

The Assault on Helgö and Birka and the end of the Iron Age

Peter Lindbom

Abstract. In this article I propose that there was an assault on the island of Helgö at the end of the 10th Century, and that this attack was orchestrated by the Swedish king or his Rus allies. The attack on Helgö was synchronised with a simultaneous assault on Birka. Both attacks have common characteristics: the hall buildings were thoroughly destroyed and a huge amount of arrows was shot at the houses. The majority of the arrowheads from the isles are of foreign origin, and more specifically, of Rus making. This means that the attackers either were Rus pirates or Rus warriors that ransacked Helgö and plundered Birka. These attacks somehow made it easier for the king to move the trade from Birka to his new town Sigtuna, and that Helgö and Birka gave way to the urbanisation process and the Medieval period in Sweden.

The title of this article is meant to be provocative, as it is a statement about how we are to understand and interpret the past. However, 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 traditional archaeological materials. 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 present a problem with stories about battles like the Teutoburger forest, Fyrisvallarna or Helgeå. Unfortunately we seldom have information about these places. As these sites are rarely found and excavated, the credibility of these sources has decreased and they have been dismissed as fantasies. However, recently discovered finds from Kalkriese have provided more evidence that historical texts such as Tacitus’ tale about the Germanic massacre on a Roman army might after all be true.

What do we do when we stumble on a find that consists of a lot of weapons, and 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, and what further conclusions can we draw from these materials concerning the past?

In this article I present the arrowheads from Helgö and Birka, and argue that the only logical explanation of these finds is the assumption that they are remains from an assault that took place in the 970’s. As ‘un-

tidy houses', both the Hall on Helgö and the "Garrison" on Birka can be thought of as a unique phenomenon in Swedish Archaeology, since most houses seem to have been cleaned and emptied before they were abandoned (fig. 1, 2). Both houses show signs of intentional 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 of some kind. In order to present these attacks, I will first give an archaeological background and present the arrowheads found on the two isles. It is these artefacts which form the basis to my explanation of 'how' and 'by whom' these assaults were carried out.

My theory is based on the finding of more than 300 arrowheads on 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 10th Century, which 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 facts strengthen my idea that the attackers were foreigners.

One may speculate that the arrows would have been part of some kind of offering, and that they have been intentionally spread over the settlements on Birka and Helgö. But this is hard to accept, as some of the arrows were stuck in the walls of the houses, and seem to have been shot from a certain direction. There may have been some bizarre ritual, where one shot arrows at one's houses in order to achieve some unknown purpose, but this seems highly unlikely, as there is a clear intention behind the shots (see figures below).

The fact that so many arrowheads have been found on Helgö and Birka is also a rare phenomenon, which only has parallels in the Danish bog finds, where an equal number have been found. There are different theories on the origin of the Danish finds. The traditional view is that an attacking force was defeated, and was then offered to the Gods (Ilkjær 2001, 2003). A more recent perspective sees the depositions as a Danish version of the Roman triumphal marches (Storgaard 2001, 2003). It is interesting to note that in this Danish example, two completely different interpretations concerning the origins of the weapons have been proposed based upon the same material: one where the foreign attacking troops lost and their gear were sacrificed, while the other imagines the Danes made victorious campaigns abroad and brought the spoils home to sacrifice. One common observation made by both interpretations is that the arrows and weapons were deposited or offered in heaps in the Danish bogs, whereas the arrows from Helgö and Birka are found in a very haphazard manner near settlements and buildings, and in some cases have been found stuck in the walls and the houses.

One problem is that the foreign arrowheads from Birka and Helgö come from "open contexts", while most of the Swedish arrows come from "closed contexts" or graves. 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 his "social capital" that showed who they were and to what social strata they belonged, we can start to compare the two sets of material in order 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

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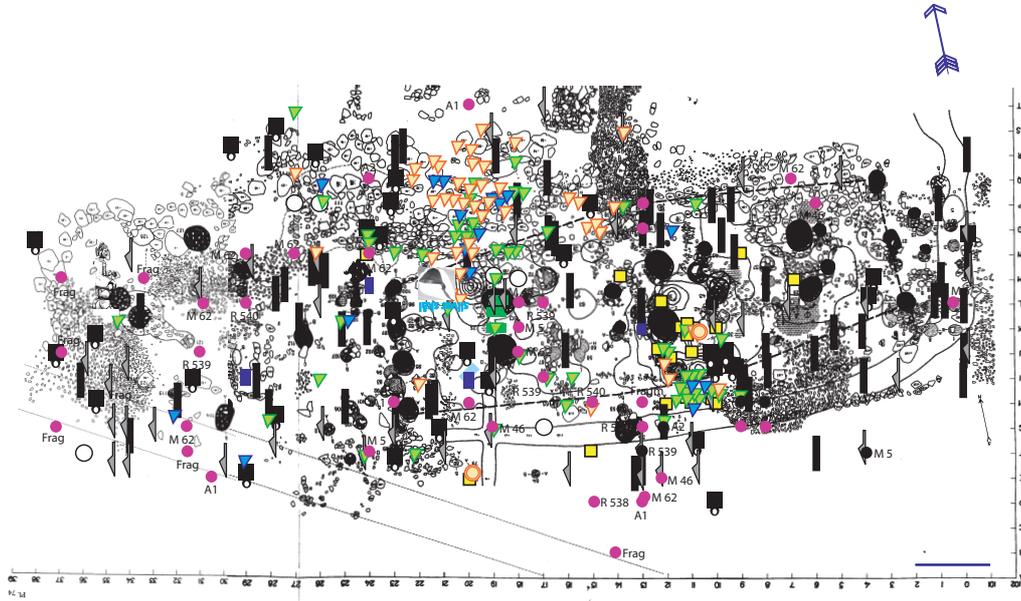


