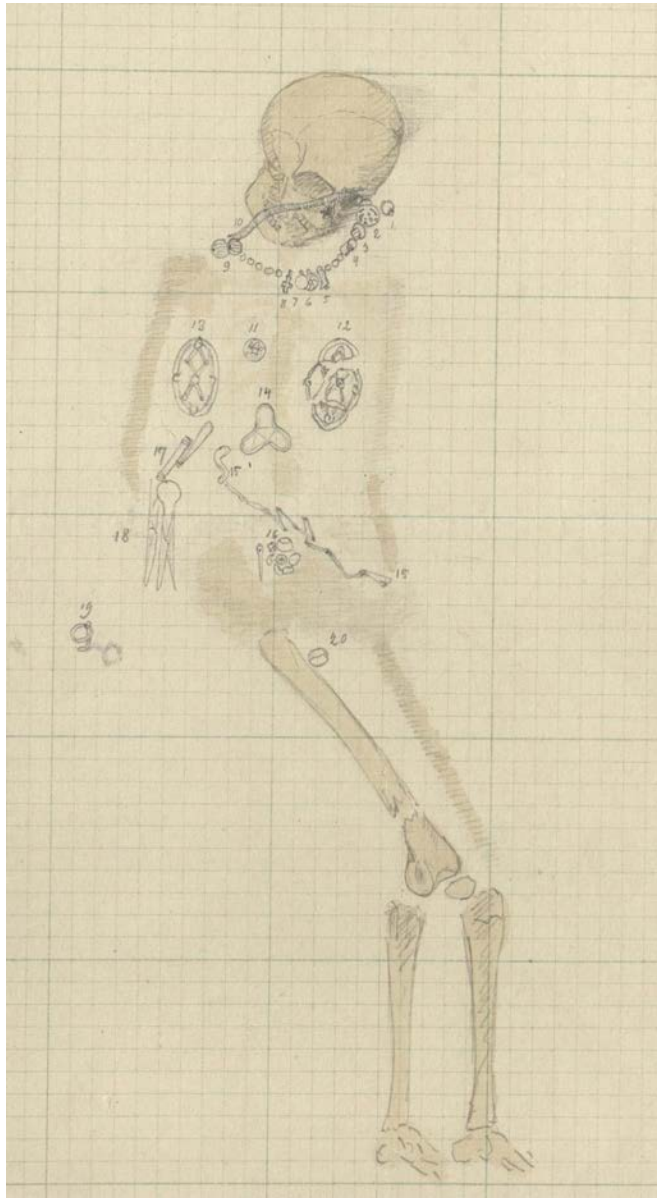


Abundant Charms: The Amulet Necklace of Grave Bj. 968

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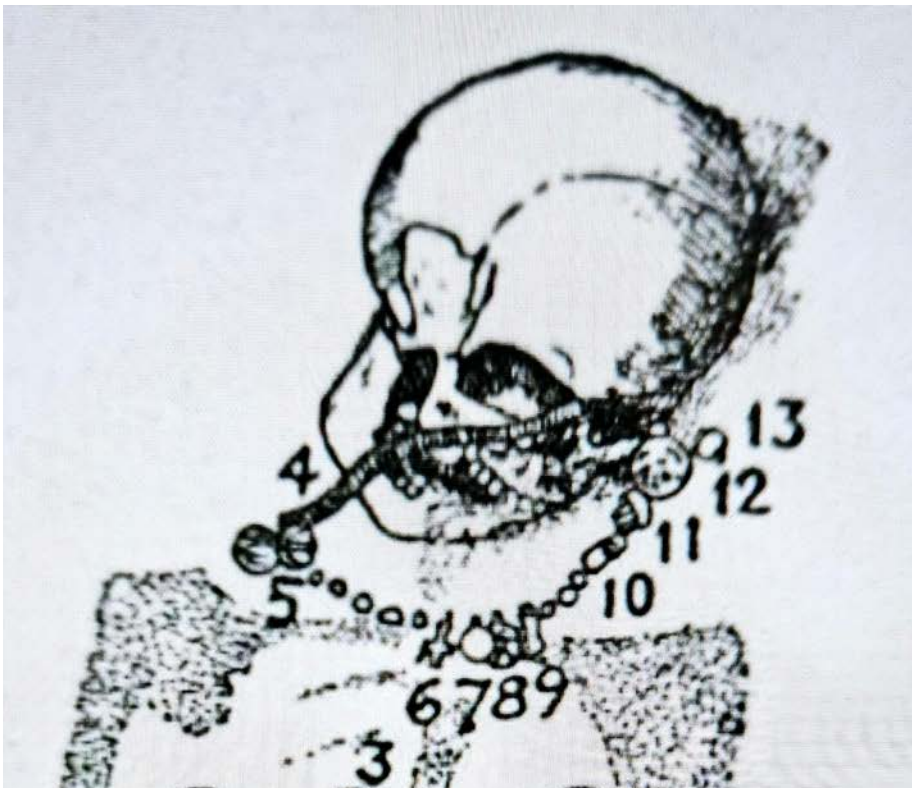


