

TYOLOGICAL CLASSIFICATION OF THE CAST BELT MOUNTS OF THE LATE AVAR PERIOD (LATE 7TH – EARLY 9TH CENTURY)

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Abstract: The main goal of the above rather dry list was to take the first tentative step towards the acutely needed classification of the accumulated archaeological material. Based on my own research, I shall here outline the conclusions that can be drawn for the belt sets with figural ornament. The analysis is based on the personal examination of the ornament and composition of 571 objects, all of which were separately drawn. The most interesting pieces were also analysed using magnified interpretative drawings. The distribution of individual types was mapped. The map showing the workshop areas were based on the comparison and analysis of these maps.

Keywords: Late Avar period, cast bronze belt mounts, typology, current studies on vegetal and geometric ornament

Although the arbitrary nature of the categories set up in an archaeological typology can hardly be denied, the typological similarities, geographic distribution and the technological traits of a sufficiently large body of material nonetheless provide the necessary anchors, which enable the identification and classification of separate groups.¹

This study proposes a procedure for the assessment of belt sets, complemented with a summary of my own findings,² the latter mostly concerning large strap-ends with figural scenes, described as Type 5. The modifications to the initial classification reflect the new findings after the closing of the study's original manuscript.

While gathering material for the study published in 2007, it became clear that the seeming homogeneity of Late Avar belt sets can only be resolved through a very precise classifica-

tion based on an assessment of the material, size and ornament of the find assemblages. In the case of ornament, the origins and style of the decorative motifs need to be determined. However, artefacts cannot be studied in themselves, divorced from their find context, and thus the sex and age of the buried individual as well as the other grave goods (weapons and horse or horse-harness fittings) and the position and rank of the deceased within the cemetery must also be considered.

In the case of burial grounds, the proportion of the excavated and unexcavated area should be specified, alongside with the extent to which the burials were looted in antiquity and the ratio of burials with belts to the total number of graves. The examination of the possible strategic and/or geopolitical aspects of the location of the site and the metallurgical analyses of the finds can provide impor-

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¹ The Hungarian version of this study was published in 2009 (FANCSALSZKY 2009) and it has been updated to include new findings. The papers read at the Sofia conference (Sofia, May 27–28, 2009) have since been published in English together with the Bulgarian presentations (AVARS 2014), but my paper was omitted from that volume. The present publication is designed to remedy this omission, for which I am grateful to the editors of this volume, especially to Attila Türk.

² FANCSALSZKY 2007.

tant clues for the interpretation of major sites. Obviously, meaningful statistics can, theoretically, only be derived from wholly excavated and unlooted burial grounds, but these are few and far between. Still, a sufficiently large sample does permit the identification of certain tendencies.

About two-thirds of the large strap-ends with figural decoration discussed here had a vegetal ornament on the other side, the implication being that there was no separate “griffin” and “tendrill” people. I drew every object which I had personally examined and thus formed an overall idea of the typology of vegetal ornamentation too. These findings have not been published yet; however, together with the geometric designs, it did enable the elaboration of a typological scheme.

The findspots of the finds shown in the plates are not specified because they only serve to illustrate a particular type.

1. Research history, description of the studied material
2. Data collection, statistical tables, location of the analysed graves within the cemetery – representative examples
3. Environmental analysis (relief, hydrology, climate, flora and fauna) and physical anthropological analysis
4. Thematic subdivision of the objects and their ornament
 - 4.1. Object: mostly large strap-ends (a more complex imagery, with some exceptions)
 - 4.2. Material: bronze, white bronze, silver, lead, tin, gold
 - 4.3. Size: 1:1 for illustrations and measurements with millimetre accuracy in the text descriptions (in the case of verifiable data)
 - 4.4. Technique: pressing, casting, openwork, raised frame, chip-carved, punched, terminal knob, tinning, gilding, broken artefacts
 - 4.5. Typology: distinction between animal, human, vegetal and geometric ornament
- 4.6. Typo-chronology: hypothesis of the growing complexity of the designs
Ornament: simple/adopted/basic interpretation – complex/independent/creative
- 4.7. Origins: late antique (Greek, Celtic, Roman, Byzantine); Iranian (Sassanian, Arab); steppean (animal style, “Scythian”, Bulgar)
- 4.8. Analysis: mathematical formulas in description (design formula – semiotics); art (mass-produced or creative)
- 4.9. Other grave goods: ceremonial belt, weapons, horse deposition, possible correlation with traces of gilding, tinning (silvering)
- 4.10. Arrangement: growing complexity of motifs; stylistic development; simultaneous presence and mixing of the four basic ornament types (geometric, vegetal, human, animal)
- 4.11. Interpretation: similarity of motifs = creative treatment and workmanship of motifs
5. Animal and human depictions
 - Pressed belt sets
 - 5.1. Pressed animal figures (middle Avar antecedents, belt mounts, large strap-ends)
 - Cast belt sets
 - Row of griffins
 - 5.2. Two griffins – large strap-ends
 - 5.2.a. Two griffins (in a row or antithetically)
 - 5.2.b. Two griffins (openwork, with animal figures on both sides)
 - 5.3. Three griffins – large strap-ends
 - 5.3.a. Three griffins in a row
 - 5.3.b. Three griffins in a row (within a raised frame)
 - 5.3.c. Three griffins in a row (one with its back to the other two)
 - 5.3.d. Three griffins in a row (one backward-looking)
 - 5.3.e. Three backward-looking griffins in a row (variations, buckles, mounts)
 - 5.3.f. Three beaked griffins (buckles, mounts)

