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Fra funn til samfunn
Jernalderstudier tilegnet Bergljot Solberg
på 70-årsdagen

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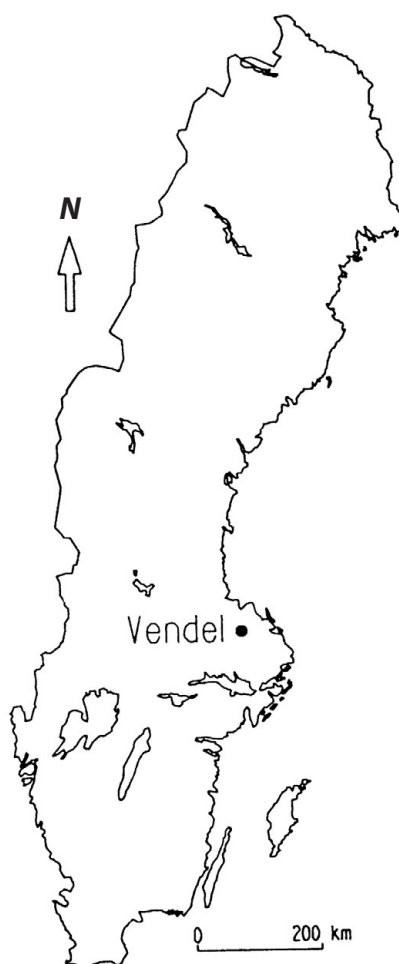
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Three riders coming to Vendel



In this paper the author tries to reconstruct the event that caused the building of a

Figure 1. Sweden. Vendel parish is situated in northern Uppland, ca. 38 km to the north of Uppsala. After Seiler 2001, Fig. 1.

large mound in the present parish of Vendel. Three adults and three children were buried in the mound. These graves were probably more or less contemporary. The mound is situated on a hillock close to the old road towards the main settlement area. The mound stands out from the main pattern of graves and settlements, not only by its large size, but also by its relative distance from the settlements. The mound was excavated during the SIV project (Svealand in the Vendel and Viking periods - sponsored by the Swedish Tercentenary Foundation), which was initiated in 1996. During the project, we chose Vendel as one of our model areas. The Vendel parish is situated less than one day's ride from Old Uppsala. During the relevant periods, Vendel was probably an administrative unit, a so-called *Hundred*, in the old Svea folklands, the *Tiohundraaland*, which again was a central part of *Svithjod* (cf. Arrhenius 2004). The main aim of the SIV research project was to investigate how the relations between the central power (the king and his retinue) and the local society were organized in a proto-feudal society. The graves in the Vendel mound are thought to be one example of how these interregional contacts worked.

Research background

The Vendel Parish is situated around 30 km north of Uppsala (Fig. 1). During the last decades of the 19th century, a cemetery of boat graves was discovered during the enlargement of a modern church yard. Hjalmar Stolpe excavated 14 graves altogether. The spectacular finds from the older boat graves in particular made Vendel famous and even gave the name to a prehistoric period (the Vendel period). One reason for choosing Vendel as a model area was that it had been extensively investigated by previous scholars. During the early decades of the 20th century, as much as 70 cemeteries with 1100 graves had been surveyed, and approximately 240 graves had been excavated.

The cemeteries contained boat graves as well as cremations. All of the graves were situated along an esker going in a NW-SE direction through the parish. It appeared that, within each cemetery on the esker, the oldest graves were placed on the highest part of the esker and the more recent ones were situated lower down. As part of our research project, we carried out complementary excavations in order to improve the dating of the cemeteries. The work was delegated to Anton Seiler as part of his doctoral thesis (2001). Through his examination of the grave goods in the oldest graves, Seiler showed that they all originate from the last quarter of the fifth century. No earlier graves were found. This indicates that a colonization of the area took place during the last half of the fifth century AD (cf. Arrhenius 1998). This theory is supported by analyses of pollen diagrams from two sites in the parish. The diagrams indicate that cultivation accelerated during this period (Karlsson 1999). These diagrams as well as our findings also showed that in several cases, the settlements and graves from the early medieval period were placed upon Stone Age sites. In one of the diagrams there was clear evidence that a heavy fire took place about year 0 AD. This incident may have disturbed and perhaps destroyed the older settlement. A new settlement did not appear until the colonization during the fifth century.

