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Sword parts and their depositional contexts

– Symbols in Migration and Merovingian Period martial society

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A key feature of swords from the Migration and Merovingian Periods is that they consist of many different parts, as recently highlighted by the discovery of the Staffordshire hoard. This paper seeks to understand sword parts and their depositional contexts by interpreting them as symbols of kleptocracy, animated by their object biographies in a martial society. This is done by evaluating four important finds from Sweden: a stray intact sword from Scania, a cremation grave from Heberg in Halland, a wetland deposit from Snösbäck in Västergötland, and the settlement finds from Uppåkra in Scania.

The presence of the various different parts varies substantially in the different kinds of contexts. In particular, the Uppåkra settlement is missing hundreds of sword parts that ought to have been there given the professional excavations and systematic metal-detecting over many years there. This allows for the interpretation of the Uppåkra sword parts as the remains of a battlefield of about AD 600 where most of the sword parts were removed from the site shortly after the battle.

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This article was inspired by the 2009 discovery of some one hundred sword pommels and thousands of fragments of sword parts in an Anglo-Saxon gold hoard at Ogle Hay in Staffordshire (Leahy & Bland 2009). In March 2010, we presented a paper on the chronology and typology of sword pommels at the Staffordshire symposium at the British Museum (available at www.finds.org.uk). There we pointed out that the Staffordshire hoard is the largest known assembly of sword pommels from the 6th and 7th centuries.

The Staffordshire hoard may only be understood in comparison with other contexts that have produced very large numbers of sword pommels from the same era. Apart from burials, there are no such contexts in Britain. We thus argued that one must compare the Anglo-Saxon hoard with similar contexts in Sweden, especially hoards, wetland deposits and central place settlements, but also, given typological constraints, burial contexts such as boat graves and cremations. Burial contexts however are not good comparisons. Instead, the first

site that comes to mind is the settlement of Uppåkra in Scania with some 29 reported finds of sword pommels. The second site is a bog at Snösäck in Västergötland with four sword pommels.

Material

Northwest European swords from the period AD 375–700 form a single cohesive group of objects due to their piecemeal make-up. They are peculiar artifacts as they consist of several interchangeable parts made from different metal alloys. This distinguishes them from their predecessors of the Bronze Age and the Pre-Roman Iron Age and their successors of the Viking Period, which tend to be made of one single alloy or ore. At certain chronological junctures specific assemblies of sword parts were fixed in time through deposition. One distinct elite phenomenon with a short life span is the so-called *Goldgriffspathen-Horizont* c. 450–490, the “horizon of gold-grip spathas” with weapons that are derivative of Romano-Byzantine designs. They are generally only found in opulent burials. A case in point is the grave of King Childeric from AD 481/482 with its prestigious sword fittings and eclectic mixture of Roman and barbaric insignia amongst other grave goods. These sword types soon disappeared from circulation, and the opulent burials became less grandiose. Instead there was a shift in favor of new types of sword parts, ring pommels in particular.

A few thousand swords are known from north-western Europe from this period. This vast material must be interpreted from a wide perspective. Yet the iron sword blades do not fare well in Scandinavian soil. By contrast, pommels, scabbard mouths, hilt decorations and chapes in various alloys are often well preserved and lend themselves well to comparative analysis with the Continental material. In total, there are some 400 known pommels from the period. These are found in at least ten different kinds of context, each of whose chronology may be very different, despite the typological parallels between sword parts or the hierarchical structures behind them.

1. Individual cremations (e.g. Heberg, Lundquist 2008)
2. Individual boat inhumations (e.g. Valsgårde 7, Arwidsson 1977)

3. Other individual inhumations (e.g. Krefeld-Gellep 1782, Pirling 1979)
4. Mass/mixed cremations (e.g. Vainionmäki, Purhonen 1996)
5. Mass inhumations in boats (e.g. Salme, Konsa 2009)
6. Settlements (e.g. Uppåkra, Helgesson 2010)
7. Wetland deposits (e.g. Snösäck, Fischer et al 2008)
8. Dry-land hoards (e.g. Staffordshire, Leahy & Bland 2009; Webster et al. 2011)
9. Workshop assembly lines (e.g. Mästerby, Gustafsson 2011)
10. Decontextualised museum objects (e.g. SHM 9822:826, Behmer 1939)

The literature offers four major studies of Migration/Merovingian Period sword pommels. The first large sword catalogue is that of Elis Behmer (1939). Secondly, we have Vera Evison’s 1967 study of ring swords. Thirdly, we have the larger study by Wilfried Menghin (1983), a catalogue with some 151 swords from all over Europe selected from over 200 burial contexts. The drawback to these publications is that they are outdated by now and difficult to access. The distribution pattern of sword pommels from graves based on these studies formed two zones, one centered on the English Channel and the other in Scandinavia (Steuer 1987; Hedeager 1991).

Fourthly, there is Nørgård-Jørgensen’s extensive catalogue of weapon burials in Scandinavia 520/30 to 900 (1999), which does not include mainland Sweden, however.

In addition, Fischer *et al.* 2008 is a critical revision of Evison’s and Menghin’s work in the North Sea area, listing 42 sword pommels. It focuses on the Bifrons-Gilton type and runic inscriptions in burials along the English Channel, but it also discusses Swedish pommels not included in the other four works. The research surveyed above shows that the Continental chronological horizon for sword burials lasts from c. 375 to 650 and is much more sharply defined than that of Scandinavia, where sword burials are less common. In England, the trend in the grave goods was similar to that of the Continent, but lagged behind, c. 500–700, including the opulent early 7th century inhumations of Sutton Hoo and Prittlewell.

