

# Viking Age Keys and Locks

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Symbolism in life and death

**By Ramona Sue Steele**

## **Introduction**

The concept of ownership is not a new one. The use of locks to safeguard property dates back beyond the Viking age, even as far back as to the Gates of Troy and beyond. Invention of the lock and key has been attributed to many cultures, but their origin is still unresolved. Despite when and where the lock and key were developed, the Vikings of Gotland and the rest of Scandinavia found use for them in their everyday life, as well as in the afterlife. Remnants of locks and keys are found throughout the archaeological record of the Viking age, as well as during the Migration Period, and the Medieval Period throughout Europe. This paper will focus on the Viking Age evidence of locks and keys on Gotland, at Birka on Björko, and on Helgö. Included in this paper is previously un-published data from excavations by Per Lundström at Paviken, Västergarn parish, Gotland between 1968-1971, and new data from the 2013 excavation of the same site.

## **Paviken**

Presentday Paviken is located in the Västergarn parish, on the island of Gotland, in the Baltic Sea, and is part of Sweden. Paviken is situated approximately 1.45 kilometers from the nearest coastline. The archaeological site is on a nature preserve, and thus has remained uncultivated for roughly 1000 years. This makes an excavation of this site particularly interesting. Changes in sea level have pulled the coastline further away from the site, so that what once was a seaside port with river access, is now grassy grazing land for Gotland cattle.

Paviken's excavations intend to find evidence of a Viking Age port and trade center. The 2013 excavation of the site found many artifacts that would suggest a village with workshops for glass and metal work. The sod was removed from three trenches and all soil was dry sieved. Layer A in all trenches found charcoal, burnt and unburnt faunal remains, clay, flint, iron objects, glass, glass or metal slag, beads, and garnets. Some found bronze pieces or chains, iron knives, worked bone, raw and worked amber, whet stones, bone and stone needles, and silver coins. A lead weight and some small pieces of gold and gold foil were also found. In Layer B, constructions were documented and excavated. A distinct post hole, as well as some possible postholes were located, samples were taken from hearths with charcoal for radiocarbon *C14* dating, and a few

constructions with distinctly darker soil were also located. A deep trench was dug in trench three after reaching a sterile layer and a stratigraphic profile was drawn to show the distinct Layer A, Layer B, sterile layer, and clay layer at just short of 1 meter depth (Figure 1).

### **Keys and Locks**

The list of various finds above does not contain any documentation for keys or locks. The only specimen of this sort found during the 2013 excavation was found without context or provenience in the sieve piles. It is however certain that it came from one of the three trenches excavated this season. The key can be described as: Iron, part of the ax, two tine, L: 27mm (Figure 2).

Per Lundström's excavations at Paviken were far more successful in locating both keys and locks. Translation of Per's database of finds from the site turn up ten key specimens and eight lock specimens. Utilizing GIS, the locations of each find has been mapped out (Figures 3&4). A spreadsheet of all finds, their locations, and descriptions has been translated (Tables 1&2). A diagram (Figure 5) and photographs (Figure 6) of Per's lock and key finds gives better insight to his description of the artifacts listed in his database. Finally, a phosphate map (Figure 7) shows the combined test pits and trenches from the 1968-1971 and 2013 excavations of the Paviken site and the proximity of the 2013 trenches to those where the finds were located in Figures 3&4. Per Lundström's phosphate mapping of the area has been instrumental in deciding what areas will be excavated. Higher phosphate levels suggest human occupation.

### **Gotland**

So how does this compare to the rest of Gotland? Are keys and locks commonly found in living areas? In Lena Thunmark-Nylén's *Die Wikingerzeit Gotlands II*, a compilation guide of Gotlandic archaeological single finds, eighty-five individual keys and two locks were documented from throughout the island (Thunmark-Nylén, 1998). In *Die Wikingerzeit Gotlands I*, her work on grave finds, sixty-four identifiable keys, and one lock were documented from only 511 graves in 17 parishes in Gotland (Figure 8) (Thunmark-Nylén, 1995). Of those 511 graves, 34 were determinably Gotlandic female graves with keys as grave goods (Figure 9-11), and 7 were male graves with keys as grave goods (Figures 12-15). Only one grave had a distinct lock,

but no keys. It was decidedly a male grave, that of a craftsman, due to the other grave goods present which included weights and scales (Figure 16).

Unfortunately, this sampling is small and limited. Only three Viking Age farmsteads on Gotland have been excavated: Fjåle, Gannarve, and Burge. And only a few hundred graves in a limited number of parishes have been examined. There is an inestimable amount of each left unfound or unexcavated. The records suggest that keys are found commonly in female burials. But to more fully answer the question of where keys are most commonly found, we have to look to other Viking Age sites in the region.

### **Helgö and Birka**

Helgö and Birka are both island sites in Sweden, located in Lake Mälaren (Figure 17). Each site has a different representation of locks and keys than that of Paviken or Gotland. Helgö, when excavated, had an extensive representation of locks and padlocks, as well as keys (Tomtlund, 1978). The site at Helgö appears to be a workshop for manufacturing locks and keys. There are several different designs of locks, including rim locks and padlocks. Tomtlund suggests that the more basic key (those with an ax with a 1-3 tines or teeth) fit a more archaic lock style (Figure 18), whereas the keys with a symmetrical bit with in-turned teeth fit more modern, developed locks (Figure 19) (Tomtlund, 1978). Padlocks and keys varied in size and material used to manufacture them, as well as method of use (Figures 20-22). Some keys were sliding keys (Rosendahl and Wilson, 1992), while others were turning keys (Tomtlund, 1978), it all depended on the locking mechanism. Smaller locks were made of bronze and larger locks of iron, however the bronze locks were more decorative and poorly constructed. Locks and keys were made in Helgö because it had natural sources of the raw materials needed for production (Lundström, 1978, and Tomtlund, 1978).

Birka, though not far in distance from Helgö, has a totally different representation of artifacts. Much of the information from Birka comes from longhouses or graves rather than a workshop, however there is evidence of lock manufacturing as well. Out of the forty-one identifiable padlocks found at the "Garrison" on Björko, eleven were from graves (Gustafsson, 2005). Several of the locks from the Garrison are poorly constructed and perhaps are more symbolic than functional. Marita Westerholm, as cited by Gustafsson, suggests that these "miniature"

locks were given as a token to high ranking individuals within the Garrison and accompanied by ornate keys with decorated handles, also carrying symbolism of their status (Gustafsson, 2005).

Other keys were also found in Birka, but in a different context. Openwork-cross keys were found in the graves of women presumably after the Christianization of Scandinavia. Wicker suggests that there are far more keys found in female graves than in male, but also suggests an increase in female graves after conversion to Christianity due to a decrease in the practice of female infanticide (Wicker, 2012).

## **Discussion**

So why would women be buried with keys and not men? Jesch suggests that women were in charge of the home and the farm and therefore the guardian of the keys. Keys were a symbol of a woman's status in the home and in society (Jesch, 1991). Women would run farms both in the presence of their husband or while he was away. They could also inherit land from fathers or husbands (Westholm, 2004). Similar to how the locks in Birka were symbolic of the male status, keys were symbolic of a woman's power in the home. The role of a woman and the symbolism of keys is even accounted in the *Poetic Edda*, in the Lay of Thrym (Þrymskviða) when Thor disguises himself as Freya and goes to wed Thrym so that he will return Mjólnir, which was stolen. Heimdall says, "Busk we Thór then in bridal linen, and buckle on him the Brisings' necklace. Let a housewife's door keys dangle about him. let woman's weeds be worn by him. Let him bear on his breast bridal jewels, a hood on his head, as behooves a bride." Then Thor answered, "A craven wretch may call me the gods if I busk me in bridal linen" (Hollander, 1962). Though Thor thinks the wearing of keys is beneath him, a woman would show her status by wearing her keys on her chains on the outside of her dress.

