

## The Mysterious “Omega” Brooches

By Ásfríðr Úlfvíðardóttir

**Note:** This document is based on two brief articles originally written for the newsletter of the Slavic Interest Group, *Slovo* (<http://slavic.freesevers.com>). Updated 10<sup>th</sup> March, 2012.

If you've ever spent much time looking at the early medieval archaeological finds that have been popping up on antique sites and eBay over the past few years, you may have noticed some very striking penannular brooches. These brooches, commonly called “omega brooches” have wide, flattened terminals and sometimes they have silver accents on their copper-alloy base, or have loops along the sides of the terminals, where beads or cowrie shells are attached. Another variant has beads or shells threaded onto wire that is wrapped around the looped head of the brooch. The plainest style is a simple length of wire that has been shaped with the ends flattened to achieve its' shape.

Many of the sellers of these brooches say they are from Staraya Ladoga, and date to the Viking Age, and you can find reproductions on websites catering to re-enactors that imply they were used to fasten that characteristically Norse garment, the “apron dress” (e.g., Raymond's Quiet Press, 2010; Sulik, 2011; Historiska Fynd, 2011).

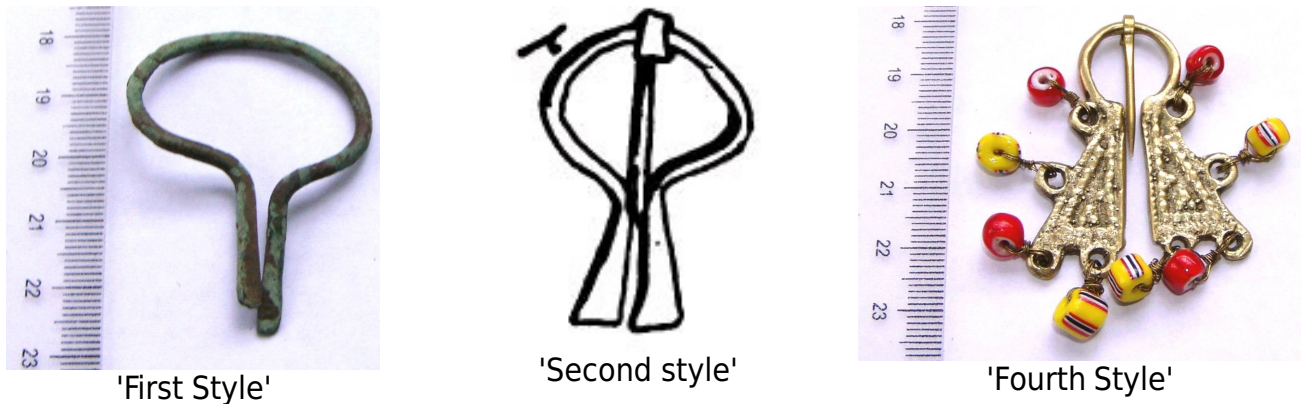
But how true are these claims, and where else could these pins have come from?

Finds from Staraya Ladoga in the early medieval period, even when carefully excavated, are problematic when trying to determine the origins of the deceased. The women were often buried with a collection of Scandinavian, Finnic and Slavic jewelry, making it difficult to determine the “ethnic origins” of the deceased (Roesdahl and Wilson, 1992; 304). Thankfully, a vital clue to this mystery comes from the Hull and East Riding Museum and the British Museum which indicate this jewellery style originated far away from Lake Ladoga. The curator of the Hull Museum, Tom Sheppard, received a cache of Russian objects from Efaefsk or Efaevo (Sheppard, 1904; Appendix), possibly excavated in 1900 (*ibid.*) by the archaeologist M.V. Terekhin who had previously worked at the site (Terekhin, 1893). The British Museum later purchased part of the find, and both museums include text and images describing these finds on their respective websites (Hull and East Riding Museum, *pers. comm.*; Wood, 2004; Appendix).

Efaevo, near Krasnoslobodsk, previously located in the Penza Oblast of the Russian Empire (Terekhin, 1893), is today a part of the Republic of Mordovia. At the time that these brooches were worn – the 11-15th centuries (Hull and East Riding Museum, 2010; Golubeva 1987a) – this area was occupied by a Finno-Ugric tribe, called the Mordvins (of which the republic derives her name), who are also sometimes known as the Volga Finns. These brooches are therefore not Scandinavian, “Viking” or even particularly “Viking Age,” but are early- to post-medieval and are Finno-Ugric.

