

Eötvös Loránd University  
Faculty of Humanities

PHD THESIS

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FLORAL PATTERNS IN THE LATE-AVAR DECORATIVE ART

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## I. Research background and objectives

In quest of the Avars there was a change in the western research from the 1980's, then in the Hungarian one from the beginning of the 90's as well. While, earlier, the Avar period was seen at most "eastern", steppe nomad, or, in point of the late-Avar period it was looked at mostly in the frame of the Carpathian Basin, then from the 1990's the Avar material culture was reckoned to be a Byzantine phenomenon on the verge.

Recognizing that the culture of Byzantium, or rather of the Mediterranean had great influence on people living in the area of the Basin of the Mediterranean Sea, came together with the centre-approach of the periphery's cultural phenomena. The tendency, the principle of which is the centre-periphery model, has had great importance so far, its program of work uses the approach even in its title. (*Die Awaren am Rand der byzantinischen Welt*, Ed. Falko Daim, 2000).

To some extent the result of the approach implied by the prevailing research stream is that, for today, the Avar and the late-Avar material culture were reliably settled among the Mediterranean-Byzantine coherencies. Therefore this thesis can use as a documented fact that the ancient tradition prevails in the late-Avar ornamentation, and that it is a part of a Mediterranean koine.

Thus the goal of my work was not to collect more data to the Mediterranean-Byzantine roots of the Avar and late-Avar ornamental material culture, but to elaborate, as far as possible, the details of a picture drawn universally for today.

After realizing the importance of Byzantine culture and ornamentation the archaeological research has to proceed to the regional differences of the ancient tradition and, as far as possible, to stylistic, qualitative aspects. By means of these aspects, the examination of ornamentation's cultural concerns, and sociological and identity formation role can be possible.

In case of the areas located in the periphery of the Mediterranean the work is more complicated: beside the examination of the Mediterranean trends, in case of the material cultures setting on the margin it is important to differentiate their own characteristics and the feature from the centres beyond the Basin of the Mediterranean Sea. The great influence of the Mediterranean area constituting geographically the Carpathian Basin makes the distinction of such cultural components in the examined region convoluted, in some eras almost impossible.

Contrary to the centre-periphery aspect, which studies the phenomena in the margin of the Mediterranean area from the centre, there can exist other aspects as well, particularly in the circumstances of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. In the 8<sup>th</sup> century while the Byzantium-based Mediterranean was weakening, its peripheries started to get independent partially. Practically the Carpathian Basin was taking part in that process where - after the segmentation of the Mediterranean - some regions showed many particular characteristics in material culture after the Byzantine hegemony in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

In the examination of the late-Avar ornamentation, which can be dated to the decline of Byzantium, we can talk about a centre-centre model complementing the service of the centre-periphery one. Moreover we have to make an attempt to another examination which considers each periphery as an independent unit and compares their characteristics. Especially, as from the second half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century till the 9<sup>th</sup> century, so almost completely in the existence of the late-Avar material culture, the material culture of the non-Islamic Mediterranean is unknown to us apart from few exceptions.

The objective of the dissertation is to elaborate the floral components of this dark-aged, outlying area's ornamentation. I had to restrict the analysis due to the expansive question. As the late-Avar era used an ornamental material culture, which was united to previously unknown extent, and composed many characteristics specified in the Carpathian Basin, on one hand the examination of the trends in the frame of the whole Avar culture and on the other hand the relations of the European-Mediterranean and – in a small part – of the steppe were centred in the analysis.

## II. Method

The assumption of the analysis was ensured by classification of the floral ornamentation in the given subject. The system of the classification is based primarily on patterns, and secondly on the differentiation of the elements drawn on it. As the author of this thesis is an archaeologist, he is using analogies in the formal analysis. Excluding some very reasonable cases, for the sake of the avoidance of anachronisms I collected the quoted, comparative materials beyond the Carpathian Basin according to synchrony approach from the late antiquity to the early Middle Ages. Defining the frames of the time period I followed the periodisation based on Alois Riegl's definition which was the most commonly used in other works specialized in ornamental arts. (from the Fall of Rome till - implicitly in my case - the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century as it is the end of the Avar era.)