As seen in the grave goods from Gotland, women are buried with their chain of keys as a symbol of their power and status following them into the afterlife. Lindquist suggests that along with the keys that a woman takes into the afterlife, she also takes with her a knife to protect those keys, her property, and her home (Lindquist, 2005).

In addition to the symbolic importance of locks and keys, the design of keys, as well as the accompanying grave goods, help to identify whether a grave belongs to a male or female. Keys

that belonged to women appear to be of a simpler manufacture. They are not very decorative, but more functional. The handle can be open or closed loop, a simple solid rod, or a more elaborate web-like design, but the ax tends to have one to five tines (teeth), but rarely a flat sliding bit. Keys that belonged to men have more ornate handles (as seen in the token keys from Birka), iconography of powerful birds of prey etched in the handle, they have flat sliding bits with in-turned teeth, or just notched. These are used for padlocks, or chests, rather than doors.

## **Conclusion**

The sites that have been studied are few, and there is more to be discovered about the symbolic role of keys. Either in male or female graves, or in other contexts, there seems to be a symbolic purpose for them that traverses the boundaries of religion, gender, society, and time. Their presence in the archaeological record does not cease after the Viking Age, but persists. Keys are found in grave sites throughout Scandinavia and in Viking settlements in the British Isles and beyond.

It cannot be a coincidence that the tradition of taking earthly possessions as well as duties into the afterlife is seen in many cultures. The Greeks, the Romans, the Egyptians, are all buried with things they will need in the next life. The Vikings may have practiced a different religion, and performed their rituals according to their faith, but the purpose of the ritual was the same. Today's cultures warn that you can't take your worldly belongings with you when you die, but there is an obsession with accumulating material goods and protecting one's property at all costs. How is this different from the Vikings hoarding their wealth, or elaborate funerals where they are sent off in a blazing ship with slaves, livestock, horses, food, and riches to accompany them into the next life?

Today, keys are misplaced, and locks can be cut off if the key is lost. Technology has advanced the role and manufacture of locks and keys to the point that pieces of plastic with a computer chip inside acts more effectively than a lock made from a hunk of metal with a key to open it. The Viking Age however, did this with style. Locks and keys appear to be manufactured for symbolic sealing of property as well as actual restriction of access to property. Whether the lock was functional, the symbolic nature of the thing suggested to someone who tried to steal it that

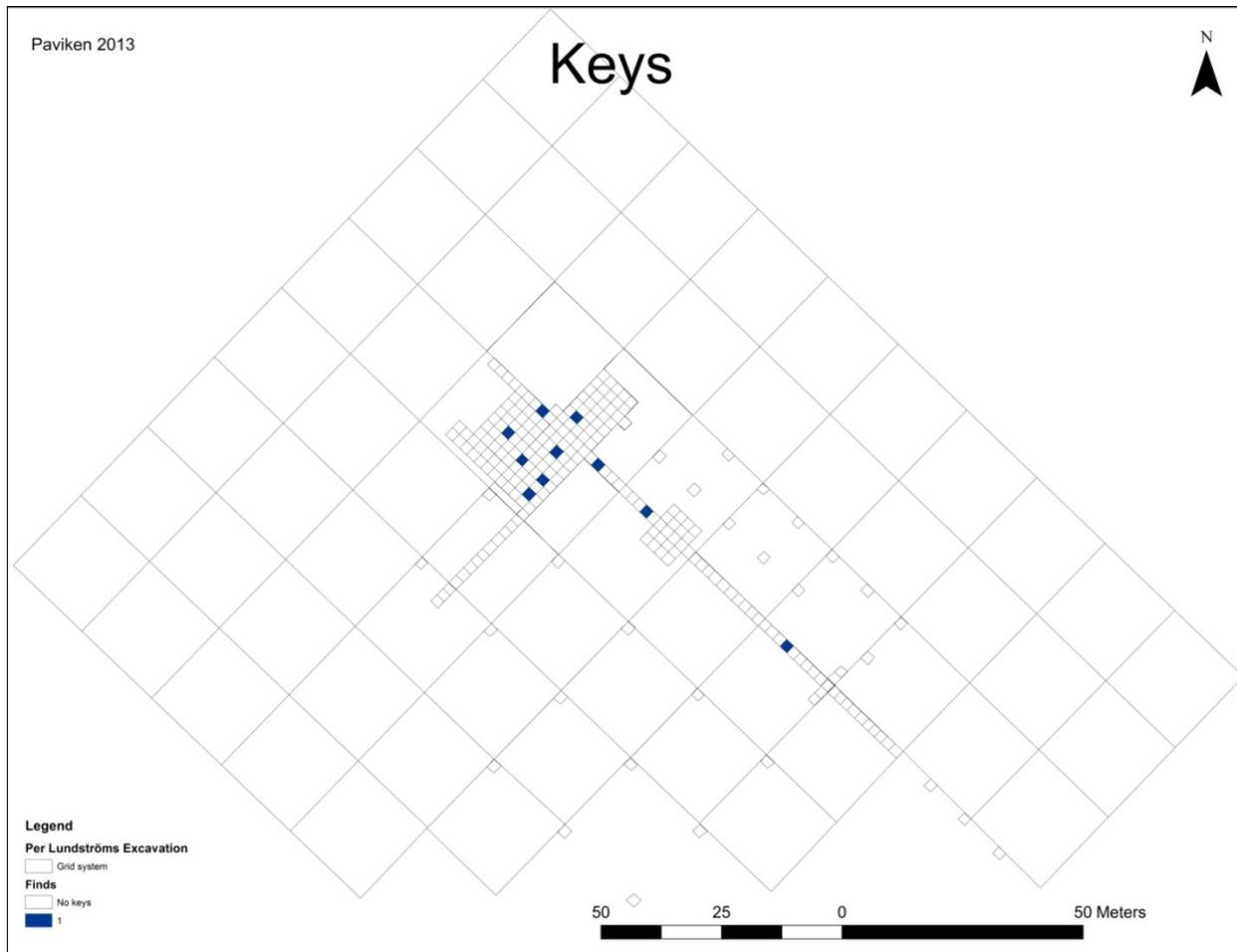
the owner would protect the contents by any means. The function and responsibility of, and for, locks and keys was eternal.



