

The Facial Lappet of the Great Beast in Viking Art: Comparative Anatomy Solves an Art History Mystery

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Abstract: A common motif in Scandinavian and related art from the Viking age is the image of a quadruped that modern scholars call the Great Beast. The Great Beast is usually depicted with a facial lappet, the anatomical significance of which has been enigmatic before now. Modern scholars sometimes call it a lip-lappet, due to the impression that it seems to emanate from the upper lip. Here, I show that it is a stylized representation of part of the nose. Specifically, it represents the alar fold of the rhinarium, the hairless nasal appendage of mammals.

Keywords: Great Beast, lappet, Viking art, Scandinavia, rhinarium, anatomy.

Introduction

Scandinavian and Scandinavian-derived art of the Viking age (8th–11th c.) underwent a progression of styles that modern scholars now call the Oseberg style (c. 800–c. 875), Borre style (c. 850–c. 950), Jellinge style (c. 900–c. 950), Mammen style (c. 950–c. 1000), Ringerike style (c. 1000–c. 1050), and Urnes style (c. 1040–c. 1170)¹ (Fig. 1). Art of the Mammen through

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¹ David M. Wilson, Ole Klindt-Jensen, *Viking Art*, Ithaca, Allen and Unwin, 1966; Signe Horn Fuglesang, “Stylistic Groups in Late Viking and Early Romanesque Art”, *Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia, Serie Altera in 8°*, Vol. 1, 1981, pp. 79–125; Signe Horn Fuglesang, “Early Viking Art,” *Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia, Serie Altera in 8°*, Vol. 2, 1982, pp. 125–173; David M. Wilson, “The Development of Viking Art”, in Brink, Stefan (ed.), *The Viking World*, London, Routledge, 2008, pp. 323–338; Jane Kershaw, “Viking-age Scandinavian Art Styles and Their Appearance in the British Isles. Part 2: Late Viking-age Art Styles”, *Finds Research Group Datasheets*, Vol. 43, 2010, pp. 1–8; James Graham-Campbell, *Viking Art*, London, Thames and Hudson, 2021. The dates given here are a combination of those from David M. Wilson, “The Development of Viking Art”, *op. cit.* and James Graham-Campbell, *Viking Art, op. cit.* Cf. dates in Michael Müller-Wile, “Tierstile des 8.–12. Jahrhunderts im Norden Europas. Dendrochronologie und kunsthistorische Einordnung”, in Müller-Wile, Michael, Larsson, Lars Olaf (eds.), *Tiere, Menschen, Götter: Wikingerzeitliche Kunststile und ihre neuzeitliche Rezeption*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2001, pp. 215–250 (in which the date of

Urnes Styles includes numerous images of a quadrupedal creature that is often shown entangled with one or more serpents. Modern scholars often call this quadruped the Great Beast, a term that Johannes Brøndsted introduced for it in 1924.² The Great Beast usually sports a moustache-like appendage that is sometimes called a lip-lappet³ (Fig. 1f–l). The anatomical significance of the appendage has thus far been obscure, and scholars who note its presence typically do so without advancing a hypothesis as to what it represents.⁴ An exception is Anne-Sofie Gräslund, who called it a *nosfliken* (Swedish for “nose flap”), thereby advancing a hypothesis that the lappet represents part of the nose.⁵ The lappet’s location often suggests mammalian whiskers or the chemosensory barbels of certain fishes, e.g. carp or catfish, but potential hypotheses as to what it represents have not yet been investigated. Here, I present an investigation into the anatomical identity of this lappet.

Anatomy of the facial lappet

The earliest recognizable Viking representation of the Great Beast occurs on the Jelling Stone, a Mammen style monument of the Danish king Harald Bluetooth, (Fig. 1f), who reigned c. 958–986.⁶ The beast’s snout bears a facial lappet that starts at the snout’s anterodorsal (upper front) corner and extends dorsally over the nostril, then turns ventrally (downward) and terminates at the edge of the upper lip (Fig. 1f). A similar facial lappet occurs on an animal rendered in the Jellinge style on a silver cup from the burial

1060–1070 for the later ‘Urnes’ style may refer to art of the ‘Urnes-Romanesque’ style of other authors).

