

The Amulets of German Merovingian Aristocracy

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The amulets referred to in this paper were found mainly in the eastern part of the Frankish tribal lands. There, in the Rhineland, Christianity did not hold as much ground in the 6th and 7th centuries as during later periods. Therefore, members of the Frankish aristocracy (a clear indication of the social strata the owners of the jewelry belonged to are the materials, i.e., precious metals, that the pieces were made of) preferred to rely on tried and tested amulets based on the native religious conventions rather than on Christian imagery (e.g., baptismal crosses).

Keywords: Merovingians, amulets, traditional cults, paganism, pagan relics.

Merovingų epochos germanų aristokratijos amuletai

Straipsnyje aptariami amuletai buvo surasti daugiausia rytinėje frankų gentinės teritorijos dalyje. Čia, Reino žemėse, VI ir VII a., skirtingai nei vėlesniais laikais, krikščionybė nebuvo plačiai paplitusi. Dėl šios priežasties frankų aristokratijos nariai (kurių socialinį statusą ryškiai pabrėžia jiems priklausantys juvelyriniai dirbiniai iš brangiųjų metalų) labiau pasikliaudavo tradiciniais su prigimtinė religija siejamais amuletais nei krikščioniškąja simbolika (pavyzdžiui, krikščionių kryžiais).

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Merovingai, amuletai, tradiciniai kultai, pagonybė, pagonybės relikvai.

Magic played an important role as the foundation for early religious beliefs. It was one of the ways early humans used to explain the phenomena that they could not comprehend in the framework of their daily lives. A common definition of magic is “ritualistic human behavior aimed at influencing a material object or phenomenon in a supernatural manner” (Токмаев, 1990, p. 404), and magic is generally classified into specific types based on the goals that such behavior aims to achieve, including medicinal magic, protective magic, malicious magic, hunting (or economic) magic, etc.

A member of an early tribe would perform a magical ritual to actively influence the predisposition and progression of events to achieve a beneficial result. This is the essential feature that separates magic from divination, or actions aimed at the foreclosure of the future and obtaining information about what is to come by way of specialized rituals (fortune telling) or an interpretation of events (bird and animal behavior, change of seasons and elemental events, etc.). Compared to magical rituals, they do not tend to actively influence reality.

The onset of the early Middle Ages in Western Europe coincides with the Christianization of the barbaric states. It was a complex period of struggle and multifaceted mutual interference between Christianity and paganism.

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Frequent mentions of the manifestations of paganism in the resolutions of church councils in the Merovingian Kingdom serve as evidence that the Church had serious worries about the perseverance of paganism in the lives of the first generations of Christians. The Church opposed magic very vehemently. Various clerical documents are our major source of information on the manifestations of magic. This information makes it safe to conclude that magic was enormously widespread in those days.

Magic proper was largely preserved in clerical literature as the descriptions of protective magic. This can be concluded from the resolutions of church councils and books of penance which expressly prohibited the wearing of any objects by Christians (under clothes or on them) as amulets, especially as charms against malicious magic. Evidently, people in the Merovingian kingdom believed that wearing such objects ensured the constant presence of a protective magical force or connection with a guardian spirit (deity) in between magical rituals lest the wearer fell victim to the omnipresent hostile forces. The value of an amulet (protective charm) was an uninterrupted contact with the source of magical powers and its transfer to the wearer.

The Church considered worn amulets one of the most overt manifestations of paganism (Fontes..., 1928, p. 43). The Church usually condemned this and prohibited Christians from wearing amulets that had a clearly magical appearance, such as bands (small bags for wearing on the neck) with herbs, animal bones, and the like, or amulets with quotes from the Holy Scripture (MGH. Legum. III. 1906, p. 262, 268). The Church policy was supported by the government: capitularies of Carloman in 742 A.D. (MGH. Legum. II. 1883, p. 25) and Charlemagne in 769 A.D. (Ibid., p. 45) included prohibitions of wearing amulets. Until recently, there was no clear evidence which social strata of the Merovingian society were the intended targets of these prohibitions. An analysis of the archaeological findings will undoubtedly shed some light on this issue. The subject of this paper is said analysis.