Because of the goals I set, some important research fields as the inner relations of the Carpathian Basin and regional differences in the Avar era, or the connection of the late-Avar findings to classes of society were neglected. But, on the other hand, to achieve my goals, I needed to widen the study object into two ways. Through the examination of moulding techniques we got closer to the lives of such workshops which made these materials; and, what is more, in the sake of recognizing the trends and relations of the Avar ornamentation, it was necessary to complement the interpretation of the rather – regarding iconography - neutral floral patterns with certain elements of the figural ornamentation.

In the previous years, science methods are primary in the examination of most archaeological items. The PhD thesis, when does not deal directly with comparative analysis of floral patterns, would like to – with using the “Dreisäulenmodell” by Falko Daim – get closer to the ornamentation, or rather the origin of the materials having it on them.

## III. Results

### 1. A Mediterranean crisis indication: the late-Avar culture

In parallel with writing the thesis, by experimental tested examinations it was managed to draw a conclusion for the system and infrastructure of casting in bronze in the Carpathian Basin. The extensive nature of the reconstructed system explains that though it was technically possible to make almost infinite numbers of the same object, we can find such examples only among a single set of mounting. Thanks to the constant re-modelling the material culture of the late-Avar era shows a very diverse picture through the typologically same objects.

In contrast with the Byzantine design elite culture in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, or the pieces imitating that with the same typological characteristics but using a cheaper quality material, the material culture based on the cast pieces of the 8<sup>th</sup> century is a relapse. This phenomenon is not confined to the Carpathian Basin. That the casting technology came to the front in the Mediterranean was a part of a decadent process, which could be accompanied by the decline of the Byzantine centre's importance. As the earlier cultural unit similar to the Mediterranean

fell apart, moulding was applied in a wider range of the material culture. The moulding did not demand so much special technical experience compared to other, more complex plate and goldsmith works; moreover it was an extensive phenomenon showing symptoms of the segmentation of adjacent regions.

This tendency reached the Mediterranean peripheries. The moulding trend spread locally fast and in a much wider range among the people living in the Northern periphery, which is rather familiar to the author of the thesis, than in the Mediterranean native country of the trend.

While the relations were weakening significantly, relatively independent border cultures like the late-Avar one were coming into existence, which were also influenced by the centres beyond the Basin of the Mediterranean Sea. Therefore the spread of moulding in bronze is functionally related to the late-Avar development and rather they are the two aspects of the same process.

## 2. The phases of the late-Avar ornamentation

The late-Avar ornamental art can be divided into four, formally and chronologically well separated phases.

a) The Late-Avar Animal Style. The first period of the late-Avar era used figural ornamentation. Beside the quadrupedal mostly griffin predators, there are floral designs being only simple constructed circular lobe ornaments. Their most common design is drawn on the simple stem, filling the cycles of the scroll ornament and applying large circular leaves. Beside them mostly a certain type of a floral palmette is used by the ornamentation of the first half of the late Avar era. Its main types compose one in the whole Carpathian Basin united and locally marked ornamentation which is the first independent ornamental style in the late-Avar era.

According to Volker Bierbrauer in place of „griffin and trendil style” the definition Late-Avar Animal Style is used in the dissertation.

In the first half of the late-Avar era the animal figures, the types of foliated scroll with half-palmettes and the designs in some cases can be all found in the approximately contemporary Mediterranean Byzantine or – related to this – in the western Mediterranean and also in the early Muslim ornamental art. However, the application of the pattern and motif variations in the Carpathian Basin bears a number of unique and – to the Mediterranean culture – unfamiliar elements. Contrary to the Mediterranean half-palmettes consisting of more elements with similar significance, the traces of the circular lobe’s large leaves can be found more frequently in the Eastern European or Central Asian ornamental arts. However, the Avar variation of the “floral palmette” being a composite motif was influenced by Central Asian – Silk-road cultures, nonetheless the lobular arch of these floral palmettes is as being angle-filling of palmette-designs a well-known element of the Mediterranean decorative art. According to, on one hand, the simplicity of the floral elements and, on the other hand, the figural domination of the late-Avar animal style could have been influenced by a nomadic taste.

