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THE SIGN OF THE CROSS ON THE EARLY MEDIEVAL AXES – A SYMBOL OF POWER, MAGIC OR RELIGION?

INTRODUCTION

The tradition of adorning of weapons goes back into the distant past. In the early Middle Ages people also tried to make their weapons look impressive. Among numerous motifs used to decorate swords, spears, spurs and others military accessories, a special position is held by the sign of the cross (Kurasiński 2006). The main aim of this paper is the analysis of a group of early medieval axes marked with this sign and discovered in the territory of Europe. Then, it would be explained why this holy symbol was put on such a murderous weapon as the axe.¹

Among several dozens of ornamented early medieval axes, the group decorated with the signs of the cross is not very impressive. The general number of all the artefacts which are known to the author does not surpass 30 specimens. The geographical distribution of this kind of axes is very wide, but, what is interesting, the majority of finds are located all around the Baltic Sea and in the neighbouring territories (Fig. 1). Additionally, most of them were discovered in Scandinavia (Denmark – 3, Sweden – 7 and Norway – 2), a few axes were found in Poland (4), Finland (2) and Latvia (2), and only single specimens come from Estonia and Germany. Finds from the territory of Russia (3), however, group along the basin of the River Volga, on the route from Scandinavia to Volga Bulgaria. An isolated find comes from Bulgaria, but in scholarship it is connected with Northern Europe and the Viking culture as well.

In comparison to the total number of early medieval axes found in the territory of Europe, the artefacts marked with the sign of the cross are very rare. It is clearly visible for example in Poland, where over 900 battle-axes and axes are known from the period of the 6th–the 1st half of the 13th cent.,² but only 27 specimens were ornamented (Kotowicz 2011). Among these artefacts only four were marked with the sign of the cross. It is only 0.45% of all the axes discovered in Poland.

The chronology of this group of items encompasses almost the whole early medieval period. The earliest specimen with this type of ornamentation comes from Horland in Norway. This axe was excavated in a grave which can be dated to the 7th–8th cent. (Paulsen 1956, p. 90, fig. 33:a). The youngest axe is still unpublished. It is preserved in the collection of the Museum of the Polish Army in Warsaw and can be probably dated to the 13th cent., since its provenance is unknown (No. 34 MWP). What is interesting, however, most decorated axes are dated to the 10th and especially the 11th cent.

Unfortunately, not all of the mentioned finds were documented in a correct way. In addition, for 10 of them only the find place is known, without any data on the archaeological context.³ One axe, from Talsu in Latvia, was dredged from Lake Vilcumuiža together

¹ The author is indebted to Mr Yuriy Kuleshov and Sergej Kainov from Moskva (Russia) and Mr Andrzej Janowski from Szczecin (Poland) for their help with accessing hardly available literature.

² Based on data collected by the author for his forthcoming Ph.D. dissertation *Early medieval axes from the territory of Poland*.

³ These are axes from Hejde, Husby, Lund, Närke and Prästgård in Sweden; the vicinity of Płock and the Museum of the Polish Army in Poland; Ulyanovsk in Russia; Hiie in Estonia; Utajärvi in Finland.

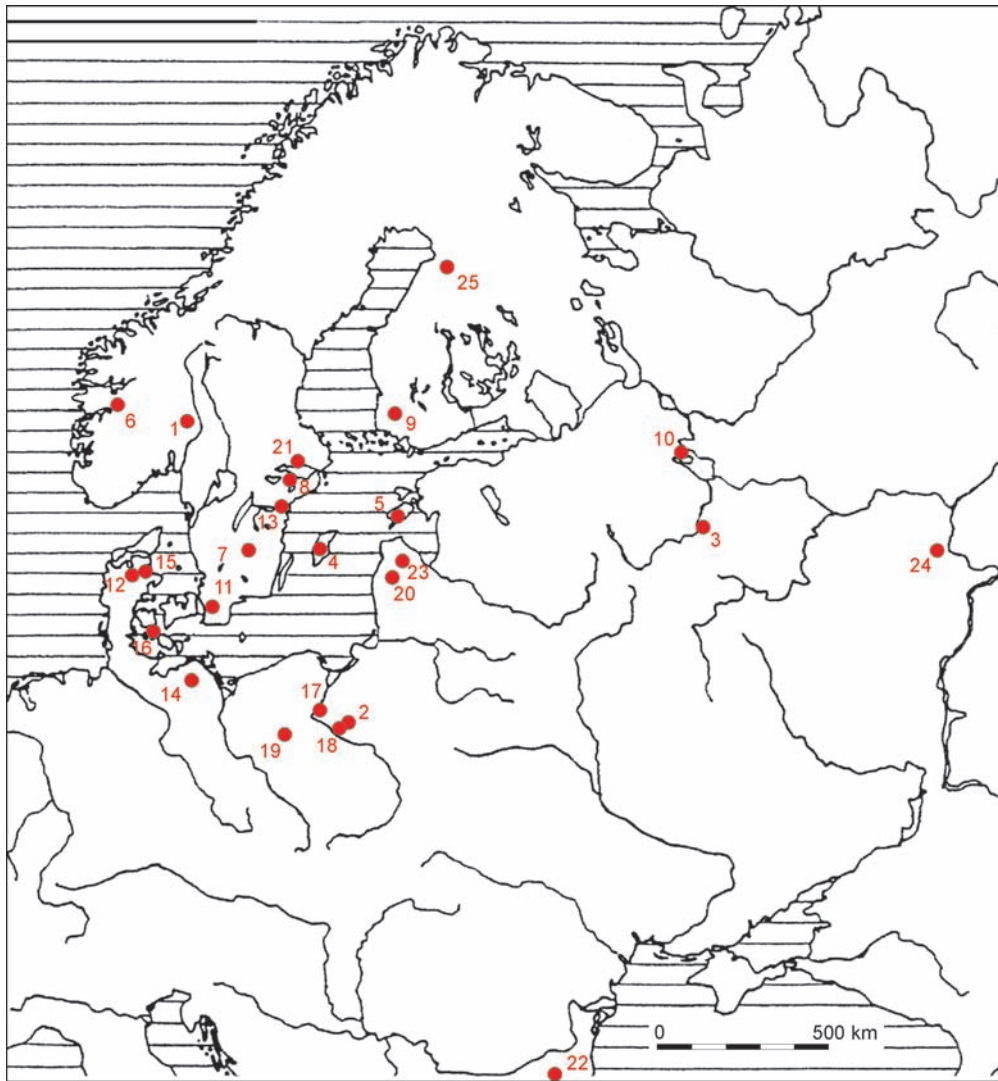


Fig. 1. The location of early medieval axes with the sign of the cross in Europe: 1 – Alm Østre, Norway; 2 – Blichowo, Poland; 3 – Gorodishche, Russia; 4 – Hejde, Gotland, Sweden; 5 – Hiie, Estonia; 6 – Horland, Norway; 7 – Hultsjö, Sweden; 8 – Husby, Sweden; 9 – Köyliö, Finland; 10 – Lukovec, Russia; 11 – Lund, Sweden; 12 – Mammen, Denmark; 13 – Närke, Sweden; 14 – Neu-Nieköhr, Germany; 15 – Over Hornbæk, Denmark; 16 – Pederstrup, Denmark; 17 – Pień, Poland; 18 – surroundings of Płock, Poland; 19 – Poznań-Luboń, Poland; 20 – Raņķi, Latvia; 21 – Skensta, Sweden; 22 – Stan, Bulgaria; 23 – Talsu, Latvia; 24 – Ulyanovsk (Simbirsk), Russia; 25 – Utajärvi, Finland. Drawing by P. N. Kotowicz

with 141 other specimens, which were deposited there as a sacrifice (Kazakevičius 1996, p. 234). Three come from strongholds (Lukovec in Russia, Neu-Nieköhr in Germany and Stan in Bulgaria). 12 were discovered in (often richly equipped) graves.⁴

We know several kinds of representations of the crosses. The most popular and the simplest are Greek (five specimens), Saint Andrew's (saltire – three specimens), and Latin crosses (four specimens), the cross potent (four specimens), the Celtic cross and

the swastika (two specimens). More complex motifs, such as the cross pattée and the sign of the Rurik Dynasty are present on single artefacts. In fact, none of these symbols is connected with pagan or Christian symbolism (besides the sign of the Rurik Dynasty); it is difficult, however, to indicate the artefacts from the pagan period.

