Feeling Single, Seeing Double: Pyramidal Scabbard Mounts in Langobard Tombs

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Introduction

I am currently in the process of making a scabbard for a recently acquired spatha and need to suspend it from an appropriate late 6th or early 7th century belt or baldric. For a Langobard presentation, I chose to draw upon the finds from the necropolis at Nocera Umbra in the province of Perugia, Italy; this Langobardic cemetery was in use from c.570 CE through the middle of the 7th century (see Rupp, 2005). I began to examine the hardware associated with scabbards and sword suspension systems, which include small pyramidal fittings made from bone. I was surprised to find how many of the graves from Nocera Umbra only had a single pyramidal mount—despite the fact that reconstructions I have seen all used pairs—so I decided to investigate this a bit further. Why were there so many single pyramids? Were there differences between the examples found in pairs versus those found singly? How might a single one have been used as part of a sword suspension?

The following discussion provides an overview of the broader context for pyramidal sword mounts during this period, examines the evidence from Nocera Umbra, and poses several possible explanations for the presence of single pyramids—each weighed in light of the contents of the graves. In an addendum, I include a brief summary of the process of recreating a Langobardic bone pyramid mount and offer several possible reconstructions that could incorporate a single such item.

Background

What are these pyramidal mounts? They are likely a familiar sight to anyone who has browsed images of swords from Anglian/Saxon Britain and Frankish areas in the 6th/7th c. CE, where

Figure 1. A pair of gold sword pyramids from Sutton Hoo with inlaid cloisonné garnet and glass; collection of the British Museum, No. 1939,1010.28. Image reproduced under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 License.

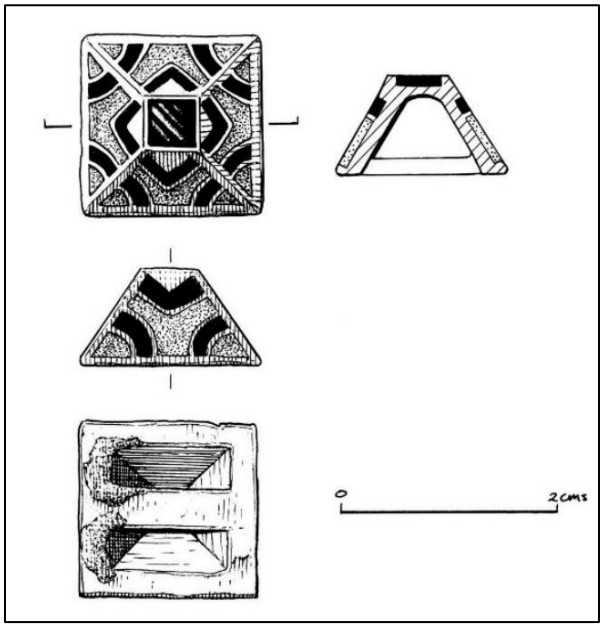


Figure 2. Scale drawing showing the base and cross section of a pyramidal mount found at Sutton Hoo, now in the collection of the British Museum, No. 1991,0411.2853. Image reproduced under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 License.

pairs of round or pyramid-shaped mounts are associated with spatha suspension and are generally interpreted as fasteners for the part of

the strap that passes through the scabbard slide. The pyramidal ones are usually about 15 to 20mm square at the base and between 10 and 13 mm high. Many examples are of metal, including five pairs from the Staffordshire Hoard and others from Sutton Hoo (see Figure 1). The bronze, gold, silver, and iron examples typically have a bar on the underside for a narrow strap to pass through (see Figure 2).