The use of metal detectors in recent years has changed everything, and Staffordshire is a milestone within the research field of the Late North-west European Iron Age. The generous laws regulating the retrieval of prehistoric metal objects in Britain and Denmark in particular has caused a vast increase in reported finds of sword parts. Staffordshire, by contrast, is a peripheral area given earlier archaeological research and metal detecting. It is no exaggeration that this find has put all canonical literature and scholarship on Anglo-Saxon, Merovingian and Vendel Period material culture and art history into question, as well as the study of Latin epigraphy.

Interpretive model

The Migration Period's new emphasis on the prestige of sword parts can be interpreted as a search for symbolic order and stability in a new society with different rules of engagement. For our project to verify this underlying hypothesis, we must integrate and reconcile the material and contextual extremes. To do so, our perspective must distance itself from the theory of the burial ritual as a mirror of martial society (Effros 2003). Note that on the Continent, graves are often equipped with sword blades only, although the fittings would have been well preserved if deposited. Thus, we believe that parts other than the blade were circulated in living material culture instead. Swords were obviously never integrated into the burial rite without previous deliberation, as this represented a decrease in personal property and the ability to circulate goods in the network. Instead, our interpretive model employs two theories.

First we use the concept of object biographies (Joy 2009) as a strategy to explore the development and termination of patron-client relationships. Some sword parts were transferred to other objects to emphasise an important symbolic subordination. Examples are the sword rings from Valsgårde 7 and Sutton Hoo that have been detached from their pommels and mounted on a drinking horn and a shield respectively. Each may have testified to an event such as the defeat of an enemy who lost his claim to wielding power as evidenced and declared by the removal of his political insignia. Drinking beer out of the horn would thus have been a commemorative event showing

how social order had successfully been maintained by means of recycled pommel rings. We suggest that the drinking was a public ritual in front of a lot of people who understood that a sword ring served as *pars pro toto* in the reproduction of the ruling order. Object biographies might also coalesce in hoards as the result of certain collective events. These may have been battles, where the spoils of war were gathered afterwards, or the paying of a levy or ransom by a number of parties to appease a threatening warlord or tax collector. In any case the coalescing of individual biographies into one was probably dictated by a need to limit the future number of potential sword wielders.

Secondly, we use the concept of kleptocracy (Fischer 2005), "the rule of thieves". This implies that competing warlords would seek to reduce the available material goods of rivals, in particular such items that pertained to social status and political legitimacy. In the Roman Period, the equipment of entire military units had been sacrificed into bogs. This was no longer the case in the Migration or Merovingian Periods. Instead, the deactivation and disarmament of political opponents and their material belongings was manifested in a new way. The symbolic exchange of sword parts as gifts in return for loyalty had a negative counterpart. It is generally believed that the patron-client networks of the Migration Period's new warlord elite were fragile and subject to constant friction. This meant that sword parts that had previously been fixed investments were free to circulate anew if an alliance was terminated. The elite was therefore always eager to limit its numbers. This is a fundamental characteristic of kleptocracy: the value of one's personal property will increase if the property of others disappears or is destroyed. Deliberate acts reducing the property of others enhances the scarcity and value of what is left. The deposition of a sword part was therefore highly significant. In particular, sword parts deposited in non-burial contexts were more meaningful than those we find in graves, as they are more likely to include objects meant to disappear from circulation for political reasons.

The two theories thus complement each other in elucidating the source material, the Staffordshire hoard in particular. The reduction and destruction of as many hostile/competing sword pom-

mels as possible was vitally important to a successful 7th century kleptocrat. The elite must have had severe difficulties in keeping the circulation of too many sword parts down, especially given how tempting it would have been to each ambitious warlord to commission a new line of such objects. This may have been the case with the many Bifrons-Gilton type pommels that first appeared in the early 6th century but circulated at least until the deposition about AD 700 of the Staffordshire hoard. In future work we aim to trace object biographies from hoards and settlements to elucidate the participatory dynamics of sword parts in the political discourse. The objects were appreciated differently across time and space. But the act of destruction put an end to a diversity of object biographies. The memory of the past material world of the subjugated was silenced when they were deprived of their symbolic regalia.

The symbolic handling of the sword and its various components is pivotal here. There is a dichotomy of scarcity and abundance in an armed culture where politics are enacted by means of a ritual display of instruments of power. Uncontrolled and too-frequent practice of such display, due to unrestricted access to instruments of power, causes friction in the chain of command and the rule of law can no longer be distinguished from acts of crime. Thus we cannot attribute general political significance to any sword, as it may have been employed to very different ends. Indeed, though swords have at times been used to emphasise social inequality between men, in other situations, they have been the prime instrument to exclude women from the right to rule. A modern example is the local elections in the *Landesgemeinde* of Innerrhoden in the Canton of Appenzel, Switzerland. Here, adult men only voted by raising and lowering swords. Adult women were excluded until 1991, as they were considered to lack *Wehrfähigkeit*, the ability to wield a sword in combat. Women were also excluded from the vote due to their inability to execute *Hausväterliche Gewalt*, male rule by violence within the household (Wanger 2002).

A further example of sex, gender and age as expressed by the use of swords is found in the Old Norse poem “The Waking of Angantyr” (Ney 2004). Here, Tove wakes her buried father An-

gantyr up from his chamber-grave sleep (Fischer et al. 2009). She forces him to hand over a family heirloom, the sword Tirfing, so that her sons may keep up a family feud for many generations to come. Inheritance between male generations is however difficult to grasp in the Scandinavian archaeological material. There is not a single example from the Lake Mälaren provinces of grave of an old man, osteologically determined as *senilis*, buried with a sword. This may mean that old men did not have the right to be dressed up as young warriors for burial, save for the exceptional boat graves.

