

# The Assault on Helgö and Birka

The title of this article is meant to be a provocation, as it is a statement about how we are to understand and interpret the past! But it is also a case study in the use of Battlefield Archaeology, and the aim is to show that we *tend to belittle the results and interpretations that this new discipline makes possible, when analysing our traditional Archaeological materials*. One problem is the fact that we only have the Norse Sagas, and other written sources like Chronicles that tell us of the “mythical” battles that took place in the past. Stories about battles in places” like the Teutoburg forest, Fyrisvalarna or Helgeå. Unfortunately we seldom have enough information about these battlefields, and rarely have been able to find and excavate these sites. A fact that has meant that the credibility of these sources have decreased, and in many cases have been dismissed as mere fantasies! Recently Tacitus’ tale about the Germanic massacre on a whole Roman army proved to be true, as the fantastic finds from Kalkrise in northern Germany proved him right!

-What do we do when we stumble on a find that consists of a lot of weapons, which only makes sense if they are put into a martial context? Do we dare to interpret them as the remains of an ancient Battlefield?

## The case studies

In this article I present the archaeological finds from Helgö and Birka, and argue that the only logical explanation to these finds is to assume that they are remains from the assault that took place in Mälaren in the the 970:ies. Both the Hall on Helgö and the “Garrison” on Birka are examples of a unique phenomena in Swedish Archaeology, as untidy houses are very uncommon, since most houses seem to have been cleaned and emptied before they were abandoned (Fig 1, 2). Both houses also show signs of destruction, and are full of broken glass, weapon details and other debris, as if they were left in a hurry or after a fight or disturbance.

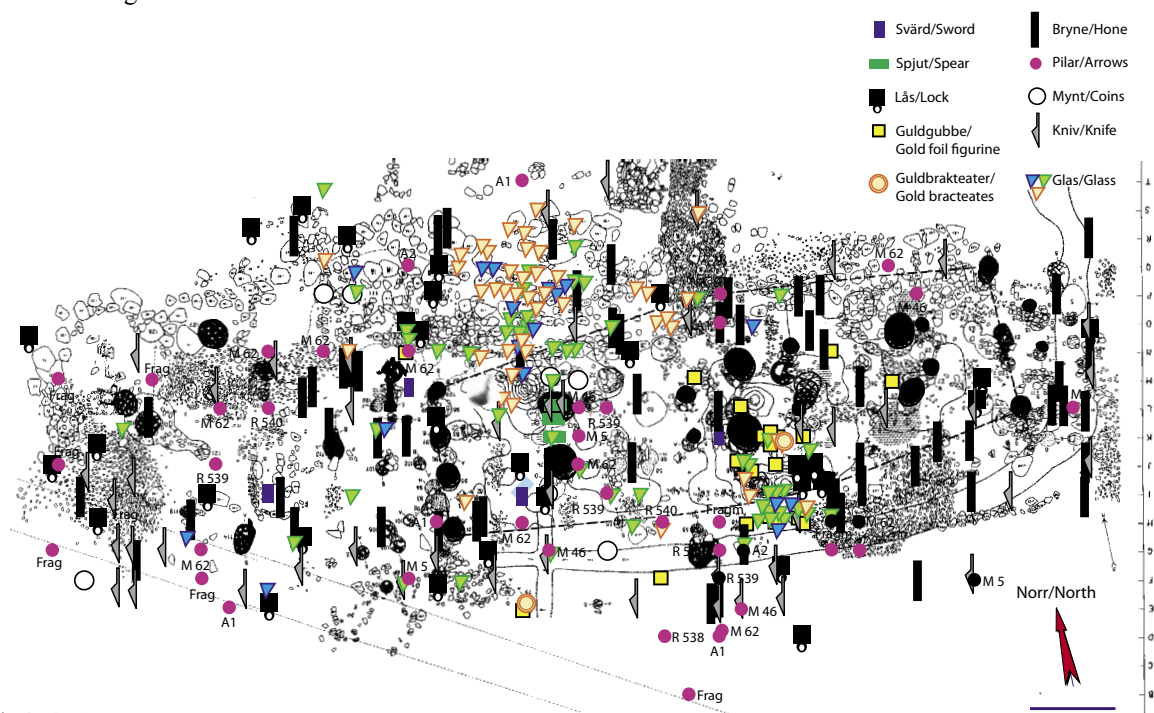


Fig. 1. The Hall on Helgö, observe the devastation of the house and all the things that have been left in this very "untidy house".

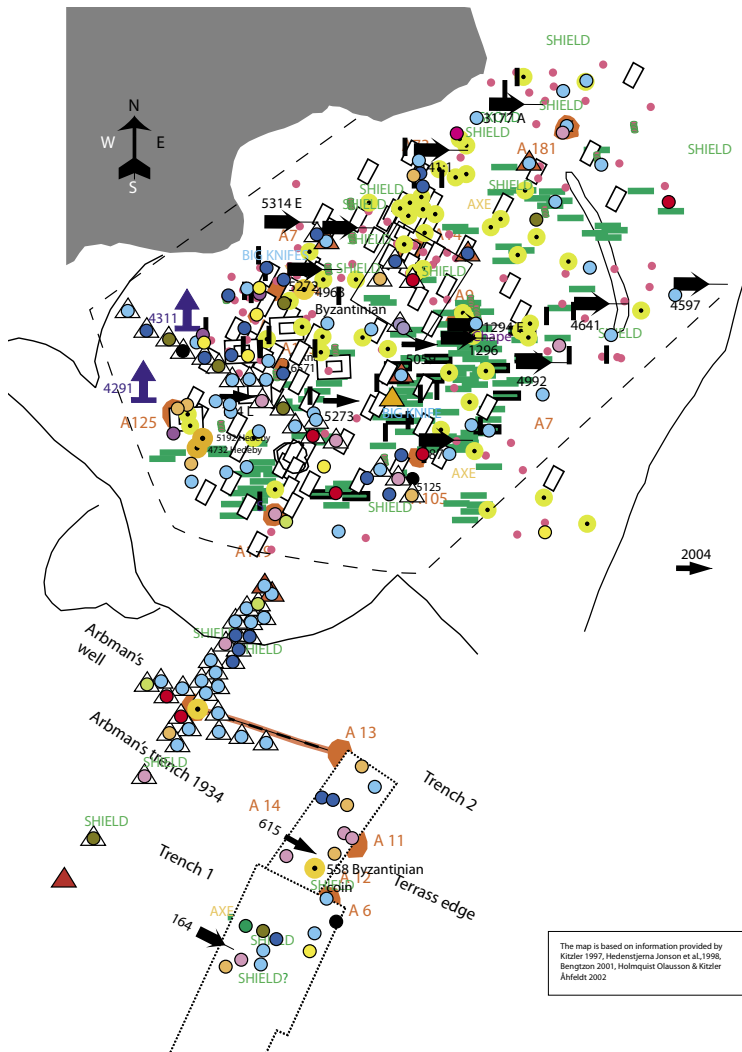


Fig. 2. The untidy house on Birka or "the warrior's house". The Garrison was probably attacked, and much like the the Hall on Helgö, it was abandoned in a hurry! There are plenty of weapons and military equipment in- or outside the Garrison, something that indicates that it was attacked, and that the mess is the remains of the Battle of the Garrison described in text.

In order present the story of the attacks on Helgö and Birka, I will first give an archaeological background and to present the arrowheads found on the two Isles, finds that make up the foundation for my explanation of *how* and *by whom* the assault was carried out.

### Bogfinds and battlefields

My theory is based on the findings of more than 300 arrow heads from the two Isles, where the majority of the points either belong to foreign types of eastern or Russian origin. Both on Helgö and Birka there are a number of special Russian arrowheads, which belong in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century or later, and have only been found in a few other places in Sweden; in Estuna, and in the Saami metal depots (Lindbom 2006, Lindbom in press). These are facts that strengthen my idea that the attackers were foreigners.

One may speculate that the arrows would have been part of some kind of offering, and intentionally would have been spread all over the Settlements. But this is hard to accept, as some of the arrows are actually stuck

in the walls of the houses, and seem to have been shot intentionally at the houses. There may have been some bizarre ritual, where one shot arrows at one's own houses in order to achieve some unknown purpose, but this seems highly unlikely, as there is a clear direction and intention behind the shots (see Maps below).

The fact that so many arrowheads have been found on Helgö and Birka is a very rare phenomenon, which only has parallels in the Danish Bogfjnd, where equal amounts of arrow points have been found. There are different theories on the origin of the Danish finds. The traditional view is that an attacking force lost, and was then offered to the Gods (Ilkjær 2001, 2003). A more recent perspective sees the depositions as a kind of Danish version of the Roman triumphal marches (Storgaard 2001, 2003). In the Danish case one has discussed the origin of the weapons, but drawn completely different conclusions, were some mean that *the foreign attacking troops lost* and their gear were sacrificed, while others believe that the Danes made victorious campaigns abroad and brought the spoils home, only to sacrifice them!

