

Report 1, 29th of June 1999.

The excavation at Fröjel has started!

Finally, we have started the second year of excavation within the frame of Fröjel Discovery Programme, the four year long research-project of the Viking Age harbour at Fröjel on the west coast of Gotland. This summer, the field course is very much an international course, while we have participants from all over the world. All together, there are some 15 persons from abroad, coming from USA, Canada, Australia, England and Germany.

This is the second year of archaeological excavation at the Viking Age harbour at Fröjel, Gotland, Sweden. Last year's excavations concerned mainly two different questions we wanted to have answers to. The most important question concerned the transition phase from paganism to Christianity. We know from earlier excavations and reports that there were Christian burials in close connection to the old school house in Fröjel, as well as to the school masters house. But we didn't have any good knowledge about the number of graves, or if the area hosted something more then just a few graves. And we did not know the exact dating of these early Christian graves.

The other question we wanted answers to, concerned the settlement in the central part of the trading place. So far, we have carried out very little investigations in this part of the settlement area.

The results from the last years' excavations are showing that we to a high degree succeeded to reach our goals, not at least when it comes to the question of the transition between paganism and Christianity in the area. In the schoolmaster's yard, we investigated a part of a Christian churchyard from the earliest phase of Christianity. All together, we found some 40 skeletons, laying in narrow wooden coffins, and orientated in a east-west direction, with their heads in the west and their feet in the east, in line with the Christian customs. There was one exception from that. One of the persons was laying inversely, with her head in the east and her feet in the west.

One third of the persons had been buried with their jewellery, in the form of an animal head brooch, a comb, bead necklaces and fingerings. The woman who was laying in the opposite direction was equipped with a knife, a belt buckle, a bead necklace and a pendant in the form of a coin struck for King Ethelred of England around the year 1000.

The artefacts indicate that the oldest part of the churchyard is from the time around the year AD 1000. This means that what we have found is one of the oldest Christian Churchyard we know of in Gotland. The churchyard was probably in use for about 100 years, and then the new church was built on top of the cliff above the school.

During the last winter, Carola Liebe-Harkort has examined the skeleton from the churchyard, and she can show that all the skeletons were of women and children. Just north of the graves, we found the remains of the fence surrounding the churchyard. It had been built of planks standing in an upright position, supported by stones.

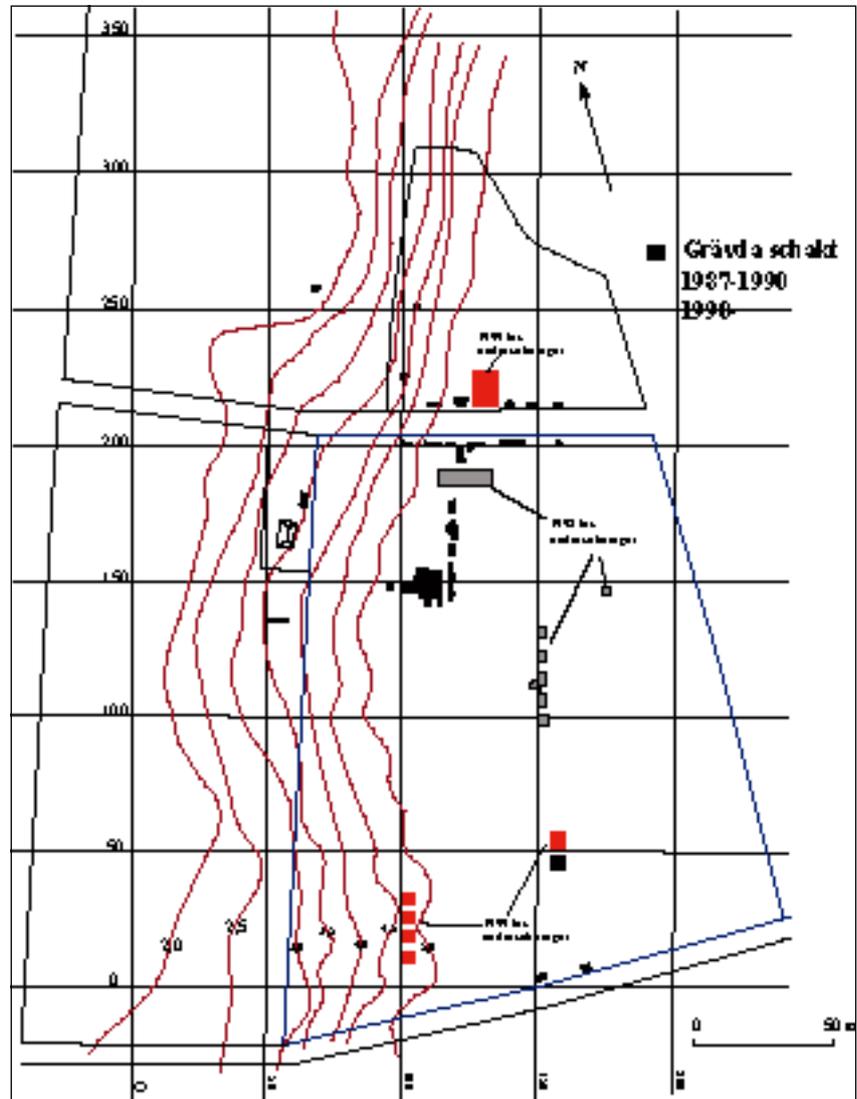
What we obviously had found and partly excavated, was the north part of the churchyard, and we could conclude that there must have been a wooden church, a so-called Stave church, in the vicinity. It seems, sorry to say, that the house of the schoolmaster has been built on top of the wooden church, or just beside it.