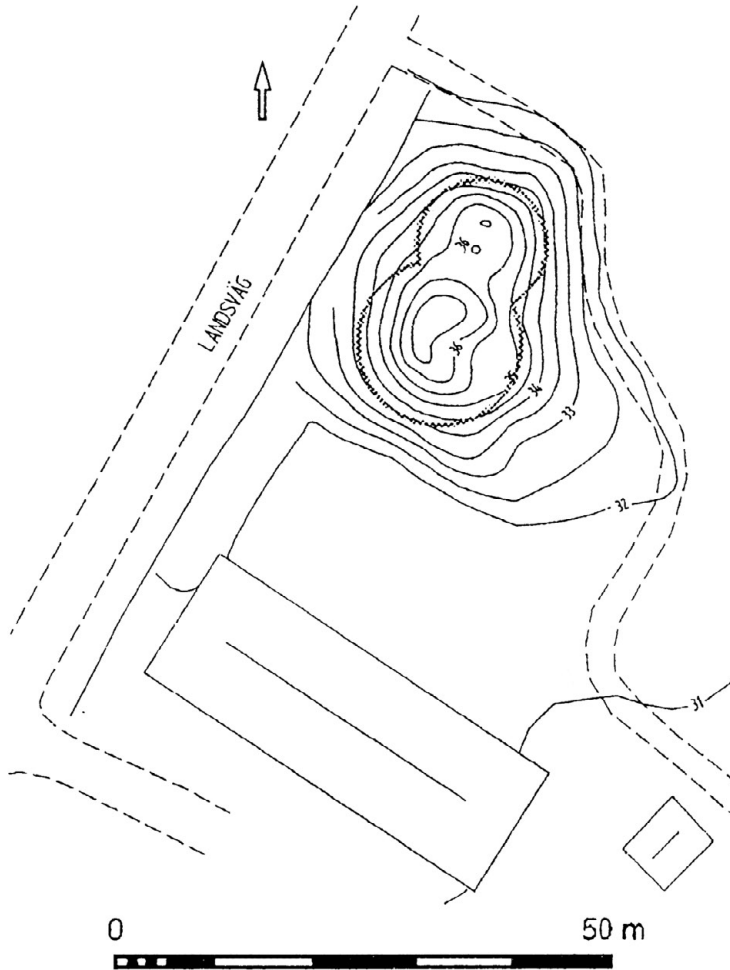


Figure 2. Plan with contour lines of Vendla's mound. After Seiler 2001, Fig. 22.

A large mound situated on a small hillock to the east of the esker diverges from most of the cemeteries. The mound has been known as Vendla's mound since the nineteenth century. In local folklore, it was believed to be the grave of a giant woman called *Vendla*, who not only built the church but also had hidden a treasure somewhere in the wall of the church.

Vendla's mounds

When we made a closer survey of the mound, it appeared that Vendla's mound was in fact not a single mound. Instead it was two mounds placed very close to each other on the same hillock (Fig. 2). The survey was performed by georadar. This examination showed that the eastern part of the mounds was rather empty and we therefore tried to leave as much as possible of the eastern part of the mounds undisturbed, in order to be able to reconstruct the mounds after excavation. The geophysical investigations

also showed that the mounds had been built over several stone-settings. Although illuminating, these investigations did in no way prepare us for the real complexity of the mounds.