**Figure 1:** Stratigraphic profile of deep trench in Paviken 2013 trench 3 (square 39:9).



**Figure 2:** Part of key found at Paviken 2013.

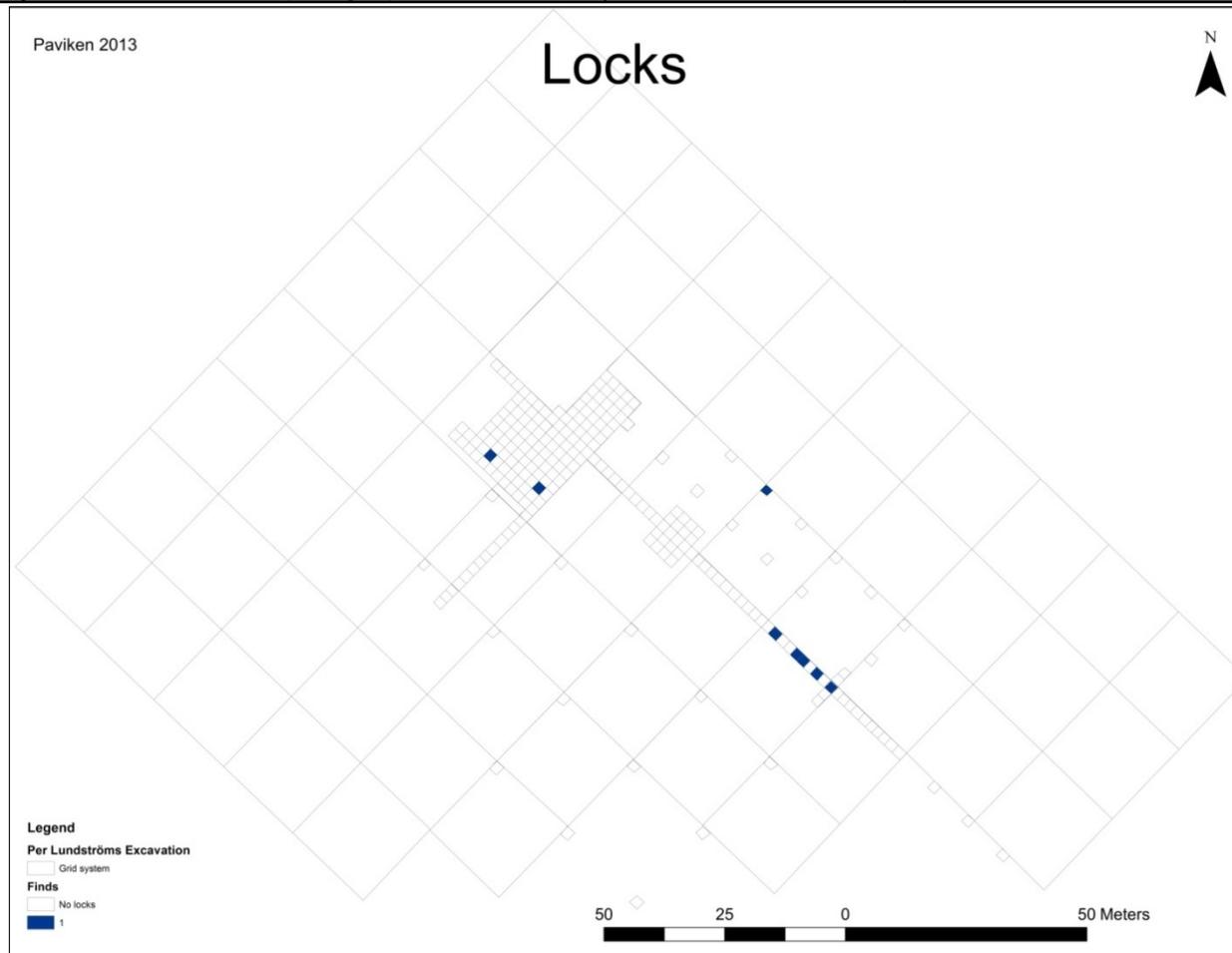


**Figure 3:** Paviken site map with key finds from Per Lundström's 1968-1971 excavations.

**Table 1:** Translated description and location of key finds from Per Lundström's 1968-1971 excavations.

Find	Square	Layer	Description
Nyckel	21:82	Layer B excavated	Iron with U-shaped directional ax.
Nyckel	35:48	Layer A examined	Iron, incision in one piece with oval loop-shaped handle and rectangular outwardly angled ax. L: 110 mm.
Nyckel	35:9	Layer A	Iron with bronze fittings on the handle. L: 83 mm.
Nyckelhandtag	36:7	Layer A	1 (no description)
Nyckel	36:23	Layer A excavated	Iron, oval loop-shaped shaft, ax bent 90°. L: 60 mm.
Nyckel	36:51	Layer A excavated	Iron, part of the ax, or part of the locking mechanism. L: 13 mm.
Nyckel	36:54	Layer A excavated	Iron, fragment of ax piece. L: 43 mm.
Nyckel	36:74	Layer A examined	Iron, 2 tine, round open worked handle.

<b>Nyckelskaft</b>	37:4	Layer A	Iron, 1 piece.
<b>Nyckel</b>	39:4	Layer A excavated (Test Square)	Iron. Has open worked oval handle with round, thin rod. L: 27 mm.



**Figure 4:** Paviken site map with lock finds from Per Lundström's 1968-1971 excavations.

**Table 2:** Translated description and location of lock finds from Per Lundström's 1968-1971 excavations.

Find	Square	Layer	Description
<b>Hänglås</b>	23:1	Layer A (Test Square)	Fragment of bottom plate, oval disk with 2 holes. L: 20 mm B: 15 mm T: 1.5 mm .
<b>Hänglås</b>	35:78	Layer A excavated	Iron fragments of spring construction.
<b>Låsbeslag</b>	36:64	Layer A excavated	Sheet of iron with perforations. L: 37 mm.
<b>Hänglåsbygel</b>	39:2	Layer A excavated (Test Square)	Iron. H: 33 mm
<b>Hänglås</b>	39:5	Layer A excavated (Test Square)	Iron, only half the bar preserved. Round, thin rod. L: 29 mm.
<b>Hänglås</b>	39:6	Layer A excavated (Test Square)	Shackle, iron. L: 50 mm.
<b>Låsbeslag</b>	39:8	Layer A	Iron.
<b>Låsbeslag</b>	39:10	Layer A	Iron.



Figure 5: Per Lundström's diagram of key and lock finds from the 1968-1971 excavations.



Figure 6: Photograph of select pieces of Per Lundström's key and lock finds from the 1968-1971 excavations.

