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Transition Style in Scandinavian Art, late 11th – first half of 12th Century

Abstract

Works of art that belong to the so called 'Transitional style' display a combination of Scandinavian Viking ornaments and European Romanesque stylistic elements. Many of these transitional monuments (the end of 11th – the first half of 12th century) give us an opportunity to trace the development of art from the Viking epoch to the Romanesque. Transition style is a result of the migration of Romanesque images and stylistic elements into the art of Scandinavian countries. This process was conditioned by the christianization of Scandinavia during the 11th–12th centuries. In this article we suggest to look afresh at a few examples of Norwegian wooden carving portals of medieval stave churches and other examples of monumental wooden and stone decorated carvings such as capitals, fonts, liturgical furnishing and metal works from Norway, Sweden and Denmark. The iconographic method applied to all those images enabled us to discern the main features of Scandinavian 'Transitional style'.

Key words: *Scandinavian art, Medieval art, Viking art, Decorative art, 'Transitional style'*

Decorative and applied arts are good indicators of stylistic changes which is a gradual process with no fixed dates. Monuments labeled as "Transitional style" display a combination of Scandinavian Viking ornaments and European Romanesque stylistic elements. Many of these transitional monuments (the end of 11th – the first half of 12th century) give us a possibility to trace the development of art from the Viking epoch to the Romanesque. The main research on stylistic development of Viking art has been done by Professor S. H. Fuglesang, published in a series of illuminating articles.¹

Changes of styles in Scandinavian art of 10th–12th centuries have a strict progression: from Mammen style to Ringerike style; from Ringerike to Urnes style; from Urnes to Romanesque style² (fig. 1). The last stage can be

1 S. H. Fuglesang, Stylistic groups in late Viking and early Romanesque art, *Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia*, 8/1 (1981), 79-125.

2 Ibid.

described in two ways: Scandinavian elements, while retaining their traditional iconography vary stylistically. Ornament, gradually losing elongation and refinement of forms, becomes more rounded and robust. Such is the northern portal of Hopperstad, where Scandinavian elements were largely subjected to the influence of Roman art, but were easily recognizable (fig. 2). Hence, carving elements of this portal seem to be influenced by Romanesque art: new types of predatory beasts, combining Scandinavian and Romanesque features, appear in this period.

The portal from Lem church (Jutland, Denmark) has a false doorway, made with two semi columns with bases and undecorated capitals. The arch of the doorway is constructed as two tendrils, integrated by a loop, which formed a central part of the composition.

On the other hand, a new type of beasts emerged in reliefs, combining Romanesque features and Scandinavian iconography. Among the Romanesque elements, there are feathered wings, legs, resembling bird's legs, heads, with a clear transition from the forehead to the front of the muzzle, which looks like a beak, large teardrop-shaped eyes and small pointed ears. As an example, we can refer to the fragment of a bench from Sakshaug church (12th c., Trøndelag, Norway) or the western portal of Hopperstad church (12th c., Sogn, Norway) (fig. 3).

Three stages of 'Transitional style' can be distinguished from one another. Early objects of 'Transitional style' show stylistic unity with the art of the Viking Age. This period of monumental and decorative carving Scandinavian art has not been preserved much. These are fragments of church decoration from Torpo (11th c., Buskerud, Norway) and Hemse (11th c., Gotland, Sweden). The surviving fragments of carved reliefs of these churches are quite flat, bare and resemble the carving of runic stones. Patterns, despite the large number of nodes and interlacing tails, are devoid of depth and multidimensional space, characteristic of Scandinavian works of ornamental art.

Another example of Late Viking art is a small fragment of carving from Torpo, which demonstrates a development of Scandinavian 'Transition Style' (fig. 4). Ornament was made in low relief of high quality: the ornament's design was made skillfully, well detailed with smooth lines. The character of the carving is reminiscent of a stone relief. The Runic stone from Øland (Sweden, Sandbychurch) can be a comparative example. Two

images of 'Urnes' beasts with small wings are saved on this fragment. The body of the main dragon is a saved fragmentary, like a flat ribbon, which is crossing a visual surface. Two smaller dragons are crossing this line parallel to each other and forming a composition of a double cross. The style of this relief looks quite archaic, but dragon's wing and legs refer to Romanesque influences.

