

Nordic Art Styles

Strengthening Old Roots & Sewing New Seeds,
An independent study

by

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Nordic Art Styles

For our study into Nordic Art styles, a few points of consideration must be made:

- 1) “Nordic Art” encompasses the art styles that originated in the modern-day areas of Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Sweden, Finland and the Faroe Islands.
- 2) We will only be looking at the Nordic Art styles that existed prior to the Christianization of the regions (AD 1050 and earlier). This is due to a number of reasons:
 - A) To keep the study to a reasonable endeavour,
 - B) To look at the styles in their most genuine form as representations and expressions of the Nordic peoples and their cultures,
 - C) With the introduction and impact of the Roman Catholic Church, the regions and inhabitants were no longer able to practice their traditions or culture freely. This had a definite impact on the expression of art in those regions, dictating much of the subject matter, while also adding in the influence of various other art styles from other cultures, and
 - D) Before the Conversion, the pagan population also practiced inhumation - burying the dead with a variety of grave goods. Christianity brought an end to this practice as well, which has greatly reduced the number of archaeological evidence found in relation to this topic that dates from AD 1050 onward.
- 3) The Nordic peoples did not record history in the sense we are now familiar with; the recording of history through writing was only introduced by the Roman Catholic Church (approximately AD 1050). This lack of records leaves only surviving artefacts and archaeological sites as our window into the art of these ages, of which there are few and far in between due to the harsh elements persistent in the Nordic areas.

While individual pieces that date prior to AD 800 are indeed discovered, the digs often yield either too few specimens or too broad of a gap in previous finds to indicate any consistency of artistic styles.

- 4) While technically still pre-history, it is not until we enter the Viking Age (AD 800-1050) we find extensive archaeological evidence of artistic styles. The expansive nature of this Age resulted in a wide distribution of the developing Nordic art styles, many of which remained in environments more favourable to preservation than the local Nordic regions (England, Scotland, Ireland, Iceland, Russia, etc...). This is why, even though there is much surviving from pre-history, it is not until the Viking Age that we look at any actual consistent styles of art.
- 5) While we are solely studying the actual styles of Nordic art (which take place solely during the Viking Age), some time will be spent looking at art that existed in the ages prior to the development of these styles. This should aid the reader in understanding the foundations that led to the development of the more formal styles of this study.

1. Stone Age Art

13,500 - 1,750 BC

(Paleolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic)

Archaeological finds in the Nordic area are adequate during the Stone Age. However, the oldest materials that have survived the aging of time are almost entirely stone and purely functional in origin; if artistic decorations were once featured on these items, the traces have since worn away. It's not until the Mesolithic era, over half-way through the Nordic Stone Age, that we have surviving evidence of what we would today consider art.

I) The Saraakallio Rock Paintings

circa 4500 BC

Located in the centre of modern-day Finland, The Saraakallio rock paintings are located on a large rocky cliff next to the Keitele Canal, a central water route.¹ With the pictures numbering upwards of 200, this is the largest rock painting site the in all of Finland and, potentially, the oldest surviving in the Nordic regions. All of the paintings were done with red paint (a mix involving hematite-rich soil and blood) and contain mostly images of humans, boats and deer/elk figures.²



A descendant of a Saami shaman (noaidi) studies the Stone Age rock painting. Photo taken by Ernst Manker, 1938.

¹ Lahelma (2008).

² Jyväskylän University (2014).

II) Astuvansalmi Rock Paintings

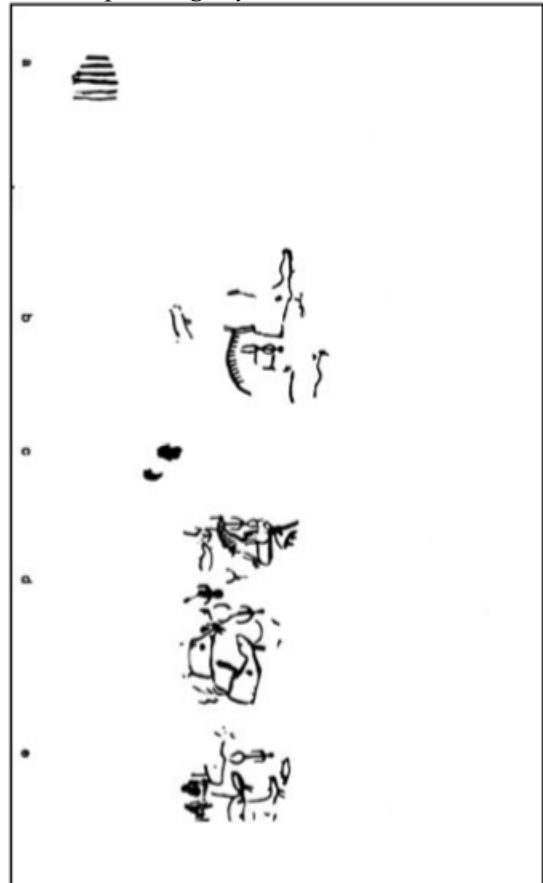
circa 3000 BC

The Astuvansalmi site is located on Lake Yövesi in southern Finland. The 66 images can be found on a steep cliff that rises out of the lakeshore.³ The cliff itself is roughly shaped like a human head and the images feature a mix of elk, humans and boats among various symbols. It is believed the images are linked to North European shamanistic tradition due to similarities in the subject matter to surviving imagery and tales of the indigenous Saami people.⁴ All but one of the 18 elk face west, and there is the rare image of a female figure with a bow, thought to be either the goddess Tellervo or Akka, a female spirit in Saami shamanism.⁵ Small amber statuettes of deity, also found at the site, reinforce this idea while giving notion that the Astuvansalmi site was used for ceremony.⁶



The “Tellervo” of Astuvansalmi, photo by Ohto Kokko.

