

# **Viking Age Scabbard Top Mounts from Britain.**

**By R. Scott**

The purpose of this enquiry is to examine the evidence for Scabbard Top mounts in our period and place of study that is in Britain roughly from the Christianisation of the Saxons to the coming of the Normans, from the Eighth to the Eleventh centuries. That period saw the end of the Romano British Culture, the Anglian period become the Christian Saxon period and the conquest by the Normans. Therefore we may see evidence from all these cultures plus influence from the continent as far as the Byzantine Empire. In short we are concerned with those Top mounts that may reasonably have been expected to have been found in Britain C8th. ~ C11th.

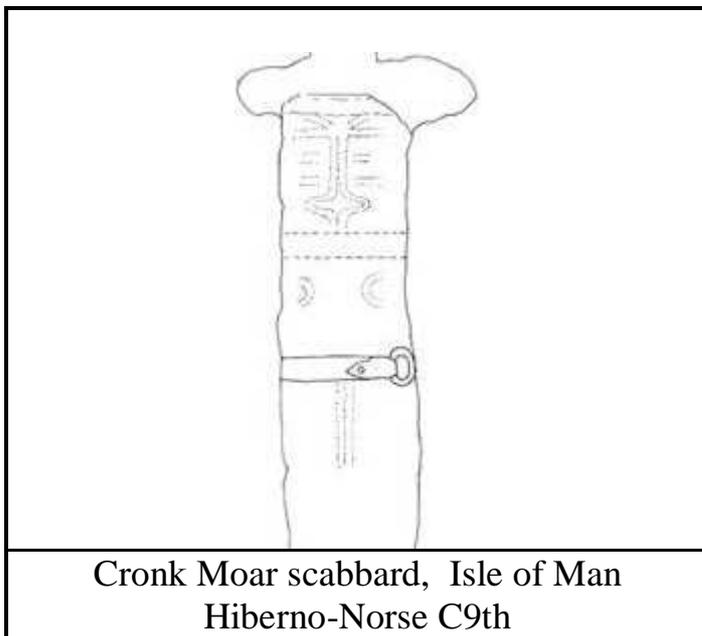
In the Anglian period Scabbard top mounts are well known from the archaeological record, those from Chessell Down and Faversham immediately springs to mind. The sagas, though much later, record the scratching of Runes on 'Valbost' and 'Vettrim'. Archaeological finds have suggested that the 'boss' is the pommel cap on the sword hilt whilst the 'rim' is the fitting around the mouth of the scabbard- the Scabbard Top mount.

With the Christianisation of England came many religious, political, social and economic changes. Surprisingly perhaps, this has affected attitudes to the decoration of English scabbards. The rich adornment of metal work all but disappears except from Viking craftsmanship, in fact no metal Top mounts have been found on English soil from this period. It must seem therefore a pointless investigation if no finds match up with this enquiry. This would be the case if there was no other evidence either, however several manuscripts show possible mounts others show probable mounts, especially if we cast our net further and look to 'all the known mounts' from this period. Even so there are only five and one of those has perished!

These finds plus a sample of 20 contemporary illustrations provide us with three distinct categories of Top mounts all of which are elaborated on below.

For clarification the scabbards have been redrawn all in the same idiom. For the sake of integrity, where possible the relevant sword hilt has also been included.

**Type 1. Simplex type.** In this category belong the scabbard Top mounts which are simple strips probably designed solely to protect the mount of the scabbard. One is recorded from archaeology, but being made of leather it has long since perished. However enough remained initially to show that it was decorated. Many contemporary illustrations show a re-enforcement band around the scabbard mouth. However, as they are illustrations we cannot tell if they are also made of leather or a strip of metal, as were so many similar Anglian mounts. Also lacking from most of the illustrations is any indication that these mounts were decorated despite all the embellishment of all the archaeological finds.



Hiberno-Norse scabbard from Cronk Moar in the Isle of Man. Bersu and Wilson were responsible for the excavation and the excavation report of this site. The report drawing does not show the scabbard mouth reinforcing strip, however it is clearly mentioned in the text. In the accompanying drawing I have added the band according to the excavated description.

At least one Saxon Manuscript shows a simplex top mount fitted to the scabbard. A simple line is drawn across the mouth of a scabbard which is other wise devoid of decoration.



