

**A group of Merovingian brooches from the collection of the
Comtesse de Béhague (1870-1939)**





Pair of bird brooches



The small brooches, cast as birds of prey in profile, are highlighted with garnet inlays in raised cells for their eyes and tails. Raised oval bosses mark the centres of their bodies; these are worked with concentric zig-zag grooves around ring and dot motifs on stems in the centres. The upper surfaces are defined by chip-carving with the ridges defining the beaks, necks, wings, talons and tails defined by stitched stamp work. The garnet plates, roughly chipped around the edges, are set on crosshatched foils. The hinges and catchplates are preserved on the reverses with corroded remains of the original iron pins. The brooches are a close pair, differing only in small details, such as the shape of the mouldings on the neck.

Small brooches like these (called *Kleinfibeln* in the German literature) were popular throughout the 6th century in the territories controlled by the Merovingian Franks. They were worn as part of a suite of personal jewellery that included bow fibulae and sometimes disc brooches. These variants of bird brooches with a small upper wing, body boss and talon are known as *Vorges* type, after a site in Aisne in northern France, with finds recorded in the Charente and Pas-de-Calais as well as in the Rhineland.¹ This distribution would support the published provenance of the Béhague pair from a grave at Witternesse (Pas-de-Calais).²

Brooches of *Vorges* type are found in graves dated to Phase 5 (ca. 520-555) in the chronology of southern German graves³ and comparable brooches found in England likewise appear in burials from the middle decades of the 6th century.⁴ In fact, one of the few other brooches with oval bosses came from a grave at Bifrons in Kent.⁵ As the *Vorges* type generally had plain rectangular bosses on the bodies these brooches may have come from a single workshop, although the elaborate interior decoration of the Béhague pair is unique.

Merovingian mid-6th century AD

3.3 x 1.8 cm / 1.3 x 0.7 in., silver, gilding, garnet

Provenance

Comtesse Martine- Said to be from Witternesse (Pas-de-Calais); Marie-Octavie Pol de Béhague (1870-1939), Paris; thence by descent to Marquis Jean-Louis Hubert de Ganay (1922-2013); Robin Symes

Published

Froehner, W. 1905: *Collection de la comtesse R. De Béarn*, Premier Cahier, Paris, p.20, pl. IV, 16 – 17 (fig. 1).

Thiry, G. 1939: *Die Vogelfibeln der Germanischen Völkerwanderungszeit*, Rheinische Forschungen zur Vorgeschichte, Band III, Bonn, p. 113, pl. 20, no. 475.

Sotheby's Monaco, 5 December 1987, *Antiquités et Objets d'Art*: Collection de Martine, Comtesse de Béhague, Provenant de la Succession du Marquis de Ganay, pp. 31 – 2, lot 49.

Christie's London, *Antiquities*, 7 July 2021, auction 19875, lot 79.

Related Literature

Adams, N. 2014: *Bright Lights in the Dark Ages, Early Medieval Ornaments from the Eugene and Claire Eddy Thaw Collection*, The J. Pierpont Morgan Museum and Library, New York.

Adams, N. 2015, "Between Myth and Reality: Hunter and prey in Early Anglo-Saxon Art", in *Representations of Beasts in Early Medieval England and Scandinavia*, M.D.J. Bintley and T.T.J. Williams (eds), Anglo-Saxon Studies 29, Boydell and Brewer, Woodbridge, pp. 13-52.

Arrhenius, B. 1985: *Merovingian Garnet Jewellery, Emergence and Social Implications*, Stockholm, Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, Stockholm.

Art in the Dark Ages in Europe, c. 400-1000 A.D., Catalogue of an Exhibition held at the Burlington Fine Arts Club, London, 1930, Oxford and London.

1, Werner 1961, pp. 43, 60-61, Taf. 41, nos. 213-4, Fundlist 8, Karte 8 (Typ *Vorges*). These generally had a rectangular boss on the body, cf. Thiry 1939, Taf. 19.

2, Froehner 1905, p. 20, pl. IV, 16-17; Thiry 1939, p. 113, Taf. 20, no. 475. See appendix.

3, Koch 2001, pp. 46, 55 (Heidelberg-Kirchheim, Heuau grave 56, 75-6 (Code X26), SD-Phase 5 (ca 520-555) or early phase SD-Phase 6 (ca 555-590).

4, Parfitt and Brugmann 1997, pp. 100, 130, 166, fig. 23, Mill Hill grave 25a, Kentish phase III (530/40 – 560/70). These were imports from the Continent, evidence of contacts and trade across the English Channel.

