

THE REPRESENTATION OF A SAINT ON HORSEBACK AND THE ARCHANGEL FROM THE AVAR PERIOD

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The interpretation of symbols and figures depicted on finds from the Migration Period is one of the controversial issues of archaeological research. It is a particularly difficult question what the contemporary representations with Christian subject actually showed, and how their origins and religious meaning can be explained. That is why the two Avar box brooches from Nagyharsány (County Baranya), which are connected in several ways both to Antiquity and Christianity, are of particularly great importance. The figures of the saint on horseback and the Archangel depicted on the brooches have survived in religion, art, popular belief, and legends until today.

The Avar Period box brooches with Christian symbols are known in scholarship from the 1930s. The pieces discovered in Hungary (near Keszthely and in County Baranya) were discussed together – but by one researcher¹ – although the funerary equipments deposited in the graves and the costume of the dead differed from each other. Beside the similar elements of the brooches, there were conspicuous differences in technique and decoration.

In Nagyharsány a silver brooch framed with beaded wire was discovered when turning over the ground for vine, and during the subsequent excavation a smaller item was found.² On these pieces the gold *repoussé* central plate with figural ornament was surrounded by a gilt indented border bearing a ring of curvilinear decoration.

The gold plate of the stray brooch depicts a winged, haloed archangel wearing Roman toga, holding a fiery sword with a cross-bar in his right hand and a globe in his left hand. The figure is flanked by the fragment of a supplication in Greek, ARXANΓE – ΛE BO[HΘI] (Archangel – help).³ Between the beaded frame and the row of twelve curves, a foliated scroll was engraved that followed the wavy line (Fig. 1).

The archangel can be considered as the pre-figuration of Victoria represented on the reverse of imperial and Byzantine coins. The goddess of victory on the solidus of Justinian I and the archangel are equally winged figures having a halo/nimbus, and both are holding a globe in their left hands. Victoria has a long, straight object in her right hand that terminates in a cross at its top, which differs only partially from the wavy fiery blade of the archangel. The angel can be associated with Saint Michael, the Archangel, who was also represented with a globe as the protector of the Earth and Israel.

On the brooch from grave No. 60, the embossed border framing the figural plate is surrounded by ten curves, which were complemented with engraved curved lines, and triangles where the curves met. On



Fig. 1: The stray brooch (photo: István Füzi, Janus Pannonius Museum)

¹ Garam, Éva: Die awarenzeitlichen Scheibenfibeln. *Communicationes Archaeologicae Hungariae* 1993 [1994], 118.

² Papp, László: A nagyharsányi avar temető I. (Das awarenzeitliche Gräberfeld von Nagyharsány). *Janus Pannonius Múzeum Évkönyve* 8 (1963) [1964], 115, 131–132.

³ Transcribed by János Harmatta: Papp, László: A nagyharsányi avar temető I. (Das awarenzeitliche Gräberfeld von Nagyharsány). *Janus Pannonius Múzeum Évkönyve* 8 (1963) [1964], 115.

the gold plate, the horseman wearing a Roman tunic stabs a serpent twisting below the feet of his horse with a lance – terminating in a cross at the top – held in his right hand. Next to the haloed head of the horseman, a star was shown similarly to the reverse of imperial and Byzantine coins (Fig. 2).

The warrior has various interpretations in scholarly literature: a mounted figure,⁴ a saint,⁵ Christ,⁶ Saint George (?).⁷ Although the representation is similar to the figures of ancient Bellerophon mounted on the winged Pegasus stabbing Chimera, as well as Roman emperors triumphing over barbarians – that also appear in Byzantine art, – it cannot be identified with Bellerophon because of the serpent. The identification with Christ can also be questioned, because he is represented mounted only during his entry into Jerusalem, and he is shown riding upon a donkey instead of a horse. In addition, the figure of the crucified Christ, *Christus Triumphans*, is joined only by the *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God).

There are several reasons to suggest that the figure on horseback represents the martyred military saint, Georgius, which is also supported by the interpretation of the figures on the brooches.

Saint Michael fights against the Evil as the leader of the host of angels. Saint George does the same as the embodiment of the Archangel on Earth. According to the text of the Vulgate,⁸ the devil (*diabolus, satan*) appears in the form of a dragon (*draco*) and a serpent (*serpens*). The pictorial representation of the haloed horseman fighting with the serpent is also depicted on a casting mould.⁹

In medieval legends,¹⁰ chivalric romances and folk tales, however, the figure of the seven-headed red dragon of the Apocalypse setting upon a pregnant crowned woman standing on a crescent survived in heroic tales where the princess is saved from the dragon.¹¹

Endre Tóth considers that the box brooches testify to the Christian belief of sixth-seventh century Avars, and they were “locally made” pieces reflecting “Mediterranean relations.”¹² The iconography untypical of the Avars, the quality of construction, and the Greek lettered inscription make it apparent that the brooch



Fig. 2: *The brooch from grave No. 60*
(photo: István Füzi, Janus Pannonius Museum)

⁴ Garam, Éva: Die awarenzeitlichen Scheibenfibeln. *Communicationes Archaeologicae Hungariae* 1993 [1994], 101, Abb.1.3.

⁵ Daim, Falko: Pilgeramulette und Frauenschmuck? Zu den Scheibenfibeln der frühen Keszthely-Kultur. *Zalai Múzeum* 11 (2002), 116.