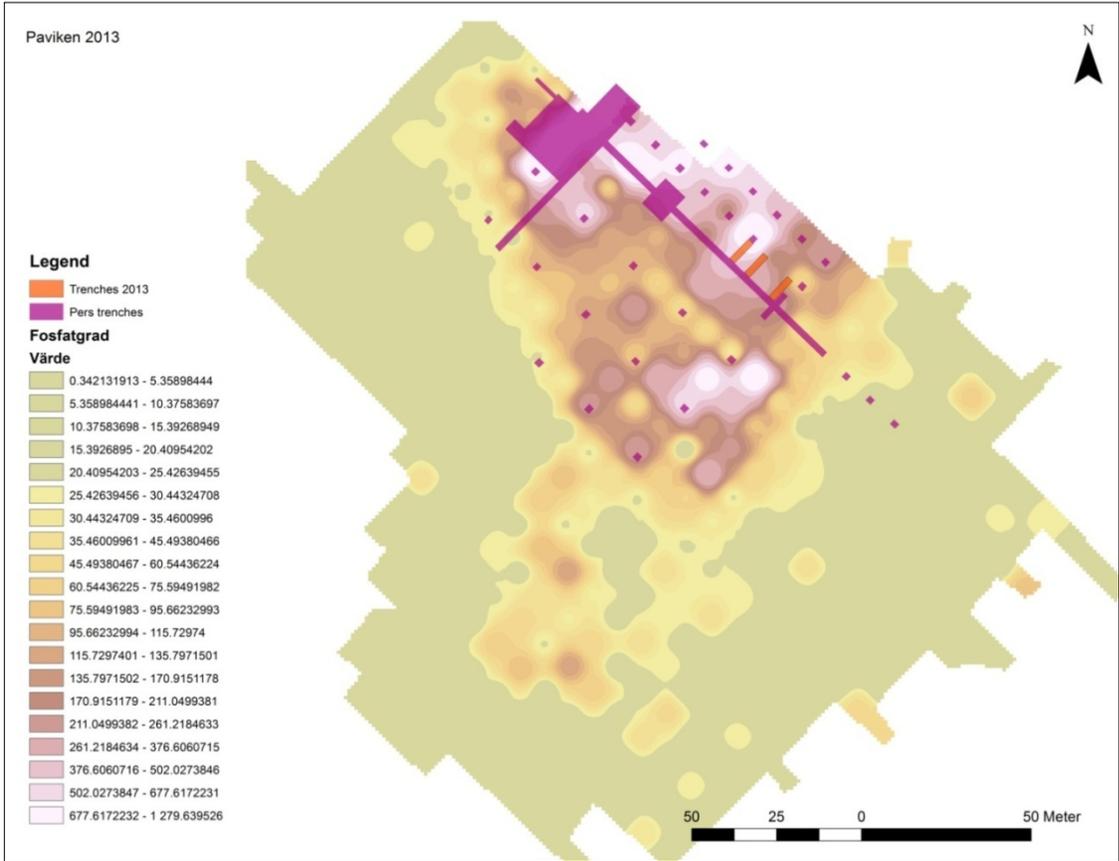


Figure 7: Per Lundström's phosphate mapping of Paviken, Per's 1968-1971 trenches, and the 2013 trenches.

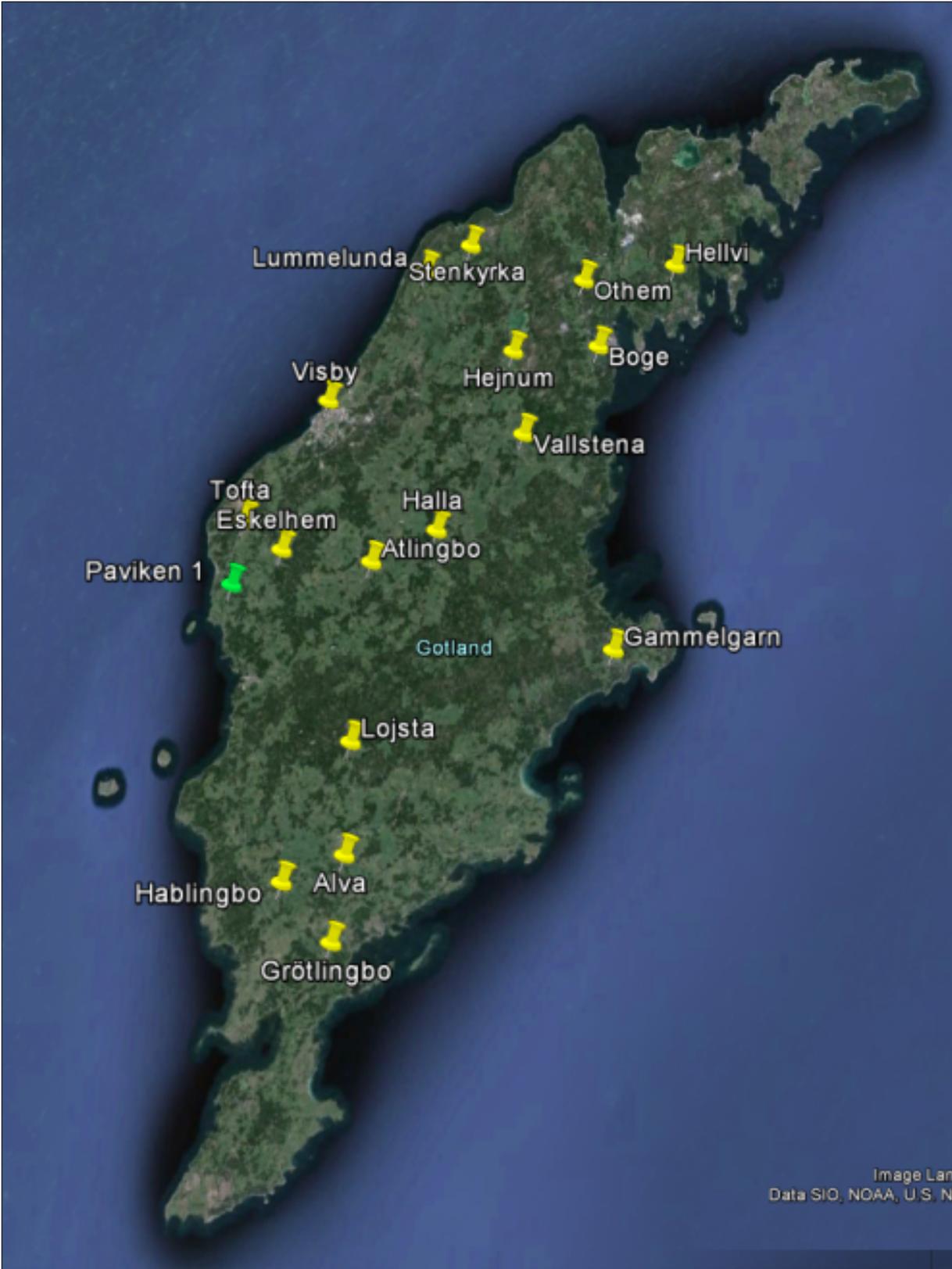


Figure 8: Gotland grave sites with keys and locks as documented in *Die Wikingerzeit I* in relation to Paviken.