A few wooden carving fragments of this period were found in Sweden. The first ones of note are five fragments from Hemse church (fig. 5). Two of them have concentric ornaments; others have plant-beast ornaments. One fragment is saved as part of a doorway. It provides a possibility for reconstruction of the church entrance. The carving represents a plate network with quite symmetrical cells and loops in points of intersection and two fragments of beast bodies. One of them looks like a dragon from Torpo with a thin, long elongated body and a wing with detailed feathers. The second dragon is only as a small fragment with a pair of bird legs.

The flourishing of the 'Transitional style' can be associated with the creation of works of monumental and decorative objects as portals of churches at Hopperstad and Ulvik (12th c., Sogn, Norway). These works have repeatedly drawn the attention of researchers who noted the stylistic unity of this two works of art. The carvings of these portals stand out for their extreme expression, which is a characteristic of Scandinavian art. The ornament consists of the complex interweaving of graceful symmetrical plant shoots with heavy buds at the end and twisted bodies of 'Transitional style' winged serpentine animals.

The portal from Ulvik (fig. 6) can be considered to be a classical example of 'Transitional style'. All elements of this portal are symmetrical. A composition of the top area was lost, but it was similar to the Hopperstad portal. Two identical tails of the main dragons and fragments of two smaller dragons under them have been preserved. Beasts with serpent looped bodies, wings, bird's legs and head are depicted on the portal jambs. The beasts are similar to the Hopperstad ones, but their bodies are thinner and twisted, the composition is more compact and is concentrated in the lower part of the portal. Ulvik provides us with the best example of the main principals of Scandinavian 'Transitional style': a proportion ratio of the main and smaller beast's bodies or plant ornaments with small snaky beasts; the gradual broadening and narrowing of dragon's bodies; sharpness of the ornament; a correlation between the ornament and background.

The final stage of 'Transitional style' as a rule is characterized by clarity of compositions, elegance and refinement. Ornaments with a plastic expression lose their characteristic disorder and multidimensionality - in order to understand the image, the viewer does not have to track the gaze of each individual tail or escape. The images are "read" easily.

The capitals from Urnes church (the second quarter of 12th c., Sogn, Norway) provide a broad field of study of the development of Norwegian art of the 12th century (fig. 7). Carving of these capitals can be described as Romanesque style, but it was made in the Scandinavian tradition: animal's bodies are elongated or wound around themselves.³ Beasts look like winged snakes or have thin looped tails. The bestiary on the Urnes capitals can be divided into several groups. One of them includes animals which were made in the tradition of Viking art:

1. Quadrupeds or 'lions'; beasts of prey with thin legs, long neck and small head with or without mane hair. 'Lion's' muzzle has a strong resemblance to a wolf's head with drop-shaped eyes and sharp ears. A sharp-toothed mouth is open; a long and thin tongue is hanging down. A long tail with plant elements the hindquarter of the body and ending with a plant scroll. Sometimes the beast has a looped neck and is biting itself.
2. Beasts with twisted bodies. Fantastic animals which look like 'lions' with a twist in the middle of the body.
3. 'Dragons' with ribbon looped bodies, small wings, thin legs, feet looking like a plant shoot and twisted tails. The heads, with small keen ears and drop-shaped eyes, are similar to a wolf's head. Iconography of these beasts derives from the Romanesque tradition, but the character of carving, elongated silhouettes, looped lines testify that the reliefs are still a part of Viking Age art.