### Symbolic and utility arrows

One problem is that the foreign arrowheads from the Isles come from "open contexts", while most of the Swedish arrows come from "closed contexts" or graves. This means that the two materials are hard to compare according to traditional archaeological methodology, as the two contexts are assumed to be incompatible. But if we realise that the traditional grave finds are part of an ideological investment that Iron Age man chose to make, and was part of their "social capital", that showed who they were and to what social strata they belonged. We can start to compare the two materials in order to analyse how we are to understand the finds from these different contexts. If the grave finds are part of the social capital that was invested by the mourners at the funeral, one can state that "the grave arrows" are part of the indigenous traditions that were in vogue during a specific time period, as the contents and the types in the graves vary from time to time during the Iron Age.

The majority of the arrow finds found on Helgö and in Birka's Garrison does not belong to the same types generally found in Swedish graves during the Iron Age. They either belong to readily identifiable Russian types, or to strange hybrid types, that make up the arrow heads typical for the Rus tradition (Medvedev 1966, Wegrae-

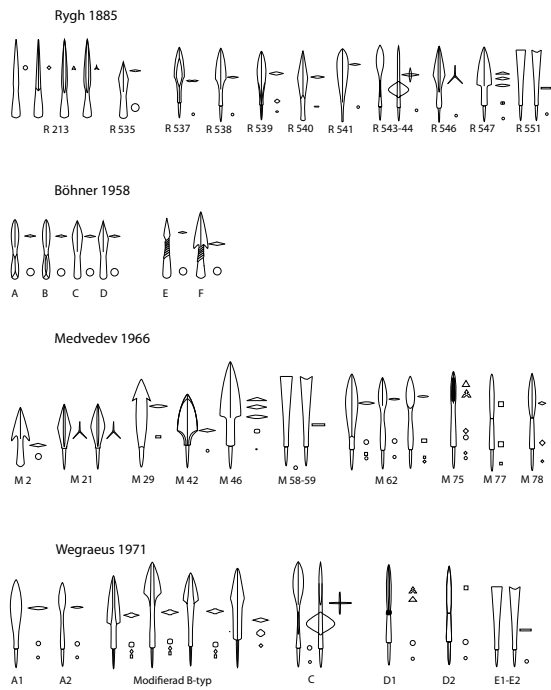


Fig. 3. The synthesised types as they were presented in my thesis, note that many of the types in the different typologies are actually the same type of arrow heads, where different names have been used by the scientists. The aim of this typology is to show that the heads are related, and that they occur in different archaeological contexts, but belong in the same Cultural historical context, and must be seen as a whole integrated material Culture.

us 1986, Lindbom 2006). Thus there is big difference between these two contexts, where one is representative of the indigenous material Culture, while the other is foreign and atypical for the region.

### Foreign types and typologies

In order to analyse the materials from Helgö and Birka, I will first present the indigenous types and their development during the Iron Age. I then turn my attention to the atypical arrowheads from Helgö and Birka to show that these finds are a combination of Russian types and points that have to be characterised as "Rus" arrowheads. In this article I will assume that the Rus were a hybrid Culture that developed between Scandinavian colonisers and the indigenous Slav population during their interactions during the latter part of the Iron Age (see Duczko 2004, Hedenstierna-Jonson 2006).

This means that the *Scandinavian arrowheads are grave deposits*, while the arrowheads from the houses on Helgö and Birka came from a hitherto unknown battle or battles in Lake Mälaren region during the tenth Century, and that they are common utility arrows used in warfare. There is no real contradiction between the two types in a functional sense, as both traditions can be said to have been used as symbolic markers and showed their owner's identity. But this far there are no signs of the defenders presumably Swedish arrows in the materials from Helgö and Birka, which makes the

situation very similar to the Danish Bogfjinds, where the majority of the finds are said to belong to the attacking or defeated foreigners. However there is a difference between the finds, as the foreigners won on both Helgö and Birka!

### Scandinavian types

In my thesis *Weapons in the time of the wreccas*, I showed that the Norwegian arrowheads have a long and unique development, that can be studied with a long continuity during the whole Iron Age to the early Medieval Period, roughly 0-1250 AD. I used Rygh's types in order to identify the different arrowheads in the Norwegian finds, but soon found that his types could be used in order to analyse the Swedish materials too (Rygh 1885, Lindbom 2006). Later I used both Böhner's and Medvedev's typologies in order to analyse the Continental and Eastern influences on the Scandinavian arrowheads. I have thus made a new synthesised typology in order to cope with this material, consisting of Rygh's, Böhner's, Medvedev's and Wegraeus' typologies (Böhner 1958, Medvedev 1966, Wegraeus 1971, Fig. 3).

### Indigenous tang and imported socket

In my studies I found that the indigenous traditional arrowhead design is the tang, a construction that occurs in the materials from the Stone Age right through to the end of the Viking Period. The socket head is always the result of a foreign influence, which occurs now and again from the Roman Iron Age into the early Medieval Period. One could even say that the *tang point is the traditional solution*, while the socket point is part of a fashion and is a part of a foreign influence that is often seen in the elite graves from different phases of the Iron Age.

The tang point thus has a long and continuous development in the Scandinavian material, where the Norwegian is especially suited for a "long duree" type of study of the progression of different arrow types during the Iron Age. In the Norwegian material one can observe the transition from less malleable materials such as stone and bone to iron sometime during the

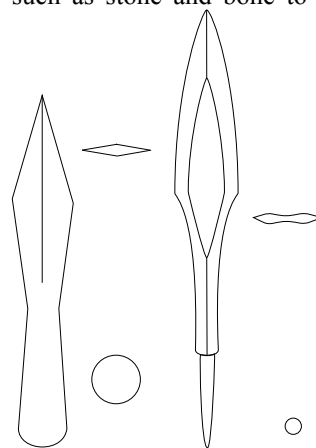


Fig. 4. The difference between the traditional tang (to the right) and the socket (on the left). Observe the "spike like" tang, that is typical of the late Iron Age Arrow points.

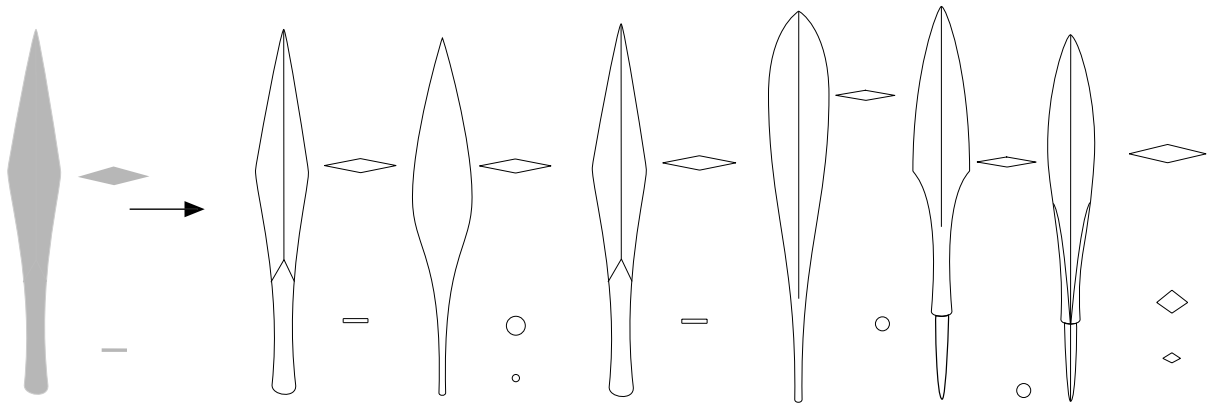


Fig. 5. The development of the Norwegian tanged arrow head, showing the transition from bone to Iron, and also the change from flat tongue shaped tang to the "spike-like" version during the early Viking Age, here represented by the types R 540, R 541, R 547 and R 539.

middle of the Roman Iron Age, a development that also had technological consequences, where the traditional flat rectangular tang was transformed to pointed spike-like tang (Fig. 4). This transformation has both technological and ideological reasons, as the older flat tang was prone to split the wooden shaft due to the shape of the tang, which acted like a wedge and tended to split the shafts on impact. The technical solution to this problem was found on the Continent, where Scandinavians were active as mercenaries in the wars between the Romans and different Germanic peoples, and came to import both the socket points and the new innovative tang during the fifth Century. The Continental spike-like tang occurs in the Norwegian warrior graves during the end of the fifth Century, and gradually superseded the indigenous tanged points (Lindbom 2006, Fig. 5).