Fig. 1. The Hall on Helgö. Observe the devastation of the house and all the things that have been left in this very “untidy house”.

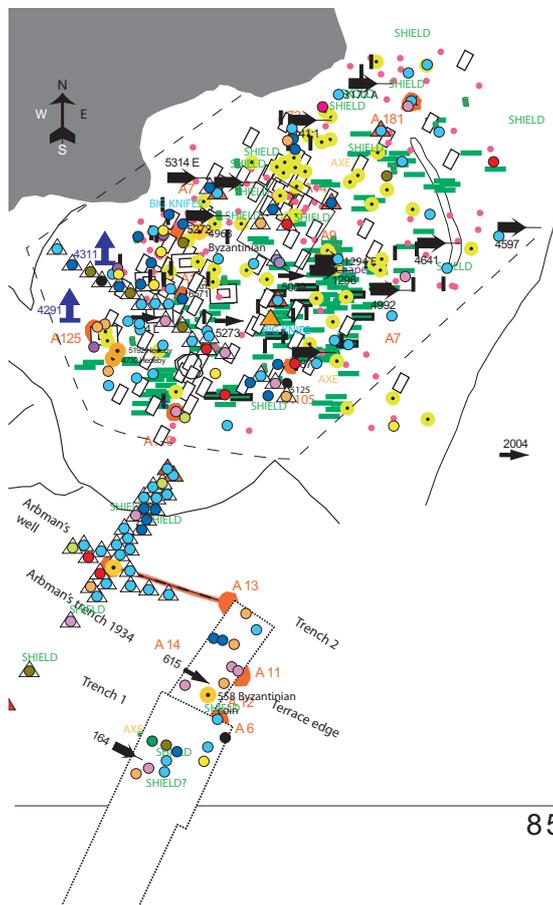


Fig. 2. The untidy house on Birka or “the warrior’s house”. The Garrison was probably attacked, and much like the Hall on Helgö, it was abandoned in a hurry. There are plenty of weapons and military equipment in- or outside the Garrison, suggesting that it was attacked, and that this is the remains of the Battle of the Garrison described in the text.

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 through time during the Iron Age, while the foreign arrows only describe a frozen moment when the attacks hit the isles.

In order to analyse the materials from Birka and Helgö, I will present the indigenous types and their development during the Iron Age. I then turn my attention to the atypical arrowheads from these two sites 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 the latter part of the Iron Age (see Duczko 2004; Hedenstierna-Jonson 2006).

In my thesis *Weapons in the time of the wreccas*, I showed that the Norwegian arrowheads have a long and unique development, spanning the whole Iron Age to the early Medieval Period, roughly AD 0–1250 (Rygh 1885; Böhner 1958; Medvedev 1966; Wegraeus 1971; Lindbom 2006; *fig. 3*). In my study 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 “longue durée” 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 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 on impact due to the shape of the tang, which acted like a wedge. 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 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 Mälar designs, but there is also a

