

Objects and motifs. On visual communication in the Avar Empire

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Zusammenfassung

Objekte und Motive. Zur visuellen Kommunikation im Awarenreich

Heute wie in der Vergangenheit erfolgt ein Großteil der sozialen Kommunikation nonverbal. Der vorliegende Beitrag beleuchtet vor allem einen Aspekt daraus: die Verständigung mittels Bildern und Symbolen. Als Bestandteil gesellschaftlicher Codes können sie Gruppenidentitäten verstärken; viele funktionieren auch über Kulturgrenzen hinweg, andere werden jedoch missverstanden oder neuinterpretiert. Die Analyse von Bilderwelten kann einen Beitrag leisten, die Gedankenwelt einer Gesellschaft zu verstehen.

Die vorliegende Arbeit thematisiert zunächst kurz die soziale Kommunikation mittels Bildern und Symbolen, und versucht in der Folge, anhand einiger Beispiele der reichen archäologischen Hinterlassenschaften der Awaren im Karpatenbecken (567/568 bis ca. 800) zu zeigen, wie Bilder und Symbole innerhalb und auch über die Herrschaftsgrenzen hinaus arbeiten.

Summary

Today, as in the past, a large part of social communication is non-verbal. The present paper especially highlights one aspect of this: the communication through images and symbols. As element of social codes, they can reinforce group identities; many work across cultural borders, but others are misunderstood or reinterpreted. The analysis of imagery contributes to understanding a society's way of thinking.

This paper at first briefly examines the social communication through images and symbols. In the following, it seeks to demonstrate how images and symbols work within and beyond the borders of hegemony by reference to some examples from the rich archaeological legacy of the Avars in the Carpathian Basin (567/568 until c. 800).

Introduction

New scientific methods of analysis have given archaeology a considerable boost in recent decades¹. Archaeometry provides completely novel insights into the production and use of objects, while isotope and DNA analyses provide us with far-reaching information about specific individuals. Before now, only conventional anthropological observations – measurements, age, gender, pathologies – and grave furnishings could provide information about deceased individuals. An extensive interdisciplinary research project, the Synergy Grant »HistoGenes«, will attempt to describe the population history of the Carpathian Basin in the Early Medieval period, based on 6,000 paleogenetic investigations and numerous isotope analyses. When completed, the study will also have global-historic relevance, as it will reveal the multiple connections, the constant sequence of lesser and greater migrations, and the kinship relations among human groups.

However, it makes sense and is also necessary to negotiate the micro level – the level of everyday praxis – even in areas that are traditionally the domain of antiquarian

archaeology. This involves, for example, the meticulous characterisation of groups, the detailed study of processes, of social and cultural changes at the deepest level: everyday human existence. The present contribution aims to take a small step in this direction. Since the Avars were a non-literate people, one of the few ways to approach the micro level is through their imagery. Here, we examine non-verbal communication through images and symbols seen in the Avar realm, using some examples from our research.

The Avar Empire as a scientific test setting

From a global perspective, the Avars are a footnote in history. However, for Byzantium, Central, and South-eastern Europe, and even for the Franks, their empire was of great importance and exhibited a considerable degree of force. Under a treaty with the Lombards, they took possession of the Carpathian Basin in 568. Their empire existed for almost a quarter of a millennium. Shortly before 800, Charlemagne led a campaign against the pagans, probably also aiming to

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incorporate the former Roman Pannonia into his empire and to capture the Avar royal treasury².

There is an immense quantity of data available for studying the history and archaeology of the Avar Empire. Numerous written sources exist for the early period up to 626 when the Avars – allied with the Sasanids – unsuccessfully besieged Constantinople, as well as for the period of Charlemagne's Avar Wars and afterwards. Above all, however, about 70,000 inhumation burials (some of them richly equipped), numerous settlements, and some hoards permit the sort of interdisciplinary studies that, for example, would not be possible for the Sarmatians or the Huns. The multi-cultural and multi-ethnic Avar kingdom is therefore ideally suited to test scientific concepts and methods.

Images and symbols convey messages

Images and symbols play a significant role in all social processes. The relevant theoretical literature diverges widely, since many disciplines, at least marginally, are devoted to this topic³. These range from sociology, philosophy, and semiotics to psychology and the historical sciences, especially art history, with its iconographic and iconological methods.

Images and symbols are very conspicuous in the representation of power by the elites. Their use has a twofold effect: internally, directed toward their subject population, and externally, aimed at other rulers.