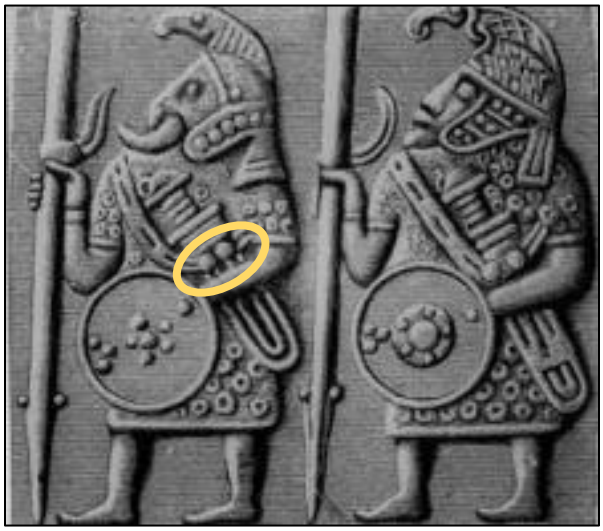
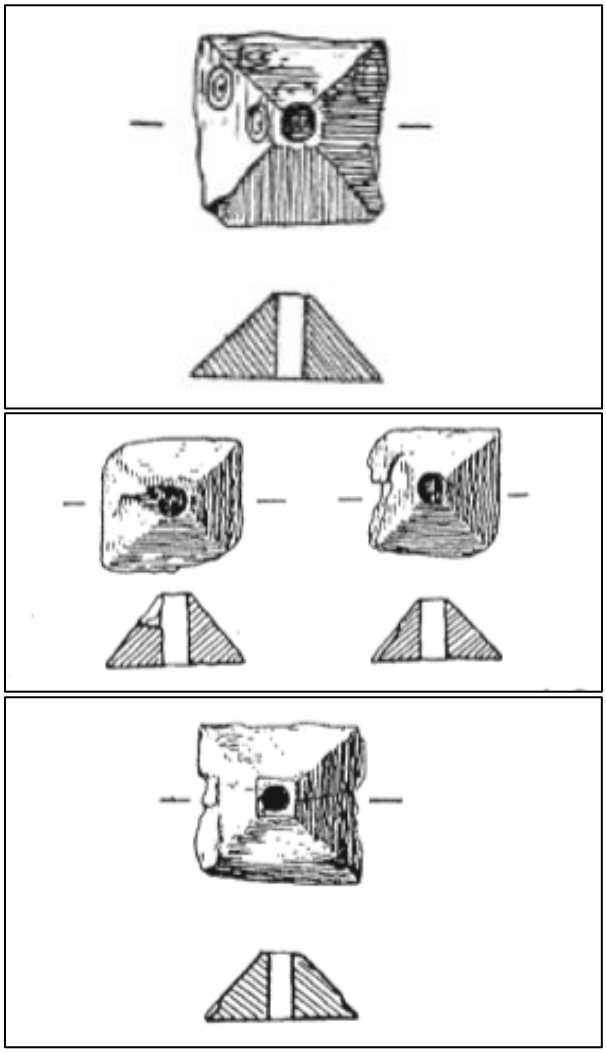


Figure 3. Pressblech from Vendel XIV, Uppland, Sweden, showing figures wearing ring-hilt swords on baldrics; paired fittings indicated in yellow oval.

Equivalent paired scabbard mounts have also been excavated in Vendel Period Scandinavia and contemporary iconography shows them in use (see Figure 3). The *pressblech* from the helmet in Vendel grave XIV depicts two figures wearing swords suspended from baldrics. The two dots below the hilt of the swords appear to represent fittings on either side of the scabbard's strap bridge.

In his study of Merovingian swords and scabbard furniture from sites in modern-day Germany, Wilfried Menghin noted that in addition to the paired metal mounts, a second type of pyramidal mount with a slightly different shape was often found alone (Kocsis and Molnar, 2021). He also identified bone examples similar to the Nocera Umbra pyramids in several graves from Frankish-controlled areas. These include a paired set from Marktoberdorf (Grave 187) and several single examples as well. As these lack the bar on the underside of the metal examples, Menghin (1983) was unconvinced that they served the same function despite the similarity in size and shape and their association with swords and scabbards. Nevertheless, the finds of paired bone mounts alongside two-point suspension hardware suggest that even if this was a less-common practice and most served some other function as single items, they could also be used in the same way as their metal counterparts.

In Langobardic contexts in Italy, many examples of the pyramidal mounts are made of bone, including all the examples from the Nocera Umbra necropolis (Rupp, 2005). Like the Frankish examples Menghin documented, they have a central hole drilled from the apex through to the base (see Figure 4; Figure 10 in the Addendum shows a reconstruction).



Figures 4a-c. Examples of bone pyramid mounts from Nocera Umbra; from top down, Graves 74, 98, and 106. Drawings from Rupp, 2005.

Like their metal counterparts from neighboring regions, the examples from Nocera Umbra range from 18 to 23mm on each edge at the base and 12 to 15mm tall. The apex of the pyramid is flattened and the holes appear to be up to 3mm in diameter. Unlike the Scandinavian swords shown on the Vendel *pressblech*, no iconographic sources clearly depict scabbard furniture or suspension hardware in a Langobard context. However, based on accompanying grave finds, the paired pyramidal mounts in Italy are typically associated with a "five-piece" belt set (see Figure 5, right), named for the number of principal hardware components (Godino, 2016), which appear similar to contemporary Merovingian sword belts (Figure 5, left).