² Johannes Brøndsted, *Early English Ornament*, London, Hachette, 1924, pp. 284–295, 302–303.

³ Anne-Sofie Gräslund, “Dating the Swedish Viking-age Rune Stones on Stylistic Grounds”, in Stocklund, Marie, Lerche Nielsen, Michael, Holmberg, Bente, Fellows-Jensen, Gillian (eds.), *Runes and Their Secrets: Studies in Runology*, Copenhagen, Museum Tusculanum Press, 2006, pp. 117–139; David M. Wilson, “The Development of Viking Art”, *op. cit.*; Jane Kershaw, “Viking-age Scandinavian Art Styles...”, *op. cit.*, p. 5; Anders Winroth, *The Conversion of Scandinavia: Vikings, Merchants, and Missionaries in the Remaking of Northern Europe*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2012, p. 69; James Graham-Campbell, *Viking Art*, *op. cit.*, pp. 127, 132.

⁴ David M. Wilson, Ole Klindt-Jensen, *Viking Art*, Ithaca, Allen and Unwin, 1966, pp. 69, 96–99, 104, 112, 120–121, 125, 147, 151, 154, 157, 159; Richard N. Bailey, *Viking Age Sculpture in Northern England*, London, Collins, 1980, p. 55; Anne-Sofie Gräslund, “Dating the Swedish Viking-age Rune Stones...”, *op. cit.*; David M. Wilson, “The Development of Viking Art”, *op. cit.*, p. 332; Jane Kershaw, “Viking-age Scandinavian Art Styles...”, *op. cit.*, pp. 1, 2, 3, 5; Anne-Sofie Gräslund, “The Late Viking Age Runestones of Västergötland. On Ornamentation and Chronology”, *Lund Archaeological Review*, Vol. 20, 2014, pp. 29–53; James Graham-Campbell, *Viking Art*, *op. cit.*, pp. 83, 85, 89, 99, 119, 122, 127, 133, 141.

⁵ Anne-Sofie Gräslund, “Runstenar om Ornamentik och Datering II”, *Tor*, Vol. 24, 1992, pp. 177–201.

⁶ Johannes Brøndsted, *Early English Ornament*, *op. cit.*, pp. 282–287; James Graham-Campbell, *Viking Art*, *op. cit.*, pp. 38, 94–98.

chamber of King Gormr, Harald Bluetooth's father, in Jelling⁷ (Fig. 1e). The facial lappet on the Jelling cup beast starts at the snout's anterodorsal corner, extends dorsally over the nostril, then turns posteroventrally (rearward and downward). It terminates at the edge of the upper lip, as in the lappet of the Jelling Stone beast. The facial lappet of the Great Beast on the Bamberg and Cammin reliquaries, which are rendered in the Mammen style, also starts at the snout's anterodorsal corner, extends dorsally over the nostril, and continues posteroventrally.⁸ It extends ventrally a little beyond the edge of the upper lip (Fig. 1g, h), unlike the Jelling examples. The lappets on the two reliquary beasts are clearly homologs of those of the Jelling Stone beast and the Jelling cup beast, differing mainly in that the lappets of the two reliquary beasts are exaggerated in length.

Comparison with animal heads in Oseberg and Borre style art reveals that the facial lappets in the above examples are exaggerations of the alar fold of the rhinarium. The rhinarium, the hairless external body of soft tissue around the nostrils, is a feature unique to mammals. The part of it that curls dorsally and laterally around the nostril is the alar fold (Fig. 1a). The rhinarium, including its alar fold, is prominently and realistically depicted on the faces of wooden animal-head posts from the Oseberg ship burial, a burial that occurred in 834.⁹ The two that have been nicknamed the "Academician's animal-head post" and the "Carolingian animal-head post" are relatively realistic portrayals of predatory mammals, complete with diagnostically mammalian pinnae (ear flaps) (Fig. 1b, c). The "Carolingian" post even sports a diagnostically mammalian division of the dentition into incisors, canines, and molariform cheek teeth. The heads' morphology is too generic to precisely identify as that of a specific predatory species, but the prominence of the alar fold in both heads matches that of members of the Canidae (dog family) and Ursidae (bear family) in that the fold curls so far around the side of the nostril so that it borders the nostril's entire lateral side. This differs from the situation in the Felidae (cat family), Phocidae (seal family), Otariidae (sea lion family), and most members of the Mustelidae (weasel family), in which the alar fold borders the nostril mainly dorsally and not laterally. It is therefore plausible that the heads were meant as dog, wolf, or bear heads, if not generic predatory mammal