5, Thiry 1939, p. 113, no. 476, Bifrons grave 41. Another brooch with an oval centre was found at Nesles (Pas-de-Calais)(Thiry, loc. cit, no. 477).



These little profile birds with their fierce beaks descended from the eagle brooches made in the 5th century AD for the various 'barbarian' groups whose political confederations were established on the borders of the Western Roman Empire. They may initially have alluded to Roman imperial eagles, thus signaling allegiance to the empire or to Roman culture. High-status women wore eagle brooches and men displayed birds of prey on their purses and saddles. As some 5th-early 6th century examples also had the central part of the body emphasized with a raised oval boss, it is clear such elite brooches were the models for these.

Although these little eagles are traditionally shown upright, some excavated examples were pinned horizontally, thus depicting the birds in flight. In the course of the 6th century, images of eagles, particularly when depicted with a fish in their talons, were associated with Christian symbolism and beliefs. ⁶

Author: Debra Noel Adams



Fig. 1 Froehner
19051988.305a, b

Cloisonné disc brooch



The cellwork of the brooch is arranged in three zones around the centre. The widest is divided into seven segments, each with a stepped half cross. Seven further cells of this shape are arranged along the border of the outermost zone, with curved cells to either side. The third zone consists of trapezoids and the centre features a X-cross with semi-circular cells at the tips of the arms. A twisted beaded wire disguises the junction between the basal sheet of the cellwork and the backing plate. All of the original inlays are lost but hardened white paste survives in 33 of the cells. The hinge and catchplate are preserved on the reverse. The former, mounted on a gold strip, retains remnants of the original sprung pin in copper alloy. The latter is elaborately decorated with three beaded wires to the closed side bent and arched over the tip, together with strands of very worn beaded wires wrapped around the catch itself. There are several holes in the backing plate to the sides of these pin fittings, also visible from the front side where the inlays are missing.

This brooch was published, but not reproduced, in the 1930 Burlington House catalogue¹ and it is not clear when, where or from whom the Comtesse acquired the piece.² As it was not featured in her 1905 catalogue, it may have been acquired after that date. The Comtesse not only bought from dealers in Paris and Europe but also on her travels, sailing the Mediterranean, and indeed the world, on her private yacht, Nirvana.³

Merovingian mid-6th century AD

4 cm / 1.6 in. (diameter) gold, garnet, cement, copper alloy

Provenance

Comtesse Martine-Marie-Octavie Pol de Béhague (1870-1939), Paris; thence by descent to Marquis Jean-Louis Hubert de Ganay (1922-2013); Robin Symes

Published

Art in the Dark Ages in Europe, c. 400-1000 A.D., Catalogue of an Exhibition held at the Burlington Fine Arts Club, London, 1930, Oxford and London, Case N, p. 74, no.28.

Rupp, H. 1937: *Die Herkunft der Zelleneinlage und die Almandinscheibenfibeln im Rheinland*, Rheinische Forschungen zur Vorgeschichte, Band 2, Bonn, p. 62 & 75, pl.11.6.

Sotheby's Monaco, 5 December 1987, Antiquités et Objets d'Art: Collection de Martine, Comtesse de Béhague, Provenant de la Succession du Marquis de Ganay, pp. 29-30, lor 41.

Christie's London, *Antiquities*, 7 July 2021, auction 19875, lot 79.

Related Literature

Adams, N. 2014: *Bright Lights in the Dark Ages, Early Medieval Ornaments from the Eugene and Claire Eddy Thaw Collection*, The J. Pierpont Morgan Museum and Library, New York.

Adams, N. 2015, "Between Myth and Reality: Hunter and prey in Early Anglo-Saxon Art", in *Representations of Beasts in Early Medieval England and Scandinavia*, M.D.J. Bintley and T.T.J. Williams (eds), Anglo-Saxon Studies 29, Boydell and Brewer, Woodbridge, pp. 13-52.

Arrhenius, B. 1985: *Merovingian Garnet Jewellery, Emergence and Social Implications*, Stockholm, Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, Stockholm.

1, *Art in the Dark Ages* 1930, Case N, p. 74, no. 28. Although the brooch is continental in origin, the accompanying remark in the catalogue – that it resembled Kentish workmanship of ca AD 600 – is not completely inaccurate.

2, Cloisonné brooches were certainly available on the art market at the time. Another brooch of this same class published by Rupp (1937, pp. 75-6, tav. XXI,1) was originally in the possession of an English antiquarian, G. Carmichael, who then sold it to a Parisian antiquarian (Paroli in Bernacchia et al. 1995, p. 296).