Another example of the late 'Transitional style' is a subtle thread of the bench from Kungsora church (1100-1150, Västmanland, Sweden) (fig. 8). The bench's back side is decorated with a relief, depicting two frontally positioned and intertwined dragons with long necks. The beasts' heads are very small with well-developed eyes, ears and mouth. Dragons have elongated bodies and tails that are twisted in a variety of loops. Each dragon has a pair of legs, resembling a bird with feathers and wings. The whole image has a central axis and symmetry, so that the composition becomes static.

3 E. B. Hohler, The capitals of Urnes church and they Background, *Acta Archaeologica* 46 (1975), 1-60.

'Transitional style' is reflected not only in objects of monumental wooden carving, but also in decorative arts. We can present as an example the ornamental freezes of an altar from Liseberg (1135, Jutland, Denmark), a baptismal fonts of St. James church (1140, Avebury, Wiltshire), and from Vamlingbo (Gotland, Sweden), a relief from St. Nicolas church (1000, Ipswich, England) (fig. 9).

In conclusion, it is important to note, that 'Transitional style' should not be studied like a process of substitution of Viking art by the Romanesque. Works of this period provide not only an understanding of the specific process in art of Scandinavian countries, but also reveal the way of thinking and the value system of medieval people. Analyzing the key features of the 'Transitional style' we can emphasize the following: Scandinavian elements, while retaining its traditional iconography, vary stylistically. An ornament gradually loses elongation and refinement of forms and becomes more rounded and robust. The most important point is the emergence of a new type of predatory animal, a winged dragon, combining Romanesque features and Scandinavian iconography.

It should be noted that the phenomenon of 'Transitional style' indicates the resistance of Norse art. Innovations in art came with the Christian faith and were part of the official art associated with large cities and the construction of stone cathedrals, introduced into the artistic life of the country, of which many parts are isolated by mountains and fjords. The rest of the artistic and spiritual life in Scandinavia for a long time remained under the auspices of former aesthetic ideologies. Carved wooden portals can be regarded as provincial art, despite the fact that they were created by outstanding carvers. The Romanesque elements of these work, which include portals of Ulvik or Hopperstad, are reduced to a single solution, while the elements that match the 'Transitional style' make up the bulk ornamental composition.

At the same time, in the category of monuments, ornamental elements which include hybrid images of combining features of Romanesque art and Old Norse, include not only the above mentioned sites, but many others that are not related to wood carving, and which were created decades earlier and later. Diffusion of this process on the one hand reveals the stability of the art system and, on the other, shows the appearance of the works of art extending from the Viking Age, but not yet arriving at the Romanesque style. Nevertheless, certain stylistic and iconographic schemes

suggest the existence of the intermediate Nordic style, which reflects the features of Christian and pagan art, showing a very slow process of the change of the strong traditions of Viking Age art. This allows several different points of view in the history of art of the Scandinavian countries, of Norway in particular, which is usually quite sharply divided into Christian and pagan art. Instead, we have before us a picture of alternative art in Northern Europe, indicating a more independent development.

