

SUMMARY

THE ARMED MERCHANTS OF SZURPIŁY. ON THE ROUTE FROM SCANDINAVIA TO THE VOLGA BULGARIA

In the first phase of the Baltic early Middle Ages, the Viking period, the so-called oriental style developed in the areas along the Volga and Dnieper routes and at the Baltic seaside. It was characteristic of men's attire and was reflected in the model of clothing (caftan) untypical of these territories, and in the specific ornaments of elements of clothing, especially of the belt set. The oriental style was inspired by the elements from various cultural regions: the Black Sea-Caspian steppes, the Volga-Kama Region, the Dnieper River basin, the Near East, and to a lesser extent also from Byzantium and Western Europe. The motifs from Asian art, from steppe cultures prevailed. Production of goods in this convention took place in Volga Bulgaria, the emerging Scandinavian Rus', in eastern Scandinavia, in the lands of the Livonians, as well as in the areas inhabited by the Balts. Judging by the funerary contexts, they were the elements of attire worn by wealthy men representing the merchant-warrior class.

In total, in the settlement complex in Szurpiły (the Suwałki district), ten items were found that can be considered as signifiers of representatives of the merchant-warrior class: a gilded helmet rosette (Fig. 2), a buckle and a belt end fitting decorated in an oriental style, a belt spreader two buttons, a spherical weight for pan scales, and – with reservations – a buckle, most probably made from a damaged horse harness fitting, and three lamellar armour plates (Figs. – 4, 5). The definite majority – as many as eight of the eleven analysed relics – were found in the largest settlement, the so-called Targowisko, two were discovered in the cremation cemetery, the so-called Mosiężysko, and one was found at the eastern foot of the hillfort Góra Zamkowa (Fig. 3).

The magnificent rosette from the helmet of a high-ranking mounted warrior (Fig. 2) was made in a style that developed in the broadly understood Asia and the steppes of Europe (Fig. 6). Most likely, it was made in Volga Bulgaria (Fig. 7). In the Viking period, similar rosettes were used as ornaments of the Chornaâ Mogila type helmets (also known as Old Ruthenian-type helmets), as fasteners for caftans, saddlebags, or elements of a horse harness (Figs. 8–11). The closest analogies to the rosettes come from the areas inhabited by nomads, such as Sarkel – Bielaâ Vieža (Cimlânsk district, Pliska (district Kaspičan), Krasnodar Krai and Ukraine (Fig. 12). Based on the chronology of the relics from Sarkel and Pliska found during archaeological research and on the analysis carried out by Marcin Engel and Cezary Sobczak, we believe that the rosette from Szurpiły should be dated from the second half / end of the 9th century to the first half of the 11th century.

The best analogies to the buckle (Fig. 4: 1) come from Courland (Figs. 14:3–5, 8, 26, 27). They are one-piece items with a round or slightly oval/triangular frame and a characteristic edging in the front part (Fig. 15). Our proposal is to name them the Oberhof-type buckles. In terms of style, the closest to the Szurpių find are the relics from the northern edge of the area, that is the cemeteries in Raņķu Kapenieki (district Kuldīga) and Apuolē (district Skuodas). A highly simplified version of this type comes from Lake Vilkmuiža in the northern part of the Curonian Peninsula, and from an unknown site in the former East Prussia (Fig. 16). The Oberhof-type buckles noticeably refer to the 3b-type belt buckles from Gotland and they are their Baltic imitation. The thing that distinguishes them from the original is that they have only solid plates decorated with a very simplified, geometrised ornament; moreover, the original tripartite edging in the front part of the frame has also been simplified to a plain form. The 3b-type buckles are known from Gotland, Finno-Ugric areas and Budzistowo (Figs. 14:6, 9, 12–13, 15, 19, 21–23, 30). This type dates from 1090/1110–1200. Most of the Oberhof-type buckles are loose finds, which makes it difficult to precisely determine their chronology. Few attempts to date them refer to the period between the 10th and the 11th century. The 3b-type buckles, inspired by oriental designs, were manufactured in Gotland and in the workshops of the Livonian craftsmen. Their simplified form, the Oberhof-type buckles, are present in Courland and should be regarded as a local product, and the specimen from Szurpių as an import.

