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Mysterious helmet from Verden and its “link” with Tibetan helmets¹

Keywords: Helmets, Franks, Carolingians, Avars, Central Asia, Tibet

Since the nineteenth century an increasing number of so called multisegmental helmets, dated from the 3rd century AD, have been discovered in Europe. New theories on a formal break with so called “Roman” head protection construction ideas at the 3rd century AD still raises more questions than answers and this has become one of the most interesting studies on late antique and early medieval period armament. Even if most scholars accept the eastern origin of the idea of segmentation of the main bowl of the late antiquity period helmets, most theories are still based on a heavily Eurocentric point of view. However, many of the “European” finds come with no simple answer as to the origin or provenance of a particular helmet, while in many cases a strong eastern influence can be clearly seen. Such “controversial” helmets mostly offer a good opportunity to track mutual influences in armament or even armour as they were absorbed by the warriors of Eurasia.

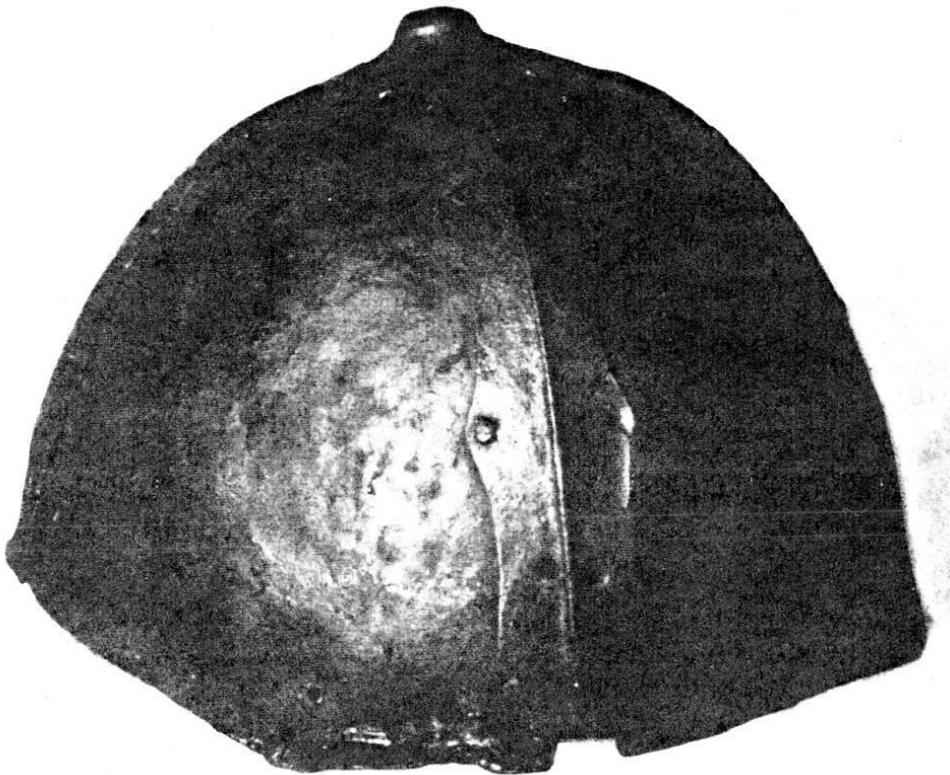


Fig. 1. Photo of the helmet of spangenhelme construction published by W. A. Wilbrand in 1914. After W. A. Wilbrand *Ein frühmittelalterlicher Spangenhelm*, „Zeitschrift für Historische Waffenkunde”, 6, Leipzig, 48

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¹ I would like to express my thanks to S. Kainov and Yu. Kuleshov for the extremely interesting debate which become an origin of this paper. The results of the research carried out under the research theme No. 452/16/S (Wojskowość starożytnego Iranu na tle porównawczym) were financed from the science grant granted by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education

Among such finds we can place a helmet which was possibly found at the very beginning of the 20th century during field works near the town of Verden an der Aller in Lower Saxony, Germany. It was published by W. A. Wilbrand in 1914 in *Zeitschrift für Historische Waffenkunde*.² Based upon W. A. Wilbrand words, this helmet and a spearhead were both found nearby and were a random discovery or belonged to a warrior who drowned in a swamp as there were no traces of a burial.³ Wilbrand speculate that this item might be specifically Saxon as he could not find any parallels between it and known Frankish or Carolingian helmets. He also described the helmet as probably dating between Migration Period and the times of Charlemagne (Charles the Great)⁴.

