THE ORIGIN AND
THE MAIN
ORNAMENTATION
FEATURES OF
THE CURONIAN ANIMAL
STYLE

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The origin of the animal style in Europe. In search of the origin of the animal style in Europe, researchers point out complexity and multiple aspects of the problem; they also indicate several factors responsible for the formation of this style (Salin B, 1904; Åberg N, 1923, 1926; Schetelig H, 1906; Holmqvist W, 1939, 1950). Of these no longer doubted parentage lines of the German animal style is realistic art of the Roman Empire and its provinces. The first encounter of the Germanic tribes which spilled all over Europe was with the culture of the Roman Empire and its provinces, or repercussions of this culture (Schetelig H, 1906, p. 32). However, the Antique naturalistic art was only one of a number of diverse cultural forces (Salin, 1904), which fermented Germanic art. Over the Migration period, the Germanic tribes, which found themselves in Central and Western Europe, and even to a larger degree those who settled in England, fell under the influence of Celtic art, rather symbolical in nature but also abounding in zoomorphic elements (Cunliffe B, 1997). The Goths and Gepids, in the second c., the initiators of the big migration process in Europe, by the year 235 had already reached the coast of the Black Sea to find there realistic Sarmato-Scythian art under strong influence by classical Greek culture at that time (Brown K.R, 1996, p.226-234). In the second half of the fourth c., the nomadic tribes of Hunes and Avars also joined the wave of migration to add something to emerging animal style. European animal style was a cultural product of all these tribes (Brown K.R, 1996, p. 225-226; Wilson E, 1994, p. 67-75). Due to all these influences and obvious efforts by the Germanic tribes to create and elaborate animal motifs, Europe of the second half of the fifth c. saw the rise of the animal style I. In the sixth c., the art of European tribes had developed into style II, later, it was transformed into style III. The latter completed the Merovingian or Vendel period (Salin B, 1906, Schetelig H, 1906, 1946). In Germanic art, animal was a symbolical representation of Germanic gods combined and multiplied to enlarge their magic and healing power. The Early Christian art incorporated the animal motifs created by the Germanic peoples, in Western Europe, since the sixth or seventh c., Christianity impacted the Germanic animal style (Wilson E, 1994, p. 67-75). This accounts for presence of Biblical iconography and philosophy in some of figurative subjects featured on personal ornaments, bracteates and household items of the sixth-seventh c. Some of the most popular of such subjects are Daniel in the lions' den, Entry into Jerusalem and Michael the Archangel fighting the dragon (Ramoniene, 1997, p. 58, 93, 205).

Animal style in the north-Germanic lands. Animal style originated in Germanic lands in the north of Europe. About the mid-fourth - early fifth c., the Germanic peoples created and rapidly elaborated zoomorphic motifs and the style as a vehicle for their sensibility. The art, which originated as an amalgam of diverse influences, was soon transformed significantly and molded into characteristic Germanic style. The mainland Germanic artists were responsible for this process too.

The formation of the Germanic animal style took place under the influence of Sösdala and Sjögrop styles, typical
in the mid-fourth and the mid-fifth c. of a small area of southern Scandinavia (Skåne province, Scandinavia) and Nydam style (after peat-bog finds from Nydam in Jutland Peninsula, Schleswig-Holstein region). These styles evolved from a merger of the art of the Late Roman Empire and its provinces with north-Germanic artistic traditions. The animal motifs of the Sösdala, Sjörop and Nydman styles were the key elements in the formation of the Style I (Salin B, 1904, p 182). These styles are characterized by designs of chased geometric ornaments, e.g. "S" and "C" shaped motifs which form a pattern bearing resemblance of a spiral, a "star" motif and a variety of semicircles and triangles, and other, as well as animal motifs like four-leg animals, bird heads. Both types of designs were featured on brooches, belt buckle-plates and belt-mounts, horse trappings-mounts and other artifacts (Salin B, 1904, p. 310, 383-393; Forssander J. E, 1937, p 183-272; Fabech C, 1991, p. 121 –136; 1996, p. 135-142; Bittner-Wróblewska A, 1992. Vol.2, plate X). Even though these styles evolved in small areas, but the migrating tribes, trade contacts, exchanges of gifts, marriages alliances disseminated them rapidly across Central and Western Europe, in some instances their influence reached the coast of the Black Sea.

