MEROVINGIAN PERIOD EQUESTRIANS IN FIGURAL ART

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Abstract

Naturalistic figural art is rare in the Merovingian period. However, during the period of Christianisation (late sixth/seventh century AD) one can observe a considerable increase. One of the motifs – a victorious equestrian – arrived north of the Alps in the late sixth century, most probably with Frankish warrior groups who took part in the wars in northern Italy. Image carriers were part of prestigious horse equipment. However, north of the Alps the motif was transformed completely from that of the warrior’s world into the female world.

Key words: Warrior saints; sixth/seventh century AD; Phalerae; Italy; South-West-Germany; France.

Introduction

In July 2008 Gerhard Fingerlin, the former chief of the archaeological heritage in Freiburg in Southwest Germany was able to celebrate a large success. After years of effort he won a famous object back from a private collection for the public. It is a phalera from Hüfingen (Schwarzwald-Baar-Kreis; Germany) (Fig. 3.2) which came via confidential agents from an anonymous person to the archaeological heritage (Fingerlin 2008). It is part of set of three phalerae (Fig.3) – the others were found during a chaotic excavation in the year 1966 in a wooden chamber grave which had exceptional conditions for the conservation of organic material. The report of the accidental discovery looks like an archaeological nightmare (Fingerlin 1974, p.591ff). The preserved chamber was destroyed with a large digger! When the archaeologists arrived, not a single object was found in situ, some other objects has been “collected” by private persons. The third phalera was one of those. It is of high interest, because of its figural decoration which is very rare in Merovingian period. Tens of thousands of graves are known from present day France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxemburg and Germany but only a handful of figural designs have been noted.

Images of Horses and Horsemen in the fifth until mid sixth century AD

The horse as an important symbol in the migration period is clearly demonstrated by many of the articles in this volume (additionally cf. Wagner 2005). Especially in the fifth century AD a pair of horse heads is – next to birds of prey - a widely distributed decoration in central Europe. These can be found e.g. on strap ends combs and purse-mounts, all elements of the world of the male. To females belong small brooches used in pairs to close a cloak on the shoulders. They derive from circum-Mediterranean examples (Martin 1995, pp.646-652). A few of them are in form of horses and horsemen. Particularly these seem to be forms from regions with a continuity in population and culture from the Roman period, the so called Romani (Marti 1990, p.57ff). The meaning of these horsemen is not clear. Under discussion is an example from Xanten in the lower Rhine region. For a long time it was accepted as an equestrian from around AD 600, but as Kurt Böhner (1997) has shown it could be also Samson killing the lion.

Also rare are hunting scenes, even though they were common in the Mediterranean world, many mosaics demonstrate such (e.g. Daltrop 1969; Catalogue Arles 2003, p.134 Nr.55 and 185). The very few examples could be diffused as ornaments of imported weapons. Especially the helmets of the so called Baldenheim type shown in two cases hunting scenes (Ament 2003). The specimen from Chalon-sur-Saône (dép. Saône et Loire; France) has a headband made on a die (Sperber 2006, p.133 with fig.49). Stylistically it is from a Mediterranean early Byzantine workshop and shows hunting scenes with horsemen. The second helmet with a chase is from Montepagano (Prov. Teramo; Italy) (Sperber 2006, p.127 fig.47), but here the scenes are embossed in the parts of the calotte. In the Merovingian world only the bronze pressing plates from a wooden bucket from Giberville (dép Calvados; France) are ornamented with a hunt (Pilet et al. 1990, p.23ff with plates 10-11). However, the exact contents as well as the exact meaning of the illustration is unclear, and every interpretation will always be uncertain. The same is true for a stamp which was used on pottery found in Banthelu (dép. Val-d’Oise; France) (Périn, Feffer 1997, p.272).
As far as I know, these are the only hunting scenes in the Merovingian world.

More common than figural art is the animal style. In sixth century AD animal style I was widely distributed, not only in Scandinavia, but also in the Rhineland and in south western Germany. It is obvious that this style seems to be used mostly on female’s dress accessories like brooches.

