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Christian Missionaries or Viking Raiders? Insular Crosier Fragments in Scandinavia

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Crosiers, as symbols of ecclesiastical office, were ubiquitous across western Christianity in the early medieval period, yet few examples survive from the first millennium. The largest and most important corpus of early medieval crosiers in Europe is the Insular group, which numbers around 60 examples dating from the 7th to the 12th centuries (Murray 2007, 81-3). Their survival varies from complete examples to single fragments. They essentially consist of a wooden shaft, or core, onto which metal fittings are attached. Usually the fittings are made of copper alloy, although occasionally they are of silver. In most cases the shaft is covered with two or three sections of metal sheeting, the vertical joints of which are sealed with metal binding strips, while the horizontal ones are covered by cast metal bi-conical, or barrel-shaped, knops. A metal head is attached to the top of the shaft, and a metal ferrule is fixed to the end. Decoration may be cast, incised, or applied, and is limited to the head, knops, binding strips and ferrule (Fig. 1). The vast majority of examples in the corpus are from Ireland, a further six are from Scotland and five fragments are known from Viking Age contexts in Scandinavia. The Scandinavian material is particularly important because of its early date, as well as demonstrating a greater variety of form within the corpus. This paper addresses the question of how these Christian artefacts reached Viking Age Scandinavia.

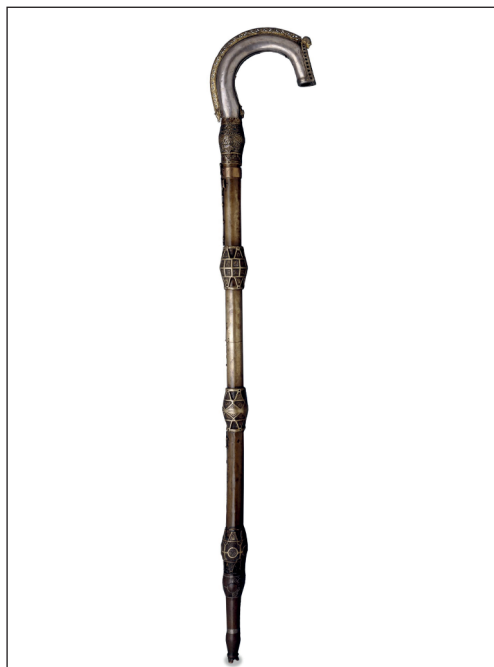


Fig. 1. Irish crosier of unknown provenance, 10th century with 11th- and 12th-century additions, H. 133.5cm, W. 22cm, T. 5.73cm (Trustees of the British Museum).

The Evidence

Five Insular crosier fragments have been identified in Scandinavia on the basis of their form, decoration and techniques (Bourke 1987; Staecker 1997). The group comprises two from Norway (from Setnes, Møre og Romsdal, and from near Stavanger, Rogaland); two from Sweden (from Helgö, Uppland, and Lund, Scania); and one from Hedeby, Schleswig-Holstein, in modern Germany. All of the finds were discovered in the ground in the 19th and 20th centuries and information about them is summarised in Table 1.

Find place	Element	Museum Reg. No.	Date	Provenance/ Culture
Nr. Stavanger	Mount	Nationalmuseet 7759	c. 675-700	Insular
Hedeby	Knop	Schleswig-Holsteinische Landesmuseen KS D 602.115	c. 675-725	Insular
Helgö	Head	Statens Historiska Museum 25075:1000	c. 700-835	Ireland (northern half)
Setnes	Knop	NTNU Vitenskapsmuseet T18198:9	c. 750-850	Northumbria (Cumbria)
Lund	Knop	Kulturen KM 38326:1	c. 800-900	Insular

Table 1. Insular crosier fragments from Scandinavia

Hedeby

The copper-alloy knob from Hedeby (Fig. 2) was a surface find within the central settlement (Capelle 1970, 16-7, pl. 6), where a number of other pieces of Insular metalwork have also been found (Wamers 1985, 109). These include a large enamelled glass stud (Graham-Campbell 1980, 91, no. 316; Wamers 1985, 109, cat. no. 166, pl. 30.8) that is very similar to two examples on the 8th-century paten in the hoard from Derrynaflan, Co. Tipperary (see Ryan 1983, 25, pl. 63), and probably derives from a similar piece of Church metalwork.



Fig. 2. Crosier knob from Hedeby, Schleswig-Holstein, H. 3.05cm, Dia. 4cm (Schleswig-Holsteinische Landesmuseen).