During the excavation it appeared that, below the mounds, there were a few traces of an early settlement. Seeds from this occupation were C14-dated to about year 0 AD. (The same period as the heavy fire found in the pollen diagram). In addition, there were two irregular stone-settings that I believe belong to the pre-Roman period as well. In the northern setting A2: 2 (Figs. 3 and 4), the cremated bones belonging to a mature man were found. Pieces of pottery were also found spread among the stones. In the setting A1: 3 (Figs. 3 and 4), situated more to the south, the cremated bones of a young person were spread among the stones. Among the bones were also pieces of pottery and a small iron ring. A charred seed was C14-dated to 360-110BC. Below the

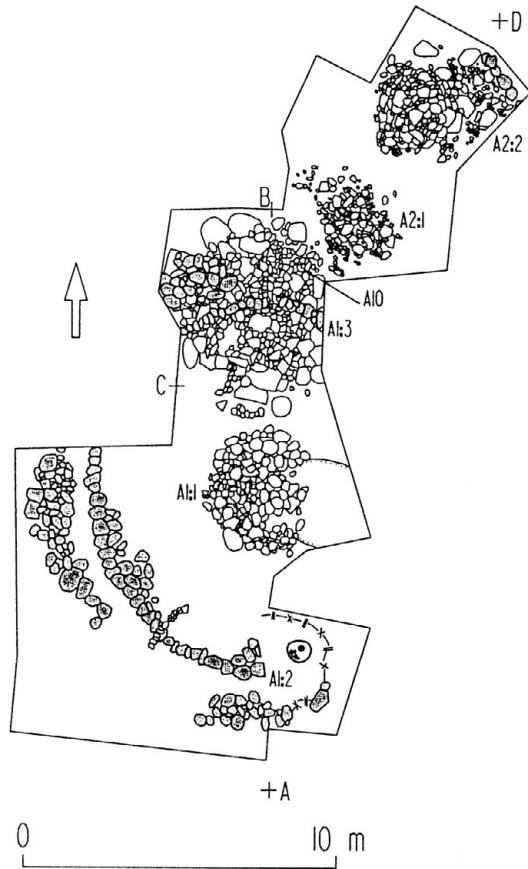


Figure 3. Plan showing the stone-settings at Vendla. After Seiler 2001, Fig. 24

stone-setting, at the edge, a cremation pit was found (A10, Fig 3). This contained the cremated bones of a child and a dog. Seiler, who excavated the stone-settings, believed that the graves belonged to the Migration period and that the C14-dating had been contaminated by charcoal from the early settlement. However, the dating of seed grain from the grave is distinctly older than the settlements in the area. In addition, the cremation pit and the way the cremated bones were spread on the stones are both traits associated with the early Iron Age in Uppland (cf. Bennet 1987, Arrhenius & Eriksson in press). The single find of a small iron-ring also indicates an early date (cf. Hjærtner-Holdar 1993:177ff). Thus, in my view, the early finds under Vendla's mounds should be dated to the early Iron Age. Considering that the settlement remains are very small, they may have been parts of a cultic building erected around the year 0 AD in connection to the earlier graves.

About 800 years later, the hillock was used again for building two cairns which were later covered by the two mounds. A third grave was placed in the filling of the

