

The Winchester 'weather-vane' reconsidered

By Birthe Kjelbye-Biddle

1. Previous research on the Winchester panel

On 17 December 1910 The Hampshire Chronicle reported that during excavations at the cathedral, under the south transept, there was found some 17 feet deep and in the peat, a metal strip or band with a curious, indeed elegant, decoration made up of interlaced slightly-raised work, which resembled somewhat Celtic Style. Near it was found a massive ring. On the following 16 March R.A. Smith exhibited this bronze panel to The Society of Antiquaries, noting that it was found at the south-east angle of the south transept, near a bronze ring, 18 inches (0.46 m.) below the top of the peat, the peat being 10 to 12 feet (3.0 to 3.6 m.) from the surface.

The panel was cleaned and flattened in 1911. It is rectangular, 281 mm. long, 46 mm. wide, and 1 to 2 mm. thick. One side bears a complicated incised decoration, formerly gilded. The pattern is plain on a punched background, each punch being about 1 mm. in diameter. This same punch has been used to mark the ends of contour and other interior lines of the decoration. At each corner of the panel there is a pear-shaped drop, c. 8 mm. long. The pattern and its punched background is framed by an engraved line, leaving a 2.5 to 3 mm. wide blank border along all four sides. The holes for attaching the panel to its original background are placed inside the framing line, with

their outer edge just touching it, apart from the central holes in the two short sides which cut the framing line and lie half in the border and half in the decorated area (Fig. 1). There are fifteen of these attachment-holes, each with a diameter of 2 to 3 mm., one at the centre of the panel, three in each of the short sides, and four on each of the long sides. The latter holes are equally spaced in pairs towards each end. With the possible exception of the central perforation, the holes were pierced after the working of the decoration.

The panel has been published and referred to frequently since 1911. Various interpretations of its decoration and purpose have been put forward, but there has been general agreement that the decoration is in the Ringerike style. R.A. Smith saw 'interlacing scroll-work springing from a cruciform pattern at the centre' (1). Brøndsted saw a floral motive and a disintegrated animal (2). T.D. Kendrick perceived foliate ornament (3). H. Shetelig suggested the combination of a cruciform centre of floral ornament and the struggle of the great beast and the serpent (4). W. Holmqvist in 1951 saw the Winchester panel as probably not a Scandinavian product since 'As far as can be seen, it has no zoomorphic details but consists solely of typically English and highly conventionalized acanthus ornaments' (5). D.M. Wilson stated that 'the design ... bears no trace of any zoomorphic



Fig. 1. The Winchester panel, Winchester Cathedral Library. Photographed at the Winchester Research Unit after cleaning, Photograph No. WRU 20138 (WRU 20130 is a photograph before cleaning). The panel is shown as it normally has been, with the fleur-de-lis or animal feet at the top. The head of the main animal can be seen at the lower right side. Scale ca. 3:5.

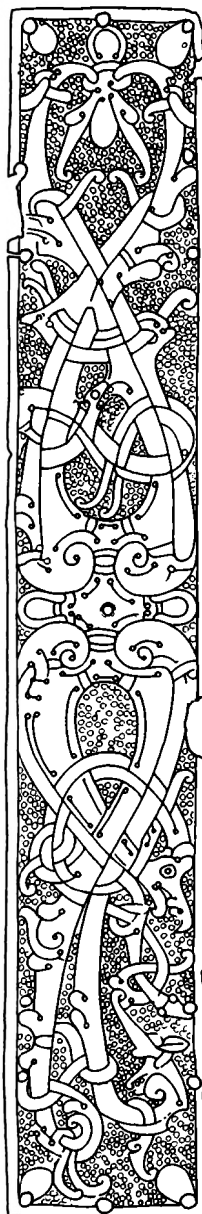


Fig. 2. The Winchester panel, Winchester Cathedral Library. Drawing by Nicholas Griffiths. Scale ca. 3:5.



Fig. 3. The Winchester panel, Winchester Cathedral Library. The head of the main animal. Enlargement from photograph WRU 20138. Scale ca. 2:1.