Left half of a tracing of the Astuvansalmi paintings by Pekka Sarvas



³ Taavitsainen (1978)

⁴ Lahelma (2008)

⁵ “

⁶ Grönhagen (1991)

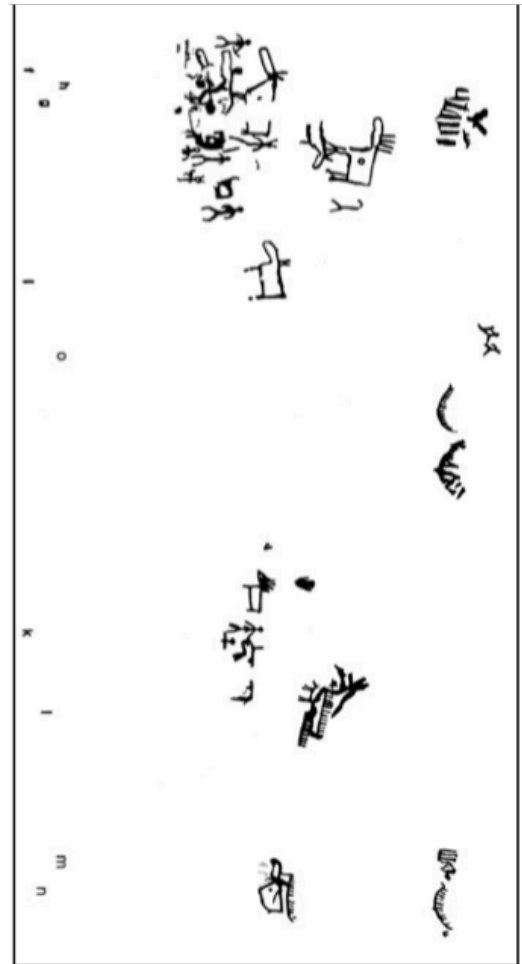
Astuvansalmi Rock Paintings (*cont...*)

One of the amber pendants found underwater in front of the Astuvansalmi paintings. Photograph by Juhani Grönhagen.



Four amber pendants found at Astuvansalmi. Photo by Antti Lahelma, drawings Charles Marin.

Right half of a tracing of the Astuvansalmi paintings by Pekka Sarvas



2. Bronze Age Art

1,700 BC - 500 BC

The Bronze Age in the Nordic regions brings with it a much larger wealth of archaeological evidence than the previous Stone Age. This gives more insight into both the day-to-day life in these regions, as well as a more fleshed out glance into the spiritual beliefs, practices and values of this age.

I) The Trundholm Sun Chariot *circa 1400 BC*



*Trundholm Sun Chariot, showing golden side of the disc.
Total size measures 21''W × 14''H × 11''D
Photograph by the The National Museum of Denmark*

Discovered in the Trundholm moor in Odsherred, Denmark, this highly detailed sculpture made from bronze can be found at the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen. One side of the bronze disc is plated with gold, and all six wheels consist of four spokes. The sculpture is thought to be a Bronze age representation of Skinfaxi, the horse that pulled Dagr, the personification of

day in Norse mythology, across the sky in a chariot.⁷

⁷ Lindow (2001)

Trundholm Sun Chariot (*cont...*)

The gold-plated side is thought to symbolize the sun's travel from East to West during the day. The four spoked wheels reinforce this idea, as the portrayal of a circle with a perfectly equilateral cross is termed the Solar Cross, or Solar Wheel, and are thought to represent the four directions, the four seasons and the continuing predictable cycles of nature.⁸ This symbol is quite common across the Bronze Age, whether it's symbolism is the same or not, and appears in many cultures, but is most commonly seen today in various Native American symbolic and decorative practices.



*Detail of the golden plating on the Trundholm Sun Chariot
Photograph by the The National Museum of Denmark*

⁸ Nilsson (1950)

II) The Lille Strandbygård Petroglyphs

circa 1000 BC

This site can be found at Lille Strandbygård in Nylars on the island of Bornholm. The sun-wheel Petroglyphs present at this site were made from compressions known as ‘cup marks’.⁹

These symbols, present with the previously discussed Trundholm Sun Chariot, are found in numerous petroglyphs from the Bronze Age in Denmark, appearing at over 100 separate sites.¹⁰



The Lille Strandbygård Petroglyphs Photo by Helga Steinreich



*Detail of the ‘cup marks’ forming multiple solar wheels.
Photo by the Tanum Museum of Rock Carvings*

⁹ Price (2015)

¹⁰ “

3. Iron Age Art

500 BC - 800 AD

The beginning of the Nordic Iron Age is characterized by the fall of the Roman Empire. This resulted in Northern Europe being flooded with resources that were previously scarce, such as gold. With this abundance came the development of interlacing figures that the Nordic regions are well-known for. Towards the end of the Nordic Iron Age (and the fall of the Western Roman Empire), the overabundance of gold had been exhausted and the regions returned to gilded bronze like in the Bronze Age before.¹¹

Zoomorphic figures are really at the forefront of the art of this age. Anatomically correct animals were the common subject matter in the early parts of the Iron Age, while their portrayal by the later parts of this age had eventually morphed into abstract animals. These initial “ribbon animals” are often referred to as ‘knot work’ and are a foundation to the future development of Viking Age art styles.

¹¹ Collis (1997)

I) The Gundestrup Cauldron

circa 100 BC

Found in a peat bog near Gundestrup in Denmark, the Gundestrup Cauldron is notable for being the earliest known piece of European silverwork. The silver cauldron, weighing just under 20 pounds, is made up of a round base, five interior plates and seven exterior plates.¹² It is important to note that the cauldron was never actually completed, with one plate being absent.



*Detail shot of the Gundestrup Cauldron. Photo by the National Museum of Denmark.
Diameter: 27" Height: 17"*

¹² Nielsen, Andersen, Baker, Christensen, Glastrup, et al. (2005)

The Gundestrup Cauldron (*cont...*)

Not much is known as to the narrative of the subject matter, except that many of the figures appear to be in conflict. It's original craftsmanship is unquestionably skilled, although the repairs administered over time are subpar in comparison.¹³ The fact that this, the oldest example present in the region of silversmithing, consists of almost 20 pounds of silver and it's unquestionable quality in craftsmanship of has led to much speculation regarding the cauldron's purpose and, to some extent, it's exact origin of creation in Northern Europe... and curiosity as to why it was never completed.