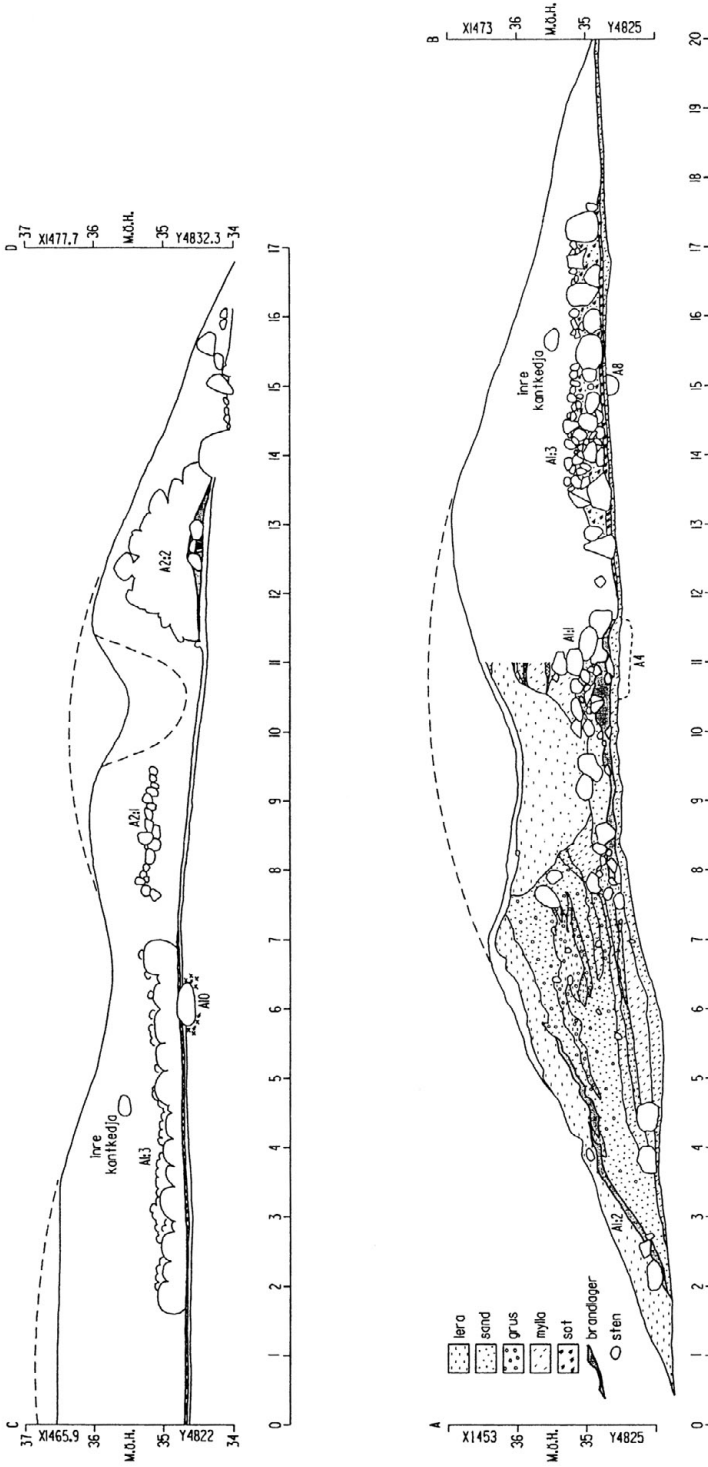


Figure 4. Sections through the graves at Vendel. A: The northern mound. B: the southern mound. After Seiler 2001, Fig. 23.

southern mound. The two cairns A2: 2 (the northern) and A1: 1 (the southern) seem to have been built in a sequence (Fig 3 and 4). A2:2 was neatly built in the shape of a cone. The space between the stones was empty. This indicates that the cairn was covered by the overlaying mound immediately after it was built. The southern cairn did not have these empty spaces between the stones, instead it was surrounded by two stone circles. In the north, these circles crossed one of the pre-Roman graves A1: 3. The cairn itself was neatly built, and originally had a stone standing upright in the centre. Here, there was a secondary intrusion in the shape of a ditch cut through the filling of the mound. The ditch was probably made in historic times. The disturbance had reached the cairn, but did not disarrange the cremation layer situated below the cairn (Fig. 4 below). There were also traces of a similar ditch that had not reached the cremation layer in the northern mound (Fig. 4 above). Fortunately, the ditch did not disturb a third grave A1: 2, which consisted of a cremation layer placed in the filling of the southern mound in the top of the southern side. In the surface of the mound on this side Seiler found a row of stones more or less pointing to this grave. The sequence of the three graves thus seems to be that the encircled grave A1: 1 was the first to be built, followed by the northern cairn A2: 1. Thereafter, the graves were covered by the two mounds.