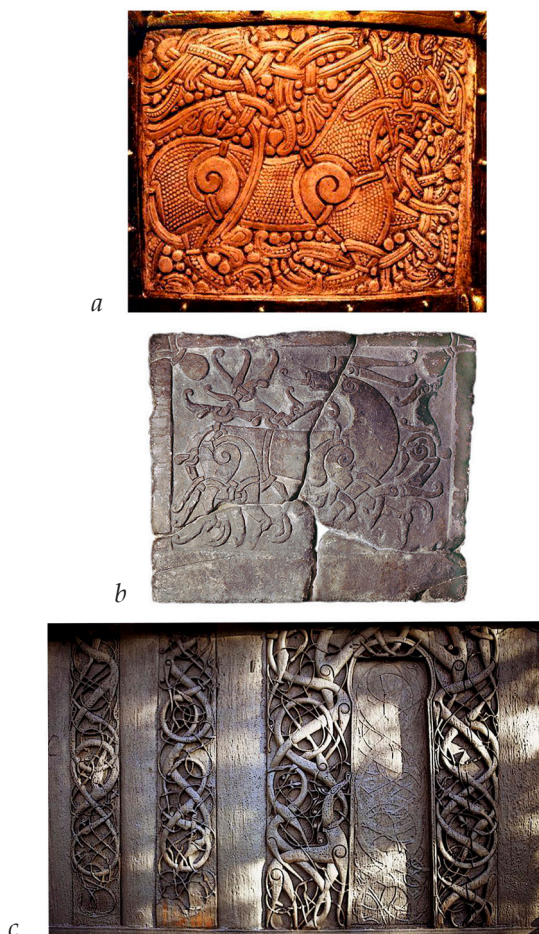


Fig. 1: (a) Cammen casket, Mammen style, 10th c. The original was lost after the Second World War. Copy in the Muzeum Historii Ziemi Kamien'skiej; (b) Stone slab in the Ringerike style, c. 980-1070, found in the churchyard of St. Paul's Cathedral, London; (c) Northern portal from Urnes church, Urnes style, 1060-1080, Sogn, Norway



a



b

Fig. 2: (a) Fragment of northern portal from Hopperstad church, 12th c., Sogn, Norway; (b) Portal from Lem church, 12th c., Jutland, Denmark



Fig. 3: (a) Relief from Lem church, 12th c., Jutland, Denmark; (b) Fragment and reconstruction of portal from Hemse church, 11th c., Gotland, Sweden

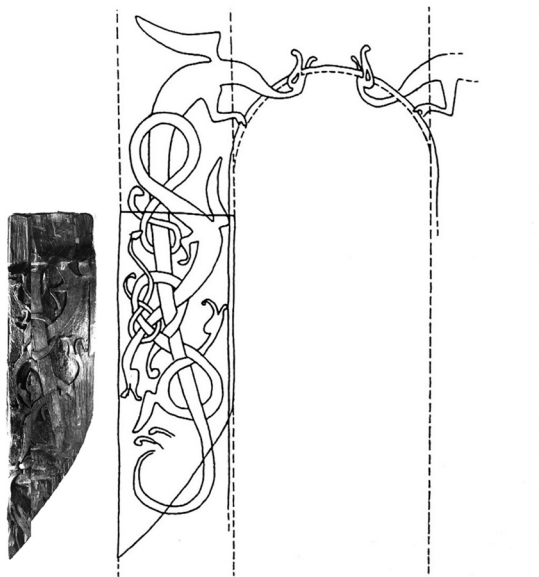


Fig. 4: Fragment and reconstruction of wooden portal from Torpo church, 11th c., Buskerud, Norway

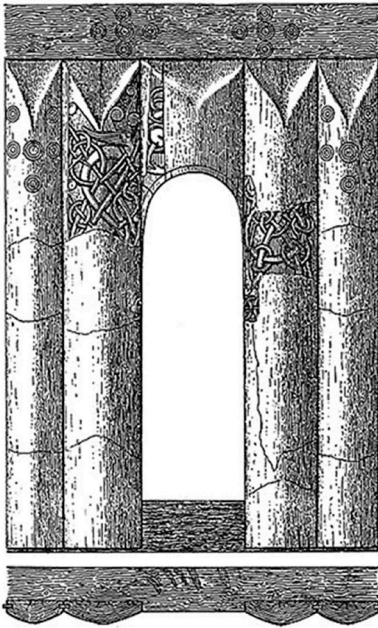


Fig. 5: Fragment and reconstruction of portal from Hemse church, 11th c., Gotland, Sweden

