

A Viking gold pendant from Spilsby, Lincolnshire

Antony Lee, The Collection: Art and Archaeology in Lincolnshire

The study of myth has a long tradition, and archaeological objects which allow us to bridge a gap between famous myths and legends and the lives of everyday people in the past have always been of the greatest fascination. In Norse mythology, Thor, God of thunder and lightning, had a specific role as a deity of healing and protection. This latter function was particularly reflected in stories of his eternal battle against the giants known as Jötnar, through which he kept the world of mortal men and women safe. Thor's hammer Mjöllnir, his most potent and recognisable attribute, became an apotropaic device used in jewellery and carved onto standing stones and buildings as a symbol of protection.

The Collection is delighted to have recently acquired a rare and significant example of a pendant in the form of Mjöllnir, discovered near Spilsby in 2013. The pendant is 19mm in length and 15mm wide, featuring an integral suspension loop. The pendant is made from gold and is decorated on all faces with small stamps in the form of crosses, or perhaps even miniature axes. Pendants of this form are well attested in Scandinavia, occurring on settlement sites, in hoards and in both male and female burials. The Scandinavian pendants are most commonly found in copper alloy and silver, but are often highly decorated with punched designs or with applied filigree. In contrast, although the number of examples known from the Danelaw of eastern and northern England is growing, English examples tend to be much plainer in both design and decoration, and usually produced in silver.

That the Spilsby pendant is made from gold is unusual. Only one other parallel in gold is known from Britain, an example found at South Lopham, Norfolk and now in Norwich Castle Museum. That too was decorated with punched designs, in the form of triangles containing dots. The level of decoration, combined with the use of a prestige metal, suggests that the Spilsby pendant was most likely of Scandinavian manufacture and represents an example of cultural contact and trade between the people of the Danelaw and those of Scandinavia.

The pendant dates to the late 9th or early 10th Century, and some scholars have suggested that the growth in popularity of these pendants at this time may relate directly to the growth of Christianity and the appearance of jewellery in the form of crucifixes. The Thor's hammer pendants may therefore not only represent a desire for divine protection, but also be an overt symbol to promote traditional religious beliefs perceived to be under threat.

The pendant was acquired with the kind support of the V&A Purchase Grant Fund, the Headley Trust and the Friends of Lincoln Museums and Art Gallery.