Subsequently the Verden helmet was merely noted in several publications, but during the last couple of year interest in it started to increase. In 2015 it was used in R. D'Amato's studies on medieval Byzantine helmets of the 9th to 12th century AD.⁵ Even greater attention was paid to it by A. L. Kubik⁶ and D. Wierzbowski in 2016.⁷ In separate papers those authors proposed a origin even further to the east. In the current paper I will try to go into greater detail concerning my ideas about this extremely interesting and intriguing piece.

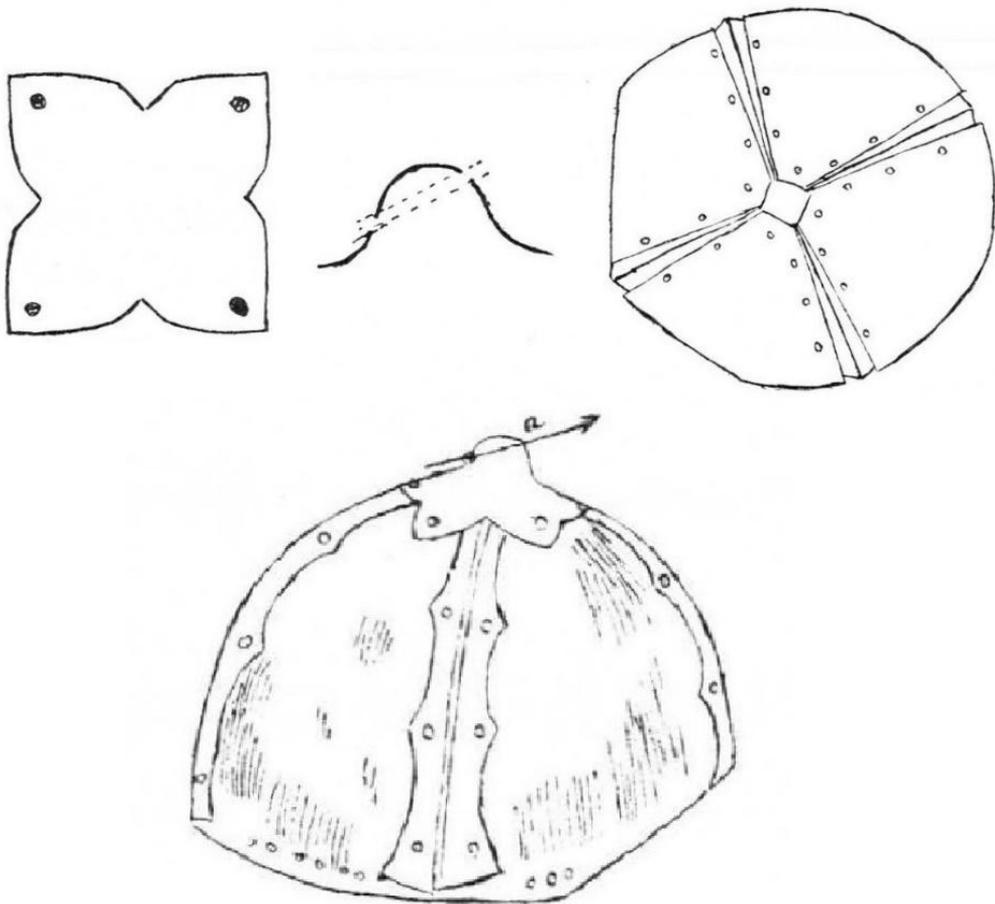


Fig. 2. Drawings of the Verden helmet made by W. A. Wilbrand and published in 1914. After W. A. Wilbrand *Ein frühmittelalterlicher Spangenhelm*, „Zeitschrift für Historische Waffenkunde”, 6, Leipzig, 49-50

² WILBRAND (1914) 48-50.

³ WILBRAND (1914) 49.

⁴ WILBRAND (1914) 49-50.

⁵ D'AMATO (2015) 79, fig. 42.2.

⁶ KUBIK (2016) 80, fig. 3.

