

A bronze dragon head from Gotland

SHM 108125_HST



Fig. 1. SHM 108125_HST. Photo: Ola Myrin, SHM. License: CC BY 4.0

1. Description

The object I have chosen for this assignment is a small bronze fitting shaped like an animal head, displayed at the Swedish History Museum (Historiska museet, Stockholm). It is cataloged as “Ändbeslag med holk” (end fitting with socket), and measures approx. height = 66 mm and length = 62 mm. The head is elongated, curving forward in a smooth arc from the socket, measuring roughly 10 cm in length. The hollow cylindrical socket is open at the base, with side holes for nails, indicating that the object was fitted over a round wooden peg as part of a larger construction.

The gap between the jaws is filled with openwork interlace, composed of bands that weave over, under, and around one another in a complex, symmetrical knot visible from both sides. Large almond-shaped eyes are set prominently on either side of the head in raised relief, while small ears or horn-like projections appear on the back of the skull. The surface has a dark greenish patina characteristic of aged bronze.

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2. Context

Exhibition

The object was published by C.R. af Ugglas and exhibited in the “Swedish Tercentenary” art exhibition in the United States in 1937–1938 (catalog no. 93). More recently, it has been displayed in the exhibitions “Vikingar” (2001–2019) and “Vikingarnas värld” (from 2021) at Historiska museet in Stockholm.

Origin and preservation

The object was found on Gotland, Sweden, though the exact find spot is unknown. Gotland is one of the richest archaeological regions in Scandinavia for Viking Age finds, reflecting its central role in Baltic and wider trade networks (Roesdahl 2016). Many objects derive from burials, hoards, or stray finds in agricultural land, but without documentation of the discovery context, it is not possible to determine how this piece was deposited or preserved (Brink & Price 2008).

Dating

The catalog card dates the object to around 1100 or slightly earlier, placing it at the end of the Viking Age or the transition to the early medieval period. For stylistic comparison, it is compared with a closely related object: a dragon head from Båticke in Eskelhems parish, Gotland (inv. SHM 8312). This piece is essentially identical in design, though not cast from the same master model; it may be a later copy. Differences include the material (copper rather than bronze), the presence of a longitudinal ridge along the midline of the head, and slightly less openwork interlace, whereas the present object shows more pronounced openwork and somewhat flatter relief in the eye surrounds and the spiral ornament around the nose.

Manufacturing

This object was produced by casting, using a two-part clay mold with a core. A master model and core were first shaped, likely in wood, and refined with wax. A fine clay mold in two halves was formed around the model; the core was then positioned centrally, the mold was filled with wax, sealed, and clamped. During heating, the wax melted out, allowing molten bronze to fill the cavity and reducing air

bubbles. After cooling, the mold was broken, and the casting was removed for cleaning and finishing. (Graham-Campbell 1994: 94; Agricola 1556/1950; Brink & Price 2008: 473)

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3. Ornamentation

The decoration on this object combines a naturalistic animal head with abstract interlace, a hallmark of late Viking Age art. The dominant decorative feature is the openwork knot filling the space of the open jaws, consisting of bands that loop and interweave in a flowing, figure-of-eight pattern, characteristic of the Urnes style, the last of the six recognized Viking Age art styles, generally dated to c. 1050–1125 (Graham-Campbell 2013: 132–145).

The Urnes style is characterized by graceful, asymmetric compositions of intertwined animals and serpentine ribbons, where thinner and thicker strands loop around one another, and takes its name from the carved wooden panels of the Urnes stave church in Norway (c. 1050–1100) (Graham-Campbell 2013: 132). Typical Urnes motifs include a “great beast” locked in combat with thinner serpents, rendered with smooth curves and an open, visible background, as seen here in the openwork interlace where light passes through the gaps. Urnes-style openwork brooches are among the most common finds of this type across Scandinavia (Brink & Price 2008: 334–336).

Beyond the interlace, the head carries further decorative elements: large almond-shaped eyes set within raised frames, a leaf-shaped or spiral motif below each eye, and small projections on the crown that enhance the zoomorphic character. The overall impression is of a creature that blends dragon, serpent, and beast, a stylization typical of Scandinavian animal art, in which the boundary between species is intentionally ambiguous (Graham-Campbell 2013: 135–147).

The dating to around 1100, suggested by af Ugglas, aligns well with the Urnes style, which represents the final phase of Viking ornamental art before the transition to Romanesque styles in Scandinavia (Brink & Price 2008: 13).

Discussion about style

It can also be argued that this is a transitional object, closest to Ringerike, with clear similarities to early Urnes.

The Ringerike style (c. 980–1060) is characterized by naturalistic, full-bodied animal forms with clearly defined musculature (Graham-Campbell 2013: 118–131). Some features of this object align with Ringerike: the large sculpted head with pronounced three-dimensional modeling, the almond-shaped eyes, the arched neck with palmette-like contours, and the spiral-shaped additions and organic lobes around the head.

However, the openwork braiding at the neck/jaw, with thin interlaced bands of varying thickness forming loops and S-shapes, is a classic Urnes hallmark. The denser foliage typical of Ringerike is absent, replaced by the cleaner, more laconic expression of Urnes.

Discussion about dating

The object is therefore likely dated to around 1050–1080, representing a transitional phase in which Ringerike volume and animal forms are combined with Urnes-style openwork interlacing.

4. Perspective

This artifact was part of a larger object, probably a Nordic wooden reliquary shrine shaped like a building with a gabled roof, and likely had an identical sister piece.

Discussion about the application

The modern museum label identifies it as a “dragon head for a reliquary shrine” (Drakhuvud till relikskrin), while the older catalog card uses more cautious language, “troligen gavelkrön från relikskrin”, reflecting the uncertainty surrounding objects found without a clear archaeological context.