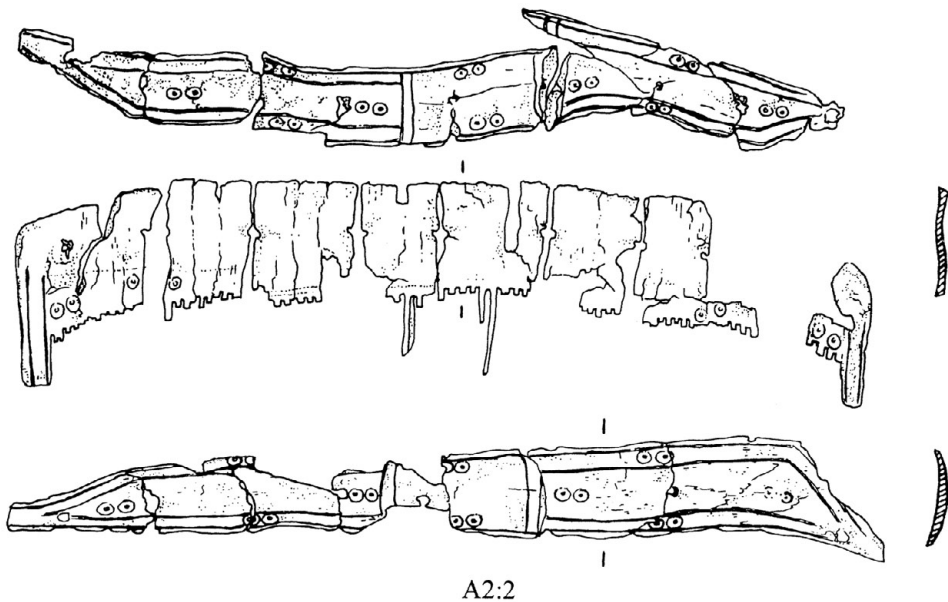


Figure 5. The Frisian comb from grave A2:1. After Seiler 2001, Fig. 27.

The identical filling indicates clearly that the mounds were built at the same time. Most probably, the intention was originally to build one long mound, but the filling material was not sufficient. The filling appears to have been cut grass turf which was placed in a layered sequence. The latest grave was the cremation grave A2: 2, placed in the filling of the southern mound (Fig. 3).

Although there is a clear chronological sequence between the three graves, the time span seems to be very small. A relatively short time-span is indicated by the C14-datings (A1:1: 1260 +/- 70 BP, A1:2: 1250+/-50 BP and A2:2: 1265+/-60 BP). When calibrated, however, the radiocarbon dates only indicate that the graves are generally from period 1. The archaeological material offers a more precise result. The comb with connection plates from grave A2: 2 is very indicative (Fig. 5). In contrast to the combs found in the two other graves, which are typical of the early Viking age in northern Europe, the relevant comb from A2:2 is of a Frisian type. Typical for the Frisian combs are the broad connection plates with a straight ridge and incised ornaments consisting of double contour lines and circles. As shown by Temple (1972), this type of comb belongs to the earliest phase of the Viking period. According to the latest chronology that would be around 750-800.

All three graves contained a rich cremated bone material, indicating that the individuals were young. The oldest in A1: 1 was 18-24 years old, and the others somewhat younger (*juvenilis*). All three, most probably men, were accompanied by a child, 5-6 years old. All three men had a horse and a dog. There was also an abundance of gifts of food in all three graves. Bones of cattle, pig and goat/sheep, as well as wild birds, geese and hen were identified. Dogs and hunting-birds were present in two of the graves. In A2:1, goshawk, sparrow hawk and merlin were found, whereas in A1:1 only goshawk was found. The most striking of the gifts, however, was the abundance of fish of different species. Among the identified species were herring, pike and pikeperch, but also whitefish, salmon and eel. Many of the species, such as herring, whitefish and salmon must have been brought from the Baltic, indicating trade in the area. Of special interest is that some of the fish was not cremated, but was clearly given as gifts in the late stage of the burial. Especially noteworthy was a more or less whole perch placed at the edge of the cremation layer in grave A1: 1. It had never been in the cremation fire, but must have been placed there afterwards.