⁶ Tóth, Endre: Honfoglalás előtti keresztények a Kárpát-medencében (Christians in the Carpathian Basin before the Hungarian Conquest). In: *Magyarok térben és időben. Nemzetközi Hungarológiai Konferencia. Tatabánya – Esztergom 1996. május 28–31* (Hungarians in space and time. International Hungarological Conference. Tatabánya – Esztergom, 28–31 May 1996), eds Fülöp, Éva Mária – Kisné Cseh, Julianna. *Tudományos Füzetek* 11 (1999), 172; Tóth, Endre: Zur Herkunft und Ikonographie der Scheibenfibeln der Keszthely-Kultur. *Zalai Múzeum* 14 (2005), 183. The interpretation is questionable because Christ was represented fighting on horseback only later.

⁷ Kiss, Attila: A népvándorlás kora Baranyában (The Migration Period in County Baranya). In: *Baranya megye története az őskortól a honfoglalásig* (The history of County Baranya from Prehistory to the Hungarian Conquest), ed. Bándi, Gábor (Pécs: Baranya Megyei Levéltár, 1979), 364.

⁸ Vulgate, The Book of Revelation 12.7: “...Michael et angeli eius præliabantur cum dracone...” and 9: “...draco ille magnus, serpens antiquus, qui vocatur diabolus, et satanas...”

⁹ Wulff, Oscar: *Altchristliche Bildwerke. Beschreibung der Bildwerke der christlichen Epochen; Altchristliche und mittelalterliche byzantinische und italienische Bildwerke; Beschreibung der Bildwerke der christlichen Epochen / Königliche Museen zu Berlin, Bd. 3, Altchristliche und mittelalterliche byzantinische und italienische Bildwerke* (Berlin: Reimer, 1909), Taf LVI. Nr.1128.

¹⁰ Iacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea. Historia de Sancto Georgio*.

¹¹ Vulgate, The Book of Revelation 12.1–4.

¹² Tóth, Endre: Honfoglalás előtti keresztények a Kárpát-medencében (Christians in the Carpathian Basin before the Hungarian Conquest). In: *Magyarok térben és időben. Nemzetközi Hungarológiai Konferencia. Tatabánya – Esztergom 1996. május 28–31*, (Hungarians in space and time. International Hungarological Conference. Tatabánya – Esztergom, 28–31 May 1996), eds Fülöp, Éva Mária – Kisné Cseh, Julianna. *Tudományos Füzetek* 11 (1999), 172.

with the Archangel plate is the product of a Byzantine workshop. The brooch depicting Saint George, having a related content, cannot be regarded as a local product, either.

The central plates of the brooches were pressed on a beeswax layer. Due to the fact that beeswax from the graves of saints was applied apotropaically against various threats, Falko Daim suggested that the brooches might have been pilgrimage relics.¹³ He also mentioned that because of its softness, beeswax could not have been used for stiffening. From Hellenistic times on, however, there was a method employed in European goldsmith's art that thin objects made from precious metal were filled with different kinds of soft material that hardened later, or the sheets were pressed on them. Due to the soft material, the *repoussé* motif on the gold foil was not damaged during the pressing, and it adhered better to the base.

If the brooches had been pilgrimage relics, they would have at the same time testified to the Christian belief of their owners. Nevertheless, the brooches from Nagyharsány were worn by affluent Avar women, who were certainly not Christians on the basis of their funerary rites, their gravegoods and other belongings.¹⁴

RECOMMENDED READING

ALFÖLDI, ANDRÁS

Zur historischen Bestimmung der Awarenfunde. *Eurasia Septentrionalis Antiqua* 9 (1934), 285–307.

DAIM, FALKO

Pilgeramulette und Frauenschmuck? Zu den Scheibenfibeln der frühen Keszthely-Kultur. *Zalai Múzeum* 11 (2002), 113–132.

GARAM, ÉVA

Die awarenzeitlichen Scheibenfibeln. *Communicationes Archaeologicae Hungariae* 1993 [1994], 99–134.

GLASER, FRANZ

Die Bildmotiv der Scheibenfibeln aus Keszthely. *Zalai Múzeum* 11 (2002), 145–152.

TÓTH, ENDRE

Honfoglalás előtti keresztények a Kárpát-medencében (Christians in the Carpathian Basin before the Hungarian Conquest). In: *Magyarok térben és időben. Nemzetközi Hungarológiai Konferencia. Tatabánya – Esztergom 1996. május 28–31* (Hungarians in space and time. International Hungarological Conference. Tatabánya – Esztergom, 28–31 May 1996), eds Fülöp, Éva Mária – Kisné Cseh, Julianna. *Tudományos Füzetek* 11 (1999), 163–182.

TÓTH, ENDRE

Zur Herkunft und Ikonographie der Scheibenfibeln der Keszthely-Kultur. *Zalai Múzeum* 14 (2005), 183–202.

WALTER, CHRISTOPHER

The Origins of the Cult of Saint George. *Revue des études byzantines* 53 (1995), 295–326.

¹³ Daim, Falko: Pilgeramulette und Frauenschmuck? Zu den Scheibenfibeln der frühen Keszthely-Kultur. *Zalai Múzeum* 11 (2002)

¹⁴ I would like to say words of thanks to István Füzi (Janus Pannonius Museum) for the photographs.