Frans Theuws and Monica Alkemade (2000) have put forward a rather controversial interpretation of weapon burials in Northern Gaul. They regard these as evidence of Gallo-Romans altering their burial tradition to appear more Germanic and barbarian in the new martial society. They thus argue that Continental sword burials mark an ideological rapprochement between different ethnic groups where a small community of immigrants was able to influence the settled majority. In other contexts, archaeologists have argued that the sword in the burial ritual distinguished men of a certain ethnicity. This appears to be the case in the well-known cemetery of Castel Trosino in Umbria. Recent research has shown that 90% of all men buried there between AD 570 and 610 received swords in their graves, while coeval cemeteries in the vicinity fail to show such a pattern (Paroli & Ricci 2008). In this case an ethnic model has been employed, where an immigrant retinue of Lombards was identified at the cemetery, separating themselves from others by exhibiting a virtual monopoly of armed violence in the burial rite.

These widely different contexts and the range of possible interpretations show the importance of a thorough understanding of each individual archaeological context for the overarching theory to be applicable on the micro-level, as demonstrated by the four case studies discussed below.

Case 1: SHM 9822:826, Scania

This stray find from a Scanian wetland (Behmer 1939: taf. XVLL, 1a-b, Helgesson 2010) is the best-preserved sword of its kind in Sweden (fig. 1). It can be used as a model when evaluating other

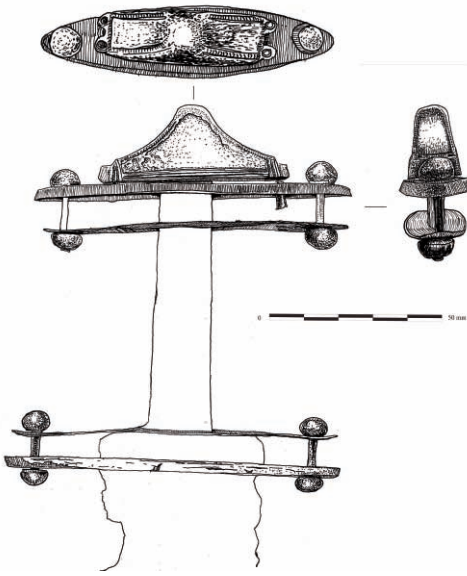


Fig. 1. Scania (SHM 9822:826). This decontextualised sword is in many ways normative for all research into Vendel Period swords, as its complete hilt has no less than 20 different parts.

sword contexts. The more or less intact weapon consists of no less than twenty-one different parts. This sword has been disassembled and reconfigured on several occasions. Most rivet heads and rivets are secondary replacements, and this may well be the case with some of the guards, too.

Case 2: grave 2, Heberg, Halland

Heberg is located some 3 km north of the Slöinge estate (Lundqvist 2000), an active and well-to-do farmstead with some bead and garnet production during the Vendel Period. Grave 2 at the Heberg cremation cemetery was structurally insignificant with its remains of a small funeral pyre. Yet it offers considerable comparative evidence. Though fragmented, the finds from Heberg exemplify the eclectic sword compositions of the time (Lundqvist 2008). In grave 2 we find remains of five different sword components (fig. 2).

The Heberg sword shows Merovingian material culture meeting Anglo-Saxon in the display of aristocratic power (Fischer et al. 2008). The sword ring has English parallels while the pommel looks Frankish. If intact, the Heberg sword

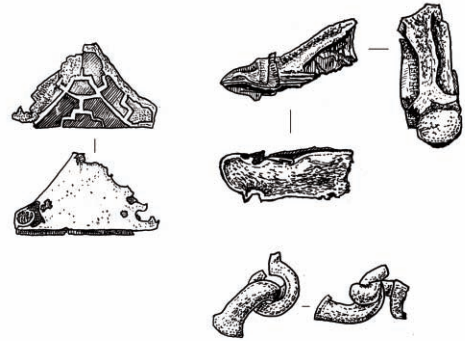


Fig. 2. Halland, Heberg, grave 2. The grave goods include five components of a sword probably imported from the English Channel region. (Illustrations not to same scale.)

composition would have been considered perfectly normal for a context such as a wood-lined inhumation burial within a row grave cemetery in northern Gaul or Kent. Note also that the closest parallel to the pommel, from Concevreux, Aisne, in France (Evison 1967, p. 91, n. 22), sports a ring that would not have raised any eyebrows in Vendel Period Scandinavia. It is difficult to date Heberg grave 2 closer than to the very end of the Migration Period or the earliest Vendel Period (c. 520–590). This cremation context is pertinent to the further discussion of Uppåkra in terms of what material remains we may expect to dominate when sword parts are found.

Case 3: Snösbäck, Västergötland

Finds from Snösbäck (fig. 3–5) were accessioned by the Historical Museum between 1858 and 1862 under four different inventory numbers. In 2007 and 2008 we compiled most of the published material surrounding Snösbäck from the museum's inventory notes, *Tillväxten* and Behmer 1939. We then discussed the context with Charlotte Fa-bech and Bengt Nordqvist on several occasions,

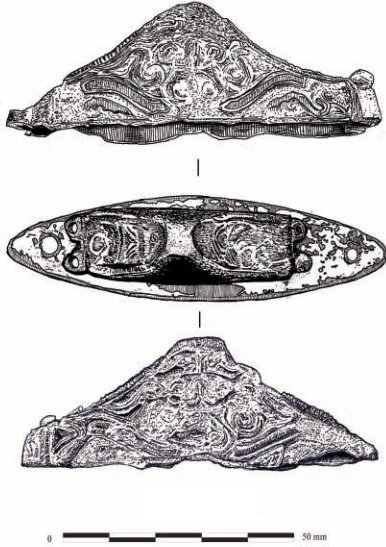


Fig. 3. Västergötland, Snösbäck (SHM 2528-1c). This pommel of Beckum-Vallstenarum type belongs together with at least one guard and a rivet head in the catalogue.