*Detail shot, some of the outside features of the Gundestrup Cauldron.
Photograph by Knud Winckelmann*

¹³ Nielsen, Andersen, Baker, Christensen, Glastrup, et al (2005)

II) Vendel Era Helmet

circa 650 AD

Found in a boat grave in Vendel, Sweden, this helmet (officially titled *Vendel I*) is one of the last examples of Nordic art prior to the Viking Age. The decorated helmet, along with other prestigious items, indicate the grave to be for a warrior of high social standing.¹⁴



*Original Vendel I helmet.
Photograph by the Museum of History in Stockholm.*



*Detail from the original Vendel I helmet portraying
two elite warriors, one a berserker.
The image could be referencing the Völsung saga.
Photograph by the Museum of History in Stockholm.*



*Recreation of the Vendel I helmet.
Photographer & re-creator unknown.*

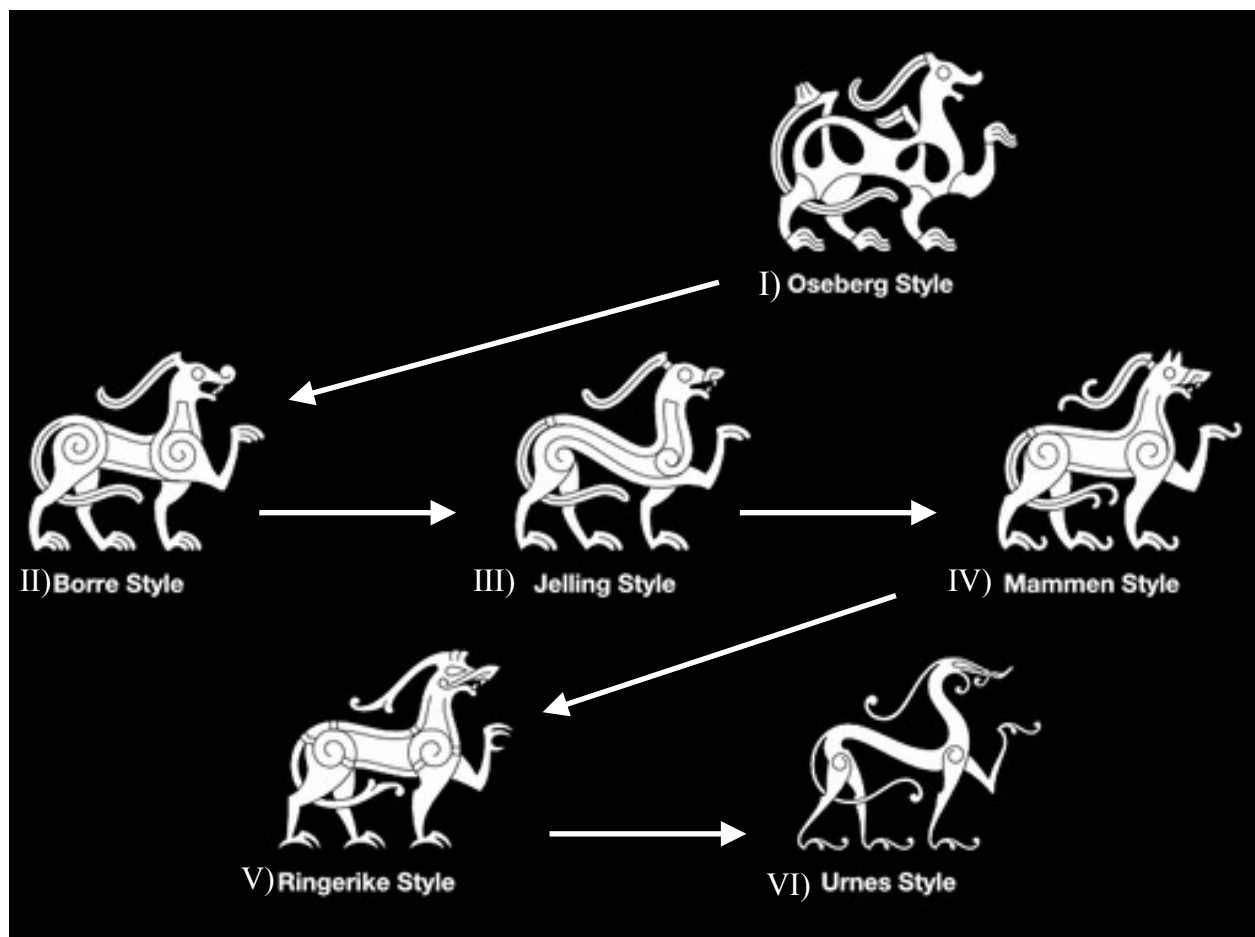
¹⁴ Jesch (2012)

4. Viking Age Art

AD 800 - 1,050

Characterized by the expansive nature of this era, the Viking Age marks the last era before the Christianization of the Nordic regions. The expansive nature of this Age resulted in a wide distribution of the developing Nordic art styles, many of which remained in environments more favourable to preservation than the local Nordic regions (England, Scotland, Ireland, Iceland, Russia, etc...). This is why, even though there is much surviving from pre-history, it is not until the Viking Age that we look at any actual consistent styles of art, many of which overlap.

— Visual Breakdown of Viking Age Art Styles —



Graphic designs by Jonas Lau Markussen. Used with permission.

I) THE OSBERG STYLE

circa AD 750 - 875



Named after the farm in Norway where the burial mound was found, the Osberg burial mound dates to AD 830, with some contents inside dating back to AD 780, indicating their creation as earlier.¹⁵

While a lifetime could be spent discussing the variety of items found in this burial site alone, the main concern for our investigation into style is the motif of the ‘gripping beast’, which is especially present in the “ribbon animals” (zoomorphic ‘knot-work’).¹⁶

While zoomorphic figures have been ever-present in Nordic art since time immemorial, and “ribbon animals” being common ever since the Nordic Iron Age, this seemingly small addition of the beasts gripping each other (or sometimes the frame of the artwork itself) is the first defining feature to see any amount of large usage, giving us our first official style.

