A rare animal-headed cross-bow brooch from Plinkaigalis in Lithuania
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A rare animal-headed cross-bow brooch from Plinkaigalis in Lithuania.

By Vytautas Kazakevičius


Among the finds from grave 106 at the Plinkaigalis burial ground, in the Kėdainiai district there is a gold-plated, animal-headed, cross-bow brooch of silver. The grave is dated to the beginning of the 6th century A.D. The brooch is alien to the Lithuanian material and the author considers that it was manufactured on the western coast of the Baltic. A Scandinavian influence is likely to underlie the series of Prussian cross-bow brooches starting in the 8th century. The chronological break might be the result of faulty dating.

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One of the most characteristic Baltic adornments of the Migration period are cross-bow brooches. There is rather a large variety of them: brooches with a bent bar, brooches with a long, a starshaped, a circular decoration, stepped brooches, etc. (LAA IV 1978, p. 35, 39–46, žem. 26–28, 32). Cross-bow animal-headed brooches are somewhat rare. They include brooches which differ from the abundant articles produced by local craftsmen in their style of production and decoration and witness to the cultural and trading relations with different European tribes and nations of the time.

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 A.D., the trade routes between the East Baltic area and the Empire with its provinces, which had existed for centuries, were subject to a gradual decline, new relations were established and dealings with the Germanic world, especially Gotland and Scandinavia became still closer.

Some evidence of such relations — imported goods — was found at the recently excavated burial ground at Plinkaigalis. One of them is a cross-bow brooch with an animal head, found in grave No. 106 (Fig. 1).

The burial ground of Plinkaigalis is in the Kėdainiai district, Krakės parish, about 25 km west of Kėdainiai. It is situated on an oblong hill on the left bank of the Šušvė river (the right-hand tributary of the Nevežis). The tentative exploration of the cemetery started in 1977. It was undertaken by the archaeological expedition of the Academic Methodological Committee of the Cultural Ministry of the Lithuanian SSR for the preservation of cultural monuments. Since 1978 it has been excavated by the Institute of History of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences. An area of 2235 m² was excavated between 1977 and 1981; 247 inhumation graves dating from the 5th–6th centuries, 7 cremation graves from the 7th century and 2 inhumation graves from the late Neolithic were uncovered, also four skeletons of horses, the chronology of which is not quite clear, but they are dated not earlier than the 2nd half of the 6th century. The goods found in the graves are kept in the Museum of History and Ethnography of the Lithuanian SSR at Vilnius (IEM, AR).

Grave No. 106 was uncovered in the central part of the burial ground. In the rectangular pit, 220×80 cm by 35 cm deep from the
present surface, a skeleton of a man aged 45–50 was found. The dead man was buried lying on his back, his head pointed NW. at an angle of 300°, his hands clasped on his breast, his legs outstretched (Fig. 2). The grave goods consisted of: a gold-plated brooch of silver with an animal head, lying under the right pelvis (Fig. 3); at the left side of the waist remnants of a leather belt laid lengthwise. This had an iron buckle, a bronze bound termination, coated with tin and bronze plates. Lying across the left pelvis was a knife in a leather sheath with an ornamented horn handle. Near its blade was a bead of amber — an amulet. Beside the left thigh-bone, its hilt by the waist, was a fighting knife 36.6 cm long. The fighting knife may have been fastened to the belt when deposited in the grave. On the left shin-bone a socketed axe was found. On the basis of the inventory (Fig. 4) the grave is dated to 500 A.D.

The cross-bow, gold-plated silver brooch is moulded. It is 7.12 cm long. The spiral ends in two hemispherical knobs. The spiral is 6.4 cm long. The bow and leg are triangular in cross-section, 0.9 × 0.75 cm. Their sides have an embossed ornament in relief of two spirals of a horizontal letter "S" and one of a reversed letter "S". The spirals are separated by groups of transverse notches (Fig. 1). The leg of the brooch terminates in a stylized, expressive animal head with "hair", eyes and a snout. The knobs of the spiral, the bow, leg and head are gold-plated.