According to P. Paulsen's division, we can distinguish a few techniques of decoration appearing on this group of axes, such as punching, engraving and inlay in bronze, silver or gold. In the same set, three axes with open blades can be found. They were decorated with the signs of the Latin cross. In particular, one specimen had a little hole in the shape of the Greek cross.

⁴ Alm Østre and Horland in Norway; Blichowo, Pień and Poznań-Luboń in Poland; Gorodishche in Russia; Raņķi (?) in Latvia; Köyliö in Finland; Mammen, Pederstrup and Randers-Over Hornbaek in Denmark; Skensta (?) in Sweden.

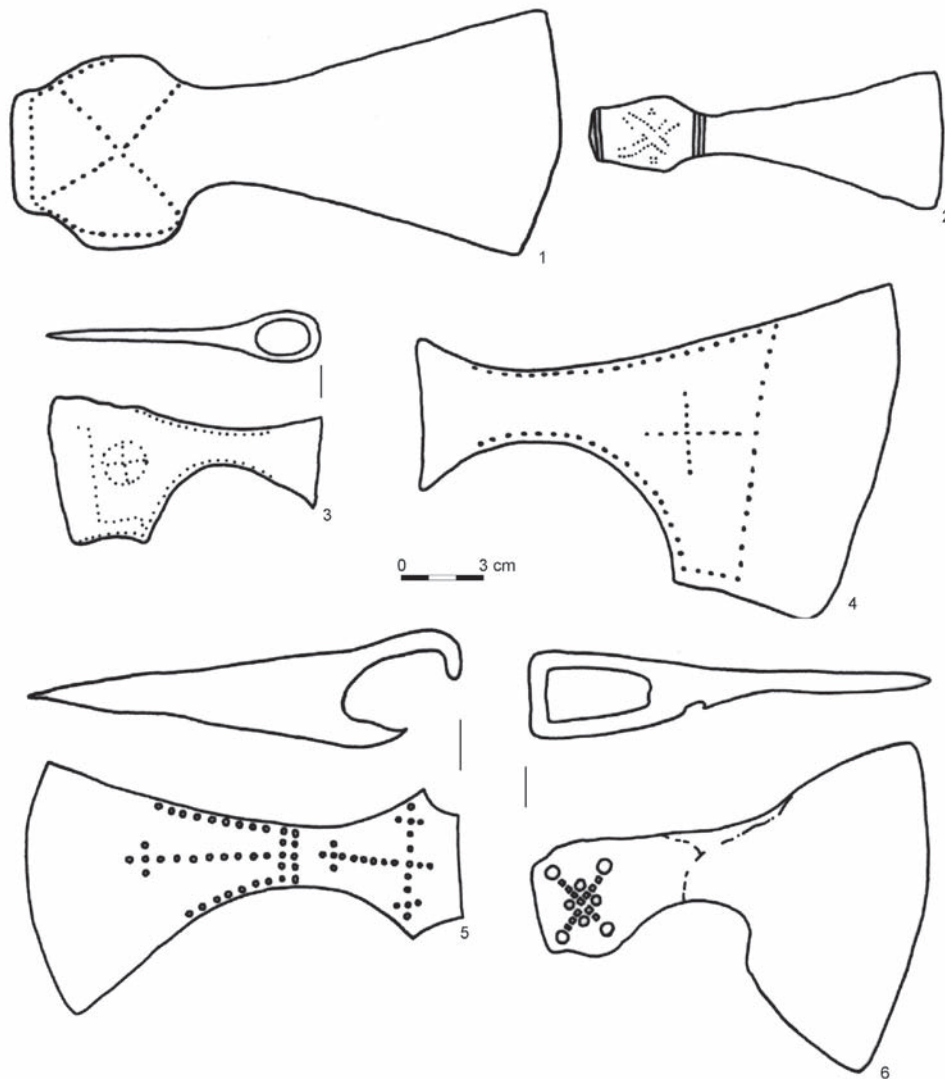


Fig. 2. Early medieval axes with the sign of the cross made in punching technique: 1 – Horland, Norway (after Paulsen 1956, fig. 33:a); 2 – Alm Østre, Norway (after Paulsen 1956, fig. 33:b); 3 – Raņķi, Latvia (after Paulsen 1956, fig. 34:a); 4 – Talsu, Latvia (after Paulsen 1956, fig. 34:c); 5 – Neu-Nieköhr, Germany (after Paulsen 1956, fig. 34:h; Heindel 1992, fig. 13:b); 6 – Hiie, Estonia (after Paulsen 1956, fig. 36:a)

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS – TECHNIQUE, SHAPE AND CHRONOLOGY

Punching is a simpler technique, which was used in six cases (Fig. 2). Among them there is an axe (Fig. 2:1) representing Type A according to J. Petersen's typology (1919). It was excavated in a 7th–8th cent. grave in Horland (Norway). The axe was discovered with a single-edged sword, a sickle and a socketed axe. The large Saint Andrew's cross was punched on its shafthole (Paulsen 1956, p. 90, fig. 33:a). Another axe is a small one which belongs to Type K according to J. Petersen. It comes from Norway (Fig. 2:2). It was discovered in a 10th-cent. barrow grave in Alm Østre with a rich set of artefacts, including: a stone vessel, two bosses, a sword, a bit, two stir-

rups and a gaming piece. Similarly to the previous case, the saltire cross was put on the shafthole of the axe (Paulsen 1956, p. 90, fig. 33:b). Two more axes come from Latvia. Both can be classified as Type IVA according to A. N. Kirpičnikov (1986). The first of them was probably discovered in a cemetery close to Raņķi (Fig. 2:3), with two axes, a sword, two spearheads, a sickle and a spur. This artefact, marked with the Celtic cross on its blade, is dated to the end of the 11th and the beginning of the 12th cent. (Paulsen 1956, p. 92, fig. 34:a). The other specimen was dredged from Lake Vilkuņģi in Talsi (Fig. 2:4). Also in this case, the Latin cross was put on

