

Warrior Saints? – Two unusual brooches from the Late Viking Age in Denmark

Anne Pedersen & Sigmund Oehrl

The paper will present and interpret two unique Viking Age brooches which were discovered during metal detector surveys on Sjælland, Denmark, in 2003 and 2007. The brooches represent a horseman killing a serpent-like animal with his spear. The stylized serpent or dragon is clearly associated with the Urnes style, dating to about 1050–1100. The meaning of the motif will be discussed on the background of early medieval dragon slayer narratives and imagery. The comparison indicates that the Viking artist was inspired by the Christian tradition of the equestrian saints. As will be shown extensively in our paper, the reception of the iconography of equestrian saints has a long tradition in Continental Germanic and Scandinavian art. However, the Migration and Merovingian Period depictions presented in the paper were incorporated into a pagan iconography, and it is more than likely that, although the artists borrowed the motif from Christian contexts, they modified and re-interpreted it on the background of pagan ideas, myths, and legends. Whether the Late Viking Urnes style horsemen from Sjælland also represent pagan ideas is another matter. The Urnes style was used in definite Christian contexts and in many cases, it conveys definite Christian ideas. The two brooches from Denmark are clearly influenced by Byzantine depictions of Saint George and Saint Theodore. Presumably, the Urnes style brooches from Sjælland must be considered as the by far earliest known depictions of Saint George the dragon slayer in Scandinavia. Previous art historical research stated that the motif of Saint George killing the dragon on horseback found its way into Western art after the first crusade. In our opinion, this view needs to be revised in the light of the new finds. The Danish brooches represent the earliest depiction of Saint George in Scandinavia, perhaps even the earliest depiction of Saint George in Western art. Thus, they add new perspectives to our understanding of the process of Conversion and the adoption of Christian iconography and narratives in Scandinavia.