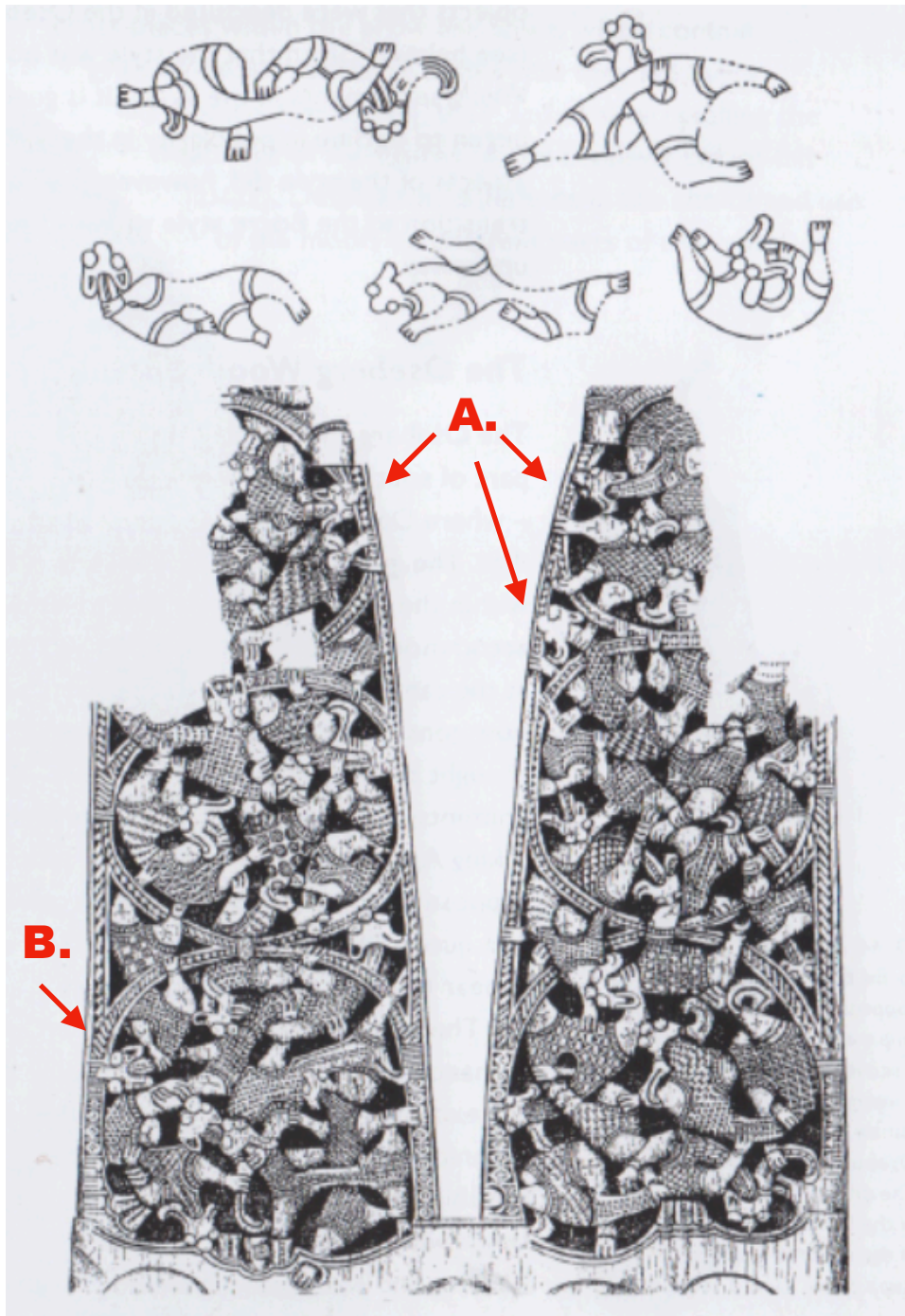
At first glance it can be difficult to discern the content of each piece; the sheer abundance of intertwining features can be overwhelming to the eyes. Apart from the sole defining feature of the Osberg style: the “gripping beasts” motif — some other features often present themselves in this style. Here are the design compositions to look for:

1. ***Beasts’ feet are gripping surroundings,***
2. The gripping feet are three-toed,
3. Perfectly round eyes,
4. Motifs, or beasts, are of equal size & compositional value, and
5. Design is closely interlaced (very little visible background).

¹⁵ Durham (2002)

¹⁶ Fuglesang (1982)

THE OSBERG STYLE (*cont...*)



A. — Beasts gripping each other & the frame. Notice how the feet all have three toes.

B. — Round eyes.

...Notice how little of the background is visible and how equal in size each beast is.

Detail of Osberg Style from the Osberg ship burial, James Graham-Campbell, Viking Art, Thames and Hudson, London, 2013, p. 49

THE OSBERG STYLE (cont...)

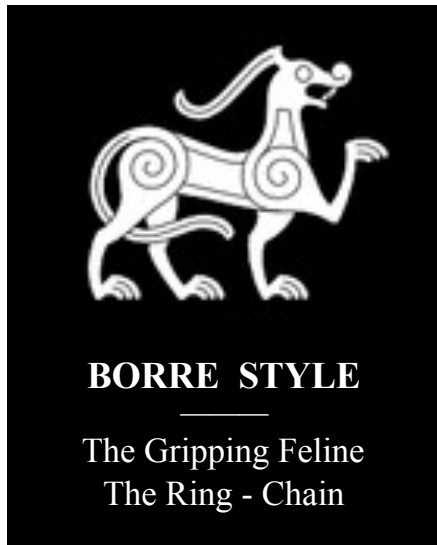


*Detail woodcarving on
the Osberg ship's prow.*

*While one of the more
basic surviving examples
of the Osberg style,
notice how the three-
toed beasts are all
gripping.*

II) THE BORRE STYLE

circa AD 850 - 950



This style is named after a ship grave found in Borre, Vestfold, Norway. The basis of the gripping beast motif from the Osberg style is still commonly found here, but with some new evolutions: the beasts now feature triangular heads that face forward, have feline facial features and ears that protrude. The “ribbon-animals” that resemble knot-work, while they are still present, are scarcely used in the design, rather than the central focus of the art.¹⁷

A second motif that is distinguishing of the Borre style is the ‘ring-chain’ motif, in which inlacing circles are separated by transverse bars and then overlaid by what can only be called lozenges.¹⁸ It’s important to remember that Borre style pieces can feature both the motifs of the “gripping feline” and the “ring-chain” combined in the same design, or alternatively, one motif can appear exempt of the other.

At a quick glance, this style stands out due to it’s utilization of all available space — even more-so than the Osberg style. The resulting appearance is clustered and tight, with almost no background being visible. When identifying the Borre style, you should look for:

- 1. Beasts’ feet are gripping surrounding,**
- 2. Beasts’ heads are triangular and face forward,**
- 3. Beasts’ heads have feline qualities and protruding ears,**
- 4. The Ring-Chain (see below),**
5. Beasts’ feet are three-toed,
6. Eyes are either round or almond-shaped, and
7. Very tightly designed; almost no background visible.