Images and symbols also serve to demarcate and at the same time self-affirm social and cultural groups of all kinds. They contribute to making the identities visible that form along the lines of gender, age, language, religion, origin, and economic activity in a given society. Local traditions can also play a vital role⁴.

Images and symbols, therefore, have both exclusive and inclusive functions. They can help to bridge language barriers and promote the emergence of »rhizome-like cultural entanglements«⁵. A special form is represented by the images that intentionally leave open several possibilities of interpretation.

Images and symbols travel. With them, the original meaning may be carried over, or the images can be adapted – altered in content or style. In this way, new meanings may be added, or they can be changed to suit an individual taste or value system.

In the following, the Avar material will serve as an exemplar, showing how imagery was employed in communication in the Avar Empire. The examples are arranged chronologically since the forms of pictorial and symbolic communication changed according to the particular geopolitical situation.

Society and communication

A society cannot exist without rules – either broadly accepted or aggressively enforced. For humans to coexist with others a social order is needed, based on generally accepted norms of behaviour. The question of how these norms come about is the subject of numerous disciplines, discussed by historians, theologians, cultural anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, and others (e.g. Luhmann 2011, 303ff.). It is arguably undeniable that behavioural norms develop over an extended period and are thus traditionally anchored; on the other hand, though, they can also be changed. Until norms were codified, it was probably the elders or other prominent persons who transmitted traditions and whom one could ask for guidance in a specific case. The value systems and sets of rules underlying a society can be described as the »societal culture«, while also acknowledging that the concept of culture is used in very diverse ways, not least in archaeology.

Certain norms are binding for the entire population (society, community, tribe, people)⁶. The fact that »the values« of society are currently being discussed to the point of exhaustion is probably an exception. In less turbulent times »values« are hardly ever reflected upon, one simply lives by them, they are thus part of a »mentality«.

It becomes interesting when societies – with their different languages, sets of rules, value and code systems – collide with one another. Most often, this affects practical things, e.g. the shaping of relationships. The term »double contingency« describes the negotiation process of aligning (so far as possible) the other side's expectations and one's own contributions (Parsons et al. 1951, 16; Luhmann 2011, 305). The approach also works in conflict situations. Niklas Luhmann's remark (2011, 307) that »the emergence of common values or undisputed common points may only be secondary« is important in this context. It can be assumed that in this phase of intercultural contacts, provided they are peaceful, there exists an acceptance of the foreign culture's otherness. One is confronted with terms, symbols, and images that may arouse curiosity, but one does not (yet) understand their meaning. Could it be that this interpretational space actually encourages the creation of new things?

Images serve to transport meaning (Luhmann 2008, 123). These range from general significance, like group affiliation, to specific messages like »Our khagan is the greatest of all mounted warriors«. Complex images can contain statements on different levels that may be deciphered or overlooked by viewers, depending on their level of education (Bourdieu 1974, 159ff.). Sometimes this can lead to misunderstandings, but it can also be used positively, especially in intercultural areas: bridges can be built with the help of syncretisms, e.g. if the image of a bearded man can be understood as Christ, but also as Wotan⁷.

2 On the history of the Avars see Pohl 2018. On the archaeology Bálint 1989, 147–192; Daim 2003; Vida 2008; Bálint 2019.

3 In 1983, a groundbreaking symposium was held on this topic in Marburg an der Lahn: Roth 1986.

4 To treat symbolic communication in terms of actions (rites, customs) would go beyond the scope of the present work. See Althoff 2013.

5 In 2012–16, an interdisciplinary network funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft devoted itself to cultural »entanglements«: Christ et al. 2016, in particular Mersch 2016, 188–192.

6 It would exceed the scope of this study to address the question of how norms are created or enforced.

7 This is discussed by Paulsen 1978, 13–18, concerning a gold-leaf cross with two eagles.

The Avar realm and its surroundings have bequeathed us a vibrant world of images. The multi-part belt sets, in particular, bear countless depictions of animals and hybrid creatures, but also occasionally scenes with people or portraits. There are also decorated fibulae and metal vessels, especially those from the treasure of Sănnicolau Mare/Nagyszentmiklós (Romania) with its 23 gold vessels⁸. A few images can be found on antler or bone objects, and on ceramics, as well. Pictorial textiles surely existed, and perhaps paintings and woodcarvings as well, but none have survived.

