Excavation of the remains of a silver hoard on the island of Gotland, Sweden

Gotland - Viking silver island

No place in the Viking world, has such a tremendous number of silver hoards found, as the island of Gotland, situated in the middle of the Baltic Sea. Almost every year, there is a new hoard found, and in all, there are today some 750 hoards, containing something like 200,000 coins and other silver objects. The hoards have come to light during some 150 years of primary agricultural activities, mainly found during the end of the 19th century and early 20th century in connection to an extensive land division project (Laga skifte), leading to huge new areas turned into cultivated fields.

A follow-up of a putative plundered place of Viking objects was carried out a few years ago in the form of a metal detector examination of the major part of a cultivated field in Hogrän Parish in the middle part of the island of Gotland. Hereby it was encountered a number of silver objects tightly together which prompted the investigator (archaeologist Jonas Paulsson, who performed the metal detecting of the field) to believe that it likely were leftovers of a silver depot still in the ground.

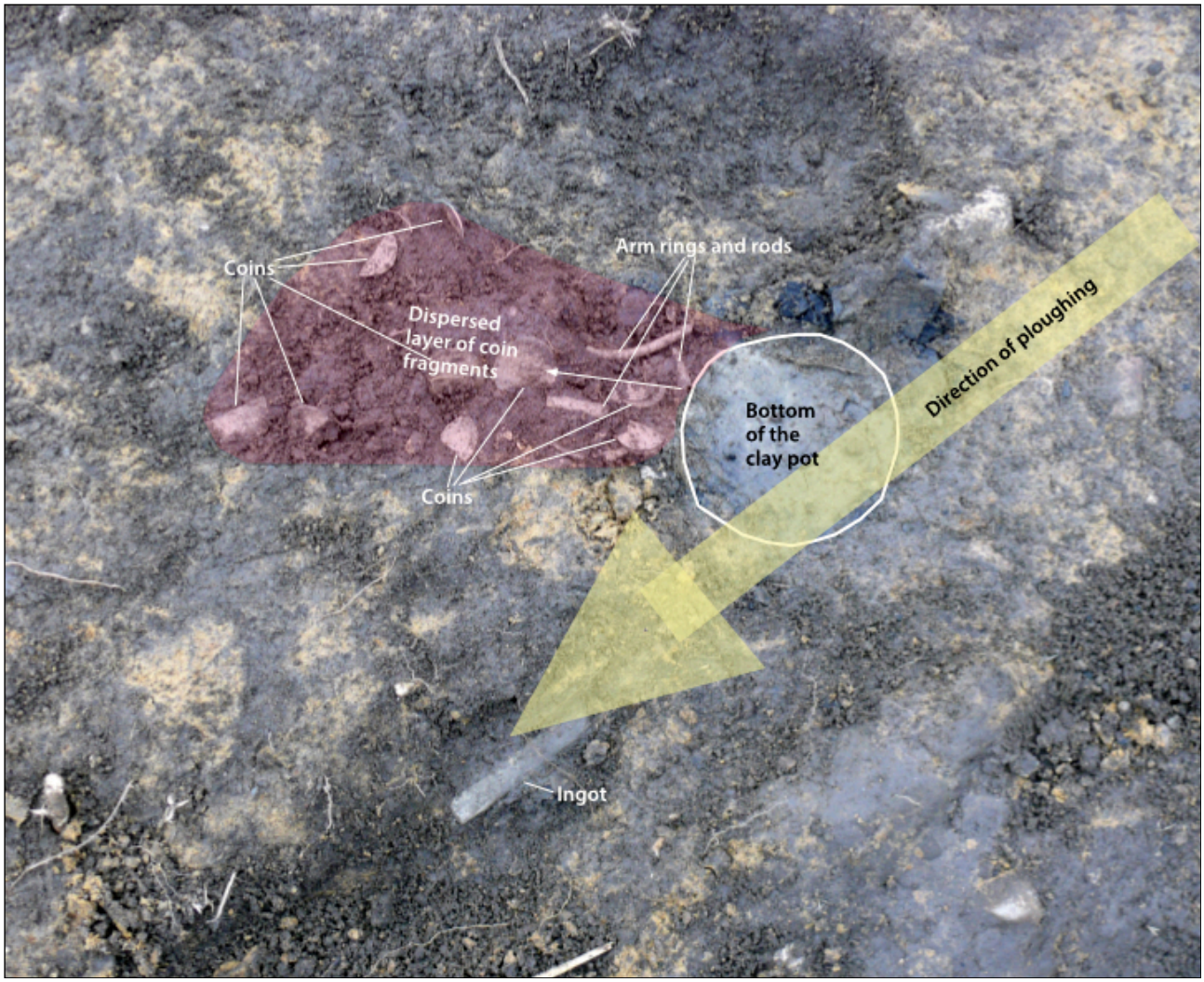
We carried out a minor excavation of the area of the objects some time after. The aim of the study was to pick up any residue of the depot, which meant that a fairly limited area, about 1.30 x 0.90 cm wide, around the site of the finds were excavated. All soil that was taken up were examined with the detector.