M/s Cotton Cleopatra C.viii folio 18v  
Saxon C11th.



Bible of Count Vivien.  
Carolingian C9th.

Several Carolingian manuscripts show the simplex fitting around the mouth piece. The Bible of Count Vivien shows a highly ornamented scabbard so it is a little surprising to find attached a simplex mount.

A second manuscript depicts a scabbard with a simplex mount that is decorated. In a French Psalter now in the Bibliothek Munic in Amiens part of a curious strapping system is depicted, above which is drawn a simplex mount embellished with three circles. We cannot tell if these are marks on leather or embellishment onto a metal strip.

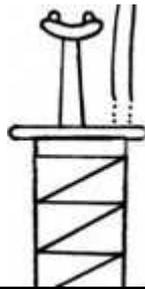


N. French Psalter  
Bibliothek Munic, Amiens  
Carolingian C9th



Oratory of St. Benedict in  
Rome.  
Carolingian C9th.

A third illustration of a scabbard from the Carolingian empire is to be found in the Oratory of St. Benedict in Rome. A highly ornate sword is stowed in a scabbard which is delineated by a simplex mount at the mouth. The scabbard is decorated with lines running parallel down the length of the scabbard. Over these decorative marks are further diagonal lines which may be further decoration or otherwise represent the strap wrapped around the scabbard.



Lupus of Fulda's  
Leges Barbarorum  
C10th copy of Carolingian  
original.

In this illustration we are faced with Charlemagne's sword and scabbard, here rendered with a simplex mount and familiar zig zag lines down the front. Seemingly even the scabbards of Royalty were depicted with simplex mouth pieces despite the survival of a scabbard designated as Charlemagne's being decorated extensively around the mouth piece.

Note however the similarity between the pommel and that of the Dybeck sword.

In this illustration of a Byzantine scabbard, the artwork is absent except for a couple of lines around the mouth piece. In light of other illustrations this probably represents a simplex mouthpiece, added simply to enhance the appearance of the scabbard as well as re-enforcing the scabbard mouth.



St. Demetrtius Ikon.  
Byzantine C11th.

<b>Evidence for Top Mounts Type 1, Simplex Mounts; -</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
Found/ Illustrated in Britain?	X	
Manufactured in Britain?	X	
Found/ Illustrated in Scandinavia?		X
Manufactured in Scandinavia?	X?	
Found/ Illustrated in Central Europe?	X	
Manufactured in Central Europe?		X
Found/ Illustrated in Eastern Europe?	X	
Manufactured in Eastern Europe?		X
Found/ Illustrated Pre C8th?	X	
Found/ Illustrated Post C11th?	X	

**Type 1. Simplex type conclusions.** In the Isle of man we find a fusion of Norse and local traditions. The sword is an import but it is possible that the scabbard was made locally. The scabbard tip was adorned with a unique chape of bone the mouthpiece may likewise have been made of leather than the more usual metal.

Given the array of this type of mouthpiece, found across three or four hundred years and from the Isle of man to Byzantium, it is likely that this type of mouth piece was fairly universally employed. From French King to Manx warrior the simple strip protects the mouth piece and probably decorated with art work of the appropriate cultural idiom.

Materials are likely to be varied from simple leather strips to embellished bronze or silver mounts. None have been found cast in these metals from this period and although they are know from Anglian times fabricated strip was fairly common and that is what may have been employed here.

Many manuscripts post conquest period show a continuation in tradition of this simplex mouth piece, seemingly becoming even thinner and perhaps ending up as a mere line outlined on the scabbard as a skeuomorph hinting at the majestic mouth pieces of former days.