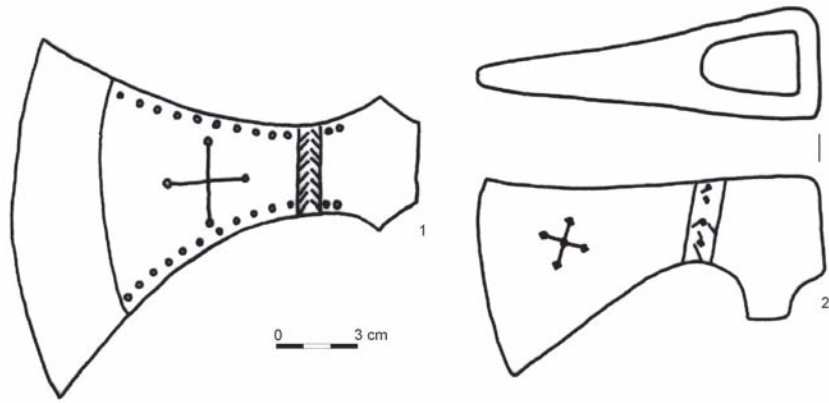


Fig. 3. Early medieval axes with the sign of the cross made in punching and engraving techniques: 1 – Husby, Sweden (after Paulsen 1956, fig. 34:b); 2 – Utajärvi, Finland (after Paulsen 1956, fig. 36:d)

the blade of the axe. This artefact is dated to the end of the 11th cent. (Paulsen 1956, p. 91, fig. 34:c). An 11th (?) cent. axe decorated with two Latin crosses (on the shafthole and the blade) as well was found in the stronghold in Neu-Nieköhr, Germany (Fig. 2:5). This specimen is close to Type L according to J. Petersen's typology (Paulsen 1956, p. 97–98, fig. 34:h; Heindel 1992, p. 30, fig. 13:b). In this group of artefacts, the axe from Hiie in Estonia is the youngest

(Fig. 2:6). It is decorated with the saltire cross on the shafthole. The axe, based on the chronology of the sword which was found in the same place, is dated to the beginning of the 12th cent⁵ (Paulsen 1956, p. 94, fig. 36:a). As we can see, this type of ornamenta-

⁵ This kind of dating can be very doubtful because the artefact's form and asymmetry of the blade (which resembles an adze) refer to specimens which appeared in Europe as late as in the 13th cent. (cf. Głosek 1996).

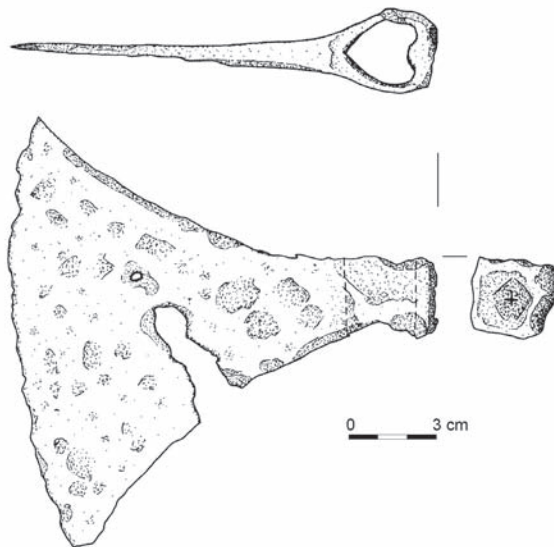


Fig. 4. The axe from Blichowo, Poland with the sign made in engraving technique. Photo and drawing by P. N. Kotowicz; redrawing by A. Sabat

tion appears in numerous territories and over a broad period of time.

Two axes have signs of the cross made in a combined technique: punching and engraving. On the blade of the 11th–12th cent. axe from Husby (Sweden), belonging to Type M according to J. Petersen's typology (Fig. 3:1), the Greek cross is engraved. It is topped with punched dots (Paulsen 1956, p. 91, fig. 34:b). Analogical decoration can be seen on an early medieval specimen as well (Fig. 3:2), which is similar to Type V according to S. I. Коцкуринa (Кочкуринa 1982, p. 145, fig. 32:4, 7). It was discovered in Utajärvi, Finland (Paulsen 1956, p. 97, fig. 36:d).

A small group of axes are specimens, on which the signs of the Greek cross were engraved with a sharp tool. Their small number is so exceptional because early medieval axes which were decorated in the same technique represent the largest group among all

ornamented European specimens. Both of them come from Poland. The first one belongs to Type M according to J. Petersen's typology and was discovered at the end of the 19th cent. in the inhumation cemetery in Blichowo (Fig. 4). The axe was excavated in the male grave No. 6, dated to the mid–11th cent. Apart from it, a wooden bucket with hoops was discovered in the grave (Rutkowski 1906, pp. 41–42, tabl. IV; Kordala 1999, pp. 106–108, fig. 3:a; 2006, p. 39, cat. 3, tab. 24:1; Kurasiński 2005, pp. 200, 203, fig. 3:4). The cross was put on an isolated field, in the shape of a rhombus on the back side of the hammer. The signs of the cross visible on the second specimen were engraved on both sides of the blade. Unfortunately, we are not sure whether these axes were initially inlaid. None of them bears traces of any kind of such work; it is possible, however, that the grooves were originally inlaid with bronze or silver wire. The

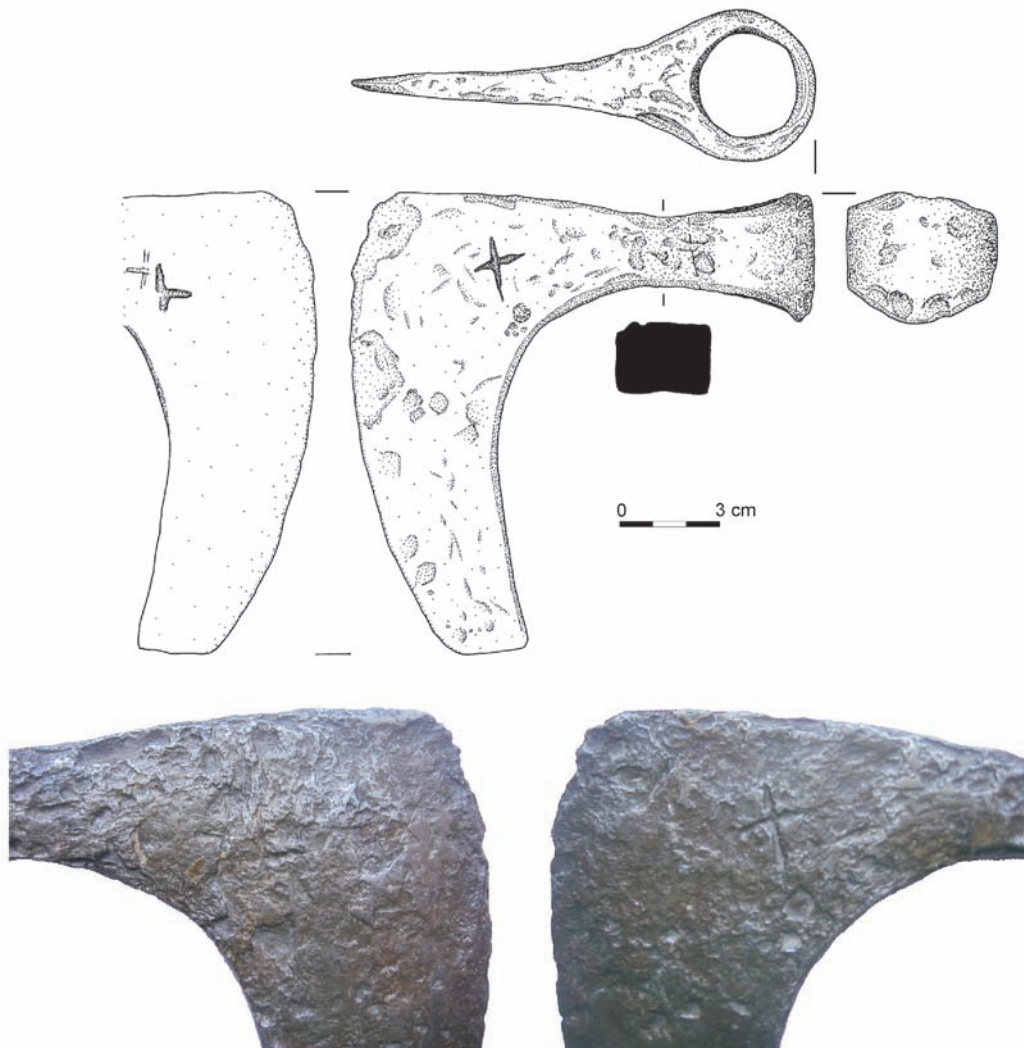


Fig. 5. The axe from the collection of the Polish Army Museum in Warsaw. Photo and drawing by P. N. Kotowicz; redrawing by A. Sabat