From Lithuanian archeological findings dated by the early sixth c., a sliver-gilt crossbow fibula with a zoomorphic foot coming from Plinkaigalis (Kėdainiai district) cemetery, grave No 106, is attributed to Sjörup style (Fig. 1-1a; Kazakevičius V, 1983, p. 189-196). Two other crossbow fibulas with zoomorphic foot found in Vidgiriai (Šilutė district) graves No 2 and 30 are dated to the late fifth or early sixth c. (Fig. 2) The crossbow fibula from the grave No 2 is decorated in spirals that were familiar to the Sösdala style (Fig. 2:1). However, it is difficult to establish the style of the brooch corning from the grave No 30.

In Western Europe (Lower Austria) around the middle of the fourth and fifth c. saw diverse cultural forces result in the Untersiebenbrunn style. In Germany, in the first half of the fifth c., emerged the Wiesbaden style. Brooches of the Wiesbaden style were found not only in Central and Western Europe, but on Ölandand in Norway, likewise (Äberg N, 1923, Fig. 236; Werner J, 1981, p. 233). Southern England gave rise to the Jutish A ornamentation style indebted to the Sösdala and Sjörup styles. Both geometric and animal motifs in the Wiesbaden, Untersiebenbrunn and Jutish A styles are very close or even intermingled with the north-Germanic animal art around the mid-fourth and the mid-fifth c. This might account for the fact of personal ornaments and all household metalwork found in Europe and Scandinavia from the mid-
cruciform brooches (Almgren, 1897; Salin, 1904, fig 67-69; Åberg, 1956, p. 115-130, Fig. 114-138). In the late fourth and early fifth c., Germanic artists started “zoomorphizing” these brooches (Fig. 4). To elaborate this crossbow type even more, they transformed the foot of the brooch into an animal head, which was given eyes, "eyebrows", nostrils, and a "forehead" (Fig. 3: 1-3, 8, 10; 4). Two or four warts or bony extrusions also adorned animal heads. Sometimes animal head on the foot was almost turned into a tiny independent sculpture piece (Fig. 5: 1). Of Lithuanian archeological examples dated to the second half of the fifth and sixth c., such crossbow fibulas with sculpturally articulated animal heads come from Pagrybis (Šilalė district) and Lazdininkai (Kretinga district, excavations of 1998) grave No 39 (Fig. 3:11; 5:2). As early as the second half of the fifth and the early sixth c. such brooches acquired more decorative elements characteristic of the Style I. Having originated in the north of Europe, the animal art was further elaborated on the Continent (Salin, 1904, p. 355; Erä–Esko, 1956, p. 25-26; Gaimster, 1998, p. 208). “Zoomorphic” brooches from the Baltic lands of this period represent a long-foot crossbow type with a cast catch (Fig. 5: 2,6). Therefore, no matter that the Baltic and Germanic jewellers of the fifth and sixth c. picked out distinct fibula type to explore the possibilities of animal art, Germanic parentage of the Baltic artists' “zoomorphic” imagery is beyond dispute. On the other hand, it is obvious, that the Baltic jewellers...
did not copy their models blindly, but transformed the animal style that dominated the European art of the period according to their own understanding (Fig. 1-6).

**Baltic artifacts of animal style from the fifth-sixth c.**

One of the most interesting and disputable aspects of the Baltic ornamentation system is the origin of animal style motifs in the Baltic lands. Lithuanian archeologists, who focus on the sources of this style and its manifestation at different periods, fall into two camps. Some of them hold that Baltic animal style evolved in the areas populated by the Baits and drew from indigenous cultural sources (Vaitkuskiene L, 1987, p. 44-53; Nakaitė L, 1991, p. 94-105). However, others believe that this style originated due to the influence of Scandinavian and mid-European (the middle Danube) art (Tautavičius A, 1981, p. 23-31, 1996, p. 273; Šimėnas V, 1992, p. 32). Both those, who deny Scandinavian parentage, and those who take into consideration migration of peoples in Western and Central Europe as well as along the coast of the Black Sea, point out that animal art emerged on the eastern coast of the Baltic through Scandinavian inspiration.

