A Vendel Period gold and garnet pendant from Gamla Uppsala
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Kort meddelande

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In May 2015 an extremely rare find in the shape of a complete gold and garnet pendant (fig. 1) was made during field work by the research project Gamla Uppsala – the emergence of a mythical centre. This appears to be the first find of a gold cloisonné object from a settlement site in Svealand. It can in some ways be compared with a recently discovered group of small gold and garnet objects from comparable sites including Tisso and Uppåkra.

Unlike other finds of the same date and technical character from Svealand, the Gamla Uppsala pendant is a piece of women’s jewellery. Only one or two female graves from the Early Vendel Period (AD 540–610) with gold jewellery are known from the region (Bratt 2008, p. 223 f, 264). None contain certain cloisonné items.

The fieldwork took place between the South Terrace with its great hall and the present churchyard wall of Gamla Uppsala church. The primary aim of the investigation was to find evidence for the 12th and 13th century Archbishop’s manor. A major 13th century building was indeed confirmed, but far older layers also turned up beneath and around it. The excavation revealed a large, previously unknown artificial terrace dating from the Migration or Vendel Periods. Associated culture layers contained workshop evidence that indicate copper-alloy casting, iron smithing and the handling of amber, garnets and glass (Ljungkvist et al. 2017).

Between this new terrace and the great hall, parts of two stone pavements were exposed. This area had been surprisingly well cleaned and retained only quite thin culture layers from the 6–8th centuries. There was no evidence for any intense activities during the 9–12th centuries. One pavement consisted of rather small stones, laid out in a single thin layer. The other was closer to the great hall and made of larger stones, placed as an extension of what we interpret as a hollow way that begins at the foot of the terrace.

The pendant was found in the very bottom of the thin culture layer that covered the latter stone pavement. An intriguing question is whether this small object was deposited intentionally or dropped accidentally. It is quite small, but on the other hand, a dropped gold pendant should be quite easy to find on a fairly cleaned stone pavement. We cannot therefore rule out that it was deposited intentionally.

The pendant measures 20 x 16 mm. The back plate is slightly deformed and there is a little microscopic damage to the garnets and the gold cells. But in general the object is very well preserved. It has the classic cloisonné box construction with the back plate in the bottom and a slight hollow space between the garnets and the bottom of the gold cassette where embossed waffle-

Fig. 1. The Gamla Uppsala pendant, found in 2015. Photo: Max Jahrehorn, Oxider AB.
Fig. 2. The find location of the pendant (marked with a star) in Gamla Uppsala’s Vendel Period manor area.
A. Southern terrace, the sal or great hall.
B. Northern terrace with large workshop building (extension unknown), workshop.
C. Western terrace, workshop B, so far unidentified buildings.
D. Grave clusters on the present vicarage property.
E. Högåsen cemetery with the three great barrows and the assembly mound.
F. Stone pavements known from excavations in 2015 and from earlier excavations beneath the church, probably related to roads and courtyard areas.
G. The North mound, built into the Eastern terrace. Its original size is as yet unknown.
H. Identified walls and/or roads, including their hypothetical extensions. Only the northern most structure has been closely dated.

Patterned gold foil is placed. It was made by a highly skilled craftsman, as is evident in the choice of the beaded wire, the cut of the garnets, how the cell work was made and not least in how the garnets were fixed into their cells.

Scandinavian jewellery finds offer almost no parallels to this object. We have had to search in a broader European context. A characteristic detail on the pendant is the four-leaf clover motif that is fairly common on gold and garnet objects of the 6th and 7th centuries, particularly as single cut garnets. Another important feature is the mushroom-shaped garnets that appear frequently in contexts from the half-century around AD 600, such as the Sutton Hoo grave, the Staffordshire hoard, the Skrävsta sword pommel and the Wijndum brooch (Arrhenius 1985).

Dating the pendant’s manufacture and deposition is somewhat problematic as the associated layer lacks a narrow dating window. The most closely related objects we have encountered so far, considering material, style and craftsmanship, are the disc brooches from the grave of queen Arnegonde, dated to about AD 580 (Perin et al. 2005).
The box technique of the pendant also finds evident parallels in a number of other objects from Hermann Ament’s phase AM II (Legoux et al. 2006). On the other hand, the mushroomshaped garnets rather indicate a dating to AM III (560/70–600/10) or JM I (600–630/40).

The pendant might have been deposited long after its manufacture, but it is as mentioned in a fine condition without any signs of significant wear on the loop or the back side. It has therefore most likely been deposited in the decades around AD 600, which means it is contemporary with most of Gamla Uppsala’s major monuments. The pendant’s closest stylistic parallels are found in Merovingian royal burials, which underlines the status of the original owner of this small piece of wealth.

References


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