Prestigious goods with figural art from Mediterranean World

In the last quarter of the sixth century AD an enormous amount of objects from Italy has been noted especially in south west Germany, the Alamannia. Even military equipment like spearheads, body armour, helmets of the lamellae type, belts, stirrups and horse gear arrived in larger amounts, and additionally female dress accessories (Oexle 1992, p.99ff; Koch 1997; Graenert 2000; at least and summing up Keim 2007). But also kinds of religious believe – demonstrated by the use of foil crosses – connected Italy and the Alamannia (at least Riemer 1999). They were made of thin sheath of gold and used for funerary purposes only. In addition the documented features show that these crosses were attached on a piece of cloth and deposited on the faces of the dead. The impact of the influences is so great, that scholars are talking about the “Lombard horizon” (Werner 1935, p.23 [without using this item]; Oexle 1992, p.102 used the term “Kontaminationshorizont”; Graenert 2000, p.417ff with further reading in footnote 3).

To the most interesting aspect of this horizon belongs the phalerae. They were use in sets of three – one cen-

Fig. 1. Reconstruction of a tack with phalerae and set of phalerae from Ittenheim in Alsace (France). 2-4 scale 1:2 (1 after Werner 1943, p.12 fig.4; 2-4 after Schnitzler 1997, p.54).
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tral and two laterals – on the chest strap of the saddle (Fig. 1.1). Their diameter is around 9 to 12 cm. The base plates were of copper alloy but on the front is normally a sheath of silver attached with an image. Even though these illustrations were made with a die, no identical sets are known until now. The phalerae from Ittenheim in Alsace (Fig. 1.2-4) (Werner 1943, plates 4-5; Schnitzler 1997, p.53ff Nr.10), and from an unknown find place in Italy (Fig. 3.4-5) (Werner 1943, plates 6-7; Greifenhagen 1975, p.102 Taf. 71.1-2), seem to have the same “programme”, maybe a hunt for boars, which are on the lateral plates but orientated to the warrior (personifying force and courage?) on the centre plate (from the Italian set the central plate is missing). The origin of these phalerae in the Mediterranean, especially in Italy, is significant by specimens from Lombard period Italy (Fig. 2) (Werner 1943, plates 6-7; 1952, plate 9.1-2; Brozzi 1971, plate B.5; Greifenhagen 1975, p.102 Taf. 71.1-2; Menis 1990, p.381ff Nr.X.38), and by stylistic arguments, in one case additionally by an inscription (Fingerlin 1974, p.617). Furthermore in Italy naturalistic figural art with equestrians was common, e.g. on ivories (Volbach 1976, plates 26.48 and 39.67), coins, finger rings (Quast, forthcoming), and silver dishes like in Isola Rizza (Prov. Verona; Italy), with a combat scene (at least Catalogue Bonn 2008, p.362), or in the Vatikan with a hunting scene (Werner 1943, plate 9). The motive survived also on Lombardic period shield

Fig. 2. Phalerae from Lombard period Italy: 1 Cividale (province Udine); 2-3 Reggio Emilia (province Reggi Emilia); 4-5 „Italy“, without exact provenance. Scale 1:2 (1 after Menis 1990, 382 no. X.38; 2-3 after Werner 1952, plate 9.1-2; 4-5 after Greifenhagen 1975, p.102 Taf. 71.1-2).

Regarding the Merovingian period equestrians in figural art, most of the known sets of phalerae are of interest¹. Significant is the Christian programme in Hüffingen – now completed with the third plate (Fig. 3) (Fingerlin 1974; 2008). In the centre is Mary, with the child, on a throne; next to her on the lateral plates are equestrian saints. Noticeably both the lateral phalerae are not made with the same die. The left one shows the horseman in battle with a snake or worm with human head, which demonstrates the evil. The equestrian kills it with his lance. On the right phalerae (the new discovered one) the cavalier lifts his right hand as a sign for victory. This ties in clearly with the late antique gesture of the imperial adventus (Stutzinger 1983). An incomplete inscription in Latin on the left phalera may

¹ Cf. amongst others Böhner, 1995; Quast 1993, p.457 (List 1).