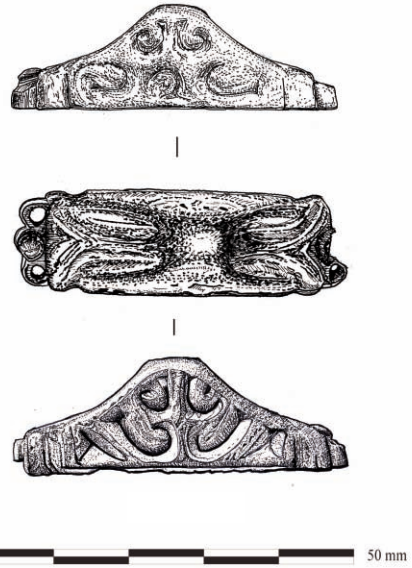


Fig. 4. Västergötland, Snösbäck (SHM 2547-1). This pommel of type Bifrons-Gilton is an import from the English Channel region. It has undergone several modifications prior to being broken off a sword and having had its ring knob removed.

while also presenting it at the Staffordshire symposium in 2010. It was clear that a closer examination was needed.

We studied nine objects at the SHM in April 2011, a piece of bone being missing. We wanted to know if the objects under different inventory numbers attributed to the Snösbäck area actually belong together. This proved to be the case (see catalogue below), and we believe we can explain the odd provenance.

The *utmarker*, “outland” of Snösbäck was a wetland in the early Vendel Period. Borders between settlements often extend into wetlands as these form natural boundaries. By the same token, these wetlands become meeting points where ritual deposition may have taken place. Following the introduction of the steel plow, agricultural expansion caught up with the dormant state of affairs in the wetlands during the late 19th century. Thus, when people began to drain and till the wetlands of Snösbäck in 1858–62, farm hands from adjacent parishes such as Falköping and Kar-

leby worked together in a commonly owned area. When someone found a precious object he would reported as hailing from the point of his origin, that is, his hamlet, its parish and so on. Then another farm hand would for obvious reasons go looking in the same spot. But his finds would be listed according to his farm and its parish, etc. Late 19th century Swedish heritage bureaucracy could be erratic from time to time, causing some finds to be more rapidly handled than others. And so we have ended up with four different inventory numbers for objects that all most likely derive from one spot.

Snösbäck is different from Staffordshire as the former find contains an iron sword blade and a gold bracelet. We see two possible reasons for this. Firstly, the Staffordshire hoard is a much more selected assemblage, and secondly it may also be that Snösbäck will turn out to be a larger deposit than currently known. It might in fact be a late case of the type of war booty deposition seen at Finnestorp. More should be done about Snös-

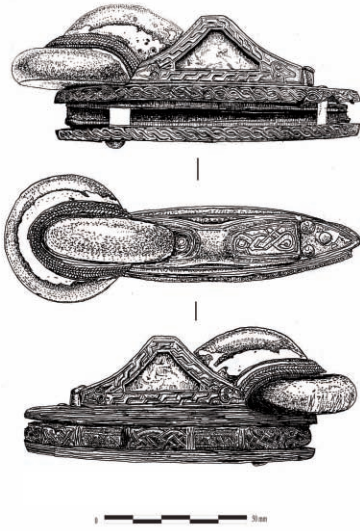


Fig. 5. Västergötland, Snösbäck (SHM 2561). The pommel consists of 14 different parts. There are a number of marks from a sharp object along the outer edge the ring knob. This may be evidence of intentional destruction during the Vendel Period, but can also be a result of an attempt by the finders in the 19th century to verify the metal or alloy content of the knob.

bäck. In particular, the site should be pinpointed and made subject to expert metal detecting. The site should also be integrated into its local context, where the deposition site at Finnestorp in Larv obviously forms a crucial point of reference (Nordquist 2004).

Very little is certain about the finds from the wetland of Snösbäck, besides the fact that two conspicuous items, a gold bracelet and a bent sword blade, are older than the other preserved metal objects. Both are also small: better suited for use by very young people than by mature adults. But there is a possibility that all nine objects were deposited at one event. What kind of an event could this have been? The Rök runestone (c. AD 800) in nearby Östergötland tells of battlefields where up to twenty kings lie fallen (Wessén 1958). Snösbäck could be a wetland deposit with a long tradition, where late Migration period objects were first deposited, and a subsequent deposit from

the early Vendel Period has been added to the finds. But it seems very plausible that all objects belong together, and that certain objects from the Late Migration period circulated for a very long time.

In this light, Snösbäck might be interpreted in the following highly speculative or cinematic fashion. In the early 7th century a death-marked local young princeling receives two ancient Scandinavian heirlooms: a mid-5th century gold bracelet and a late-5th century sword. With him on a quest were three adult bodyguards who carried an eclectic mixture of recycled late-6th and early-7th century sword parts from at least four regions of Europe: Scandinavia, the English Channel, Frankish Gaul, and possibly Alemannia or Italy. The story ends tragically. The young ring lord and his retainers get entangled in a transaction that ends up badly for them. Our princeling and his bodyguard may have lost a battle out there in the wetland, an interzone of local power spheres. Their killers may then have decided to deactivate the oldest sword blade but to deposit it in one piece, where the stripped pommel at the end emphasised the termination of any future executive command. The killers then stripped three of four pommels of their rings, and rid themselves of the princely regalia in the shape of the bracelet for the wetland to hide.

Case 4: Uppåkra, Scania.

Uppåkra will need little introduction for the reader with an interest in the material culture of the early Vendel Period. But the site calls for careful scrutiny: this central place extends over an area of 40 hectares, and over 20,000 metal objects have been retrieved from the site since the early 1990s when the current Uppåkra project began.