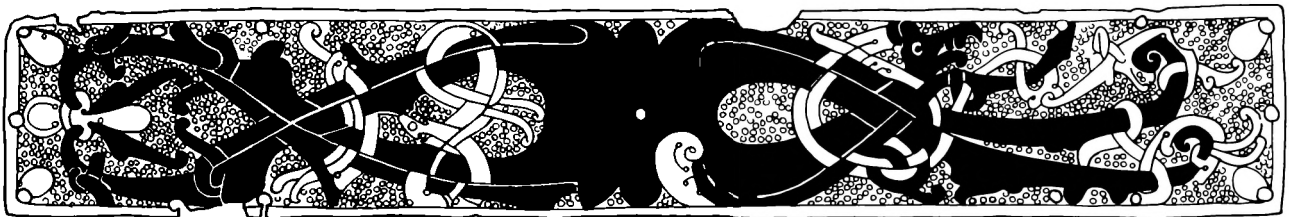
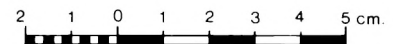


Fig. 4. The Winchester panel, Winchester Cathedral Library. The great beast in black. The panel is shown horizontally, with the fleur-de-lis to the left and the head of the main animal at the top to the right. Drawing by Nicholas Griffiths. Scale 3:5.



characteristic beyond the shell spiral which, in its original form, was an animal's hip' (6). Recently Signe Horn Fuglesang described the Winchester panel in detail and saw a double scroll and animal design, which meet in the centre of the panel, one 'purely vegetal', the other a ribbon-shaped animal with a head (7).

2. *A new way of looking at the panel*

The drawing of the panel by Nicholas Griffiths published in Fig. 2 is not in fact very different from R.A. Smith's drawing of 1911, which has been used by scholars until now, apart from Signe Horn Fuglesang (8). The interpretation of the motif suggested here is however at variance with most earlier views. The principal conclusion of this re-examination of the panel is shown in Fig. 4.

If the panel is seen with the fleur-de-lis or knot at the top, as it has always been published, the design can be described as follows:

1. On the right-hand side, half-way down the lower half, there is an animal head in profile, with two round ears, a large, oval eye, and a large open mouth, the lower jaw of which is curled back, and the upper lip folded.
2. The long neck of the animal curves upwards to the left and ends on the left side at the middle of the panel.
3. At the middle of the panel, the neck joins the body, which is twisted so that it is seen from above, and fills the width of the panel in the form of two horse-shoe shaped loops.
4. A long necktop starts where the neck meets the body, runs along the left side of the neck, sprouts a tendril opposite the head, and ends in a small

snake head midway between the main animal head and the lower right corner of the panel.

5. At the middle of the panel the two forelegs grow from the lower right side of the body. The legs are seen sideways, with the right leg to the left of and partly above the left leg. The legs run in a gentle curve from the middle right side of the panel to the lower left corner. Tendrils at the back of the knees and at the feet give the hock an anatomical feel. The neck, necktop, and forelegs interlace, and in their upper part are symmetrical around the long axis, forming and enclosing an egg-shaped field filled with punch-marks.

The upper half of the animal, seen here in the *lower* half of the panel, is thus seen from its right, both forelegs outstretched, with the left leg, starting in a hip spiral, appearing a little further forward than the right, as if the animal were running forward. At the centre of the panel the body is given a half turn, and is seen from above.

6. The hindlegs are seen from above and start in hip-spirals on top of the body. Like the forelegs, the lower legs sprout tendrils, indicating the hocks. The left leg crosses over the right in the centre of the upper half of the panel, the legs enclosing an egg-shape around the long axis. The hind legs are symmetrical around the short axis with the forelegs and necktop.
- 7 The feet of the hindlegs meet at the centre of the top of the panel and are bound with a ring, with a pear-shaped drop between the claws forming a fleur-de-lis or hanging acanthus.
8. Immediately to the left and the right of the hip-spirals a tail, split into two, starts. The tail-parts

follow the outer sides of the legs and end in a loop around the legs just below (from the anatomical point of view) or above (as the piece is here described) the knees.

This is the main animal or great beast. The head is small in relation to the body, the neck is interlaced with the forelegs and the tail is split in two, but the animal is otherwise quite naturalistic and is not at all disintegrated.