In the Mordvin-Moksha language these brooches are called *syulgam* (сюлгам) or, *syulgamo* (сюлгамо) in the Eryza language (Mordovia Wiki). There are, broadly speaking, four main styles of brooch. The first style, is rather simple, made of wire and bent into shape. The second style like those from Efaevo (Sheppard, 1904) have the 'legs' of the brooch flattened, while the third has patterns – geometric or granulation work - decorating the flattened legs. The fourth is the eye-catching style with perforations so that beads, coins or cowrie shells can be attached to the 'legs' (Figure 1).

The quoted source which some websites of antique dealers and jewellers use, regardless of the precise style of the brooch, is edited by V. Sedov, and titled *Finno-Ugri i Balti v Epokhy Srednevekoviya (Финно-Угры и Балты в Эпоху Средневековья)* which covers the archaeology of Finno-Ugric and Baltic peoples of the Middle Ages. While this book *does* include drawings of Mordvin jewellery, it does not have the examples seen online of scrollwork-decorated legs, and the type with perforations.



**Figure 1: Three of the four major 'types' of brooch:**

**Left:** The simplest style, with slightly flattened terminals. Courtesy of Sandy Sempel, Fröjel Gotlandica, Australia. Dated 10-11<sup>th</sup> c. (Golubeva 1987a).

**Centre:** Longer, flattened legs. From Sheppard (1904). Dated 11-15<sup>th</sup> c. (Golubeva 1987a; Hull and East Riding Museum, 2010).

**Right:** The most complex style, with simple granulation patterns, and piercings to suspend more ornaments. Reproduction by Keith 'Chips' Whitthread, Australia. Dated 17-18<sup>th</sup> c. Vinnichek (2001-2).

It is probably safe to say that *two* types of Omega brooch can be dated to the middle ages – the simplest bent-wire style, 10-11<sup>th</sup> c. (Golubeva 1987a; Hull and East Riding Museum, 2010) and the slightly more complex brooch with flattened-out legs, sometimes with what appears to be very simple dotting on the legs, dated 12-15<sup>th</sup> c. (Golubeva 1987a).

The elaborately decorated omega brooch style, with granulation work on the legs, at earliest, appears to date to the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries (Alihova *et al.*, 1964). Brooches with scrollwork patterns, as seen at Raymond's Quiet Press, have been dated to the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Mordovian Republic History Museum, 2009).

It seems that the brooch style with perforations evolved even later. Vinnichek (2001-2) says that the brooch dates to the 17-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, which may be supported by the contemporary artwork, showing brooches with pendants (Figure 2). This style is also extremely similar to 19<sup>th</sup> century examples collected by ethnographers, where the threading holes are used to attach densely beaded panels decorated with cowrie shells, bells, beads and chains (eg. Suomen Museot Online; Heikel, 1896) (Figure 3).

So where does this leave the many Viking Age re-enactors who like to wear these brooches for an exotic touch to their outfit? Sadly, only the very simple bent-wire style appears to be contemporary to the Viking Age. The slightly more complex style with flattened terminals is dated to the middle ages (~pre-15<sup>th</sup> c.), *far* later than the Viking Age. But even then, these brooches are part of a fashion particular to the Mordvins, not the Norse who lived around the Baltic coast. The fancier, decorated and pierced styles are even more chronologically distant, dating from approximately the 17<sup>th</sup> century. You cannot deny that these are striking pieces of dress, which is why it seems such a shame they are being worn in such an anachronistic manner.

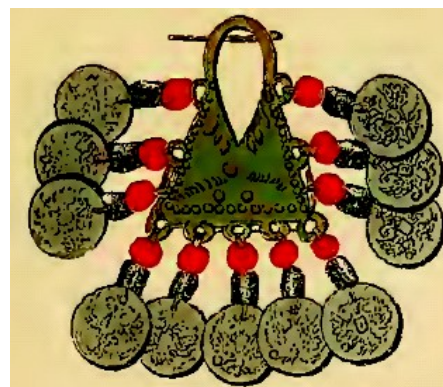


**Figure 2: Late 18<sup>th</sup> century images of Mordvin women.**

**Left:** Drawing of a Mordvin woman (Georgi, 1799). NYPL Image ID: 1241926.

**Centre:** Drawing of a Mordvin-Moksha woman (Georgi, 1799). NYPL Image ID: 1241929.

**Right:** Drawing of an elderly Mordvin-Moksha woman (Georgi, 1799). NYPL Image ID: 1241930.



**Figure 3: 19<sup>th</sup> century brooches worn by Mordvin women.**

**Left:** Drawing of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Mordvin woman wearing a syulgam at the throat. (Heikel, 1896)