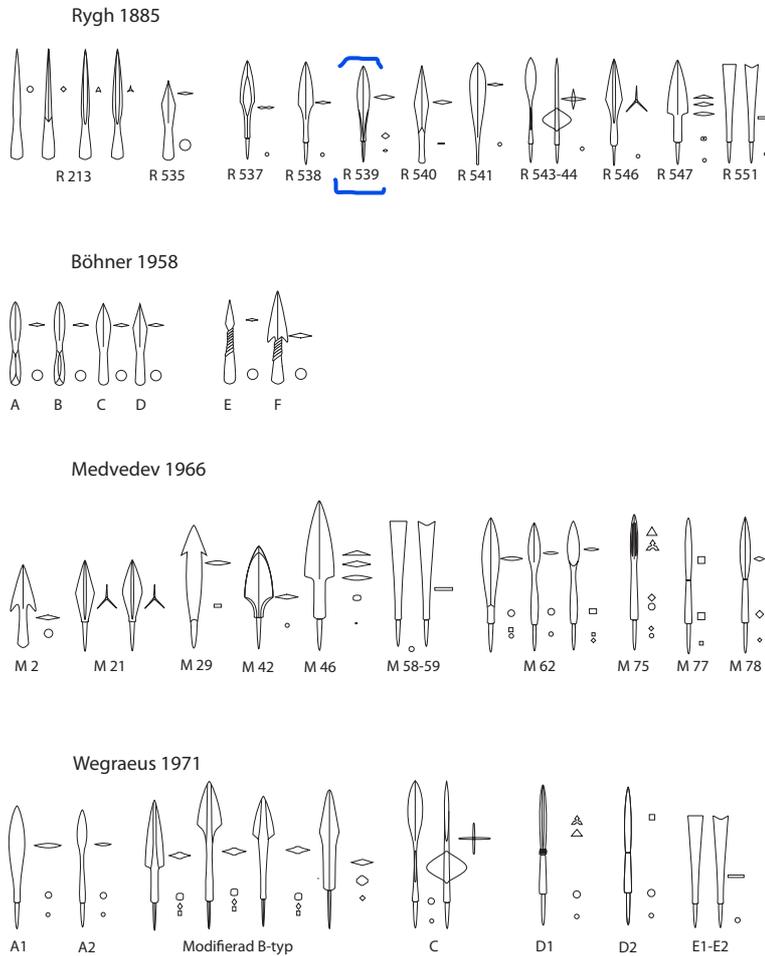


Fig. 3. The synthesized types as they were presented in the author's thesis, note that many of the types in the different typologies are actually the same types of arrowheads, for which researchers have used different names.

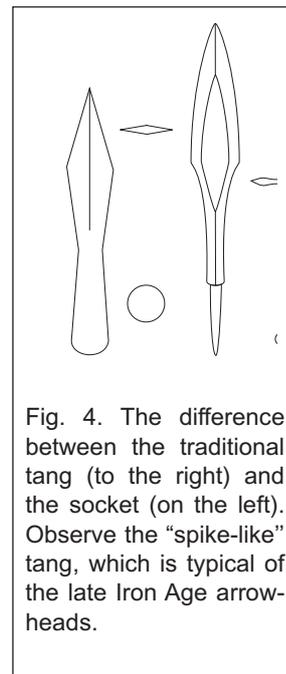


Fig. 4. The difference between the traditional tang (to the right) and the socket (on the left). Observe the "spike-like" tang, which is typical of the late Iron Age arrowheads.

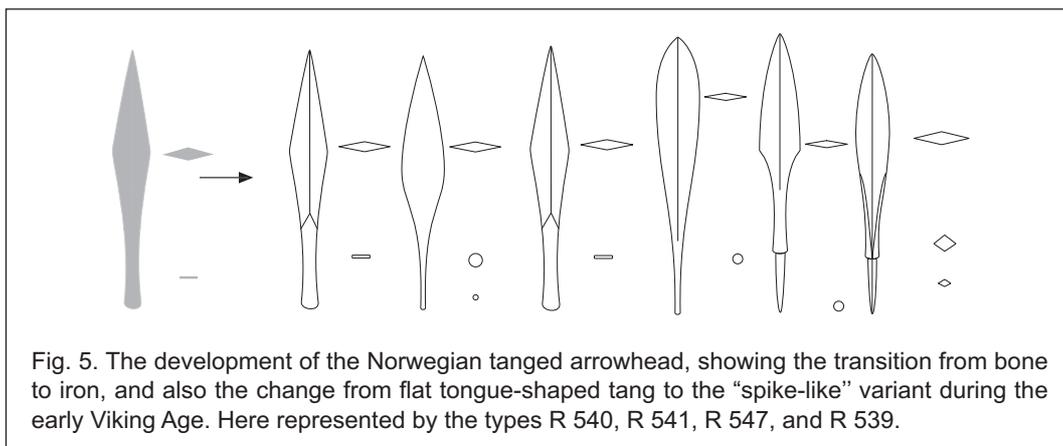


Fig. 5. The development of the Norwegian tanged arrowhead, showing the transition from bone to iron, and also the change from flat tongue-shaped tang to the "spike-like" variant during the early Viking Age. Here represented by the types R 540, R 541, R 547, and R 539.



Fig. 6. The three traditions, the Norwegian square-shaped design, the Mälars type with its sleek and round shape, and the Easter Rus tradition with its rectangular cross section.