Analysis of the finds

Not all the Langobard graves that include pyramidal bone mounts also include the components of one of these more complex sword belts, and curiously, most of the spatha graves at Nocera Umbra with associated pyramid mounts only included a single one. The first and most obvious question was whether there was any correlation between the hilt style and the accompanying suspension hardware. Not all spathae from Nocera Umbra were the same style. Having already noted the parallels between the Anglian/Saxon, Frankish, and Scandinavian sword furniture, what fittings are associated with the elaborate ring-hilt swords versus less ornate examples with mostly organic hilts? Were there any obvious conclusions to be drawn? In total, Cornelia Rupp's catalogue (2005) of finds from over 160 graves includes 42 individuals buried with swords. The two ring-hilt swords in Graves 1 and 32 are not accompanied by any pyramid mounts—either bone or metal—and some other element of the accompanying hardware would presumably have anchored the strap to the scabbard. The remaining examples have metal pommels but otherwise appear to have had hilts comprised of entirely organic materials, such as wood or horn, as the hilt and grip have disintegrated. There was no observable relationship between hilt style and single vs. paired pyramid mounts.

No pyramid mounts were recorded among 28 of these other graves. This does not negate the possibility that they may have once included bone mounts that deteriorated in the ground, but over one-third of these 28 graves yielded bone combs, indicating that soil conditions did not necessarily preclude the survival of small worked-bone objects. Nevertheless, these graves could not offer any information on the use of pyramidal mounts in spatha suspension and the following discussion is confined to an examination of the finds from the twelve burials that showed a clear connection between swords and bone pyramid mounts (see Table 1).

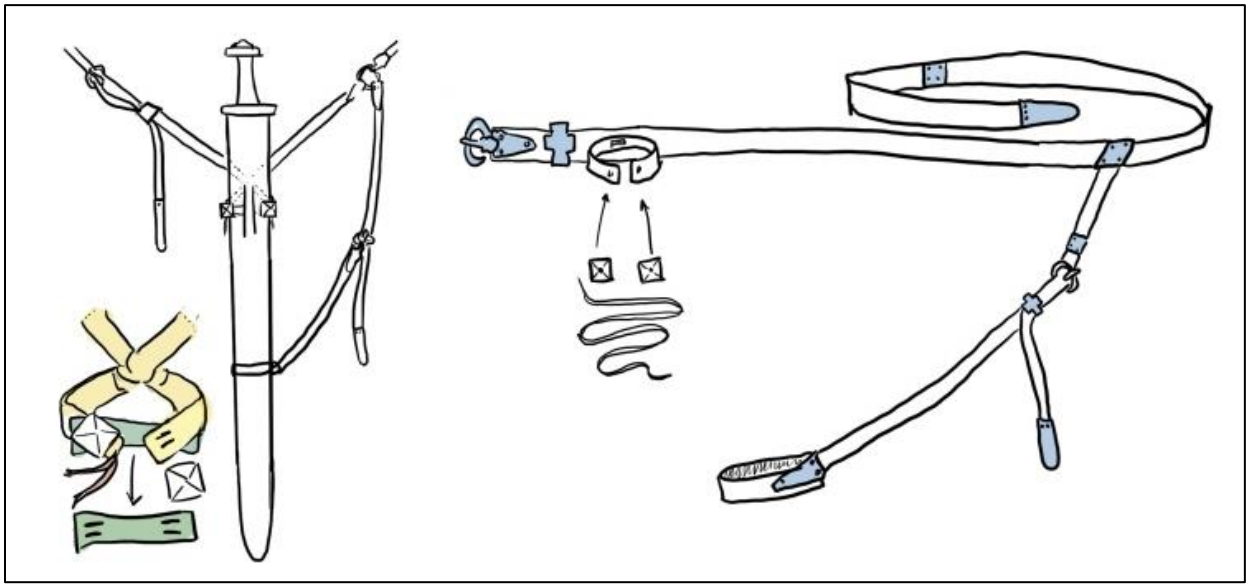


Figure 5. Proposed reconstructions of 6th/7th century spatha suspensions; a Merovingian example at left, based on R. Marti's hypothesis, Langobard example at right based on Y. Godino and L. Luppes (Godino, 2016).

Table 1. Spatha graves from Nocera Umbra containing one or more bone pyramids.

Grave	No. of Bone Pyramids	Possible belt hardware in grave	Location of pyramid mount (if recorded)
20	1	"Multiple" belt	On the left of the skeleton, between elbow and knee, found with spatha
74	1	Three strap fittings/plaques	
98	2	Buckle, counter-plate, strap end, rhomboid and rectangular plates	At the spatha grip
106	1	Plate, counter-plate, strap end, and rectangular plate	
111a	2	Triangular, rhomboid, and several other plates from a plain iron buckle set	Mismatched pair, different sizes; one found below the hilt to the left of the spatha; the other found on the blade.
111b	1		To the left of the spatha, below the hilt
115	1		
132	2	Four fittings - including possible diamond and two triangular plates	One found on spatha tip, the other nearby; the two are not identical in size
137	1	"Multiple" belt	Near the spatha grip
139	1	One strap end, two glass beads, buckle	On the spatha blade
156	1	Buckle, strap end, rhomboid, square plate, and slide	Found near the spatha blade
163	1	Buckle	