(Image: Hjalmar Stolpe, listed in SHM)

In a chamber grave within the black earth of Birka lay a woman with a beautiful necklace. Not beautiful, perhaps, by modern day standards. The necklace lacks the symmetry and design aesthetic seen in jewelry today. But the necklace is beautiful because of her many pendants and the symbolism they carried, and what they might tell us about the woman in life.

Grave Bj. 968 has been identified as a female, buried at some point between 906 and 975 C.E., according to the museum where her remains are kept. However, artifacts found within her grave would date her to the later end of that spectrum, after 950 C.E. She was rediscovered by Hjalmar Stolpe as part of the overall excavations of Birka, Sweden in 1881. Thankfully, Stolpe took fairly detailed grave drawings which allow us to see her position in the grave, and the position of her jewelry and the belongings with her. It is this drawing that reveals her necklace to us. The pieces are now individually listed in the museum as separate entities- the original overall impact of her necklace has subsequently been lost. This project has been undertaken with the desire to see the necklace in its complete form as well as to understand the meaning behind each amulet on it.

A more detailed drawing by Holger Arbman in *Birka I: Die Gräber* allows us to see a more detailed close up of the necklace. It is this drawing that I will use in the reconstruction.



(Image: Arbman, 395)



My reconstructed necklace

Artifact #4 on the grave plan is a silver brocade band that would have originally been around her forehead, and will not be included in the necklace reconstruction.

The Beads:

Starting on the right hand side, near her ear, Artifacts #5 on the grave drawing are two large beads. Based on the picture of the extant beads from the Historic Museum and also the drawings from Arbman and Stolpe, these appear to be melon lobed beads, one made from rock crystal and the other from uncolored glass.



(Image by Gabriel Hildebrand, SHM)



(Image by Holger Arbman, *Birka. Die Gräber. Tafeln*)

The remaining beads, as described by Arbman, are not listed in any order within the necklace but include

- a blue one in a silver ring (346: II), no longer available. Stolpe lists this as item #3 on his grave diagram, Arbman lists it as #11.
- a biconical one made of amber, type plate 115: 13, diam. 1.1 cm,
- a large one made of rock crystal with 7 grooves, plate 122: 121, diam. 1.5 cm and 5 spherical worn, diam. 1.2-1.3 cm
- a large, undyed melon-shaped glass plate, plate 122: 12 g, diam. 1.7 cm
- with gold foil 4 double and 3 simple, of the latter at least one broken away from a multiple, all pea-shaped, diam. 0.6-0.7 cm
- a silver foil pea-shaped one, diam. 0.8 cm
- a brown-yellow one with melted white threads and yellow rings, plate 122: 12 i (the colors are incorrect, the blue eyes do not exist), diam. 1.3 cm
- a ring-shaped light blue with white melted threads, plate 122: 12 c, diam. 1.2 cm
- a biconical blue one, plate 122: 12 h, diam. 1.1 cm
- 3 blue ring-shaped, diam. 1-1.25 cm
- a ring-shaped undyed, diam. i cm, a light green pea-shaped, diam. 0.8 cm
- an uncolored longitudinally fluted one, cf. plate 122: 2 e, diam. 0.9 cm
- a brownish(?) with an overlay of alternating brown-violet and white threads, plate 122: 12 e, diam. 0.8 cm
- a mosaic bead made of glass flow made of white and dark brown-violet rods, plate 122: 12 f, diam. 1.2 cm
- another mosaic bead, Plate 122: 12 a (the light green color comes out poorly on the plate), diam. 1.1 cm, made of green and yellow rods, in light blue fields 8 eyes with red pupils and alternating white and dark blue rays, around the middle a blue thread surrounded by one white and one red each
- a red pearl with melted yellow-white threads and 3 eyes, the red pupils with alternating yellow-white and dark blue rays, plate 122: 12 d, diam. i, i cm
- 3 green-white ring-shaped ones with a brown-red thread melted in a zigzag, plate 122: 12 b, diam. i cm
- a fourth, probably similar, badly damaged
- 2 barrel-shaped, one yellow and one red, diam. i or 1.1 cm
- 3 blue faience beads, plate 122: 12 k, all divided into 5, diam. 1-1.1 cm