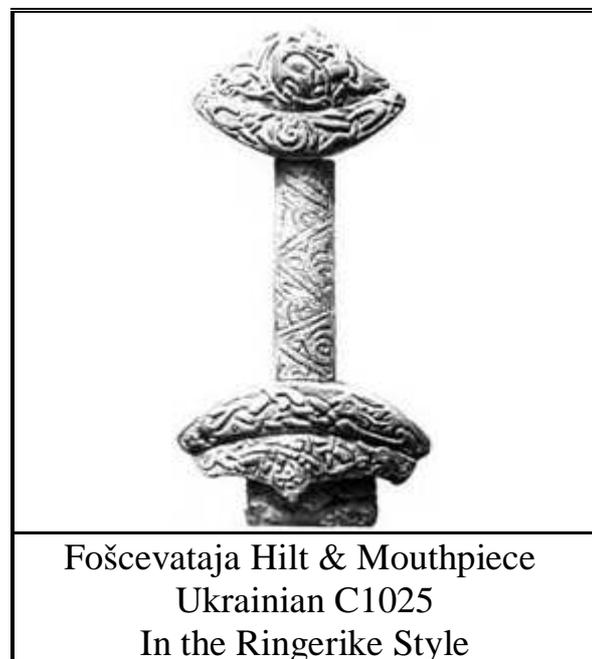
**Type 2. Mount with a Flared bottom edge.** This type of mount is cast and highly decorated. It is fitted to the scabbard as an embellishment, also serving to protect the mouth of the scabbard



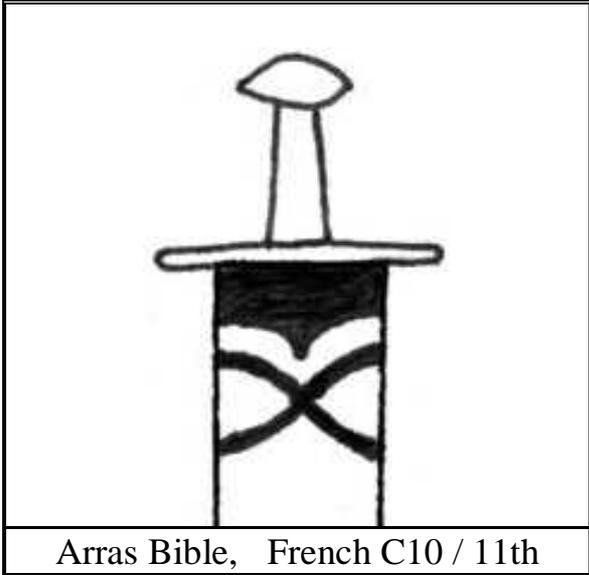
Dybeck Hilt & Top mount  
Skåne, C975Ad  
Winchester Style

The best known of all the extant mounts fits into this category. It is the Dybeck Top mount from Skåne in Sweden. Dated to 975Ad, this was a time in which Skåne belonged to Denmark. The artwork style in which it has been executed in is called The Winchester Style, which strongly suggests that it was a trade good, made in England! If that wasn't confusing enough, the mount has fused itself with age to the bottom of the sword cross guard. It is therefore commonly, though erroneously considered to be part of the sword hilt.

A second Top mount found was discovered in Fošcevataja in the Ukraine dated to C1025Ad. Despite considerations of exotic location and therefore origin. This mount is decorated in the Viking Ringerike style, examples of which are to be found across Europe and Scandinavia as far as Ireland. Either this piece was another trade import or was made locally imitating an extant Viking style. Similarly it has attached itself to the bottom of the cross guard and is often thought to be part of it.



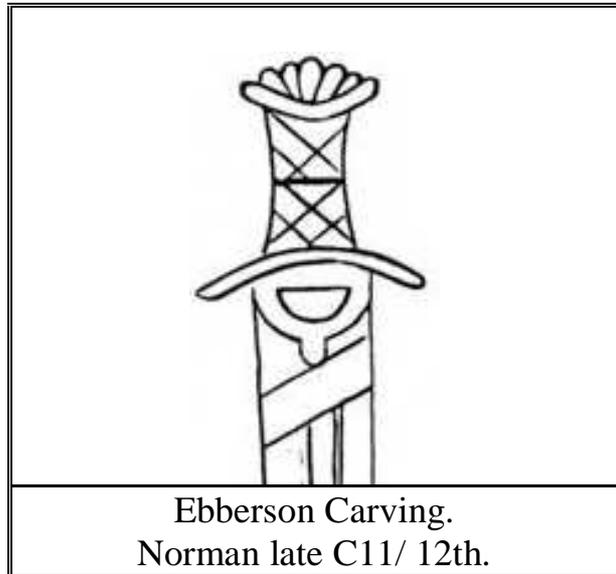
Fošcevataja Hilt & Mouthpiece  
Ukrainian C1025  
In the Ringerike Style



Arras Bible, French C10 / 11th

Manuscripts provide another example similar to these two finds. In the Arras Bible, compiled in France in the C10/11th; an illustration depicts a mounted warrior with a sword and scabbard. The scabbard appears to be fitted with a top mount which is roughly rectangular in shape and which drops to a scalloped point in the middle. Under the mount is an 'X' feature which probably had something to do with the belt fitting.