A heraldic style of the belt end fitting (Fig. 4:2) is made in a style that developed among the Turkic elites and was an element of high-ranking mounted warriors' culture. Then, it spread among the steppe peoples and those who remained under the cultural influence of the Turkic Khaganates, even in the remote parts of the then world. The best analogies to the Szurpių relic are the find from the kurgan 1 in Orlovka (Fig. 18:1) and the fitting of one of the belts found in the treasure in Sarkel – Bielaâ Vieža (Fig. 18:6). Both are similar to the specimen from Szurpių not only in terms of the technique, shape and ornamentation, but also dimensions. Territorially close, but culturally re-adapted analogies of this relic come from Scandinavia and Finland (Figs. 18:2–5, Fig. 19). It can be assumed that the heraldic fitting from Szurpių was manufactured around the mid-9th century, not later than at the end of the 10th century, probably in workshops located in the south-eastern regions of Europe. Most likely, it was made by the Turkic environment. Undoubtedly, it was used intensively and for a long time.

The oriental-style buckles discussed above and the heraldic strap end fittings are not the only belt elements in oriental style found at the Scandinavian and south-eastern coast of the Baltic Sea. In the Baltic lands, they were concentrated along the trade routes: on the Curonian coast, along the Daugava and in the Livonian lands (Figs. 14:1–2, 7, 10–11, 14, 16–18, 20, 24–25, 28–29, 32–34). In Northern Europe, the first oriental-style belt fittings appeared in the early Viking period (the 2nd half of the 8th – the 2nd half of the 9th century) in southwest Finland and central Sweden, and their popularity grew from the late 10th century to the 12th century. The Baltic and Finno-Ugric finds from Estonia and Finland as well as a significant number of relics from Gotland date back to that time.

Ring belt spreaders are typical finds of Viking period, although the piece from Szurpių, decorated in a geometric style, has the best analogies in the Upper Volga

River Region and the Volga Bulgaria (Fig. 20, 21). They date from the 10th to the first half of the 11th century.

Solid buttons (Figs. 4:7–8) are a foreign element in Northern Europe. They were, however, a typical decoration used by the nomads for strapping shirts and caftans. The buttons were the elements of men's, less often women's outerwear and decorated both the headgear and footwear. In Northern Europe, single buttons made of bronze sheet are known, but cast items predominate. Most buttons were made of bronze, and few of silver or lead. They were found in 14 graves in Birka and single ones in Uppland, the Aland Islands, Haithabu and southwest Finland. All finds from Scandinavia have been dated to the middle Viking period – from the second half of the 9th century to the end of the 10th century. They attest to the fact that people were wearing caftans at the Baltic seaside. This clothing, typical of the nomads, the Turkic peoples and the Chinese, also became fashionable in the 10th century among the elites of the Byzantine Empire. At the present stage of research, it is difficult to determine from which of these sources it reached the Baltic seaside (and was it only one source?).

A spherical weight for pan scales (Fig. 4:9) belongs to rare, heavy weights, the weight of which is around 100 g, which corresponds to half of the Scandinavian mark, i.e. 204 g and correlates with the weight of the silver bars for weighing which they were designed. Pan scales appeared in the second half of the 9th century in a wide area from Eastern Europe to the British Isles. It is believed that pan scales, standardized sets of weights and the entire weight system are innovations of Islamic origin. The scales and weights were found in the entire Baltic Sea basin and were produced there. They were concentrated along the coast and major rivers marking trade routes, mainly along the Daugava. The weight from Szurpily should be dated from the end of the 10th century to the end of the 11th century.

The buckle (Fig. 4:3) was made from a fragment that constitutes slightly more than half of the original bow-shaped fitting (Fig. 22). We were unable to find any direct analogies for this relic. Horse harness fittings have the most closely related common characteristics and they are referred to as hourglass fittings in Scandinavian literature, and in Russian as bow-shaped fittings.

Three plates of the lamellar armour were made of iron sheet (Figs. 4:4–6). Lamellar armour has been used from ancient times to modern times. At the dawn of the early Middle Ages, it was used by the Turkic peoples, the Khazars, the Volga Bulgarians and the Hungarians. At that time, it was also common in Byzantium, in the Near and Far East, and in Southern and Eastern Europe. The lamellar armour plates dated to the mid-10th century (Birka) and the 12th and 13th centuries were discovered in the Baltic Sea basin. There are more specimens that come from the 14th century and later periods. The best analogies to the plate from Szurpily, reinforced with an iron rivet, come from the Donetsk hillfort near Kharkiv, the settlement in Ostolopovskoye and the warrior's grave in Bek-Bik (Figs. 23, 24). About three-cm-wide plates, analogous to the ones from Szurpily, appear in the contexts dated around the 8th–12th century. The best analogies to the Szurpily lamellar plates date from the 10th to the 12th century.