Plates, where indicated, refer to the images in *Birka I. Die Gräber. Tafeln*.

Neil Peterson of the Dark Ages Re-Creation Company has an excellent statistical breakdown on the types of beads found in Viking age as well as the bead charts used by Johann Callmer in his analysis of Viking Age beads in Scandinavia. According to their data, there are 39 beads listed for Bj. 968.

Her round rock crystal beads were common to this period, but her grooved crystal bead was uncommon. Her gold and silver foiled beads were very popular and common in bead findings throughout her life and burial period. Sixteen of her beads were considered uncommon beads, occurring sparsely in contemporary finds. Her faience beads were becoming more popular at this time and occurred with greater frequency in the finds. Of her beads, four are considered trace, with only one bead being found in the bead assemblages during her burial period. Two could not be classified- one being the amber bead, as Callmer did not include amber in his classification. I believe the other unclassified to be the striped brown-purple and white bead, as it does not appear on any of the bead charts.

Her necklace reflects both the popular bead trends at the time- rock crystal, foiled segmented beads and faience beads, as well as unique and uncommon beads, reflecting her wealth and status. For additional information on the statistics of her bead findings, their classifications and how I made the beads for my reconstruction, please refer to my paper on “The Beads in Birka Grave Bj 968.”

The Cross



(Photo credit: Ola Myrin, Historic Museum//SHM)

Artifact #6 is listed as an equal armed cross of cast silver, stamped with circle designs. The back is undecorated.

While a Christian church had been present in Birka since 830 C.E, it had been met with very little interest from the locals. An additional unsuccessful attempt at conversion was made in around 930 C.E. by the Archbishop of Hamburg. So while Christianity was certainly not a foreign concept to those living in Birka at this time, it could hardly be considered to have been mainstream. By the time the first Christianized king ascended the Swedish throne in 990, Birka had already been abandoned, and pagans and Christians continued to coexist in Sweden until at least the 12th century.

There is debate on whether wearing the cross in this grave context was a sign of the wearer's conversion. Jensen feels strongly that the woman in Bj. 968 was Christian, given that she was buried with a cross in a location with a known Christian congregation (Jensen 61). Others disagree, stating that the cross and crucifix pendants that many Birka women carried with them to the grave may simply be seen as an insurance of help and protection from an outside source (Gräslund 379). Non-Christians did appropriate Christian imagery for non-religious purposes, which complicates efforts to associate these artifacts with religious belief (Delvaux 435). Birka grave Bj. 750 contained both a cross and a Thor's hammer indicating either a mixing of religion or a lack of strictly religious association with the amulets (Fuglesang 18). Neil Price feels that the crosses and crucifixes that appear in Bj. 968 and other graves would likely have been used solely as a symbol of magical power- that they had a different meaning to the religion that had crafted them would not inhibit the Vikings from using them in a non-Christian ritual context (Price 88, 125).

The Coin:

Artifact #7 is listed by Arbman as a "Hedeby half-bracteate", represented on plate 143: II but that is perhaps a mistake in the text as plate 143 shows two other coins attributed to 968- #9 and #11, both pierced with a hole to make them able to be worn as pendants (Arbman 160). Half-bracteates are very thin coins from silver foil. The Historic Museum does not offer a cataloged "coin pendant", but it is noted by both Arbman and Stolpe, who indicated that it was made of silver. #9 features a stylized bearded man on one side and a running horse on the other. This style of coin was minted in Hedeby and common in Denmark between 870-900 CE (Markowitz). #11 is badly damaged but the visible arches and dots on the back is suggestive of its neighboring pendant, #12 which is of a design minted in Hedeby by Harald Blåtand (Bluetooth) and were in circulation between 958 and 986 CE (Markowitz). The Historic Museum does offer a photograph of #11 but no indication of where in the grave it was found or if it was being worn.