The taste producing the late-Avar animal style and some elements of the ornamental knowledge could have met hypothetically in the Central Asian steppes close to the high civilizations. But for the knowledge of the Avar ornamental arts the Carpathian Basin provided the opportunity to appear. After the poor, nomadic material cultures, the late-Avar, varied and large cast-bronze materials cannot be defined without the Mediterranean and European environment. According to the examples rarely known, around the turn of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries a trend existed in Byzantium and in its peripheries which similarly to the

late-Avar animal style preferred figural motifs. The late-Avar animal style could fulfil in the environment of a randomly consistent, Mediterranean trend which provided its motifs as griffins or quadpedal predators. The received motifs were adapted by the environment of the Carpathian Basin, while a number of elements (birds, floral elements e.g. ivy scroll) were neglected. The complex figural scenes are good examples for the fertile influence and sample of the Mediterranean culture on motifs: at the same time these scenes indicate how innovatively the late-Avar animal style could not only transform but also apply those pictures in its own environment which had not occurred on any identical medium types - like belt mountings - in the Mediterranean native land.

#### b) Late Antique Sphere

In the second half of its application the late-Avar animal style loosened, changed. In the background of this process there was a wide spread in the Carpathian Basin of late antique kind floral and figural motifs, patterns, decorative elements and object types which were unambiguously originated from the Mediterranean in the middle third of the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

Contrary to the method in the previous times symmetrical palmettes, natural and diversified floral motifs, new objects like wide, shield-shaped mountings; binding, cased strap-ends and other decorative elements (structured framing of a design/pattern and an object) formed such complex units which were imitated more or less unchanged by the Avars.

The formal diversity and variety of the Late Antique Sphere proves that the late-Avar environment was not able to adapt the Carpathian Basin trend as well as it had been to the circular-lobe ornamentation. It could not alter but rather ruin or fade some elements.

Incapability of the Avar to adapt the late antique objects shows that these objects under quality did not spread on some areas in the Carpathian Basin (mostly on the Great Plain): the - - according to the era - more complex and often symmetrical lobe patterns were applied on the variants of the new-type but simple objects in the eastern areas of the Danube.

#### c) Geometrical Circular Lobe Style

In the second half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century a united decorative style came into being in the Carpathian Basin originated again from the late Avars. Contrary to the Late Antique Sphere the circular lobe patterns are based on one circular lobe leaf which fully fills only the scroll ornament cycle. As they consist of plane-cut, schematized leaf hitches, I will refer to the patterns as Geometrical Circular Lobe Style to distinguish them from circular lobes of the Late Avar Animal Style. The ornamentation of the Geometrical Circular Lobe Style suits the preference of Late Avar Animal Style without its natural character or figural decoration.

Despite their typical Avar appearance, analogies of the geometrical circular lobe patterns can be found in the Mediterranean Sea Basin, from Hispania to the Caucasus. Their general characteristic is that they favour symmetrical patterns in contrast with the Avar style. Regarding the cycle designs there is another difference between the two styles. Contrary to the extraordinary circular lobe leaves in the Avar variation, the Mediterranean patterns consist of 2 or 3 half-palmettes with similar-size leaves. Their more complex character comes across against the Avar variation: in the Mediterranean they are reckoned as rather simple patterns. Ornamentation based on the geometrical circular lobe hitches flourished only after the Avar era, between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries: in this respect the patterns of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries are regarded rather modern.

The simplicity in the Avar variation bears that kind of a flavour which developed the late-Avar Animal Style. Regarding the circular lobe patterns an adaptation which can be linked to the steppe nomad level of the Avar exerted an influence on a Mediterranean ornamental trend. Similarly to the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, in this case also the Avar

environment could - to its own image - form a Mediterranean trend being seemingly close to the reconstructed Avar taste. It developed a characteristically Avar decorative style which was typical of the second period of the Avar ornamental art.