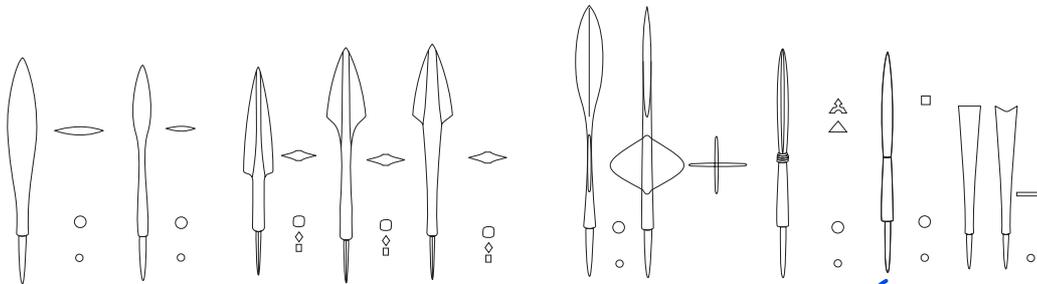
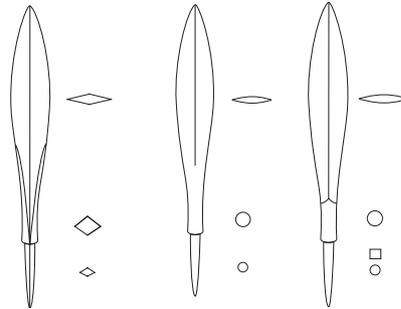


Fig. 7. The Mälars tradition is very similar to Wegraeus' typology, here shown with the types A–E according to Wegraeus 1971.

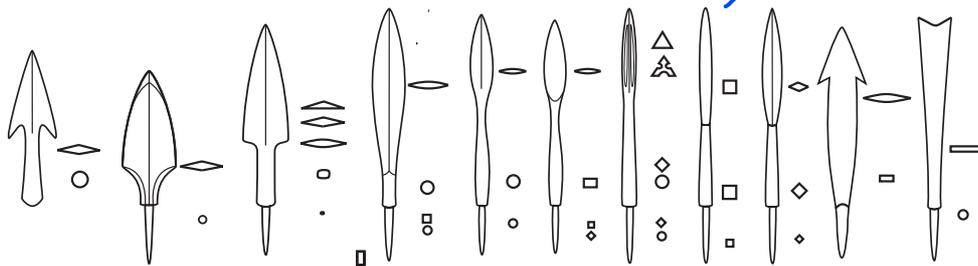


Fig. 8. The Eastern Tradition corresponds with Medvedev's typology; note that there are some Russian types that have Swedish counterparts, for example the type M 62.

third variation, the Eastern or the Rus tradition.

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 8th Century, and is characteristic for the new material culture that is typical both for Norway, Sweden and Denmark during the Viking period. 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 arrowheads 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).

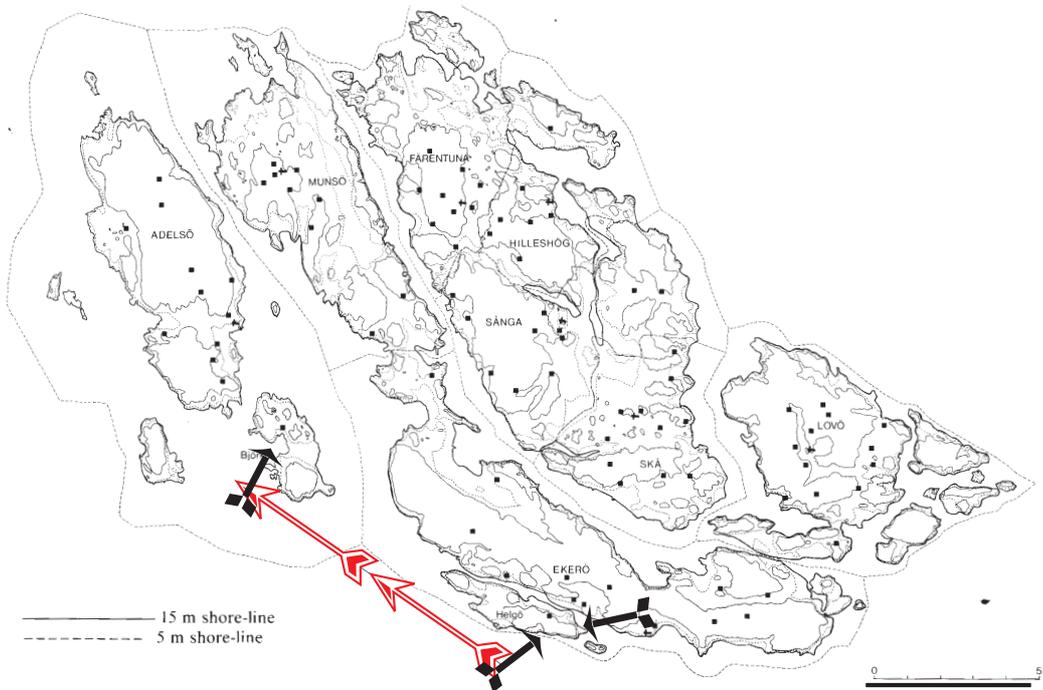
The Mälär type or, Wegraeus type A1, is first introduced in the graves on the newly established trading post on Birka sometime in the first half of the 8th Century. It would seem that the change from continental socket point to the indigenous tanged type is due to ideological reasons, and may be taken as indicating 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 8th or the 9th Centuries, and is typical of the Rus in Russia (Pushkina 1997; Muraseva 1997; Jansson 1997; Duczko 2004; Lindbom 2006). The Rus version, or Eastern tradition, is a mixture of both the Norwegian and the Mälär traditions, but it is mainly a close relative of the