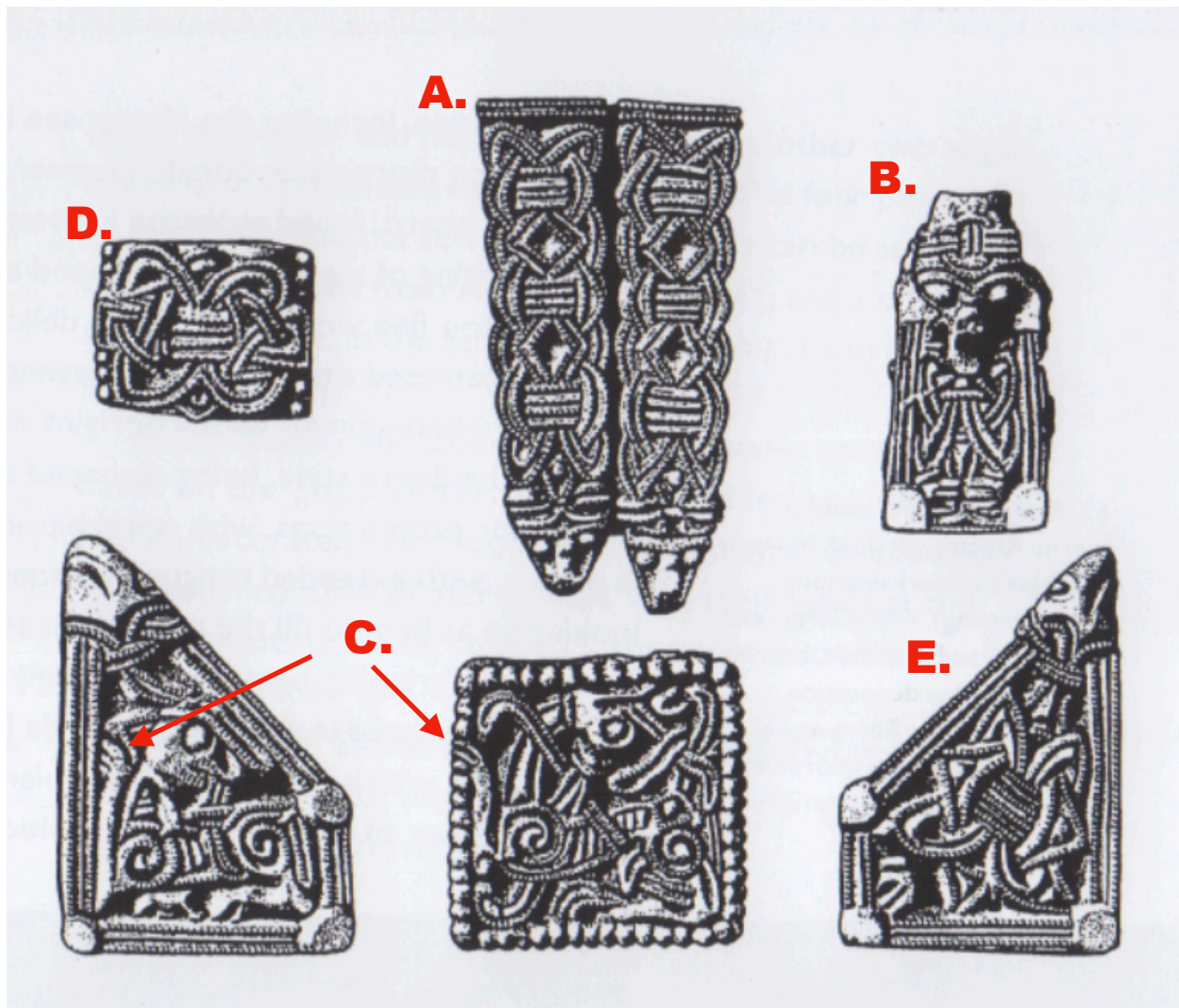
¹⁷ Wilson (1995)

¹⁸ Kershaw (2010)

THE BORRE STYLE (cont...)

- A. — The Ring-Chain motif with 'lozenges'. Notice the triangular heads at the bottom.
- B. — Triangular, feline head with round eyes.
- C. — Beasts gripping the frame; protruding ears and round eyes.
- D. & E. — Ring-Chain motifs.

Notice how each design uses all of it's space;
almost no view of the background can be seen.



*Details of the Borre Style from gilt-bronze horse mounts
found in the Borre ship burial, James Graham-Campbell,
Viking Art, Thames and Hudson, London, 2013, p. 65*

THE BORRE STYLE (cont...)



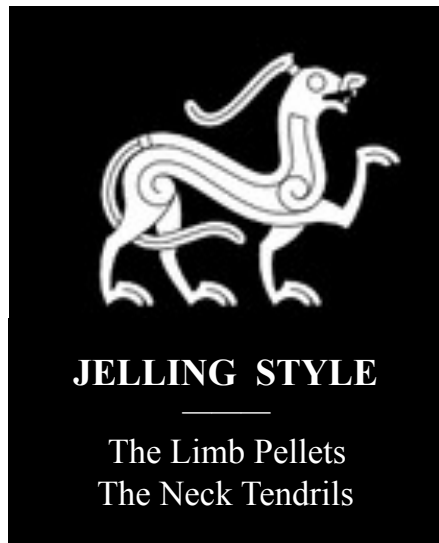
Borre style brooch. Replica made from original found at Bjölstad, Sel, Oppland, Norway.



Borre style bronze pendant found in Hedeby (Haithabu).

III) THE JELLING STYLE

circa AD 900 - 975



The Jelling style, named from the location in Denmark by the same name, brings back how prevalent the ribbon-animals were in the Osberg style. The most important difference with this style is that the beasts are no longer gripping their surroundings.

In the Jelling style, the beast's head is always shown in a profile view, with a single round eye and an open jaw.

The mouth will have a curled lip lappet and the joints are all intersected with small pellets. The animals are usually interlocked into an S-shaped form, have spirals that

represent the hip and shoulder joints and, in contrast to the Osberg and Borre styles, they always have two-toed (or U-shaped) feet.¹⁹ Finds in the Jelling style are significantly more rare than the other styles from the Viking Age.

Keep an eye open for:

- 1. Beasts' feet are often not gripping surrounding,**
- 2. Beasts' heads are in profile and have a round (or almond-shaped) eye,**
- 3. Beasts' heads have a curled lip lappet (see below),**
- 4. Beasts' have small pellets intersection limbs at the joints (see below),**
5. Beasts' hips are often represented with spirals,
6. Beasts' bodies often resemble an S-shape,
7. Beasts' necks can have tendrils, and
8. Some background is visible.

¹⁹ Fuglesang (1982)

THE JELLING STYLE (cont...)

- A. — Beast's curled lip lappet, and round eye. Notice the head is in profile.
- B. — Small pellets intersecting the beasts' limbs at the joints. Notice the two toes.
- C. — S-shaped bodies.