- 5.4. Four or more griffins – large strap-ends
 - 5.4.a. Four griffins
 - 5.4.b. Five griffins
 - 5.4.c. Six griffins
- Lion belt sets
- 5.5. Lion belt sets – large strap-ends, small strap-ends, mounts
 - 5.5.a. Lion mounts and large strap-ends: backward-looking animal figure
 - 5.5.b. Lion mounts and large strap-ends: animal combat scene in a medallion
 - 5.5.c. Lion mounts and small strap-ends: forward-looking animal figure
 - 5.5.d. Large lion strap-ends: unique pieces, unassignable to type
- Round animal mounts
- 5.6. Round animal mounts: griffin, bird, animal combat scene, lion, mask
 - 5.6.a. Round griffin mounts
 - 5.6.b. Round bird mounts
 - 5.6.c. Round animal combat mounts
 - 5.6.d. Round lion mounts
 - 5.6.e. Bird and mask pendent mounts
- Animal combat scenes
- 5.7. Large strap-ends, fragments and belt mounts with animal combat scenes
 - 5.7.a. Basic animal combat scene on large strap-ends
 - 5.7.b. Basic animal combat scene on large strap-ends: decorated with semi-globules
 - 5.7.c. Basic animal combat scene on large strap-ends: punched decoration
 - 5.7.d. Basic animal combat scene on large strap-ends: terminal knop
 - 5.7.e. Large strap-ends with animal combat scenes, the animal bodies elongated into ribbons
 - 5.7.f. Large strap-ends and belt mounts with incomplete or disjointed composition
 - 5.7.g. Animal combat scenes with figures facing the lower end of the strap-end (to the right)
 - 5.7.h. Animal combat scenes with clumsily drawn figures
 - 5.7.i. Broken pieces with animal combat scene
- 5.8. Unique animal combat scenes
 - 5.8.a. Artistically outstanding pieces with unique animal combat scene
 - 5.8.b. Unique animal combat scenes with the animals subsumed into ornamental patterns
 - 5.8.c. Unique animal combat scene in the dissolving style
 - 5.8.d. Unique animal combat scene in a mixed style: simultaneous figural-vegetal-geometric depiction
 - 5.8.e. Unique animal combat scenes of the Nyékládháza type
- 5.9. Animal-headed tendrils: large and small strap-ends
- Belt sets with a “Christian” theme
- 5.10. Belt sets with a “Christian” theme
 - 5.10.a. Two antithetic doves pecking at a tree
 - 5.10.b. Two antithetic doves pecking at a tree and an eagle clutching a fish
 - 5.10.c. Eagle with cross
 - 5.10.d. Other depictions of birds or fishes
- 5.11. Unique pieces unassignable to animal depictions (large strap-ends, small strap-ends, strap-loop, mounts)
- 5.12. Large and small strap-ends with animal heads (boar, moose)
- Human depictions
- 5.13. Human depictions on large strap-ends, small strap-ends, buckles, mounts
 - 5.13.a. Large and small strap strap-ends, buckles, mounts with a bust or portrait
 - 5.13.b. Large and small strap-ends with a circus scene (human-lion combat)
 - 5.13.c. Nereid mounts and buckle
 - 5.13.d. Small strap-ends with female figure
 - 5.13.e. Riders with raised hands (feline-faced, female), depicted *en face*

- 5.13.f. Riders with raised hands (human figure, male), depicted in profile
- 5.13.g. Human depiction: unique pieces unassignable to type
- 6. Geometric and vegetal ornament
 - Pressed belt sets
 - 6.1. Pressed geometric and vegetal ornament (middle Avar antecedents, belt mounts, large strap ends)
 - 6.1.a. Interlace
 - 6.1.b. Figure-of-eight looped interlace
 - 6.1.c. Grid-like pattern
 - 6.1.d. Stone inlay imitation
 - 6.1.e. Wavy line, herringbone
 - 6.1.f. Tendril
 - Cast belt sets
 - 6.2. Belt sets with geometric ornament
 - Large strap-ends and mounts with geometric ornament
 - 6.2.a. Grid
 - 6.2.b. Small circles
 - 6.2.c. Axially symmetric circles
 - 6.2.d. Wavy line-circle-straight line combinations
 - 6.2.e. Wavy line – herringbone
 - 6.3. Pieces with vegetal type ornament
 - 6.3.a. Mechanically repeated petals/leaves
 - 6.3.b. Axially symmetric leaves/tendrils
 - 6.3.c. Linearly symmetric leaves/tendrils
 - 6.4. Pieces with vegetal ornament
 - 6.4.a. S tendrils
 - 6.4.b. Flat tendrils
 - 6.4.c. Heart tendrils
 - 6.4.d. Cornucopia
 - 6.5. Genuine plants
 - 6.5.a. Grapes
 - 6.5.b. Lilies
 - 6.5.c. Papyrus
 - 6.5.d. Acanthus
 - 6.5.e. Palmette/palmette bunch
 - 6.5.f. Tree
 - 6.6. Unique vegetal depictions of outstanding craftsmanship
- 7. Compositions in a mixed style (geometric – vegetal – animal – human)
- 8. Engraved-punched pieces (so-called Nagyszentmiklós circle)
- 9. Scale ornament
- 10. Workshops, chronology, results
 - 10.1. Workshops
 - 10.1.a. Tisza–Körös confluence
 - 10.1.b. Vienna Basin
 - 10.1.c. Northern Danube region
 - 10.1.d. Upper Tisza region
 - 10.1.e. County Baranya
 - 10.1.f. Danube–Tisza confluence
 - 10.1.g. Tisza–Maros confluence
 - 10.1.h. Budapest area
 - 10.1.i. Kiskörös area
 - 10.1.j. Area of the north-western marchland
 - 10.1.k. Körös rivers confluence
 - 10.1.1. Keszthely area
 - 10.2. Chronology
 - 10.3. Main findings
 - 10.4. Conclusion
- 11. Social dimension and social history

SUMMARY

The main goal of the above rather dry list was to take the first tentative step towards the acutely needed classification of the accumulated archaeological material.

Based on my own research, I shall here outline the conclusions that can be drawn for the belt sets with figural ornament (see note 2). The analysis is based on the personal examination of the ornament and composition of 571 objects, all of which were separately drawn (57

plates). The most interesting pieces were also analysed using magnified interpretative drawings (28 figures). The distribution of individual types was mapped (31 maps). The map showing the workshop areas were based on the comparison and analysis of these maps.

The statistical analysis of the material was based on the detailed assessment of 78 Avar period cemeteries with a high number of burials according to various criteria. I only exam-

ined the cultural connections of belt sets with figural ornament. It must here be noted that a burial assemblage of horse deposition, weapons and belt set was only recovered from 31 graves, which seems realistic in the light of the 135 analysed cemeteries (including the 78 burial grounds mentioned above), even considering the high number of looted graves,

The material was classified according to the subject of the decorative depictions. The types and their sub-types are listed under Nos 5–9.