Swedish heads; the Russian points in general are smaller and lighter than the Norwegian arrowheads. 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 (fig. 8). We do not know when the Rus types developed, but they are present in the Russian material from the 10th Century or even earlier. The Rus arrowheads from Russia occur in chamber graves similar to the ones present on Birka and in the boat grave materials from the Mälär valley belonging to the 10th 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 material in for example Gnezdovo is mainly made up of M 62 points (Lindbom 2006).

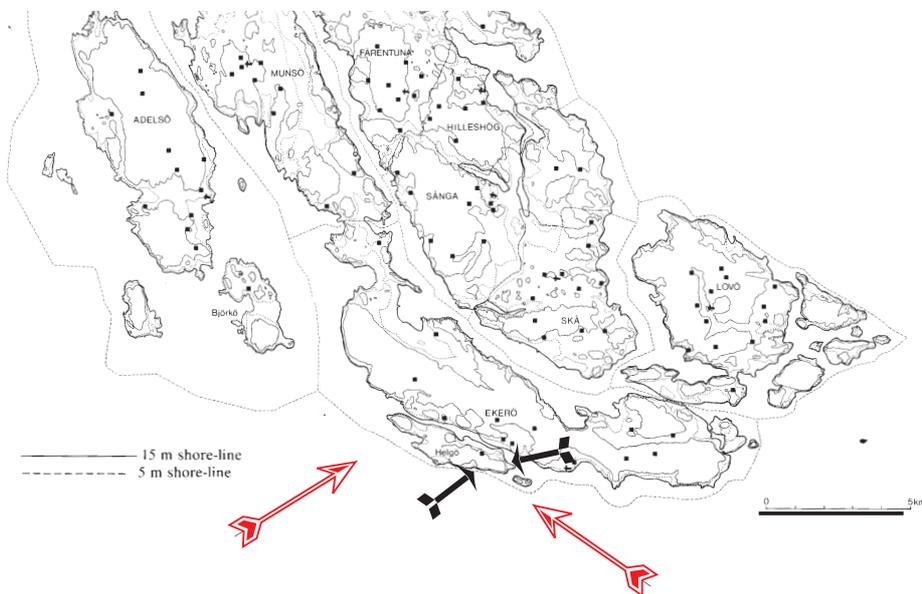
The Assault on Helgö

Sometime during the middle of the 970's both Helgö and Birka were attacked, and both attacks probably were carried out as "pincer movements". Most likely there were two groups of assailants that either attacked simultaneously or with a slight delay between the different assaults (maps 2, 3). One interesting point is that the distance from Helgö to Birka is only 10 km on the water, and a crew of oarsmen could make the trip in less than 30 minutes; a fact which suggests that the arrowheads are the remains of assaults on the two isles long ago forgotten (fig. 1, 2 above).

The Helgö 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. It would

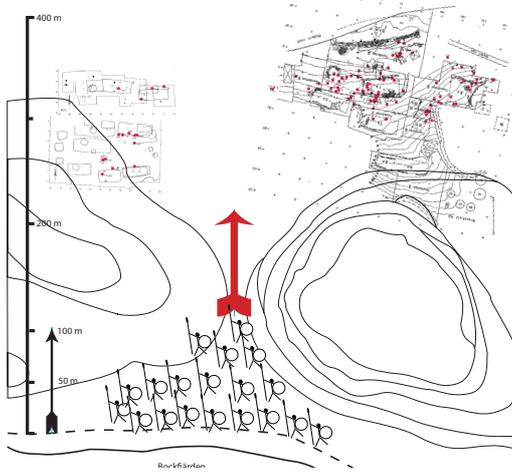


Map 2. The location of Helgö and Birka in Lake Mälaren, note the short distance between the islands, around 10 km. It would take an attacker less than half an hour to row from Helgö to Birka by boat.