Bertil Helgesson (2010, pp. 86–87) lists 29 sword pommels from Uppåkra. These are all later than the lance- and spearhead deposits near the main buildings in the northern part of the site (cf. Andersson 2012), and the sword pommels are therefore an unrelated and different phenomenon from a later era. For the classification and chronology of these sword pommels, Helgesson relies on the most recent chronology of early Vendel Period weapon graves (Nørgård-Jørgensen 1999). Helgesson (2010, p. 111) lists some 25 pom-



Fig. 6. Scania, Uppåkra (U 6399). The Nydam style pommel has had its rivet loops broken off. This suggests that the pommel was removed using an object that was pushed underneath the side of the pommel, thus breaking it off by force rather than by first gently removing the rivets with pliers.

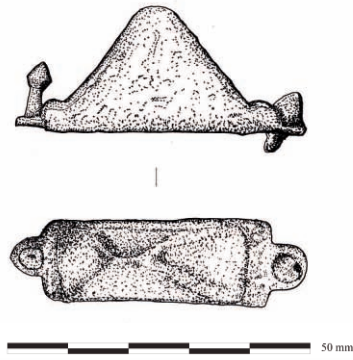


Fig. 7. Scania, Uppåkra (U 4259). This triangular pommel still retains its rivets, but has been removed by force so that one of the rivets is displaced and the other twisted.

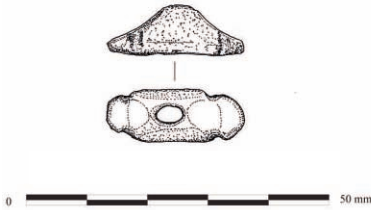


Fig. 8. Scania, Uppåkra (U 9797). This pommel of type Chessel Down with its top hole has no rivets but has been glued to a guard of organic material. It was knocked off its hilt with a blow from below.

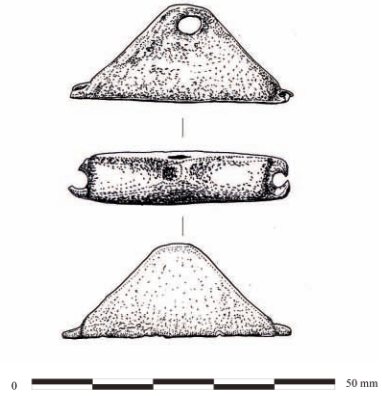


Fig. 9. Scania, Uppåkra (U 4475). The pommel is missing its rivets, and the rivet holes have been ripped open in order to remove the pommel from the hilt. A hole has been punched into the top of the pommel to allow a tool to push the end of the grip out of the pommel.

mels with inventory numbers and allocates them to four chronological groups: one of type Nydam (400–475), 17 of type SP₂ (520–620) and four of type SP₃ (560–680). In total we have been able to examine sixteen pommels, five rivets and two gaskets from Uppåkra (fig. 6–12). This brings the sum total of all sword parts from the Migration and Vendel Periods in Uppåkra to a mere 32. Uppåkra thereby assumes quite an odd position among the four case studies (tab. 1).

It is difficult to make sense of tab. 1, as it is impossible to accurately compare a stray find, a cremation, a wetland deposit and a settlement. Still, it has the advantage that even absent parts can be accounted for. Given the usual number of sword parts per pommel, we can estimate that the missing material at Uppåkra amounts to some 200–500 objects. But are the 32 sword parts not simply the broken remains from plowed-over cremation graves? This was a tempting first conclu-

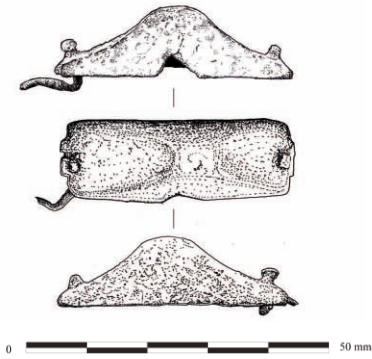


Fig. 10. Scania, Uppåkra (U 5615). The pommel has been subject to a lot of force as shown by the twisted rivets.

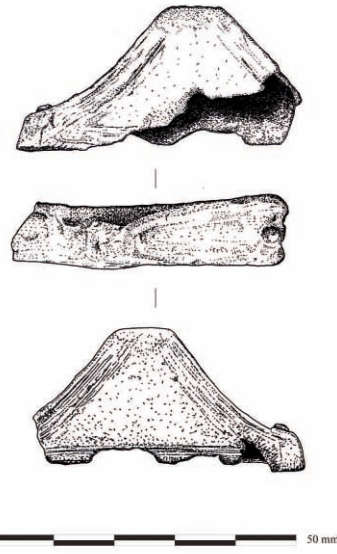


Fig. 11. Scania, Uppåkra (U 37265). This pommel is very fragmented, having received several blows and been bent off the sword hilt.

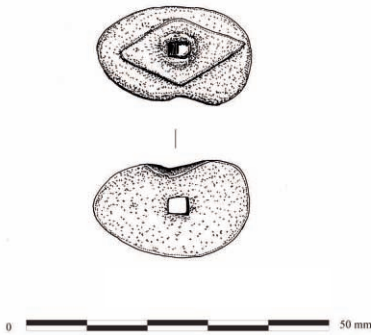


Fig. 12. Scania, Uppåkra (U 5101). A seax pommel. The use of force is visible on the bent edge of the gasket where a tool has been inserted in order to separate the gasket from the hilt.

Table 1. Sword parts from the four studied finds.