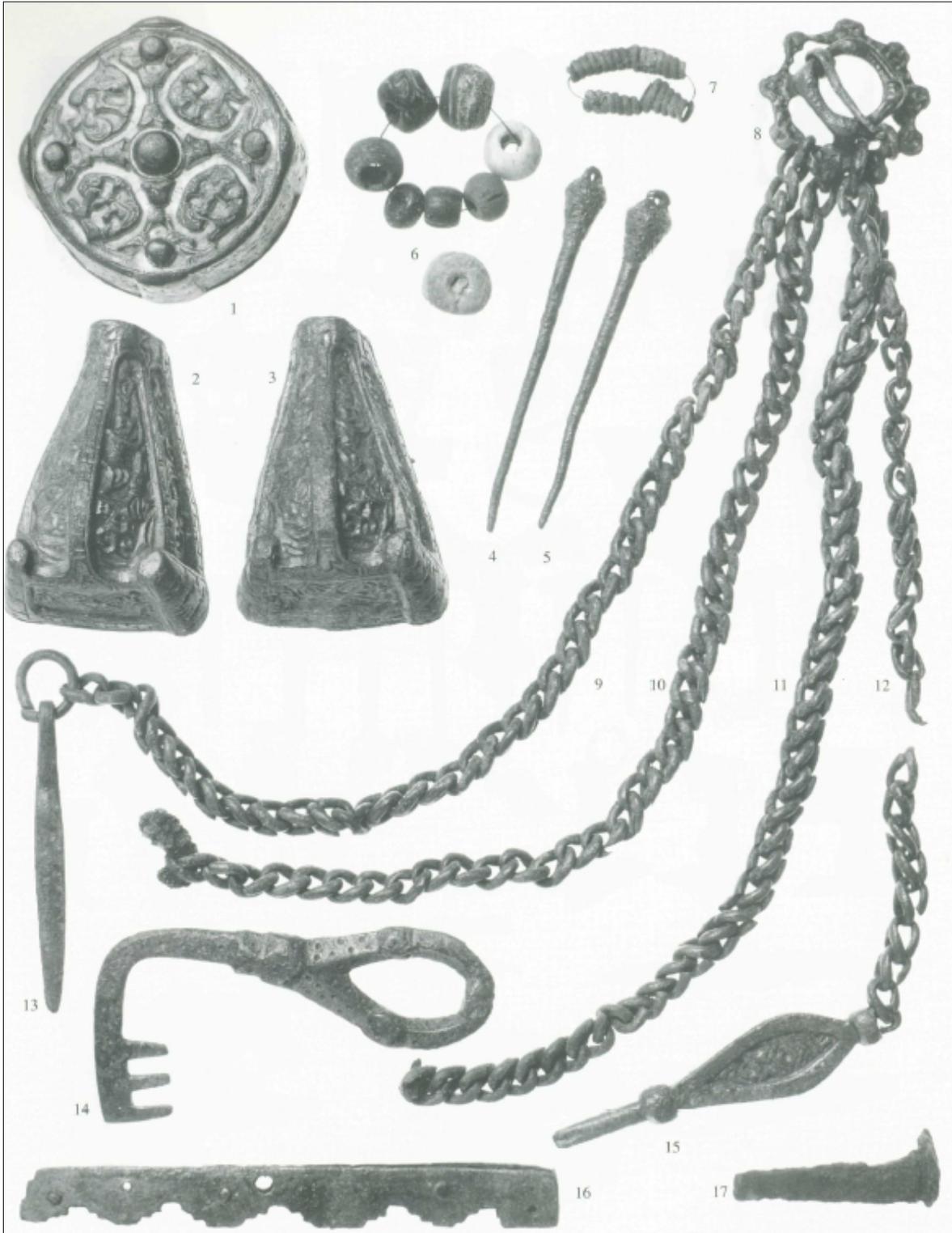


Figure 9: Gotlandic female grave goods from Abb. 40 (Thunmark-Nylén, 1995).

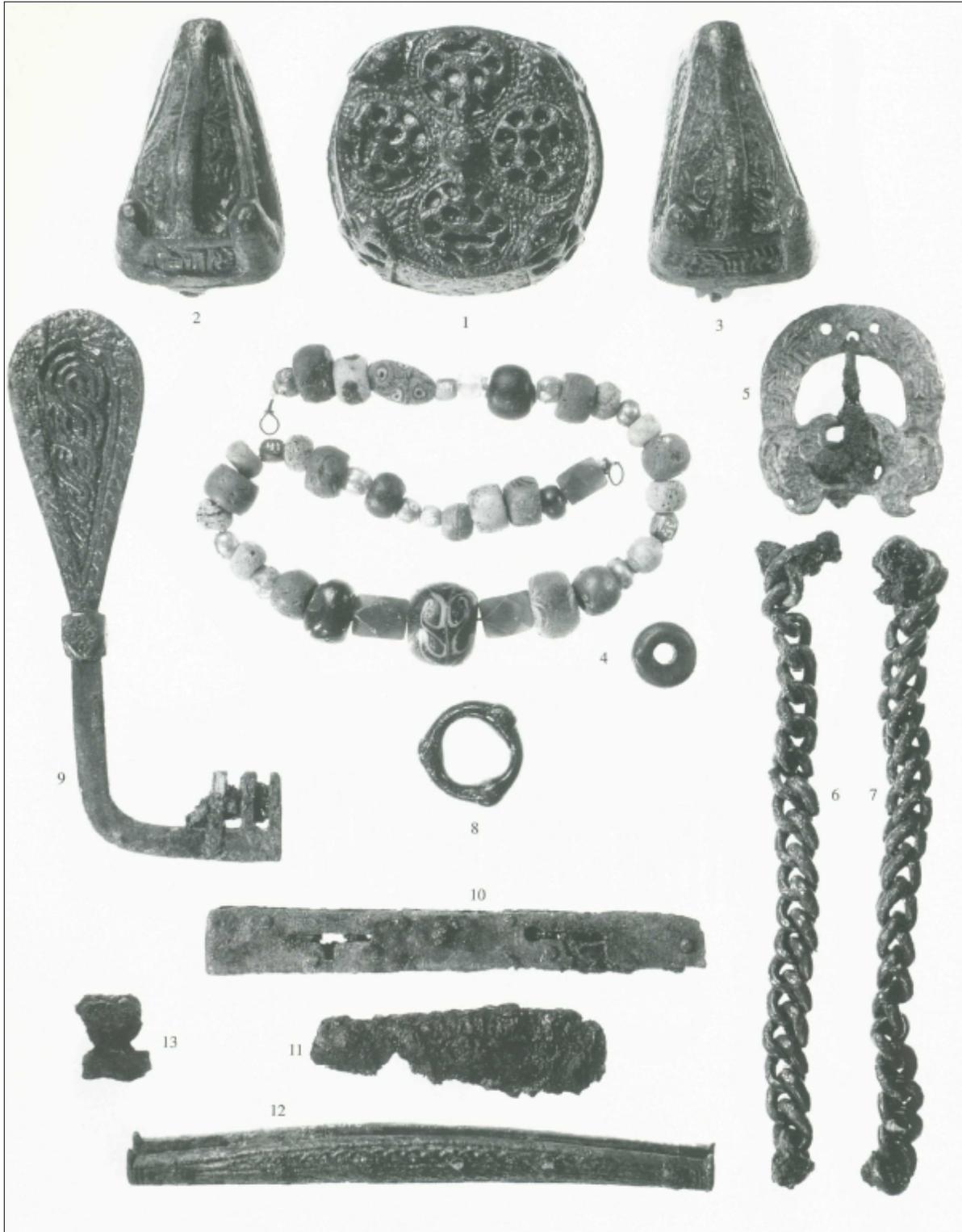


Figure 10: Gotlandic female grave goods from Abb. 194 (Thunmark-Nylén, 1995).