(Photo Credit: Holger Arbman)



(Photo Credit: Holger Arbman)

Florent identifies the coin pendant in the necklace as belonging to the KG 5 type (Florent 152) He actually identifies two pendants, a KG 5 as well as a KG 7 as belonging to the necklace, but neither Stolpe or Arbman record the necklace as having this additional pendant. The KG

designations were given by Brita Malmer in her work published in 1966, *Scandinavian Coins Before AD 1000*. The label of KG 1-12 sorts the coins into chronological groups. She tentatively identified these coins as being minted in Hedeby, but indicated further research was necessary, and in a later work indicated that the group KG 10 may have been minted elsewhere, such as the Jutland, the Danish Islands of Skåne. The Hedeby series of coins can be divided into two parts, before and after a small lull in monetary exchanges in the second half of the ninth century. KG 2-6 are coins minted before 850 C.E. and represent the first and smaller half of the series of coins, with only 130-140 surviving today (Metcalf 410).

KG 5-6 type coins are the Wodan/Monster type coins. They are adorned with the face of Wodan (Odin) on one side and a monster on the other. The primary difference between KG 5 and 6 is that KG 5 has a coiled snake with the monster and KG 6 has simplified that design into a circle with a line attached to it. The current thought is that KG 5 was likely minted in Ribe, rather than Hedeby, based on the fact that only KG 5 has been found in Ribe, and only KG 2-4 has been found in Hedeby (Metcalf 417). Finds of coins from groups KG 2-6 have been concentrated in Birka, in women's graves, and are often pierced. Of type KG 5, 16 coins were found in 11 graves in Birka (Metcalf 415).

The use of coins as pendants is not an uncommon practice within the Viking age. About three percent of coins that were in circulation show signs of having been adapted for wear with either a small hole or a loop attachment. In Viking Age Scandinavia, three main types of economy can be seen: a status economy, where precious metals are a means to enhance the status of their owners through prestige items such as jewelry; a bullion economy, where all silver objects- including coins, are used as a means of payment based only on weight and fineness; and a coin economy where coins are circulated and their value is guaranteed by the issuing authority (Florent 29-30). By turning a coin into a pendant, the wearer stops it from functioning as a coin and returns it to a status economy, where its purpose is to enhance the wearer- not only as a beautiful object, but also to demonstrate that the wearer is wealthy enough to turn a useful coin into a piece of jewelry.

The Shield:



(Photo credit: Gabriel Hildebrand, Historic Museum/SHM)

Artifact #8 is a pierced, shield shaped silver pendant with a central boss and swirling dot designs. This swirling motif, known as a "running wheel", usually consists of dots or circles and is a common design in miniature shields, similar to their full-sized counterparts. Shield pendants form the largest group of small-size weapons recovered from Viking Age graves, settlements and hoards. They are always round, usually about 3 cms in diameter and of silver or copper alloy (Gardela 480). Within Birka, 17 examples of miniature shield pendants have been found, with one coming from a cremation grave and the rest from inhumations (Gardela and Odebäck 96).

In funeral context, miniature shields appear to be exclusively buried with women, and appear to have been utilized in various ways- suspended around the neck, sewn onto clothing, or carried in a pouch (Gardela 102). They have been found in graves with other amulets that are considered ritually religiously significant, such as Thor's hammers and anthropomorphic or zoomorphic figurines, suggesting they were worn by ritual specialists; however, their wearers were not buried with larger ritual items such as iron staffs (Gardela 102, 2021). Interestingly, in graves with miniature shields, no full size weaponry has been found and the bones of the wearers do not show signs of combat related trauma (Gardela 480, 2023). Many miniature shields come from graves with very rich grave goods, particularly those found in chamber graves, suggesting the wearers belonged to a wealthy elite (Gardela and Odebäck 99).

Like full sized shields, miniature shields may have had different meanings in everyday life and in a funeral context. Shields could be seen as a connection with the valkyries, given some of their shield-related names: Shield-Scraper, Shield-Truce, Shield-Destroyer, Shield-Violence. Some believe that the miniature shields possibly reflected the properties and symbolism of their full

sized counterparts- to protect the wearer from evil or curses (Gardela and Odebäck 104). Others believe that their inclusion in the graves were to protect the living from the dead themselves. This explanation seems somewhat unlikely in this case, given that the pendant was strung as the center of an overall necklace rather than being pinned or sewn to the clothing. However, additional study is needed to truly know what the miniature shield pendants meant to their wearers.