Originally gilded, the knob, which is of squat proportions, is decorated with three ornamented friezes comprising two rows, each consisting of four crouching animals, divided by a band of interlace. Its animal ornament may be compared with that in the Book of Durrow (Trinity College Dublin MS 57, folio 192v; see Meehan 1996, 64), and with some of the animals depicted on the 'Tara' brooch, from Bettystown, Co. Meath (National Museum of Ireland R4015; see Whitfield 1995, fig. 14a), suggesting a date in the decades around AD 700.

Setnes

While very different in style, the knob from Setnes, Romsdal (Fig. 3) is also decorated with three friezes of ornament, consisting of two rows, each originally featuring four crouching animals, divided by a central interlace band (Marstrander 1963, 144-9, fig. 11; Marstrander 1965, 29-34, fig. 12). This knob is made of gilt silver and its ornament is executed in both high relief and openwork. The knob was cut into two in antiquity and the surviving half features secondary fixing holes relating to its re-use, perhaps as a brooch. It was discovered as part of a richly-furnished Viking boat grave, which also included a house-shaped shrine, a hanging bowl and a silver seal mounting, amongst other Insular objects, as well as Scandinavian material. While no human remains were recovered, on the basis of the nature of some of the finds it is thought to have been a woman's grave dating from the first half of the 10th century (Marstrander 1965).



Fig. 3. Crosier knob from Setnes, Romsdal, H. 3.68cm, W. 3.74cm (NTNU Vitenskapsmuseet).

The ornament of the knob finds its best parallels in Northumbrian art of the period between the mid 8th and mid 9th centuries. In particular, the animals may be compared with those on a bowl from Ormside (Webster and Backhouse 1991, 172-3, cat. no. 134) and on a cross-fragment from Dacre (Marstrander 1965, 31-2; Bailey and Cramp 1988, 90-1, pl. 235).

Both of these locations are in Cumbria, an area of Scandinavian influence (see Griffiths 2010, 39-41, 89-99, 144-55), which is suggestive of a Cumbrian origin for the knob. Indeed, the Setnes knob is the earliest archaeological evidence by far for crosier use in Anglo-Saxon England, making it a very significant piece. There are no other crosiers from England surviving from before the 11th century (see Backhouse *et al.* 1984), and so it is all the more surprising that it has not received further attention

from Anglo-Saxon scholars. In this light one might consider the possibility that the house-shaped shrine from the Setnes burial is also Northumbrian in origin, as a silver seal mounting from the grave may also be of Anglo-Saxon background (Marstrander 1963, 150-1).

Lund

The third Insular crosier knop from Scandinavia (Fig. 4) is an early 20th-century find from Lilla Gråbrödersgatan, in Lund (Berg 1931, 16, fig. 26; Alenstam-Petersson 1952, 235-7, fig. 1; Gardelin 2013). Although now in poor condition, this copper-alloy knop was clearly a highly decorative gilded piece. It is now of squat proportions, both of its ends having been trimmed. The ornament is divided transversely into three main areas, as on the Hedeby and Setnes pieces. It has a central milled band, above and below which, instead of a frieze, is a series of four trapezoidal panels decorated with alternating interlace and spiral ornament. By comparison with the ornament on a crosier ferrule



Fig. 4. Crosier knop from Lund, Scania, H. 3.6cm, Dia. 4.15cm (Kulturen).

from Shankill, Co. Antrim (Alenstam-Petersson 1952, 236-7; Youngs 1989, 152, cat. no. 148), and with the layout of the panelled ornament on a crosier from near Prosperous, Co. Kildare (Mahr 1932, pl. 74; Bourke 1987, 168), a 9th-century date seems likely. A contemporary circular mount, which would appear also to have derived from an Insular ecclesiastical object, was also found in Lund attached to a lead weight (Alenstam-Petersson 1952, 237-8, fig 2; Wamers 1985, 107, cat. no. 154, pl.3.5). Some fragments of Insular metalwork are also on record from nearby Uppåkra (Hejll 1998, 53, fig. 54; Helgesson 2001).

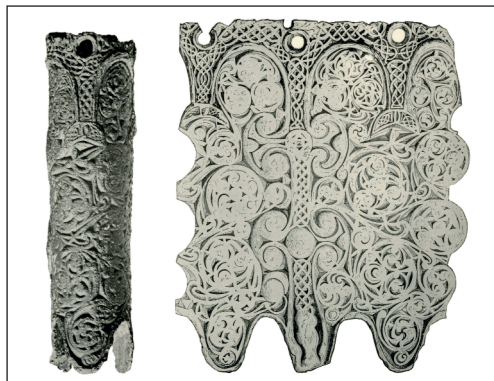


Fig. 5. Cylindrical crosier mount from near Stavanger, Rogaland, with drawing of expanded ornament, H. 15.5cm, Dia. 3.95cm (after Mahr 1932)

Near Stavanger

A more unusual object was found somewhere near Stavanger (Fig. 5) in the early 19th century (Undset 1878, 46-8, fig 38a-c; Petersen 1940, 44, cat. no. 51, fig. 44). This highly decorative cylindrical mount, made of cast copper alloy and originally gilded, is decorated all over with spiral and interlace ornament. It features three original fixing holes at its upper end, as well as a secondary fixing hole of smaller diameter. Its ornament shows heavy influence from Insular Gospel books, and it is particularly close to the ornament in the Book of Durrow (fol. 3v; e.g. Meehan 1996, 18), suggesting that it dates to the later 7th century.

