

Birka Posaments

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Posaments of Birka

The majority of Norse posaments come from the grave finds at Birka. Birka is located in east-central Sweden (just east of Stockholm), on the island of Björkö, and was a major trading center during the Viking Age. The finds from Birka date from between the 8th and 10th centuries and include a mix of male and female full-body inhumations (with grave goods!). The Birka finds have been interpreted as a meeting of Scandinavian aesthetics with Slavic and Middle-Eastern influences. Whether the Birka finds represent a unique fashion or were more wide-spread is difficult to ascertain, without a larger body of finds from across the Scandinavian territories. (tl;dr – Apply Birka posaments to non-Birka clothing with the understanding that that’s not how it was used in period. It’s cool if you do, but don’t represent it as correct.)

Birka Posaments from Birka are made from a number of different materials:

- Spiral Wire (similar to modern Tenntrod) – Spiral wire consists of thin wire wrapped around a silk core. (One source has indicated that the spiral wire is unique to Birka)
- Gold/Silver/Bronze Wire – plain wire of precious metal.
- Twisted Wire – Twisted wire is two (or more) wires twisted together.

An interesting note, in some of the graves, posament is formed around mica, presumably to hold it to the surface of an object. Examples of this can be found in grave 832.

Birka Posaments can be grouped into three major types

- Braids – 3, 4, 5, and 6 strand plaits.
- Single motifs – Simple flat knots, crosses, and deer.
- Chains of motifs – Celtic-like knots and crosses
- Balls – Turks head-style knots and buttons.

From grave finds we can determine that some posaments were often attached to fine fabrics like samite silk before being attached to garments. In other cases, the textiles are too degraded to determine how the posament was attached and what it was attached to.

Birka Posaments can be applied in a couple of different ways:

- Alone – A single band of posament
- Paired – A band of spiral wire posament paired with a posament of a different type (i.e. the golden stag of grave 735 and the band and loops in grave 632)
- Complex – Groupings of designs in complex patterns (i.e. the squares and loops of grave 644)
- Other – See, for example, the suite of posaments in grave 524 (grave 524 has A LOT of cool stuff [including cruciform posaments, game pieces and weapons], but only one bone [(part of?) a mandible]).

Unfortunately, because of the degradation of the textiles, we cannot be certain about where and to what the posament was attached. It is also difficult, because of the nature of the find, to determine if the posaments were associated primarily women or men, or were evenly distributed between the sexes.

Other Norse Posaments

Viking Age Posaments have been found in Hedeby, Denmark; Huddinge, Sweden; and Gotland, Sweden (to me the items found at Gotland are not posament in the type in the Birka finds).

From Huddinge



From birkaposamente.de

Other Posaments

A fifteenth century grave in Beloretschensk, Russia (near Sochi) turned up a number of posaments made of simple wire. The posaments were in two basic types, crosses similar to the crosses from Birka and ornamented squares. There is no evidence pointing to an “evolutionary” link between the posaments from Birka and the ones in Russia.