The Valkyrie:



(Photo credit: Ola Myrin, Historic Museum, SHM)

Artifact #9 on her necklace is a silver pendant in the form of a female figure (346: 9), plate 92: 8, length 2.6 cm (Arbman 436). She has her hair in a braided knot at the nape of her neck that seems to run over one shoulder and down her chest. The hands are held together or clasped across the chest. The dress is ankle-length and richly patterned or decorated. An elongated, undecorated part that runs down the side suggests that she also wears a long shawl over her shoulders.

Casting molds to create small women's figurines appear more frequently in Birka than in the rest of Scandinavia combined and it is likely that this pendant was made there. It is notable that while the figurines have been found in graves with Christian crosses, they have never been found in a grave with Thor's hammers (Jensen 32). The pendant has usually been interpreted as a Valkyrie, but as she is shown without weaponry that casts some doubt on that identification. It has also been theorized that the unarmed figurines depict Freya, but there is little evidence to support that. Perhaps it is more likely that it depicts an aristocratic housewife in all her glory ("Bj 968 - Sök i samlingarna"). New research on a workshop in Ribe that manufactured similar figurines suggests that they are everyday people engaging in ritual ceremonies- of which women played prominent roles (Curry).

The Chair:



(Photo credit: Ola Myrin, Historic Museum/SHM)

Artifact #10 Silver pendant in the form of a barrel chair (346: io), Plate 92: 14, height 1.55 cm, made of thin sheet metal, with circles on the seat and below it, no fastening arrangements preserved, probably originally a soldered eyelet (Arbman 436).

Miniature chairs have been associated with seiðr, a form of divination magic primarily practiced by women seeresses called völvur, or vǫlur. They draw comparisons to the thrones, chairs and platforms that appear in literature as part of the scene when seiðr was being performed (Gardela et al. 458). Special platforms, called seiðhjallr were erected in halls, homes and even on battlefields; high enough that the seeress's performing on them were reported to have broken necks and backs as a result of falling from them during their ritual work. The seats upon these platforms were often seen as identical to the hásæti or “high seat” that were places of honor in Germanic halls. They also seem to be connected with Hliðskálf, the throne of Odin from which the god is able to see out over all the worlds (Price 120). Some of the miniature chairs found show canine-esque animals and birds adorning the arms and backrests, both animals associated with Odin. The miniature chair pendant from Lejre, Denmark in particular shows a figure that appears to be in a long garment and many rows of beads, with a shawl and hair scarf or cap, seated upon a box chair that has birds and wolves. While the figure appears to be dressed in traditionally feminine clothing, one eye of the figure is scratched out, evoking imagery of Odin, who sacrificed an eye to gain knowledge of wisdom and knowledge of all the world. Odin is considered the master of seiðr but the sagas make it clear that he was taught it by Freya, and that it was a form of sorcery conventionally practiced by women (Price 69).

Jensen argues that the coupling of chair amulets with crosses in two graves (Bj. 968 and Bj. 774) indicates that these objects must have had as much a Christian connotation as a pagan

one. He feels that the chairs may have been local Christian symbols, meaningful to the local Christian culture within Scandinavia. Interpretations have been made that the miniature chairs are representative of the throne of God or one of the seven Angelic choirs (Jensen 61). This is a somewhat problematic view as 22 chair pendants have been found in 18 different localities throughout Scandinavia, and only two are also found with crosses (Jessen 452). None feature any identifiable Christianized iconography. Jensen's interpretation of many amulets also features a distinctly Christianized bias- while he states his interest in the miniature artifacts solely as archaeological objects with no association to "imagined Norse religion", he does not seem to have the same difficulties in associating a variety of them with Christianity.