The plough layer consisted of a 23-25 cm thick layer of soil that rested directly on yellow sandy loam. In the transition to the sterile soil was clearly visible tracks of the plough. In the centre of the excavated area were found rather scattered coins, pieces of rods, ingots and jewellery.



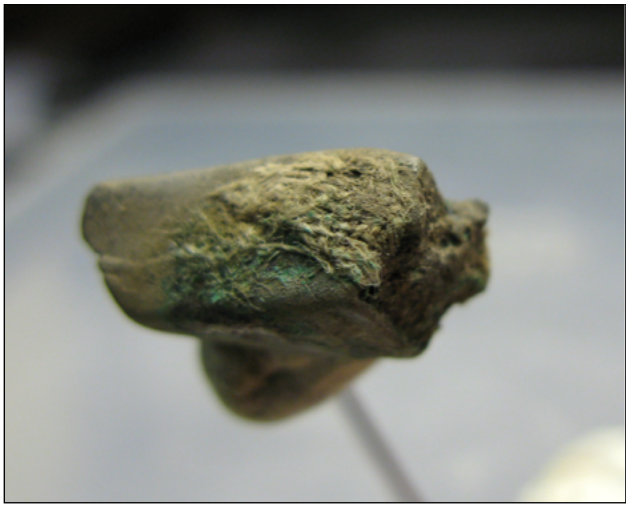
The examined surface taken down to the level of undisturbed soil, which means about 23-25 cm of topsoil . In the bottom of the image, just above the stone, was recovered bottom of a pot with numerous fragments of Arabic coins and scattered obliquely to the right fragments of coins, silver rods , etc.

In the transition to the pristine soil, the bottom of a pot of rough, reddish brown goods, and of very poor quality, still preserved. The plough had peeled of the entire pot except at the very bottom, which gave us a good opportunity to get an idea of the depth of the silver depot. The bottom of the pot was about 23-24 cm below the soil surface, which means that the upper part of the pot, if it had been about 20 cm high, almost reached the surface. In other words, it is likely



Detail of bottom of the earthenware jar with the spread of the object in southwesterly direction. The ploughing has been from the north , wherein the entire pot, except the bottom, has been destroyed. The objects in the the pot has been turned aside toward west of the ploughing direction. It should be noted that the fragments of silver encountered at the bottom of pot has been taken up before the photo is taken. Photo Majvor Östergren.





