

# Gold- and silver-smithing

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Objects of gold and silver form an important and interesting group of artifacts from the Viking Age. The large quantity and the multiplicity of types bear witness to the high status of goldsmiths in a society which had easy access to metals, and outside contacts which served as a source of inspiration and innovation.

The levels of society with which the goldsmiths were involved were those of kings, chieftains and noblemen. The connection was traditional and inevitable, for these classes had special needs (the distribution of valuable gifts for example) and the necessary economic background. They also had contacts with similar classes in Scandinavia, in the rest of Europe, and in the Orient. These contacts were responsible for the relative homogeneity of Scandinavian fine metalworking, in which native traditions were merged with foreign influences. All the precious metals had to be imported, from the Caliphate, Germany, France and England. Silver was predominant, but gold had a higher value and unrivalled prestige, as is shown by the presence of gilding on most bronze and much of the silver jewellery.

The goldsmiths' products—dress accessories, jewellery, drinking vessels, horse equipment—were important to many social classes. They were primarily decorative, but also demonstrated the social status, religion and ethnic origin of the owner. They were also of economic significance. In Viking Age Scandinavia there was no developed monetary system, so silver and gold were weighed. Because of this, jewellery was chopped up (to become *hacksilver*) or was of a standard weight, as were neck-rings and arm-rings which could double as ornaments and as a means of payment (cat. no. 141–53).

The Scandinavian goldsmiths had a multiplicity of manufacturing and decorative techniques at their disposal: casting, forging, filigree and granulation, chasing, niello, gilding, plating and inlaying with precious stones and glass. The only technique absent from their repertoire was enamelling.



Fig. 1. Selection from the Sejrø hoard, Denmark, including twisted arm-rings, plaited neck-rings, chain, and brooch with filigree ornament. Right:

a simple Thor's hammer on chain, second half of the 10th cent. Cat. no. 142.

A substantial part of the goldsmiths' work was devoted to the manufacture of high-status objects such as neck-rings and arm-rings made of a flat band, a single rod, or up to 12 twisted rods. The twisted rings were quite new to Scandinavia and have oriental prototypes. From Byzantium came the skill of making fine, elastic, chains in a crochet-like technique or of small linked rings (cat. no. 142).

Some techniques were very popular and were used throughout the Viking Age: punching with repeated triangular stamps (cat. no. 143), niello, inlaying of silver (using black silver sulphide (cat. no. 103)), and filigree and granulation, which were introduced into Scandinavia from western Europe and developed into high art.

Denmark has a special position in the Viking Age goldsmith tradition, for its proximity to the Continent encouraged political and artistic development. The Danish smiths were probably responsible for the introduction into Scandinavia of

jewellery such as the trefoil brooch (cat. no. 135–7), and they also began to make bowls to replace drinking horns (cat. no. 36, 124, 532). In tenth-century Denmark there was both high-quality casting (p. 198, fig. 99) and filigree, characterized by the consistent use of interlace and animal motifs (cat. no. 32, 142). The art of filigree came to maturity at the court of Harald Bluetooth; workshop finds at the fortresses of Fyrkat and Trelleborg suggest that power-centres were also important artistic centres. But the most important of the Jutland sites was Hedeby where, for example, forty-two bronze patrices for embossing sheet metal for filigree jewellery have been found (cat. no. 105). The jewellery from the hoard from Hiddensee (cat. no. 265), a Thor's hammer pendant from Skåne (cat. no. 181), and a gold spur from Værne Kloster, Rød, Norway, are some of the most magnificent examples of filigree art. This technique reached its apogee in the eleventh century when the Jutland



Fig. 2. Oval brooch; bronze with gilding, silver and niello. From Birka, Sweden. 9th cent. Cat. no. 103.



Fig. 4. Filigree-decorated gold brooches from Hornelund, Jutland, Denmark. C. 1000. Cat. no. 107.

smiths made splendid objects such as the gold brooch from Hornelund (cat. no. 106, 107). These royal filigree jewels were of the highest status and they, or imitations of them, are found throughout Scandinavia—in Russia, England and Iceland.

Local specialities were also developed, penannular brooches, for example, of Irish type, which were designed to fasten men's cloaks; magnificent objects of silver, with niello and gold filigree. They were introduced to Scandinavia by way of Norway and were also made in Sweden and Russia (cat. no. 138–40, 219, 364). Another local type was the large and heavy cast brooches from eastern Sweden and Russia (cat. no. 305).

Fig. 3. Equal-armed brooch; silver with gilding and niello. From Elec, Russia. 10th cent. Cat. no. 305.



The goldsmith's art was particularly lively and original on Gotland, where the smiths were expert in most techniques and were willing to absorb foreign influences. Their outstanding tenth-century products were drum-shaped brooches (cat. no. 104), and bracteates. Both types of object display filigree motifs borrowed from north-German enamelled brooches, which in their turn were inspired from Byzantium. In the eleventh century the smiths of Gotland developed an art which was a combination of earlier Gotlandic forms, copies of eastern Slav jewellery, and variants of Danish brooches. This Gotland jewellery had a wide distribution outside the island

and can easily be recognized in finds from Estonia, Finland, Öland and the Swedish mainland.

The products of the Scandinavian goldsmith in the Viking Age show a wealth of forms and techniques without parallel in the earlier periods. The goldsmith created an eclectic art which, nevertheless, is very lively, thanks to his skill and his ability to combine native traditions with the cultural heritage of Europe.

Fig. 5. Drum-shaped brooch; bronze with gilding, silver, gold and niello. From Mårtens, Gotland, Sweden. 11th cent. Cat. no. 104.