3, The boat, a two-masted screw steamer built in Glasgow in 1904, sailed under the patronage of the French and Austro-Hungarian governments but was requisitioned during World War I, then given in reparation to the Italians where it served as the Prime Minister's yacht. It was eventually torpedoed and sunk in World War II outside Taranto.

The brooch originally would have been set with garnet plates, intricately notched to fit into the interlocking cloisonné cells. The stones would have been placed directly against reflective gold foils with the depth of the cells filled up with a putty-like cement to secure the sandwich of components. The remnants of cement on this brooch are presumably original.

Cloisonné disc brooches were a fundamental component of a well-to-do woman's parure in the 6th century. These very elaborate disc brooches with intricately cut 'stepped' garnets appear towards the end of the overall cloisonné series; a comparable example excavated at Schretzheim Grave 513 (Dillingen an der Donau) can be dated to ca. 565-590/600. The wire decoration of the catchplate on the reverse of the latter brooch is very similar to the Behague brooch, and like ours, it is missing its inlays. In addition to the brooch, the woman in this grave was buried with two different bow fibulae and a necklace of millefiori glass and amethyst beads.

Disc brooches of this type were also worn by the Langobards, a Germanic tribe from the Elbe in northern Europe who invaded Italy in AD 568 from their power base in Pannonia. In fact a brooch found in a Langobardic grave at Belluno, Italy (Fig. 1) gives us a good idea of the original appearance of the Béhague and Schretzheim brooches. This piece has lost many, but not all, of its garnet plates.

We cannot determine why the garnets are missing on this brooch. The stability of the sandwich of components in garnet cloisonné can be affected not only by the soundness of the pastes, but also by the chemistry of the soil and burial conditions. As this piece was presumably discovered in the late 19th or early 20th century, the stones may simply have not been recovered from the ground. There are, however, other brooches from the same series with empty cellwork and this has been taken as evidence of interruptions in the supplies of garnet from India to the West.

Author: Debra Noel Adams



Fig.1

4, Such brooches (Vielitz 2003, Gruppe H) are known as einzelligen Scheibenfibeln (fine-celled disc brooches). This brooch is classed as an H2 brooch. Like the pair of Merovingian disc brooches from the Béhague collection, this piece was also mis-identified by Rupp (1937, pp. 59, 75, Taf. XI, 6) as being from Cesena in Italy.

5, Koch 1977, pp. 24-5, Gr. 513, Stufe 3 (ca. 565-590/600); Koch 2001, pp. 61, 79, Abb. 17, Code X31 (SD-Phase 7 ca 580-600). Viellitz (2003, pp. 80-81, Abb. 27) dates these ca 560/70-600/610, but suggests the majority were made ca 580-600.

6, Arrhenius 1985, pp. 152, 208, no. BM 14, fig. 69. The brooch is now in the British Museum (reg. no. AF.529). See also a comparable brooch from Castel Trosino tomb 168 (Bernacchia et al. 1995, pp. 293, 295-6, fig. 237). The Comtesse owned another Langobardic brooch (Sotheby's Monaco, lot 40), now in the British Museum (reg. no. 1989,0906.1).

7, Von Freeden 2000. A Group H1 brooch from Hüfingen (Baden-Württemberg) grave 268, for example, upon examination showed no sign of ever having been inlaid and was from modern excavation that did not recover any inlays from the soil.

Pair of cloisonné disc brooches



The cloisonné brooches are composed of flat garnets set directly on boxed waffle foils over beds of cement. The concentric cellwork has two outer zones set with trapezoidal garnet plates, the outermost with semicircular cells at the cardinal points. The centres are slightly bossed and feature quatrefoil garnet plates. The beaded wire disguises the junctions of the cellwork sheets with the backing plates. The brooches were fastened by means of sprung pins on the reverse, with the coiled spring and a portion of the iron pin preserved on the reverse of one. Each catchplate is decorated with a twisted wire arranged in serpentine loops; these are set between applied grooved strips. One brooch is lacking three trapezoidal plates in the outer zone; the other is lacking four trapezoidal garnets and one semicircular inlay.

Merovingian last decades of the 6th century AD

4 cm / 1.6 in. (diameter) gold, garnet
Diam: 3.9 cm

Provenance

Witternesse (Pas-de-Calais);
Comtesse Martine-Marie-Octavie Pol de Béhague (1870-1939),
Paris; thence by descent to Marquis Jean-Louis Hubert de
Ganay (1922-2013); Robin Symes.

Published

Froehner, W. 1905: *Collection de la comtesse R. De Béarn*,
Premier Cahier, Paris, p.20, pl. IV, 16 – 17 (Fig. 1)

Art in the Dark Ages in Europe, c. 400-1000 A.D., Catalogue of
an Exhibition held at the Burlington Fine Arts Club, London,
1930, Oxford and London, p. 73, no. 24 – 25.

