

Audronė Bliujienė**A SCANDINAVIAN-STYLE BELT BUCKLE FROM THE UŽPELKIAI CEMETERY***Abstract*

A belt binding decorated in Scandinavian style is one of the most interesting artefacts discovered in the Užpelkiai cemetery in the Kertinga district of western Lithuania. Dating back to the 9th-10th centuries, this artefact is unique in the archaeological material of Lithuania. It is decorated in the Borre style and was possibly made in Lithuania according to models imported from Scandinavia.

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THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE UŽPELKIAI CEMETERY

The cemetery of Užpelkiai in the district of Kertinga in western Lithuania was archaeologically investigated in 1985 and between 1987 and 1994. It is situated on a low hillock on the left bank of a stream known as the Žiba (Fig. 1). An area of 1,164 square metres has been excavated, but this is only a

small part of this interesting site. Eighty-two inhumations, most of them previously disturbed, one cremation burial, six horse burial and several destroyed barrows have been discovered at the site (Šimėnas 1986; Bliujienė 1988, 1992, 1994). The whole material from the cemetery can be dated to three periods. The destroyed remains of the barrows are from the 3rd-1st centuries BC – 1st century AD; most of the inhumation and the horse buri-



Fig. 1. The cemetery of Užpelkiai, view from the northeast.



Fig. 2. Belt buckle and binding after conservation.

als are from the close of the 4th–6th centuries AD, and some of the graves are from the 9th–12th centuries AD.

One of the most interesting artefacts was encountered in 1990 as a stray find in plot X, square A–7. It is a bronze belt buckle with a binding decorated in Scandinavian style (Figs. 2, 3: 1–4). It was from the area of 9th–12th century grave, and was probably from a destroyed male inhumation. Both the belt buckle and the binding are of cast metal, with ornament in relief. The artefact is massive, while most Lithuanian belt buckles are forged and not massive, being decorated with various kinds of stamped impressions. This type of decoration is a characteristic feature of Lithuanian ornaments. The buckle measures 3.7 x 3.2 cm. The two-sided binding is 5.7 x 2.8 cm (Fig. 2). The buckle and the binding are decorated in the Borre style (mid-9th – close of the 10th century), named after a rich barrow burial at Borre in Vestfold, Norway (Graham-Campbell & Kidd 1980).

The Užpelkiai buckle bears the main geometric motifs of the Borre style, such as a simple knot and a series of rings surrounding hollow-sided lozenges. There are 12 small hollows on the decorated side of the binding.

THE COPPER ALLOY OF THE ARTEFACT

The belt buckle and the binding consist of a multi-component copper alloy by combining copper with zinc, lead, tin and other admixtures (Table 1). The buckle and the binding were examined with x-ray electron probe microanalysis, carried out with the JXA-50A (Japan) by Dr. E. Matulionis of the Institute of Chemistry of Vilnius, to whom I wish to express my thanks.

The arc of the buckle and the ornamented side of the binding are, relatively speaking, of the same multi-component alloy metallurgically known as the brass group (in which copper is treated with zinc, lead, tin and other admixtures). There is, however, a great deal of lead (25.8%, 43.9%) in this alloy. The metal of the buckle arc is heterogenous. The same is true of other copper alloys of the 8th–13th centuries in finds from western Lithuania: i.e. the quantity of lead increases (Merkevičius 1973). On the one hand, increased lead content points to the use of another source of lead than previously and to the intentional addition of lead. On the other hand, this may be due to later casting, for which broken artefacts made of copper alloys were collected and used for making new ornaments.

Table 1. Absolute quantities in %.

Chemical element	Examined parts of the belt buckle			
	Buckle bow	Ornamented part of binding	Bottom plate of binding	Buckle tongue
Cu	62,8139	49,9178	83,8639	82,4436
Pb	25,8003	43,9014	2,0819	1,5952
Zn	6,2996	6,1639	8,8780	14,9981
Sn	0,1863	0,3258	0,5387	–
Ni	0,0382	0,0277	0,0093	0,0036
Fe	–	0,0481	0,0715	0,0384
Ag	0,1330	0,2649	0,1194	0,1246
Sb	0,0218	0,1820	0,0101	0,0236

Table 2. Absolute quantities in %.

Chemical element	Belt buckles from Kopparsvik cemetery Index no.						
	1209	1220	4046	8490	10602	12276	28714
Cu	83,3	85,8	88,4	80,9	88,5	72,4	74,6
Sn	9,9	10,6	8,6	11,5	9,5	24,2	17,9
Pb	2,7	2,1	1,9	1,0	1,0	1,5	2,0
Zn	3,6	0,5	5,6	1,0	1,0	1,9	5,0
Fe	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Ag	–	–	–	–	–	–	–

The bottom plate of the binding also belongs to the brass group, but there is only 2.1% of lead in its copper alloy. Finally, there is no tin in the alloy of the tongue, or fastener, and it can be identified as a copper alloy known as tombac.