#### The spread of the Norwegian western tradition

The socket continued to be an elite trait in Scandinavia through the whole Iron Age, while the socket soon was incorporated into the traditional archery equipment both by warriors and hunters. The sockets disappears in Norway and Sweden during the time period 500-700 AD., and were replaced by the indigenous tang arrowheads belonging to the western tradition.

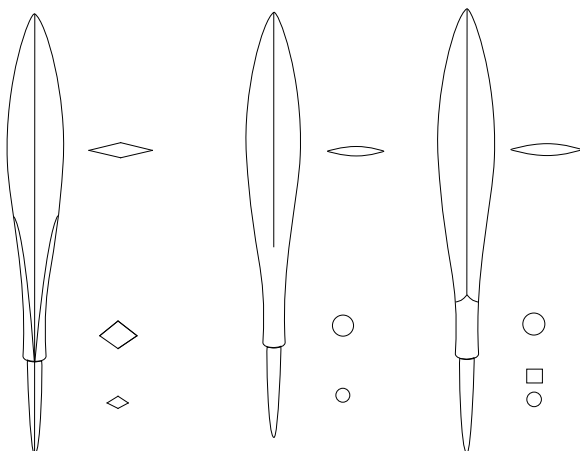
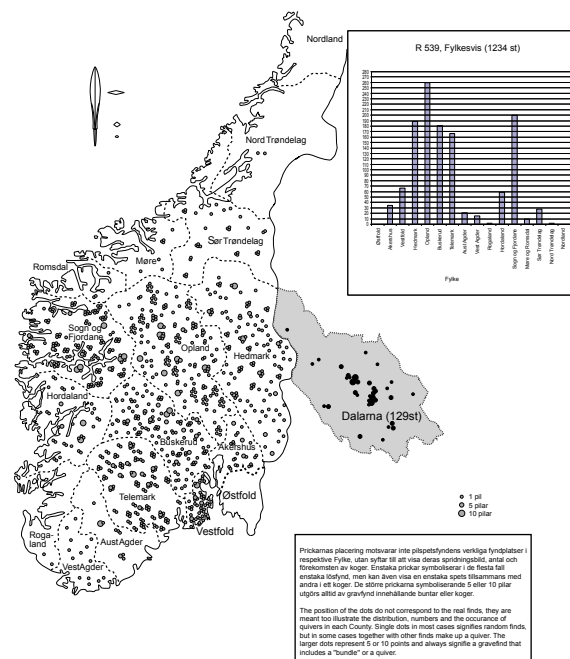


Fig. 6. The three Traditions, the Norwegian square shaped design, the Mälartype, with its sleek and round shape, and the Easter Rus tradition, with its rectangular cross section.

The tanged arrowheads have a long development during the Iron Age, and resulted in two different traditions, where the pointed square shaped tradition is typical of the Norwegian arrowhead, while the Swedish points are more rounded and have a more sleek aerodynamical design (see Fig. 6). In figure 6 one can see both the Norwegian and the Swedish Mälardesigns, but there is also a third variation, the Eastern or the Rus tradition.

In Norway one can see the development of the tanged type from the early versions of slate or bone of the type R 540 to the late type R 539, the latter is typical for the Norwegian Viking Age. R 539 is finalised as a type in the eighth Century according to Farbregd, when the type finally gets its ledge on the tang (Farbregd 1972). Somehow this type of arrow is exported to Sweden during the end of the Vendel Period, when the continental fashion and the socket point is replaced by the western tradition in the warrior graves during the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Centuries (Lindbom in press). The interesting point is



Map 1. The distribution of Rygh's type R 539, one of the most common Norwegian arrow heads, note the concentration of points in the Swedish County Dalarna.

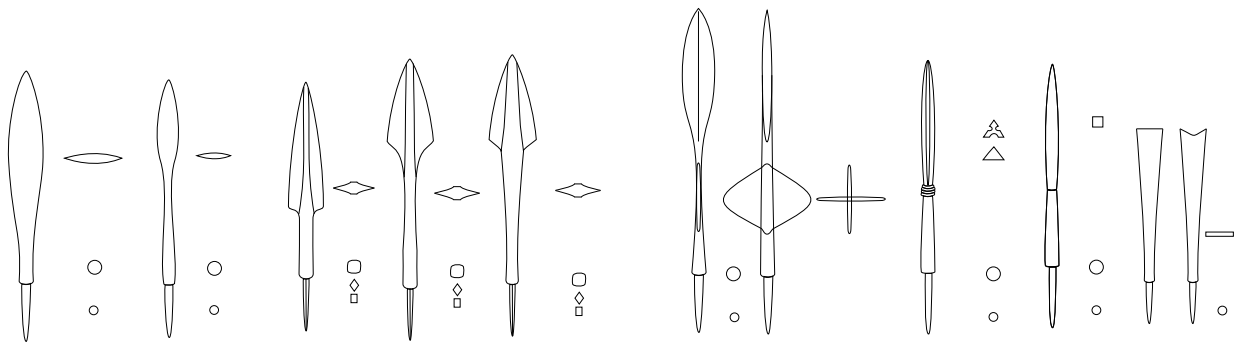


Fig. 7. The Mälär tradition is very similar to Wegraeus' typology, here shown with the types A-E according to Wegraeus 1971.

that the continental socketed point disappears together with the Vendel Period fashion typical for the Boat graves in Mälardalen and from the weapon graves from Gotland, and is replaced by a regional version of the Norwegian R 539 during the 8<sup>th</sup> Century.

The Mälär type or Wegraeus type A1 is first introduced in the graves on the newly established trading post Birka sometime in the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> Century. It would seem that the change from continental socket point to the indigenous tanged type is due to ideological reasons, and indicates the start of the Viking Age. A fact that is important since it has consequences for the way we understand the Eastern tradition, a custom that seems to have been introduced in the 8<sup>th</sup> or the 9<sup>th</sup> Centuries, and is typical of the Rus in Russia (Pushkina 1997, Muraseva 1997, Jansson 1997, Duczko 2004, Lindbom 2006).

The Norwegian type R 539 seems to be the origin of the common Viking Age tang type in Scandinavia, and spread to Sweden during the 8<sup>th</sup> Century, and is characteristic for the new material Culture that is typical both for Norway, Sweden and Denmark during the Viking Period. A development that seems to indicate an ideological change in the region, where the Scandinavians switched from being professional soldiers/mercenaries to aggressive colonisers that attacked the British Isles, Europe, the Baltic countries and Russia during the eight Century and onwards to the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> Century.

### *The Mälär and Eastern traditions*

In general the Swedish arrow points are smaller and weigh less than their sturdier Norwegian counterparts, but also their design is different, as the Norwegian arrow heads are very angular in their design, whereas the Swedish heads are rounded. According to various Blacksmiths the Swedish Mälär design takes more time to make than the angular Norwegian points. This indicates that the design was chosen consciously, as the Norwegian tradition is easier and cheaper to make, than the Mälär types. Wegraeus' types are typical of the Viking Age, and have their Rus counterparts in Medvedev's typology in Russia (Fig. 7, 8).

The Rus version or the Eastern tradition is a mixture of both the Norwegian and the Mälär traditions, but it is mainly a close relative to the Swedish heads as the Russian points in general are smaller and lighter than the big Norwegian arrow heads. One of the most common Rus types is the type M 62, a type that closely follows the development of the two Mälär types A1 and A2 (see Fig. 8). We do not know when the Rus types developed, but they are present in the Russian material from the 10<sup>th</sup> Century or even earlier. The Rus arrow heads from Russia occur in chamber graves similar to the ones present on Birka and in the Boatgrave materials from the Mälär valley belonging to the 10<sup>th</sup> Century (Arbman 1936, 1940-43, Lindbom 1993). A major difference between the Swedish graves and the Russian ones is the fact that the graves from Birka consist of the Mälär types A1, A2 and D2 heads, while the Rus mate-