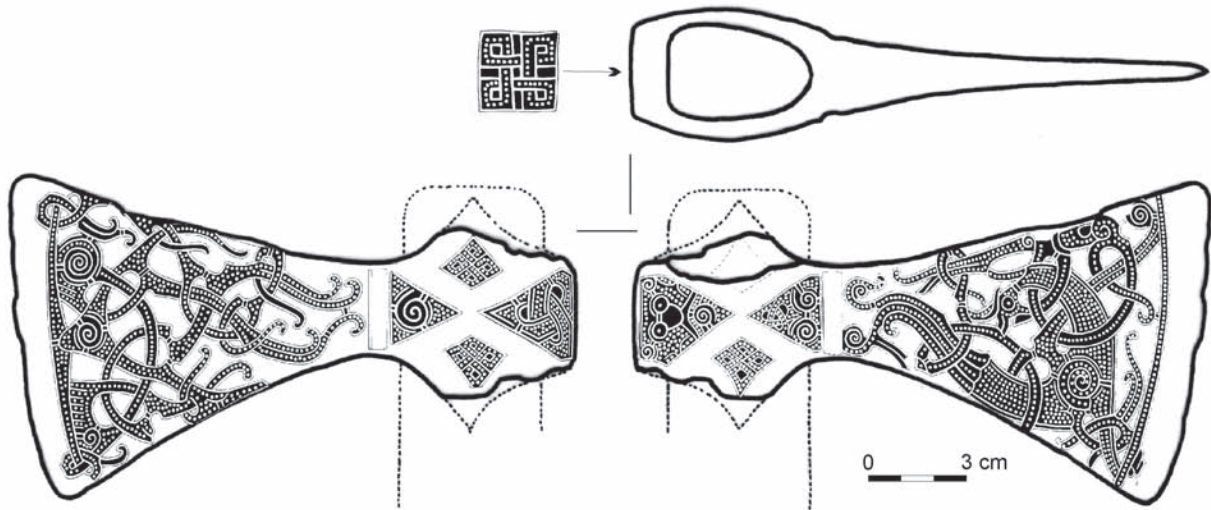


Fig. 6. Early medieval axe from Mammen, Denmark (after Vellev 1991, fig. 16)

other one (of unknown provenance) is preserved in the collection of the Museum of the Polish Army in Warsaw⁶ (Fig. 5). This specimen can be dated to the 13th cent.,⁷ and decoration of the Greek cross was put on both sides of the blade. On its right side, a trace of one more sign is notable, which in all probability resulted from an unsuccessful attempt at ornamenting the specimen.

Undoubtedly, the most prestigious axes decorated with the inlay technique belong to a group of axes defined by P. Paulsen as *Prunkaxten*. The axe discovered in a chamber grave in Mammen (Denmark) is the finest example of this spectacular group (Fig. 6). This artefact, belonging to Type H/(K) in the classification of J. Petersen, was deposited in the chamber grave after 970/971 (Andersen 1991), together with another axe, spangles of gold foil, strap-ends, a cauldron and other smaller items (Iversen, Näsman 1991). The axe is decorated on both faces with inlaid silver and brass wire, which form geometrical, zoomorphic and floral motifs. The specimen was so significant that it became the determinant of the ornament style from the end of the 10th and the beginning of the 11th cent. (Fuglesang 1991). On the side parts of the shaft-hole and the head of the axe symbols of a stylized swastika were placed. It was chiefly a characteristic symbol of pagan beliefs, but it was also popular

in early medieval Christian art (Paulsen 1956, pp. 101–107, fig. 40–41; Vellev 1991, fig. 16).

The following axes, in fact battle-axes, are less spectacular. They are ornamented with silver inlay and belong to the 11th cent. Type Lunov according to Peter Paulsen's typology. One of them (Fig. 7:1) came from Lund in Denmark (Strömberg 1953; Paulsen 1956, pp. 159–163, fig. 85:a–b), and the other one (Fig. 7:2) was accidentally discovered before the Second World War in the inhumation cemetery in Luboń near Poznań in Poland (Rajewski 1937, pp. 84–85, Plate XI:2; Nadolski 1954, p. 43, footnote 27; tab. B/72, Plate XV:4; Paulsen 1956, p. 158, fig. 84; Kara 1992, p. 169, fig. 1). What is interesting, they both display the sign of an identical cross, in the type of the cross potent. The battle-axe from Lund bears this sign on the sides of the shaft-hole. On the specimen from Poznań-Luboń, however, the sign has been recently discovered, and it is placed on the back side of the hammer. As a matter of fact, those specimens differ in details of ornamentation. The fact, however, that they bear the same kind of sign of the cross may indicate that they were made in the same workshop, certainly in the Slavic environment. The bearded axe discovered during excavations in 1984–1985 in the inhumation cemetery in Danish Over Hornbæk is also similar to Type Lunov (Fig. 7:3). The axe was found with an iron knife in one of the graves. On the shaft-hole there is a visible stylized Greek cross made of silver (Iversen, Näsman 1991, p. 46; Nielsen 1991; Pedersen 2002, p. 31). One more original battle-axe with rich silver decoration (Fig. 7:4) comes from the stronghold in the village of Stan (Bulgaria). This specimen, dated to the end

⁶ Unpublished. No. 34 MWP. It could be published in this article by courtesy of Prof. Janusz Cisek, the Director of the Museum.

⁷ Close analogies to our artefacts are the axes found in the stronghold from the 2nd half of the 13th cent. in Raciąż, Tuchola Distr., Poland (Świątkiewicz 2010, figs. 12:3, 13:1).