Art history and archaeology have developed a rich set of instruments for the systematic comparison and interpretation of imagery⁹. In such descriptions, a distinction must be made between form, motif, style, and production technique. Before a motif is interpreted, a formal description is carried out with particular attention to details that could indicate a shift in meaning or even a complete reinterpretation. If possible, type-representatives of the same period are compared, followed by the search for prior forms, taking into account »typological rudiments« and more recent developments.

Iconography and iconology lead a shadowy existence in the archaeology of the Avar Empire. In 1929 Nándor Fettich (1929) made initial attempts to interpret the images on Late Avar belt sets. His monograph has excellent, large-format photographs, which often also show the reverse sides of the objects, allowing conclusions to be drawn about the technique used to produce them. Gyula László published a popular overview of Avar »art« in 1970, and the most detailed study of the iconography of Late Avar belt ornaments to date is the work of Ján Dekan. It is still worth reading, not only because of his profound expertise (Dekan 1972). In 2007 Gábor Fancsalszky published a monograph on the »Tiere- und Menschendarstellungen auf spätawarischen gegossenen Gürtelbeschlägen« (Representations of Animals and Humans on Late Avar Cast Belt Fittings) with a detailed typology of the belt parts and depictions. The »Handbuch zur Geschichte der Kunst in Ostmitteleuropa« (Handbook of the History of Art in Eastern Central Europe), published in Leipzig, provides a brief overview of the Avar legacy and deals in greater detail with selected exemplary objects (Daim 2017; Lübke/Hardt 2017). Gergely Szenthe (2020) recently presented an extensive examination of the belts with vegetal ornamentation of the Late Avar period.

Can the study of this world of images and symbols provide insight not only into cultural developments within the Avar Empire but also into their relations with neighbouring entities? Let us test this on the basis of some case studies.

The Early and Middle Avar Empire

Soon after the Avars and their allies settled in the Carpathian Basin, they began to conduct raids along the Balkan

border of Byzantium. The warrior bands included allies who immigrated with the Avars from the East, local groups such as late-antique Romans, stay-behind Lombards and Gepids, as well as combatants from many parts of Europe, probably also from the Baltic region and the Frankish Empire (Vida 2008a; Vida 2018).

To some extent, this mixture of peoples can be recognised in the archaeological record, which shows for the first half of the 7th century an amazing cultural diversity (Vida 2008a).

In 626, the Avars and their allies, which included the Sasanid Persians, even attempted to conquer the eastern Roman capital, Constantinople. However, the Theodosian Land Walls held firm, and the Byzantine fleet managed to prevent the Persian forces from crossing the Bosphorus. For the Avar khagan, the defeat was a catastrophe – his fate is unclear. At the very least, we read of power struggles involving the leadership. The Avar Empire survived the crisis, but the raids had to stop; a cultural change began, which lasted until the second half of the 7th century. From 626 on, the previously so eloquent written sources remain silent (Pohl 2018).

The western connection: Merovingians and Franks in Pannonia

In the Carpathian Basin, the seizure of power by the Avars after the Lombards' departure for Italy will have taken place rapidly, but the settlement of the vast territory by the Avars and their allies was a longer process. The encounter between the newcomers and the remaining local population, provincial Romans, and various Germanic groups who had remained in the area, led to mutual adaptations. However, immigrants from western and even northern Europe may also have played an important role. Attracted by the Avars' forays into the Byzantine Empire, entire clans probably came in search of adventure and plunder. Recent research reveals an ever-clearer picture of the unholy alliances that faced off against the wealthy Eastern Roman Empire¹⁰.

In this context, it is important to differentiate the further development of local forms from novel ones, which can be traced to new contacts with the northern Italian Lombards and the Merovingian and Frankish peoples of the late 6th and early 7th centuries. This is most likely to be successful if the original forms and motifs are still recognisable and have not yet been locally changed or adapted. The so-called »Jankovich Gold« could be identified as the splendid pure gold adornment of a Merovingian spatha belt (Fig. 1)¹¹. But the inlaid iron decoration, which is found primarily in earlier Pannonia, also provides evidence for intensive intergroup contacts. So, too, the strap-end from Zamárdi (Hungary), grave 1280 (Fig. 2a–b), especially in its tiny glass inlays, shows a technical and stylistic correspondence with the buckle and the associated counter-plate from sarcophagus 11 from Saint-Denis; the latter

8 See below for the treasure of Sănnicolau Mare/Nagyszentmiklós. The gold vessels can probably be connected with the Avar elite, but this assumption is not undisputed.