A second illustration though post conquest, confirms to this category of Top mount type. In the church of Ebberson in Yorkshire can be found the carving of a Sword and scabbard. Around the scabbard mouth is an open work Top mount with a distinctive lobe on the bottom. Under the mount is a diagonal feature which probably had something to do with the belt fitting. The date of the carving is thought to be late C11th. or C12th.



Ebberson Carving.  
Norman late C11/ 12th.

<b>Evidence for Top Mounts Type 2, Flared edge mounts; -</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
Found/ Illustrated in Britain?	X	
Manufactured in Britain?	X	
Found/ Illustrated in Scandinavia?	X	
Manufactured in Scandinavia?	X?	
Found/ Illustrated in Central Europe?	X	
Manufactured in Central Europe?		X
Found/ Illustrated in Eastern Europe?	X	
Manufactured in Eastern Europe?		X?
Found/ Illustrated Pre C8th?		X
Found/ Illustrated Post C11th?	X	

**Type 2. Mount with a Flared bottom edge, conclusions.**

The purpose of this mount would seem to be to protect the scabbard mouth and in doing so provide an extra piece of decorative fitment to embellish the appearance and prestige of the sword and scabbard.

Interestingly enough each of these four mounts are roughly the same shape, despite distribution across Europe and Scandinavia and a time difference of perhaps a hundred years. Made in England they were exported and may have been made until after the conquest. Viking examples also seem to have been known and again exported East wards. The French example serves to show that this type was known in Europe completing perhaps a universal picture of the distribution of this Type of Mount.

The English and Scandinavian examples are both cast in bronze the former also embellished with gilding. It is perhaps significant that both examples are found as export items and sadly with no accompanying chape. We have to consider the option of course that both items were made abroad by the relevant craftsmen, however these must have been drawn from a manufacturing tradition in England and Scandinavia so the thrust of the argument remains sound.

This type is not exclusively found in pre Viking age art work. Anglian examples of cast mouth pieces do exist some with embellished lower edges but none echo this distinctive shape. The Ebberson carving shows continuation till after the conquest of this particular type which is more than likely therefore to have evolved within this period.

**Type 3. Box mount with fittings.** This type of mount, like the Edged version, fully encloses the scabbard mouth, but it is much larger approaching or exceeding a square front face. The reason for this is due to the fact that the scabbard securing straps fit straight onto the Box mount, which therefore has to cope with the weight of the suspension of the scabbard.



Essen Minster Hilt & Top mount  
German C975. In the Acanthus Style

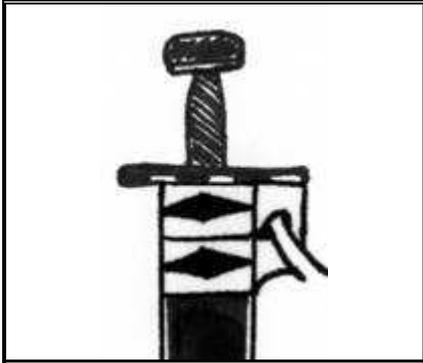
The Scabbard in The Minster at Essen in Germany has been dated to C975Ad and is decorated in the Acanthus Style. The front face has a distinctive cut out, upwards from the bottom edge. The back features two vertical lugs, placed side by side through which s a single strap could be passed horizontally.

The artwork is exceedingly fine featuring relief worked gold leaf.