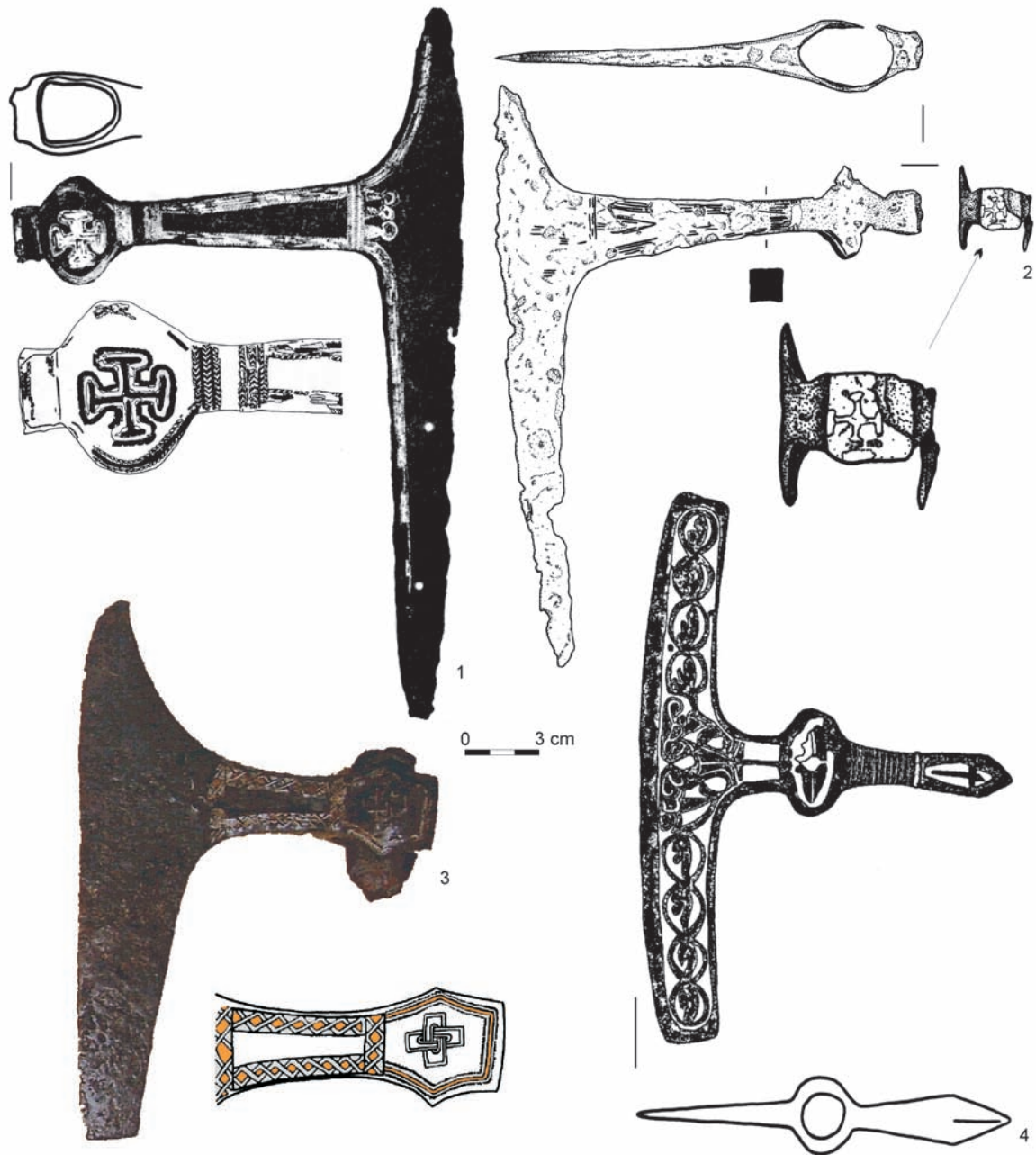


Fig. 7. Early medieval axes with the sign of the cross made in inlay technique: 1 – Lund, Sweden (after Strömberg 1953, figs 1–2); 2 – Poznań-Luboń, Poland (drawing by P. N. Kotowicz; redrawing by A. Sabat); 3 – Over Hornbæk, Denmark (after Nielsen 1991, p. 10); 4 – Stan, Bulgaria (after Ђотоѡ 2004, Plate LI:587)

of the 10th or the early 11th cent., has a broad blade and an elongated hammer. Among various, mainly floral decorative motifs, signs of Latin crosses were created on the hammer of the battle-axe (Yotov 2003, p. 25; 2007, p. 324, fig. 3:b; Ђотоѡ 2004, pp. 98–99, cat. 587, fig. 54, tabl. LI:587).

An exceptional ornamentation was put on an axe which belongs to Type IV according to A. N. Kirpičnikov. It was found in Pień, Poland (Fig. 8:1). The axe was discovered in a chamber grave of

a *maturus* age man. The grave was richly equipped (apart from axes, there were also: a wooden bucket, a bronze bowl, a wooden vessel, a whetstone, an iron knife and fragments of silk textile) and it can be dated to the end of the 10th or the 1st half of the 11th cent. It is probably related to Northern and North-Eastern Europe. Ornamentation in the form of inlaid sheet stripes made probably of silver is notable on the surface of one of the axe's sides in the blade's upper part and on the set traces. The X-ray analysis

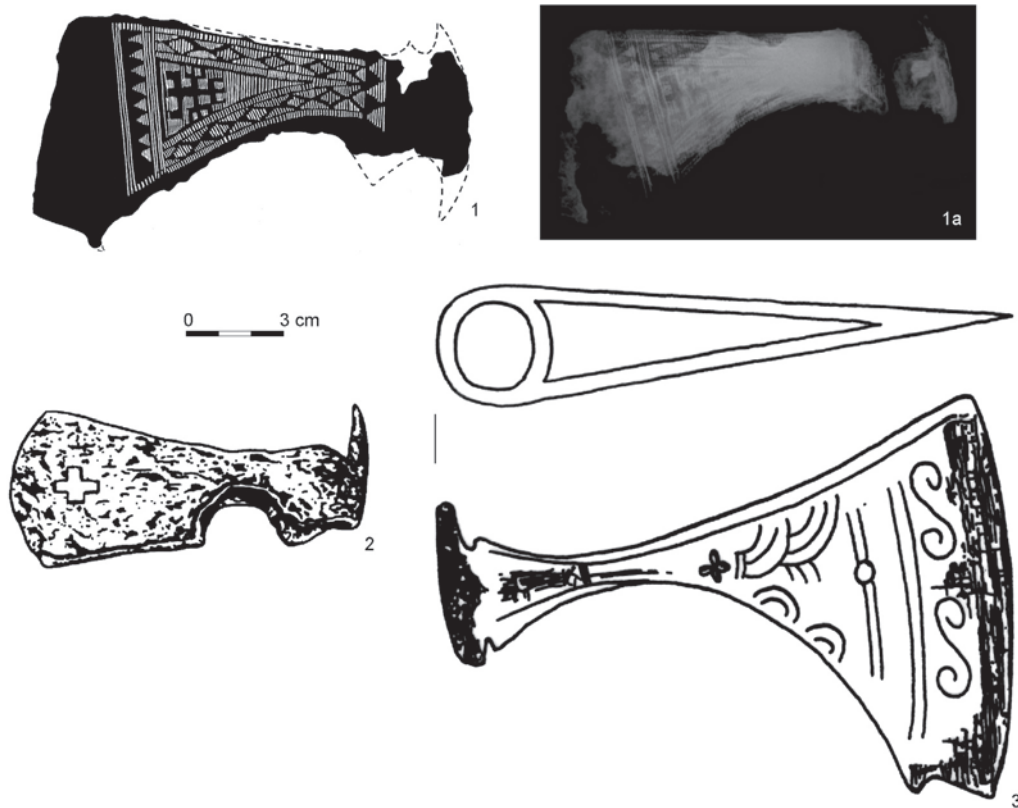


Fig. 8. Early medieval axes with the sign of the cross made in inlay technique: 1–1a – Pień, Poland and x-ray photo of the axe (after Janowski, forthcoming, fig. 3–4); 2 – Gorodishche, Russia (after Спицын 1905, pl. 391); 3 – Lukovec, Russia (after Курдашов, Вашенькин 1999, fig. 2:14)

demonstrated that both surfaces of the axe's iron part were ornamented. The central part of the composition is occupied by a pattern made of an unornamented space in the shape of some kind of the cross potent. Its each arm is topped with a reversed E letter (Drozd, Janowski 2007; Janowski 2010). The inlaid crosses – in these cases, in the form of Greek cross – are shown on the blades of two more Type IV axes, found in the territory of Northern Russia. The first of them (Fig. 8:2) was discovered in 1853, in the 11th-cent. barrow grave in Gorodishche (Спицын 1905, Plate 391; Кирпичников 1966, cat. 275). The other one comes from Lukovec (Fig. 8:3) and was found in the stronghold dated back to the 2nd half of the 10th – the 11th cent. (Курдашов, Вашенькин 1999, p. 68, fig. 2:14).