The Basic Knots

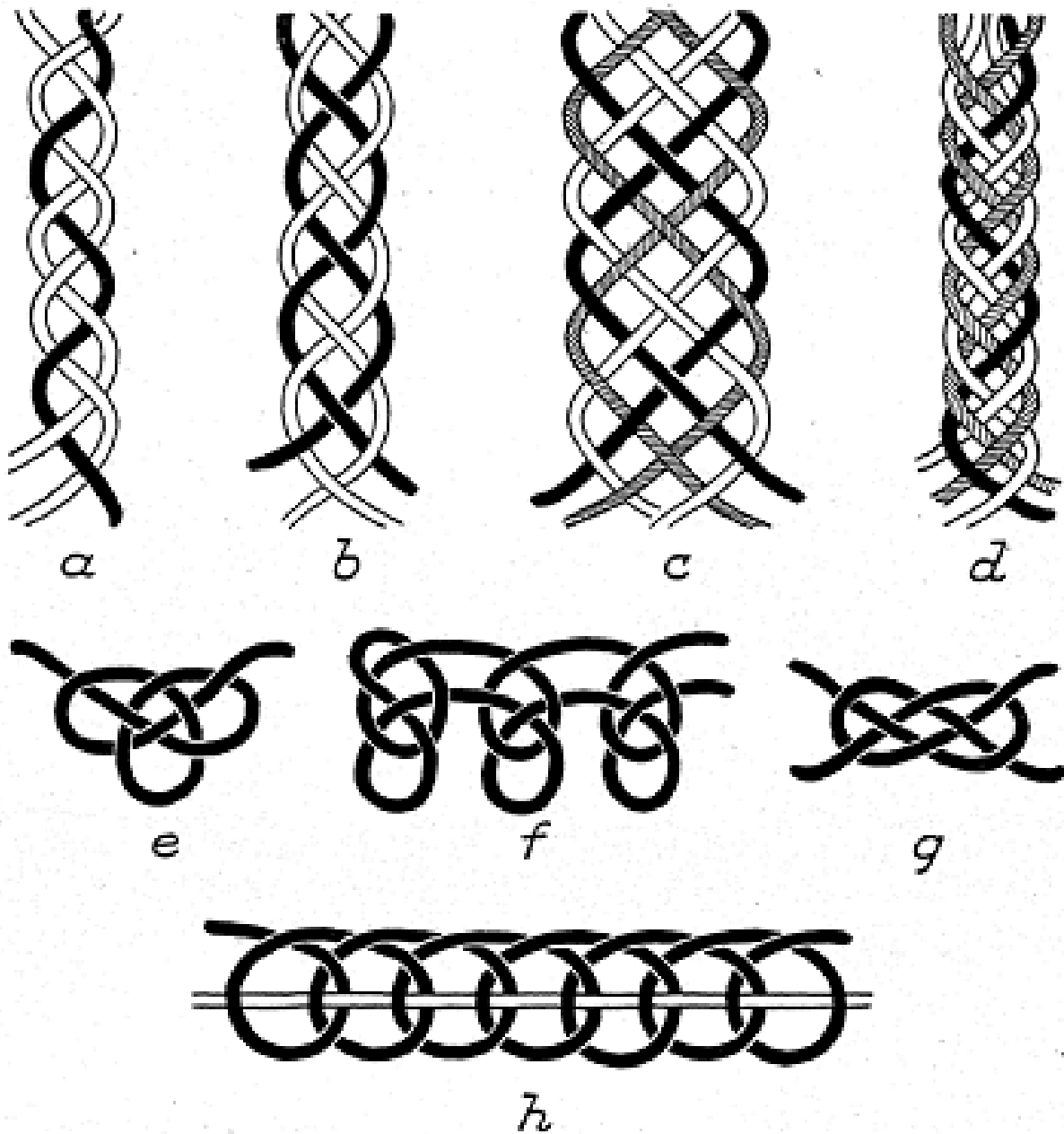


Abb. 21. Vorkommende Arten von Flechten und Zierknoten.

From Birka: III. Die Textilfunde aus den Gräbern, by Agnes Geijer, pg. 100

Examples of Birka Posament

Alone



Birka Grave 739 (<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/bild.asp?uid=349354>) This posament remains attached to the silk it was appliquéd to. The wire used in this is listed as bronze.



Birka Grave 736 (<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/bild.asp?uid=59490>)



Birka Grave 832 (<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/fid.asp?fid=616596&g=1>)

Paired



Birka Grave 832
(<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/bild.asp?uid=349622&page=1&in=1>)



Birka Grave 832
(<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/bild.asp?uid=394548>)



Birka Grave 735 (<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/bild.asp?uid=340585>)

Complex



Birka Grave 644 (<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/fid.asp?fid=617951>)

Posament with Mica



Birka Grave 832 (<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/fid.asp?fid=617954>)

Other



Birka Grave 524 (<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/bild.asp?uid=349357>)



Complete suite from Grave 524



Birka Grave 886 (<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/fid.asp?fid=616595&g=1>)

Resources

<http://www.eithni.com/posaments> – Eithni’s Keep

Eithni has done some OUTSTANDING work cataloging and organizing data about the Birka posaments. She is also the source of the “how-to” pages attached to this handout.

http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/birka.asp?sm=10_6 - The Swedish Historical Museum’s Index of Birka Grave Goods (in Swedish with sketchy English translation)

The definitive index of everything found (so far) at Birka. It’s kinda amazing.

Images of the Birka finds used in this handout are from the SHM’s index, which provides their pictures under a Creative Commons License, attribution 2.5 Sweden (CC BY 2.5 SE)

(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/se/legalcode>). Images used in this document were cropped to allow them to fit better on the page.

<https://birkaproject.wordpress.com> – The Birka Project (in Swedish)

<http://www.silberknoten.de/en/index.php> – Silberknoten (in German with English translation)

Pictures and background on a handful of the Birka posaments and one from Gotland.

<https://timeless-textiles.com/> - Timeless Textiles

A regional supplier of tenntrod, neither the most expensive or the cheapest, but the most reliable shipping.

<http://www.pewterofsweden.com/en/> - Pewter of Sweden

A reliable Swedish source for tenntrod, they have a number of different options in terms of silver content and diameter.