The ornamentation of the brooch and the head of the bar have no direct analogies in either Lithuania or other countries in the East Baltic area. It differs from the other five
animal-headed cross-bow brooches found in Lithuania (Fig. 5), i.e. the brooch from the same burial ground, grave No 107 (Fig. 6:1) (IEM, AR), the stray find from Pagrybis, in the Šilalė district (Fig. 6:2) (KVIM, 709:26) (LLM I 1958, pav. 321), the brooch from Rubokai, the Šilutė district, grave No 107 (Fig. 6:1) (Bezzenberger 1909, Abb. 145; Åberg 1919, Abb. 64; Gaerte 1929, Abb. 217:e; Kulikauskas, Kulikauskienė, Tautavičius 1961, pa. 239) and the brooches from the Jauneikiai burial ground, in the Joniškis district, graves No. 390 (Fig. 6:4) (IEM, AR 537:808) and No. 466 (Fig. 6:5) (IEM, AR 537:1026) Vaskevičiūtė 1978, pav. 1,2). All of them are made of bronze, ornamented with even and cord-like strokes or with a flat surface, sometimes called Raupenfibel (Oxenstierna 1940, P. 234, 236).

These brooches are later than that from grave No 106 and dated to the sixth century. The brooch from Plinkaigalis, for instance, was found together with a narrow-edged axe, work and battle knives, an iron belt buckle and a bronze binding of unknown function. The inventory of grave No 41 from Rubokai consisted of: a socketed axe, a scythe, iron spurs, an iron clasp, two bronze spirals and iron tweezers (?) (Bezzenberger 1909, P. 169–170). Grave No. 390 at the Jauneikiai burial ground contained a bronze necklace with a twisted ring and a hook and loop ends, two spearheads — one with a profiled head, the other with a short rhomboid-shaped head with a long sheath, a battle knife and a socketed axe. Grave No. 466 at Jauneikiai yielded a battle knife and two spearheads — one with a laurel-shaped head, the other with a head of a prolonged rhomboid and a long sheath.

A very few brooches of this type dating from the sixth century have been found in...
Fig. 4. The inventory of grave 106.

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Fig. 5. 6th century animal-headed cross-bow brooches of bronze, all found in Lithuania. 1. Plinkaigalis, grave 107; 2. stray find from Pagrybis; 3. Rubokai, grave 41; 4. Jauneikiai, grave 390; 5. Jauneikiai, grave 466.
Latvia as well. Stray bronze brooches from Krustpils, Jēkabpils district should be mentioned. One of them closely resembles the brooch from grave No. 390 at Jauneikiai (LA 1974, 158 lpp., tab. 42:2). A silver, gold-plated, cross-bow brooch with an animal head was found in grave No. 2 in the burial ground at Geistauti, Liepāja district. This grave contained a silver necklace with elongated ends and a multangular ring, a bronze silver-plated cross-bow brooch with a fan-shaped prong, a fragment of an iron cross-bow brooch, a bronze bracelet, thickening at the ends, a sword with one-edged blade, remnants of a belt with an iron clasp, a tiny cup and a piece of horn (LA 1974, tab. 40:16-27).

The brooch found in this grave has analogies in East Prussia and is considered to have come from there. A fragment of a similar, most likely imported bronze brooch was found accidentally in the burial ground at Ošbirze, in the Talsu district. It cannot be earlier than the sixth century, and has not been published anywhere (LV M, 7579:74).

More cross-bow brooches were found in the lands of the West Balts, stretching to the south west of Lithuania. N. Åberg, while discussing the material culture of the East Prussian population in the Migration period, also described cross-bow animal-headed brooches (Åberg 1919, p. 93-97, Abb. 127-131). Brooches of the Prussian tribes are often made of silver, sometimes gold-plated, more rarely of bronze, with little animal heads, more stylized than those in Lithuania or Latvia. Their geometric pattern is more intricate, and spirals are found as well. Cross-bow animal-headed brooches were found in the burial ground of Daumen, graves No. 38, 150 (Heydeck 1895, Taf. IX:2, VI:9; Oxenstierna 1940, Abb. 18, 19), Gr. Waldeck (Åberg 1919, Abb. 129), accidentally in the district of Rambynas (Oxenstierna 1940, Abb. 41) and in the Schlakalken burial ground, grave No. 25 (Åberg 1919, Abb. 130). They are ornamented with spiral motifs, except the brooch from the Daumen burial ground, grave No. 150. The latter bears groups of transverse notches, and an expressive, absolutely stylized head (Oxenstierna 1940, Abb. 39). In the grave together with the brooch were found five silver buckles and two strap ends, a silver spur and a knife (Heydeck 1895, p. 65-66, Taf. V:7,9, VI:9-11). This brooch must be contemporary with the brooch from Plinkaigalis, grave No. 106 as they are of analogical form. The brooch from Schlakalken burial ground was found together with a clasp and a quadrangular binding (Åberg 1919, p. 96). An unornamented cross-bow animal-headed brooch is known from the Sensburg burial ground (Åberg 1919, Abb. 127). It is the only one brooch in East Prussia with a less stylized head resembling the brooch from Plinkaigalis, grave No. 106.