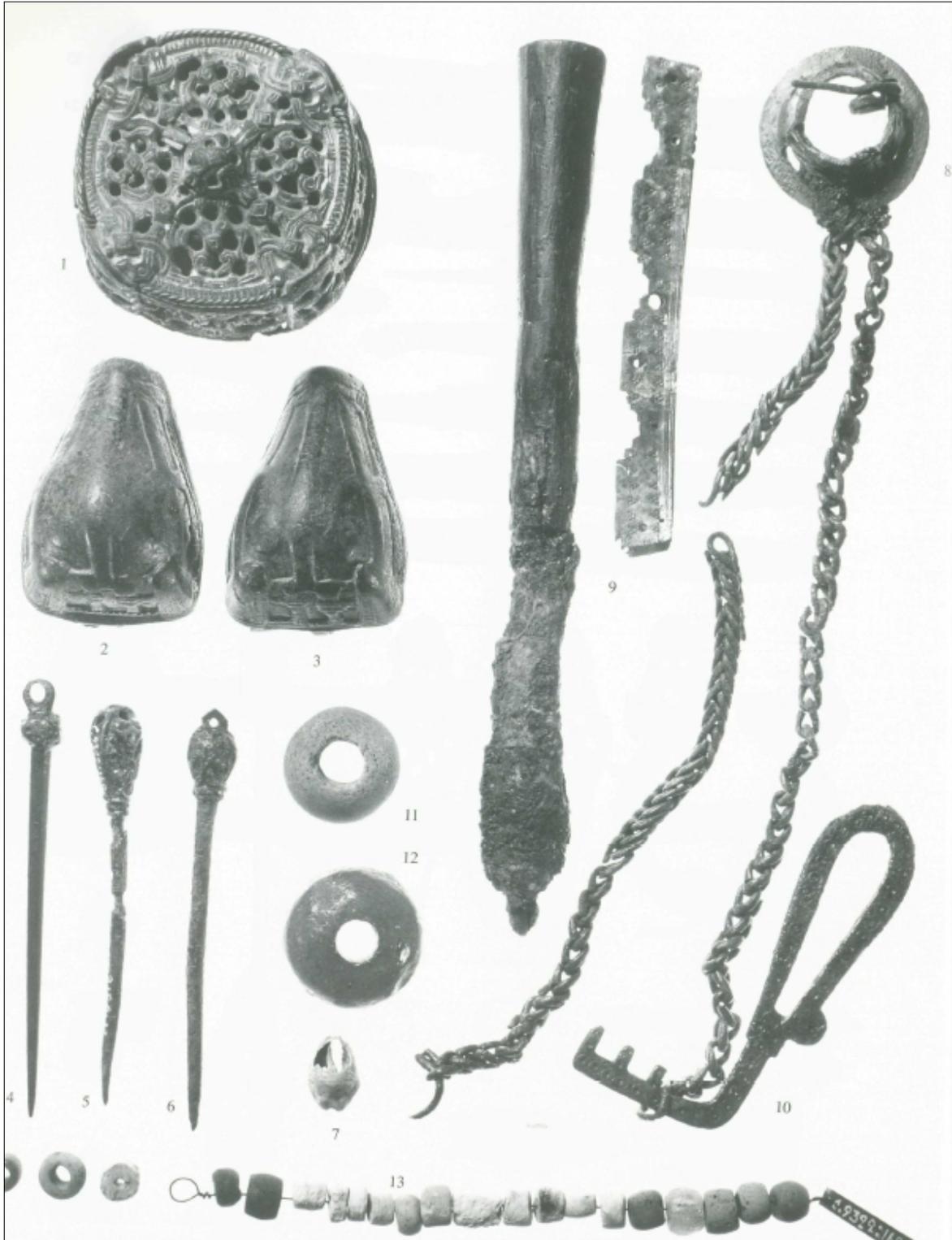
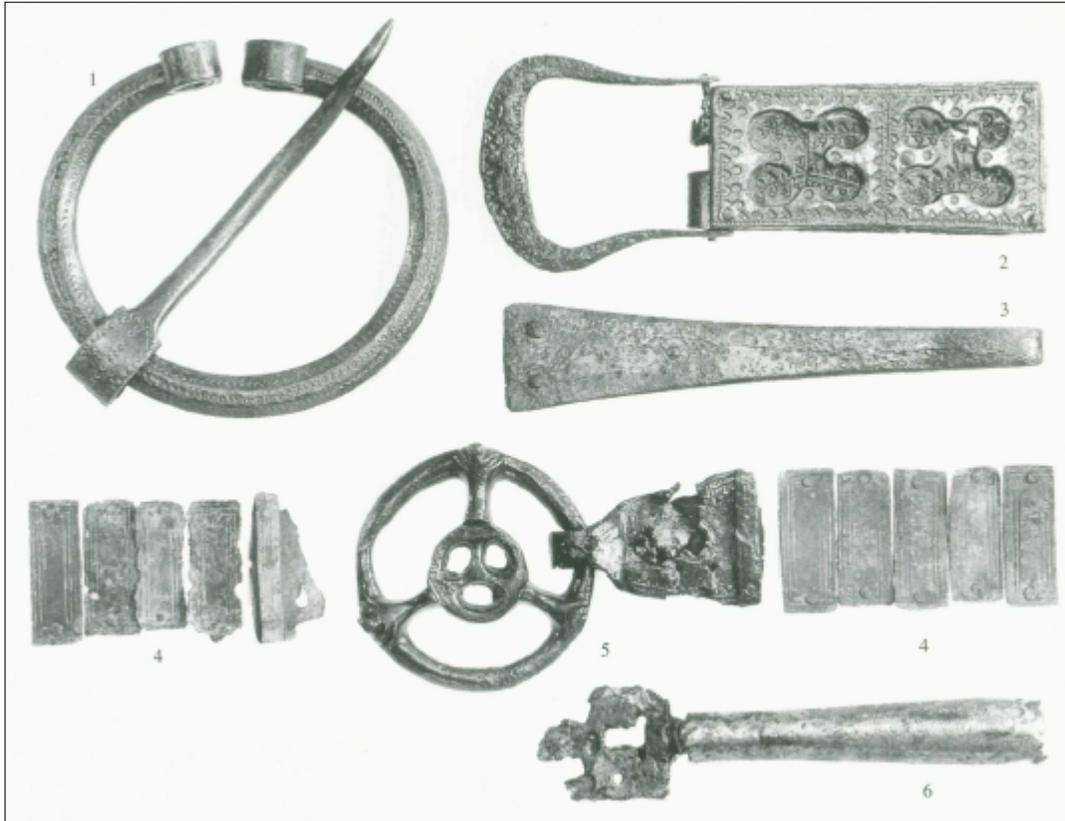
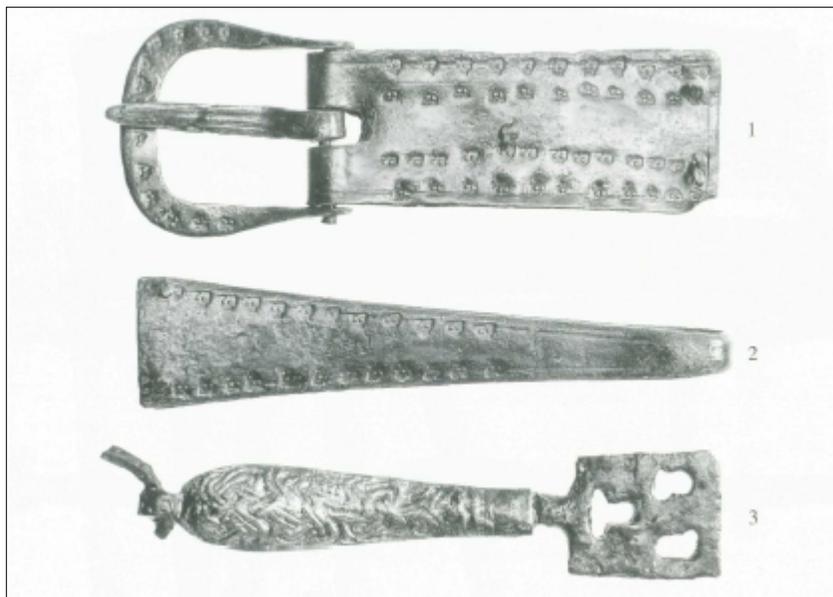


Figure 11: Gotlandic female grave goods from Abb. 192 (Thunmark-Nylén, 1995).



**Figure 12:** Male grave goods from Abb. 396 (Thunmark-Nylén, 1995).



**Figure 13:** Male grave goods from Abb. 393 (Thunmark-Nylén, 1995).



Figure 14: Male grave goods from Abb. 313 (Thunmark-Nylén, 1995).