An examination of the finer details of the compositions indicated that most of the figures are not particularly well-drawn copies of the original imagery. The motifs can be derived from the late antique, Byzantine, Central Asian and Germanic ornamental vocabulary, and although they appear on a wide range of artefact types, this visual idiom was conceived locally and was typical solely for the Avars. Avar craftsmen tended to create mechanically repeated figures/patterns and rarely composed scenes. The large strap-ends usually have three figures, while parts of these compositions appear on the smaller belt mounts. The quality and workmanship of the figures and patterns indicate that these products rarely eclipsed the handicraft level – only in a few instances can we speak of the category of minor arts.

The most noteworthy findings with a bearing on some of the fundamental issues of Avar studies is that we cannot speak of separate “griffin” and “tendril” groups in the Avar population, that a mount-decorated belt was not accorded to every adult male and that the belt sets were not produced in a central workshop. It seems likely that the wearing of a mount-adorned belt was related to the individual’s social position/rank.

The above findings must at this point be complemented with a brief overview of earlier studies on belt sets with vegetal and geometric ornament. In this case too, the identification, separation and analysis of smaller groups seems to represent the viable path to new results. The findings will either confirm or modify the above picture. It is hardly surprising that, daunted by its immenseness and the seeming lack of any orderliness, few scholars have ventured into the thicket of classifying the entire material.

The following findings can be quoted regarding vegetal and geometric ornament. It is quite obvious that an arbitrary, whimsical selection can hardly yield meaningful results either from an academic,³ or an antiquarian⁴ standpoint.

An analysis and modelling based on mathematical interpretation can be fruitful in the classification of the elaborate geometric and vegetal designs, an approach that can be found already Hampel’s monumental work.⁵ Szaniszló Bérczi followed this path (alongside the analysis of the decorative motifs of the Conquest period), but we are still awaiting the publication of his more recent research conducted during the past two decades.⁶ One possible reason for the impasse is that in order to make further progress, the entire published material has to be examined.

In her sadly discontinued research, Éva Pávai derived the tendril ornament from a single basic motif, the S-shaped animal figure.⁷

Mention must certainly be made of the works discussing the origins of various ornamental motifs⁸ and of the studies devoted to the manufacturing techniques of the (early) belt sets.⁹ The studies quoted here provide an ample bibliography for a better understanding

³ DEKAN 1972.

⁴ HUSZKA 1930.

⁵ HAMPEL 1905, 524–525.

⁶ BÉRCZI 1987; BÉRCZI 1987a.

⁷ PÁVAI 1991.

⁸ NAGY 1998; NAGY 1999.

⁹ HEINRICH-TAMÁSKA 2006.

of the problems encountered in this field of research.

Margit Nagy's research on interlace is in part based on her exhaustive knowledge of Germanic art and in part on the proven survival of late antique art. Additionally, her pioneering studies introduced the findings of western ornament research to Hungarian archaeology, from which this direction was virtually absent. Her chosen field is extraordinarily exciting because interlace ornament marks the boundary between geometric and vegetal designs. The clarification of origins, meaning and technique is fundamentally important in the case of both. Moreover, her findings are wholly reliable and acceptable because they represent the opinion of a scholar who is equally at home in Roman and late antique as well as Germanic and early and Late Avar archaeology.

Modern analytical procedures can also yield exciting and wholly new results as shown by the findings discussed in the studies published in the volumes edited by Falko Daim.¹⁰

The monographic treatment of certain types clearly indicates that technique can provide irrefutable evidence in the case of cultural connections.¹¹ The modelling of the technical and cultural connections between the Lombards and the Avars also allows more general conclusions, pointing beyond the actual case study.¹²

Smaller motif groups have also been analysed. In his study on lobed mounts, Csaba Szalontai argued for the survival of the Avars into the 9th century.¹³ His approach shares many similarities to the analytical procedure employed here, which in my view is a feasible path. He consistently applied this procedure in a later study devoted to the Hohenberg–

Záhony type mounts, again with chronological implications.¹⁴ József Szentpéteri discussed the scale-ornamented belt sets in a paper analysing the snake motif.¹⁵ Falko Daim emphasised the Byzantine origins of one class of objects when creating his typo-chronological scheme, which is essentially based on tendril patterns, ranging from flat tendrils to thin rod tendrils.¹⁶ His chronological groups are as follows: earlier eighth century; mid-eighth century to the later 8th century; later 8th century to the early 9th century. His geographic groups are the Italian-Byzantine, the Balkanic-Byzantine and the Black Sea-Byzantine groups. Éva Garam summarised her views on various motifs of the vegetal ornament appearing among the decorative designs of the Nagyszentmiklós Treasure in the catalogue accompanying the treasure's exhibition in Budapest.¹⁷ In her view, these were represented by the metalwork bearing tendril designs and engraved-punched palmettes, which she grouped as follows: (1) semi-palmettes, dissolving tendrils and budded palmettes; (2) engraved-punched tendrils; (3) thin rod tendrils.

In his discussion of a widespread decorative motif broadly described as the "tendril flower", Béla Miklós Szóke distinguished the following main elements: the three-leaved palmette (*fleur-de-lys*), the cord-like, twisted stem and the tendril flower itself. He found that we cannot speak of any artistic development in the case of the basic motif.¹⁸

Birgit Bühler expressly treated early medieval vegetal ornament.¹⁹ The categories set up in her first study followed the sub-divisions of late antique art: vegetal-geometric palmettes, semi-palmettes, semi-palmette with crescentic

¹⁰ DAIM 1996; DAIM 2000.

¹¹ HEINRICH-TAMÁSKA 2006.

¹² HEINRICH-TAMÁSKA 2005, 298–299.

¹³ SZALONTAI 1991.

¹⁴ SZALONTAI 1996.

¹⁵ SZENTPÉTERI 1993.

¹⁶ DAIM 2000, Abb. 112.

¹⁷ GARAM 2002, 104–108.

¹⁸ SZÓKE 2001, 116.

¹⁹ BÜHLER 2000; BÜHLER 2002.

outer leaf, S tendrils and wavy tendrils with semi-palmettes, semi-palmettes with a double tendril motif. A later study addresses the technical details of the ornaments.