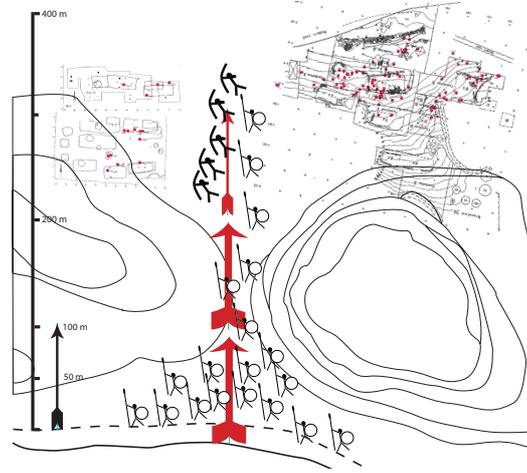


Map 3. We do not know from which direction the attack on Helgö came, perhaps from the southwest or maybe the southeast. The attackers came from two directions in a classical “pincer movement manoeuvre” from the southwest and the northeast.

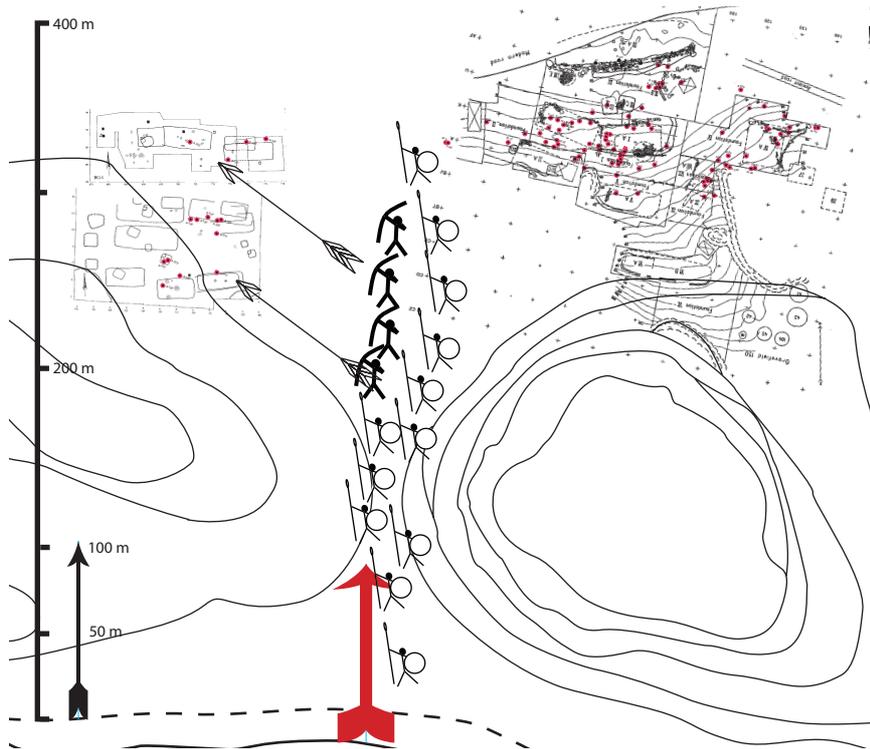
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Map 4. The landing at Bockfjorden.



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



Map 6. The archers open up on the houses, and their line of fire, here illustrated by big arrows to show the direction to which they were aimed and shot.

seem as if the aggressors knew this and used this knowledge in order to be able to 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 about a hundred metres, and there are a dozen arrows found in the eastern part of the houses, maybe they came from the attack which either forced the inhabitants to flee or was sufficient to kill those who ventured outside (*map 5, 6*).

The main force focused its assault the Hall. Many opened up already from maximum distance about 200 metres, and shot volleys of arrows in order to give suppressive fire and allow the foot soldiers to advance towards the Hall. One can see several concentrations of arrows where the archers aimed their attack, and one can draw an imaginary “line of fire” in order to see from where the archers loosened the projectiles, and even see if their aim was ‘spot-on’, fell short, or over-shot (*map 7*). One has to assume that the archers used the standard tactics and shot volleys 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 northwestern corner of the Hall indicates that the inhabitants were trying to defend themselves, and had gathered in there in order to meet the attackers. Maybe they were trying to escape the attack, as there are a few

valuable objects like the Buddha and the crosier that were lost and trod down into the earth after their owners had been shot or killed by the attackers (*map 8*).

