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A Viking Period Sword from Skäckerfjällen with a Decorated Antler Grip

Swords with decorated grips made of antler seem to have been rare in Viking Period Scandinavia. In his comprehensive and very valuable 2014 monograph *Viking Swords*, Fedir Androshchuk lists only one sword found in present-day Sweden with a preserved antler grip (cat. no Jä 12). This is a type V sword from an inhumation grave excavated in the early 20th century at Rösta in Ås parish, Jämtland (SHM 12426: male grave IV; Kjellmark 1905, fig. 21). The grip (*medalkastli* in Old Norse sources) seems usually to have been made of wood, which may have been wrapped with leather, linen or woolen ribbons (Androshchuk 2014, p. 104, cat. nos Go 87, 166, Gä 20, 37, Sk 4, 7, Sö 5, Up 33, 51, 57, 109, 111–3, 116–8, 241–2, Vs 10, Ög 1; see also Arbman 1940, p. 157, 160, 305; 1943, pl. 2:2). There are also decorated copper alloy grips and grips wound with silver or gold wire (Marek 2005, p. 22; Androshchuk 2014, p. 104).

Only one antler sword grip, then. However, when working through the museum collections of Viking Period grave finds from Jämtland in The Swedish History Museum in Stockholm, I

discovered another one: a previously unidentified decorated antler grip belonging to a probably somewhat earlier type M sword (SHM 33463). This sword is from a cremation grave, and so only small fragments of the grip survive. They are nevertheless enough to reconstruct parts of one plate of the grip (figs 1–2). In Androshchuk's study (2014, cat. no Jä 6), these fragments are misidentified as “fragments of comb (and comb case?)”, while they are described as “comb case or fitting?” (*kamfodral eller beslag?*) in the museum catalogue.

The grip has originally consisted of two plates, fastened together around the tang of the sword with several iron rivets along each side, in the same manner as the grip of the aforementioned type V sword. Johnny Karlsson of the Osteoarchaeological Research Laboratory in Stockholm identifies the material as reindeer antler (pers. comm., July 2015).

Sword type M belongs to the Middle Viking Period (Androshchuk 2014, p. 171). The decoration on the grip consists of interlace on a cross-hatched background. It resembles the decoration on combs of Kristina Ambrosiani's (1981, p. 37,



Fig. 1. Fragments of an antler grip plate from a type M sword found in Skäckerfjällen in Kall parish, Jämtland. SHM 33463. The sword itself is on loan to Jämtland County Museum, and so a substitute is shown here (based on Gollwitzer 2001, pl. 19:1, with kind permission). Length of grip c. 8.8 cm.



Fig. 2. The back sides of the same fragments.

65) type A₃, common in Scandinavia during the same period. The same kind of decoration is also known from coeval skis (Huggert 2012, p. 169–171) and from later objects, for example an antler spoon and a birch lid found in Trondheim and dated to the 11–12th centuries (Roesdahl 1992, cat. nos 570–571; see also Holmqvist 1934; Zachrisson 1976, p. 45).

The cremation grave containing this sword was found by chance on flat ground by a reindeer herder in the mountains between Jämtland and Nord-Trøndelag in 1989. The sword itself was retrieved by the herder, while the antler fragments were found by Anders Hansson during subsequent excavation in 1992 (excavation report in Jämtland County Museum and ATA; short version in Hansson 1994, p. 6, 10). The site is near the tarn Burvattnet in a valley in Skäckerfjällen (Skjækerfjella) Mountains, 650 m above sea level and less than 1 km east of the present Norwegian-Swedish border (Raä Kall 382:1; cf. map in Hansson 1994, fig. 1). This is far from the time's farming districts and not near any historically known route between Nord-Trøndelag and Jämtland either. The people behind this burial thus probably belonged to a nomadic or semi-nomadic group living in the area (cf. Welinder 2008, p. 101, 107).

Altogether five Viking Period swords have been retrieved from expertly excavated graves within the present borders of Jämtland (Androshchuk 2014, cat. nos Jä 5, 6, 9 [a type V sword, whose correct inventory number should be JLM 29751], 12 and JLM 29952 [a type F sword from a grave excavated in 2009, not observed by Androshchuk]). As I have shown, at least two of these swords have had grips made of antler. This suggests that in Jämtland, antler sword grips were not all that rare.

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