Korta meddelanden

Glazed ceramic resurrection eggs found in Sweden and their Slavic origins

By Rune Edberg, Christina Larsson and Torbjörn Brorsson

Glazed ceramic resurrection eggs are very rare finds in northern Europe. Eleven are known from Sigtuna, Sweden, three of them having been found in good condition and undamaged, one preserved in full but cracked, and seven fragmentary. All are from the town's occupation layers. Three undamaged resurrection eggs are known from rural Gotland, also Sweden. Two finds from medieval Denmark's Slesvig province (now in Germany) complete a total of 16 Nordic finds.

The ceramic resurrection eggs from Sigtuna and Gotland have been studied by Rune Edberg and Christina Larsson, resulting in a research report (Edberg & Larsson 2024). This short contribution highlights the results of this study in which also Torbjörn Brorsson took part by performing an Inductively Coupled Plasma (ICP) analysis of the ceramic clays in the Sigtuna finds and corresponding artefacts found abroad. Sylwia Siemianowska, Wrocław, and Alina Sushko, Kiev, provided samples from ceramic resurrection eggs and other ceramics found in the region of Silesia, Poland, and in Kiev and its region, Ukraine, respectively. These two researchers have previously published important studies on ceramic resurrection eggs (Pankiewicz & Siemianowska 2020; Siemianowska et al. 2023; Sushko 2011; 2020).

Eastern connections

Sigtuna, in Uppland province, Sweden, is a town established in the 970s CE, with a royal residence, mint and episcopal presence. Crafts and trade soon flourished, the eastern connections, known also from written sources, having revealed themselves in numerous finds in the occupation layers, in the more than 100 years of Sigtuna archaeology (e.g. Roslund 1997; Edberg & Söderberg 2018).

The first glazed ceramic resurrection egg in Sigtuna appeared in 1927 and the eleventh and last, until now, in 2015. The first find was published in detail by Holger Arbman (1945). This prominent Sigtuna, Birka and Lund scholar was familiar with the finds of similar objects in the realms of Ancient Rus, and Kiev was mentioned as a supposed origin (fig. 1).

A comprehensive research literature about ceramic resurrection eggs exists, mainly published in Russia, Ukraine, USSR and Poland. Edberg & Larsson's study contains a review of this, with many references. However, no recent certain estimate of the total number of ceramic resurrection eggs is available. Tatiana Makarova (1966) knew of roughly 100 finds in total, of which 70 were from the territories of Ancient Rus. Ingo Gabriel (2000) published a map with about 55 find locations known to him, but offered no calculated numbers. Recently, Kamil Kajkowski (2020) listed over 80 from West Slavic territories, mainly Poland.

Curly brackets

It has convincingly been suggested that the ceramic resurrection eggs originate from the workshops set up by Byzantine specialist potters, when starting the construction of churches in Ancient Rus. In Kiev, the Tithe Church was built in the 990's, followed by many others. Glazed



Fig. 1. Ceramic resurrection egg from Sigtuna, Uppland. Site: kvarteret Ödåker 4 (SHM, no. 18562). Found in 1927 by workmen when digging for a basement. In very good condition, glossy, with a chestnut-coloured bottom glaze and light yellow glaze pattern of curly brackets. Size: 44 mm. Rattles when shaken. Swedish History Museum, Stockholm. Photo: Ola Myrin, SHM.

tiles with the curly bracket ornaments, similar to the pattern typical of the ceramic resurrection eggs, have been well known since early 20th century excavations in Kiev and nearby city castles. Similar conditions for production were supposedly also present in in other Ancient Rus centres, where churches were built and embellished at an extraordinary pace.

No solid proof of the production of glazed ceramic resurrection eggs anywhere before *c.* 1000 CE was found in the published research literature, nor of any earlier, reliably dated finds. Assumptions of possible 10th century datings could thus not be verified.

In the report, the Sigtuna and Gotland finds are described in detail. Also, seven Sigtuna egg fragments were examined with ICP/MA-ES technology. The purpose was to determine the amount of twelve different trace elements in the pottery clays. Clays with identical chemical composition are from the same area, and according to Torbjörn Brorsson, none of the seven eggs matched clays found in the Sigtuna area or East Central Sweden in general. The amounts of Ca, Mg and Na were much lower in the eggs than in the local clays from the Sigtuna area. As expected, they are all imports. Two of them corresponded very well both with Kiev eggs samples and samples of other ceramics from that town and its immediate surroundings (fig. 2a–b).

Four other Sigtuna finds showed a mutually similar clay profile but could not be matched with any clay in the databases available to Brorsson. He suggested, however, considering the chemical composition, a possible origin in Ukraine, although not Kiev. No matches with clays from northern Rus were found. The seventh Sigtuna sample was an outlier which could not be matched at all. No Gotland find underwent ICP examination.

Silesian manufacture

The four, so to speak, homeless Sigtuna finds can tentatively be mentioned in connection with the great number of finds which may indicate production also somewhere in areas now parts of northern or western Ukraine or adjacent lands. Of the four egg fragment finds from Poland examined with ICP, included in Brorsson's study, two from Wrocław were apparently made in Kiev. The other two, found in Opole, were manufactured from Silesian clays. Manufacture of ceramic resurrection eggs in Silesia is thus attested, although such eggs did not reach Sigtuna, at least not in this sample.