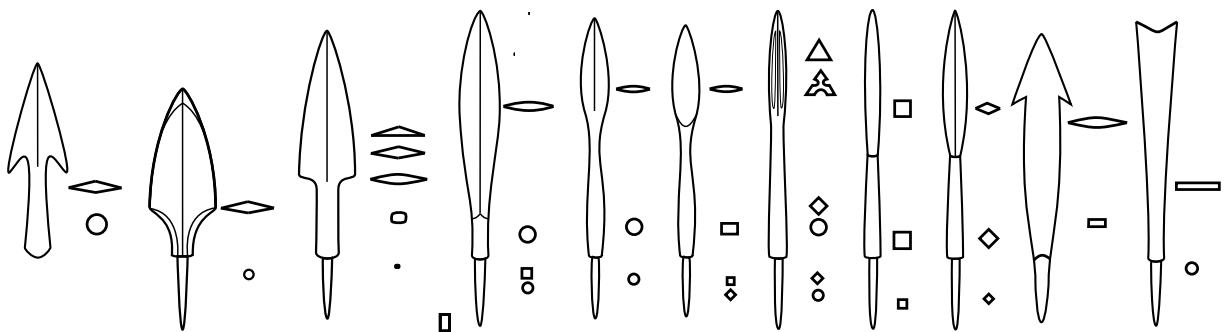
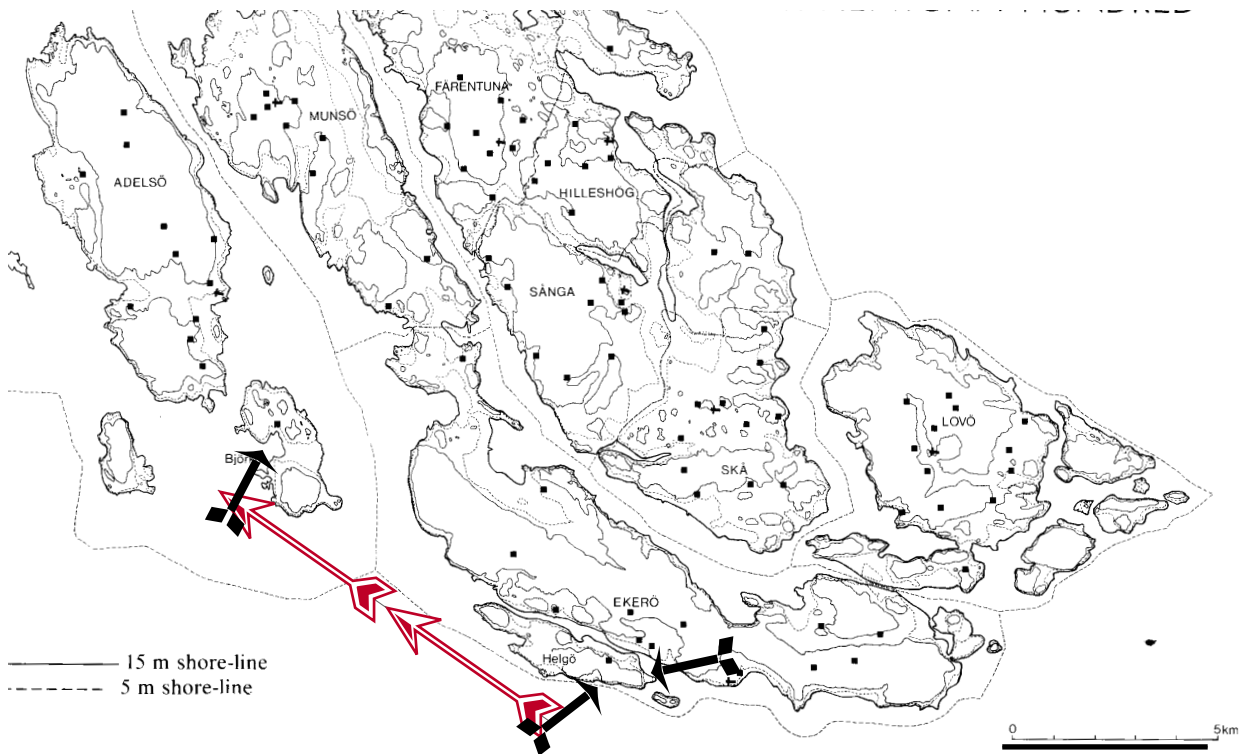


Fig. 8. The Eastern Tradition corresponds with Medvedev's typology, note that there are some Russian types that have Swedish counterparts, for example the type M 62.





Map 2. The location □ half an hour to travel from Helgö to Birka by boat.

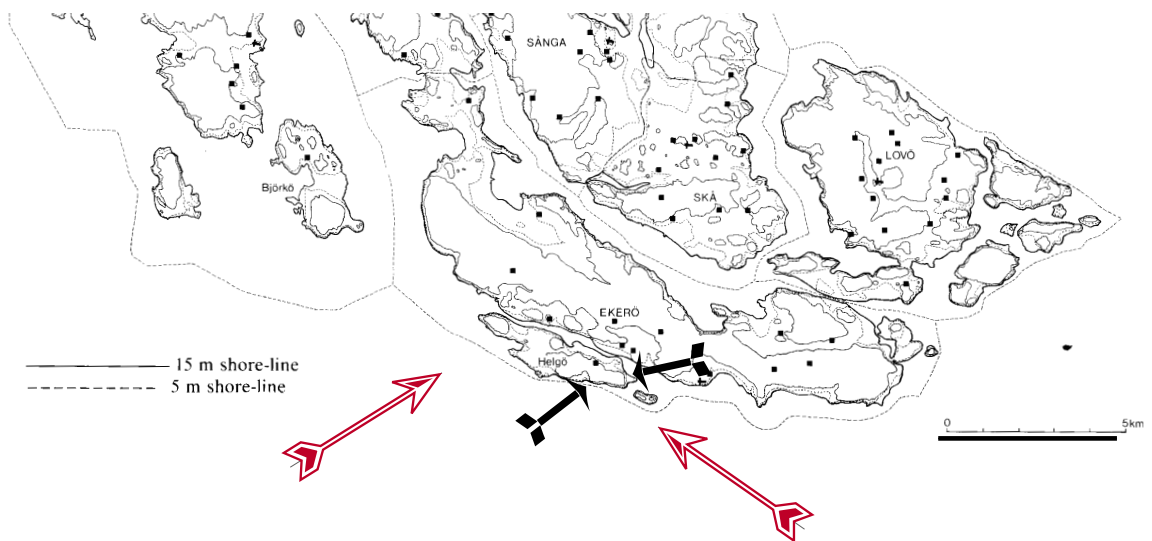
rial in for example Gnestdovo is mainly made up of M 62 points (Lindbom 2006).

There is evidently a difference between the social capital used by the elites in Sweden and Russia, where they used types that are typical of the members belonging to a special warrior or elite group. The point is that the Mälars and Rus traditions do not occur simultaneously in the warrior elites graves either in Birka or in Gnestdovo, but seem to be some sort of "badge" that shows the person's membership in a retinue or warrior band (Lindbom in press). The arrow heads from Helgö and Birka indicate that the owners of these points are foreigners that came from the outside, while the locals

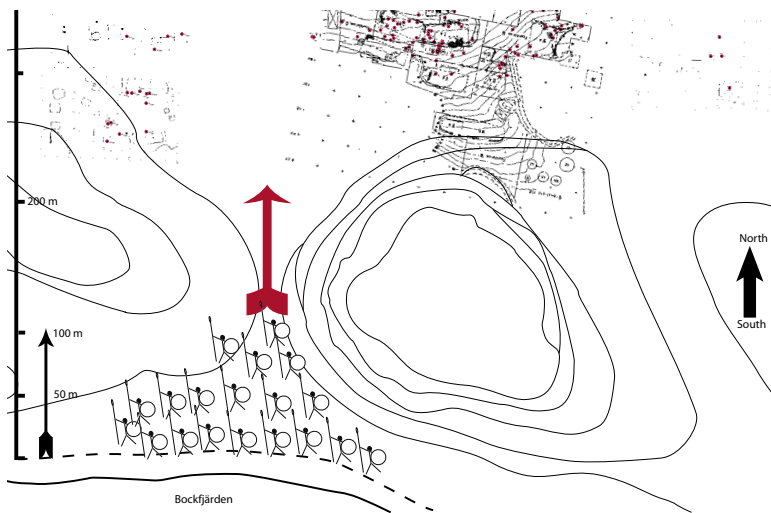
used the traditional Mälartypes. It would thus seem that the arrowheads from the Isles belonged to an alien group of warriors, and that have been deposited in a very specific manner in and around the houses on Helgö and Birka.

*The assault on Helgö*

Sometime during the middle of the 970:ies both Helgö and Birka were attacked, and both places were probably assaulted in a fairly advanced manner, that was carried out as a "pincer movement attack". Probably there were two groups of assailants that either attacked si-



Map 3. We do not know from which direction the attack on Helgö came, perhaps from the south-west or maybe the south-east. The attackers came from two directions in a classical "pincer movement manoeuvre" from the south-west and the north-east.