#### d) The graved-punched Sphere and “end-Avar” Horizon

At the end of the late-Avar era, the trace of the adaptive effect which previously had developed a decorative art twice in the Carpathian Basin largely disappeared again. The last period of the Avar decorative art can be characterized again as multi-coloured, which could have been observed between the two great circular lobe periods in the Late Antique Sphere.

Around the turn of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries graved-punched, drop-shaped leaf patterns, ‘Stäbchenranke’-designs and the Sobor-Kiskőrös Group formed closely related, but by the relief, ornamentation and object-types well-structured, mostly parallel used decorative horizons.

### 3. Conclusions: European processes in the background of the late Avar ornamental art

The circular lobe ornamentation was by its quantitative aspects in the late Avar animal style and in the style of geometrical lobe ornaments a specific feature of the Carpathian Basin and of the Avar, although nearly every aspect has its analogies in the Mediterranean. Both of the horizons using the circular lobe ornament as primary floral pattern were able to create an independent quality – a decorative art of their own.

While separated by the style of geometrised lobe ornaments in the Carpathian Basin, the two horizons of various ornamentation are closely related to each other by a number of patterns and motifs. The substantive relationship is proved, beyond a large series of common motifs, by a preference for symmetrical palmette-patterns, the lily-like patterns and the ‘Lilienzier’, and by the affinity for geometrical patterns (twisted ribbons). However, there are relevant differences between the two horizons.

The most significant difference in their relations to naturalism and floralgeometrical designs. In the earlier, late antique horizon the geometrical patterns are often hidden by the relatively large, natural-like floral elements. The decorative art of the last late Avar period designed more, smaller and mostly geometrised floral elements in a pattern-field of the same size. Beside the trend of the floralgeometrisation the design of the pattern was more and more accentuated – instead of real connecting elements, like tendrils, the cohesion of the design was ensued by the symmetrical structure of the motifs.

Mediterranean parallels can be found beyond all four phases of decorative art separable in the Avar territory. In cases of the late Avar animal style and the style of geometrised lobe ornaments these parallels are rather premises, on those bases the milieu of the Carpathian Basin produced a new quality. However, in cases of the late antique horizon and the ‘end-Avar’ phase we can detect exact analogies to our objects among artefacts prepared in Byzantium or in the Mediterranean (see the belt-mount originated from the middle third of the 8<sup>th</sup> century and found in Kiskundorozsma; see also a wider range of analogies from the turn of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries; the most important of them are probably the findings in Hohenberg).

Accordingly in the phases of the late-Avar ornamental art, when an independent decorative art – simultaneously belonging also to the Mediterranean structure – came into existence in the Carpathian Basin, it had just more or less remote parallels in the Mediterranean. Quite the contrary, when the late-Avar decorative art was unable to adapt, or to transform the used forms to its own image, we can certainly find their close antecedents in the Mediterranean regions mostly in the surroundings of the Avar territory.

Therefore as far as I am concerned the four trends reflecting in the late-Avar decorative art are not the own innovations of the late-Avar Carpathian Basin. Their native land could be found in any region of the Mediterranean which is related to the Carpathian Basin. Accordingly, the geometrising process of the floral ornamental art in the 8<sup>th</sup> century responds to the Mediterranean trends, though it may also have some regional characteristics.

There are traces of several independent ornamental traditions of form existing approximately at the same time through the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Mediterranean material culture, reflected by the objects of personal use. It was ambiguous in view of the dating difficulties and the great geographical distances among the sporadically survived records, whether the analogous pieces belonged to the same time-bound trends ('modes') or they did not. The trends reconstructed by the Avar appearance of these common ornamental arts were well-embedded into the processes of the Mediterranean. For this reason the late-Avar decorative art, which was multitudinous and chronologically well-divided may have a significant contribution to the cognition of the 'dark-ages' of the Mediterranean in the late antiquity and early Middle Ages. The late-Avar ornamental art was not a separated phenomenon intelligible in the environment of the Carpathian Basin, but a loop in the chain connecting the antiquity and the early medieval Europe.

Publications of the author connected with the thesis:

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