Helgö

The fragment discovered during the excavations at Helgö (Fig. 6) is the most remarkable of the Insular crosier finds from Scandinavia. It is a volute-headed crosier, consisting of a socketed head and a conical knop, both made of cast copper alloy. It is predominantly decorated with glass and enamel, and is in relatively good condition. The volute head is dominated by a beast whose body curls back on itself and whose open jaws clasp a human head. Holmqvist (1955, 47-50) confidently ascribed the crosier-head to Ireland, an attribution that, justifiably, has never really been doubted



Fig. 6. Crosier head from Helgö, Uppland, H. 11cm, W. 6.3cm, T. 2.65cm (Statens Historiska Museum).

(Harbison 2004, 29, 32). It appears to have been decorated with red enamel, which has now changed to a whitish colour (Holmqvist 1955, 49; Bruce-Mitford 2005, 76-80) as well as with yellow and green enamel and blue and white millefiori. Indeed, the use of red and yellow enamel in geometric patterns in combination with blue and white millefiori links it with objects found in the northern half of Ireland, such as the belt-shrine from Moylough, Co. Sligo (O'Kelly 1965), the Antrim cross (Harbison 1978), a drinking-horn terminal (Youngs 1989, 62, 38, cat. no. 55), and on mounts from the crannógs at Lagore, Co. Meath, and Coolure Demesne, Co. Westmeath (Kelly and Sikora 2011, 66, cat. nos. 95, 97). This suggests that the original provenance of the crosier-head lay somewhere in the northern half of Ireland. While most scholars have dated it to the 8th century (e.g. Holmqvist 1955, 50-1; Henry 1965, 116; Graham-Campbell 1980, 91; Bourke 1987, 166; Youngs 1989, 152, cat. no. 147; Laing 2006, 182), Peter Harbison (2004) has argued for a date around AD 800. Indeed, an extension of its dating range, into the first third of the 9th century, may be suggested by the date of the Arabic coins found in proximity to it, which were minted between AD 827-33, as well as its close

affinity with the figurative mounts on the Oseberg bucket, which has a *terminus ante quem* of AD 834 (Bonde and Christensen 1993). Although it was probably articulated when deposited, the Helgö find is still only a fragment of a crosier. Indeed, four individual fragments of other Irish objects were also recovered from the site (Wamers 1985, 106, cat. no. 143b-e, pl. 32.1; O'Meadhra and Lamm 2011).

Context

Two main theories have been advanced to explain how Insular ecclesiastical material, such as these crosier fragments, came to be deposited in Scandinavia. The traditional theory is that it represents material looted from church sites in Ireland and Britain during Viking raids, which was subsequently broken up and the decorative elements retained and re-used. It is thought that these pieces were brought back to Scandinavia where they may have been kept, lost, traded or gifted, and their discovery in settlements and burial contexts is consistent with this interpretation. This theory is supported by both the historical record concerning raiding and the large number of fragments of Insular metalwork that have been recovered from Scandinavia, principally from Viking Age graves in Norway (e.g. Petersen 1940; Bakka 1965; Wamers 1985; Wamers 1998; Müller-Wille 2002; Sheehan 2013).

This traditional view of how Insular crosiers arrived in Scandinavia has come under increasing scrutiny since the 1970s, when a number of Scandinavian archaeologists suggested that these finds may represent evidence for undocumented early Christian missions to Scandinavia (Holmqvist 1975; Blindheim 1976, 26; Holmqvist and Granath 1979, 55). The inspiration behind this viewpoint was the record of Ansgar's early 9th-century mission from Germany, which has prompted some scholars to suggest that there may have been other Christian missions for which documentary evidence has

not survived. This theory, using the crosiers as evidence, was most thoroughly investigated by Jörn Staecker. Although he actually concluded that the crosiers could not be used as evidence for early missions to Scandinavia (Staecker 1997, 446), the theory has nonetheless proved pervasive and, in a number of cases, has become the favoured interpretation, superseding the traditional raiding narrative for the occurrence of Insular ecclesiastical metalwork in Scandinavia (e.g. Bergqvist 1999; Helgesson 2001; Mikkelsen 2002; Zanrisson 2004, 167; Nordeide 2011, 151-2, 301).