There were also other interesting items in the graves. Pots were found in all three graves, and a u-shaped thin mount of bronze found in A1: 1 could have been used as an edge for a wooden bowl. The decorated nails from grave A2: 2 and A1: 2 as well as the spikes may belong to the horse equipment. The single find of two beads (one red and one white) in grave A2: 2 could, together with the nails, have been used as adornments on the horse-trappings. In all three graves, there were nails of the type used for boats. Most probably, the cremated were originally placed in a small boat. Surprisingly, there were very few traces of personal ornaments. In A1: 2 a faceted knob and a needle may be parts of a ring-pin. In this grave, as well as in grave A2: 2, there were also burnt and highly fragmented textile remains.. According to Anita Malmius, who is currently writing her doctoral thesis on textiles from this period, the textiles are of the finest quality yarn. This fine quality could be compared to textiles found in Birka as well as in Western Europe.

Gaming pieces of bone or antler were found in all three graves. Of a certain interest



Figure 6.
An iron tattooing instrument from grave A1:2.
Photo G. Eriksson

is that in the grave A2: 2 the gaming pieces were of two types. Some of the smaller type belong to the Viking period. Others were larger and higher, very similar to those used in the early Vendel period. Based on the occurrence of these early gaming pieces, Seiler dated the grave to the sixth century (Seiler 2001:66). I argue, however, that this date is impossible with reference to the comb and the C14-dating (see above). Professor Torstein Sjøvold, who examined the gaming pieces, believes that they were cut from whale bone. They may have been precious antiquities or may simply have been robbed from an older grave (corresponding gaming pieces were found in boat-grave XII) at Vendel (Stolpe and Arne 1912).

The most striking item is an instrument found in grave A1:2. It was made of iron, 3,2 cm long and was heavily corroded. Conservator Margaretha Klockhoff skilfully prepared the piece and revealed a small, beautiful and very well preserved artefact (Fig. 6). The object consisted of a handle decorated with parallel grooves. The handle is flattened in one end and here a ring is attached. The other end is also flattened, but ends in three triangular points which have sharpened edges. In the centre of the flat part is a small hole. In the Nordic Viking material I have found no object directly corresponding to this instrument. However, comparisons to ethnographic material indicate that it most probably has served as a tattooing instrument.

Tattooing is an old art known from the early Stone Age. Sjøvold has shown that that the so called «Iceman Ötzi» from Tyrolia had tattooing marks (Sjøvold 1996). Quite possibly, the coloured faces which are mentioned in some of the Icelandic sagas, and also by Ibn Fadlan, originally meant that the Norsemen were tattooed. Tattooing was actually forbidden at a church council held in Scotland in 787 AD (Birket Smith 1941:274f). It is therefore plausible that tattooing was well known in the period. Tattooing has also been performed in South Eastern Europe and in the Balkans as folk art up to the present and sailors are well known for getting tattoos, for instance in Amsterdam (cf. Brain 1979). People were tattooed for beauty as well as for medical purposes (cf. Armstrand 2001:21ff; Hellgren 1967). It is quite possible that, in our case, the tattooing instrument was part of a medical kit. An extremely small knife (about 3 cm long) found among the stones in the cairn of grave A2: 2, and a tiny awl