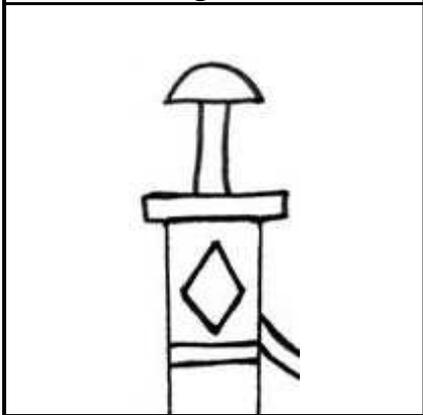
One of the Sword and Scabbards attributed to Charlemagne has been added to at various times over the years. The scabbard top mount is though however to date from C1050Ad and of French manufacture. It is currently in the Louvre in Paris. The embellishment with precious stones is typical of Byzantine art decoration of religious icons and reliquary boxes particularly of the Relic cover of Constantine Vii Porphyrogenitus. The suspension straps appear to be fitted one to either side of the scabbard mouth.



Charlemagne Hilt & Mouthpiece.  
French C1050? Set with Precious Stones

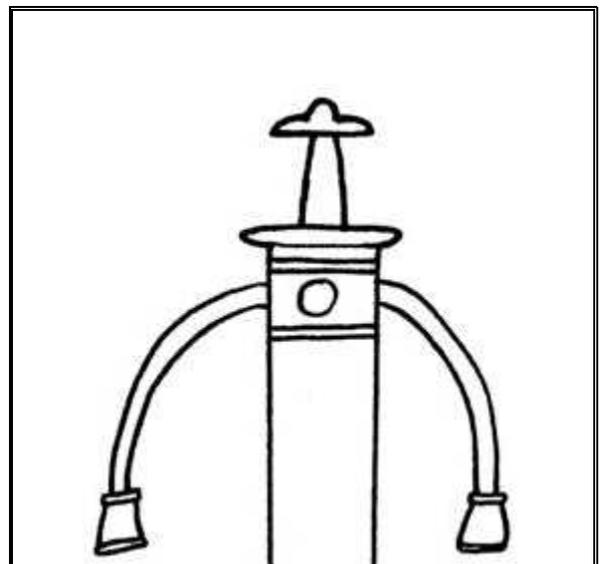


St. Gall M/s.  
Stifts Bibliothek, France.  
Carolingian C9th.

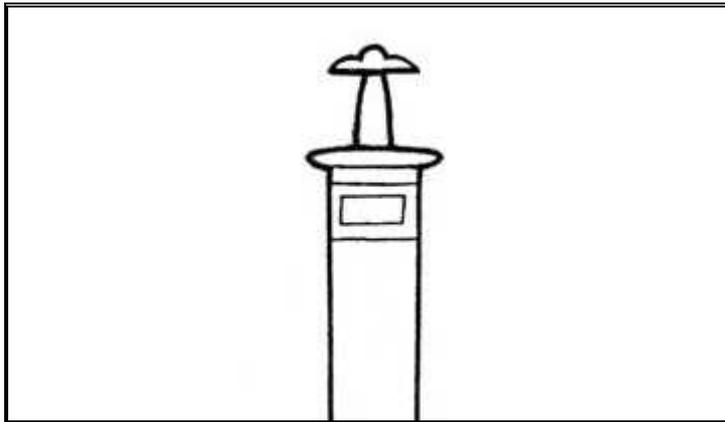


As well as these scabbard finds there are several manuscript illustrations which appear to depict the Box mount type of scabbard fitting. Two scabbards appear in the St Gall manuscript currently in Stifts Bibliothek in France. This is Carolingian work of the C9th. The first example shows a box fitting decorated with two lozenges which may represent precious stones as on the Charlemagne scabbard. A suspension strap passes through a single lug which is drawn to the side of the box mount. In artistic convention of the time this lug may actually be on the back, but drawn on the side for clarity. Either way there can be no doubt that this is a box type mount with the strap fitted to the mount. The second illustration shows a similar mount with one lozenge decoration and a strap butting up to the mount. Again the fitment lugs are probably on the back as we know from the Essen Minster example.