Cornelius Tacitus wrote that Germans took to battle “images of wild beasts they kept safe in forests and sacred groves” (*Historia*, IV, 22). The latter, he said, were related to the cults of individual deities (*Germania*, 9). It is evident that the Germans had thought that the animal the image of which they would place in a sacred grove was a companion (attribute) of a deity. This companion (or a magical helper in the later European fairy tales) was sacrificed to the related deity and was evidently a totem animal of a specific tribe. These totem images acquired an iconographic status as the staff heads of military standards. “Military bands and troops of Germans just before the emergence of feudalism had banners that could be subdivided into two archetypes: three-dimensional images of sacred (sacrificial) animals made of metal that were probably clans’ totems at an earlier stage, and standards made of fabric similar to Roman *vexilla*, sometimes carrying imagery of the German sacred bestiary” (Кулаков, 1989, p. 63, 64). If knotted and fringed cloth banners were, in essence, a man-made image of a freshly dressed hide of an animal just sacrificed to the gods to protect the army facing the enemy and did not directly influence the shapes of German amulets, the staff heads of these standards were a symbolic representation of sacrificial animals before the ritual and had a direct relation to the meaning and shape of the amulets.

Totem images in sacred groves probably functioned as public protective charms for the ancient Germans. Most likely, they were the origin (under the Roman and, to a lesser extent, Celtic influence) of much smaller items, such as elements of clothing and decorations, that now functioned as private charms ensuring magical protection for the wearer. The use of such amulets gave an opportunity of securing the support of a powerful supernatural force that manifested itself as the animal. In accordance with this interpretation, an object must have a number of attributes to serve this purpose. Among them are its shape, matching the shape of the sacrificial (sacred) animal or bird, a graphical sign (or a figurative image) with a consistent magical meaning on the surface of the amulet, and the material of the amulet, which must be indicative of its ritual purpose, distinct from the everyday use of such materials elements of clothing domestic articles.

One of the authors of this paper had a chance to examine the archeological collection of the Merovingian era from 2000 to 2003, thanks to the generous assistance of the staff of the A.S. Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, who acquired this collection in May 1945. There is a fully exhaustive description of this collection (Менгин, 2007). We are relying on these observations and the collection itself in providing the following analysis of some amulets dating back to the early Christianization of the West German tribes. The German archeologist M. Bertram



Fig. 1. Crosses sewn onto shrouds: 1 – the Wurmlingen gold cross, Wurmlingen, Baden-Württemberg, Germany, 7th century, size 9.9 × 8.1 cm (PSM, Inv. No. Aap 628); 2 – the Chiusi-in-Casentino gold cross, Chiusi della Verna, Prov. Arezzo, Italy, first half of the 7th century, size 4.0 × 4.0 cm (PSM, Inv. No. Aap 1462)

1 pav. Kryžiai, prisiūti prie mirusiųjų skraisčių: 1 – Wurmlingen auksinis kryžius, Wurmlingen, Baden-Württemberg, Vokietija, VII a., dydis 9,9 × 8,1 cm (PVDM, Inv. Nr. Aap 628); 2 – Chiusi-in-Casentino auksinis kryžius, Chiusi della Verna, Arezzo provincija, Italija, VII a. pirma pusė, dydis 4,0 × 4,0 cm (PVDM, Inv. Nr. Aap 1462)

attempted to examine the cultic peculiarities of the Alemannic decorations. Considering that “the semantic of the German beast style [...] remained not revealed” (Бертрам, 2007, p. 173), the author of these words interpreted some of the ornaments on the obviously Christian objects as appearances of pagan influence without knowing that V. Kulakov wrote about this occurrence nearly two decades ago (Кулаков, Валуев, 2001, p. 19, Fig. 1.1).

Catalog

Merovingian (late 5th century–mid-8th century) articles that could be classified as amulets from the stocks of the State Museum of Fine Arts:

1. **Crosses** (equilateral and non-equilateral, or Greek and Roman, in heraldic terms), composed of two rectangular sections of gold fold jointed with a pin at the center (Fig. 1, 1.2). In the 7th century, such crosses were



Fig. 2. A pair of silver-gilded fibulae from the Buegelfibeln section of Marchépot, Dep. Somme, France, the first half of the 6th century, length 10.81 and 11.16 cm.