⁷ Torsten Capelle, "Zum Silberkelch von Jelling", *Acta Archaeologica*, Vol. 55, 1986, pp. 199–200.

⁸ David M. Wilson, Ole Klindt-Jensen, *Viking Art*, *op. cit.*, pl. LIV, LVI; Lennart Karlsson, *Nordisk Form om Djurornamentik*. Stockholm, Statens Historiska Museum, 1983, fig. 78, 79; James Graham-Campbell, *Viking Art*, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

⁹ Niels Bonde, "Dendrochronological dating of the Viking Age ship burials at Oseberg, Gokstad, and Tune, Norway", in Sinclair, Anthony, Slater, Elizabeth, Gowlett, John (eds.), *Archaeological Sciences 1995: Proceedings of a Conference on the Application of Scientific Techniques to the Study of Archaeology*, Oxford, Oxbow, 1997, pp. 195–200, at p. 197.

heads. Whether or not this is the case, it is at least evident that the morphology of the rhinarium in both cases was modeled after that of a canid or bear.



Fig. 1. Lappets in Viking art of the Oseberg style (b, c), Borre style (d), Jellinge style (e), Mammen style (f–h), Ringerike style (i, j), and Urnes style (k, l), including depictions of the Great Beast (f–l), with yellow indicating the alar fold of the rhinarium and its iconographic homologs, and with blue indicating the jowl and its iconographic homologs. (a) Domestic dog. (b) “Academician’s post,” from Oseberg ship burial, early 9th c. (c) “Carolingian post,” from Oseberg ship burial, early 9th c. (d) Wooden carvings from Gokstad ship burial, c. 900. (e) Jelling cup, late 10th c. (f) Jelling Stone, late 10th c. (g) Bamberg reliquary, late 10th c. (h) Cammin reliquary, late 10th c. (i) Heggen vane, early 11th c. (j) Söderala vane, early 11th c. (k) Urnes stave church portal (currently on the north side of the building), late 11th c. (l) Urnes stave church west gable, late 11th c.

Each of these two animal-head posts also sports an additional lappet that extends posteriorly from near the rhinarium and appears to represent the jowl, the whisker-bearing part of the muzzle (Fig. 1b, c). This lappet is narrow and is strongly curled at the posterior tip in the “Carolingian” head. On both heads, it is immediately dorsal to a smooth area that represents the gingiva (gum), which supports the hypothesis that it represents the jowl.

Further stylization of both kinds of lappets occurs on artifacts from the Gokstad ship burial, a burial that occurred between 900 and 905.¹⁰ Artifacts from the burial include several carved wooden animal heads of the Borre style.¹¹ On the snout of each is a rostral lappet that starts at the snout’s anterodorsal corner and curls dorsally over the nostril, which identifies it as a stylized homolog of the alar fold (Fig. 1d). Each head also bears a narrow lappet that extends posteriorly from the muzzle and is curled at the tip in some cases. It appears to be a posteriorly displaced homolog of the jowl lappet in the animal-head posts from the Oseberg ship burial.