	SHM 9822:826	Heberg	Snösbäck	Uppåkra
Context	Stray find	Cremation	Wetland	Settlement
Gold (g)	-	-	44.5	c. 200
Garnets	-	Yes	Lost	Yes
Swords	1	1	4	25
Pommels	1	1	4	25
Guards	4	1	4	-
Blades	1	-	1	-
Rings	-	1	1 (3 lost)	-
Sum	21	5	30 (3 lost)	32 (200-500 lost)

sion. But cremation graves like Heberg grave 2 yield a variety of different sword parts that are notably absent in Uppåkra. These pieces must have been prevented from entering the ground at the settlement due to some factor that was absent from the three other contexts. It looks like selective human action in the shape of an event had an impact on what was left of the swords at Uppåkra.

Conclusion – a hypothetical battle site at Uppåkra?

Weapons are extremely rare in the local burial rite in Scania. They are also very rare as stray finds in the region. Meanwhile, sword pommels from a rather coherent time period and of a very similar quality, that is, cheap copper alloy, are by no means infrequent at Uppåkra, although they have been subject to an abrupt and forcible disassembly. One may safely assume that in late 6th century Uppåkra, there were not just pommels lying idly around, they belonged together with the other alloy or metal fittings that went with swords, assembled together as single material entities and symbols for. Thus, the broken low-status sword pommels from Uppåkra do not constitute evidence for continuity, on the contrary. In particular, pommels with broken rivet holes or twisted rivets are frequent on the southwestern outskirts of the settlement, along a wide slope. Something has prevented all the other parts material from being deposited. Today, hundreds of sword parts are missing although they must have been there. The excavators and detectorists of Uppåkra have been active in the area for a very long time. Had larger sword pieces, such as the c. 10 cm long and 2.5 cm wide lower guards of gilt copper alloy been there, they would have been detected even if fragmentary – as in the case of the contemporary grave of Heberg, but also the Migration Period hilltop settlement of Runsa in the Mälars Valley (Olausson 2011). We interpret the presence of broken sword pommels (and the absence of all other parts that ought to go along with the pommels) as evidence of an armed conflict in Uppåkra. There is reason to believe that the many finds of such mundane sword pommels scattered over a wide area at Uppåkra are testimony to disruption. More precisely, we would like to propose the hypothesis that this context is the remains of a battle fought on the southwestern outskirts of the Uppåkra settlement. Here on

the slopes facing towards the Sound, the low-ranking male defenders of Uppåkra may have been defeated some time in the late 6th century. The sword pommels were rejected as spoils of war by the victorious intruders as the pommels were of inferior status and quality, while some blades were kept as trophies and removed from the site, after having been tested by cutting against something that would cause inferior blades to crack.

This event calls for comparative examples, as battlefield archaeology is very much en vogue in archaeology. The Uppåkra site itself has other forms of weapon deposits. But the lance- and spearhead deposits to the north that are probably of an earlier date, however (Herschend 2009, pp. 370–375; Andersson 2012). Outside of Uppåkra, the first site to come to mind is Korsbetningen by Visby on Gotland. In 1361, a professional Danish retinue under king Valdemar IV massacred a ragtag army of 1,800 peasants dressed in an array of old-fashioned protective gear (Thordeman 1939). The Hanseatic town of Visby was sacked afterwards. The corpses of the dead peasants were not searched as the battle took place during a hot summer and the dead were giving off foul odours. Instead they were rapidly buried in mass graves, still wearing gold finger rings and other finery.

Was Uppåkra itself ever capable of supporting such professional killers as those who sacked it sometime in the late 6th or early 7th century? This is unlikely, they would not regularly have been stationed at the central place itself. Instead it is more probable that there were small units of professional warriors barracked in surrounding settlements under the formal control of the central place. Helgesson (2010) argues that the garrison was decentralized into precisely such establishments by the 8th century. We believe that this took place much earlier, in the early 6th century after one of many take-overs of the site. We suspect that Uppåkra had no residential professional garrison in the late 6th century. Those killed on the battlefield are likely to have been boys and old men, unable to resist the onslaught of a professional group of killers arriving from the shores of the Sound. At Uppåkra, the inhabitants had time to organize an improvised defense, and to hide their most precious belongings. But the battle proved disastrous and the site must have been

overrun by the attackers who retrieved and removed the spoils of war from the site.

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Catalogue and Commentary

Snösbäck, Västergötland

1. SHM 2528 1a

Iron sword blade topped with a Chessel Down type pommel. Blade measurements, SHM Inventory (1858): total length 1 aln 7 tum, width 5 tum. 2011 measurements: total length 90.3 cm, handle length 12.2 cm, blade width 4.5 cm. Pommel measurements, Menghin 1983: length 3.5 cm, height 1.5 cm. 2011 measurements: length: 3.5 cm (plus an additional 0.8 cm from the missing piece), height 1 cm, bottom width 1.2 cm, top width 0.6 cm.

The sword has a very well balanced thin blade. It compensates for its mere 90 cm length by having the sharpened edges extend very far along sides of the blade, looking like a miniature long sword. This configuration has served to extend the reach of the weapon. The handle would fit someone with relatively small hands, whereas an adult would have had to use the wide part of the blade to install a guard to protect the hand. It is no doubt due to the blade's slim and swift character that someone has been able to bend it immediately prior to deposition. Our impression is that this is a select weapon for a young teenager, allowing speed and agility with the wrist to compensate for adult arm length, reach, weight and power.

It is very likely that the missing part of the pommel may have held a sword ring that was removed by force immediately prior to the pommel's deposition. This is the only preserved sword blade from Snösbäck. The sword has been deactivated and rendered harmless, its blade having been bent into a u-shape. The sword combination is unusual for Swedish standards with only two preserved parts, pommel and blade.

Date: early 6th century. This sword appears older than the other sword assemblages from Snösbäck. Both the pommel and the blade probably date from the early 6th century and may have been kept together in an assembly for a very long time. Yet it cannot be excluded that various old parts were kept in pristine working condition in different assemblies well into the early 7th century, only to be fitted together in a retrograde fashion towards the very end of their use period.

