

Norse Religious Jewelry

William Talbot

The Vikings wore a variety of jewelry with religious significance. Undoubtedly The two most important pieces were the Thor's hammer and the cross. These two pieces of jewelry were an indispensable part of Viking dress. However they were rarely if ever worn together. These two pieces represent two opposing world views in the land of the Northmen. The Thor's hammer for the old world of a pantheon of deities with Thor being one of the most venerated and the cross for the new world of one God and the religious leadership of Rome. While one of these pieces represented the old world and the other represented the new they were both produced at the same time and in the same places. Undoubtedly various regions had one being more popular than the other. In fact a stone mold was discovered at Trengarden, Jutland, Denmark, dating from the late 10th century can be used to cast one Thor's hammer and two crosses simultaneously.

Thor's hammers were made of a variety of materials. Silver, gold, lead/tin, and even amber. They were often elaborate and richly decorated. Many of these hammers were figurative in design. The upper point of the handle being formed in the fashion of a gargoyle or ferocious beast. The hammer part of the piece was often pointed at the bottom, rising upward to relatively small hammer faces. A few of the hammers even formed a bridge between the hammer and the cross. A 10th-11th century example with a gargoyle head from Vatnsdalur, Iceland, is clearly cross like in shape but would be inverted from the traditional method of wearing a cross.

Crosses in the Viking world were generally of three types. The first, which seems to be represents more exclusively Norse is equal armed, often featuring Christ on the cross. These could be quite plain, as in the those that would have been produced in the combination cross and Thor's hammer mold previously mentioned. Others of this type were quite elaborate. A silver example from Birka, Sweden, dating from about 900 is formed from sheets of silver and embellished with the figure of Christ constructed of filigree and granulation. The second type of cross has a Russian influence. It is predominately found at Rus Viking sites. It is essential a circle with four holes at the four points between what would be the arms of the cross. This forms an equal armed cross that is entirely made up of curved lines. These typically had a raised central boss. They did not typically feature Christ on the cross. The final type of cross is strongly influenced by the Byzantines. Due to the Varangian Guard and the strong connection between the Norse royal lines and the eastern Roman Empire The majority of imported crosses and many of The Norse produced crosses are in The Byzantine style. These are of both equal armed and typical shapes. These invariably feature Christ on The Cross.