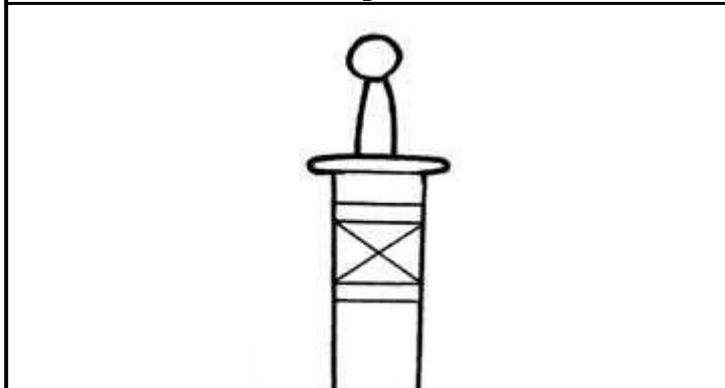
In 1066 the Normans invaded England. The wonderful but slightly enigmatic Bayeux tapestry has bequeathed us with a wealth of imagery from the period. Still under debate is whether it was made in England or France and to some extent the date is also debated whether C11th, C12th or even later is not known for sure. We can be satisfied that we are seeing imagery from the time of the conquest and this must apply to the scabbard fittings also. Several are depicted within the tapestry scenes including several variations. There is no doubt that one type at least is a box type since the fitment of straps to the side of the mount akin to the Charlemagne mount are clearly shown.



Bayeux Tapestry Scabbard.  
From the scene entitled;  
'Where Harold and Guy converse'.  
Norman Late C11th?



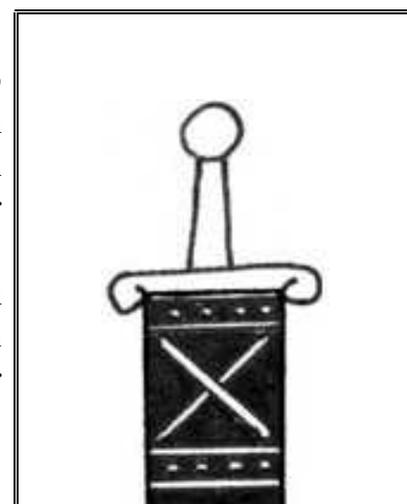
Scabbard on the Bayeux Tapestry  
From the scene entitled;  
'These men carry weapons down to the  
ships'.



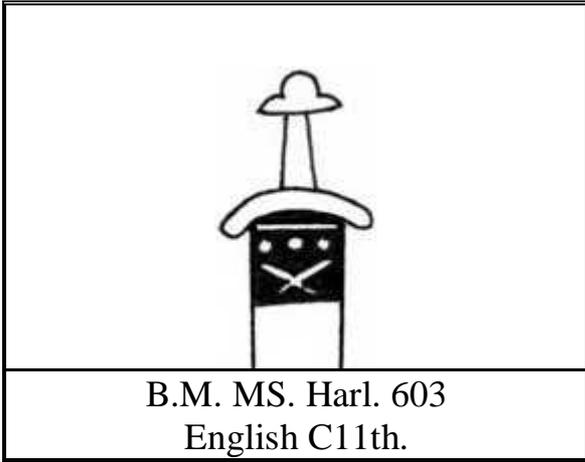
Scabbard on the Bayeux Tapestry  
From the scene entitled;  
'Where Harold gave his oath to William'.

Two further examples from the Tapestry are also shown. Neither of these indicate how the straps are fitted to the scabbard but they are included here for the sake of completeness. Either could simply be intended to represent a decorative element on the scabbard, however research elsewhere has shown that this is unlikely. One of the examples depicts an 'X' feature, this must therefore be also considered as an independent strap fitting system as we saw illustrated on the Arras Bible.

Further examples of this 'X' feature occur in two other Manuscripts of the C11th. The first known as M/s Lat 8846, folio 62v depicts either a box mount to which the suspension strap is added, or a stylised version of the strap attached in an 'X' to the scabbard, or indeed a Box mount which has been decorated skeuomorphically to imitate a strap bound around the scabbard. Its not clear enough from the illustration, but the examples are included here for completeness.