Fig. 3. Phalerae with images of equestrians: 1-3 Hüffingen (Schwarzwald-Baar-Kreis; Germany); 4 Seengen (Kt. Aargau; Switzerland); 5 Nendingen (city of Tuttlingen; Kr. Tuttlingen; Germany) grave 36. Phalera: a bronze sheath with lateral decoration (impressed corded wire), b the same sheath in the iron frame; 6 Pliezhausen (Kr. Reutlingen; Germany) grave 1. Scale: 1:2 (1 and 3 after Fingerlin 1974, plate 40; 2 after Fingerlin 2008, p.69; 4 after Mossbrugger-Leu 1971, plate 20.4; 5 after Fingerlin 1993, 224 fig.158; 6 after Böhner, Quast 1994, 389 fig. 4c).
The transformation of the motif into the female world

The most prominent imitation of a Mediterranean phalerae is the golden specimen of Pliezhausen (Kr. Konstanz), grave 38. The requirement for the image of an equestrian saint was large enough to cut the central part of a Mediterranean silver bowl and add a fastening on the backside (Fingerlin 2006).

The popularity of the motive and the “steps of imitation” can be demonstrated by different brooches from the seventh century AD. While the specimens of Oron- le-Châtelet, „La Copelenaiz“ (Kr. Vaud; Switzerland) (Fig. 4.1) (Baum 1937, plate 17.46) and Rouen (dép. Seine-Maritime; F) grave 15 (Fig. 4.2) (Périn 1989, p.34 fig.13) are naturalistic, the next step - Pramay (Kr. Vaud; Switzerland) (Fig. 4.3) (Laur-Belart 1943) and Hilterfingen (Kt. Bern; Switzerland) (Fig. 4.4) (Moosbrugger-Leu 1971, plate 48.27) – is a little bit “in solution”. Finally in grave 12 from Saint-Jean-de-Gonville (dép. Ain; France) (Fig. 4.5), the equestrian is only schematically imaged in the centre of the plate (Baud, Hublin 1999, p.354 fig.4). Particularly in the Burgundian part of the Merovingian Empire, Christian scenes often illustrate buckle plates. Equestrians are shown on the specimens from La Balme (dép. Ain; France) (Fig. 5.1) and Ladoix-Serrigny (dép. Côte d’Or; France) (Fig. 5.2). In the first case the entrance of Christ into Jerusalem is pictured (Barrière- Flavy 1901 plate 40.1; Cartier 1911); in the second case Christ as a armed horseman of the Apocalypse (Gaillard de Sémainville 2003). In Burgundy buckles with rec-

2 The iconography is not part of my article. It always will be a little bit uncertain, because we have no Merovingian period written sources for the interpretation. To use sources hundreds of years later written after the religious change to Christianity contains problems. For possible interpretations of the Pliezhausen motif cf. Hauck 1957 and at least Böhner 1995, pp.707-717 (with further reading).

3 A similar observation was made for the motif of men wearing a helmet with a pair of up-curved horns which was transformed from Vendel to Viking period also from the male to female world (Helmbrecht 2007, p.166ff).

Fig. 4. Brooches with images of equestrians: 1 Oron-le-Châtel „La Copelenaz“ (Kt. Vaud; Switzerland); 2 Rouen (dép. Seine-Maritime; France); 3 Pramay (Kt. Vaud; Switzerland); 4 Hilterfingen (Kt. Bern; Switzerland); 5 Saint-Jean-de-Gonville (dép. Ain; France). 1 without scale, others scale 1:1. (1 after Baum 1937, plate 17.46; 2 after Périn 1989, p.34 fig.13; 3 after Laur-Belart 1943; 4 after Moosbrugger-Leu 1971, plate 48.27; 5 after Baud, Hublin 1999, p.354 fig.4).