Detail of the Jelling Style from a silver cup from the Jelling burial, James Graham-Campbell, Viking Art, Thames and Hudson, London, 2013, p. 83

THE JELLING STYLE (cont...)



*Jelling style brooch, Historic Museum, Oslo, Norway.
Notice the spiral indicating the hip.*

IV) THE MAMMEN STYLE

circa AD 950 - 1025



The style is named after a chamber grave discovered in Mammen, Denmark. Continuing with the S-shaped animals introduced with the Jelling style, the Mammen style switches away from a balanced symmetry present in the past styles into a more asymmetrical design.

A motif present in many Mammen style pieces is that of a Great Beast (always a mammal) intertwined in battle with one or more serpents. Spirals that represent the hip joints in the previous Jelling style are still present here. The heads of the beasts are always in profile, with round or almond-shaped eyes.

The tendrils that are present are often long, wavy and resemble an S-shape; the tendrils sometimes end in a spiral. Concave dents are a common giveaway to identifying the style, and small pellets, similar to the ones present in the Jelling style, now intersect the ribbons instead of the beasts' joints. A final, almost defining, feature of the style is the introduction of vine-like vegetation that flows throughout the design.²⁰

Keep an eye open for:

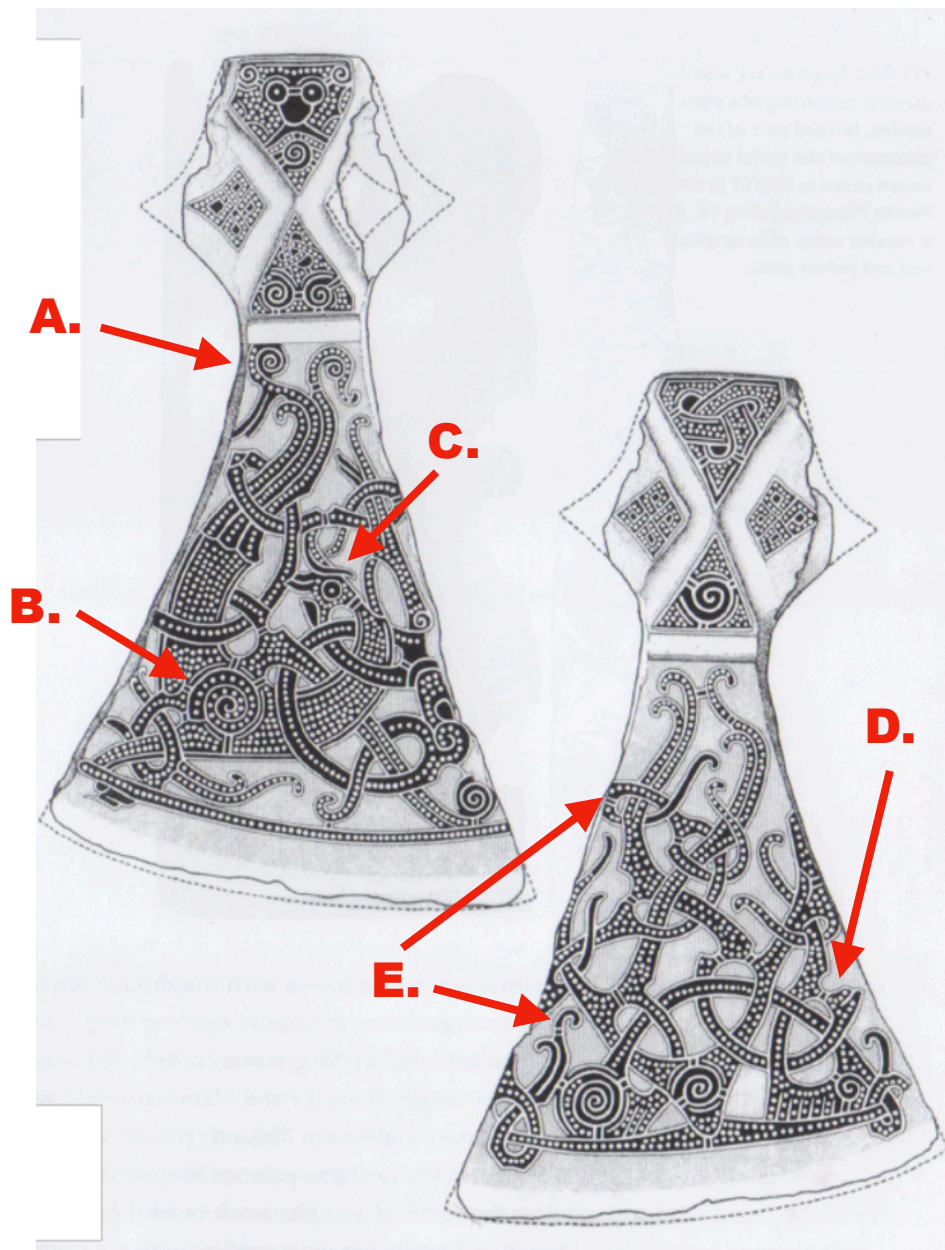
1. **Tendrils are long, wavy, and sometimes spiral (see below),**
2. **Beasts' heads are in profile and have a round (or almond-shaped) eye,**
3. **Small pellets intersect ribbons throughout (see below),**
4. **Concave dents are present in the design (see below),**
5. **Vine-like vegetation flows through the design,**
6. **The design is asymmetrical,**
7. Beasts' hips are often represented with spirals, and
8. Beasts' bodies often resemble an S-shape.

²⁰ Graham-Campbell (2013)

THE MAMMEN STYLE (cont...)

- A. — Tendrils ends in spiral.
- B. — Beast's hip is represented by a spiral.
- C. — Beast's head in profile with a round eye.
- D. — A small concave dent; notice how common it is across the whole design.
- E. — Small pellets intersection the ribbons.

Notice how vine-like vegetation flows throughout the piece.



Details of the Mammen Style from an inlaid silver and gold iron axe from the Mammen burial, James Graham-Campbell, Viking Art, Thames and Hudson, London, 2013, p. 103

THE MAMMEN STYLE (cont...)



*The original Mammen axe, that gave the style its name.
National Museum of Denmark.*



The Mammen style Bamberg Casket. Currently being held in the Bavaria National Museum in Munich, Germany.