2 pav. Pora sidabrinių paauksuotų Buegelfibeln grupės segių iš Marchépot, Somme departamentas, Prancūzija, VI a. pirma pusė, ilgis 10,81 ir 11,16 cm



Fig. 3. Surface images of bird and animal pairs: 1 – a bronze silver-coated buckle frame from Schwarz-Rheindorf, Nord-Rhein Westfalen, Germany, beginning of the 7th century, size 4.81 × 2.59 cm (PSM, Inv. No. Aap 596), 2 – shield (?) overlays made of silver-coated bronze from Schwarz-Rheindorf, beginning of the 7th century, length 4.81 and 4.85 cm (PSM, Inv. No. Aap 597–598).

3 pav. Paukščių ir gyvūnų porų apkalų vaizdai: 1 – žalvarinė pasidabruota sagties dalis iš Schwarz-Rheindorf, Šiaurės Reinas, Vestfalija, Vokietija, VII a. pradžia, ilgis 4,81 ir 2,59 cm (PVDM, Inv. Nr. Aap 596); 2 – pasidabruoti žalvariniai skydo (?) apkalai iš Schwarz-Rheindorf, VII a. pr., ilgis 4,81 ir 4,85 cm (PVDM, Inv. Nr. Aap 597–598)



Fig. 4. Raven-shaped pins and fibulae: 1 – a gold-coated silver pin head from Schwarz-Rheindorf, first half of the 6th century, size 5.89 × 1.15 cm, 3.02 × 1.05 cm (PSM, Inv. No. Aap 557, 559); 2 – gold-coated silver fibulae with almandine inserts from Schwarz-Rheindorf, size 3.38 × 1.35 cm (PSM, Inv. No. 564–565); 3 – a silver fibula with an almandine insert from Schwarz-Rheindorf, first half of the 6th century, size 3.35 × 1.92 cm (PSM, Inv. No. Aap 557, Aap 659); 4 – a gold-coated silver fibula with a purple glass insert and the background of silver foil, Dep. Nord de la France, France, first half of the 6th century, size 3.11 × 1.5 cm (PSM, Inv. No. Aap 659); 5 – a gold fibula with almandine and glass inserts from Fèrebrianges, Dép. Marne, France, first half of the 6th century, size 3.12 × 1.76 cm (PSM, Inv. No. Aap 689).

4 pav. Varno pavidalo smeigtukai ir segės: 1 – paauksuotos sidabrinės smeigtuko galvutės iš Shwarz-Rheindorf, VI a. pirma pusė, dydžiai 5,89 × 1,15 cm, 3,02 × 1,05 cm (PVDM, Inv. Nr. Aap 557, 559); 2 – sidabrinė paauksuota segė su almandino inkrustacija iš Shwarz-Rheindorf, dydžiai 3,38 × 1,35 cm (PVDM, Inv. Nr. 564–565); 3 – sidabrinė segė su almandino inkrustacija iš Shwarz-Rheindorf, VI a. pirma pusė, dydžiai 3,35 × 1,92 cm (PVDM, Inv. Nr. Aap 557, Aap 659); 4 – siadabrinė paauksuota segė su violetinio stiklo inkrustacija ir sidabro folijos danga, Nord de la France departamentas, Prancūzija, VI a. pirma pusė, dydis 3,11 × 1,5 cm (PVDM, Inv. Nr. Aap 659); 5 – auksinė segė su almandino ir stiklo inkrustacija iš Fèrebrianges, Marne departamentas, Prancūzija, VI a. pirma pusė, dydžiai 3,12 × 1,76 cm (PVDM, Inv. Nr. Aap 689)

sewn onto a piece of cloth placed above the face of a deceased person according to the customs of early Christian Lombards and Alemanns. Despite the purely Christian shape and function, the images punched on these crosses had a traditional ritual meaning. It was a canonical “pagan icon” depicting Wotan-Odin, the king of gods, surrounded by animals sacrificed to him: boars (“guardian spirits,” Хлебов, 2002, p. 130, 131) and birds (ravens) (Fig. 1.1). The “pagan icon” in its more simplistic version was a composition of symmetrically located full-face images of an elderly bearded man (Кулаков, 2012, p. 212, Fig. 204, 205.1). Such a traditional depiction of the face of the king of gods could be officially interpreted by the Church as an image of the Holy Savior. However, the individuals who had this image made evidently thought that the “pagan icon” would be a better amulet for the dead tribesman than the yet little-known Jesus.