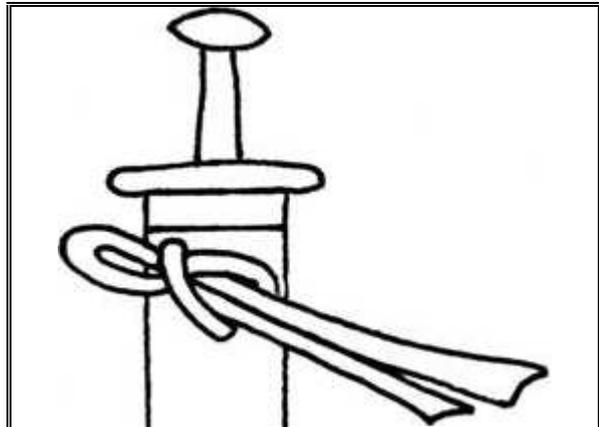


M/s Lat 8846, fol. 62v.  
Norman C11th



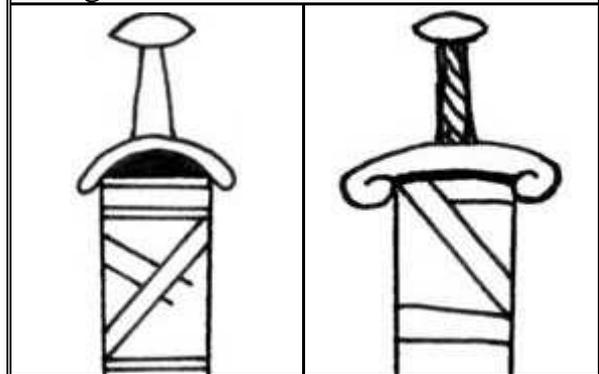
In this second English example, again from the C11th a similar element is depicted. However the lack of clarity as to the fitment of the suspension straps must leave us unsure as to whether this is a combined Top mount and strap suspender, or simply a stylised way of depicting a strap tied crosswise around the scabbard for suspension.

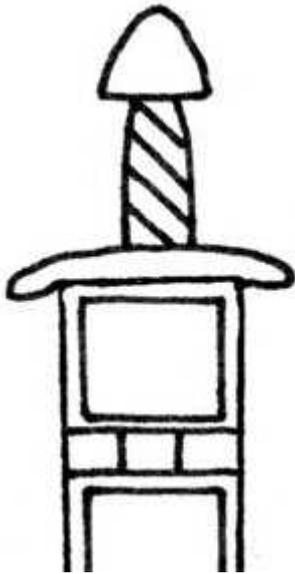
The Invasion of England by Ivarr the Boneless is depicted in 'An English Historical' A Norman manuscript of the C11th. A couple of good illustrations of scabbards are shown, including one which strongly suggests that the scabbard was fastened around the waist by means of two ties.



Invasion of England By Ivarr the Boneless. 886 Illuminations from An English Historical. Norman C11th.

Nowhere, however is there a good illustration of how the ties are attached to the scabbard! A large 'X' feature is shown in two other scenes and once again we must satisfy ourselves with an arrangement in which the ties fasten straight onto the scabbard or fasten onto a box mount decorated with an X motif.

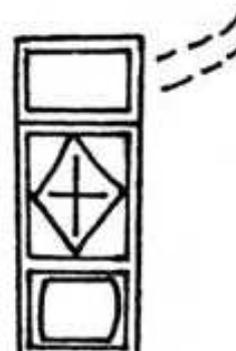




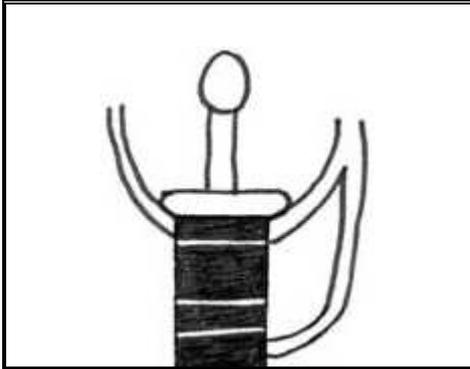
Triptych of the forty martyrs  
Now in Leningrad.  
Byzantine C11th.

Contemporary Artwork from the Byzantine in the form of carved ivory miniatures, can be rich in detail and invaluable for fittings that may be omitted from manuscripts. A scabbard from the Triptych of the forty martyrs now in Leningrad depicts a scabbard very clearly, missing only in the small detail of strap attachment! The front is highly decorated with rectilinear motifs, at the mouth of the scabbard is illustrated a prominent square. This is likely to be a box mouthpiece to which the straps are added. However due to the lack of precise detail it could as well be an art motif. The straps must fit to the scabbard somehow, no other alternative (such as an 'X' feature) presents itself, however without clarification a Box mount is only one possibility.