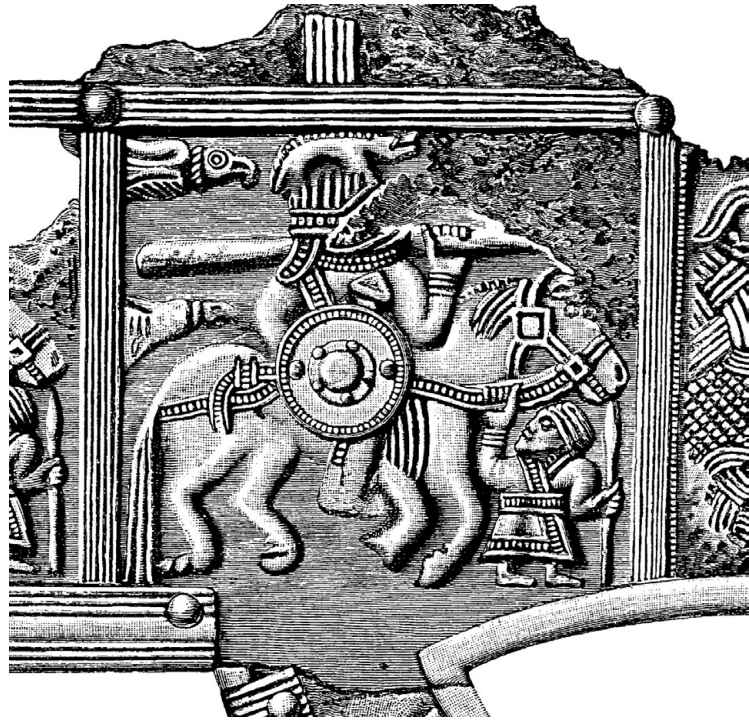


Figure 7.
*A «pressbleck» from
the helmet from
Vendel boatgrave I
showing the small
groom. After Stolpe
and Arne 1912,
Plate V, Fig. 2.*

found in grave A1:2 could also belong to a medical kit used by our three riders.

Who were the three riders?

The occurrence of items that could be used for medical purposes - especially the unique tattooing instrument - makes it appropriate to discuss who these riders were. I think it can be concluded that they did not belong to the native population, since they were not buried in the main cemeteries on the esker.

The social status of the men is indicated by several types of data in the archaeological record. First of all, the variety of wild species indicates that the young men were hunters. Graves showing falconry is known in 30 cases from Sweden (cf. Ericson & Tyrberg 2004). Uppland has the highest frequency of such graves, clearly belonging to the aristocracy. Another indication is the presence of gaming pieces, signalling that our riders belonged to the upper class. Thirdly, there is the presence of children. It is quite possible that each child served as a groom for a horse, similar to the one that is depicted on one of the mounts to the helmet from Vendelgrave 1 (Fig. 7). If this is true, it is another indication of the elevated social status of the men.

Some of their grave goods - the horse, the dog and in two cases falcons, as well as the gaming pieces - is largely equivalent to what was present in the boat-graves on the esker nearby. However, in contrast to the equipment in the boat-graves, the graves of