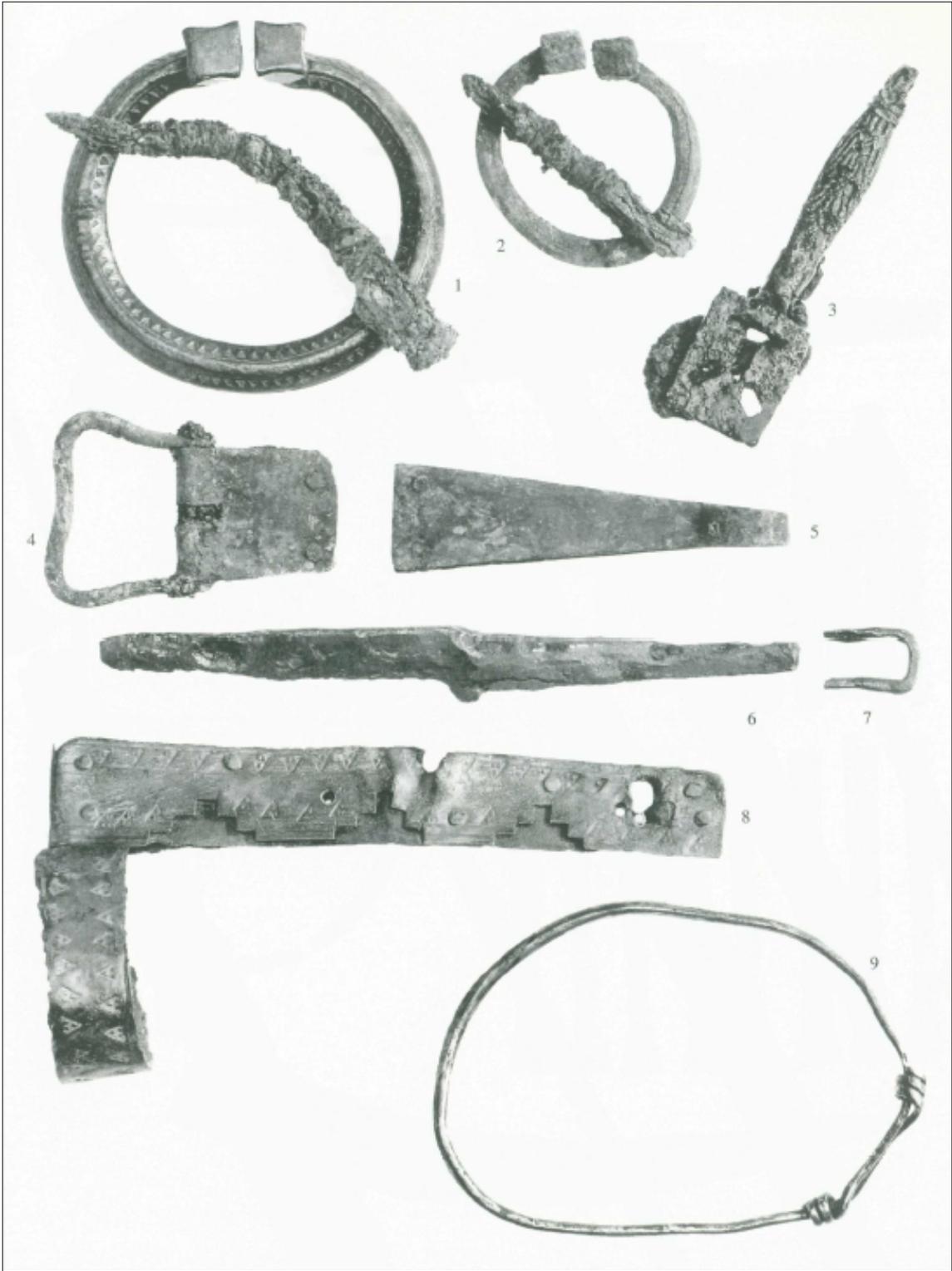
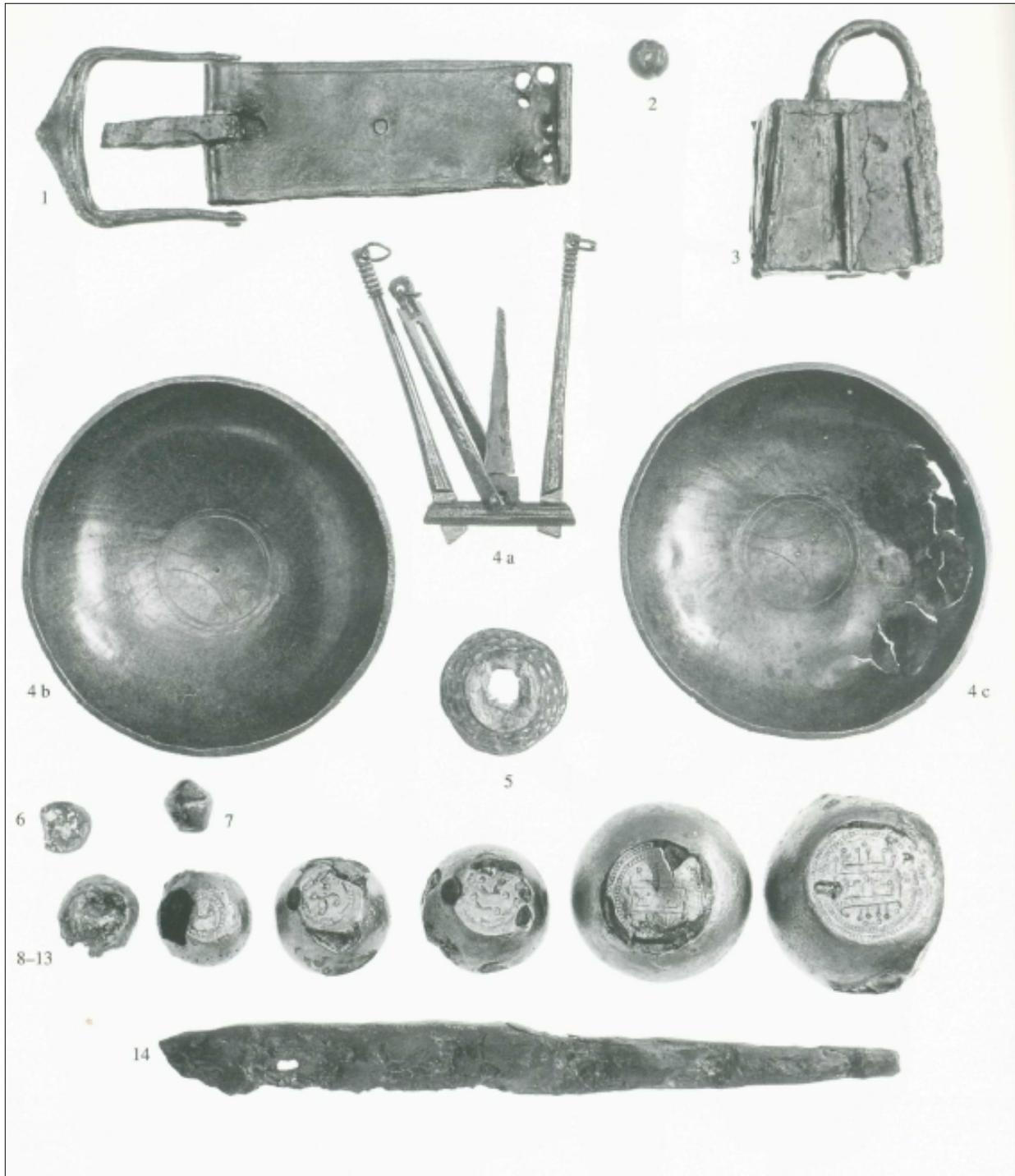
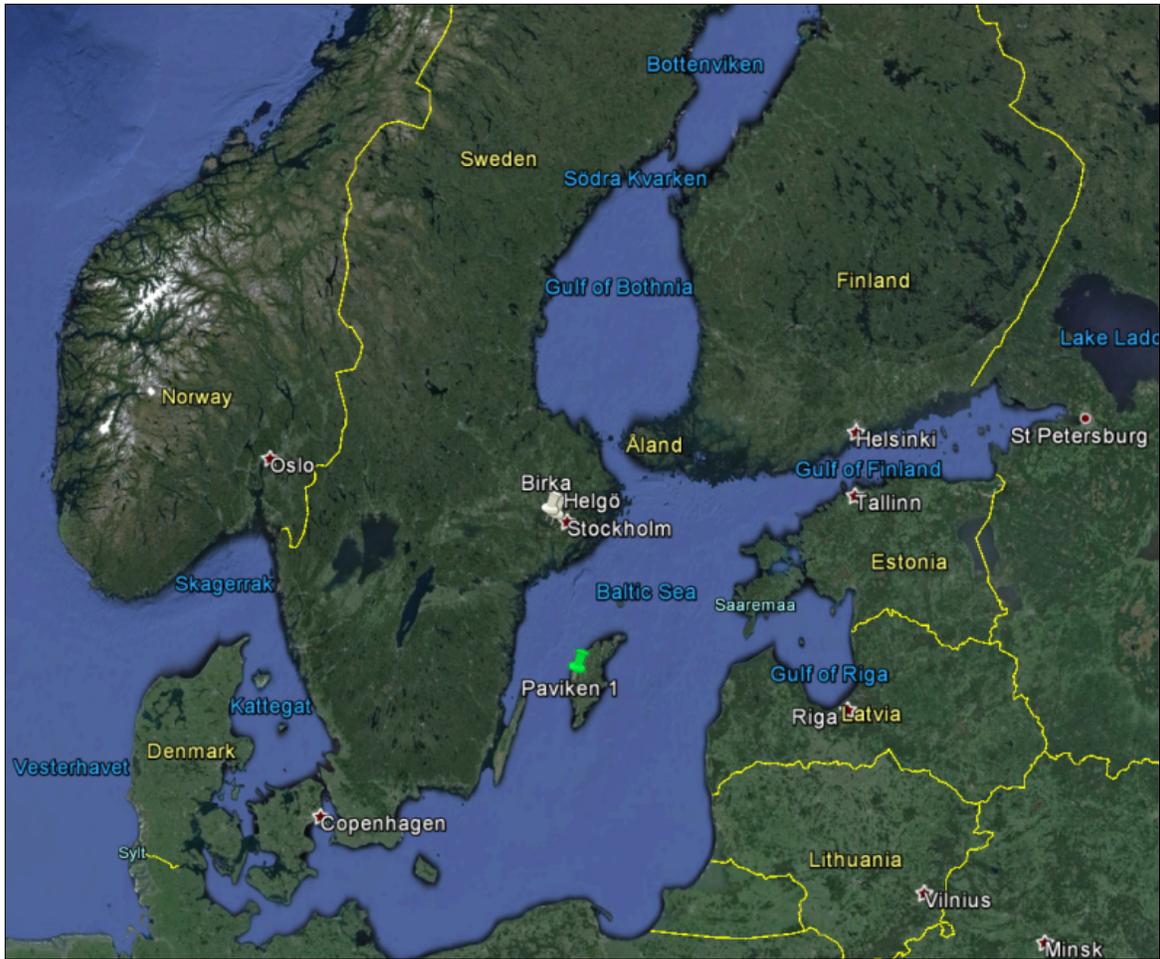