Vegetal ornament has most recently been rigorously analysed by Gergely Szenthe, who contributed studies to both of the Sofia conference volumes. He also discussed manufacturing techniques and made a series of

experimental castings for reconstructing metalworking procedures.²⁰

The above brief survey indicates the complexity of the material and the arbitrariness of the current terminology. The main goal of this paper was to propose a viable solution for both – even though I am fully aware that in these cases, new advances can only be hoped from productive debates.

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²⁰ SZENTHE 2013.

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A KÉSŐ AVAR KORI (7. SZÁZAD VÉGE – 9. SZÁZAD ELEJE) ÖNTÖTT BRONZ ÖVVERETEK
TIPOLOGIAI FELOSZTÁSA

A késő avar kori öntött bronz övveretek mintakincse az avar korszak második felének (670/700–829) jellemzője. Az anyag tipológiai beosztása az érintkező kultúrák (frank, szláv, bizánci, bolgár) hasonló anyagcsoportjainak konkordanciája miatt szükséges. A csoportosítás elemei: állat- és emberábrázolás, geometrikus és növényi motívumok.

Tisztában vagyok a régészeti tipológia beosztási rendszereinek önkényességével, de véleményem szerint a kellő nagyságú anyag belső összefüggései mégis adnak olyan támpontokat, amelyek alapján érdemes hozzálátni a csoportok rendszerezéséhez. A dolgozatban az övveretek feldolgozásának módszertanára teszek javaslatot, kiegészítve ezt saját eredményeim összefoglalásával. Ez utóbbiak nagyrészt az alakos ábrázolású nagyszíjvégekre vonatkoznak, ennek eredményeit tükrözi az 5. pont. A módszertani felosztás finomítása a 2007-ben megjelent munkám kéziratának lezárása után kialakult véleményemet tükrözi.

Meggyőződésem, hogy a késő avar kori övveretek látszólagos homogenitását azoknak minél precízebb csoportokra osztásával fel lehet oldani. Ennek alapja a tárgyak elemzése anyaguk, méretük, ábrázolásuk alapján. Ez utóbbinál meg kell próbálni a motívumok eredetének és stílusának meghatározását. A leleteket azonban nem csak önmagukban kell vizsgálni. Értékelésükhöz hozzátartozik az eltemetett személy neme és életkora, egyéb fontos mellékletei (fegyverek és ló, vagy lóra utaló szerelékek), helye és rangja a temetőn belül.

A fenti példákból világosan látszik az anyag összetettsége és a terminológia esetlegessége. Írásunk célja főleg az, hogy mindkét kérdésben megoldási javaslatot vessen fel. Természetesen tisztában vagyunk azzal, hogy ilyen esetekben a termékeny vita az egyetlen lehetséges előre vezető út.