The signs of the cross made in the inlay technique are known from Type M axes too. Symbolic representation of the silver inlaid Latin cross was put on the neck of the axe from Skensta in Sweden (Fig. 9:1), which was discovered with a sword, a spearhead and burnt bones. The axe is dated to the 11th cent. (Paulsen 1956, p. 113, fig. 48). A more complex ornamentation can be seen on the axe from Köyliö in

Finland (Fig. 9:2), discovered in a grave (Leppäaho 1964, p. 128, Plate 62:a–b). A silver cross with wide arms – the cross pattée – was put in the central part of composition which covered the blade. A silver inlaid Celtic cross – unfortunately, poorly preserved – is visible on the axe of the same type, found in the 19th cent. in Hulstjöö, Sweden (Fig. 9:3–3a). The specimen is dated to the 11th cent. (Paulsen 1956, pp. 109, 111, fig. 45, 49; Iversen, Näsman 1991, p. 46).

The miniature axe from the surroundings of Ulyanovsk (Simbirsk) in Russia is a particular specimen which belongs to the *Prunkaxt* group (Fig. 10). It was discovered in 1913. The axe, made of bronze with the iron blade, is dated to the 12th cent., on the basis of the artistic style of three identical signs, placed on its blade. The signs, connected with the Rurik Dynasty, are schematic tridents (*tryzubs*), with their middle arms being topped with crosses. Two of them were made of silver in inlay technique, and the third was engraved. In the neighbourhood of the sign inlaid on the side part of the blade there is a Christian inscription and a small Greek cross. The axe belongs to Type III according to A. N. Кирпичников (Спицын 1915, pp. 222–223, fig. 3; Городцов 1926; Новосадский 1930;

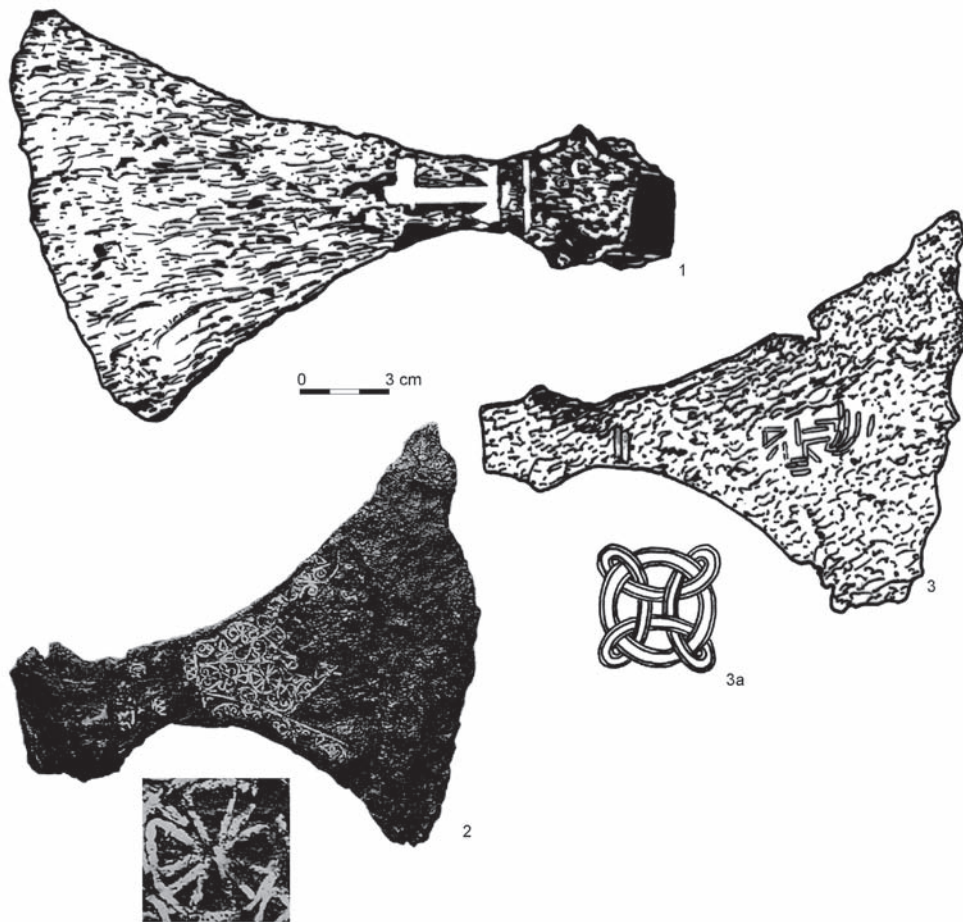


Fig. 9. Early medieval axes with the sign of the cross made in inlay technique: 1 – Skensta, Sweden (after Paulsen 1956, fig. 48); 2 – Kõyliö, Finland (after Leppäaho 1964, Plate 62:a-b); 3 – Hultsjö, Sweden; 3a – reconstruction of the cross on the axe from Hultsjö (after Paulsen 1956, fig. 45, 49)

Paulsen 1956, pp. 138–145, fig. 74; Кирпичников 1966, p. 36, Plate XIX:2; Kirpičnikov 1986, p. 92, fig. 14; Мусин 2005, pp. 163–164).

It is worth mentioning that three Type M axes with open blades are decorated in their inner parts with incised Latin crosses (Fig. 11:1–3). The axes come from Pederstrup (Denmark; Brønstedt 1936, pp. 181–182, fig. 91; Paulsen 1956, p. 67, fig. 25: c – he dates them to the 2nd half of the 10th cent.), Närke (Sweden; Paulsen 1956, p. 67, fig. 25:b) and Hejde (Gotland, Sweden – Thunmark-Nylén 1995a, Plate 260:5; 1995b, p. 312). For only one of them, the one from Pederstrup, a context of discovery is known. The specimen was found in a barrow grave with a horse-shoe shaped brooch and iron rivets, and it can be dated to the end of the 10th cent. (Brønstedt 1936, pp. 181–182). Additionally, from the area of Płock⁸ in Poland (Fig. 11:4) one more axe is known.

⁸ The axe was probably discovered in the inhumation cemetery (Kurasiński 2005, p. 200, tab. 1:6, ryc. 3:5).

It is remarkable for untypical location and technique of making the cross (Nadolski 1954, Plate XIV:1). On the blade of an 11th-cent. Type M axe a small Greek cross (1.4×1.7 cm) was incised. It is of uncertain function, either utilitarian or decorative one. It is important that crosses were put not only on the surfaces of the axes. A silver ferrule survived on the shaft of the Type M axe (Fig. 11:5) from the 12th-cent. barrow grave No. 1 in Kalinovshchyna (Northern Russia). It is topped by the cross pattée (Мусин 1999, p. 135, fig. 2:15; 2001, fig. 3:15; 2005, p. 165).