When found in gravesites, miniature chair pendants are only in female-identified graves. They could be made of silver with incredible details and gilding, or simpler barrel-shaped versions that could be made of silver, copper alloy, antler, bone or amber. They were all clearly made with attention to detail and based on the extensive wear shown on some examples, saw much use with their owners (Gardela et al. 125). Except for the Ihre grave in Gotland, chair pendants in burials are all from the late 9th and 10th century. In hoard finds, they are dated slightly later, from late 10th to early 11th century. They have only been found in the south and eastern regions of Scandinavia and were manufactured in the area, rather than being imported (Price 124). When found in burials, they are linked to sites that are recorded as either being seats of power for early rulers or with high numbers of the wealthy elite. The burial locations are also fortified or had known military connotations. This suggests a link between the völvu and not only the ruling class but also their involvement in predicting or influencing the outcomes of battles, as seen in the sagas (Gardela et al. 457). Whether the chair pendant was a tool integral to the practice of divination or simply a symbolic mark of her societal role, the chair pendants are strongly suggestive of the völvu (Gardela et al. 451, Price 125).

Artifact #11 is a silver ring with a blue bead, now lost. This was listed in Stolpe's grave drawing as item #3. It appears in the drawing to be a melon lobed bead strung onto silver wire.

The Serpent:



(Photo credit: Jens Mohr, Historic Museum/SHM)

Artifact #12 is a bronze pendant (346: 12), plate 98: 28, diam . 2.6 cm, gold-plated, openwork, a dragon in Jellinge style, a white glass river pearl on the eyelet, the surface is heavily worn.

This particular pendant style was seen in other graves in Birka, including Bj. 835 and Bj.1084 which had seven identical pendants in this style. However, animal figurines did not have the same popularity in Birka that they had in other countries, such as Norway (Jensen 42). Interestingly, Bj. 835, dated to roughly the same burial date, shared other similar pendants with Bj. 968, including a hanging cross, a coin pendant and a shield, but lacked the chair pendant and the female figurine.

In the Viking age art, there does not seem to be a distinction made between snakes and dragons. There are two snake-dragons mentioned in the Edda: the Midgard Serpent and Nidhogg, both who are connected with Ragnarok. Snakes and dragons were also connected with treasure which was expected to grow as the beast grew (Jensen 37). However, there is no clear interpretation as to what the beast on this amulet meant to the wearer.

The Ring:

Artifact #13 is a silver ring (346: 13), plate: 111: 10, diam. 1.4 cm, wide, slightly roof-shaped front. It seems to be a simple band with no visible decoration and a knot closure. No picture is given. It is likely that this was either a piece of jewelry being reused or a piece of hacksilver that had been repurposed into a decorative ring and added to the necklace.

Burial at Birka

Birka's burial customs differ from the rest of the Viking world, where individuals were buried close to their family farmstead. Instead Birka residents used large grave fields, similar to modern cemeteries. Chamber graves in particular are considered divergent from the traditional burial customs and were used in the Viking age for people requiring special burial customs, connected to their wealth and social status (Linderholm et al. 448). Within Birka, the deceased in chamber graves seem to be socio-politically connected to the ruling and upper classes and had important functions in the society as merchants, advisors, etc (Ringstedt, 143).

There are many well-equipped women's graves throughout Viking Age Scandinavia- not least from Birka. These often contain spectacular jewelry through the addition of brooches, bronze tools for hygiene or sewing, beads of glass or stone, and pendants. However, even in some richly appointed graves, there is the presence of brooches and beads, but no pendants, while other graves, such as Bj. 968 have many. She shared similar pendant types and styles with other graves, such as Bj. 835, but her grave was a chamber grave, which took more time and effort to create than the simpler pit grave of Bj. 835.

Isotope testing showed that the woman in Bj. 968 shared a common geographic homeland to those buried with her in the adjoining graves in cemetery 1A (Linderholm et al. 456-7) . This includes grave Bj. 967, who during different isotope testing, appeared to be a local resident of Birka rather than a recent traveler (Price et al. 32), suggesting that Bj. 968 was the same.

Attempting to ascribe a faith to the woman in grave Bj. 968 is obviously a matter of speculation and theory. There is no evidence for completely Christian graves or a Christian cemetery at Birka. However, there are about 15 coffin and chamber graves on the edge of town thought to be possible Christian burials due to the lack of grave goods and the occasional presence of crosses (Price et al. 29). While her grave lacks some traditional grave goods such as pottery or glass beakers, it did contain a locking mechanism, key plates and an iron cramp with a support ring- possibly for a chest, as well as ceramic casting molds, whetstones, the handle for a bucket, and an iron wedge. She was clearly buried with a variety of grave goods befitting her status in life, making it unlikely that she had converted, but if she was recently Christianized, those who buried her chose to honor her in the more pagan style.