The facial lappet of the Jelling cup beast and of the Great Beast on the Jelling Stone is clearly the homolog of the lappet that represents the alar fold in the Borre style carvings, and not of the lappet that appears to represent the jowl. The facial lappet of the Great Beast on the two Mammen style reliquaries is also a homolog of the alar fold lappet and differs from that of the Jelling cup beast and the Jelling Stone Great Beast mainly in that it is exaggerated in length (Fig. 1f, g). All of this indicates that the facial lappet of the Great Beast in Mammen style art is a stylized depiction of the alar fold of the rhinarium. The term “lip-lappet” is therefore a misnomer, and it could be more accurately called a nasal lappet, a snout lappet, a muzzle lappet, or—with more generic wording—a facial lappet.

The Great Beast’s facial lappet evolved further in subsequent styles. In the Ringerike style, it is often rendered such that it terminates in two posteroventral lobes instead of one (Fig. 1i, j), and it may be narrow and elongated¹² (Fig. 1j). In the Urnes style, the narrowness and elongation of the lappet are taken to the extreme, and its tip usually extends posteroventrally beyond the ventral edge of the upper jaw¹³ (Fig. 1k, l). In all Viking styles, the facial lappet begins at the anterodorsal corner of the snout and arches over the

¹⁰ Niels Bonde, “Dendrochronological dating...”, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

¹¹ Nicolay Nicolaysen, *The Viking-ship Discovered in Gokstad in Norway*, Oslo, Cammermeyer, 1882, pl. VI, XI.

¹² David M. Wilson, Ole Klindt-Jensen, *Viking Art*, *op. cit.*, fig. 61, 62; Lennart Karlsson, *Nordisk Form om Djurornamentik*, *op. cit.*, fig. 80, 82, 95; James Graham-Campbell, *Viking Art*, *op. cit.*, pp. 132, 140.

¹³ David M. Wilson, Ole Klindt-Jensen, *Viking Art*, *op. cit.*, fig. 66, pl. LVIII, LIX, LXIX; Lennart Karlsson, *Nordisk Form om Djurornamentik*, *op. cit.*, fig. 107, 108; James Graham-Campbell, *Viking Art*, *op. cit.*, pp. 151, 152, 161, 162.

nostril, in keeping with its origin as an exaggerated representation of the alar fold of the rhinarium.

Concluding thoughts

Biological disciplines and concepts can be useful in the study and interpretation of the animal iconography of past cultures. As shown here, the zoological discipline of comparative anatomy can be used to solve such mysteries as the origin of the Great Beast's facial lappet. The realization that the lappet was meant as part of a nose and not a lip changes the way we view the face of the Great Beast in the art of the Vikings, bringing us a step closer to understanding the beast as it was understood by those who produced and used the art that incorporates its image.

List and sources of illustrations:

Fig. 1. (a) Domestic dog (photo by author). (b) "Academician's post," from Oseberg ship burial. Source: photo by Kirsten Helgeland on Wikimedia Commons (WC), CCA-Share Alike 4.0 ([link](#)). (c) "Carolingian post," from Oseberg ship burial, Source: photo by Kirsten Helgeland on WC, CCA-Share Alike 4.0 ([link](#)). (d) Wooden carvings from Gokstad ship burial. Source: Nicolaysen 1882, pl. XI fig. 2 and 3, pl. VI fig. 1b and 2a (public domain). (e) Jelling cup. Source: photo by John Lee on WC, CCA-Share Alike 4.0 ([link](#)). (f) Jelling Stone. Source: Brøndsted 1924, fig. 198 (public domain), with inset drawing by the author. (g) Bamberg reliquary. Source: drawing by Stefan Bollmann on WC, Free Art License ([link](#)). (h) Cammin reliquary: Source: drawing by Stefan Bollmann on WC, Free Art License ([link](#)). (i) Heggen vane. Source: photo by Kulturhistorisk Museum, UiO on WC, CCA-Share Alike 4.0 ([link](#)). (j) Söderala vane. Source: photo by Jens Mohr on WC, CCA-Share Alike 4.0 ([link](#)). (k) Urnes stave church portal (currently on the north side of the building). Source: photo by Micha L. Reiser on WC, Free Art License ([link](#)). (l) Urnes stave church west gable. Source: drawn by the author after photo by Peter Andreas Blix on WC (public domain) ([link](#)).

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