Therefore, the individual components of the belt buckle and the binding are of different copper alloys, and of different colours. These copper alloys were widespread in the 9th–12th centuries throughout Lithuania, and were also known in the East Baltic region (East Prussia, Latvia), Gotland and Sweden. Copper alloys known as brass are most often found in the Lithuanian archaeological material of the 9th–13th centuries (Vaitkunskienė & Merkevičius 1978). It is believed that the bow of the buckle, the double-sided binding and the tongue were all made at the same time by an expert in alloys. Alternatively, the tongue and the bottom plate of the binding could have been later as replacements for broken or worn-out original parts.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL PARALLELS

The belt buckle from Užpelkiai appears to be a unique find of its type in Lithuania. In trying to establish the place and time of manufacture, ana-

logues in the archaeological record of Latvia, East Prussia, where Scandinavian imports or locally made items following Scandinavian styles were not uncommon. Belt buckles completely similar to those from Užpelkiai were not found. The most similar specimen was from among the 10th century material from the cemetery of Kopparsvik one kilometre south of Visby in Gotland (Nylén 1982). The buckles differ only in minor features. Several details of the Užpelkiai buckle are also similar to those of buckles from late 9th – early 10th century graves (nos. 71 and 949) at Birka in Sweden (Arbman 1940, Tafeln 87: 5–6).

As mentioned above, the closest analogue to the Užpelkiai buckle is from the cemetery of Kopparsvik in Gotland, but as shown in Table 2, the metal of the Užpelkiai specimen differs from that of the buckles from Kopparsvik (Forshell 1992, 62). The belt buckles of Kopparsvik were examined with atomic absorption spectrophotometry.

The metal of the buckles from Kopparsvik consists of a multicomponent copper alloy made by treating copper with tin, lead and zinc. However, the copper alloys of the Užpelkiai buckle and those from Kopparsvik are highly different. The copper alloys of the Kopparsvik buckles belong to the bronze group.