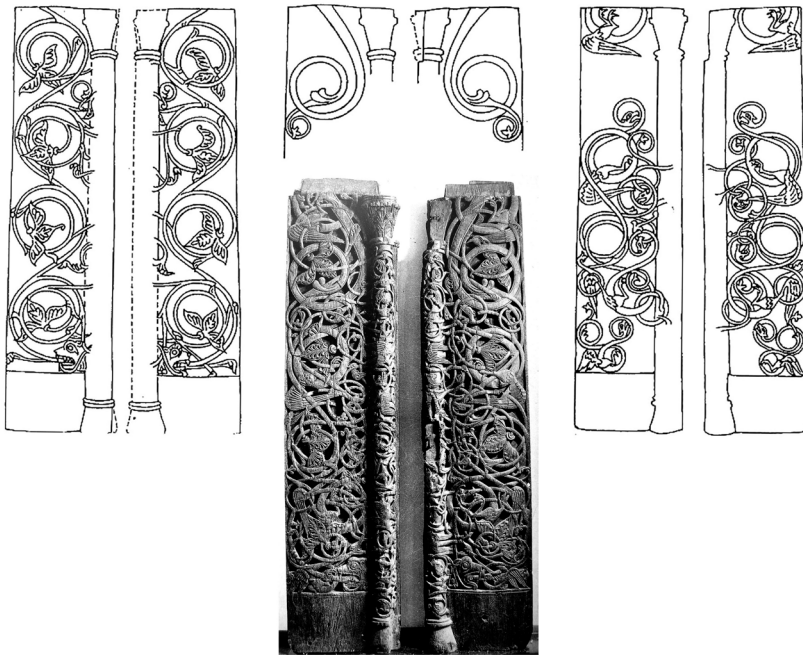


Fig. 6: Portal from Ulvik church, 12th c., Hordalan, Norway

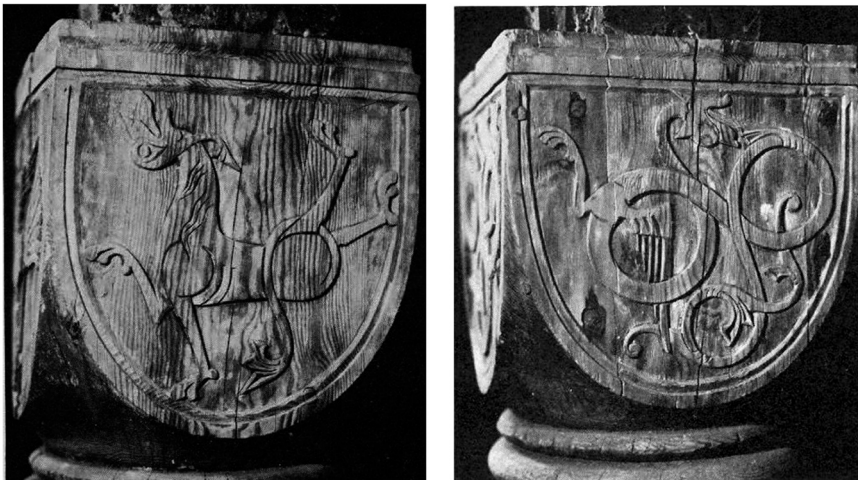
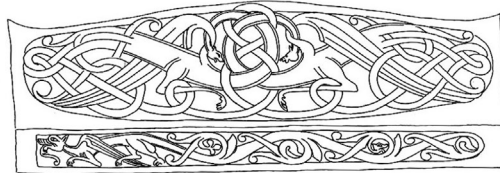
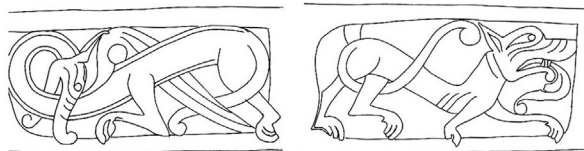


Fig. 7: Capitals from Urnes church, 12th c., Sogn, Norway; a beast with twisted body and a dragon



b.



c.



Fig. 8: Bench from Kungsora church, 1100-1150, Västmanland, Sweden



Fig. 9: (a) Baptismal font from Vamlingbo church, 12th c., Gotland, Sweden; (b) Baptismal font from St. James church, 1140, Wiltshire, England