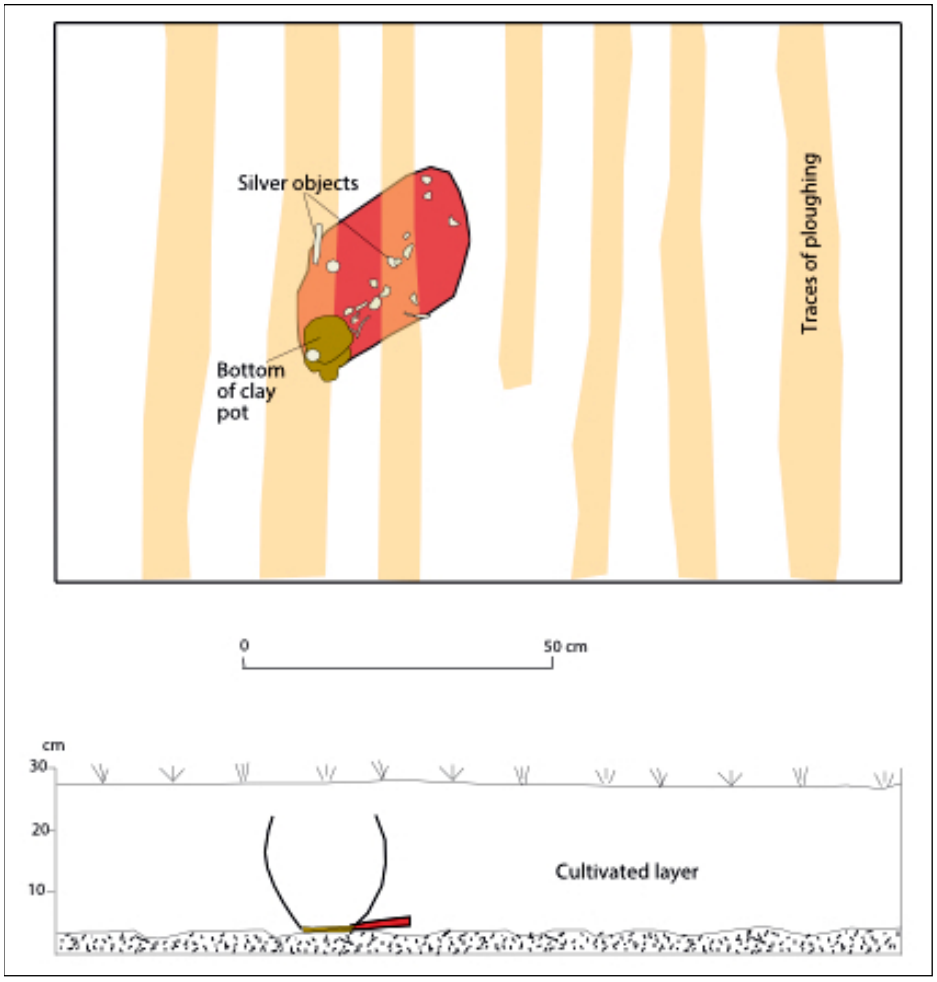
Two of the more intriguing findings consists of two pieces (cut) silver rods , about 1.5 cm long . On both the pieces are exceptionally well-preserved textile fragments. Possibly they come from a small cloth sack in which certain silver pieces remained in earthenware jars . Perhaps this indicates that one has distinguished between different forms of silver, or that the silver has been put in the jar at different times.

that the pot in the original position in the Viking Age were placed, more or less, directly on the ground.

In all, 237 coins were found, where the vast majority were very small fragments of coins. Besides coins, there were 14 fragments of rods, 7 ingots, 4 pieces of bangles, 2 arm rings, a needle of a ring buckle and a fragment of silver wire. Most of the depot had been dispersed by the ploughing during some 100 years.

Most fascinating was the findings of some well preserved textile residues fasten to two of the pieces of clipped silver bars. The hoard can be dated to around the middle of 11th century, as most of the depots on the island.

Dan Carlsson



Plan and profile of the silver depot. The items have been in a clay pot . Of the pot, only the bottom was preserved, which was directly adjacent to the transition zone between the ploughing layer and underlying untouched layer. The plough has cut of the entire pot and turned out the contents to the right in the plan, where several objects were found slightly higher than the bottom.