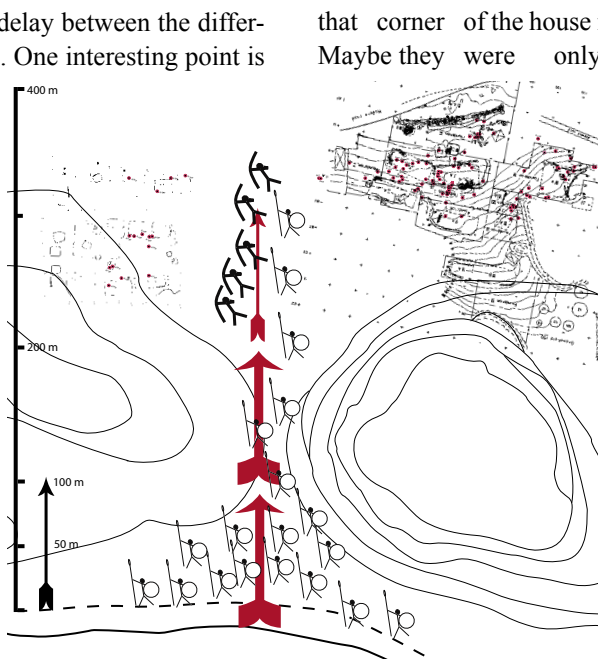
Map 4. The landing at Bockfjärden.

multaneously or with a slight delay between the different the assaults (see Map 2, 3). One interesting point is that the distance from Helgö is only 10km on the water, and a crew of oars men could make the trip in less than 30 minutes! A fact that indicates that the arrowheads are the remains of assault on the two Isles forgotten long ago (see Figures 1, 2 above).

The attackers landed at the beach near Bockfjärden in the south, and the force was able to disembark unseen from the Hall in House group 2 due to the mountain that blocked the view to the south and Bockfjärden. It would seem as if the aggressors knew this and used this knowledge in order to be able so set up a surprise

attack on the inhabitants of the Hall. They could therefore gather their forces at a rallying point somewhere in front or between the two mountains, and the advance about 150-200 metres, until they were in position to open up on House group 6 in the west or the big Hall in the east (Map 4). The distance to House group is around a hundred metres, and there are a dozen arrows found in the eastern part of the Houses, maybe they came from the attack, and either forced the inhabitants to flee or was sufficient to kill those who ventured outside (Map 5, 6).

The main force focused on the target in the east, the Hall. Many opened up already from maximum distance about 200 metres, and shot woollies of arrows in order to give suppressive fire and allow the foot soldiers to advance towards the Hall. One can see several concentration of arrows where the archers focused their woollies, and one can draw an imaginary 'line of fire' in

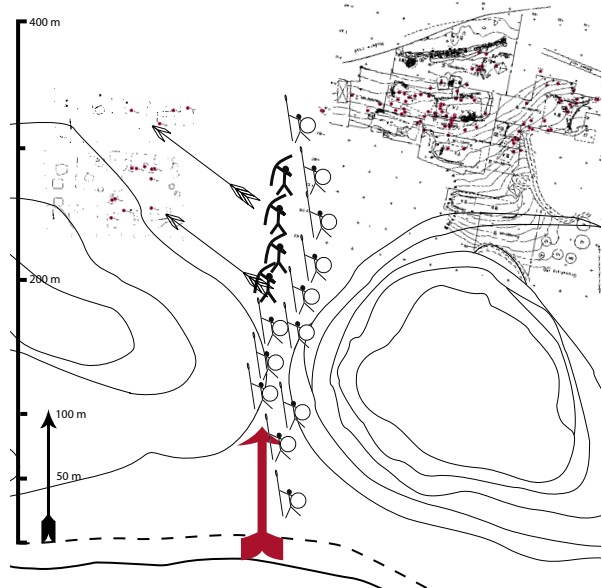


Map 5. The advance and attack on House group 6.

that corner of the house in order to meet the attackers. Maybe they were only trying to flee in order to escape the attack, as there

are a few valuable objects like the Buddha and the crozier that were lost and trod down into the earth after their owners had been shot or killed by the attackers (see Map 8).

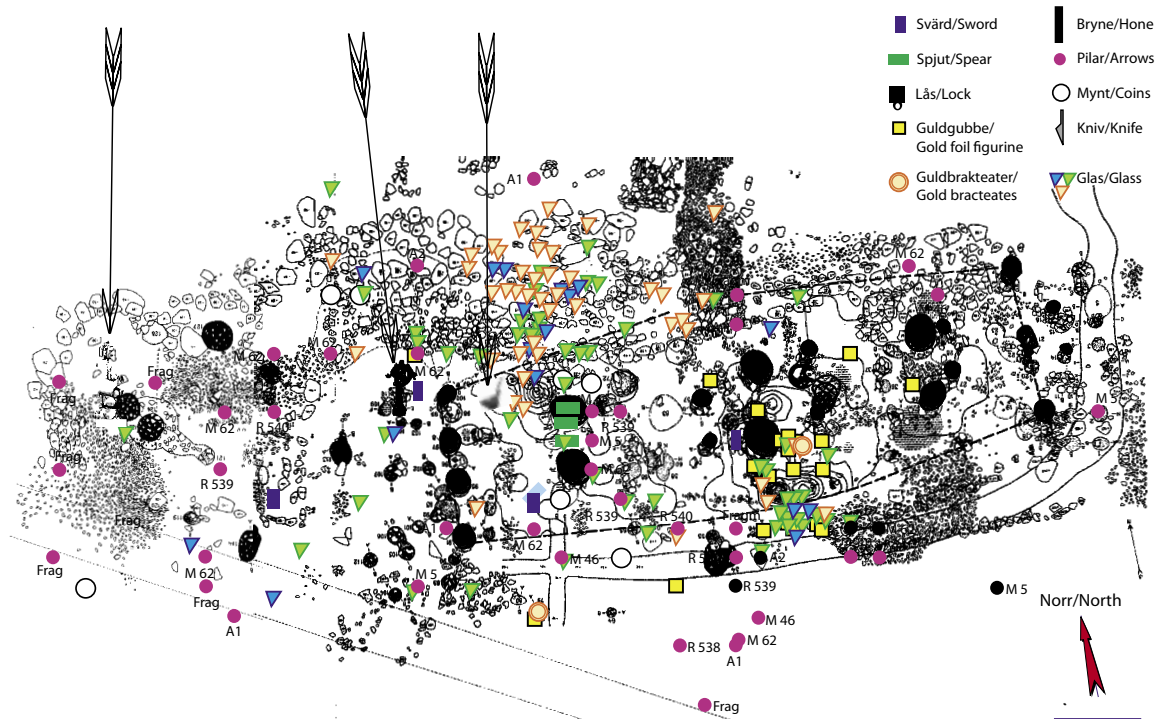
In my analysis of the situation at Helgö and the attack on the Hall, one can see the flight plans of the arrows shot at the house, where some projectiles fell short of the target, while some flew over it (Map 9). There is a high concentration in the western corner of the house, probably where



Map 6. The archers open up on the houses, and their line of fire.

der to see from were the archers loosened the projectiles, and even see if their aim was spot on or if they shot in front of the intended or over shot it (Map 7). One has to assume that the archers used the standard tactics and shot "showers of arrows" in order to provide "suppressive fire" for the advancing spear-and swordsmen, and to create what is commonly called a shower of arrows, a tactic few enemies were able to withstand without cover and protective equipment (Lindbom 1997).

The concentration of arrows in the north-western corner of the Hall, indicates that the inhabitants were trying to defend themselves, and had gathered in



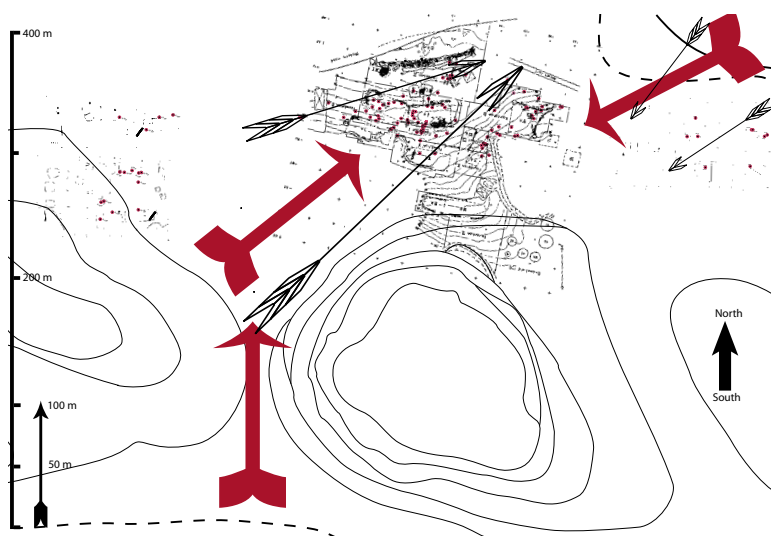
Map 7. The Helgö □

especially the concentration of arrows in front of the hose and its western corner. The Crozier, silver ladle and the Buddha are to be found outside in the north-western corner of the building.

the defenders stood. According to my view the flight plan shows that the archers open fire somewhere in the space between the two hills or mountain in the south-west of the Hall. This assumption is strengthened by the fact that there are no arrows found in the south along the hill in the south east behind foundation VI (see Map 7, 8). If my assumption is correct, the inhabitants of the Hall would have been squeezed between this southern force and the attack coming from north-east, and the trap had closed as the jaws of the pincer, and they were shot to pieces in a hail of arrows from two directions. After the arrow storm ceased, the foot soldiers moved in and killed those who survived the arrows.