A second Ivory miniature, the Plaque of St. Demetrius, of contemporary Byzantine manufacture likewise displays a wealth of detail of the art work down the front of the scabbard. Likewise, there is a prominent square element at the scabbard mouth however once again we are denied exact details of how the baldric attaches to the scabbard. Again it is likely that a Box mount has been employed after the fashion of the Essen or Charlemagne mounts but equally without further clarification the existence of the mount is only probable rather than definite.



Plaque of St. Demetrius,  
Byzantine C11th.



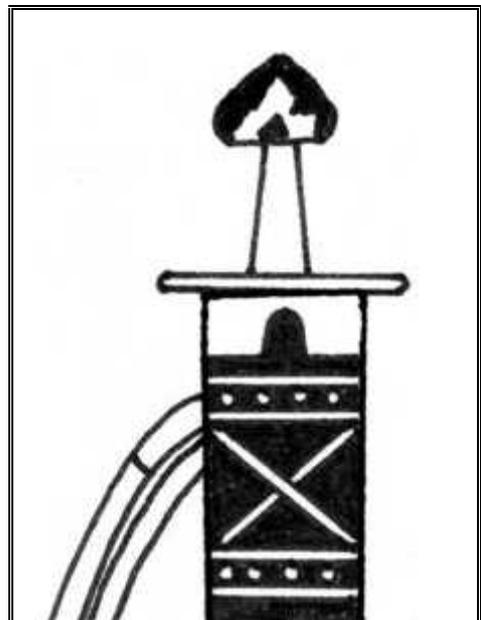
M/s Scylitzes,  
Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid  
Byzantine C11~12<sup>th</sup>.

A contemporary Byzantine manuscript, Scylitzes, now in the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid does show how straps were added to the scabbard. In this example the square element is divided into three horizontal bands. Level with the top band are the attaching points for the straps. This would suggest a method similar to that of the Charlemagne scabbard, strongly suggesting that some swords at least in the Byzantine employ utilised Box mounts.

A final consideration of Box Mounts in the illustrative record must go to the depiction of a scabbard from the Church of Incoronati in Rome. Firmly dated to the C13th and therefore outside the remit of this work clearly shown is a Box mount of the Essen Minster type, below which is prominently displayed an 'X' feature, identical to that of M/s Lat 8846 and very similar to those features in the Bayeux tapestry, and the English Historical.

The suspension straps are conveniently shown to the side of the scabbard, but frustratingly they disappear around the back where they marry up either with the Top mount or the 'X' feature'. At the scabbard mouth is a mount identical to that of the Essen Minster, and therefore possibly with similar fitment lugs on the back.

What is clear is that the 'X' is not formed by wrapping the straps around the scabbard, as the straps that are shown are much wider.



Fresco in the Church of  
Incoronati  
Rome C13th.

The 'X' feature in this illustration must therefore be considered as an independent mount, possibly to attach the straps to, and probably decorated to imitate the tradition of crossed straps. This also begs the question of course that if the 'X' feature here is an independent mount, then might not other depictions of this feature likewise show separate fittings?

<b>Evidence for Top Mounts Type 3, Box Mounts; -</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
Found/ Illustrated in Britain?	X?	
Manufactured in Britain?		X
Found/ Illustrated in Scandinavia?		X
Manufactured in Scandinavia?		X
Found/ Illustrated in Central Europe?	X	
Manufactured in Central Europe?	X	
Found/ Illustrated in Eastern Europe?	X	
Manufactured in Eastern Europe?		X
Found/ Illustrated Pre C8th?		X
Found/ Illustrated Post C11th?	X	

**Type 3. Box mount with fittings conclusions.**

This type of mount, encouragingly represented by contemporary continental finds has no parallel in the pre Viking record. We can assume then that it is a development, possibly continental, within this later timeframe, that is C10th ~C11th. The existence of the mount in later illustrations shows that the idea at least continued even if perhaps only skeuomorphically.

A few English manuscripts depict possible Box mounts, the clearest being on the Tapestry but which side of the channel it was composed is unknown. It is likely that the motifs were probably known to both Saxon and Norman especially given the cross cultural ties in the time of the Confessor.

None of these motifs are found within Scandinavian contexts however a few illustrations from Byzantium are known. In conclusion it is likely then that this type of mount, was not so widespread as the others and developed late and restricted to France, Germany and the South of England.