Contacts, Identity, and Hybridity: Objects from South-western Finland in the Birka Graves

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The Myth of an Untouched Sweden

In certain circles in Scandinavia there has long been an infatuation with the Viking Age. The period has been woven into the grand national narrative. Nineteenth-century Nordic national romanticism, which idealized the Old Norse mentality and way of life, promoted the idea of the Viking Period as a Golden Age.1 Some of this romanticism survives today in certain strains of popular culture and among Swedish nationalist groups, where dreams of an “ur-nation” and an “ur-Swedish” identity are projected onto the Viking Age.2 The period therefore still plays a role in the current discourse of Swedish identity.3

The task of writing history from non-national perspectives has begun in Swedish archaeological research. Rather than focusing on Swedes, Danes, and Norwegians, recent works have focused on a number of local and regional groups.4 In my opinion, however, it is not enough merely to emphasize the existence of regional communities; to challenge the national historiography, it is important to consider the interaction that took place between groups and to examine the ways these contacts affected social and cultural identities.

The finds from Birka, the Viking Age trade and crafts centre in the Mälaren Valley, show that people in the town had a vast contact network that included western Europe, the West Slavic region, and eastern Europe.5 The Viking Age connections of the Mälaren Valley population and of Birka with the populations of what are today Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine have long been central to Swedish archaeological research;6 however, Swedish archaeologists have surprisingly seldom discussed the Viking Age connections between the Mälaren Valley and the vast regions with which the Birka population was in contact.

1 Arvidsson 2001; Clunies Ross and Lönnroth 2001; Hagerman 2006.
2 Gardell 2001: 158.
3 Wallette 2004: 16.
6 E.g. Arne 1911; Arne 1914; Arbman 1955; Jansson 1987; Jansson 1997; Callmer 2000a; Callmer 2000b; Hedenstierna-Jonson 2006.
area and south-western Finland. Archaeologists in Finland, on the other hand, have often pointed out the close links between these areas.7

Interaction between the Mälaren area and south-western Finland can be traced far back in time. This study therefore will not only present and discuss the Birka grave finds of Finnish mainland provenance, but also present an overview of the contacts between the two areas from the Neolithic to the early medieval period, in order to provide a background and a long-term perspective.

Contacts over Water

Although water can separate regions, it can also serve as a link between geographically distant places. Lakes, seas, and rivers were for a long time the most important transport routes for people and things. It is therefore hardly surprising that there have been close contacts, going very far back in time, between regions located both in today’s Sweden and Finland and further south. In this chapter the main emphasis will be on the long-distance contacts that existed between south-western Finland and the Mälaren Valley.

The Neolithic

The earliest archaeological evidence for contacts between these areas goes back to the Early Neolithic. In eastern central Sweden the pottery from the Funnel Beaker Culture shows influences from the Combed Ware Culture that occurred on the Åland islands and mainland Finland.8 In addition, asbestos pottery from eastern Finland, dated to the transition from the early to the middle Neolithic, has been found at the Västra Mårtsbo settlement site, near Gävle on the Swedish mainland.9 From the middle Neolithic period there are further traces of contacts. Pitted Ware from central Sweden has been excavated at some settlement sites on Åland and the western coast of Finland.10 In the middle Neolithic the Corded Ware Culture was also found over much of central Europe, Scandinavia, and the Baltic region, and in the southern and western parts

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8 Larsson 2009: 407.
10 Meinander 1939; Meinander 1957; Laulumaa 2002.