Fig. 5. Buckles from Burgundy with equestrians: 1 La Balme (dép. Ain; France); 2 Ladoix-Serrigny (dép. Côte d’Or; France); 3 Noiret-Cruiseilles (dép. Haute-Savoie; France); 4 Prahins (Kt. Vaud; Switzerland); 5 Saint-Jean-de-Losne (dép. Côte-d’Or; France); 6 Dietersheim (city of Bingen; Kr. Mainz-Bingen; Germany). Scale 1:2 (1 and 5 after Barrière-Flavy 1901, p.394 fig.118 and plate 40.1; 2 after Gaillard de Sémainville 2003, p.303 fig.2; 3-4,6 after Frey 2006, p.69 fig.49).

Just as a short excursus, two examples from the South and the North should be included. In Cividale (Prov. Udine, Italy) (Fig. 6.1) (Brozzi 1971, plate D; Roth 1973, fig.142 and plate 31.5; Catalogue Bonn 2008, p.356ff) a small disc of gold sheath shows a horseman, comparable, for example; to the one from the Nendingen phalerae (Fig. 3.5a-b). The lateral zone is ornamented with animal style II. But also some elements of the equestrian are performed in that style: the head of the horse and of the cavalier. In Vendel (Uppland; Sweden) grave 1 (Fig. 6.2a) clearly on the fitting of a bridle (Stolpe, Arne 1927, plate IX.8) the horseman seemed to be completely lost in animal style, which is of course one of the characteristics of animal style. A suggestion for the “last step of the motive transformation" is shown in Fig. 6.2b.

But let us go back to the Merovingian female dress accessories. Not only on brooches was the equestrian saint a popular image. On the so-called open worked ornamental discs exist a group with “horses” (Renner 1970, p.38ff “Type XII" with map 21). The type C on the distribution map is out of interest for our context, because it shows only a horse (Fig. 7). On the contrary types A and B show horsemen. One of them with uplifted arms is distributed mostly in North-eastern Gaul, the other one with a lance in Switzerland and South-Western Germany (Fig. 7). All of them are dated to the seventh century AD. Comparable motifs can be found on some buckle plates from the Burgundian region which are also open worked, e.g. Noiret-Cruseilles (dép. Haute-Savoie; France) (Fig. 5.3), Prahins (Kt. Vaud; Switzerland) (Fig. 5.4) and as “western import" in Dietersheim (city of Bingen; Kr. Mainz-Bingen; Germany) (Fig. 5.6) (Frey 2006, p.68ff with fig.49; Barrière-Flavy 1901, p.394 fig.118) or on a tongue shaped specimen with nine rivets from Saint-Jean-de-Losne (dép. Côte-d’or; France) (Fig. 5.5).

The motif of the horseman with uplifted arms seems to be also adopted from the Mediterranean area like some check pieces from Visigothic period Spain suggest (at least Aurrecochea, Ager 2000, pp.281-286 with fig. 3.2).
Images of Merovingian period equestrians in ecclesiastic contexts

Even if the equestrian saint disappeared from the male world after a very short time, he was not only part of the female world. As part of Christian iconography he expanded, of course, also in Merovingian ecclesiastic art. On a small reliquary from Ennabeuren (Alb-Donau-Kr.; Germany) he dominates the right side (Fig. 8.1). It is the oldest reliquary from Merovingian region and dates to the mid of the seventh century AD. The small casket was made most probably in the region of Burgundy, and the different stamps used on it demonstrate a Christian programme, in which the victorious horseman plays the central part (Quast, forthcoming).

Another example of an equestrian in an ecclesiastic context is the carved stone from Hornhausen (Bördekreis; Germany) (Fig. 8.2). It did not show the “classical” Mediterranean saint but a north-alpine transformation like, for example, the Nendingen phalerae or the open worked ornamental discs. Though he is also riding over a snake carved in animal style and has two heads. As Kurt Böhner pointed out, the stone from Hornhausen was - together with other fragments from the same place - part of a choir screen of a church (Fig. 8.3) (Böhner 1976/77).