This summer's excavation (1999)

Our investigations this year are aiming at two main questions. The first concerns the question of where the actual harbour, with its jetties etc., has been situated during the time the trading place was in use. Thinking about how long time the trading place was in use (from the 6th century to the middle of the 12th century) there are an indication that the harbour has been moved several times. This depends on the fact that we have a land up rising in the area of some 3 meters since the Viking Age.

The second goal this summer is to get a clearer view of the oldest part of the settlement in the area. Our earlier investigations have given evidence in the form of artefacts that there have been some activities here from the end of the 6th century. But we don't know actually if these early artefacts should be connected to destroyed graves in the area, or from a settlement.

The map to the right is showing the central part of the harbour and trading place in Fröjel. The black areas are the areas we excavated between 1987 and 1990, and the grey areas we excavated last year, in 1998. This year, we are planning to excavate the areas marked with red colours. The areas down to the left are where we think we have the actual harbour, probably from the early Viking Age.



Looking to what we know today, I do think that the oldest part of the settlement have been in the northernmost part of the area in question, and we are now planning to have some excavations this summer to try to prove our idea. But, these first weeks will be devoted to the investigations of the area where we think the actual harbour have been during an early phase of the settlement.

So, yesterday, the first group of excavators, this time from the field school on Gotland, started their work. Many of these participants have been excavating with me for the last 15 years or so, and they are very well skilled in fieldwork.

During the excavation, I will as often as possible, give you some information about our work; our failures and our successes in the hunt of the unwritten and invisible history. The first step in our work has been to take away the turf from the area we are going to excavate, and to map all the areas of excavations by a digital instrument.

We also have opened our exhibition for the public. The exhibition is taking place in the old school house, some 400 metres from the excavation area, and we are also having guided tour to the excavation site.

The exhibition is dealing with the harbour at Fröjel and what we have found during previous digging.



The picture to the right is showing the actual area were we are looking for the harbour. The forest in the background is indicating were there was an island in the Viking Age, and between the island and the mainland, there was a strait, possible to penetrate with ships. The first step in our work has been to take away the turf, and to map all the areas we are going to excavate. Also we have in the old school opened our exhibition for the public, an exhibition dealing with the harbour at Fröjel.



Open up the trenches

During the summer, we will be at most some 40 persons taking part in the excavation, and to keep it all running smoothly, I have some 10 archaeology students taken part in our work.

To the left, Malin, being one of the archaeologist in our excavations, tries to keep the stick straight up.

To the right, Annika and Petra tries to understand the mystery of the instrument.

Many of the participants in our excavations have been joining the field courses for many years, and have acquired a very good skill in fieldwork. They take part in the excavation in either a two or a three weeks course, where the fieldwork is mixed with lectures and excursions.

Two of the persons that have joined the excavations for many years are, at the left Börje Olsson from Scania, taking part during the last 13 years, and to the right Mikke Brännström, taking part during the last 10 years.

Without the help of all these very dedicated persons, we wouldn't have come so far in our research as we actually have today, when it concerns the question of Viking Age harbours on Gotland.

I am most grateful for all your work!

