and the pendant from Suzdal‘ outskirts represents the excavation material of the 19th century with lost documentation. One more pendant was ascribed from the Gnezdovo hoard including decorations of the Scandinavian origin

(From Viking to Crusader 1992, 307). Two pendants were parts of burial goods. The pendant from Sednevo (Tchernigov district) was found in the cremation grave, among the archaeological material the round brooch of Terslev type was ascribed. The mount-pendant from Timerevo is related to the chamber grave where the Terslev type pendant was also found. The above mentioned details enable us to associate these burials with the Scandinavian origins. Thus, such kinds of pendants were specifically valuable just for the Scandinavians. Supposedly, they saw Odin and his ravens in the picture of the Khazar origin beyond the archetypal subject of the master. It can be assumed, that the transformation of the mount with such a peculiar image into a pendant evidently served as an amulet and was not occasional.

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