Of the eleven Sigtuna eggs, seven were excavated with modern stratigraphic methods and could be dated by their context. One only has a pre-1100 dating, namely 1075–1090 CE. The others belong to the time span 1125–1230 CE. One or several of the remaining specimens, among them two spectacularly beautiful well-preserved ones, found by townspeople, may or may not belong to the 11th century.

The three Gotland finds are, as noted above, from a completely different environment compared to the Sigtuna finds, most likely from ploughed-over graves from the syncretistic era between pagan and Christian burial customs (fig. 3). Their dating is quite vague: the interval





Fig. 2a–b. Ceramic resurrection egg from Sigtuna, Uppland. Site: kvarteret Professorn 4 (Sigtuna Museum, no. 2322). Excavation find 1996. Cracked, tarnished but completely preserved, revealing a small clay ball inside, in order to create a rattling sound when shaken. Bottom glaze light grey, curly brackets glaze light yellow. Size: 48 mm. One of the two Sigtuna eggs which, according to ICP clay analysis, was manufactured in Kiev. Sigtuna Museum. Photos: Sigtuna Museum.



Fig. 3. Ceramic resurrection egg from Lilla Ringome, Alva parish, Gotland (SHM, no. 9259). Found by a labourer in 1893 and probably originating from a damaged grave. Fairly well preserved. Yellow glaze with light-brown curly bracket ornamentation in marked relief, i.e. reversed order compared to most resurrection eggs. Size: 50 mm. Rattles when shaken. Swedish History Museum, Stockholm. Photo: Ola Myrin, SHM.

from the late 11th to the late 12th century is an estimate. They are, it seems, very well in accord with similar coeval grave finds from the Ancient Rus and Polish countryside (e.g. Porzeziński 2006).

Urban enterprise

As objects of the most sophisticated craftsmanship, the ceramic resurrection egg must have stood out in any environment. Such glazed and meticulously decorated ceramics objects were previously unheard of, only excluding any objects from the Orient which rarely reached these faraway lands. The production must, it is obvious, be regarded as an urban enterprise, surely protected by princes or bishops.

Four of the Sigtuna resurrection eggs were examined with SEM-EDS technology and the mineral composition of their glazing analysed. The base glazing and the decorative glazing were in each case analysed separately. All eight glazes were composed of SiO_2, P_2O_5, CaO, PbO and Al_2O_3. As for colouring agents, Fe_2O_3 appeared in all glazes and SnO_2 in all except in one of the blackish-brown glazes.

Similarities and differences in the composition of the glaze may indicate places of origin or specific ceramic workshops, a subject discussed by Christina Larsson in detail in an appendix to the research report. The eggs of Kiev manufacture all had a high P_2O_5 and CaO content, which also was the case with the three eggs from Sigtuna originating in an unidentified site. Other similarities in the glazing recipe between the two groups were also noticed. In contrast, the glazing of the Silesian eggs showed distinctive differences, probably using powder from regional glass manufacture.

Makarova (1966) suggested a typology for the resurrection eggs in Ancient Rus, mainly based on the Novgorod finds of which she considered many of a very high quality in glazing and decoration. She attributed those to a specific Novgorod workshop, active *c.* 1050–1130 CE. To further validate these conclusions ICP and SEM-EDS analyses, not available in her days, would perhaps be useful.

Excellent quality

The 14 specimens found in Sigtuna and Gotland are admittedly too few to serve as a basis for an attempt at a general typology based on craftsmanship and appearance. Besides, seven of them are preserved only as fragments. But as a matter of fact, apart from one of the Sigtuna eggs and one of the Gotland eggs, which have a somewhat simpler pattern than the rest, all seem to be of very good or even excellent manufacturing and artistic quality. Articles and photos in the research literature reveal that eggs of inferior quality and counterfeits also circulated in the Slav lands but these were perhaps not exported.

The typical pattern of curly brackets has been interpreted by various authors as mimicking feathers, ferns or sometimes various plants. But exactly this manner of decorating, starting with a spiral and turning it into brackets with an awl or needle, was practised by artisans on glass vessels already in Ancient Egypt and has been used in many places also for ceramics, examples of which may also be found in contemporary art. It is perhaps futile to attribute any specific meaning to it.

An indirect connection between birds' eggs in pre-Christian conceptions and cult and glazed ceramic resurrection eggs cannot be denied. But with Christianity the egg as a symbol was raised to a higher conceptual level, representing the rebirth of the Saviour. In consequence, they may even have been regarded as images of the Holy Sepulchre, the rattling sound proving that it is empty.

Valuable gifts?

Moreover, the glazed ceramic resurrection eggs are closely linked to the establishment of the Christian faith and rites, forcefully executed and encouraged by Slavic princes and aristocracy. In Christian Sigtuna, this symbolism was of course understood but the eggs must have been primarily regarded as valuables. In rural contexts, ceramic resurrection eggs would also represent urbanity. It is tempting to interpret the Swedish finds originally as gifts from foreign merchants, princes or their envoys.

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