Based on the catalog of the necropolis provided in the original 1918 publication and a subsequent catalog published in 2005, bone pyramids are associated with twelve burials that include swords. Of these, only three actually contained a pair. There are any number of possible reasons for the presence of single pyramid mounts, including the following:

- Soil conditions cause one mount to decompose but not the other
- One of the two mounts was removed as part of a burial ritual
- Another suspension method existed that only required one mount
- Single pyramids were purely ornamental or functioned as a toggle and were independent from a suspension belt or baldric

The first case seems extremely unlikely – the paired examples from Nocera Umbra are found very close to one another, and reconstructions of the sword belts place the mounts mere centimeters apart on either side of the scabbard slide. The probability that accidental destruction or natural processes caused the loss of one mount—but not both—in three-quarters of these burials seems extremely low. In some cases, Merovingian tombs include a mismatched set with a wooden pyramid alongside a metal one (Godino, 2016). While it is certainly possible that some of the single bone pyramids may have once been accompanied by a now-deteriorated wooden mate, this scenario would have to be present in the majority of the spatha graves for it to explain the excavation findings.

The second possibility, involving intentional removal of one of the two pyramids, is certainly plausible. Italian scholar Yuri Godino notes the textual evidence among the Langobards for a ritualized "breaking up" and dispersal of the deceased's sword belt among his heirs. The redistribution of individual belt hardware elements is also supported by instances of burials where a single mount appears as an "intruder" that is not part of a set, possibly

inherited from a relative (Godino, 2016). Interestingly, the two mounts in Grave 132 are not identical in size (Pasqui & Paribeni, 1918); while this may simply be a case in which one pyramid was lost and replaced during the owner's lifetime (in this case replaced in kind, not with wood), this could also support a hypothesis that these mounts were removed as part of a ritual deposition and incorporated into a relative's belt set. If we accept this explanation for all the missing pyramids at Nocera Umbra, however, I think it bears a review of the items found along with the mounts.

The original publication from 1918 lists no additional buckles, plates, or other belt hardware accompanying the single bone pyramids in two out of twelve graves (Graves 111b and 115). If a belt or baldric was broken up and redistributed among the deceased's heirs, the pyramid may have been left behind as synecdoche to represent the rest of the belt, although the excavation report does not provide me with any clues as to how it might have related to the scabbard at the time of deposition—was the pyramid placed back in the grave atop the spatha, or was the fastening system made in such a way that it was still attached to a strap on the scabbard after the rest of the belt was removed? Several possible attachment methods could create these conditions (see Addendum).

Of the three graves that retain paired mounts (Graves 98, 111, and 132), each one also contained belt hardware with four or five surviving components – a buckle, counter-plate, and additional square and rhomboid plates that can be interpreted as parts of the "five-piece" belt set. One of the single-pyramid graves (Grave 156), included a buckle, strap end, rhomboid plate, square plate, and strap slide that may be part of a similar suspension belt, and another contained a buckle with a triangular plate, counter-plate, strap end, and rectangular plate associated with a sword belt (Grave 106). In these cases, most or all of the richly decorated belt hardware remained in the grave; unless both are cases where a wood pyramid decayed while a bone one survived, other possibilities are that the belt was left largely intact and only ever had a single pyramid, or the removal of one of the two pyramids may have been sufficient to "complete" the ritual of breaking the belt apart. This latter option assumes, however, that the symbolic breaking of the belt was more important than the actual redistribution of the hardware involved—an assumption for which I can find no evidence.

Graves 20 and 137 included buckles with a large number of matching strap end fittings that appear to be part of a different belt style known as the "multiple belt," comprised of a main waist belt with many short, perpendicular dangling straps, each fitted with a decorative metal tip. In Langobard graves, the remains of such belts are generally found on the waist of the deceased, while the spatha is typically deposited to one side (Godino, 2016). Although these belts may have held up a seax, they do not appear to be related to sword suspension. In Graves 20 and 137, the belt components were found on the deceased's pelvis/abdomen, while the spatha