2. **Plated fibulae** crowned with “pagan icons” on top of the pins. This image is found both on the double fibulae, an element of the female dress (Fig. 2), and on large single fibulae for men. Usually, the common image was that of the so-called “Odin and the ravens,” quite a popular amulet among the Germans of the Migration Period (Кулаков, 2012a, p. 211). In some fibulae, the face of Wotan-Odin at the top of the topmost plates was



Fig. 5. Animal-shaped clasps: 1 – a gold-coated silver fibula from Schwarz-Rheindorf, second half of the 5th century, length 2.58 and 2.72 cm (PSM, Inv. No. Aap 562–563); 2 – a gold-coated silver fibula from Schwarz-Rheindorf, second half of the 5th century, length 9.5 and 9.5 cm (PSM, Inv. No. Aap 558).

5 pav. Gyvūnų pavidalo segės: 1 – sidabrinė paaukuota segė iš Shwarz-Rheindorf, V a. antra pusė, ilgis 2,58 ir 2,72 cm (PVDM, Inv. Nr. Aap 562-563); 2 – sidabrinė paaukuota segė iš Shwarz-Rheindorf, V a. antra pusė, ilgis 9,5 ir 9,5 cm (PVDM, Inv. Nr. Aap 558)

replaced with a mask of a mythical animal (Кулаков, 2016, p. 23), shaped from two symmetrical profiles of birds of prey (usually Wotan-Odin's ravens). As we can see, people who crafted some of these fibulae gradually lost understanding of the structure of the “pagan icon,” replacing the face of Wotan-Odin surrounded with the heads of mythical companion birds or messengers with the structures composed of the very same bird heads (**Fig. 2**). This is evidence of the disintegration of the canon of the “pagan icon” (most obviously under the influence of Christian ideas and prohibitions) or of an attempt to preserve the “pagan icon” in a disguised (cryptic) form.

3. **Articles with fragmented “pagan icon” imagery**, as exemplified in our catalog by an element of a clasp and overlays (probably for a shield) (**Fig. 3**). The significance of these artifacts is that they lack the face of Wotan-Odin at the center of the composition generally matching the canon of the “pagan icon” as seen in the abovementioned later imagery on plated fibulae. This can be attributed to a number of factors; for example, attempts of craftsmen or their customers to avoid direct conflict with the Church by dismantling the “pagan icon,” a customary amulet based on the conventions of the religion of their forefathers. As is evident from the date these items were created (early 7th century), an overt display of clearly traditional amulets may have been dangerous for their owners.

4. **Raven-shaped pins and fibulae (Fig. 4)**, a strictly female accessory of the Frankish dress in the early 6th century, crafted in pairs to attach the hems of clothes to the shoulders of their owners. These images have a clear attribution: hook-shaped beaks, massive in comparison to the slender body and short wings indicative of the Raven species (Kulakov, Markowets, 2004, p. 179–182). An interesting feature is that the raven shapes are located at the sides of the female owner's face. In this way, the recipient (privy to the conventions of the native Germanic



Fig. 6. A hollow gold bracelet from Benevento, Prov. Benevento, Italy, 7th–8th centuries, size 8.15 × 6.9 cm (PSM, Inv. No. Aap 1452).

6 pav. Auksinė tuščiavidurė ovalo formos apyrankė platėjančiais galais iš Benevento, Benevento provincija, Italija, VII–VIII a., dydis 8,15 × 6,9 cm (PVDM, Inv. Nr. Aap 1452)

cults) perceived a canonical “pagan icon” – an esoteric sight for the stranger’s eyes, but clearly an amulet for the owner of the raven-shaped clasps. Characteristic features of these shapes are eyes made of almandine cabochons or a whole shape filled with garnet glass (**Fig. 4**). The European tradition of making fibulae in the shape of birds of prey inlaid with precious stones dated back to antiquity (Кулаков, 2012b, с. 86). However, the craftsmen of the ancient world shaped these clasps into the eagle companions of Zeus-Jupiter, while the German jewelers replaced them with ravens.