9 A collection of Panofsky's publications: Panofsky 1955; Panofsky 1987; Wittkower 1987.

10 History: Pohl 2018 passim. Archaeology: Vida 2008a; Vida 2018; Vida 2018a; Daim forthcoming.

11 Daim 1987, 132; Vida 2000, 166ff.; Vida 2008; Daim 2011, 5.



Fig. 1 The so-called »Jankovich Gold«, first half of the 7th century, place of discovery unknown (Hungary), length of strap-end: 48 mm.

Abb. 1 Das sogenannte »Jankovich Gold«, erste Hälfte 7. Jh., Fundort unbekannt (Ungarn), Länge Riemenzunge: 48 mm.

Fig. 2a–b a Zamárdi (Hungary), grave 1280, strap-end with »toothcut« (Zahnschnitt) ornament, niello décor and glass inlays, first half of the 7th century, length: 98 mm; b Saint-Denis, Paris, sarcophagus 1, belt set with glass inlays, early 7th century, length of buckle: 120 mm.

Abb. 2a–b a Zamárdi (Ungarn), Grab 1280, Riemenzunge mit Zahnschnitt, Niellodekor und Glaseinlagen, erste Hälfte 7. Jh., Länge: 98 mm; b Saint-Denis, Paris, Sarkophag 1, Gürtelgarnitur mit Glaseinlagen, Anfang 7. Jh., Länge Schnalle: 120 mm.

finds were stratigraphically located above the Arnegundis Tomb and are therefore dated around 600 (Daim 2011, 5–7)¹². Such contacts must have taken place at the very highest level.

Another precious Frankish object may be the key to the so-called »toothcut« (Zahnschnitt) decoration, a Danubian variant of the »Germanic animal style«, which appears in the Carpathian Basin on belt ornaments, disc fibulae, and even on the gold fittings of the quiver in the Avar »princely grave« of Kunbábony (Hungary). With toothcut-decoration, small cross strokes are placed between double lines in groups of two or three. This decorative detail is found on the famous disc from Limons (France; Fig. 3), which is in the Cabinet des Médailles, Paris. It consists of a Christogram (Chi-Rho, Alpha-Omega) with the head of Christ in the centre, framed

by stylised boar or other faunal heads, which can also be interpreted as masks. According to Patrick Périn (2001), the disc could be a pouch fitting. As Egon Wamers has shown, the combination of the head of Christ with boar or other animal heads occurs frequently, and surely represents a complex of motifs »with a more or less fixed meaning« (Wamers 2008, 40–42) which, however, is not (yet) apparent to us. Here, the »toothcut«-decoration is nielloed; like the above-mentioned buckle set from Saint-Denis and the strap-end from Zamárdi, the disc also has almandine or glass inlays¹³. If we choose not to assume that the »toothcut« ornament was created independently and almost contemporaneously in the Frankish Empire and the Avar-period Carpathian Basin, or even that it came into the Frankish Empire from the East, then we must

12 On Zamárdi: Bárdos/Garam 2009, 165 Pl. 179.1; Arslan/Buora 2000, cat.-no. 114. On St-Denis: Fleury/France-Lanord 1998, II-26-II-34.

13 On the Limons disc, most recently Périn 2001; Wamers 2008, 40–42. On the connection with the »toothcut« in the Carpathian Basin of the Avar period see Daim 2011, 7.

In general on »toothcut« in the Carpathian Basin Heinrich-Tamáška 2006.



Fig. 3 Limons (France), gold disc with head of Christ and niello, garnet inlays and »toothcut« decoration, early 7th century, diameter: 63 mm.

Abb. 3 Limons (Frankreich), goldene Zierscheibe mit dem Haupt Christi, Niello, Granateinlagen und Zahnschnittzier, Anfang 7. Jh., Durchmesser: 63 mm.

regard it as a Frankish creation. Of course, »toothcut« is not a »message«, but it signals wide-ranging contacts through a simple and unambiguous decorative element.

Pseudo-buckle propaganda

Among the most fascinating find types from the Avar period is the so-called pseudo-buckle, a decorative fitting in the form of a non-functional buckle used to ornament multi-part belts. Major Hungarian researchers have concerned themselves with this Avar find type¹⁴, but until recently, the technical details had not been sufficiently taken into account, so it seemed necessary to re-examine the fittings and suggest new historical interpretations (Samu/Daim 2017/18).