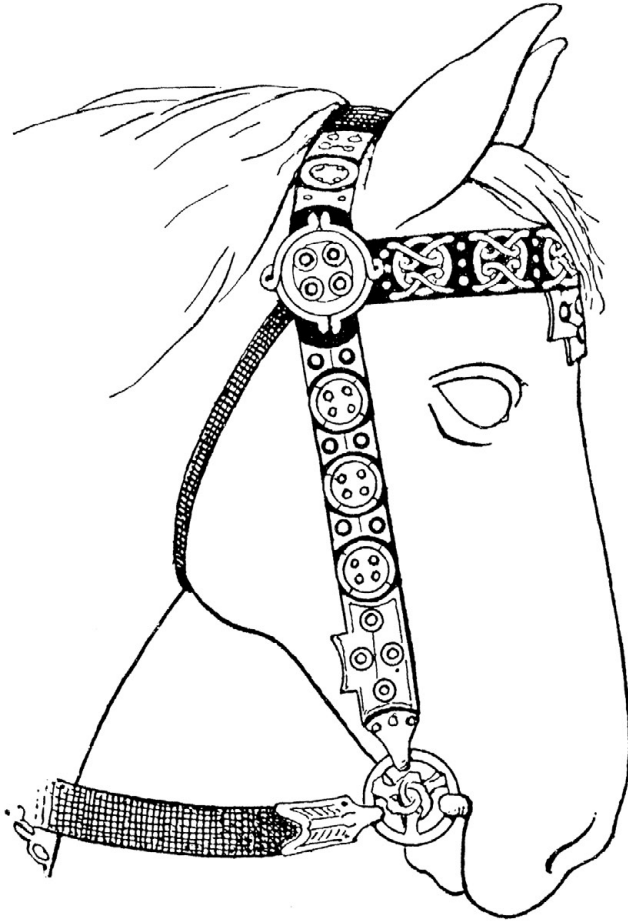


Figure 8.
The enamelled harness from
Vendel boatgrave III. After Stolpe
and Arne 1912, Plate XII, Fig. 3.

the three riders contained no weapons at all. This difference warrants an explanation. I find it plausible that our three riders were messengers sent to Vendel on a special purpose. The lack of weapons indicates that their arrival at Vendel was accompanied by a small military troop, which most probably was furnished by the Svea king in Uppsala. The administrative organisation of Uppland and parts of Södermanland into *hundreds* gathered together in *Folklands* was probably a reform initiated around 500 AD, in close association with the establishment of the Svea kingdom (cf. Arrhenius 2004). This must have implied that no one could enter the borders of Svealand without royal permission.

From where and for what purpose the three riders came to Vendel we can only speculate. The Frisian comb could perhaps indicate a Frisian origin. It is also tempting to suggest that the visit of the three riders can be associated with the expensive harness with red enamel which was found in boat-grave III in Vendel (cf. Arwidsson 1942) (Fig. 8). Did the three riders bring the harness as a gift? The medical equipment may

also reveal the identities of the riders. Such items were used by early missionaries in order to demonstrate their Christian beliefs. The healing capacity is a virtue often told about in the Vita of missionaries following Jesus Christ. Although the burials were arranged in accordance with heathen customs, there is one element that gives a hint that the visitors may have had other customs than usually seen in heathen graves. This element is the rich fish remains including more than 8 species. Sigvallius (1994:81) has analysed one of the largest collections of cremation graves known in middle Sweden outside Birka. The graves were situated in North Spånga, and the majority of the graves were dated to the early medieval period. In these graves, only less than 1%, altogether 4 graves, had fish bones. In three of them bones of pike was identified, whereas in the fourth the species could not be determined. In North Spånga uncremated fish bones were found, similar to what was found in grave A1:1. As far as I know, uncremated fish bones are not known from other graves. Perhaps the rule that only fish could be consumed during the fast had struck the natives in Vendel. This may explain why they sacrificed fish as gifts to the deceased.

A last question is why these three young men all died in Vendel. In view of the discussion above, the question is: Did they die for their beliefs? It should be remembered that the Svea king granted Ansgar permission to preach in Birka in the early ninth century. This was not a success; the Christian belief was not accepted. Other missionaries could well have visited Svealand earlier. We now perhaps know a little bit more of their destiny.

Summary

In this paper, three cremation graves from the so-called Vendla's mound are presented and discussed. The Vendla's mound is separated from the other cemeteries in Vendel, on a small hillock. The graves date from the very early Viking age, ca. 750-800. It is argued that the buried men were foreigners. The find of a Frisian comb (Fig. 5) hints that they were Frisian. The burials have a number of elements that indicate elevated social status: horses, dogs, falconry and gaming pieces as well as rich food gifts including altogether eight species of fish. In contrast to the high status boat graves at the nearby esker, all weapons were missing from the three graves. In each grave there was a young man, and all three were accompanied by a child, 5-6 years old, who probably served as a groom for the horse (cf. Fig. 7). An artifact which probably has served as a tattooing instrument is unique (Fig. 6). Together with a small knife and a tiny awl, the tattooing instrument may have been used for medical purposes. It is suggested that the three riders were early missionaries who used their medical instruments to demonstrate their Christian beliefs.

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