If this identification is correct, the object belongs to the tradition of house-shaped shrine reliquaries, portable containers for saints’ relics constructed from a wooden core covered in metal plates and shaped like small buildings. Originating in Ireland and Scotland in the 7th–9th centuries, such shrines reached Scandinavia through trade or raids (Roesdahl 2016; Brink & Price 2008; Graham-Campbell 1994). Known Scandinavian examples include Ranvaik’s Casket and the reliquaries from Melhus and Setnes. These sometimes featured animal-head terminals at the gable ends, where this object could

have been mounted over the ridge apex using its socket, serving both decorative and apotropaic purposes (Brink & Price 2008).

However, alternative interpretations must be considered. Small bronze animal heads from the Viking Age are known to have served several functions, including terminals on drinking horns, furniture fittings, dress pins, and other prestige objects. The Birka dragon head, for example, was long considered a decorative fitting before being identified as a dress pin (Kalmring et al. 2016). The hollow socket on this object could fit a ridge pole or other projecting elements, making definitive identification difficult without its original context.

Discussion about the origin

The object appears to be a high-quality cast-bronze piece produced with considerable skill in both design and manufacturing. The existence of a near-identical sister piece from Båtticke, from the same workshop tradition though not the same master, suggests that such objects may not have been unique (Graham-Campbell 2013). Their presence on Gotland may reflect the island's wealth and its connections to both Christian and pre-Christian artistic traditions at the end of the Viking Age (Roesdahl 2016).

It is likely that both this object and its parent object were produced in Scandinavia rather than imported. The ornamentation is distinctly Nordic, combining elements of Ringerike and Urnes (Graham-Campbell 2013). Irish reliquaries of the same period often incorporate enamel and figurative elements (Roesdahl 2016). Nordic reliquaries with animal heads are well documented, and parallels such as the twin reliquaries from Eriksberg and Jäla in Västergötland support this interpretation (Brink & Price 2008).

A looting scenario is therefore unlikely. While Vikings did plunder Irish reliquaries, these were usually valued for their materials rather than reused as intact objects (Roesdahl 2016). When preserved in Scandinavia, such as the Melhus reliquary, they were often repurposed rather than structurally modified. Gotland, with its strong local tradition of bronze casting and an early Christian presence in the 11th century, provides a plausible production context (Brink & Price 2008; Roesdahl 2016).

Discussion about the single find

It remains possible that the object became separated from its original context through loss or later disturbance, for example, during the looting of a medieval church on Gotland.

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Overall assessment

The artifact is most likely Scandinavian, possibly made on Gotland or in Västergötland, circa 1050–1100, for a locally commissioned reliquary in the emerging Scandinavian church, and not a looted object from, for instance, Ireland. The most cautious and academically defensible identification remains the older one: “probably a gable crown from a reliquary.”

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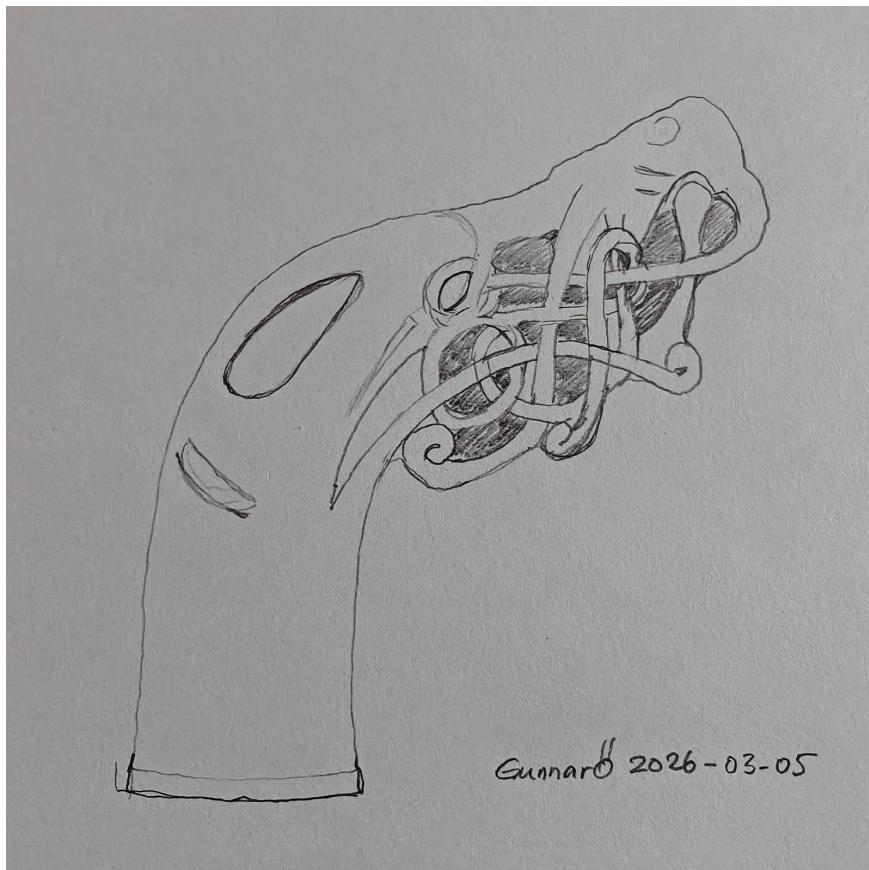


Fig. 2. Line drawing of the bronze fitting, by author (2026).

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Fig. 3. Bronze animal-head fitting, Historiska museet, Stockholm. Photograph by author (2026).

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