In order to arrive to the sources of animal art, tracing of cultural stimuli, which generated this style in the Baltic lands, is vital. Of equal importance with imported influences were local ornamentation traditions, which yielded a unique idiom of animal art in the Baltic lands. Baltic animal style jewellery, which comes from periods of the second half of the fifth-sixth c., from the seventh-eighth c. and also from the ninth-twelfth c., differs largely from the Germanic specimens of animal style. It should be noted that these artifacts represent three distinct periods, each of them characterized by different inspirations and influences, which drove the process of creation, local production or importation of such metalwork.

Baltic artists’ first exposure to quite realistically depicted animal or ‘zoomorphic’ motifs in ornamentation
took place not earlier than the second half of the fifth or early sixth c. At the same time they discovered some previously absent from the Baltic artists’ repertoire geometric motifs, such like a “S”-shape motif or “C”-shaped spiral, a broken line resembling a meander, a three-part swastika (triquet) and some unexplored by the Baltic jewellers metalwork techniques. These were the possibilities offered by relief and reverse relief versus flat surface, nieloing and gilding as a method universally used across Europe (Tautavičius A, 1981, p. 23-25, 31, Fig. 8-17; Kazakevičius V, 1981, Fig. 4-6; Šimėnas V, 1987, p. 64-67). This wave of animal art and new to Baltic metalwork geometric ornament reached them as repercussions of the Great Migration period, the art and ornamentation of which was in most instances impacted by the elements in the Sösdala, Sjörop, Nydam or Untersiebenbrunn styles (Bluijiene A, in press). Therefore, we should be looking for the origins of the Baltic animal style outside Baltic domain: in Scandinavia, on the coast of the Black Sea and around the middle Danube, all the areas inhabited by Germanic and north-Germanic peoples and their artifacts of the mid-fourth and fifth centuries and styles I-II. As it was mentioned before, the north-Germanic peoples gave the most powerful impetus to the rise of animal art in Europe.

Archeological findings from the Baltic lands dating to this period include drinking horns’ bindings, belt-mounts and belt-buckle plates, scabbard-mounts. In the second half of the fifth and early sixth c., a type of crossbow zoomorphized brooch or fibula appeared and started establishing itself across Lithuania. Such brooches were decorated in ornamental patterns of the Roman period, which were alien to Baltic ornamentation system and had no geometric counterparts (Puzinas J., 1935, tabl. XLIII-XLIV). The number of animal style artifacts from Lithuania of the second half of the fifth and sixth c. is small and is lost to abounding metalwork decorated in geometric patterns.

Most outstanding of the Baltic jewellery from this period are crossbow zoomorphic brooches. In the east-Baltic lands, two regions were the animal-style brooch spread are distinguished, namely, the northern territory of the Baits (Lithuania, Latvia) and southern - Prussia. (Kynakob В.И., 1990, c. 212, puc. 6; Kazakevičius V, 1993, p. 109). Similar brooches were found on Öland and Bornholm and in East Prussia (Fig. 3:2, 9; ?berg N, 1953, p. 93-95, Fig. 107-108). A part of such brooches could be products from the southern Baltic lands or Lithuania, fashioned after Germanic models (Fig. 3:9, 11; 5:2, 6). A part of such brooches have their foot terminating in reptile heads, but their plane foot and the bow with no designs make them different from their Norman prototypes. Baltic crossbow zoomorphic fibulas dated to the second half of the fifth or the sixth c. characteristically have a foot as if cut off at a right angle at its terminal (Fig. 3:11; 6). Sometimes the foot and the bow of such fibulas is ornamented in even and cord-like strokes, such brooches are called "Raufenfibeln" (Fig. 3:9).

However, in the second half of the fifth and sixth c. animal style did not evolve as an independent systematic phenomenon. These are just first attempts by the Baltic jewellers to copy animal designs that dominated in Scandinavia and Europe. All artifacts found from the period (crossbow brooches and wide-mouth horn bindings) are unique items with a different scheme of decoration and repeatedly manifest the absence of systematic style in the sixth and even early seventh c. In general, "zoomorphic" motifs are not typical for the Baltic ornamentation system in the fifth-sixth c.