5. Double fibulae in the shape of four-legged animals (Fig. 5). Judging by their date (5th century) and stylistic features (markedly realistic imagery), these articles were made by the craftsmen of late antiquity in accordance with the traditions of Mediterranean cults. At any rate, the images of pairs of animals are not related to the Germanic Christian tradition (Кулаков, 2012b, p. 86).

6. Bracelets and torcs with stylized dragon images. The images of snake heads and dragon body parts (Mangelsdorf, 2011, p. 99) date back to late 5th century and are seen on the gold bracelets found in the Hunnish hoards (Кулаков, 2011, p. 23–25). Originally, these mythical creatures were (and still are) the symbols of prosperity and, as a result, amulets of the peoples of the Far East. The beliefs in dragons as symbols of luck spread across Europe with the Huns. Particularly, these beliefs were expressed in the decoration of bracelets with tapered ends (**Fig. 6**) that signified the high status of their owners in the Germanic society of the Migration Period (most likely tribal warlords, see Lund-Hansen, 1998, p. 348, 350). The Benevento (Prov. Benevento, Italy) bracelet dating back to 6th–7th century (**Fig. 6**) listed in our catalog is one of the latest examples of jewelry with sketchy dragon imagery.



Fig. 7. Banded nuggets: 1 – a silver-banded lead ball from Laon, Dép. Aisne, France, first half of the 6th century (PSM, Inv. No. Aap 718); 2 – a bronze-banded bronze fibular with a glass insert from Suippes, Dép. Marne, France, first half of the 7th century, diameter 2.93 cm (PSM, Inv. No. Aap 728).

7 pav. Apvynioti liejiniai: 1 – sidabru apvyniotas švino rutuliukas iš Laon, Aisne departamentas, Prancūzija, VI a. pirmą pusę (PVDM, Inv. Nr. Aap 718); 2 – žalvarine juostele apvyniotas liejinys su stiklo inkrustacija iš Suippes, Marne departamentas, Prancūzija, VII a. pirmą pusę, skersmuo 2,92 cm (PVDM, Inv. Nr. 728)



Fig. 8. A gold pendant from Schwarz-Rheindorf, first half of the 6th century, diameter 1.7 cm (PSM, Inv. No. Aap 540).

8 pav. Auksinis kabutis iš Shwarz-Rheindorf, VI a. pirma pusė, skersmuo 1,7 cm (PVDM, Inv. Nr. Aap 540)

7. **Nuggets wrapped in metal bands** are the most archaic amulets of the Merovingian Frankish heritage. Glass beads wrapped in three types of bronze bands were known in various tribes in Barbaricum as early as in the 3rd century A.D. (Martin, 1997, p. 364). These amulet shapes are commonly found among Germanic objects of the Late Roman period from the Rhine basin to the Amber coast (Кулаков, 2016a, p. 89). Evidently, some of the larger beads had a sort of magical power for the Germans. They had to be worn not as necklaces but wrapped in bronze bands. The catalogued banded amulets are not made of glass beads but of lead or glass nuggets (Fig. 7, 1, 2), though they retain the general shape of the Late Roman Stanek III amulets (Stanek, 1999, p. 334). The idea of magic beads gradually changed by the time Franks adopted Christianity, though these amulets retained their round shape.

8. **Pendants with differently shaped signs.** The catalog lists a pendant shaped as a woven cross (Fig. 8). There are no crosses of that shape in Christian iconography. A woven cross was a solar symbol (Кулаков, 1992, p. 139, 140) in the art of the Baltic and other European peoples and was still reproduced by Baltic craftsmen until the very end of the Viking Age. Evidently, Frankish Merovingian craftsmen shared this symbolism. The solar symbolism of the woven cross is further highlighted by the color of the gold this pendant is made of.

It should be noted that the amulets referred to in this paper were found mainly in the eastern part of the Frankish tribal lands. There, in the Rhineland, Christianity did not hold as much ground in the 6th and 7th centuries as during later periods. Therefore, members of the Frankish aristocracy (a clear indication of the social strata the owners of the jewelry belonged to are the materials, i.e., precious metals, that the pieces were made of) preferred to rely on tried and tested amulets based on the native religious conventions rather than on Christian imagery (e.g., baptismal crosses).