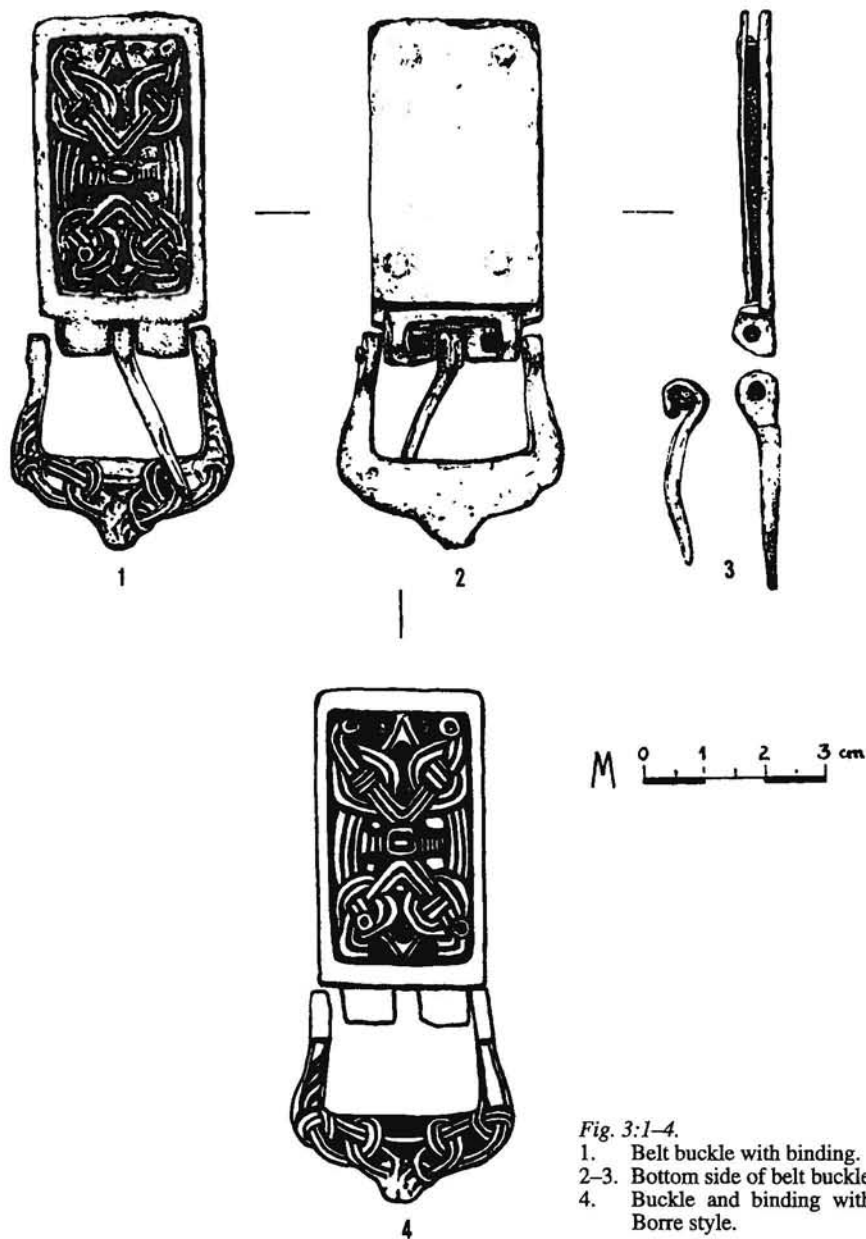


Fig. 3:1-4.
 1. Belt buckle with binding.
 2-3. Bottom side of belt buckle and binding.
 4. Buckle and binding with emphasized motifs of Borre style.

PLACE OF MANUFACTURE OF THE UŽPELKIAI BUCKLE

To answer the question of where the artefact was made we analysed its style, examined the manner in which the buckle and the binding were made, and analysed the copper alloy. The buckle is massive, being made of cast metal and bearing ornament relief. These features are not very character-

istic of Lithuanian belt buckle, but the copper alloy of the buckle and the binding are typical of Lithuanian alloys.

A comparison of the Užpelkiai buckle with Scandinavian artefacts of the Borre style shows that it is not a typical example of the Borre style as found in Scandinavia (Foote & Wilson 1975; Graham-Campbell & Kidd 1980).

The decoration of the Užpelkiai buckle has sev-

eral peculiarities. On the binding, the main accent is concentrated on the four corner motifs and the centre. The motifs near the buckle bow are not symmetrical or identical to those on the other half of the binding. The motifs in the corners are not very typical of the Borre style. All the motifs are linked by ellipses and the centre (Fig. 3:4). The buckle bow is decorated with typical Borre style ornament, and the form of the bow came to Lithuania from Gotland (Nerman 1929).

It is possible that Curonian craftsmen frequently visited Scandinavia or saw ornaments decorated in the Borre style in Lithuania. A good example is a round, flat brooch (Fig. 4) from a 10th century grave (no. 172) in the cemetery of Genčai I in the Kretinga district. In this case, it could be the Jellinge style (end of the 9th century – beginning of the 11th century) that was copied with slight modifications. There are many examples of imitation in Viking art styles. One is found in Yorkshire, England, where at the end of the 10th century English artisans skilled in carving stone attempted to carve in stone ornaments of the Jellinge style. Instead of the vigorous and vital Viking style, a grave slab from Middleton, Yorkshire presents an anaemic, soulless being which bears no resemblance to the expressive Jellinge-style dragon (Foote & Wilson 1975).

During the 9th–11th centuries imports of artefacts from Scandinavia and the adoption of Scandinavian elements of style were associated not only with the expansion of the Vikings towards the East Baltic region and Lithuania. This period is also known for intensive trading and cultural contacts and interaction among the tribes living around the Baltic Sea (Callmer 1992). During the 10th century, the influence of the Baltic regions on Gotland was much greater than vice versa (Dundulis 1982).

Only some geometric motifs from Scandinavian Viking Art (ring-chains, weave patterns, various chain motifs etc.) were passed on to Lithuanian prehistoric ornament. The animal designs of Viking art became purely geometric motifs and unknown geometrically depicted animals.

During the 10th century, the tradition of wearing belts was known among many European and Asian tribes, and there was a great deal of uniformity in the manufacture of belts. Quite often the decoration and origin of a belt was not related to its owner. Moreover, it is very difficult to define the difference between the place of origin and the ethnic traditions of decoration (Minajeva 1991). Bronze belt buckles and bindings of the 10th century from Bulgaria (Preslav) and Sweden (Birka graves 716, 1074) are very similar to those found in Volgo-Bulgarian and Hungarian territories, and they have par-

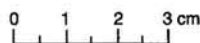


Fig. 4. Round flat brooch (grave no. 172) from the Genčai I cemetery.

allels with materials from the barrows of Gnesdov and Chernygov (Minajeva 1991).

SUMMARY

Considering the special features of the Borre style in the Užpelkiai buckle, its manufacturing technology, massive form and copper alloy composition, we may conclude that the artefact was made in the late 9th-early 10th century either in Lithuania or in a Scandinavian colony in the East Baltic region, where Scandinavian craftsmen made ornaments in a slightly modified Scandinavian manner, selling them to the Baltic tribes. This is also supported by the context of the find among graves of the 9th and 10th centuries. The Užpelkiai buckle and binding could have been copied from a ready-made object by using a wax model. This method of making ornaments was widespread in Finland and Karelia (Tomanterä 1991). With reference to this, we may explain the Scandinavian technology, style and copper alloy typical of Lithuania.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ATL = Archaeologiniai tyrinėjimai Lietuvoje