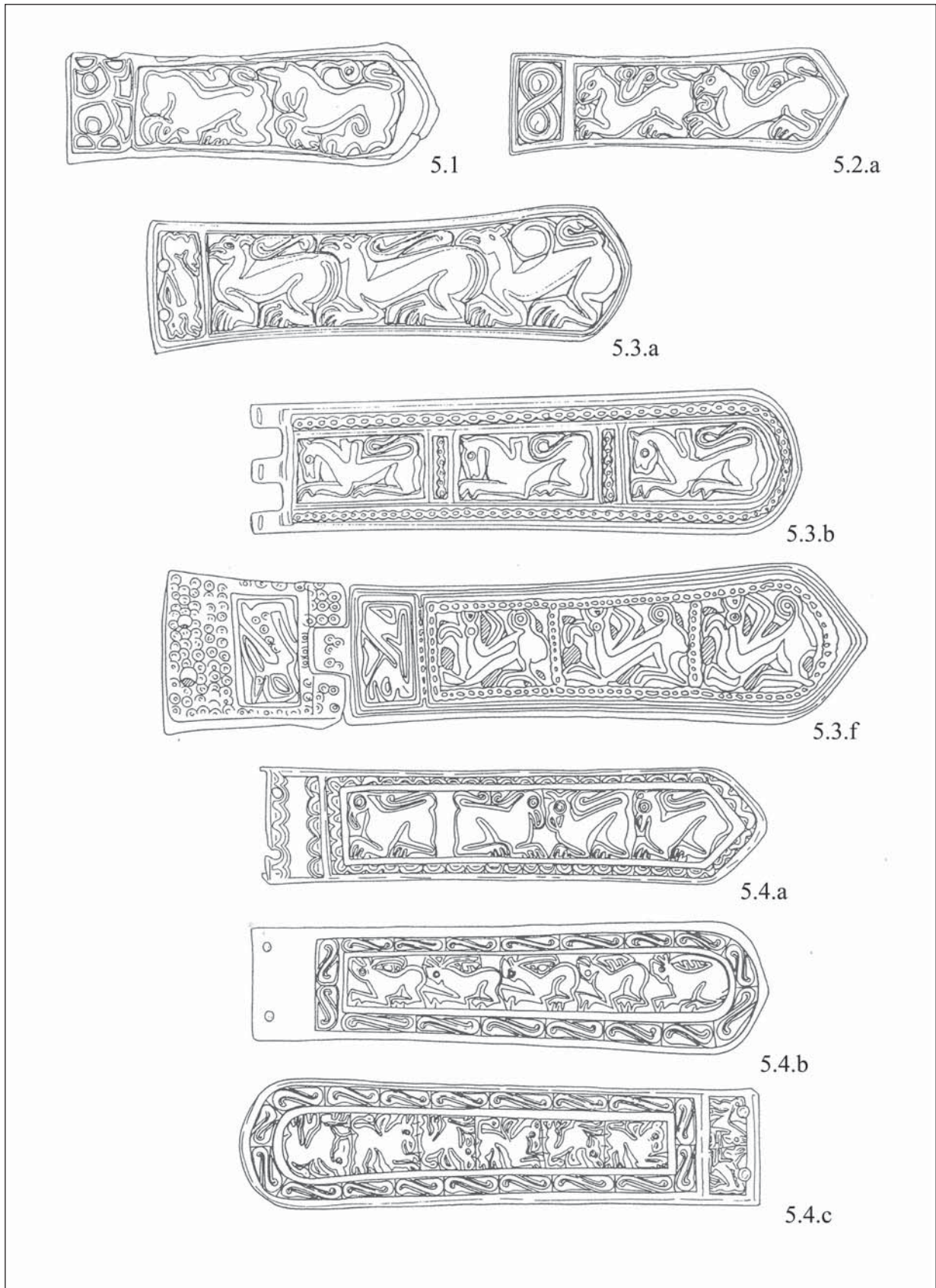


Fig. 1. Types 5.1–5.4.c
 1. kép. 5.1–5.4.c típusok

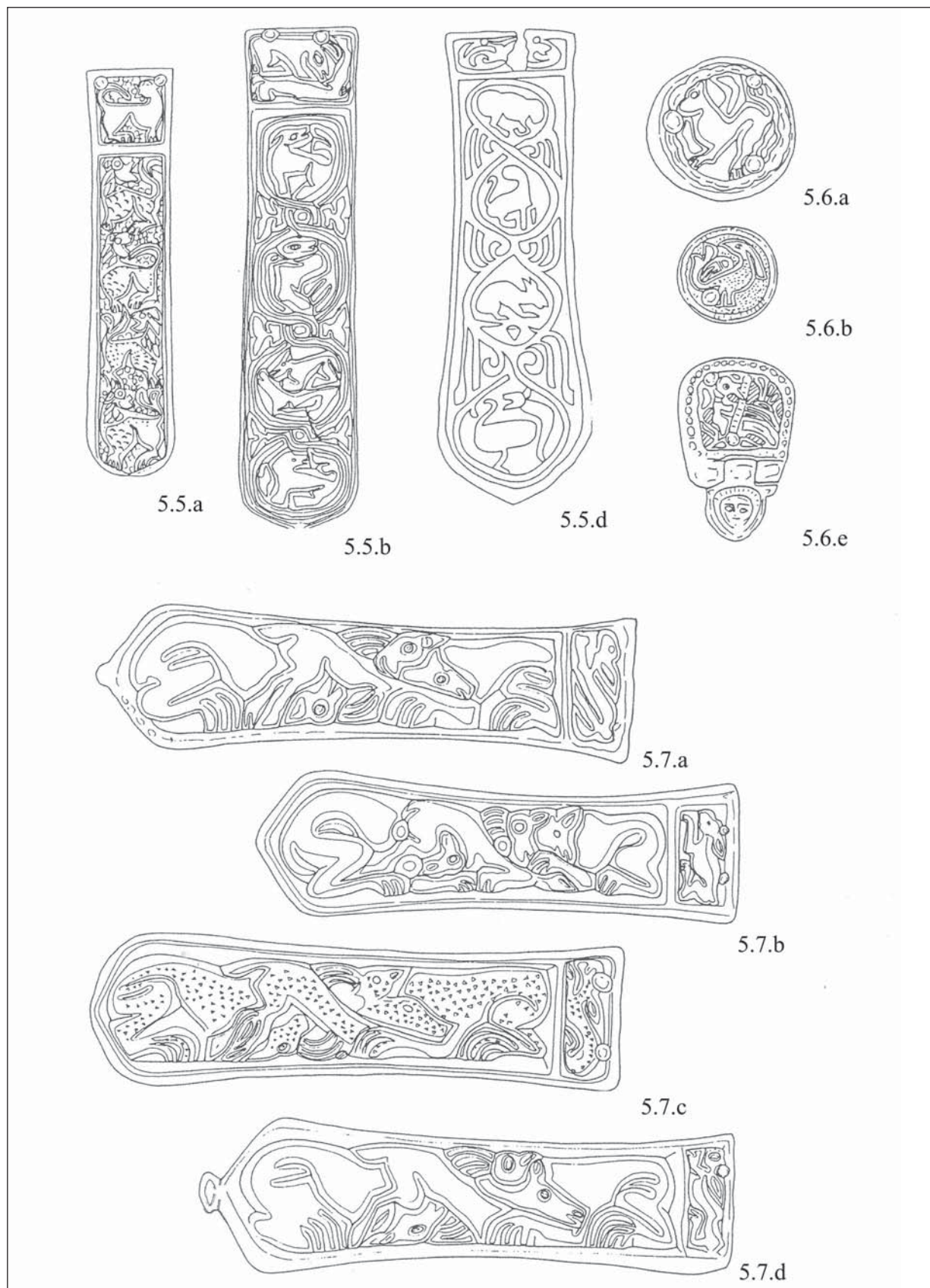


