THE VERMAND TREASURE

By WILLIAM H. FORSYTH
Associate Curator of Medieval Art

Art historians are fond of pointing out that the origins of each new style are to be found in the dying embers of the old. This theory, abused by the lazy and misunderstood by the ignorant, oversimplifies matters, yet it is true enough to be a stumbling block to those who reject it completely. A good instance of its partial truth, however, is illustrated by the treasure of Vermand, a group of richly decorated silver objects discovered in the last century, one of the finest of the more tangible links we have between the two worlds of ancient and medieval Europe. Since the pieces from the Vermand treasure in this Museum are so little known, it seems worth while to retell the story of their discovery and to give an idea of their importance.

In November, 1885, Monsieur Lelaurain, a professional digger who had made a good thing out of other excavations, began to work in one of the Gallo-Roman cemeteries in northern France, the burial places of the indigenous Celtic and Belgic races conquered by Caesar and absorbed into the Roman Empire. The site chosen adjoined the former citadel of Vermand, near Saint-Quentin, in northern France. Vermand (Civitas Viromanduorum) was an important stronghold of the late Roman Empire, protecting Gaul against the barbarian incursions that were soon to be followed by permanent occupations. Monsieur Lelaurain picked a good site. Two days after he started to dig he made a brilliant strike, far surpassing in importance the finds from the other seven hundred or more graves near by.

He came upon the remains of a sepulchral chamber containing a sarcophagus composed of slabs of dressed stone. The unusual care with which this sarcophagus had been made was matched by the beauty of the silver ornaments included in the burial. These pieces were not found in the sarcophagus but to the right of it and had evidently been mounted on a lance that was too large to be put inside. The point of the lance was also discovered near the mounts, but the wooden shaft had long since disintegrated.

These ornamental mounts are part of what must have been one of the richest military garnitures of the period. They were decorated with bold patterns in niello and gilding. The inlay remaining from the wooden shaft of the lance was silver with designs similar in type to those on the mounts. Even the iron umbo (or central knob) of the shield, which
had hung against the wall at the head of the sarcophagus, was decorated with a sheet of gilded silver, and the wooden core had been covered with purple leather and gold ornaments. One can guess how splendid must have been the rest of the grave furniture of the personage buried here. Unfortunately tomb robbers had broken into the sarcophagus before Lelaurain found it, and the sword, always an object of especial richness, is reported to have been stolen by one of his own workmen. Of the objects found in the tomb the lance mounts, a buckle, and the umbo and grip of the shield are in this Museum. Two smaller buckles, two belt ends, and the gilded lance head were in the Musée Lécuyer at Saint-Quentin. They disappeared during the first World War.

Surely this was a person of authority, probably of high rank, who carried such resplendent arms. As the grave was the richest one found in an unusually large and rich burial ground and one of the few in this area containing weapons, it was certainly that of a high military officer. French archaeologists have pointed out that the weapons differed from those of the Franks and other barbarian invaders, although showing some barbarian influence, and so one may reasonably suppose them to have belonged to a Roman or a barbarian in Roman service—perhaps the military governor of the town or region, perhaps, as has been suggested, some Ricimer or Arbogastes who led the Roman armies against his own people.

Gold coins of the emperor Valentinian I, found in the same cemetery, give us the date of the tomb, the second half of the fourth century. (The coins had been placed in the mouths of two persons buried in adjoining graves, following the pagan custom of furnishing the dead with money to pay Charon’s charge when he ferried them across the river Styx.) Valentinian was emperor from 364 to 375. This was the period when Vermand, rebuilt after the barbarian irruptions of the late third century, was the flourishing capital of its province and the rallying center in this part of northern France against barbarian attacks. And it was during the fourth century that the Franks, and other barbarians, rose to positions of great power in the dying empire, helping to defend it against recurring invasions of their own kind. Vermand was destroyed by one of these invasions in 406.

The decorations on the mounts are glorified counterparts of what is usually seen on fourth-century military equipment found along the Rhenish and Danubian frontiers of the Late Roman Empire, much of it found in sites of Roman forts. Their glitter suggests a barbarian taste, but, like the changing culture they represent, they are a composite of
old and new. The patterns belong to the repertory of late antique art, which succeeded the more classical ornament of earlier periods; the technique was a new method developed in the frontier regions along the Rhine and the Danube and used chiefly for the decoration of such military trappings. It is called chip-carving because, although not carved, the patterns are made up of wedge-shaped troughs like those left by the chips cut in woodcarving. This style makes up in the brilliance of its faceted surfaces for a loss of subtlety in modeling. The contrasts in the design are made more vivid by niello, a kind of black enamel used against the gilded silver background. Niello was often employed to decorate contemporary late antique silver, and it continued to be used on East Christian and early Byzantine silver, being found, for instance, on some of the Cyprus plates and on the book covers from the Antioch treasure in this Museum.

