VIKING WEAPONS IN IRISH WETLANDS

Julie Lund

In Northern Europe acts of deposition of weapons in wetlands—in lakes, bogs, rivers and the sea—took place from the Mesolithic to the Late Iron Age. It is generally believed that this practice ended in Northern Europe in the Merovingian period. However, this seems to be a rule with notable exceptions. In Germany weapons from the Carolingian period are found in a number of rivers. Several recent studies show that acts of weapon deposition continued in many parts of Central and Southern Scandinavia during the Viking Age. In these areas even jewellery, coins, whetstones, keys, and tools from this period are found in wetlands. In England both Viking Age swords, spearheads, axes and tools of Scandinavian origin or type have been found in rivers, mainly in the River Thames, the Witham and the Lea. It is striking that the weapons and tools were found in parts of England which had strong Scandinavian influences during the Viking Age.

A review of weapons of Scandinavian origin in Ireland shows that they too are found not only in graves, but also in wetlands. The main aim of this paper is to outline the differences and similarities of the acts of deposition of Viking weapons in Scandinavia and Ireland. In order to throw light on the purpose and consequences of these actions, I will discuss the layers of meaning of the cognitive landscape related to the depositions, and the identities of the people who performed them.

**Accidents, Warfare or Conscious Deposits?**

In Scandinavia the Viking Age weapons from wetlands were traditionally thought to have been lost accidentally. This interpretation was due to the microcostic viewpoint in the individual publications. On Zealand, Denmark, and in Scania, Sweden, more than 140 weapons have been found.4 Even on Gotland, Sweden several hundred weapons have been discovered in wetlands.5 Yet another example of Viking Age weapons from wetlands is the finds from the stream Fyris in Uppsala.6 Considering the amount of finds in these three areas, these weapons can hardly all represent misplacements. An alternative suggestion has been to perceive the weapons as traces of warfare. The number of weapons speaks against this interpretation, as it is doubtful that battles so frequently would result in large numbers of weapons ending up in the water. At some sites, several depositions took place at the same place through a period of several hundred years, which also speaks against the idea of the objects being lost in fight.7 Additionally, several swords from Scandinavian wetlands were still in their sheaths, which does not fit well with the idea of a weapon being lost in battle.8 Instead, these finds should probably be interpreted as having been consciously deposited as a part of ritual activity.9

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4 Lund, "Våben i vand", 197.
7 Lund, "Våben i vand", 211.
9 Andrén, “Platsernas betydelse, norrön ritual och kultplatskontinuitet”; Lund, “Våben i vand” and the same author’s “Thresholds and Passages".