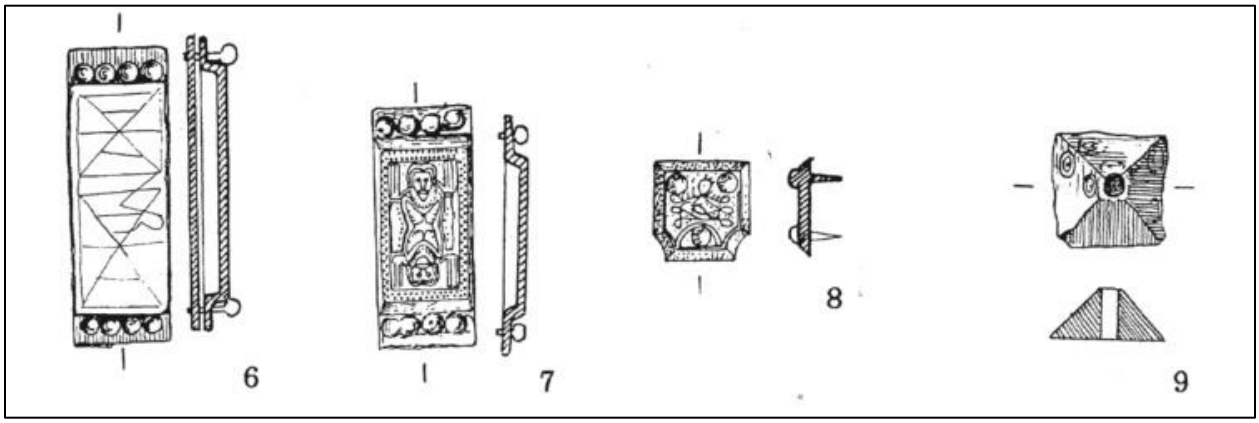


Figure 6. From left to right: box mounts, Y-shaped plate, and bone pyramid from Nocera Umbra Grave 74; image from Rupp, 2005.

was laid to the side. No fittings are noted with the spatha in Grave 137 except for the single pyramid found on the tang, while in Grave 20, the scabbard included a pair of bone splines just below the hilt, a small silver buckle and single bone pyramid (Pasqui & Paribeni, 1918).

The remaining three examples were found in graves with some sort of buckle and/or strap fitting, but without a larger belt set. In Grave 163, a simple elliptical buckle was found resting on the spatha blade. Although the original 1918 publication does not mention a bone pyramid, one is included with the grave assemblage in the collection of the museum and is noted in the 2005 publication; however, its original position in the grave is unknown. In Grave 139, a pyramid was found on the spatha blade and a strap end, buckle, and two glass beads were found nearby between the thorax and the deceased's right elbow. Grave 74 included a single pyramid and the associated belt components consist of a large elliptical iron buckle, two "box mounts" and a Y-shaped plate (see Figure 4).

It is this last assemblage that has an interesting contemporary parallel from eastern Hungary, an area where the Langobards frequently warred with their neighbors in the middle of the 6th century. This grave, likely belonging to a Gepid warrior, is located in Tiszagyenda, Hungary, and is dated to c.600-610 CE. Its contents show clear Langobardic and Frankish influences (see Kocsis and Molnar, 2021) and also provide support for the third possibility mentioned earlier—that another suspension method requiring only one pyramidal mount coexisted with the paired mount/"five-piece" belt option. The burial includes one especially crucial feature: a single bronze pyramid was found atop the scabbard, embedded in the remains of an organic slider in a way that clearly conveys its original position and orientation. The authors of a recent article in a Hungarian journal are confident that it was never part of a pair. They propose that the spatha hung from a baldric, and the pyramid was attached directly atop the scabbard slide, ostensibly to secure the strap to the slider for this single-point suspension.

Like Nocera Umbra Grave 74, the sword belt included a set of box mounts (two comparably sized rectangular ones as well as two smaller square ones), and the Y-shaped plates are also similar in form and dimension to the one in Grave 74. Kocsis and Molnar propose that these served as strap width reducers, joining the wider main portion of the baldric to a narrower section that wrapped around the scabbard (see Figure 7). These similarities place the sword belts of the two graves in the same larger context chronologically and stylistically, making the