V) THE RINGERIKE STYLE

circa AD 1000 - 1075



The Ringerike Style is notable for being the first style to see widespread use on rune-stones and picture-stones. This was so much the case, that its name refers to an area outside of Oslo where sandstone was sourced for their construction.²¹

The style continues from the Mammen style and increases the amount of vine-like, or foliate, features. It also features heavy use of intertwining tendrils, which are shorter and more slim than the tendrils present in the Mammen style. These tendrils tend to will often be in a cluster, all projecting from the same central point.²² The head, while still in profile, now exhibits only an almond shaped eye. The Beast, similar to the Mammen style, has spirals representing its hips and pellets intersecting the ribbons. What to look for:

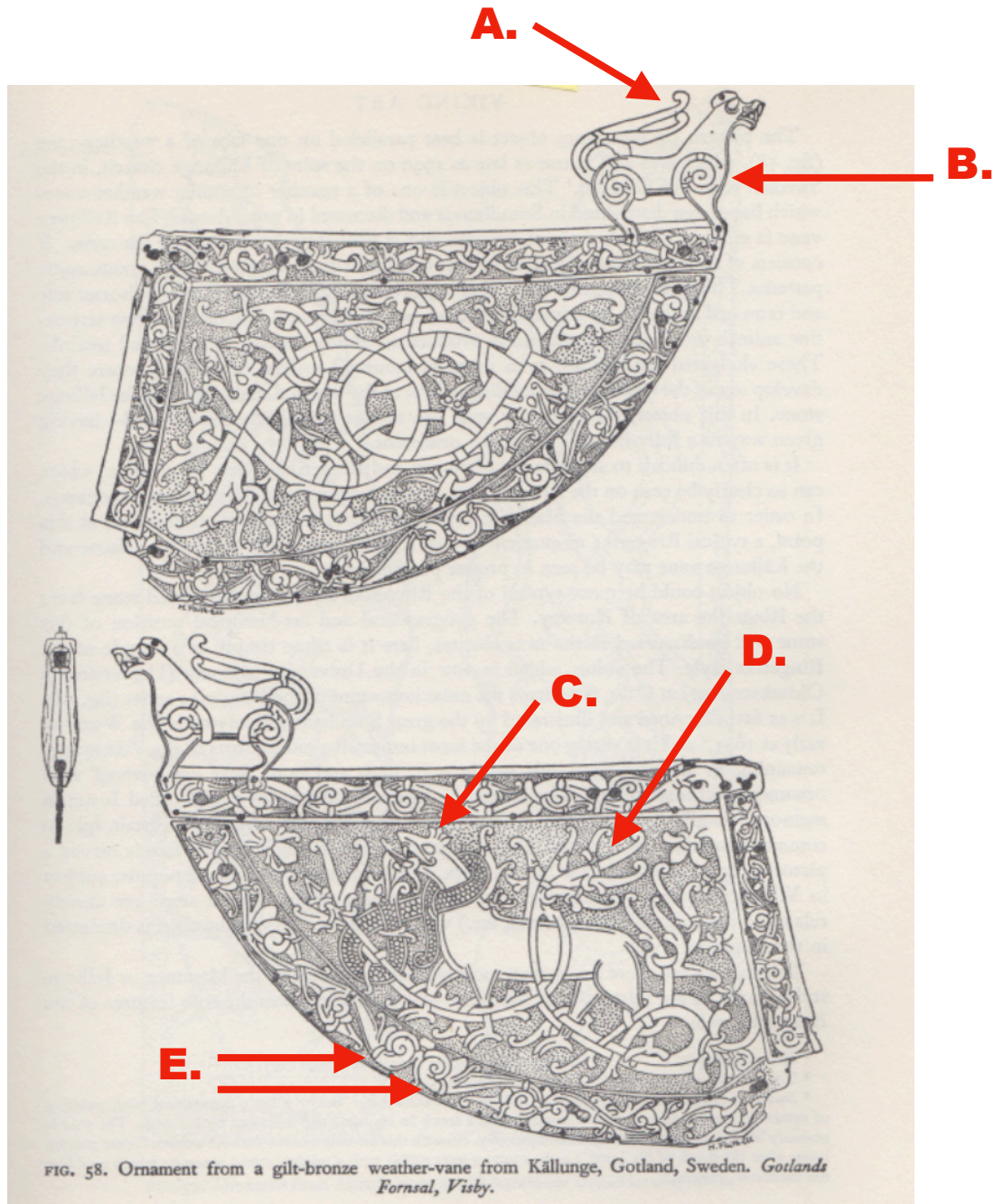
1. **Tendrils are slim and short,**
2. **Beasts' heads are in profile and only have almond-shaped eyes,**
3. **Pellets intersect ribbons,**
4. **Clusters of tendrils all projecting from the same central point,**
5. **Large amount of vine-like features,**
6. Spirals represent hips, and
7. Tips of the tendrils are often tightly rounded.

²¹ Fuglesang (1980)

²² “

THE RINGERIKE STYLE (cont...)

- A. — Tendril tips are tightly rounded.
- B. — Beast's hip & shoulder joints represented by a spiral.
- C. — Beast's head in profile with almond eyes.
- D. — Cluster of tendrils all projecting from the same central point.
- E. — Pellets intersection the ribbons.

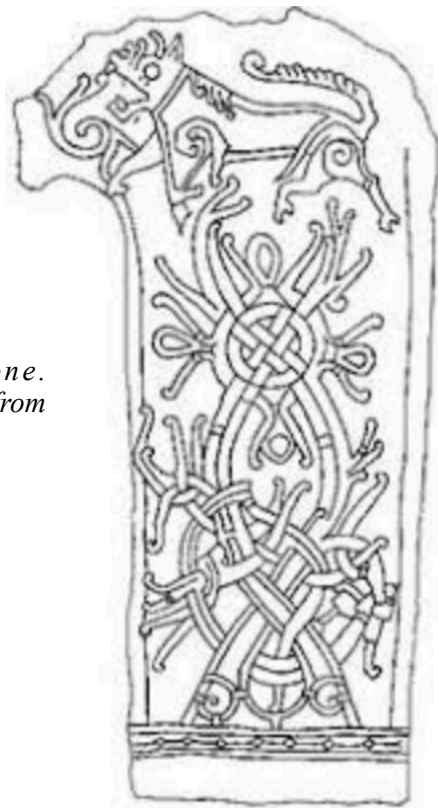


Details of the Ringerike Style from a weather vane from Källunge, Sweden, from D. M. Wilson and Ole Klindt-Jensen, Viking Art, George Allen and Unwin, Ltd, London, 1966, p. 129

THE RINGERIKE STYLE (cont...)