Fig. 2. Types 5.5.a–5.7.d
2. kép. 5.5.a–5.7.d típusok

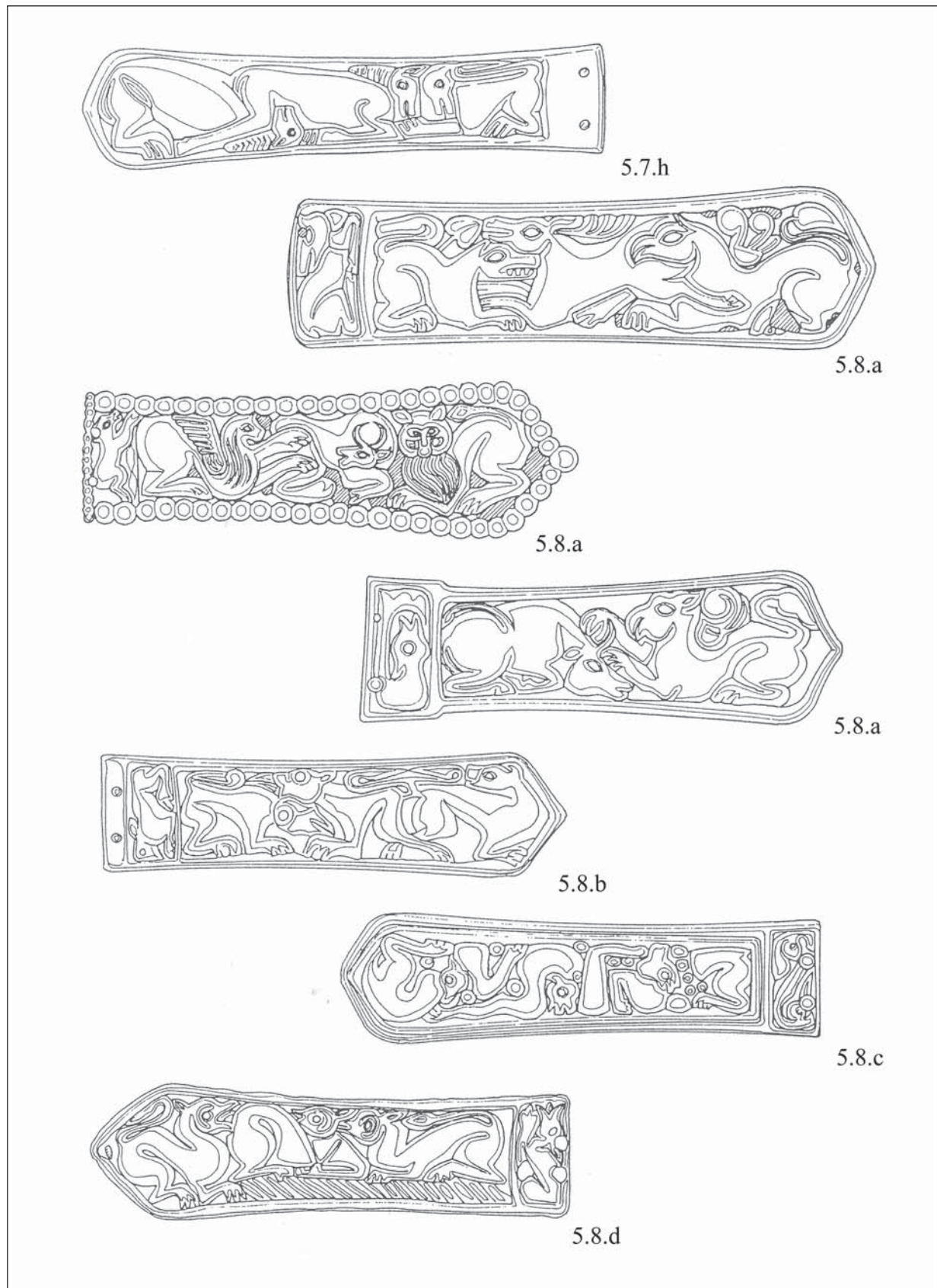


Fig. 3. Types 5.7.h–5.8.d