Apart from the main animal there are several other elements:

9. At the centre of the left side, immediately below the body and above the beginning of the neck there is a spiral, like the hip-spirals of the legs, but without a function, unless it joins the neck to the body, or, less likely perhaps, is the hip-spiral of the right foreleg left behind in the twist of the body. This spiral counterbalances the hip-spirals and gives the centre of the panel its symmetrical appearance.
10. A folded, boat-shaped ribbon ties together the split tail and the hindlegs below the crossing of the legs.
11. Below this ribbon a graceful figure-of-eight snake, with split body and tail (or two snakes, one with its head upwards between the legs of the main animal, the other with its head on the outside to the left), interlaces with the split tail and legs of the main animal.
12. Another snake starts with its head to the left and a little above the end of the necktop. The head of this snake has its own necktop and a long folded tongue which curves around the foot of the left foreleg of the main animal. The body and necktop of the snake loop the main necktop and interlace with the

left forelegs, forming a neat knot with a tendril on the right leg. The snake then interlaces in a circle with the necktop, neck, and forelegs of the main animal, folds back over, and ends at the right side of the panel midway between the top of the forelegs and the head.

13. At the bottom left corner of the panel, where it is worn, a snake with a split tail loops around both forelegs and finishes by curving along the outside of the right foot.

3. A great beast or a flower?

If the panel is turned on its side, so that the head is upwards (Fig. 4), the great beast seems quite clear, galloping at full stretch. If the panel is seen however as on Figs. 1 and 2, which is the way it is normally shown, or even if the panel is seen horizontally the other way round, so that the beast head is hanging upside down, as Signe Horn Fuglesang shows it, it is the centre which attracts attention first and looks like an acanthus seen from above (with the attachment hole at its centre). The question is whether the floral motive is the central element and the animal is constructed around it, or whether the animal is primary and the flower simply a by-product. The naturalism of the animal and the insertion of the lower left spiral support the interpretation that we have here a depiction of the fight between the great beast and the serpent(s), as Shetelig suggested, and I propose here that the beast is the main element of the decoration, and not the cruciform centre, which even Shetelig found most striking. The gilding, of which there are traces surviving in the incisions, may have picked out the main motive. In which case there would originally have been no doubt as to what was shown.

4. *Parallels*

A flower such as may be seen in the centre of the Winchester panel is not uncommon in Winchester manuscripts of the tenth and eleventh centuries (9), and can also be seen on the carved slab from the City of London (10). A detail like the hanging acanthus or palmette-loop at the top of the Winchester panel is common in English manuscripts of the tenth century and later as well as in eleventh-century Scandinavian art, be it on stone, bone, or metal. The punched background and the contour line ending in a punch (dot-ended) are very common on metal mounts of the late tenth and eleventh centuries (11). The great beast itself is closely paralleled on the Källunge and Söderala vanes (12). The head on the Söderala vane is small in relation to the body and the mouth is like that of the Winchester beast, with a large upper jaw and a small lower jaw curled back over. The lower part of the Söderala beast is twisted round, and has hip-spirals and crossed legs just like the Winchester beast. The feet are even tied together to form a palmette, but the feet point away from the body and not towards it as they do on the Winchester panel. Hindlegs and hip-spirals like those of the Winchester and Söderala animals can be seen on the Vang and Bibury stones (13). Snakes intertwining with a beast body can be seen again and again on stone and metal-work from the Jellinge stone to the Söderala vane, and especially well on the Källunge vane.

5. *Function*

There is no reason to suppose that the Winchester panel was once part of a weather-vane. It is much more likely that it was once a fitting for a casket like the Bamberg and Cammin caskets (14). These have gilt bronze panels riveted onto the casket with inter-

lace decoration on a punched background inside a plain frame. The Bamberg casket is square in plan with sides 265 mm. long and 130 mm. high. The Cammin casket was (it has been destroyed) much larger, measuring 630 mm. by 260 mm. and 330 mm. in height. Both caskets had a domed lid, but the Cammin casket seems to have been shaped like an inverted boat with bow and stern cut off. The Winchester panel could have been a horizontal element in a casket like the Bamberg casket or a vertical element in a casket as large as the Cammin casket. A panel like that from Århus (15), with its length of 74 mm., could well have been an upright on a small casket. If the great beast on the Winchester panel was meant to be seen easily, the panel would have to have been horizontal and the Bamberg casket would be the nearest parallel.

6. *Date and artistic milieu*

Stylistically the Winchester panel belongs in the Scandinavian Ringerike milieu, perhaps to its later part, as the figure-of-eight snake has an Urnes Style feel, although not as pronounced as the Urnes element on the Söderala vane. A date in the early to mid-eleventh century would seem likely for the Winchester panel. It could have been made by an Anglo-Saxon craftsman working to a Ringerike brief, but it would be simpler to suggest that this is a piece of Scandinavian metalwork.