While the missionary theory has been the focus of discussion regarding the crosier fragments and other fragments of Insular Church metalwork in Scandinavia in recent decades, the arguments in its favour are unconvincing. Indeed, there are a number of difficulties with this hypothesis that have been overlooked by some Scandinavian archaeologists. First of all, the Irish documentary record for this period is so good that it seems highly unlikely that missions were being made to Scandinavia from Ireland, or even from Irish monasteries in Britain, for which no historical or hagiographical evidence survives (e.g. Kenney 1966). This stands in direct contrast to the well-documented Viking raids on church sites in Ireland and Britain at the time (e.g. Lucas 1967; Etchingham 1996).

Secondly, all of these crosiers were fragmented, with the knops from Setnes and Lund being further cut down, and, where known, all examples have been recovered from places that have produced further evidence of fragmented Insular metalwork. This deliberate fragmentation was the way in which most plundered Church metalwork was treated, both in Viking *longphuirt* in Ireland (Sheehan 2008, 287) and in Scandinavia itself. A notable example of this is the impressive Hiberno-Scandinavian assemblage from Shanmullagh, Co. Armagh, deposited sometime around AD 900, which includes fragments of crosiers, house-shaped shrines and other Church metalwork; indeed, a crosier knop from Shanmullagh was halved in exactly the same way as the Setnes example. The Shanmullagh assemblage may relate to raiding activity at Armagh and / or to Viking activity on Lough Neagh around this time (Bourke 2010).

Thirdly, none of the crosier fragments from Scandinavia were recovered from a Christian context, with the exception of the Lund knop, which came from a Christian town. However, this object must have been a century or two old by the time it arrived in the town. The contemporary Insular mount on the lead weight from Lund is also probably from an ecclesiastical object (Alenstam-Petersson 1952, 237-8, fig. 2) and may be paralleled with similarly decorated weights from Scandinavian contexts in Ireland and Scotland, as for example at Kiloran Bay, Islandbridge, Shanmullagh and Woodstown (Graham-Campbell 1980, 88-9, 265; Bourke 2010, 25, 72, figs. 45, 47). The cutting down of the edges of the Lund knop is also in line with the way in which plundered material was treated. The lack of Christian contexts for the crosier fragments from Scandinavia stands in direct contrast to the finds of fragments of crosiers from Ireland and Scotland, which were mostly found on, or close to, known early ecclesiastical sites.

The only evidence to support the missionary theory appears to be the obvious and unavoidable fact that Insular Church metalwork is actually found in Scandinavia. On the other hand, the raided material theory has much to support it, including the litany of historical references to Viking raids taking place on ecclesiastical sites in Britain and Ireland from AD 793 onwards (Somerville and McDonald 2010, 227-45), with specific accounts of the breaking and stealing of shrines and reliquaries (Lucas 1967, 180-1; Lucas 1986, 34).

There is a heavy concentration of fragmented crosiers from Ireland dating from the 8th and 9th centuries. Fragmentation implies destruction, and notably there are very few articulated examples surviving from before the 10th century. In the 10th and 11th centuries, however, there is considerably less fragmentation. Furthermore, of the crosiers that have been handed down from one generation to the next, none can be dated to earlier than the 10th century (Fig. 1). The same pattern emerges from consideration of other types of Church metalwork in Ireland, such as bell- and book-shrines, demonstrating a clear horizon of destruction in the 9th century. Is it mere coincidence that this is the main period of Viking raiding in Ireland? The fact that similar fragmented Church metalwork formed part of the Hiberno-Scandinavian assemblage at Shanmullagh, and, has been found in, or close to,

several Viking *longphuirt* in Ireland (Ó Floinn 2001, 88, fig. 1; Wallace and Ó Floinn 2002, 229, fig. 6:17 Sheehan 2008, 287), as well as in pagan contexts in Scandinavia (Wamers 1985), is surely enough to convince one as to who was responsible for this destruction.

Conclusion

While as archaeologists it is important that we question and test the historical record, we need to be careful not to stretch our efforts to the point of unjustifiably rewriting history. It is important not to forget that the initial impact of the Vikings in the lands that they plundered was overwhelmingly negative, particularly in Ireland where there is the detailed historical record to attest it. While the missionary theory may be attractive as an alternative explanation for how Insular crosiers and other fragments of Insular Church metalwork arrived in Scandinavia, and certainly paints a more pleasant image, it lacks the supporting evidence that would be required to make a convincing argument. Considering all of the evidence, it is far more likely that the Insular crosiers came to Scandinavia in the hands of returning Viking raiders, rather than in the hands of Christian missionaries.

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