It is easy to see why objects decorated in this intricate, flashy style appealed to the taste of the soldiers of the Roman Empire, many of whom were of barbarian origin, and to the succeeding nations of invaders who occupied the lands of the old Roman Empire: Franks from northwestern Germany and the Rhineland who took over Belgium and Gaul; Goths who migrated back and forth across Europe and finally settled in Italy, southern Gaul, and Spain; Saxons who crossed from Germany to England; and above all, the Germanic nations of Scandinavia, the progenitors of the Vikings. Similar ornaments have been found from England to the Danube. The influence of chip-carving has been traced in architectural ornament also, in the geometric criss-cross patterns of eighth-, ninth-, and tenth-century sculptured decoration, and is finally found in the capitals of early Romanesque churches. Indeed, who can say whether European peasant woodcarvings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and even those of our Pennsylvania German chests do not owe something to this far-away geometric style.

Chip-carving is the counterpart in wood, stone, and metalwork of the flat patterns common in contemporary floor mosaics. These geometric patterns, found throughout the length and breadth of the Roman Empire, replaced the earlier classical ornament and reduced its naturalism to a network of abstract or semi-abstract patterns which completely filled the surface to be decorated. By the fourth century these patterns were cut in relief in chip-carving style on the tombstones of Roman legionaries as well as on their metal trappings. Chip-carving was also used on silver plate. Indeed the closest analogies to the ornament of the Vermand mounts is to be seen in a hoard of silver plate discovered at Ballinrees, near Coleraine, in northern Ireland. The ornament on a fragment of silver plate from Coleraine is so close to the star pattern (the so-called star of David) on the largest Vermand mount that one suspects a common origin, although this cannot be proved. The relation between Vermand and Coleraine is also seen in a flattened silver strip from Coleraine which can
be explained as a lance ring by comparing it with the very similar ring from Vermand. Parallels for another starlike ornament on the buckle plate from Vermand can be found on other silver plate of the period. Both these star patterns, as well as other geometric patterns of the chip-carving style, continued to be used in the art of the barbaric peoples of Europe during the succeeding period, the period of tribal migrations as it is called because of the vast movements of the barbarian nations across Europe in the centuries during and following the break-up of the Roman Empire in the West.

The ornament on the long rectangular Vermand strip, composed of two parallel vine patterns, is probably classical in origin but has been transformed and stylized in geometric fashion. The stylization may have taken place under the influence of the curvilinear art of the Celts, whose blood and spirit continued as an underground influence after their conquest. The two pairs of fantastic animals on the sides of the largest Vermand lance mount have a more uncertain origin, but they probably are derived directly or indirectly from Eastern sources. Their twisting, sinuous forms become the basis of the famous animal styles of northern Europe, perhaps best known by the contorted and interwoven dragons and other beasts represented on the illuminated pages of the Book of Kells and on the wood and metalwork of Viking art. The cicada at the top of the Vermand mount is probably derived from the cicada pins found in Sarmatian graves in Hungary and southern Russia. Salmony and Kuhn have pointed out the parallel use of the cicada in Chinese art, where it symbolizes death and resurrection.

One can only guess where the Vermand mounts were made. The great number of discoveries of similar chip-carvings on military buckles along the lower Rhine, in Belgium, and in northeast France may point to places of manufacture in this region, perhaps in state factories, as Behrens has suggested, to account for the general uniformity of the designs. Gaul was an important center for the making of silverware of the quality of the Vermand pieces. It has been suggested that the Coleraine, Traprain, and Mildenhall silver plate, to which the Vermand mounts have been compared, was booty acquired by sea rovers and that some of it was made in Gaul. Perhaps the Vermand mounts were made at Vermand itself, a center of the glass industry. A group of richly worked buckles having similar side extensions on their tongues have also been found in northern France, most of them not far from Vermand. They were probably made to order; they certainly do not suggest mass production, as much of the chip-carving work does.

The Vermand find is the most distinguished example of chip-carving work in existence. Be-
sides its interest as silverwork, its close relation with late antique silver of the third and fourth centuries on the one hand and with the later cultures of the tribal migration period on the other make it of first importance in studying the transition from the ancient to the medieval world.

The pieces from the Vermand Treasure were shown by Boulanger in Paris in 1900 at the International Exposition, where they attracted much attention. At this time they belonged to Jumel of Amiens, who presumably had bought them from Lelaurain. Jumel sold them to Stanislas Baron, from whom J. Pierpont Morgan acquired them.

Accounts of the find in this article are based on those of Théophile Eck, J. Pilloy, and A. Jumel in the Bulletin Archéologique, (1887), pp. 184-201, 213-223, and Claude Boulanger in Le Mobilier funéraire gallo-romain et franc en Picardie et en Artois (1902-1905), pl. 19, with text. I am also indebted to John Brailsford of the British Museum and René Le Clerc of the Musée Lécuyer, Saint-Quentin, who supplied information.

Capital from the church of the Trinity in Caen, with design similar to chip-carved patterns. Photograph courtesy Jurgis Baltrusaitis