The Christian meaning of the motive of the equestrian saint is underlined by some golden finger rings. The grave 164 of a child buried in Chelles (dép. Oise; France) (Fig. 9.1) (Vallet 2008, p.192 with fig.100 and p.412 with plate 37.4) contains one of them. The golden plate was decorated with a horseman with uplifted arms, but additionally with alpha, omega and a cross. From Lauchheim (Ostalbkreis; Germany) grave 38 (Fig. 9.2) (Stork 1995, p.23 fig.20) exists a ring with a horse and a cross. Just as “excursus” two related golden rings should be added. The first with unknown provenance shows a fish under a cross with alpha and omega (Fig. 9.3)\(^6\). The second is from Boppard (Rhein-Hunsrück-Kr.; Germany) (Fig. 9.4) from a late seventh century AD grave and is decorated with a bird under a cross (von Berg, Wegner 2001, p.198 fig.199).

It is obvious that on the Merovingian coinage the motif of the horseman was with one exception (Depreyot 1998 vol. 2, pl. 17.1) never used to image the reverse;

\(^6\) The knowledge of the object, and the photograph of it, I owe to Dafydd Kidd.
Fig. 8. (1) Equestrian saint from a small reliquary from Ennabeuren (Alb-Donau-Kreis; Germany); (2) Hornhausen (Bördekreis; Germany); (3) Reconstruction of the fragments of Hornhausen as a choir screen of a church. 1 scale 1:1; 2 scale 1:15; 3 without scale (1 after Quast, forthcoming; 2-3 after Böhner 1976/77, 124 fig.7 and plate 14).

Fig. 9. Golden fingerings with Christian motives: 1 Chelles (dép. Oise; France); 2 Lauchheim (Ostalbkreis; Germany); 3 Unknown provenance; 4 Boppard (Rhein-Hunsrück-Kr., Germany) without exact scale (circa 1:1) (1 after Vallet 2008, 192 fig.100; 412 plate 37.4; 2 after Stork 1995, p.23 fig. 20; 3 photograph Dafydd Kidd; 4 after von Berg, Wegner 2001, p.198 fig.199).
Images for warrior group’s identity

As mentioned the image of the equestrian – the meaning is a warrior saint – was for only a very short time part of the male world in the Merovingian Empire, especially in the Alamannic region. Just for one generation it was in use, because it was part of prestigious objects, of imports from Italy. Maybe it had quite the character of a sign for warrior groups who acted in the South in the Frankish – Lombardic wars. However, north of the Alps it lost this function. It is possible, that the Christian meaning was not applicable for Alamannic warriors. Maybe there was no understanding of the contents of the images or just for the naturalistic images as a modus of communication. In any case there was an alternative form to demonstrate warrior’s group identity and maybe religion. It was animal style II, which was very popular especially in South West Germany and the Rhine region. It appears in most cases on fittings of male dress, armament and horse equipment. Karen Høilund Nielsen (1997; 1998) has pointed out ten years ago, that this style was a “political badge”.

It is obvious that even or particularly on the fittings of horse’s harness made north of the Alps “Flechtband” was used in silver on iron. There were some objects used in the same function as the phalerae to underline this (Quast 1993, p.446ff and p.458ff [List 1b and c]). It was absolutely not because craftsmen in this region were unable to produce naturalistic figural art. Above mentioned local imitations of phalerae, and of course the brooches, illustrate that. Additionally a completely conserved wooden lyre with figural scene from Trossingen (Kr.Tuttlingen; Germany) clarifies that Mediterranean warrior’s equipment, but there may be other “mediums” e.g. like textiles (c.f. Fingerlin 1974, p.620 with footnote 100). Nevertheless, the motif was very quickly transformed into the female world. This does not mean that women prefer Christianity while men remain with their pre-Christian beliefs. If we are looking at grave furniture, e.g. to other objects of the “Lombardic horizon”, the foil-crosses, we get different information: they were used more often in male graves (Christlein 1975, esp. p.79 with fig. 5). However, this was an act of showing “wealth” during the funeral. The demonstration in daily life seems to exemplify a difference in mentality between men in women in Merovingian period.

Far away in Scandinavia the motif of the horseman with a lance was only used in the male world, namely on the helmets of Vendel (Stolpe, Arne 1927, plate 5.2 and 6.1; Böhner 1995, 715 fig. 28) and Valsgärde (Böhner 1995, pp.712-714 figs. 23-27), both in Uppland (Sweden), and centuries before already in the art of the bracteates (Axboe 2007; Pesch 2007; Quast 2002). It seems to be very probable that the illustration had another (no Christian) meaning and was a badge of elite warrior’s identity.