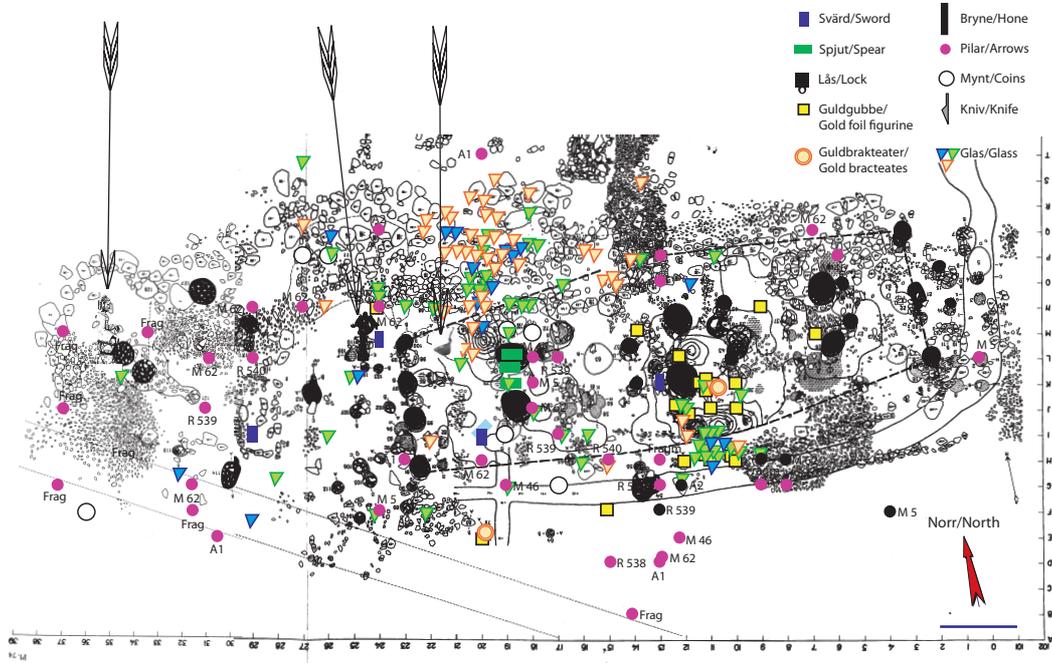
In my analysis of the attack on the Hall, one can see the flight plans of the arrows shot at the house, where some projectiles fell short of the target, while some flew over it (*map 9*). There is a high concentration in the western corner of the house, probably where the defenders stood. According to my view the flight plan shows that the archers opened fire somewhere in the space between the two hills or mountains to the southwest of the Hall. This assumption is strengthened by the fact that there are no arrows found to the south, along the hill in the southeast behind foundation VI (*map 8, 9*). If my assumption is correct, the inhabitants of the Hall were squeezed between this southern force and the attack coming from north-east, and the pincer attack closed, 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 had survived.

All in all, the assault on Helgö lasted less than an hour and all the inhabitants seem to have 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. We can also expect that a high number of arrows have been collected or destroyed, and that the actual number of projectiles has been much higher.

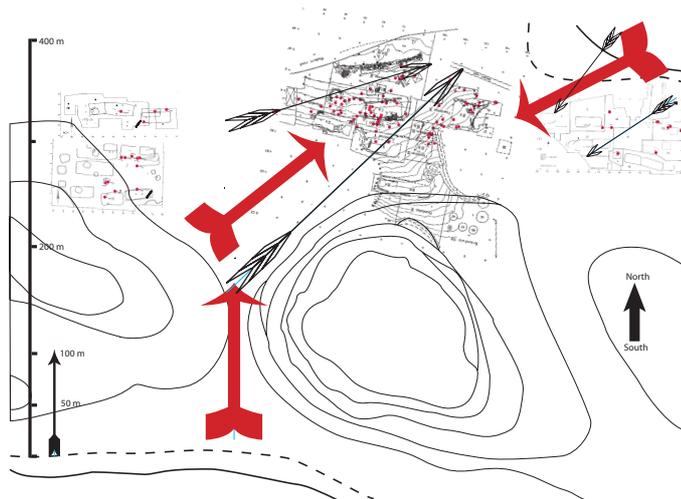
The Attack on Birka

Unfortunately we do not have enough information concerning the circumstances on Birka during the late 970’s, as there are no written sources. We do know that the wood-

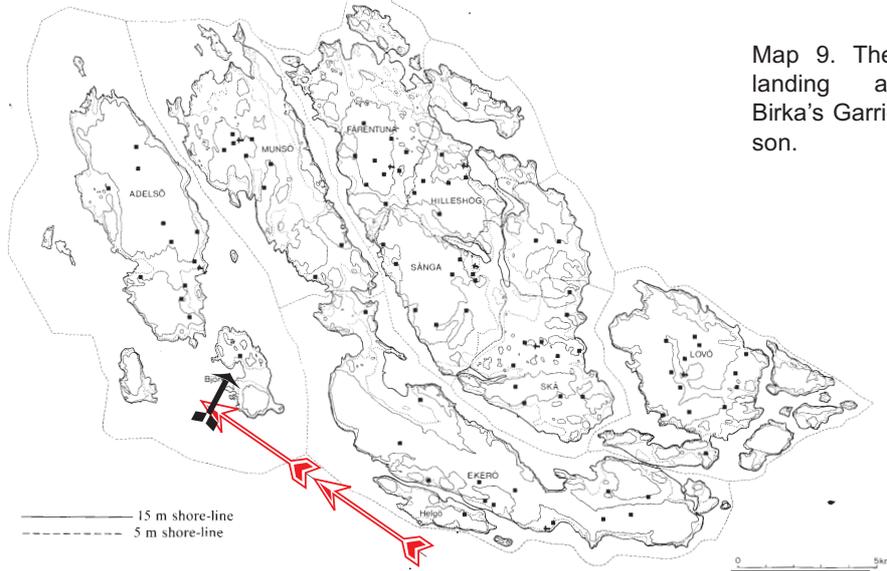
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Map 7. The Helgö Hall and the arrows, note the arrowheads in and around the walls, and also the arrowheads concentrated to the western part of the house, especially the concentration of arrows in front of the house and its western corner. Here illustrated with big arrows to show the direction they were aimed and shot. The crozier, silver ladle and the Buddha were found outside, in the northwestern corner of the building.