Coche de la Ferté, E. 1962: *Antique Jewellery from the second
to the eighth century A.D.*, Hallwag, Berne, pl. XIX.

Sotheby's Monaco, 5 December 1987, *Antiquités et Objets
d'Art: Collection de Martine, Comtesse de Béhague, Provenant
de la Succession du Marquis de Ganay*, pp. 33, lot. 51.

Christie's London, *Antiquities*, 7 July 2021, auction 19875, lot
79.

Vielitz, K. 2003: *Die Granatscheibenfibeln der Merowingerzeit*,
Europe médiévale, Éditions Monique Mergoïl, Montagnac, p.
88, 200, no. 1142/1143.

Related Literature

Adams, N. 2014: *Bright Lights in the Dark Ages, Early Medieval
Ornaments from the Eugene and Claire Eddy Thaw Collection*,
The J. Pierpont Morgan Museum and Library, New York.

Adams, N. 2015, "Between Myth and Reality: Hunter and prey
in Early Anglo-Saxon Art", in *Representations of Beasts in Early
Medieval England and Scandinavia*, M.D.J. Bintley and T.T.J.
Williams (eds), *Anglo-Saxon Studies* 29, Boydell and Brewer,
Woodbridge, pp. 13-52.

Arrhenius, B. 1985: *Merovingian Garnet Jewellery, Emergence
and Social Implications*, Stockholm, Kungl. Vitterhets Historie
och Antikvitets Akademien, Stockholm.

These famous disc brooches were amongst the first cloisonné objects introduced to the wider public when their then owner, Martine, Comtesse de Béhague, lent them to the first major exhibition of 'Dark Age' art held at Burlington House in London in 1930. The brooches were published in 1905 as coming from a rich grave at Witternesse, a small village in the Pas-de-Calais¹, but in this exhibition they were identified as 'Gothic'.² Modern archaeology has shown that such brooches were in fact worn in the territories controlled by the Merovingian Empire, essentially modern France, Germany and the Low Countries.

Disc brooches decorated with garnet inlays were a key component of female dress styles from the late 5th to the mid-7th century. Made in many sizes and styles, they were worn by royalty, the élite and wealthier members of society. We know from excavated examples that larger brooches like these were used to fasten outer garments like fine cloaks or shawls. They were largely manufactured in workshops along the Rhine and in southern Germany.³ Cloisonné disc brooches have been studied and classified in detail and the cellwork design, foils and size of the Béhague brooches belong to a type found in graves dated ca 580-620;⁴ it is likely this pair was produced in the last decades of the 6th century.

Many disc brooches display overt Christian imagery⁵ but it is difficult to judge whether quatrefoil plates like those in the centre of our brooches were meant to be seen as crosses. Quatrefoil garnet plates and ornaments were in use before Christianity became widespread,⁶ and the shape was a common central motif on brooches of other classes from the period.⁷

Both the goldworking and garnet preparation on the Béhague disc brooches are of excellent quality. Boxed waffle foils were amongst the most complicated to produce and have been documented on other high-status jewellery of the period, such as the rectangular buckles found in the royal Anglo-Saxon burial at Sutton Hoo.⁸ It is interesting to note that other design elements of the brooches, such as the wider cell walls around the raised central zones, also appear on the Sutton Hoo regalia.⁹ Whatever the social standing of their owner may have been, these features attest to the original value and status of the brooches.

Author: Debra Noel Adams



Fig. 1 Froehner 19051988.305a, b

1, Froehner 1905, p. 13. This is not impossible but cannot be confirmed (see appendix).

2, Art of the Dark Ages 1930, frontispiece, no. 23, Case N, p. 73, nos 25-6. A subsequent scholarly catalogue of disc brooches (Rupp 1937, p. 59, Taf 11,4.5) falsely identified them Ostrogothic from Cesena, Italy. It is not clear why Rupp didn't follow the provenance given by Froehner in 1905.

3, Arrhenius 1984, pp. 188-93.

4, Vielitz 2003, p. 74, Gruppe C, Typ C6.10.

5, Vielitz 2003, 123-4, Abb. 55.

6, Adams 2014, pp. 76-7.

7, Arrhenius 1984, pp. 66, 71, fig. 69; Vielitz 2003, Abb. 106, 109, 116, Gruppen A, F, H.

8, Bruce-Mitford 1978, p. 448, B1-2, fig. 319, e-1. h

9 Notably on the 'dummy' buckle (Bruce-Mitford 1978, pp. 473-81) and purse-lid (op. cit., pp. 487-52).