

The Viking Age harbour and trading place at Fröjel, Gotland

A summery of the excavation during the summer of 2001
By Carina Dahlström

This year's excavation of the Viking Age harbour and trading place at Fröjel on the island of Gotland, Sweden, is now finished. At the ancient trading place there has been vigorous activity all summer. Altogether there have been four field courses and at least 120 students from Sweden, USA, England and other parts of the world have uncovered remains from the Viking Age. During the field season participants and archaeologists have exposed an area in total of 210 m², and thus contributed to the proceeding research about the harbour and trading place.

Earlier investigations and interpretations

Previous research has shown that the harbour and trading place was inhabited from 600-1100 AD, with its era of prosperity in the 11th century. Through archaeological prospecting methods we also know that the settlement area covers about 60.000 m². Of this huge area only 1200 m² have been excavated until today. Three grave fields have been located and about 100 graves have been uncovered. A large quantity of artefacts have also been found and at this time approximately 24,000 finds are registered in Fröjel's database. About 500 constructions have been exposed, consisting of both settlement remains and graves.

A current issue has been to determine how the houses, market stalls and handicraft sheds were arranged in relation to each other. We have now found out that the buildings were laid out in a regular pattern between streets and alleys. This kind of building plan is known from early urban settlement, like Birka in Lake Mälaren.

The summer 2001

One aim within Fröjel Discovery Programme has been to "open up" the excavation to the general public. Therefore everyone was welcome to visit the excavation site during the summer. This has been done through guided tours, lead by archaeologist Alexander Andreeff. The visitors had the opportunity to experience an excavation site at close quarters and to see the artefacts that had just been found. The guided tours were very appreciated and this year saw a record number of visitors.

The excavation took place in a field that has been cultivated land for centuries. It was located in two areas some 200 metres from each other, at one of the grave fields and at the



The excavation at Fröjel had a great number of visitors during the guided tours. Here is a group of tourists being guided by the article's author at the north grave field. Photo Åke Hultsten

settlement area. Parts of both the settlement area and the burial ground have been excavated earlier and about 50 graves and a large amount of building remains have been recovered. Initially we had to find out more about the central part of the harbour settlement. The aim here was to excavate more remains, which could be related to the buildings and alleys that have been found during earlier investigations.

The second excavation area was situated on the northern grave field, dated to the 9th to 11th centuries. This area also contains settlement remains from 1000-1100 AD. Here the graves and traces from the settlement are mixed together at the same level in the ground. Even if the remains of buildings overlap the graves chronologically, occasionally it is complicated to interpret what came first.

The settlement area

Most of the remains from the central part of the harbour are dated to the 11th and the 12th centuries. In this region we excavated an area of 60 m². The excavation resulted in approximately 15 constructions.

Most of them were stone-lined postholes, both smaller and bigger ones. The small postholes probably belonged to drying racks for fish nets or for instance backyard fences. The bigger postholes most likely belonged to houses and sheds.

Wood remains and clay packings that originally had been foundation for floors inside the buildings were another type of construction that could associate to houses. In one of the trenches we also found an empty space where there were no constructions at all. The empty surface was about three meter wide and extends in north-south direction through the trench. We interpreted this space to be an ally because there were settlement traces along both sides of it. The other constructions consisted of dump of wastes and hearths. The remains show that the buildings have only covered one time period. This can be compared with the situation on the north grave field.



The Viking-Age well with its interior wood construction still preserved. Photo Åke Hultsten

The north grave field

In this area we excavated about 150 square metres. As I mentioned before this locality contains both settlement remains and graves. The building traces have the same character as at the settlement area but this year we found a construction that stood out in the crowd. Down under a heap of big stones we found a well preserved water well. It turned out to be about two meters deep, with its interior wood construction still preserved. It was built of logs dovetailed at corners and on the timber you could still see the cuts of the axes. In the mud inside the well we found tremendous amounts of animal bones and, among other things, pieces of a leather shoe. At the moment the shoe has been sent for preservation and we will soon know more about it.