It is noticeable that the symbols in the shape of the cross usually decorate axes with rich silver inlay. Such axes are mainly dated to the 11th–12th cent. Artefacts with engraving or punching are much more rare. Sometimes the decoration appears in a different form, as in the case of the axes with open blades. It is worth mentioning that J. Petersen's Type M axes were often adorned in this way (9 of 27 artefacts). They are regarded as the determinants of Scandinavian culture in the Viking Age.



Fig. 10. The miniature axe from Ulyanovsk, Russia (after Спицын 1915, fig. 3)

PAGAN OR CHRISTIAN SYMBOL?

The group of artefacts dealt with in this paper is difficult to interpret, due to their wide territorial distribution, a variety of signs and vast chronology of the symbols. The main problem is how to answer the question whether the symbols depicted on the axes are connected with pagan or Christian users. Additionally, it is hard to say whether they were used as magical signs, were placed on weapons in order to protect the owner from some kind of threats, or used as the symbol of the new religion. All of these questions are related to the problem of the meaning of the axe as a symbol of power, rule or social status.

Theoretically, the chronology should give us the answer on the question whether a given axe can be connected with the “pagan period” or maybe with the “Christian period.” As a consequence, this should explain who the user of this weapon was and for what purpose the sign of the cross was placed on its blade. In practice, this is very difficult or even impossible to establish. What is more, it is connected with different periods of time, in which the nations were converted to Christianity in particular regions of the Baltic Sea basin. For example, the official baptism of Denmark, Poland or Kievan Rus’ took place in the 2nd half of the 10th cent. The conversion of the Baltic nations, however (Latvia, Estonia) did not take place until the 13th cent. We need to emphasise the fact that even after the conversion the traditional vision of the

world coexisted with Christianity for a long time. In the analyzed regions it lasted till the end of the 12th cent. In the territories where Christianity appeared at the end of the Early Middle Ages, such as Finland, Latvia or Estonia, this process was much longer. Consequently, we can accept both interpretations for such axes, particularly as these special artefacts did not need to be manufactured in the place where they were discovered. They may have been transported to distant places by traders, because of military conflicts (such as crusades against the pagan Baltic nations), dynastic connections, or foreign colonization. The axes from historical Denmark, such as the specimens from Lund and Over Hornbæk may be good examples. These, according to some researchers, probably originated in the south-eastern and southern Baltic areas (Pedersen 2002, p. 31). The same may be true for the afore-mentioned Type M axes, which are connected in all Europe with Scandinavian influences.

Practically, only one specimen (from Horland) can be connected with a pagan Scandinavian user, due to its chronology and its particular shape. Undoubtedly, the Christian character can be assumed for the axe discovered in the surroundings of Ulyanovsk (Simbirsk), where the cross was connected with the dynastic signs of the Rurik family. Additionally, near the signs Christian inscriptions were engraved: IC XC NA – Isos Christos Nika (Jesus Christ Conquers)

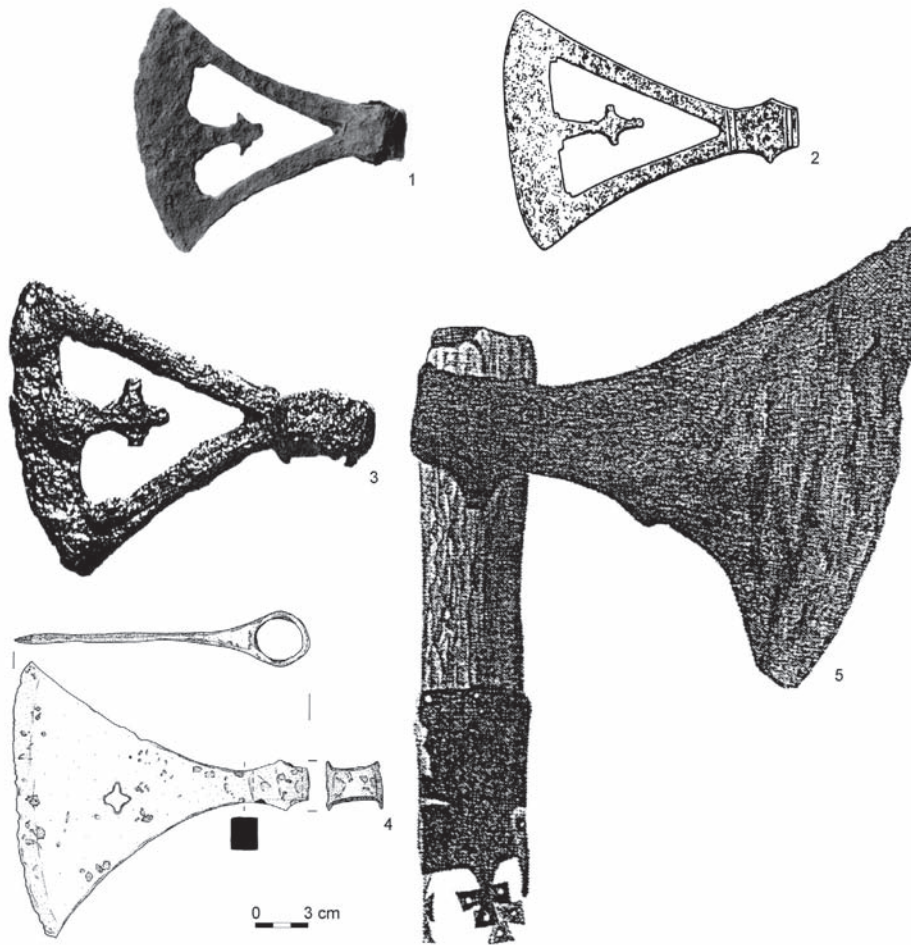


Fig. 11. Early medieval axes with blades (1–4) and shaft (5) decorated with the signs of the cross: 1 – Hejde, Gotland (after Thunmark-Nylén 1995a, Plate 260:5); 2 – Närke, Sweden (after Paulsen 1956, fig. 25:c); 3 – Pederstrup, Denmark (Paulsen 1956, fig. 25:b); 4 – surroundings of Płock, Poland (drawing by P. N. Kotowicz; redrawing by A. Sabat); 5 – Kalinovshchina, Russia (after Мусин 1999, fig. 2:15)

and IC XC – Isos Christos (Jesus Christ). According to the Russian researchers, this axe, dated to the 12th cent., is a product of a Kievan workshop (Городцов 1926, pp. 141–148), which functioned at the ducal court. The others are more questionable. Even the signs of hooked crosses – swastikas – which are identified with the old order in general and can be seen on the axe from Mammen, cannot be interchangeably connected with the pagan world. The ornamentation on the blade of this axe can be explained in

two ways. The vegetative motif on the side of the blade can be read as the pagan tree Yggdrasil or as the Christian Tree of Life. However, the bird on the other side could either be the bird Gyldenkamme of the Nordic myths or the legendary Phoenix which could be a symbol of Christ's resurrection.⁹ The other hypothesis can be supported by an assumption that the axe was made in a royal workshop of King Harald Bluetooth, the newly converted ruler of Denmark (Iversen, Näsman 1991, p. 46).