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I am indebted to Prof Dr Gerhard Fingerlin for the knowledge and information about the new Hüfingen phalera. He was so kind as to allow me to present this marvellous object in my lecture in Klaipeda. Many thanks also to Monika Weber, from the Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum in Mainz, for the graphics of this article and Andrew Brown for the corrections of my English text.

Author’s English revised by Andrew Brown

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Why was the equestrian saint popular in the female world? A conclusion

The distribution of the motif of the victorious equestrian continued in the regions north of the Alps in the late sixth and seventh century AD. This was the time, when in the territories of the Franks and the Alamans the process of Christianisation happened. Of course this was a long process which was even in the eight century AD not completed in all rural regions. It was not only a religious change but also (or more) connected with political organisations. The emergence of Christian symbols in daily life of higher social groups was opposed by non-Christian symbols of other but also higher social groups (Quast 2002, p.273ff).

The equestrian saint must have been known as Christian content because it was used in ecclesiastic contexts. Firstly, it arrived north of the Alps with the Mediterranean warrior’s equipment, but there may be other “mediums” e.g. like textiles (c.f. Fingerlin 1974, p.620 with footnote 100). Nevertheless, the motif was very quickly transformed into the female world. This does not mean that women prefer Christianity while men remain with their pre-Christian beliefs. If we are looking at grave furniture, e.g. to other objects of the “Lombardic horizon”, the foil-crosses, we get different information: they were used more often in male graves (Christlein 1975, esp. p.79 with fig. 5). However, this was an act of showing “wealth” during the funeral. The demonstration in daily life seems to exemplify a difference in mentality between men in women in Merovingian period.

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Gräslund (1997) had shown that in the Viking period Birka Christianity was preferred by women because of different reasons.
References


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MEROVINGIŲ LAIKOTARPIO RAITELIŲ ATVAIZDAI

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Santrauka

Merovingų laikotarpio (apie 450–750 m.) figūrės puošvija yra labai reta. Šių dienų Prancūzijos, Belhosijos, Nyderlandų, Liuksemburgo ir Vokietijos teritorijoje žinoma dešimtys tūkstančių kapų, bet rasta labai mažai figūrinės puošbos pavyzdžių. Bet per paskutinių V a. ketvirtį kažkas pasikeitė: didžiulės kiekis daiktų – net ginkluotės: ietigalių, šarvų, šalmų, sudarytų iš siaurų pailgų plokštelių, diržų, balnakilkų ir žirgo aprangos
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Merovingian Period Equestrians in Figural Art


Tačiau įdomiausia yra šventojo raitelio motyvo transformacija nuo kario žirgo aprangos detalės į moterų pasaulį: papuošalus ir amuletus. Šiaip ar taip, Viduržemio jūros regiono šventojo raitelio motyvas tapo populiariausiu VII a. moterų drabužių detale (7 pav.). Motyvo populiarumą ir „pritaikymo pakopas“ puikiai rodo rodos įvairios VII a. seges (4 pav.). Bet ne tik ant segių šventasis raitelis tapo populiariu atvaizdu, dar jis įsibūrė ant vadinamųjų kiauraraščių ornamentinių diskų (7 pav.).

Net jei šventasis raitelis labai greitai išnyko iš vyrų pasaulio, jis netampa tik moterų pasaulio dalimi. Kaip krikščioniškosios ikonografijos dalis jis, žinoma, išplinta merovingų bažnytiniame mene (pvz., Ennabeureno reliktacijos; Homhauzeno bažnyčios presbiterijos baliustrada).

Labai toli, Skandinavijoje, raitelio su ietimi motyvas buvo naudojamas tik vyrų pasaulelyje, būtent ant Vendel ir Valsgärde šalmų, abu iš Upplando regiono (Švedija), o šimtmečius prieš tai – dar brakteatų puošybai. Labai tikėtina, kad įvaizdis turėjo kitą (ne krikščionišką) prasmę ir buvo visuomenės elito išskirtinis simbolis.

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