**Centre:** Brooch SU4531:15, from the National Museum of Finland. (Heikel, 1896)

**Right:** Brooch SU4532:14, from the National Museum of Finland. (Heikel, 1896).

But, for the sake of completeness, it is worth knowing how these brooches were worn. Certainly, there is no evidence of apron dresses or cloak fastenings, as looking at originals in private collections and reproductions they are far too petite! Instead, it appears that historically, and modernly, these *syulgam* are worn as a shirt or shift-brooch (Prokina, 2007; Suomen Museot Online; Alihova *et al.*, 1964; Heikel 1896). According to Alihova *et al.*, (1964), the simplest styles of brooch worn in the 10-11<sup>th</sup> centuries appeared in male graves, fastening the slit of a shirt, although they were also worn by women.

Sadly, the only reconstructions I have been able to find of pre-19<sup>th</sup> century feminine Mordvin dress, dates from the 8-9<sup>th</sup> centuries (Golubeva 1987a; Stepanova, 2005), before wire-like Omega brooches became fashionable and so I have been unable to verify Sheppard's claim that the jewellery was "found in rows, resting upon the bones of the chest" (1904). Grave plans of Muromian women, another Finno-Ugric tribe who were assimilated by the Kievian Rus in the 11-12<sup>th</sup> centuries, show brooches similar to the omega style, but cast to shape, sitting at the hip, or on the chest (Golubeva, 1987b). But the accompanying reconstruction drawings simply show the brooches decoratively pinned to a shirt or dress. This may be due to a lack of preserved textiles being found with the jewellery. It is only later in this fascinating brooch's evolution that it became an important element of feminine dress.

### **Appendix: Hull and East Riding and British Museum Collections**

To access photographs and text describing the simple omega brooches from the Hull and East Riding Collection, and the more complex examples in the British Museum Collection, go to the Hull and East Riding Online Collection Catalogue (<http://www.hullcc.gov.uk/museumcollections/collections/>) and search for the following ID numbers:

- KINCM:2008.6067.42
- KINCM:2008.6067.55
- KINCM:2008.6067.56
- and KINCM:2008.6067.58

There are a further two entries in the British Museum Collection Database ([http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search\\_the\\_collection\\_database.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database.aspx)) and search the following registration numbers for text descriptions:

- 1905,0524.26-32
- 1905,0524.25

## Bibliography

All websites valid as of September 17, 2011.

Alihova, R.F., Voronina, R.F., Tsirkin, A.V. 1964. *Kel'gininskii mogil'nik: Predvaritel'noe soobshchenie*  
Online at: <http://zubova-poliana.narod.ru/archeology-kelgininsky.htm>

Georgi, J.G. 1799. *Opisanie vsekh v rossiiskom gosudarstve obitaiushchikh narodov, takzhe ikh zhiteiskikh obriadov, ver, obyknovenii, zhilishch, odezhd i prochikh dostopamiatnostei'* [A Description of All the Peoples inhabiting the Russian State, as well as Their Daily Rituals, Beliefs, Customs, Clothing, Dwellings and Other Characteristics] (Sanktpeterburg)

Plates online at: <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/index.cfm>

Golubeva, L.A. 1987a. "Mordva" in Sedov (1987)

Golubeva, L.A. 1987b. "Muroma" in Sedov (1987)

Heikel, A.O. 1896. *Mordvalaisten pukuja ja kuoseja.*

Online at: <http://www.archive.org/details/mordvalaistenpuk00heik>

Hull and East Riding Museum. 2010. *Online Collection Catalogue*

Online at: <http://www.hullcc.gov.uk/museumcollections/collections/>

Historiska Fynd. 2011. *Vikingatida Slavisk kedjedelare*

Online at:

[http://www.historiskafynd.se/index.php?page=shop.product\\_details&flypage=flypage\\_standard.tpl&product\\_id=66&category\\_id=17&option=com\\_virtuemart&Itemid=1&lang=sv&vmcchk=1&Itemid=1](http://www.historiskafynd.se/index.php?page=shop.product_details&flypage=flypage_standard.tpl&product_id=66&category_id=17&option=com_virtuemart&Itemid=1&lang=sv&vmcchk=1&Itemid=1)

Mordovia Wiki *Syulgamo*

Online at:

<http://www.mordovia.info/wiki/%D0%A1%D1%8E%D0%BB%D0%B3%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%B0>

Mordovian Republic Combined Local History Museum. 2009. *Arkheologiy*

Online at: <http://www.mrkm.ru/?cat=part1&sub=5>

Prokina, T.P. 2007. *Mordovskii narodnyi kostyum – Mordovian National Costume* (Saransk: Mordovia Book Publishers) ISBN: 978-5-7595-1748-1

Raymond's Quiet Press. 2010. *Viking Women's Dress Brooches, Shawl Pins.* Available online at:

<https://www.quietpress.com/vikingbrooch.html>

Roesdahl, E. and Wilson, D.M. [eds.] 1992. *Viking to Crusader: The Scandinavians and Europe 800-1200.* (New York: Rizzoli).

Sedov, V. 1987. [ed] *Finno-Ugri i Balti v Epokhy Srednevekoviya.* (Moscow.)

Sheppard, T. 1904. Ancient Russian Ornaments and Weapons. *The Antiquary* 50(290); 50-4.

Online at: <http://www.archive.org/details/antiquary06unkngoog>

Stepanova, J. 2005. *Kostyum finno-ugrov epohi srednevekov'ya*

Online: [http://archcostume.narod.ru/gallery\\_finn.htm](http://archcostume.narod.ru/gallery_finn.htm)

Sulik. 2011. *Bronze Mordvinian Cloak Pin*

Online at: <http://www.etsy.com/listing/68985951/bronze-mordvinian-cloak-pin>

Suomen Museot Online. *Solki*

Online at:

[http://suomenmuseotonline.fi/fi/kohde/Suomen+kansallismuseo/SU4531%3a15?museum=kansallis\\*&itemIndex=7377](http://suomenmuseotonline.fi/fi/kohde/Suomen+kansallismuseo/SU4531%3a15?museum=kansallis*&itemIndex=7377)

and

[http://suomenmuseotonline.fi/fi/kohde/Suomen+kansallismuseo/SU4532%3a14?museum=kansallis\\*&itemIndex=7379](http://suomenmuseotonline.fi/fi/kohde/Suomen+kansallismuseo/SU4532%3a14?museum=kansallis*&itemIndex=7379)

Terekhin, M.V. 1893. "Arheologicheskie raskopki i razyskaniya" *Sbornik penzenskogo gubernskogo statisticheskogo komiteta*; 1; 1-6 [pages 47 - 53 of PDF]

Online at: <http://book-old.ru/BookLibrary/30001-Pam-kn-Penzenskoy-gub/1893.-Sbornik-Penzenskogo-Gubernskogo-Statisticheskogo-Komiteta-vyipusk-1.html>

Vinnichuk V. 2001-2 "Arhyeologicheskie issledovaniya v raione Ust'-Uzinskogo mogil'nika" *Finno-Ugrica*; 44-55.

Online at: [http://www.tataroved.ru/publicat/fu\\_5-6.pdf](http://www.tataroved.ru/publicat/fu_5-6.pdf)

Wood, A. 2004. "Hair today, DNA tomorrow... university to test Viking locks" *Yorkshire Post*, August 2nd  
Online at: [http://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/around-yorkshire/local-stories/hair\\_today\\_dna\\_tomorrow\\_university\\_to\\_test\\_viking\\_locks\\_1\\_2547360](http://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/around-yorkshire/local-stories/hair_today_dna_tomorrow_university_to_test_viking_locks_1_2547360)

---

The Mysterious "Omega" Brooches by Ásfríður Úlfvíðardóttir is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).  
Based on a work at [www.medieval-baltic.us](http://www.medieval-baltic.us).

All images used in this article are in the public domain, except for the two colour photographs which are my own work, and are licensed under the same Creative Commons license as above.