 3. kép. 5.7.h–5.8.d típusok

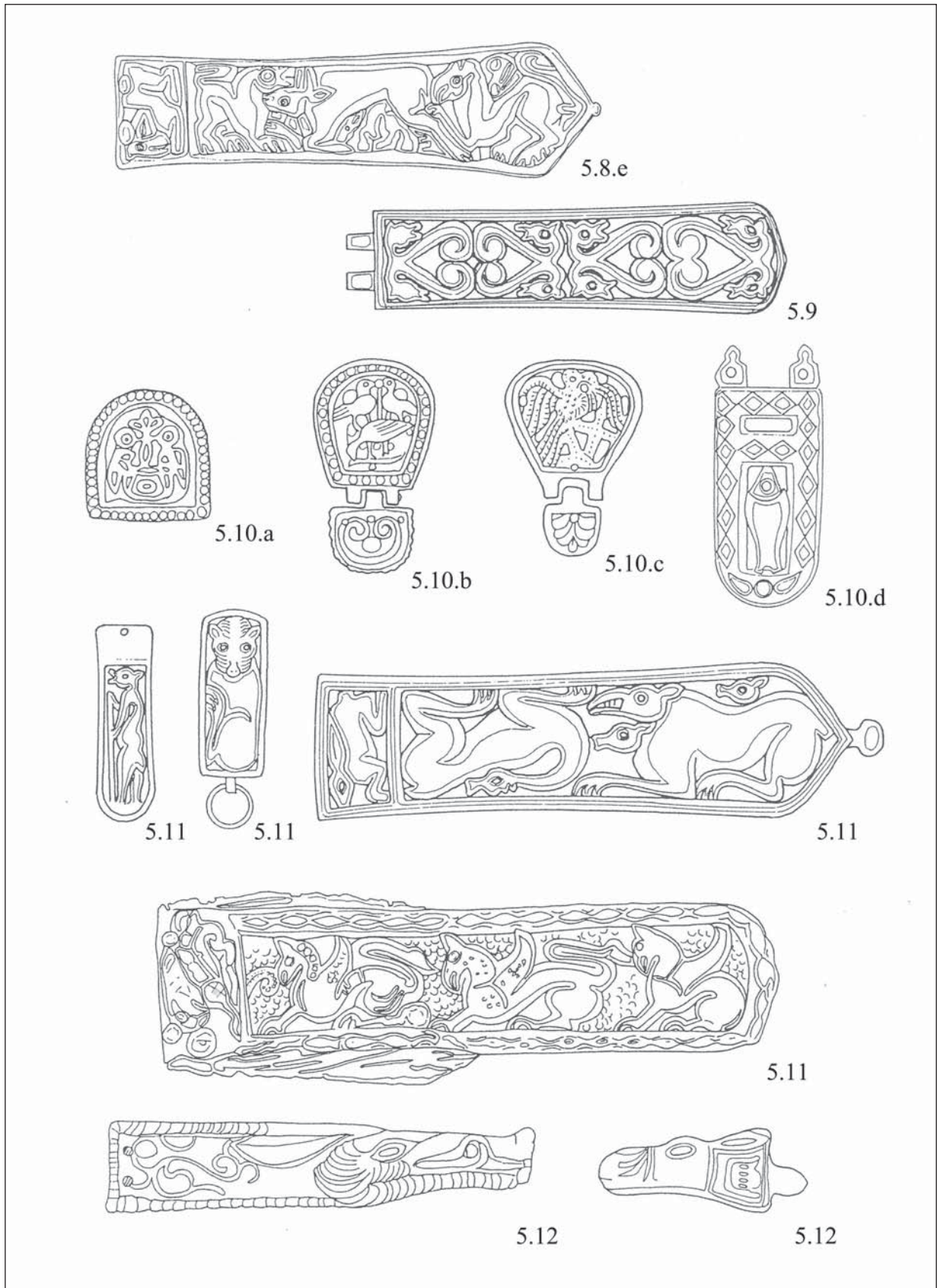
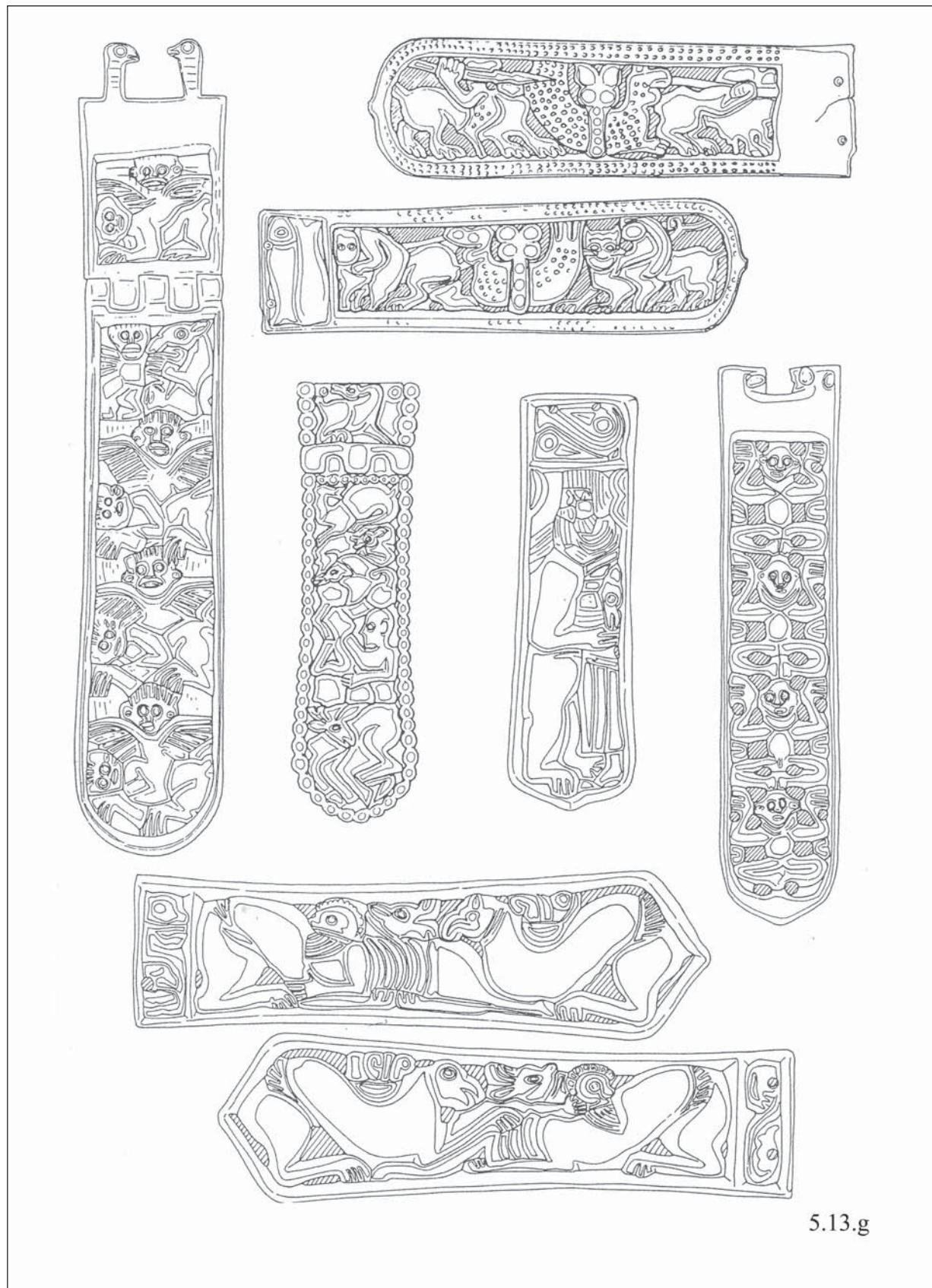


