

Korta meddelanden

A looted Viking Period ship's vane terminal from Ukraine

In December 2016, I happened to learn about a significant new Viking Period find. It would have been even more significant had it been recorded according to professional archaeological standards. As I was preparing a paper, an ordinary picture search on the Internet including the words "Ringerike" and "animal style" presented me with the expected wealth of photos, drawings and outright fantasies matching the criteria. Yet, among these was a photo of an object I had never seen before. It showed the right-side profile of a quadruped animal in a distinct Scandinavian animal style. It took only a few seconds to find out that the photo illustrated an on-line auction hosted by British-based TimeLine Auctions, of what they referred

to as of LOT 1155. Bidding had ended on 9 September 2015 and had reached a startling £14,880.

The photo was accompanied by a rather lengthy description stating that the animal had once been part of a Viking Period ship's vane, an extremely rare category of finds. I fully agree with that interpretation, and to my knowledge there are only three extant vanes of this precise type in museum collections, all from churches: Källunge and Söderala in Sweden and Heggen in Norway. A fourth vane, in a similar but distinctively later style, derives from Tingelstad church, also in Norway (Blindheim 1982, p. 85 pp). The three Viking Period vanes all have the same general outline – they are made of gilded, heavily orna-



Fig. 1. Viking Period ship's vane from Källunge Church, Gotland. Detail of a drawing by Harry Faith-Ell.

Fig. 2. The rear side of the figurine from Ukraine, presumably shortly after recovery. Photo from the Violity forum.



mented copper alloy and an animal figurine, a Scandinavian-style version of a lion, has been mounted standing on each of them (fig. 1). In addition to these, there is a slightly different, horse-like animal – which has on good grounds been interpreted as a part of a vane – from Danish Lolland. It is now in the Danish National Museum (Roesdahl et al. 1981, p. 67).

The auction site pointed out that LOT 1155 was one half of a vane figurine, i.e. that it had once been made up of two halves of which only the right-hand one survived. The same method of construction is seen on the animal figurine on the Källunge vane which I have studied first hand. Sadly there was no photo of the rear side of LOT 1155. The whole matter saddened me – yet again an important piece of material culture had been ripped out of context and rendered more or less useless for anything but stylistic comparisons. I ventilated this on social networks, and to my surprise it did not take long before I received a tip-off that the object in question was featured elsewhere on the Internet: on a forum frequented by treasure hunters, at a site called Violity. In Uk-

raine! There, in a post from 9 April 2015, a person claimed to have found what he presumed to be a Scythian object and asked for help to identify and value it. The poster further mentioned that he had found the figurine in the Skvyra region, southwest of Kiev, and attached several photos. One of these (fig. 2) depicts the find, as it seems, shortly after recovery. The hollow rear side is clearly shown, though covered with soil, and in the background the coil of a metal detector is visible.

Additional photos show the object's front and rear sides after cleaning and, in one case, also on top of a digital scale reading 67.68 g, to be compared with the weight given for LOT 1155 on the auction site – 67 g. Per the scale bar in photos on the Violity forum, the looted object is somewhat less than 70 mm high from crest to foot while LOT 1155 at the auction site is said to be 67 mm high. Intriguingly, that animal figurine was described as “Property of a German collector, acquired in the 1990’s”. Based on this statement and what I already knew in the case I contacted TimeLine Auctions to learn their views. They



Fig. 3. Comparison between LOT 1155 as presented on TimeLine's web site (top) and a photo from the Violyty forum (bottom).

promptly responded (e-mail 2016-12-17) and claimed that they had actually been offered to acquire the animal from Ukraine sometime after the sale of LOT 1155. They claimed to have arrived at the conclusion that both objects were modern fabrications and that the buyer of LOT 1155 had been offered an immediate and full refund. They further wrote that they considered the photo from the Violity forum (fig. 2) to be a fake, created with the intention to have the animal figurine look as if it had been discovered by means of a metal detector.

With this in mind I compared the images of the – if we are to believe TimeLine Auctions – two objects. One of the photos from the Violity forum is taken roughly from the same angle as that which illustrated LOT 1155 on TimeLine’s site. If they are put side by side it is possible to compare them in great detail. The photo of the (presumably) newly recovered animal has the highest resolution and some soil still adhered to the surface when it was captured. Regardless of this, it was quick work to establish that the animal figurine in the Ukrainian photo from 9 April 2015 is amazingly similar to LOT 1155. Every uneven pore, flake of gilding and patch of corrosion corresponds (fig. 3).

This can be interpreted in two ways – it can either be seen to corroborate TimeLine’s claim that there are actually two identical objects, or, to show that LOT 1155 was never part of a German collection but is the animal figurine looted in Ukraine in the spring of 2015. My personal opinion is that the latter is correct. As pointed out by Fedir Androshchuk (2016), TimeLine Auctions have been discussed in connection with other similar cases, for example by Neil Brodie, a British

specialist in cultural heritage crimes (Brodie 2016). And further: if someone was skilful enough to make two exact copies of such a complex object as the Ringerike animal figurine, cloning every single feature, it would put TimeLine Auction’s credibility in a rather desperate position. Then they would not be able to guarantee that one single object that they offer is anything but a professionally fabricated forgery in a series of unknown length.

This case serves to illustrate the desperate situation in many parts of Europe, not only in Ukraine, where illicit metal detection threatens to eradicate large parts of the cultural heritage. The weather vane animal is a stunning piece, which, as Androshchuk put it, rightly belongs on display in a Ukrainian museum, not in the drawers of a private collection.

References

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