Twelve graves which contained five men, five females and two of undetermined sex, have been excavated. Most of the graves were inhumation burials but two consisted of cremation burials. The custom of burning the dead on a funeral pyre was common during the Vendel period, 550-700 AD. In one of the cremation burials we found gaming pieces typical for the Vendel period. We also found bear claws and skeleton fragments belonging to a dog. The deceased had probably been burnt on a bear fell with his/her dog as a companion for life after death.

One of the inhumation burials was unusual. It consisted of a male who had been buried in a pitch, lying on his left side. The cranium was missing, but that was due to a later posthole that had been dug down right through his head. The remarkable phenomenon was that his hands looked like they had been tied behind his back. If they were tied up when he was still alive or after death, we don't know. Maybe he had offended the law and received a punishment or perhaps it was a symbolic act that was connected to the Viking's pagan religion.

We also found graves of a more gentle character, for example one of the female inhumation burials. The female had been put into the ground on her back,



A close-up picture from the upper part of the skeleton in grave 20 from 2001. The female was buried with many ornaments and tools.

Photo Carina Dahlström



A plan drawing of the skeleton in grave 46 from 2001. The male's hands had probably been bound behind his back. Drawing Tove Eriksson

probably dressed in her finest clothes, jewellery and tools. She wore the typical Gotlandic bronze jewellery from the Viking Age. Just below her chin there was a box-shaped brooch and next to each arm lay an animal head-shaped brooch. The brooches had several functions, both for decoration and for holding different garments together. Two dress pins were found, one on each shoulder. On her chest we also found a tool brooch with chains from which there hung a big iron key and a needle box. The woman had also two knives that had been hanging from her belt and a comb made of bone. Around her neck she wore a necklace with glass beads and right beside her head lay two spindle whorls made of stone.

Can the artefacts tell us something about the woman? Maybe they symbolise the woman's life. Perhaps she worked at Fröjel as a textile craftsman. The objects may also be grave gifts from her relatives. Anyhow, the objects probably had a very strong symbolic value both for the dead and for her survivors.

The finds

During the summer, objects that have been hidden in the soil for more than 1000 years have once again been brought into daylight. Almost 3000 artefacts of different materials and tremendous amounts of animal bones, burnt clay, pottery and slag have been found.

The biggest category of artefacts was made of iron. A large number of rivets and nails, tools associated with handicrafts like knives, semi-manufactured products and raw material have been found. Another big material category was bronze. Most dress ornaments and mountings, for example belts and knife sheaths, were made of bronze. Other artefacts that were common are beads made of glass or precious stones. In addition to this a large quantity of objects associated to bone and antler crafts have been excavated.

Samples

During the excavation we collected charcoal and wood samples from the settlement remains and graves for radiocarbon dating. By doing this we may get answers about the length of time that has passed between the burials and the settlement. We will also find out more about the difference in time between varying settlement remains.

Another analysis that is going to be done is a dendrochronological dating of the logs from the well. This is really interesting because with this method we might get a more precise dating.

This year we also collected macro fossil samples from the skeleton. This was done by the taking soil from the region around the individual's stomach. By analysing the samples we may clarify what kind of diet the people at Fröjel had.

Conclusions

Now we have to put this year's results together with earlier excavations and try to interpret how all those constructions fit together. In this way we may form a clearer conception about the settlement pattern and the function of each separate building.

As in previous years we haven't found a lot of offensive weapons. Most of the finds are connected with trading and handicrafts. This may indicate that the harbour at Fröjel was quite a peaceful place where most of the inhabitation consisted of craftsmen and merchants. For some reason the people who lived and worked here didn't need to defend the site and themselves against external threats. It seems as though most of the inhabitants were here for the same reason – to make, buy and sell products.

The early cremation burial shows that the north grave field has been used over an extensive period. Perhaps a few estates used the grave field and together set up a fishing village at Fröjel. Maybe it was



One of the more magnificent finds was this Viking-Age strap end made of bronze with gold gilding. At the lower part of the jewellery a face of a male is visible. This face can be looked at from two directions. When the strap end is turned upside down you can still see the face but its characteristic feature has changed. Photo Dan Carlsson

the people at those farms who contributed to establishing what later became one of the largest Viking-age harbour and trading places on Gotland.

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