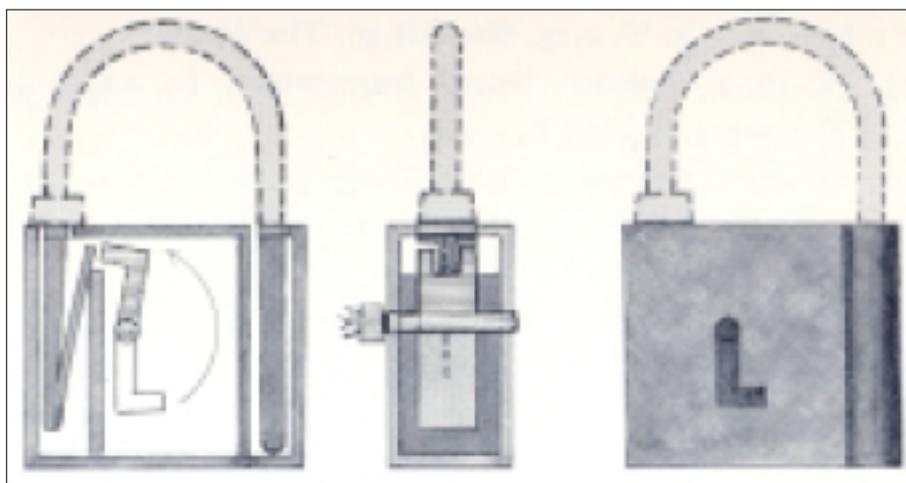
Figure 15: Male grave goods from Abb. 314 (Thunmark-Nylén, 1995).



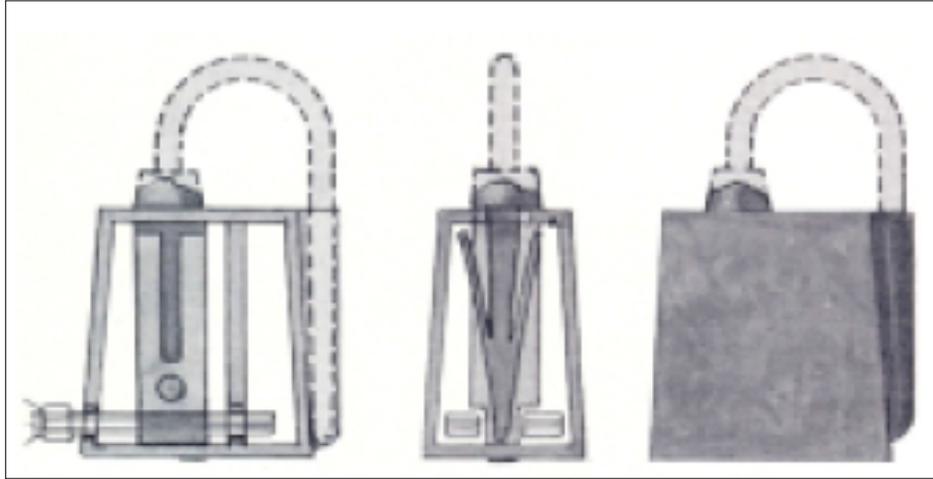
**Figure 16:** Male grave goods including padlock from Abb. 388 (Thunmark-Nylén, 1995).



**Figure 17:** Regional map of Scandinavia, Paviken site in relation to Birka and Helgö.



**Figure 18:** Tomtlund's Type I padlock design referenced at Helgö and Birka (Tomtlund, 1978, and Gustafsson, 2005).



**Figure 19:** Tomtlund's Type II padlock design referenced at Helgö and Birka (Tomtlund, 1978, and Gustafsson, 2005).



**Figure 20:** Padlocks and keys from Helgö (Lundström, 1978).



**Figure 21:** Padlocks and keys from Helgö (Holmqvist, 1979).



**Figure 22:** Keys and a lock from Helgö (Holmqvist, 1979).

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