All in all, the assault on Helgö lasted less than an hour and all the inhabitants had been killed. There is no proof of a massacre, but it is highly probable, as the numbers of arrows are more than 150, something that would indicate a massive attack on the Hall. We can expect that a high number of arrows have been collected or destroyed, and that the actual number of projectiles has been much higher if one assumes that a fierce assault. It would thus seem likely that the attackers in one swift surprise attack wiped out the people on Helgö, and then proceeded to catch up with the main force that probably already attacked or were on their way to attack Birka!

### *The main attack on Birka*

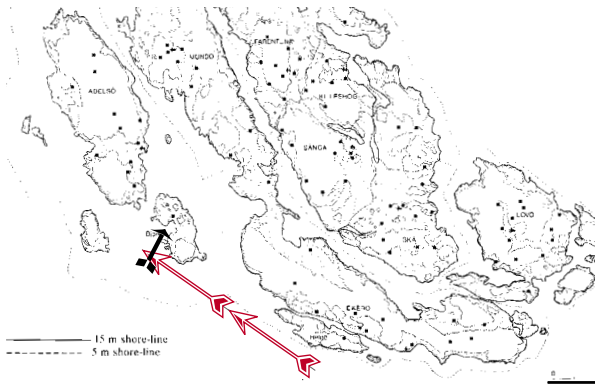


Map 8. The pincher movement.

Unfortunately we do not have enough information concerning the circumstances on Birka during the late 970:ies, as there are no written sources. We do know that the wooden palisade was burned down sometime during the 10<sup>th</sup> Century, whether this was an accident or an act of intentional act of arson connected to assault on the Island is unknown. Perhaps there was a full scale attack on the Island, but hitherto this idea is pure speculation, and would need more excavation work to be done on the Island in order to be corroborated the idea of an attack (Map 9).

We do not know if there were defensive measures on the two hills that lie on each side of the Garrison, high places where





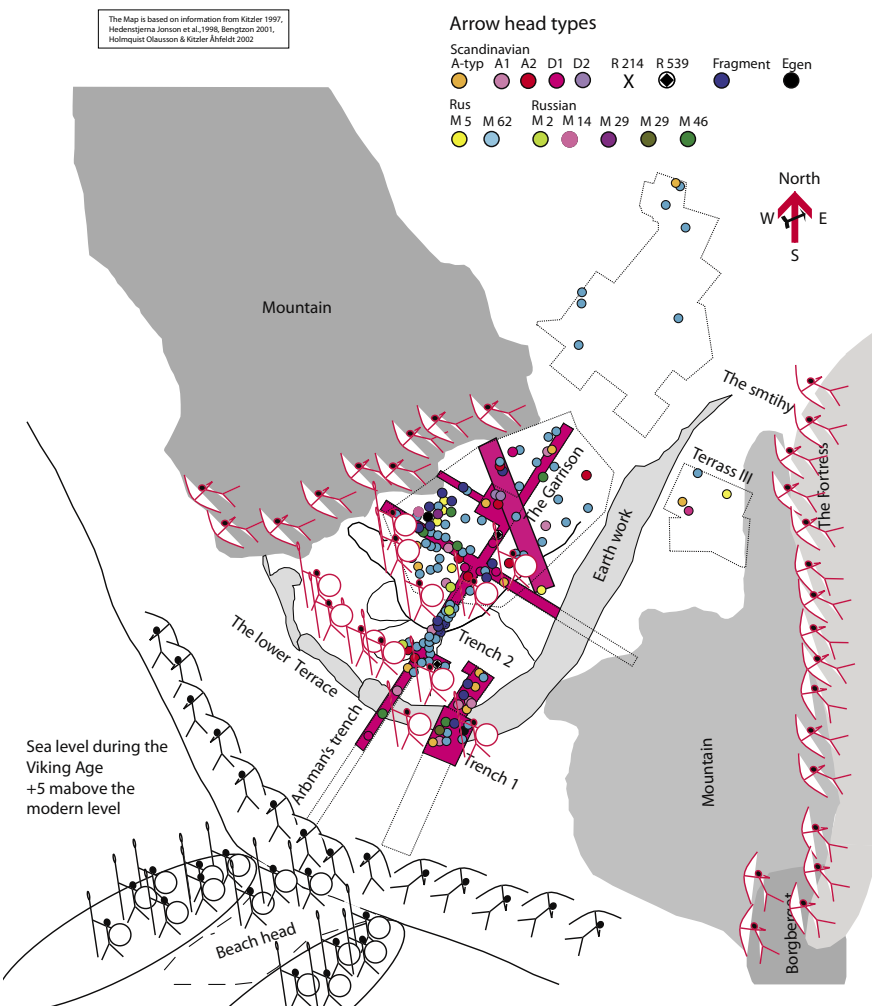
Map 9. The landing at Birka's Garrison.

the defenders either were sheltered by the palisade, or could take refuge in one or several towers that stood on the hill tops (see Map 10). Perhaps there were defensive fortifications on each side of the Garrison, where there were both regular troops manning the walls, and also groups of archers, that could hold of any undesirable advances to the Garrison from the south-west. There must have been some sort of defensive fortifications on each side of the Garrison, as the troops manning the house otherwise would have been caught in between two rocks and a hard place, if they were attacked! Without protection from above the Garrison would make up a death trap, as there were nowhere to escape if an enemy was able to scale the hill on the northern side of the Garrison. Once up on the hill, an enemy could either shoot straight down on the men in the Garrison, or straight into the fortress itself. We do not have any information of such defensive constructions, as it is only the small strip called the Garrison or the warrior's house that has been thoroughly excavated and examined. This means that we will have to make do with the information we got, and try to explain and even speculate on the reasons for the interesting case of the untidy Garrison at Birka. The situation at the Garrison (see Map 2, above) indicates, that something highly irregular took place on the Island more than a thousand years ago.

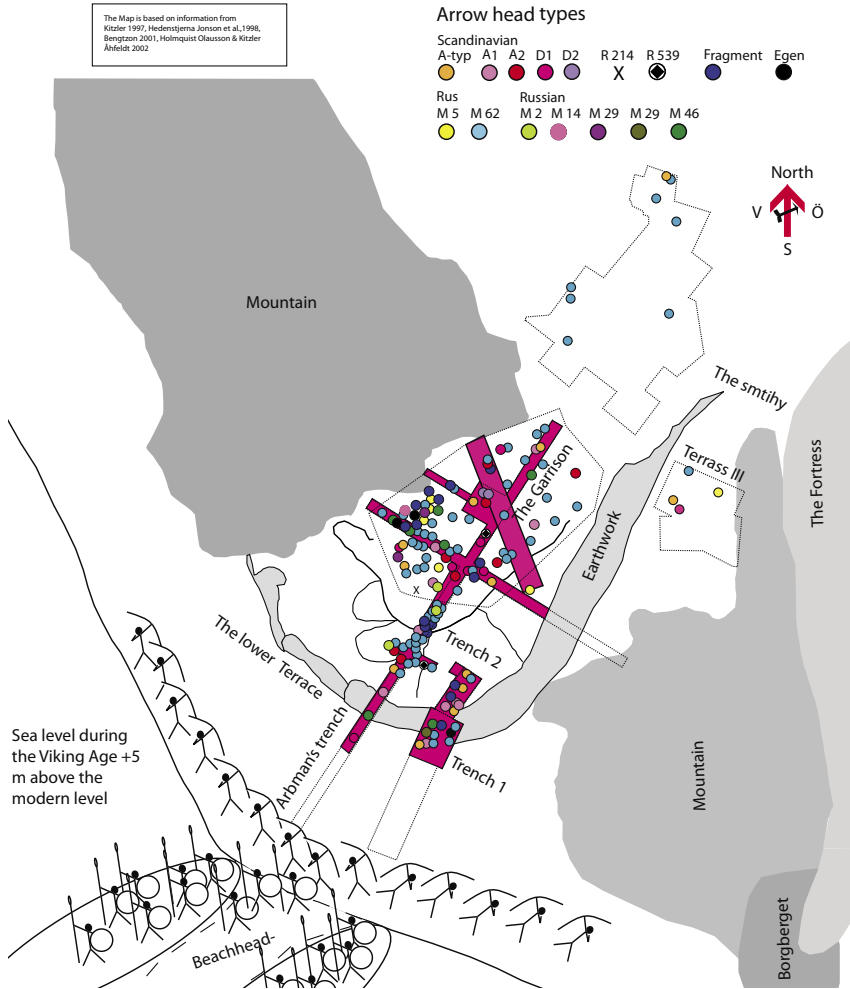
If one accepts the facts as they are and tries to understand and explain the vast number of arrow heads found in the Garrison, one would have to surmise that the attack came from the

water front in the south-west where a bridge head was put up on the jetty that is thought to have been placed below the Garrison. Most probably the Garrison was the "backdoor" to the fortress, as access to fortification from the water was easy on this side, and deliveries of food and other supplies could be carried up the steep hill to the guards in the warrior's house. One might carry supplies over land from the harbour in the town further north, but this is highly improbable as one would have to work much more, than just to deliver food and equipment to the backdoor at the Garrison.