Pendants as Amulets:

It has been argued that the pendants in some graves might be seen more as amulets with ritualistic or protective value, depending on type and quantity (Gräslund 377). To archaeologists studying the Viking age, the term "amulet" has been used to define miniature objects whose only use is symbolic. Some of these objects, such as Thor's hammers, have a clear religious connotation while the meaning of others is more speculative. "Amulets can be understood as material symbols. They can be understood as a source for those practical, ritual actions that

constituted an important part of the period's world of ideas" (Jensen 17). However, what those amulets meant likely was dependent on the wearer and their own specific beliefs.

To quote Matthew C. Delvaux, "Viking Age necklaces meant more than meets the eye. Materials like glass, carnelian and faience signaled access to the exotic. A stylish array indicated status among the elite. And unexpected inclusions- an uncommon set of beads, a surprising amulet, or a curious arrangement- might draw attention to the peculiarities of an assemblage or its bearer." (Delvaux 435). The assemblage of pendants of grave Bj. 968 have led some scholars to interpret the wearer as a sorceress (Gardela 103, 2021). Using her chamber grave as an indicator of her status and the wealth and symbolism of her jewelry as an indicator of her position, the woman buried in Birka Bj 968 was clearly an important member of her society and potentially a ritual worker or religious leader.

Constructing the Necklace

In constructing the replica of the necklace, every effort was made to come as close as possible to the original. I made the beads by hand using a torch and soft glass rods. As I had only begun learning the art of glass beadmaking roughly a month and a half prior to the completion of the necklace, my primary focus was on matching the shape, color and patterns as best as possible, with some variation necessary for size as I currently lack the skill to do some of the finer details. I crafted the metal cross, as a suitable replica could not be found elsewhere. For additional details on the process of crafting the beads and cross, please refer to my papers on both those subjects. I do not do casting metal work due to physical constraints and safety issues related to my lack of physical mobility. Thus, the remaining pendants were sourced through artisans who could provide the closest replicas possible- their information is available under "Item Sources".

The layout of the necklace was subject to interpretation. The location of the pendants was clearly marked on the grave layouts, but aside from a few exceptions, the beads were not. The museum housing the artifacts only shows the beads in a loose grouping with no indication as to a pattern or order. As there were a total of 39 beads found in the grave, it is clear from the grave drawings that neither Stolpe nor Arbman took the time to draw each individual bead, so the drawings could not even provide a rough number of beads between each pendant. Two of the beads were broken and not found near the necklace and were thus not included in this reconstruction.

I experimented with a few different layouts before stringing the beads. While the drawings showed the front four pendants without any beads between them, doing so would cause them to lay on top of each other, which did not allow them to be showcased in their individual beauty. Small beads between each spaced them far apart to be seen clearly. I chose to use the gold

and silver plated beads in the front, as I felt that their relative wealth would be something that would be prominently displayed. To space out the remaining pendants on the side of the necklace, I used small beads, including the single amber bead, to provide some room for them to be seen properly and lay correctly. A completely randomized layout felt too chaotic, so I tried to space out the remaining beads with an attempt at creating a symmetry on each side with size, if not always color or shape. I tried to place some of the more detailed mosaic beads towards the front where they could be more readily seen while utilizing some of the plainer beads in the back where they could contribute to the overall effect, but not take up the valuable visual space when viewed from the front or side. The necklace was strung with waxed linen thread. While some graves in Birka show iron wire inside the beads, no stringing material was found in this grave, so I chose to use a natural material that would have degraded quickly, leaving no trace.

Item Sources:

- Shield Pendant: Silver Raven Workshop. Jonkoping, Sweden.
<https://www.etsy.com/shop/SilverRavenWorkshop>
- Bronze Jellinge pendant: Northern Traders Es. Spain. www.notherntraders.es
- Chair Pendant: Irene Davis. Arizona, United States.
<https://www.etsy.com/shop/irenedavis1>
- Valkyrie Pendant: Irene Davis. Arizona, United States.
<https://www.etsy.com/shop/irenedavis1>
- Coin: EW Stewart. Connecticut, United States.
<https://www.etsy.com/shop/ewswart>
- Cross: made by myself, please see my paper in the construction of the cross for further details
- Ring: Pera Peris. Dippoldiswalde, Germany.
<https://www.etsy.com/shop/PeraPeris>

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