Three bronze brooches from Öland which all have an animal head termination were brought to the author's attention by the Antiquary Ulf Näsman, for which the author is very grateful. These are the brooches from Hönslorp, Algotstrum parish (KLM, 1458) and Skogsby, Torslunda parish (KLM, 4 950) kept at Kalmar museum and at the Stockholm Museum of National antiquities — the brooch from Smedby in Smedby parish (SHM 1304:1845:22). Their heads are very much like those from Plinkaigalis, but the ornament differs. All are stray finds, and therefore dated by their similarity to other brooches to c. 375/400 – 525/575 A.D. A brooch from Gråborg, Öland is ornamented with analogical spiral motifs (Åberg 1953, fig. 107) and the brooch from Altenerding, West Germany from a woman's grave, No. 421 (Werner 1970, Taf. 9:1), dating from the 1st half of the 6th century, has a similar motif. The latter is very much like the brooches from the Daumen, grave No. 38 and Geistauti burial grounds grave No. 2, and the head of the brooch from Ošbirze. J. Werner supposes it to have originated in East Prussia or the coast of Lithuania (Werner 1970, p. 78). While partly approving this opinion I must observe that it could not come from Lithuania, as such brooches have not been found here.

In the search for parallels to the head of the brooch from Plinkaigalis, grave No. 106, notice should be taken of the claps, often found in Gotland, bindings with different functions and strap ends with very similar or even ana-
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Fig. 6. The find sites of animal-headed cross-bow brooches in Lithuania. 1. Plinkaigalis, Kėdainiai district; 2. Pagrybis, Šilalė district; 3. Rubokai, Šilutė district; 4. Jauneikiai, Joniškis district.


Thus, after scrutiny and comparison of the cross-bow, animal-headed brooches from the East Baltic area two areas of their prevalence stand out, i.e.: I the northern part of the Baltic territory — Lithuania and Latvia, and II the southern part — East Prussia. In Lithuania and Latvia brooches were decorated with an ornament wide-spread in the local artefacts (Puzinas 1938, lent. XLIII). Their heads are less stylized, more expressive. In East Prussia the geometrical pattern of the brooches is more intricate and the heads more stylized. One must agree with E. Šturms’ opinion, submitted in 1950, that the East Prussian brooch ornament of the “masurgermanische Kultur” is taken over from the Salin I style (Šturms 1950, p. 20 ff).

It is difficult to state a more exact place of production of the brooch from Plinkaigalis, grave No. 106, without a good knowledge of the Scandinavian material of the Migration period. However, it differs both in ornament and in head from other cross-bow, animal-headed brooches found in the East Baltic area. The head closely resembles those of the brooches found in Öland and the belt clasp, bindings and strap ends from Gotland. The spiral decoration of the brooch from Plinkaigalis is basic, while in other East Prussian brooches it is only one element of the motif. Therefore it is assigned perhaps to the Salin I style Sjörup phase ornament (Erä — Esko

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1965, fig. 4; Stenberger 1977, Abb. 218). It follows that the brooch found in the burial ground at Plinkaigalis, grave No. 106, was manufactured on the western coast of the Baltic sea and came to Lithuania by trade-cultural relations. The existence of such relations is witnessed by the Gotland archaeological data, which include Baltic artefacts, most likely brought from East Prussia: cross-bow stepped brooches (Nerman 1935, Taf. 37: 376–378), a belt buckle and a strap end (Nerman 1935, Textfig. 186, Taf. 47:485).

It is likely that the manufacture of other cross-bow animal-headed brooches dating from the 6th century was started under the Scandinavian influence, which manifested itself more powerfully in the Prussian tribes and through them spread gradually into Lithuania and Latvia. No brooches of this type dating from the 7th century have been found. This explains the short chronological break between brooches of this type from the 6th and 8th centuries, and the consecutive development is not documented. The causes are obscure, possibly a faulty dating? Starting with the 8th century, the cross-bow animal-headed brooches acquire an original form, spread widely along the Baltic coast — the lands of the Curonians — and become an inseparable part of the Baltic material culture.

References

Sturms, E., Zur ethnischen Deutung der "masugermanischen" Kultur, Archaeologia Geographica I.

Abbreviations
IEM, AR — the Museum of History and Ethnography of the Lithuanian SSR, the Archaeological Department.
KLM — the Kalmar Museum.
KVM — the Kaunas State Historical Museum.
LVM — the State Historical Museum of the Latvian SSR.
SHM — the Museum of National Antiquities, Stockholm.