The attackers tried to land their boats at the bridge below the Garrison, but even some 200metres away, the foreigners opened fire on the Garrison and the men manning the palisade on the lower terrace (see Map 11). On Map 11 one can see in the profile that the first finds of arrowheads both in Arbman's trench and trench 1 come from an area slightly in front of the lower terrace and the earthworks that are supposed to make up the foundation for the lower palisade some 20metres in front of the warrior's house. One may assume that some of the attacker's arrows fell short of the target and landed in front of the stockade. In a picture of trench 1 and 2 one can actually see that there are no arrows found below



Map 10. Defenders and attackers, a complicated situation, where we unfortunately have too little information, and have to speculate on how the battle was fought!

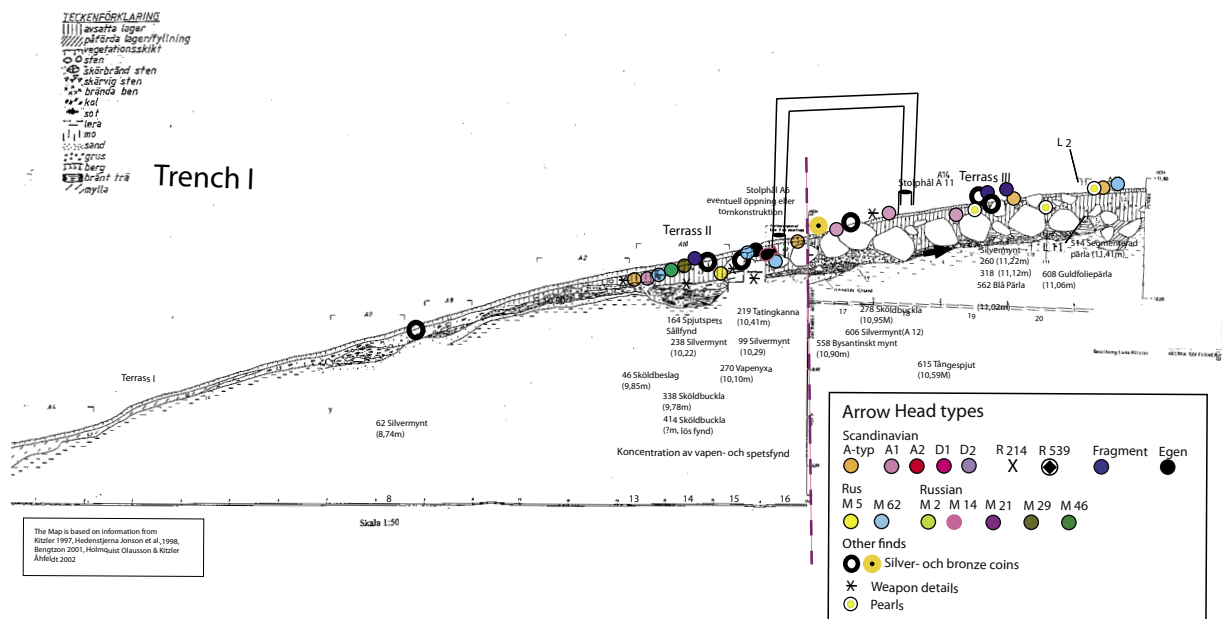


Map 11. The archers attack, and the distribution of arrows in the investigated site between the two hills. terrace 2, and that the arrowheads are concentrated in front of and behind the gate that has been assumed to have been in the palisade (Kizler 1997, Map 12). The figure of the profile in trenches 1 and 2 also shows that

the arrow heads all have been found about 50centimeters below the top soil and indicate that they have been deposited at the same time.

On maps 11 and 12 one can also see that there are two concentrations of arrows, one slightly in front of the Garrison, and one outside the house and in the south western side of the house's walls. There are also some arrows that overshot the target and landed behind it. The map also shows that there were a lot of arrows that belonged to the Rus-type M 62 (Map 11). Map 14 shows the concentration of arrows to the south-western corner of the house, where the arrows are either stuck in the wall or have buried themselves in the ground in front of the building and in the floor on the inside of the house.

This part of the house seems to have been burnt and broken down, much like the episode that is told in Egil's saga, where the Chieftain Thorolf is attacked by the Norwegian King Harald, and the house is set on fire. Thorolf decides on a last desperate attempt to break out by tearing down the wall, rather than being burnt alive or slaughtered as they try to escape the flames and ran into



Map 12. The trenches and their profiles allow us to see the the depth and the layers and the corrolation between the arrow heads and other finds, and to assess their chorology and to judge if they are contemporary. Note the concentration of missiles in front of and behind the stockade.

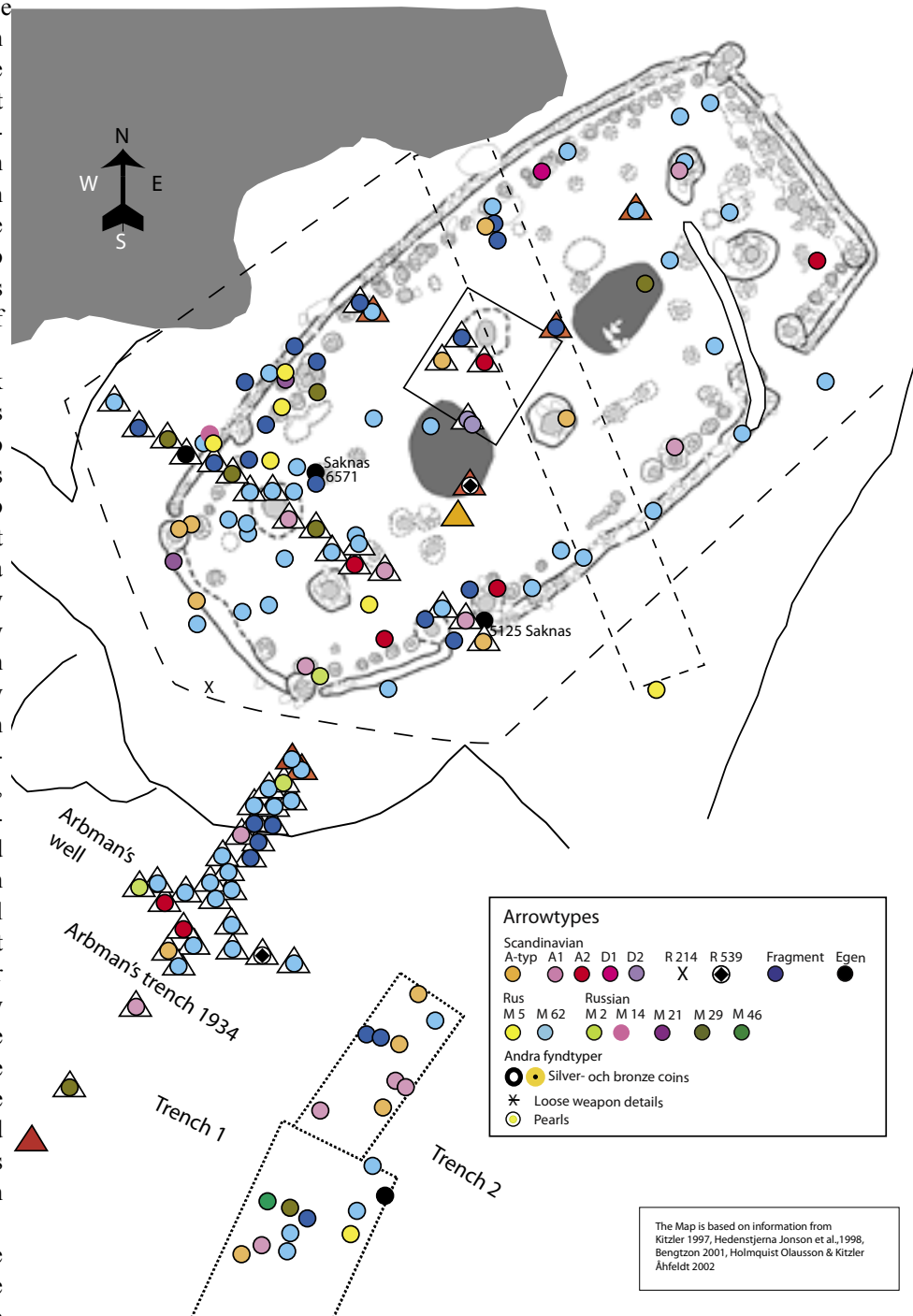
the arms of the attackers! Thorolf and his men broke down the wall and made a desperate attempt to fight off the enemy. King Harald kills Thorolf, and the fight is over (Lindbom 2008, see Egil's Saga, p. 58 ff.).