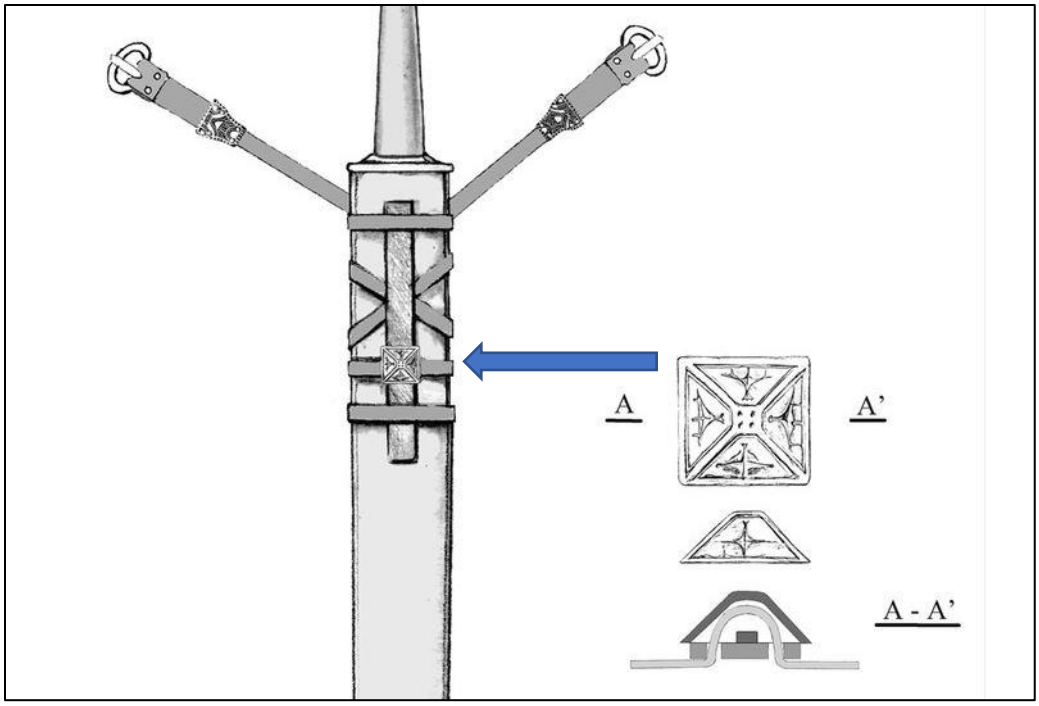


Figure 7. Illustration showing a possible reconstruction of the Tiszagyenda warrior's baldric and scabbard hardware; note the Y-shaped strap width reducers and cf. Item no. 8 in Figure 6. Image reproduced from Kocsis & Molnar 2021, p. 157.

Tiszagyenda grave a credible parallel for understanding Nocera Umbra Grave 74.

Altogether, the assemblage in the Tiszagyenda grave is strikingly similar to that of Nocera Umbra 74, and the specificity of the bronze pyramid's position at Tiszagyenda provides compelling evidence for a similar function for the single bone pyramid in Nocera Umbra 74. The use of a single pyramid mounted directly on the scabbard slide would also explain the absence of any other sword suspension hardware in Graves 20, 111b, and 115, if a richly decorated belt or baldric was removed entirely and either given to an heir or broken up for distribution among multiple heirs. In Graves 163 and 139, the single buckles may be the only metal fitting for a simpler baldric, or other plaques may have been removed prior to deposition.

Of Beads and Bands

Of course, the position of the mount at Tiszagyenda also could indicate the fourth possibility: that a single pyramid may simply have been attached directly to the scabbard slide and not at all integrated in the suspension system. A pyramid mount attachment that is independent from a suspension belt or baldric would also provide a satisfactory explanation for most, if not all, of the Nocera Umbra graves with only one pyramid. This raises the question of what function it might have served, and the most obvious parallel for a scabbard-mounted single item not involved in suspension would be the "sword beads" of the preceding century—a lone decorative bead (generally at least 2.5cm in diameter) typically affixed to the upper portion of a scabbard.

While some scholars have ascribed an amuletic or apotropaic quality to these large beads as opposed to a practical function, others have theorized that they may have served as a toggle (Evison, 1967) to secure a "peace band," a strap that kept the sword in its scabbard. Although in a well-fitting scabbard, this is a largely symbolic function rather than a necessity, there is textual evidence for peace bands (*friðbond*) in Norse sagas set several centuries later.[1] No similar written or archaeological evidence supports this practice within a 6th/ 7th century Langobard context, however, and I have yet to locate a textual reference to this practice as early as the Merovingian period. In the other camp, Menghin considered the sword bead to be amuletic (1983, p.142-143), an eastern tradition found among the Sarmatians in the 1st century BCE that spread westward with the Hunnic expansion to reach central Europe and Britain by the end of the 5th century CE. Whether functional or symbolic, the sword bead is characteristic of the first half of the Merovingian period, during which time examples in glass and amber (see Figure 8), precious stones, meerschaum, and limestone all coexisted to some degree.

Figure 8. Examples of glass and amber sword beads excavated at Entringen, Germany, dated c.500 CE. Image from Landesmuseum Württemberg, reproduced under CC BY-SA license.