**Baltic animal style of the seventh-eighth c.** The second encounter with the animal style which now made a deeper impact on Baltic jewellers was in the second half of the seventh-eighth c. (Fig. 3; 4-5, 7). At that time animal motifs reached them from Scandinavia. However, the Baltic peoples, Curonians including, inherited only the idea of "zoomorphic" style with some ornamentation elements (sprouts) and the possibilities provided by high-relief versus surface and a well perfected casting technique. Curonian crossbow brooches of the period display a variety of types, which share some of their features with their Norman models. However, from the sixth c. onwards, the development of the Baltic and Germanic animal styles takes irreversibly different routes: the Baltic jewellers geometrize animals, while Germanic artists fully embrace animal motifs.

It was not easy to integrate elements of the animal style into the Baltic geometric ornamentation program and into each piece of jewellry, but local craftsmen had coped with this task well. The Baltic jewellers picked out a reptile, a snake, as the main image for their animal patterns, obviously, due to the importance assigned to this animal in the ancient Baltic world outlook. In the Baltic mythological universe, reptiles were related with the Tree of Life, as they lived at the roots of that tree (Dundulienė P., 1979, p. 69). The image of a he- or she-snake as an abstract geometric symbol is present in Lithuanian archeological material from the Roman Iron Age (Michelbertas M., 1986, p. 147, 150, Fig. 59: 1-4,61:61; Stankus J., 1995, Fig. 4: 5). In the tenth-eleventh c., penannular brooches and bracelets with zoomorphized terminals were common with the Baits. Researchers differ in their opinion what these terminals of the ornaments...
represent: some consider they are heads of a horse (Kulikauskiené R., 1983, p. 33; Vaitkuškienė L., 1986, p. 37-50), others assert it is a snake (Varnas A., 1984, p. 109; Vaska B., 1994, p. 116-119) treated in an abstract manner. Having in mind the origins of the Baltic animal art, it seems correct to consider that the image of still more geometrized snake continues into later periods.

The image of a crawling animal was established in animal art of Scandinavia and the whole of northern Europe since the Roman Iron Age. Realistic reptile heads decorate Italian spiral bracelets from the Roman period. Such bracelets were found in Roman provinces. Realistic animal motifs are related with realistic traditions of Hellenistic art and the art of the Roman Empire (Giove T., 1996, p. 189, plate XX). More abstract reptiles are characteristic of Germanic ornamentation found on spiral bracelets, bracteates and other pieces from the Roman and Vendel periods (Andersson K., 1995, p. 28-29; 1996, p. 189, plate XX; Gaimster M., 1998). In establishing the - Germanic animal style, the animal art of Rome and its empire was just one of cultural influences (Salin B., 1904). It seems that Germanic, including Norman artists, chose a four-leg animal or bird for developing their animal motifs of the Style I-III. Besides a four-leg animal a bird, a snake is the third component of the Germanic animal imagery. The head of a bird or a snake is encountered on Frankish and Scandinavian sword-chapes (Gaimster, 1998, p. 78-79). The image of a reptile with expressive "almond-shape" eyes is apart of decoration scheme of Scandinavian bracelets from the eleventh c. (Thålin Bergman L., 1994, P. 71). This leads to conclusion that a coiled reptile, which bears resemblance a spiral, should be attributed to universal human symbols together with a swastika or equilateral cross. The way it is interpreted, in a naturalistic or abstract and geometrized manner, is the matter of individual sensibility of each tribe. It is beyond dispute
however, that these symbols were integrated into the world outlook system of each tribe.

Over the Viking period, when the relationship of the Curonians with Scandinavia, and especially so, with Gotland, became closer, the early styles of this period gave impetus to the Baltic animal style to develop. These early ones were the Broa/Oseberg (800-850), Borre (the second half of the ninth - late tenth c.) and Jellinge (mid-tenth - early eleventh c.) styles.

**Curonian animal style.** In the eighth-twelfth c., the Curonian artists developed a distinct local animal style, though largely based on geometric motifs. This style was much indebted to European animal art tradition and started evolving in the late seventh c. The most beautiful metalwork in animal style comes from the eighth - ninth c. However, the tenth - thirteenth c. were marked not only by the further abstraction of ornamentation patterns, but also by consequent decline of the style. The repertoire of the Curonian artists’ imagery included heads and sometimes tails of reptiles. Likewise other Baltic artists, Curonians assimilated animal and geometric motifs. It has to be noted too, that only a part of Curonian jewellry finds dated to the eighth-thirteenth c. are decorated in geometrized animal designs. Moreover, male and female ornaments of the period display some stylistic variations. There is much more abstraction in animal motifs featured by female pieces.