7. *Winchester in the first half of the eleventh century*

The Winchester panel was found to the south-east of Old Minster, in an area which was either part of the cemetery or on the site of the monastic buildings of the Minster. Old Minster was arguably with Canterbury the most important church in eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon England. King Cnut, Emma his queen, and one

of their sons were buried in Old Minster. The Bamberg casket is sometimes referred to as the jewelbox of Cnut's daughter Kunigunde. She married the German Emperor Henry III in 1036, and was thus associated with Bamberg, one of the greatest of the imperial residences, and the casket could well be of Danish workmanship. However pleasing it might be to accept this association, the tradition is eighteenth-century and should not be given too much weight. It is possible that the Winchester panel came from a casket which had been buried with a person of exceptional importance, but in that case the grave cannot have been that of Cnut or Emma since their remains were translated into the Norman Cathedral from their graves inside Old Minster. Be that as it may, the Winchester panel is one of the few reflections of Scandinavian presence in the upper levels of Anglo-Saxon society in Winchester during the reign of Cnut (16).

Notes

1. Smith 1911, p. 398.
2. Brøndsted 1924, p. 398.
3. Kendrick 1949, p. 100.
4. Shetelig 1948, p. 104.
5. Holmqvist 1951, p. 41.
6. Klindt-Jensen & Wilson 1966, p. 141.
7. Horn Fuglesang 1980, pp. 170-1 and pl. 30 C, D. Fuglesang indicates by an* that she has personally examined the Winchester panel and also states that the drawings she publishes (pls. 30 D and 96 A) are 'Winchester Archaeological Unit, corrected' (p. 262). The panel was indeed in the hands of the Winchester Research Unit (sic) during the first half of the seventies, when it was cleaned, conserved, and mounted by the Winchester Research Unit. A quick drawing was made for an exhibition in Winchester Cathedral in 1972 and 1973. This drawing shows the panel with the design in one half shaded grey, and in the other half unshaded, giving the impression of a two-part design, as Fuglesang interprets the panel. In no way was this drawing meant for publication.
8. Horn Fuglesang 1980, pl. 30 D. The panel is shown horizontally, but in such a way that the animal head is upside down, and cannot in fact be understood.
9. Kendrick 1949, pl. LXXI.
10. Smith 1923, p. 125, fig. 159.
11. Holmqvist 1951, pp. 40-3. – Horn Fuglesang 1980, pp. 48-9.
12. Klindt-Jensen & Wilson 1966, pl. LVIII b.
13. Klindt-Jensen & Wilson 1966, pl. LVII (Vang), pl. LXVIII (Bibury).
14. Klindt-Jensen & Wilson 1966, pp. 124-6.
15. Søgard 1961, Tavle 3. I wish to thank cand. art. Else Roesdahl, who reminded me of this piece so many years ago.
16. Biddle 1981. – Kjølbye-Biddle 1972 and Kjølbye-Biddle & Page 1975, pp. 389-92.

Literature

- Biddle, Martin, *Capital at Winchester. The Vikings in England*, Else Roesdahl et al. ed., London 1981.
- Brøndsted, J., *Early English ornament*. London and København 1924.

- Holmqvist, W., Viking Art in the eleventh century. Acta Arch. XXII 1951.
- Horn Fuglesang, S., Some Aspects of the Ringerike Style, Medieval Scandinavia Supplements 1. Odense 1980.
- Kendrick, T.D., Late Saxon and viking Art. London 1949.
- Kjølbye-Biddle, Birthe, En metodisk vurdering af Winchesterudgravningen og muligheden for en påvisning af dansk indflydelse her i sen vikingetid. Unpublished magisterial thesis. Aarhus Universitet 1972.
- Kjølbye-Biddle, Birthe & R.I. Page, A Scandinavian rune-stone from Winchester. Antiquaries Journal 55:2. 1975.
- Klindt-Jensen, O., & D.M. Wilson: Viking Art. London 1966.
- Shetelig, H., The Norse style of ornamentation in the Viking settlements. Acta Arch, XIX, 1948.
- Smith, R.A., Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of London. 2nd ser., XXIII. 1911.
- Smith, R.A., A Guide to Anglo-Saxon Antiquities. British Museum, 1923.