Maybe it was the opposite case at Birka, as there are signs of disturbance in the corner nearest the hill in the north-west, where there are finds of at least two broken swords or pommels, and a lot of plate armour and rings belonging to a hauberk both in- and outside of the house (see Map 2, 8). The south-western side of the building is badly preserved and rubble and debris have clearly been disturbed, and these layers are different than the other parts of the house (see Holmquist Olausson & Kitzler Åhfeldt 2002, plans). All in all the house has been heavily disturbed in the southern part, and also the majority of the finds come from this part of the building.

Much like the attack on Helgö the defenders of the Garrison seem to have lost the fight, as they did not have time to clear out the house, but were forced to leave in a hurry or were killed by the attackers. Contrary to Helgö the finds from Birka show a distinctly military presence, with a lot of weapons, armour, combs and coins, all of which could be associated with some kind of fight or disturbance in the building. It is logical that the attackers did not bother to clean up after the fight, or that they probably did not have the time to loot the place properly, as they were needed elsewhere, and moved on to the fortress or to plunder the town below.

The fact that there are no corpses in the Garrison may be seen to decrease the probability that there has been a

fight in the house. From examples in Battlefield Archaeology we know that it is always hard to find the corpses and the mass graves after the battles, unless we accidentally run into them by mistake. Maybe the corpses were dragged out of the building and buried in a mass grave elsewhere, either by the attacker or the survivors after the men had been killed. Perhaps there is a mass grave somewhere on the Island, where the other victims of the attack were buried.



Map 13. The Garrison or the warrior's house, note the concentration of arrows behind the palisade, and in front of the house. Also observe the concentration of arrows in the south western-corner of the house, both outside the walls and inside the building.

## *The motive for the attack on the Isles*

One can only speculate on the reasons behind the assumed attacks on Helgö and Birka, but we do know that the Trade post on Birka ceases to exist in the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> Century and the trade moves to the King's new town in Sigtuna. However we do not have enough information on the situation in the King's demesne in Signhildsberg, and perhaps there was a phase where the trade from Birka moved there, but later was moved to Sigtuna.

In a recent article by Sten Tesch *Sigtuna – Det makt-politiska och sakrala stadsrummet under sen vikingatid och tidig medeltid*, he explains the building of the town Sigtuna as a joint venture between the King and the expanding Christian Church, where the King Erik Segersäll is the prime mover in the start of "the Swedish urbanisation project". The town was originally planned in a new way with "parcels" that were assigned to different merchants, craftsmen and towns people, something that indicates a structured plan for the town probably drawn up by the King (Tesch 2007, s. 82, 87 ff.). It would seem that the merchants and chieftains that controlled the trade on Birka somehow were a threat to the ambitious King's plans, and that they somehow had to be removed for the King to carry through his ideas, in order for him to be able to introduce taxes on the trade revenues.

### **Birka's function and trade**

Birka's function has been debated by many scholars, and one difficulty is why there are so few mansions or elite halls found on the Island, as most buildings from the investigation in the town are rather small and remind us of the houses in Sigtuna on their small parcels (Gräslund 1980, Holmquist Olausson 1993). But maybe Tesch is right when he states that the elite did not actually live in these houses for any longer time periods, but only during the time when the King was present in Sigtuna. Ann-Sofie Gräslund has argued in a similar fashion, when she questioned the logistics, and stated that the town on Birka was highly dependent on the surrounding country side in order to provide the inhabitants of the Island with food and other necessities, which means that they did not live on the Island, but visited only at special occasions (Gräslund 1989). We do not know whether the people that controlled Birka were indigenous people, or if they as the grave goods in the rich chamber graves indicate belonged to Rus elite of mixed origin, that controlled the trade between the interior of Sweden and the waterways to the Rus colonies in Russia.

### **The targets of the attacks**

It seems as if the attack on Helgö took place in order to kill the inhabitants of the big Hall that was situated on the Island. Frands Herschend has suggested that the at-

tack was provoked by the fact that the inhabitants were Christians, and that they were assaulted and killed by heathen warriors (Herschend 1995). Another motive may have been that it was here that the hersir had his hall, and perhaps it was he or his family that was the prime target of the attack on Helgö. As a surprise attack on the hersir's hall would make it hard for the defenders on Birka to organise the defence, as their leader was dead, this would lead to internal strife and confusion among the remaining troops.

### **The scale and strategy behind the attacks**

We do not know if there were two attack groups involved in the assault, one that hit Helgö first, and a second group that simultaneously attacked the Garrison and fortress at Birka, or if it was only one group that first made a surprise assault on Helgö, and then continued on to Birka.

It is probable that there were indeed two attack groups, and that they performed a similar attack on Birka, where they first attacked from the south-east against the Town and fortress, and then also attacked the "back door" the Garrison in a similar pincer movement as on Helgö.

The only limit to our speculations on this attack is the scale and size of the attacks against Helgö and Birka. Perhaps it was a mere "pirate raid" that struck the rich Island of Helgö sometime during the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> Century, and that the attack on Birka is another separate attack on another occasion! If this is the case the Viking Age must have been a turbulent period, with a lot of Battles and raids that we do not know of or even heard about! Then we also have to accept that the Rus or Russian influence have been more important in Sweden than we hitherto have realised or expected, as it is the Svear or Rus that traditionally are assumed to have the role of the aggressor! But if we accept the fact that the arrow types from the Helgö and Birka both belong to the same foreign types that are very rare in Sweden, and are dated to the late 10<sup>th</sup> Century. The most logical answer is thus a large scale attack with a clear strategy and an aim to destroy and kill the inhabitants on Isles. This kind of attack will need that the sufficient number of warriors are available to deal both with the population in the town and with the defenders in the fortress. Most probably the attackers would have to lay siege to the Garrison and fortress on Birka, and to cut off the Birka's lifeline to Adelsö, in order to stop any reinforcements to come to the aid of the defenders on the island. Perhaps there even was a third attack group that assaulted Adelsö at the same time they attacked Birka.

### *Who did it!*

In order to wrap up this case, I will try to point out a probable perpetrator, and suggest *why* he or rather they



*had motives* to assault Helgö and Birka. Perhaps it was the founding father of Sigtuna Erik Segersäll, who according to Tesch had risen to power early in the 970:ies, and definitely had an interest to destabilise or destroy the Rus on Birka.

Unfortunately this is mere speculation as the written sources have little to say about this turbulent period, and we are still in the dark when discussing the events that led to the move from Birka to the new town of Sigtuna. But according to Nestor's Chronicle Prince Vladimir seems to have been ousted from Novgorod by his brother sometime during the 970:ies, and fled across the Baltic Sea to the King in Sweden. Vladimir seems to have stayed in Sweden for a couple of years before he triumphantly returned with Swedish mercenaries and began his invasion of Russia (Franklin & Shepard 1998).

We do not know *how and why Vladimir* was able to return as a successful war leader in the 980:ies, and why he was able to persuade the Swedish King to help him in his attack on his brother. Perhaps the two kings were great friends, or maybe Vladimir was cashing in favours for services given earlier, when he was a refugee or a landless war leader in the service of the Swedish King. What kind of favour would have given him the support of the Swedish King? Perhaps he and his troops were allowed to assault Helgö and to sack Birka, kill the hersir and the Rus elite in order to make it easier for the King to take control over the trade and move the merchants to the new town of Sigtuna.

We do not know this for certain, but such a scenario would make it possible to explain the extraordinary occurrence of several hundred foreign arrowheads on Helgö and Birka, and also discuss the distribution of the arrows outside and inside the houses. But more importantly to start a discussion on what happened at the end of the tenth Century, when Birka vanished and seems to have been replaced by the King's new town Sigtuna!

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