Curiously, this trend does not seem to appear in Langobardic contexts—in fact, the Langobard-controlled areas of Pannonia represent a distinct gap in the distribution of sword beads. Cylindrical stone beads became more common in the areas to the east and west of the Langobards in the mid-6th century (during the

[1] See *Gisla Saga*, *Kroka-Refs Saga*, and *Sturlunga Saga*.

final phase of the Langobard migration). Some Gepid (or possibly Langobardic) spatha graves in eastern Hungary include flat, cylindrical limestone beads (Kocsis and Molnar, 2021). These are typologically linked to the examples found in the Rhineland, Thuringia, and southern Germany—but despite this connection between the Merovingian sphere and the area east of the Danube (Menghin, 1983, p.144), the Langobardic cemeteries in west of the Danube seem not to have yielded analogous finds. By the time the Langobards arrived in Italy, the fashion for round sword beads appears to have waned (see Menghin, 1983 for further discussion) and the pyramidal mounts became the dominant fashion in the 7th century C.E.; it is possible that in this later period, a single pyramidal mount may have served the same purpose as the earlier sword bead, whether functional or decorative. In fact, a single grave in Germany (Stuttgart-Feuerbach Grave 27) included a pair of bone pyramids as well as a third pyramid made of iron (Menghin, 1983, p.365), although its function cannot be reliably assigned.

Conclusion

An examination of the finds of bone pyramidal mounts and their larger context within grave assemblages raises as many questions as it answers. However, taken as a whole, the Nocera Umbra finds strongly suggest that there were multiple modes of spatha suspension and that the method using paired mounts does not appear to have been the dominant one. Although the Nocera Umbra finds do not demonstrate the typological divergence Menghin apparently observed between the single and paired Merovingian examples, they may still be evidence of a similar coexistence of two separate functions for similar objects; this function would be determined on a case-by-case basis using the accompanying belt hardware.

Rather than interpreting the absence of a second mount in most graves as a narrative of ritual removal or an unusual soil condition, I would suggest that, as was the case north of the Alps, among the Langobards pyramidal bone mounts were likely involved with both the two-point suspension method utilizing a pair of pyramids and a one-point method that involved a single pyramid in some fashion.

Whereas the excavation at Nocera Umbra did not yield clear evidence of the exact position of the pyramid mounts on the scabbards,[2] the Tiszagyenda warrior's grave preserved a single mount affixed to the scabbard slide, providing an example of how a single mount could be incorporated into the scabbard furniture. Whether this second scenario involved the pyramid as integral to the suspension system or in an ancillary role as an ornament or toggle remains unclear, although experiments (see Addendum) suggest the latter. Thus the single bone pyramids may simply be a conflation of two objects associated with swords, combining the symbolism and/or function of the earlier sword bead with the form of the paired pyramidal strap fasteners that had recently come into fashion.

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Kocsis, L., & Molnár, E. (2021). A 6th–7th century solitary burial of a warrior with his horse at Tiszagyenda, *Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 72(1), 137-192. https://doi.org/10.1556/072.2021.00008

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Rupp, Cornelia. (2005). *Das langobardische Gräberfeld von Nocera Umbra*. Borgo San Lorenzo (Fi): All'insegna del giglio.

[2] The original excavation report recorded the general location of the mounts relative to the spatha but makes no mention of any organic scabbard components that would be useful in understanding the mounts' function or attachment method.

In order to test hypothetical attachment methods for single bone pyramids, I experimented with a reproduction I made that matches the parameters of the originals as closely as possible. Using a section of bovine femur, which was sawn to the rough dimensions (see Figure 9) and finished with a file, I created a bone pyramid mount 20mm on edge at the base and 12mm tall at the peak. I bored the central hole using a bow drill. Most of the examples from Nocera Umbra were not carved or otherwise decorated, however the example in Grave 74 is adorned with several ring-and-dot motifs on each face (cf. Figure 4a), and I used a 5mm ring-and-dot auger to decorate all four faces of my reconstruction (see Figure 10).[3]

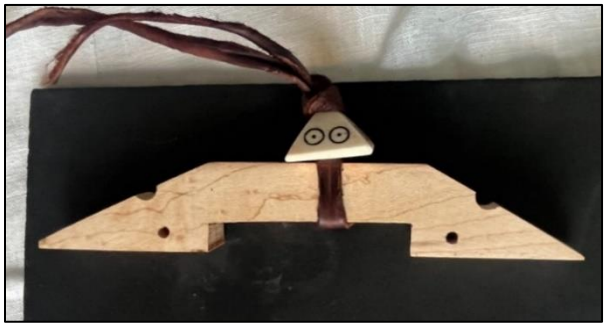
Figure 9. Section of cow femur used to fabricate reproduction bone mount.

Figure 10. My reproduction of a bone pyramid mount, based loosely on Grave 74.

In practice, experiments with several different mounting options found that there were multiple possible practical functions. The images that follow demonstrate three mounting methods (shown on a mockup of a scabbard and slide to facilitate photography from multiple angles). Building on experiments using paired mounts by Yuri Godino and Lars Luppes (Godino, 2016), all variants utilize a leather thong looped around the scabbard slide with the free ends drawn through the central hole in the bone mount and held double and secured together in an overhand knot. The original excavations at Nocera Umbra occurred more than one hundred years ago, and the published notes and drawings of the position of the artifacts in the grave from 1918 do not provide sufficient detail to locate the exact position of the bone pyramids relative to the spatha hilt, nor is there any mention of a scabbard slide (assumed in all cases to be organic, and likely indistinguishable from any traces of the wooden scabbard core).