Fig. 4. Types 5.8.e–5.12
4. kép. 5.8.e–5.12 típusok



Fig. 5. Types 5.13.a – 5.13.g
 5. kép. 5.13.a–5.13.g típusok



5.13.g

Fig. 6. Typ 5.13.g
6. kép. 5.13.g típus

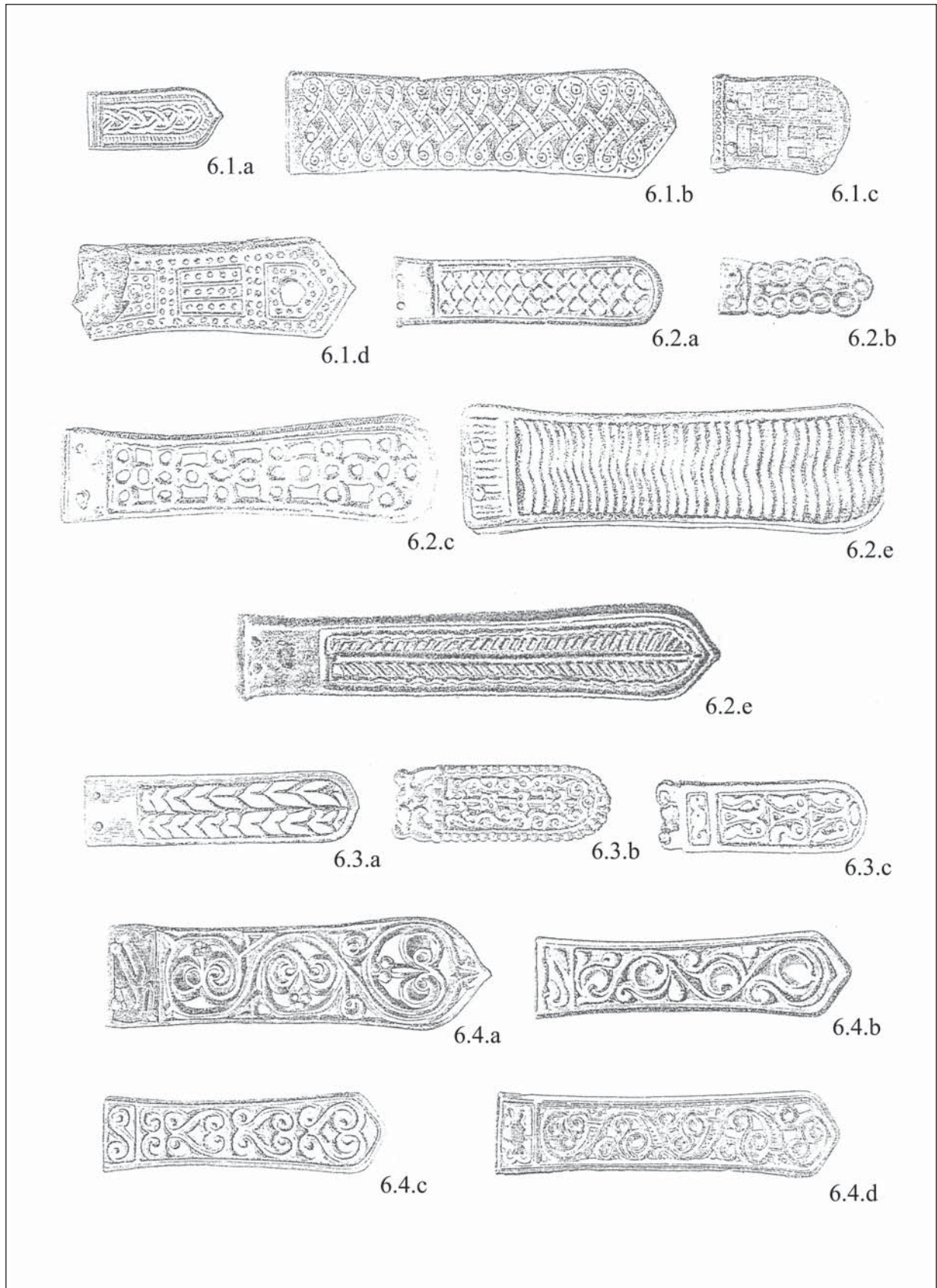


Fig. 7. Types 6.1.a – 6.4.d
7. kép. 6.1.a–6.4.d típusok

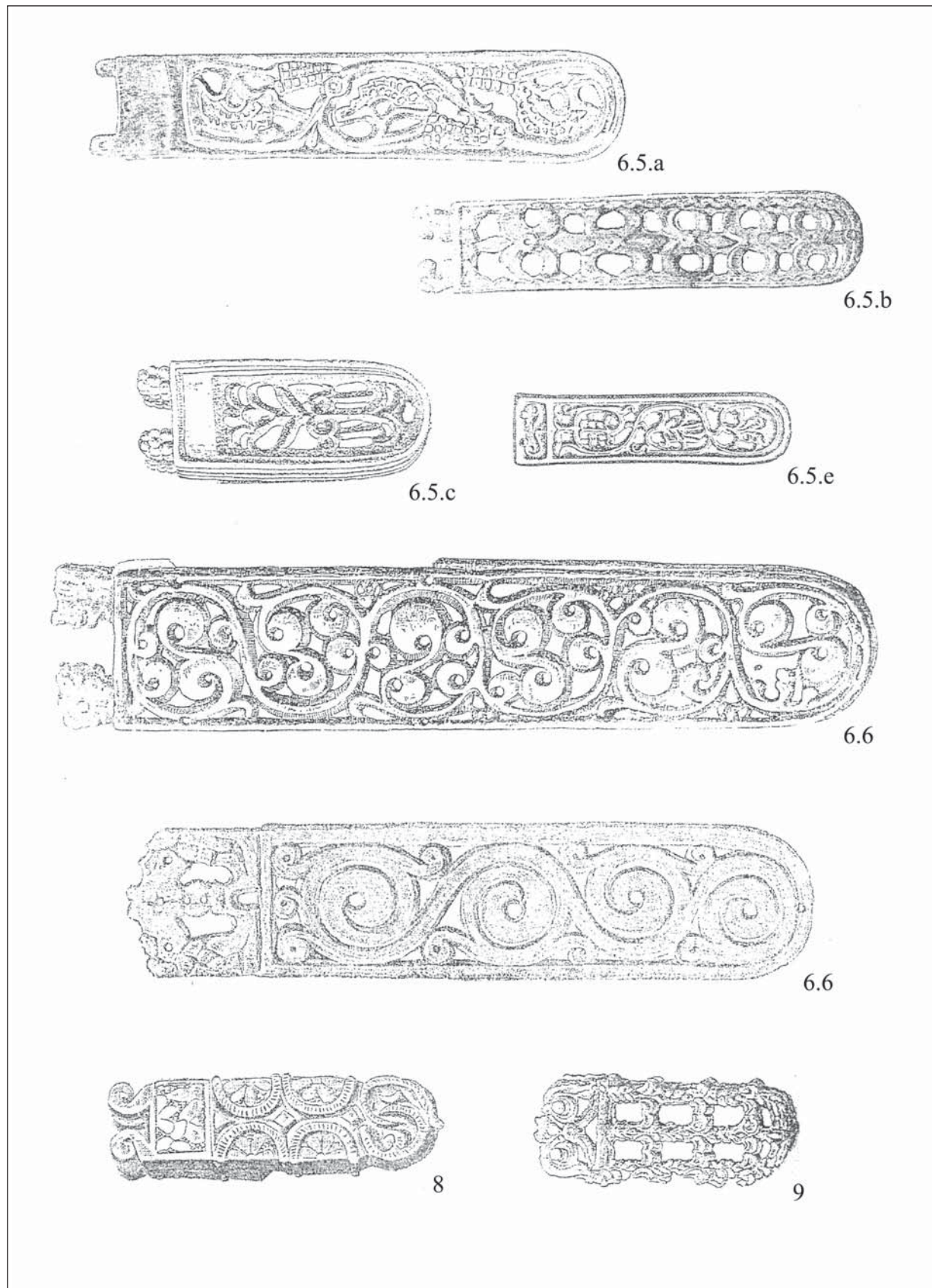


Fig. 8. Types 6.5.a–9
8. kép. 6.5.a–9 típusok