Most of the pseudo-buckles in the Avar territory are simple specimens, formed in moulds using sheet silver (Fig. 4; Garam 1991, 2–3; Balogh/Köhegyi 2001), but we also see elaborate belts with large golden pseudo-buckles. In the Avar realm, these magnificent belts make up the Bócsa-Kunbábony group, named after two of the most important find-spots, whereby the Kunbábony tomb has the richest furnishings known from the Avar Empire up to now (Fig. 5). It was commonly assumed that the simple examples were later copies of the magnificent pieces, but now there are indications that the development occurred the other way around: at least some of the simple sheet silver fittings had backs filled with lead (or a lead-containing substance) to provide stability and anchor fastening clips. This technique is known only from very early objects.

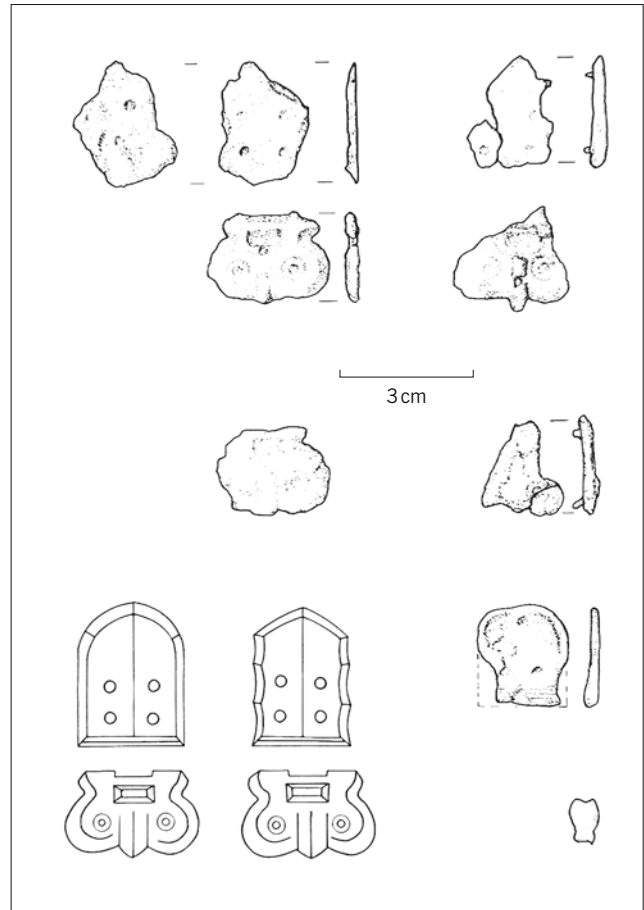


Fig. 4 Pseudo-buckles made of sheet silver from the Carpathian Basin, first half of the 7th century.

Abb. 4 Aus Silberblech gefertigte Pseudoschnallen aus dem Karpatenbecken, erste Hälfte 7. Jh.

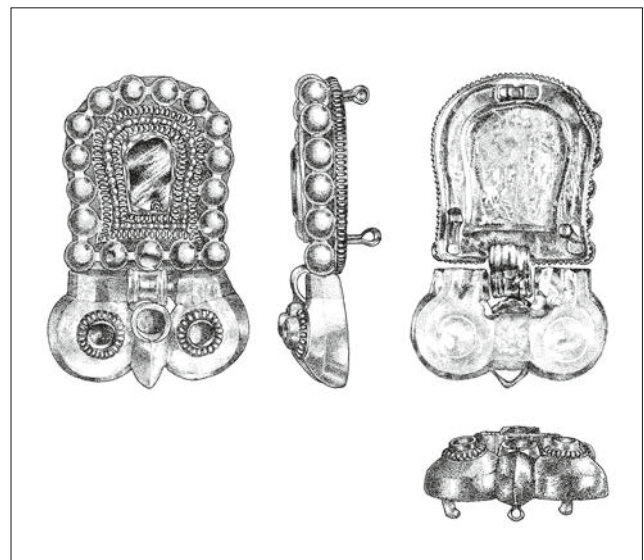


Fig. 5 Kunbábony (Hungary), gold pseudo-buckle, mid-7th century, length: 60 mm.

Abb. 5 Kunbábony (Ungarn), goldene Pseudoschnalle, Mitte 7. Jh., Länge: 60 mm.

14 László 1955, 219–285; László 1970, esp. 83
Fig. 40 with the reconstruction of the manu-

facturing process of the Tépe pseudo-buckle;
Garam 1990; Tóth/Horváth 1992.