All options are predicated on the assumption that, like the Tiszagyenda example, the pyramid was mounted to the scabbard slide. Yet another possibility is that the single mount could be used to join two halves of a baldric strap directly beneath the scabbard slide while simultaneously securing it to the slide. After trying this out, I discarded this option as an overly complicated arrangement with no obvious benefit; while a two-point suspension with two pyramids distributes the weight and tension of the spatha across several components, to do something similar with a single pyramid would create a scenario in which the entire system depends on the strength of one thong that is thin enough to pass through a 3mm hole when held double.

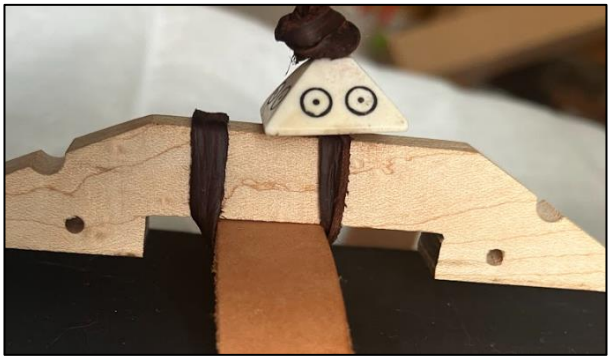
[3] Note: I initially blackened the decorated area with a mixture of beeswax and soot to enhance the appearance for photography; this was a total guess, as the Nocera Umbra inventory makes no mention of any pigmentation on the Grave 74 pyramid or any others. Anything used to enhance the contrast—if this was even done at all—would be organically derived and fugitive in the ground.



Figures 11 a & b. Mounted directly to strap bridge.

In **Example 1** (see Figures 11 a & b), the mount is purely ornamental and is mounted directly on the scabbard slide above the strap. Examples 2 and 3 show possible configurations in which a single pyramidal mount secures the portion of the strap that passes through the slider. In **Example 2** (Figures 12 a-c), the thong wraps around a strap that passes once below the bridge. When tied snugly, it is effective at preventing the scabbard from shifting along the strap from side to side.

In **Example 3** (see Figures 13 a-c), modeled after the proposed configuration of the Tiszagyenda baldric (refer to Figure 7), the strap wraps around the scabbard multiple times. In this case, the thong is tied to secure the point at which the strap crosses itself. Similar to Example 2, this



Figures 12 a,b, & c. Example 2, showing front, side, and rear views with thong tied to secure a single strap beneath the scabbard slide.

Figures 13 a,b, & c. Example 3, showing front, side, and rear views with thong tied at intersection of crisscrossed straps.

arrangement minimizes the amount of lateral play in the strap. Both Examples 2 and 3 were tested with the thong passing through small holes in the strap rather than relying on friction/tension as well, but this did not affect performance and I did not photograph these variations.

Using the strap configurations for Examples 2 and 3 without the pyramidal mount, I found that when worn, the weight of a sword generally places enough tension on the strap to keep it from sliding around, but the scabbard may move along the strap when not worn or if the sword is bouncing up and down (as on horseback, for instance). Thus while neither Example 2 nor Example 3 are strictly necessary to hang a sword, both are helpful if the wearer wishes to keep the scabbard positioned at the same point along the strap or baldric.

Example 4 (see Figures 14) shows the same mounting method as in Example 1 and in this case, demonstrates the pyramidal mount used as a toggle to secure the sword in its scabbard with a thin strap. Without any definitive textual or iconographic evidence for a Langobardic equivalent of the *friðbond*, I cannot confidently recommend this as a valid use for the pyramidal mount, (see prior discussion on p.7) but it would satisfactorily explain the majority of the individual pyramids at Nocera Umbra, allowing for a mount to be recovered from a location at the upper part of the spatha blade regardless of the position (or absence) of an associated belt or baldric.

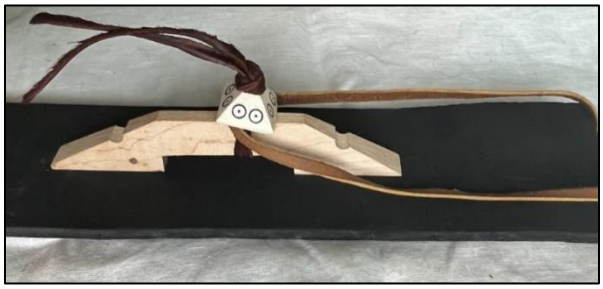


Figure 14. Example 4, showing hypothetical use as a toggle for "peace band."