2. SHM 2528 – 1b (455987)

Lower part of a guard, fitted for the blade entry, of gilt copper alloy, cut in two. Length 10.5 cm, maximum width 2.2 cm, height 0.4 cm. Blade entry length 5.5 cm, maximum width 0.7 cm. One of the holes fits a rivet with a diameter of 0.9 cm.

3. SHM 2528 – 1c (455984)

Sword pommel of gilded copper alloy. Beckum-Vallstenarum type, possibly a Scandinavian imitation of a Continental pattern but could also be an import from Alemannia or Italy. Decorated with birds of prey in Style IIb, beaded ornaments along the edges. Front: Style II zoomorphic decoration associated with beaded ornaments on edges. Length: 5.1 cm Height: 1.9 cm Maximum width: 1.2 cm width at the top: 0.6 cm. Weight: 16.5 g.

A lamellar tool has left traces from when the pommel was removed from the hilt. The base of the pommel is slightly damaged on one side. Only one rivet remains intact on the beaded side. The other side has been re-arranged for the positioning of the ring, but originally probably had 2 or 3 rivet holes. The single extant hole is meant for inserting the ring. It has a diameter of 0.2 cm, slightly larger than the earlier rivet holes. The rearrangement suggests that the diameter of the ring was about 1.5 cm.

Date: Early Vendel Period, the decades about AD 600. The pommel would not look out of place at a Lombard cemetery such as Castel Trosino or Nocera Umbra.

4. SHM 2528 – 1d

Piece of bone. Missing according to the SHM inventory. This missing item is thought-provoking, a vague indication that organic material was deposited together with the metal and alloy sword parts.

5. 2547 – 1 (455991)

Sword pommel. Cocked hat Bifrons-Gilton, subtype B3 (*forme pyramidale à profil concave à quatre échancrures*). Close parallels in Saint-Dizier 13 (Haute-Marne) and Sarre 2 (Kent). Length 3.9 cm, maximum width 2.2 cm, height 1.2 cm. Top width 0.6 cm, maximum width 1.3 cm. A ring has been attached to the pommel for a considerable time. The upper slopes on one side have been filed down for a smoother fit, causing damage to the triangular niello decor.

Date: phase MA 2 (AD 520–570). This pommel belongs to the “ring lord” horizon along the North Sea shores of Merovingian Gaul and the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms under the hegemony of Kent and is definitely an import (Fischer et al. 2008). It had been passed on by several different owners by the time of its deposition in the early 7th century, and may have been as old as half a century on that occasion.

6. SHM 2547 – 2, 3 (455990)

No. 2. Guard of gilt copper alloy with a hole at each end where rivets fastened the guard to a pommel. Two other rivet holes are on either side of the entry of the blade, with different positions. One of the holes at the end is wider: 0.4 cm. On this side, the two holes for holding the pommel are 20 mm from the entrance, while the other side they are 16 mm from it.

Length: 8.2 cm. Width: 2 cm; maximum height: 0.2 cm. Length of the hilt entry: 2.8 cm; maximum width: 1.2 cm. Weight: 11.5 g.

The guard has probably been remade to fit its current pommel. It appears that there was a shift in the placing of the rivet holes relative to the entry of the blade. This demonstrates an adaptation to the pommel and its probable ring.

No. 3. The upper part of the inlet of the guard of gilt copper alloy fragmented into two, one of whose ends is absent. Length part 1: 3.8 cm. Width part 1: 2.0 cm. Maximum width: 0.1 cm. Length part 2: 5.8 cm. Width part 2: 1.9 cm. Maximum width: 0.1 cm. Weight: 10 g. Length of the hilt entry: 5.5 cm.

The fragmented top plate entry guard (piece 6-3) is a perfect fit with the lower entry guard (item 2). They are both associated with the pommel gilded copper alloy (item 3). This suggests that the total original length was about 12.2 cm.

7. SHM 2547 (455993)

Sword bead, gilt copper alloy. The design of the base of the bead is designed to facilitate contact with a gasket. Diameter: 0.8 cm. Width: 0.5 cm. Weight: 1.5 g.

8. SHM 2599 (120493)

Top plate entry guard made of gilded silver with rivet heads of beaded gold and two beaded gold gaskets. This upper plate entry guard is in three pieces. A rivet hole can be traced on one fragment. Probable length: 8.2 cm. Max width: 2 cm. Min width: 0.2 cm. Width of hilt entry: 5.5 cm. Weight: 10 g.

9. 2561 (416103)

Sword pommel, type Beckum-Vallstenarum. Total weight: 179 g. The upper part of the pommel consists of 14 parts.

1. Pommel
2. Support plaque for garnets, left.
3. Support plaque, right.
4. Rivet attached to the upper guard, left.
5. Rivet attached to the upper guard, right.
6. Upper ring part
7. Lower ring part with rivet
8. Beaded ornament
9. Rivet head
10. Upper guard
11. Rivet
12. Guard rivet
13. Lower guard
14. Ornamental plaque between the two platforms of the guard

Measurements: 1) Pommel length 6 cm, height 2.4 cm, max width c.1.4 cm, top width 0.4 cm. Rivet 4, min length with head 2.4 cm. Ring part 6 length 3.6 cm,

width 1.2 cm. Ring part 7 diameter 4 cm, width 1.2 cm. Beaded ornament 8 width 0.8 cm. Upper guard length 10.1 cm, width 0.6 cm. Rivet 11 length 1.8 cm. Lower guard length 9.7 cm, width 0.5 cm. Ornamental plaque length c. 10 cm, width 0.9 cm.

Some of the garnet cloisonné ornamentation in the field of the internal perforated knob (similar to Valsgårde 5) is missing. The ornamental braided ring is similar to the Vallstenarum pommel, but differs from known examples from Italy and Sweden as to the presence of four ridges between two beaded ornaments.