⁷ WIERZBOWSKI (2016) 21-29.

Unfortunately the present location of the Verden helmet is unknown, as it was either lost during the Second World War or perhaps now forms part of some unknown private collection. Hence we can only try to study it from the old photos and drawings published in Wilbrands' article.⁸ The helmet itself is of hemispherical form with a multisegmented dome. It is, in fact, of a four piece spangenhelme construction, where the four main triangle-shaped pieces of the main bowl are conjoined by decorative ridges. On top of the helmet there is a four-leaved cap (5 cm wide in diameter), whose uppermost element ends in the form of a little pin with a horizontal aperture in which, perhaps, a ring for fastening a helmet decorations might have been placed. What is particularly interesting is that there is no band attached to the lower rim of the helmet bowl. The broad top ridges (17 cm long) appear in the form of teeth-like edges with an elongated rib along their central part. The helmet also has some clearly visible arch-form cut-outs above the face. Around the back of the helmet, starting from the temple on each side, there runs a line of holes, possibly for a neck guard attachment.



Fig 3. Examples of the front cut form. Upper left: painting from General Lou Rui's tomb dated to ca 577 AD, author's drawing. Tang Dynasty painted military officer figure, Daming Palace's Museum, China, author's drawing. Bottom: iron spangenhelme type helmet from Verden, drawn by D. Wierzbowski

⁸ WILBRAND (1914) 48-50.

We can note five main differences with those helmets considered to be of “European spangenhelme” or more precisely late-Roman or post-Roman (around Migration Period) construction:⁹

1. This type of helmet finial in the form of a four-leaved cap with a horizontal aperture in which a ring for fastening a helmet decoration may have been placed is unknown in this group of helmets. However it can be found in several helmets which are clearly connected with nomads in Eurasia and eastern Europe.¹⁰
2. The ridges with teeth-like edges. This form of the armour decoration is most likely to have started in the 6th century AD¹¹ in Asia from where it spread as a result of migrations by nomadic tribes. It is also interesting to note that a form of such decorations can be seen on the decorative lower band of the Bremen helmet, currently held in Focke-Museum.¹²
3. The elongated axis along the central part of the ridges. Some form of such axis can be clearly noted on the Sinj helmet (Inv. Nr. MCK-AZ-118), currently held in Museum of the Cetinska Krajina Region of Croatia and, as noted by I. Stephenson, such decorative forms were extremely popular among Asiatic helmets.¹³
4. This helmet does not possess any lower band, which is untypical for this group of helmets. However, such a feature is known from some helmets collected with Central Asia, and also on Avar helmet of lamellar construction.
5. Arch-form cut-outs in the face part of the helmet, are similar to such forms seen in much later European bascinets. In fact this feature connects the helmet from Verden with comparable forms known from western China, Xinjiang and in Chinese influenced art from Central Asia.

These five main points enable us to speak of an Asiatic style of construction and, in fact, connect the Verden helmet with the migrations of Euroasian nomadic peoples. Hence, as it was mentioned above, this piece possesses certain characteristics which are known from Eastern Asia but, as far as I am aware, cannot be found in any eastern European or western Asiatic helmet examples which could be considered as related to the Verden type of helmet. This situation become even more mysterious when we compare the Verden helmet with a helmet held in The Metropolitan Museum of Art,¹⁴ New York, acc. Nr. 36.25.86, bequest of George C. Stone, 1935. The Metropolitan Museum of Art helmet is in the form of a hemispherical, multisegmented dome. It is of a four piece spangenhelme construction, where four triangulare-shaped main bowl pieces are joined together with decorative ribs. It also possesses a four-leaved cap in the same form as that of the Verden helmet. In fact, this helmet, dated to the 16th – 18th century AD by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, shares most of the characteristics apparent in the helmet published by W. A. Wilbrand. Indeed the initial impression is that these two helmets are the same type. Nevertheless, one very important question should be asked in this context. How it is possible that the so called Tibetan helmet from The Metropolitan Museum of Art looks so similar to a helmet found by some German farmer in Lower Saxony? Is it possible that there some connection could exist between Tibet and Europe which can be shown by the bequest of George C. Stone?

⁹ VOGT (2006) 192-279.