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Abbreviations

- Fontes – Fontes historiae religionis germanicae. Ed. K. Klemen. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1928
- MGH – Monumenta Germaniae Historica
- PSM – Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts
- SA – Sovetskaya Archeologiya

Merovingų epochos germanų aristokratijos amuletai

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Santrauka

Aleksandro Puškino valstybinio dailės muziejaus (Maskva) fonduose saugoma Merovingų epochos papuošalų kolekcija. Analizuodami šios kolekcijos eksponatus galime susidaryti vaizdą, kaip baigiamajame germanų tradicinių religinių kultūrų ir krikščionybės kovos etape, VII a., atrodė rytų frankų amuletų rinkinys.

1. Kryžiai – tai „pagoniškos ikonos“ išraiška, vaizduojanti dievų valdovą Votaną-Odiną, apsuptą jam skirtų (faktiškai aukojamų) gyvūnų (šernų – „dvasių globėjų“) ir paukščių (juodvarnių) galvomis. Šios specifinės produkcijos užsakovai akivaizdžiai manė, kad „pagoniška ikona“ geriau saugos jų gentainį nei dar mažai pažįstamas germanams Kristaus atvaizdas.
2. Plokštelinės segės (Bügelfibeln tipas) viršutinė kojelės dalis užsibaigia kanonizuotu „pagoniškos ikonos“ atvaizdu. Kai kurių segių gamintojai, praradę „pagoniškos ikonos“ struktūros sampratą, pakeisdavo apsuptą sparnuotų mitinių palydovų – pranašų galvomis Votano-Odino atvaizdą tokių pat galvučių kompozicija.

3. Dirbiniai, padaryti laikantis dalinio „pagoniškos ikonos“ kanono. Šie artefaktai įdomūs tuo, kad juose (kaip ir anksčiau minėtose plokštelių segių vėlyvose replikose) Votano-Odino atvaizdas kompozicijoje, apskritai atitinkančioje „pagoniškos ikonos“ kanoną, nevaizduojamas.
4. Varno pavidalo smeigtukai ir segės – tai išskirtinai moteriškos aprangos elementas VI a. pradžios frankų genties areale. Jos buvo porinės ir jomis būdavo susegami drabužių kraštai pečių srityje. Plėšriųjų paukščių pavidalo segių, inkrustuotų brangakmeniais, gamybos tradicija Europoje siekia antikos laikus.
5. Porinės keturkojų gyvūnų pavidalo segės. Sprendžiant iš šių dirbinių datavimo V a. bei jų stilstikos (visų pirma realistiško vaizdavimo), šie dirbiniai pagaminti vėlyvosios antikos meistrų ir, matyt, atitinka Viduržemio jūros regiono religinių kultūrų tradicijas. Bet kokių atveju poriniai gyvūnų atvaizdai neturi nieko bendro su pagoniškomis germanų tradicijomis.
6. Apyrankės ir antkablės su stilizuotais slibinų atvaizdais. Gyvačių galvų ir drakonų kūno dalių vaizdavimas auksinėse apyrankėse siekia V a. pabaigos hunų kultūrinio rato tradiciją. Pirminėje stadijoje (ir iki šių dienų) Tolimųjų Rytų tautos šios mitinės būtybės simbolizavo gerovę ir atitinkamai atliko amuletų funkcijas.
7. Apvynioti metaline juoste liejiniai savo kilme yra patys archajiškiausi amuletai Merovingų epochos frankų materialinėje kultūroje. Trijų tipų stikliniai karoliai apvynioti žalvarine juoste žinomi įvairiose Barbaricum gentyse jau III mūsų eros amžiuje. Šios formos amuletų tarp vėlyvojo romėniškojo laikotarpio germaniškų senienų aptinkama nuo Reino baseino iki gintarinės pakrantės.
8. Kabučiai su įvairių formų ženklais. Kataloge pateiktas kabutis su susipynusio kryžiaus atvaizdu. Šio tipo kryžių nėra krikščioniškoje ikonografijoje.