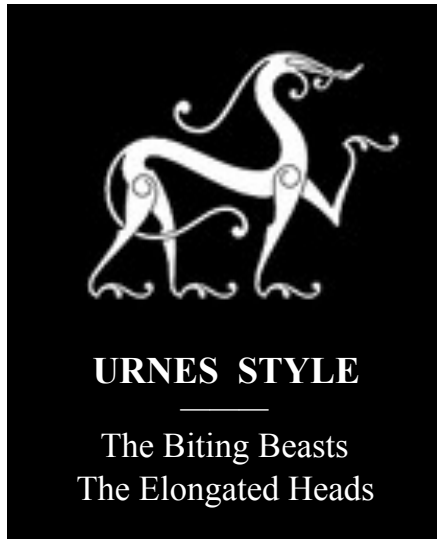
*The Vang Stone.
Ringerike style from
Vang, Oppland.*



*Ringerike style rune-stone. Vestiges of paint were found on the stone.
The picture on the left shows where the paint was found, and the picture
on the right suggests how the stone may have originally appeared.*

VI) THE URNES STYLE

circa AD 1050 - 1125



The Urnes style receives its name from a stave church in Urnes, Norway.

The style features the importance of the great beast motif in the design, and a downplaying of the foliage and vine-like appearance that was present in the Mammen and Ringerike styles.

Important features of the style are elongated, tapering legs and feet with shorter hind legs. The snake-like tendrils are thinner than previous styles and the beasts are always locked in biting poses.²³ Proportions are elongated now,

most easily demonstrated by the beasts' head almost being reduced to a ribbon itself. The tendril tips are tightly rounded, spirals represent the hips, the head is in profile and the eyes are almond-shaped, just like in the Ringerike style. The beasts now have upper and lower lip-lappets and the designs feature almost exclusively the Great Beasts motif; vegetation is rare.

Remember to look for:

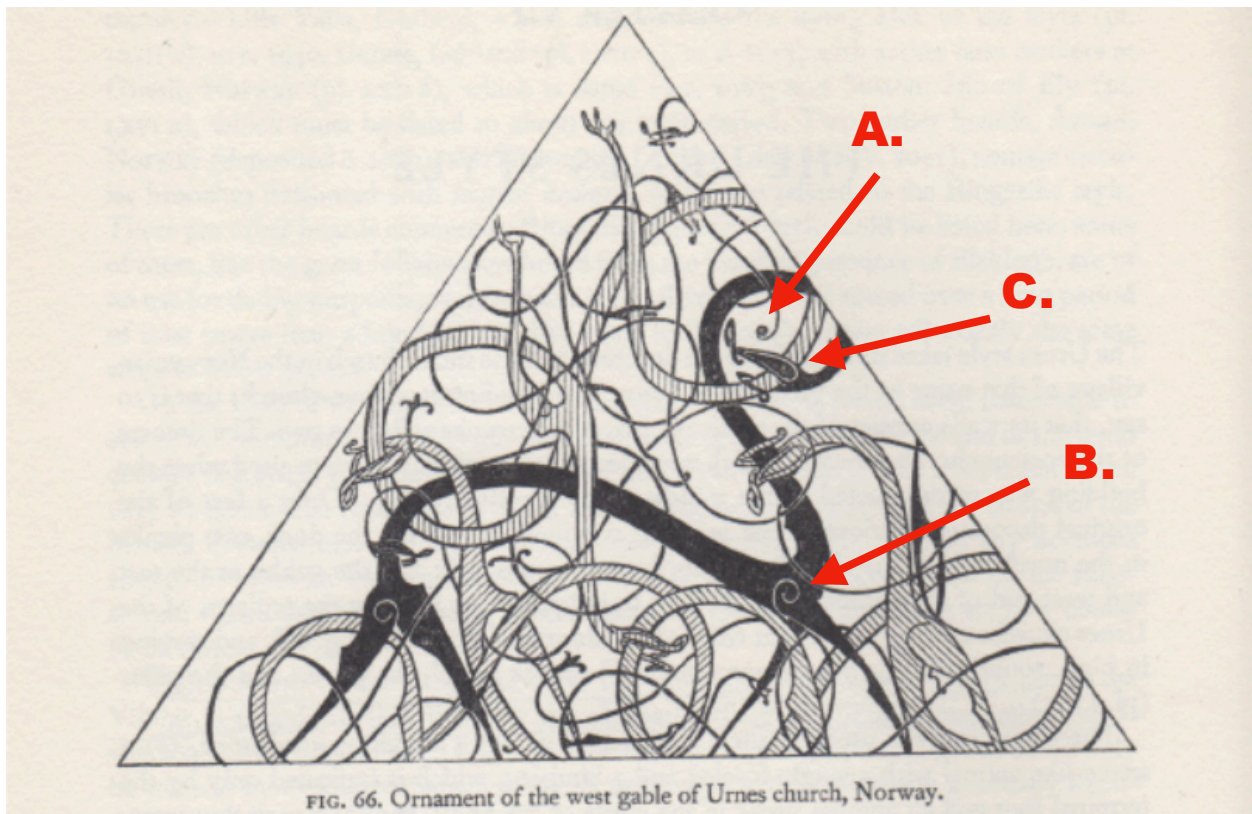
- 1. Tendrils are thin and long,**
- 2. Beasts' heads are in profile and only have almond-shaped eyes,**
- 3. Beasts' heads are so elongated, they resemble ribbons,**
- 4. Beasts' have upper and lower lip-lappets (see below),**
- 5. Every Beast is always locked into a biting pose,**
- 6. The Beasts' legs are tapered and the hind legs are shorter than the front,**
7. Design features Great Beasts only, very rarely any vegetation is present, and
8. Spirals represent the hips.

²³ *Graham-Campbell (2013)*

THE URNES STYLE (cont...)

- A. — Tendril tips are tightly rounded.
- B. — Beast's hip & shoulder joints represented by a spiral.
- C. — Beast's head in profile with almond eyes. Notice how elongated the head is. Pay attention to the upper and bottom lip-lappet.

Notice how the entire design features little to no vegetation, but is rather made up of Great Beasts all interlocked and biting one another. At least four different beast can be easily identified.



Details of the Urnes Style from the Urnes church, Norway, from D. M. Wilson and Ole Klindt-Jensen, Viking Art, George Allen and Unwin Ltd, London, 1966, p. 148

THE URNES STYLE (cont...)



Detail of the Urnes church woodcarving.

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