Date: early 7th century. The somewhat crude chiseled artwork on the pommel borders belongs to the Early Vendel Period. The ring may be an import or an attempt to emulate the large Italian type Montelius 4 ring pommels.

10. 2528 (120492)

Open Kolben gold bracelet decorated with punched crescents with two or three raised circular pellets inside each punch mark. Part of the bracelet seems twisted, as if had been removed with some force. The weight roughly corresponds to 10 solidi. Length: 17.1 cm. Max width (terminal): 0.6 cm. Weight: 44.5 g.

Date: late 5th century. Neck rings with similar punch marks are usually dated to the late 5th century (or phase D2, 450–540), with reference to the Timboholm and Tureholm gold hoards, and the worn solidus struck for Zeno (474–491) in the Broholm hoard (Fagerlie 1967), but the type could possibly date to D1, 400–450. Nils Åberg (1924, p. 64) argued for a much longer use-period of crescent decoration dies with reference to mid-6th century bracteates of the Early Vendel Period. Even if the arm ring dates to the early 6th century it would have been an ancient heirloom if deposited with the three early-7th century sword assemblies. It is therefore tempting to associate the ring with the only preserved Chessel Down-type sword, its closest contemporary.

Uppåkra, Scania Sword pommels

U 6399 is a fine gilded silver piece of mid-5th century Nydam-Sjörup Style. Yet despite its lavish beauty and obvious value, the two rivet holes have been broken off by force when the pommel was disassembled from its blade. This would never have happened in a professional garrison armory where silver would have been treated with utmost care. The pommel was an ostentatious antique. Still, it was broken off from a blade worthy of keeping, and left behind. In a, everyday situation you do not leave gilded silver behind. You take care of it and recycle it. An exceptional event, a disruption, apparently caused someone to break off the pommel from the sword hilt and then discard it. Based on comparative contexts such as Porskjaer and Nydam (Nørgård-Jørgensen 2008; Rau 2010), the pommel is missing the

following metal or alloy objects: two alloy rivets, an iron blade, an alloy scabbard mouth, and an alloy chape with two alloy rivets. Thus, a minimum of seven or more objects is missing.

U 4259 is unusual in that it is the only copper alloy pommel that retains all its rivets. Or, rather, half of the rivets as these have been broken off with considerable force. This is not something one would expect from the professional armory of a stable garrison residing continuously for centuries. There, one would have gently removed the rivets with a pair of pliers so that pommels and rivets could be recycled. This pommel is missing the following three metal or alloy objects: an iron blade, an alloy scabbard mouth, and possibly an alloy chape.

U 9797 belongs to the rare Chessel Down group (Behmer 1939; Evison 1967, Arnold 1982; Menghin 1983; Parsons 1999). It is a very peculiar shape of a pommel. In fact, we only know of three distinct cases: Chessel Down, Snösbäck and Uppåkra, although finds from Tuna i Alsike and Skedemosse are clearly related types. In terms of its distribution pattern, the pommel type may actually be of Scandinavian origin. Based on comparisons with the Chessel Down grave (Arnold 1982), it is missing at least two metal objects: an iron blade and an alloy scabbard mouth.

Then follows a number of Brighthampton-Ciply

type copper alloy pommels. All of these show traces of violence. They have been broken off from their sword hilts with force. This has been done by the intrusion of an edge underneath the base of the pommel. Once again, this is not normal procedure in a professional armory. U 4475 has a broken rivet hole, and a chip along the base. This can only be caused by the use of force. U 5615 has two twisted rivets and a chip along the base. U 37265 retains one rivet head out of three on one side, the other side has been torn off. A large chunk of the base is also missing, suggesting again that considerable force had to be used to remove it from the lower guard and the hilt.

Seax pommels

The seax (single-edged sword) pommels U 861, 4259, 5101, 5457, 28972 and others present interesting and incomplete contexts. Based on the many grave finds from Gotland and Bornholm, we are able to discern where the real loss is. The Scandinavian seax from about AD 600 is typically composed of at least five metal parts including a pommel, a gasket, a pommel support, a lower guard and a blade (Nerman 1967). The scabbards may be very intricate with sheaths or studs along the edges. No such material appears to be present.

Summary

This paper was inspired by the hoard find from Ogleby Hay in Staffordshire. It is argued that it must be compared to other non-burial contexts. Such contexts are scarce in Anglo-Saxon England, but are found in Sweden. A key feature of swords from the Migration and Merovingian Period is that they consist of many different parts, as recently highlighted by the discovery of the Staffordshire hoard. This paper suggests an interpretive framework for sword parts and their depositional contexts, interpreting them as symbols of kleptocracy, “the rule of thieves”, animated by their object biographies in a martial society.

The paper compares various sword part depositions from a perspective where the objects are understood as transient combinations that have their own stories to tell. This is done by evaluating four important finds from Sweden: a stray intact sword from Scania, a cremation grave from Heberg in Halland, a wetland deposit at Snösbäck in

Västergötland, and the settlement of Uppåkra in Scania. These show that different types of context present diverging types of evidence. The presence of various sword parts varies substantially among different contexts. In particular, the Uppåkra settlement is missing hundreds of parts that ought to have been found given the professional excavations and systematic metal-detecting there over the years. It is argued that people played a key part in the creation of sword deposits by either depositing or deliberately withholding certain sword parts. This is especially clear in the case of Uppåkra where in particular guards, rivets and rivet heads are missing, while they are found in wetland deposits, cremation graves and among stray finds. This allows for the interpretation of the Uppåkra sword parts as the remains of a battlefield where outsiders removed a substantial number of sword parts from the site perhaps already in the late 6th century.