¹⁰ See for example: KIRPICHNIKOV (1958) ris. 7; (1971) tab. 15, OVSJANNIKOV (1990) 141-149, GORELIK (2002) 75, fig. 1, fig. 7, KUBIK (2016) fig. 3.

¹¹ BOBROV, HUDJAKOV (2005) 180, KUBIK (2016) 91.

¹² LONKE (1925) 196-197, GROHNE (1929) 73-75, KUBIK (2016) 98-100.

¹³ STEPHENSON, DIXON (2003) 29.

¹⁴ Tibetan helmet from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, acc. Nr. 36.25.86



Fig. 4. Tibetan helmet from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, acc. Nr. 36.25.86, bequest of George C. Stone, 1935. Available online: <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/27749>. At the right there are visible marks of what was originally a “two hole” lacing system

Regretfully, no. When we will look more closely the similarities are revealed as rather superficial. For example, the helmet in The Metropolitan Museum of Art has no front cut-outs like those mentioned above. Furthermore its ribs are much wider in form, making them much more similar to other Tibetan examples held in New York.¹⁵ The holes on the lower part of the helmets go around the dome and were most likely used to attach an uppermost row of lamellar plates. But what is most suspicious in this helmet is the fact that some marks have been left by a now lost lacing system which was used to join the segments of The Metropolitan Museum of Art helmet before the lacing was replaced by rivets at a later date. It is also troubling that there are just sixteen years between the publication of the Verden helmet and the bequest by George C. Stone.

It seems most likely that the helmet from The Metropolitan Museum of Art was at the very beginning some sort of four piece spangenhelme type Tibetan helmet, or used the widespread “eight-plate” helmet with leather lacing.¹⁶ It is also very likely that the finial was added later as there is no evidence of a second hole from a lacing system close to the rivets connecting the finial with a main bowl of this helmet, as it can be easily seen on the ribs. It is possible that the helmet from The Metropolitan Museum of Art was, in fact, changed to look like the one published by W. A. Wilbrand. Any similarity with a so called Saxon barbarian helmet from Lower Saxony might have obtained a better price at some private collection sale. However we of course cannot exclude that both helmets belonged to one Asian line of evolution of spangenhelme construction.¹⁷

¹⁵ See for example: LARocca (1999) fig. 1, or fig. 5 below.

¹⁶ LARocca (1999) 113; (2006) 52; (2008) 42.

¹⁷ Some form of symillar constructions could be observed on medieval Asian iconography, see for example: HELLER (2006) fig. 35, fig. 36.



Fig. 5. Tibetan “eight-plate” helmet from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, acc. Nr. 2008.354, Purchase, Arthur Ochs Sulzberger Gift, 2008, Available online: <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/35643> with “two hole” lacing system

The main question remains this: If the bequest by George C. Stone was some sort of forgery, or was a reworked form original Tibetan helmet, how far can we believe W. A. Wilbrand's story about such an untypical helmet being found in northern Germany? Is it possible that a "new form" of Saxon helmet was created, based upon Asiatic helmets brought to Europe from the Far East? Although nothing can be excluded, as described above, there are clear differences between these two helmets and it remains highly unlikely that the Verden helmet was made as a forgery based on the Tibetan helmet. The close connection between Wilbrand's helmet and 6th-9th century eastern Asiatic examples make me believe that the Verden helmet is genuine, though the question concerning its datation and provenance remain open.

I also need to state quite clearly that, if the helmet described by W. A. Wilbrand was truly found in Lower Saxony, it remains a mystery as to how so eastern looking a construction appeared in this part of Europe. Nevertheless, taken together with the spiky rivet helmets from Groningen in Holland and from Bremen (Lower Saxony) in Germany, it appears that this region of Europe was keen to absorb eastern ideas concerning armour.

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Summary

The mysterious helmet from Verden and its “link” with Tibetan helmets

The article discusses a helmet that was published in 1914 in *Zeitschrift für Historische Waffenkunde*. It was possibly found by a German farmer during field works near the town of Verden in Lower Saxony. The helmet which was previously associated with the Saxons and dated between Migration Period and the reign of Charlemagne shows clearly relations with far Asian constructions.

Additionally I discuss here another helmet in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, which seems to be a 20th century reworking that imitated the Verden helmet.

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