The most common Curonian male ornament of the eighth - ninth c. is crossbow animal brooch (Fig. 8-11).

Since the eighth to late ninth c. Curonians, Latgallians and Samogitians wore crossbow fibulas with poppy-seed terminals, these also were decorated in animal motifs. Stylistically most complex are designs of fibulas which have four rather naturalistic reptile heads (type I; Fig. 8-10). Most of such fibulas were found in the burial sites in Curonian Mėguva land. Fibulas of types II-IV demonstrate a more simple decoration scheme (Bliujienė A., 1999, p. 100-106, pav. 31-36). The reptiles that terminate the foot...
Fig. 9. Crossbow zoomorphic fibula from Genčai I (Kretinga district) cemetery, grave No 226 (photo by Modestas Ežemkas).

Fig. 10. Detail of the crossbow zoomorphic fibula from Genčai I (Kretinga district) cemetery, grave No 226 (photo by Modestas Ežemkas).

Fig. 11. Crossbow zoomorphic fibulas from Lazdininkai (Kretinga district) cemetery. 1 - grave No 27; 2 - grave No 92 (both exc. 1976) (The drawings of Virgilijus Truklickas).
Fig. 12. Crossbow fibulas with poppyseed-shaped terminals from Genčai I (Kėdainiai district) cemetery, struv find grave No 185

(photo by Antanas Lukšėnas)

Fig. 13. Crossbow fibulas with poppyseed-shaped terminals from Palanga cemetery. 1 — grave No 38;
2 - grave No 115.
(drawings by Audronė Ruzienė, LNM AR K)
Fig. 14. Round flat fibulas.  
1 - Anduliai (Kretinga district), stray find; 2 - Latvijai (Kretinga district), grave No 10. (1 - according to Gaerte W, 1929. Abb. 254: c; 2 - drawing by Audronė Ruzienė LNM AR K)

Fig. 15. Penannular fibulas with zoomorphic terminals from Griežė (Mažeikių district) cemetery. 1 - the grave pit No II, LNM AR 185: 295; 2 - the grave pit No II, LNM AR 185: 276; 3 - the grave pit No V, LNM AR 185: 595; 4 - the grave pit No IX, LNM AR 185: 1027 (drawings by Irena Dumšaitė)
Fig. 16. Bracelets with zoomorphic terminals from Lazdininkai (Kretinga district). 1 – grave No 48 D (exc. in 1998); 2 – 4 grave No 107; 5 – grave No 179 (2 – were exc. in 1976)
(drawings by Virgilijus Truklickas)
those on fibulas and "zoomorhized" bracelets, have no warts on their heads. The heads on spiral bracelets were decorated in geometric patterns, such like "eyes", circles, and notches. Usually one bracelet featured two reptiles, which most probably, represent dynamic dualistic force. A zig-zag line was the most common geometric pattern to decorate such bracelets. This zig-zag line, which combined into a plait of diamonds, or, alternatively, X plait served to imitate characteristic patterns of reptile skin. The bracelets, likewise finger rings, were decorated by the "method of spiral", e.g. a complete decorative pattern was distributed across the lengths and width of two turns of the bracelet.

The burial sites of Curonian women in the lands of Mėguva yielded massive pins from the eighth-ninth c., this being the only location where such type of metalwork was found. The heads of pins feature ornamental patterns in reversed relief, while elongated knobs of the heads resemble of a schematic reptile head (Type V; Kuncienė O., 1978, p. 80). On these pins, reptile heads were often given small warts (Fig. 18). Spiral finger rings was a popular hand ornament with the Curonians of the period. Most often the terminals of such rings are tapered, sometimes one terminal is tapering and bent upwards while the other terminal is wound into a spiral. This way a ring takes a shape of a coiled reptile. The spiral shape lends movement to a design and imitates a crawling animal. One finger ring features one reptile (Bluiuienė A., 1999, fig. 85). Spacer plates of Curonian women also bear resemblance to crawling or coiling animals. Such spacer plates feature one or two, sometimes even three reptiles.

Translated by Irena Jomantienė