The relics presented above have several features in common. All of them are elements of men's clothing or equipment, which is more than extraordinary opulent. They are related to the long-distance trade or war activities. Individual relics date from the

9th to the 12th century, and the period from the 10th to the mid-11th century was the time when, at least theoretically, all these items could be used simultaneously (Fig. 25).

The number of imported relics and those related to the equipment of the merchant, who was familiar with foreign cultures on remote trade routes, proves that the scale of the phenomenon is considerable, in particular since we analyse materials from the settlement, i.e. accidental losses. They primarily testify to the intense involvement of Szurpiły's inhabitants in trading in this part of the world, which is unique in the region, because trade routes, discovered imports and merchant-warrior equipment were concentrated along the Baltic coast, the Daugava and the south-eastern shores of the Gulf of Finland.

In the period of interest to us, the multilingual peoples living at the Baltic seaside were linked by distinct cultural bonds based on the Viking culture, in particular the culture of central Sweden. This applies mainly to the populations living – apart from central Sweden – in Gotland, the coast of modern Estonia, western and south-western Finland with the Åland Islands, Livonian lands in today's Latvia, Karelia, the eastern coast of the Gulf of Finland and the vicinity of Lake Ladoga. We can notice very similar relics related to clothing of a man-warrior in these areas. According to Marika Mägi, there are more links than just intensive contacts between inhabitants. These people used similar weapons and ornaments, they shared cultural values, which probably also concerned at least some worldview issues and most likely some form of *lingua franca*. At the same time, they clearly differed from the inhabitants of the interior. In our opinion, the peoples who contributed to this Baltic community also include the Curonians and the Sambians, and perhaps the Warmians as well.

The convergence of material culture does not mean that the products manufactured in a specific place or region were in common use. On the contrary, imitations modelled on the luxurious originals were commonly produced in the entire area of the “shared cultural milieu”. The Baltic and Baltic Finno-Ugric elites engaged in the long-distance trade eagerly adapted the elements of Scandinavian culture, but also influenced their overseas neighbours themselves. Numerous Baltic relics are known from Gotland and Sweden and individual ones from Norway. The singular finds come from the sites related to the trade conducted along the Volga and Dnieper rivers (Figs. 27–29).

For Yotvingia and Szurpiły, of greatest importance was the Daugava route. It began to play a significant role at the turn of the 9th and the 10th centuries and functioned until the 12th–13th century, or even the 14th century. Travelling along the Daugava, one could arrive at both the Dnieper and the Volga. We can learn that the Prussians reached this route from *Göngu-Hrólfs Saga*, which lists, inter alia, twelve sorcerers from Warmia performing the *seiðr* rituals on the banks of the Daugava.

In the period to which the analysed items have been dated, considerable changes in the Baltic Sea basin took place. At the turn of the 10th and the 11th centuries, together with establishing direct contacts with Byzantium by Scandinavians (or rather representatives of the “eastern Baltic shared cultural milieu”), settlements in the eastern part of the Baltic Sea, situated on the trade routes leading to the south, developed. At the same time, the emporia lying further west, on the southern shore of the Baltic Sea, lost their importance. Among the archaeological finds from the then developing centres, it is possible to easily distinguish the Baltic relics, mainly Curonian and Zemgalian ones (Fig. 29). The political system of Rus' finally stabilised at the time.

Its elites underwent the process of Christianisation and Slavisation. Then, during the 11th century, the Scandinavians gradually lost their influence, both on the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea and throughout Ruthenia. At the same time, the rulers of Rus' were growing in strength and raided the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea to take control of the trade routes there.

Undoubtedly, the most interesting question is what the inhabitants of Szurpių, or the Yotvingians in general, could offer to the armed merchants operating on distant routes. The involvement of the Yotvingians in trade in the most famous Baltic raw material, i.e. amber, seems unlikely due to the remoteness from the deposits and the lack of any traces of such activities in the archaeological sources. When examining the list of goods that were exported from the Baltic Sea region, one should take furs into account, but above all the basic, as it seems, export commodity: slaves. At the end of the 10th and the 11th centuries, the Balts and the Baltic Finno-Ugric people were among the last pagans in Europe and were the tempting targets for human traffickers.