CONCLUSIONS

The explanation of the increasing number of the axes marked with the sign of the cross in the 11th and 12th cent. could be connected with a general rise of significance of the axe, both in military activity and in the symbolic domain. In the 10th cent. in the northern part of our continent, especially after Christianisation,

the number of axes in graves increases significantly. They often belonged to persons of lower social position. As a rule, they were the only military equipment

⁹ The appearance of pagan motifs in Christian symbolism among newly converted nations is a common method to accept easier the new religion (see Quast 2002).

of the dead.¹⁰ According to the opinion of U. Näsman, *so many graves with an axe as the only weapon show that this was the most common weapon, probably not in war, but adapted to the funeral ceremony as a symbol of dead warrior's social position and mainly character* (Näsman 1991, p. 180; Wołoszyn 2006, p. 599; see also Trotzig 1985; Pedersen 2002, pp. 29–30; Mäntylä 2005).

The rise of significance of the axe as a symbol of the warrior's profession is clearly visible based on the example of the so-called Varangian Guard of the Byzantine emperors. As it is stressed by most researchers, the axe did not play an important role in the Byzantine army. T. Koliás thinks that its appearance and greater use in the Byzantine army was a manifestation of external influences. He also connects its existence in the infantry's equipment with the attack of the Rus' warriors on Constantinople in 860 (Koliás 1988, p. 163). Later data about the axe in Byzantine sources are mainly connected with foreign mercenaries. Therefore, an assumption was made in scholarship that the axe had been generally unknown to the Byzantines and it had been used by mercenaries¹¹ (Schreiner 1981, pp. 234–236).

In the course of time, especially after the quelling of the rebellion of Bardas Fokas by Emperor Basil II the Great, in which the participation of the Rus' warriors was very important, the Emperor's guard began to assume a Varangian character. The membership in this guard is defined in several sources (among others Alexias, Nicéphore) as “axe-bearers” – *πελεκυφόροι*. The axes fulfilled a significant ceremonial role here. Guardsmen were holding them in the right hand, leaning the blade against the left wrist. When the Emperor came, they brought up the axes to lean them on their right shoulders. During the time of the name-day of the Emperor the Varangians saluted him and banged their axes, which emitted rhythmical sound (Koliás 1988, pp. 166–167; Wołoszyn 2006, pp. 598–599). In this case, the axe is a symbol of the guardsmen's profession and a proof of their membership in a social-profession group. What kind of axes were used

by the Varangian Guard? A recently published Byzantine ivory plaque from the 10th–11th cent. shows the warrior (interpreted as a Varangian guardsman) with a sword and an axe of a fan-shaped blade (Beatson 2000; D'Amato 2005, p. 42; Wołoszyn 2006, p. 599). It indicates that this sort of axes was characteristic for the Scandinavian warriors' axes of Type M according to J. Petersen.¹² This kind of axes is also held by guardsmen of the Emperor Michael the Amorian in the scene from Folio 26 of the *Scylitzes Manuscript*, which is dated to the 2nd half of the 12th cent. (Bruhn Hoffmeyer 1966, pp. 11–12, fig. 23; Grotowski 2011, pp. 424–425, footnote 281).

Most researchers state that the ornamented axes were associated with the social elite of early medieval Europe – such as the afore-mentioned Varangian Guard. They were symbols of power, rank and wealth. That was sure in the case of artefacts with inlay decoration (Pedersen 1997, p. 130). Some of them, however, such as the splendid axe from Mammen, were not made for combat purposes. This is notable for the common “usual” axe found in the Mammen grave (see Iversen, Näsman 1991, pp. 46, 48, fig. 2). Nevertheless, the signs marked by punching or engraving techniques did not need to be associated with rich owners.

A considerable symbolic and military role was fulfilled by the axe in early medieval communities. This is testified to by finds of miniature amulets resembling the shape of the axe. Artefacts of this type are mostly known in the territory of Rus', but they also appear in the neighbouring regions such as Scandinavia, Poland, and the Baltic countries. Several specimens are also known from Finland, Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria. The last monographic study of this kind of artefacts records 154 miniature axes, in most cases made of bronze¹³ (Kucypera, Pranke, Wadył 2010). There are different interpretations of such miniature axes. Some researchers connected them with the cult of the Slavic pagan god Perun (Даркевич 1961). It has recently been proposed,

¹⁰ This phenomenon is not a new one in Europe. It is worth mentioning the so-called *bradatica* – a favorite battle-axe of Slavonic warriors, found frequently after Christianisation in inhumation graves in the territory of the Great Moravian State (cf. Ruttkay 1982).

¹¹ The axe was of great symbolic importance in ancient Rome, whose successor was the Byzantine Empire. Worth mentioning is the custom of wearing axes in fasces by lictors following in front of the consul. It could be a proof that the tradition of wearing this kind of weapon by the Varangian Guard in front of the Emperor is of native origin.

¹² It is worth noticing that axes of this type are depicted as the weapon of guardsmen in ceremonial scenes in the *Bayeux Tapestry*, such as: bringing the news to Wilhelm the Conqueror by Guy, Count of Ponthieu and the arrival of Harold Godwinson to Edward the Confessor (Stenton 1957, fig. 12, 31; Wilson 1985, p. 225 and fig. 10–11, 28; Näsman 1991, p. 173). It can be significant proof for the high rank of warriors equipped with “Danish axes.”

¹³ The authors of this paper do not include axes made of amber (for instance see Radiņš 1992, fig. 7), which perhaps had the same symbolic connotation. They include, however, a number of small iron axes in the catalogue. These should not be treated as amulets and rather require a separate analysis.

however, that these were specific emblems which confirmed the membership of their users in ducal retinues (Makarov 1992; see also Panasiewicz, Wołoszyn 2002; Wołoszyn 2006).

There is another interesting theory that connects the miniature axes with the cult of Saint Olaf (Koktvedgaard Zeitzen 1997, p. 17; Kucypera, Pranke, Wadyl 2010, p. 119–120). The cult of this saint as the patron of traders spread in the territory of whole Northern Europe, from England to Novgorod in Rus' and to Byzantium. A principal attribute of Saint Olaf was the axe which – according to researchers – was originally the hammer, i.e., the weapon of his precursor – the pagan god Thor (Paulsen 1956, pp. 234–255, fig. 126–127; Pranke 2009; Kucypera, Pranke, Wadyl 2010, pp. 119–120). The hypothesis has recently appeared in scholarship and it suggests that the believers of Saint Olaf manifested their dedication to the patron by wearing miniature bronze axes¹⁴ (Pranke 2009). Is it possible that the same is

true for iron axes marked with crosses? It is highly probable. Particularly, this ornamentation often appears on the axes of Type M, interchangeably connected with the Viking world, or on the specimens discovered in graves, which may be associated with Scandinavian influences. It is possible that these parade axes were used by the believers of Saint Olaf. They could demonstrate their devotion by putting the crosses on the specimen associated with the attribute of the holy patron. This kind of weapon, apart from the visual effect and religious manifestation, could be considered as a magical apotropaic symbol.

All in all, the main subject of this paper appeared to be multithreaded and complicated. In addition, the axes marked with the signs of the crosses meant much more than just weapons. They fulfilled the function of insignia of authority and social rank. As a matter of fact, this process started in the pagan period, but fully developed after the conversion, when the elites wanted to strongly demonstrate their devotion to the new religion.

¹⁴ It is interesting that the signs of the cross made in punching technique usually appear on miniature axes (Paulsen 1956, fig. 97:a,c; Kucypera, Pranke, Wadyl 2010, Plate VII:1–2).

translated by Iwona Kotowicz and Grzegorz Żabiński

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