Map 8. The pincer movement and the direction of attack and flight of the arrows shot at the Hall building on Helgö.



Map 9. The landing at Birka's Garrison.



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.

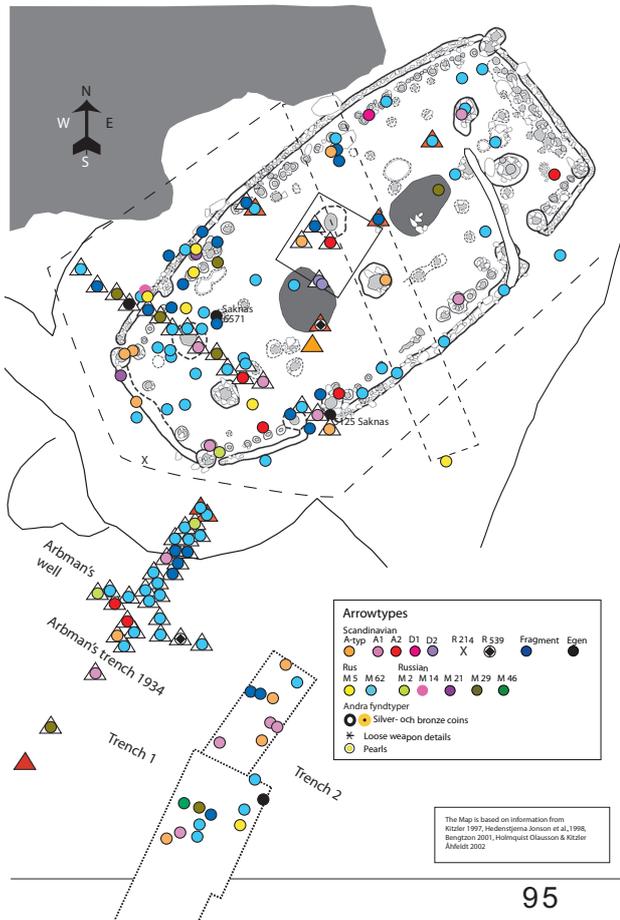


Map 11. The archers' attack and the distribution of arrowheads in the investigated site between the two hills.

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Map 12. The trenches and their profiles allow us to see the layers, their depths, and the correlation between the arrowheads and other finds. This allows assessment of their chronology to judge if the artefacts are contemporary. Note the concentration of missiles in front of and behind the stockade.



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.

en palisade was burned down sometime during the 10th 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, but hitherto this idea is pure speculation, and would need more excavation in order to be corroborated (*map 10*).

We do not know if there were defensive measures on the two hills that lie on each side of the Garrison, for example high places where the defenders were either sheltered by the palisade, or could take refuge in one or several towers that stood on the hill tops (*map 11*). Perhaps there were defensive fortifications on each side of the Garrison, where there were both regular troops and groups of archers manning the walls that could hold off any undesirable advances to the Garrison from the southwest. 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, literally, in between 'two rocks and a hard place' if attacked.

Without protection from above the Garrison would be a death trap, as there was 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 examined or excavated. The situation at the Garrison (*map 2, above*) indicates that something highly irregular took place on the island more than a thousand years ago.

If one accepts the facts and tries to understand and explain the vast number of arrowheads found in the Garrison, one would have to surmise that the attack came from the waterfront to the southwest by means of a bridgehead on the jetty, which is believed to have been located below the Garrison. Most probably the Garrison was the "back-door" to the fortress, as access to the fortification from the water was easy, 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.

The attackers tried to land their boats at the bridge below the Garrison, but from about 200 m away the foreigners opened fire on the Garrison and the men at the palisade on the lower terrace (*fig. 12*). On figure 12 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 terrace some 20 m 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 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 (*fig. 13*; Kitzler 1997). The figure of the profile in Trenches 1 and 2 also shows that the arrowheads have all been found about 50 cm below the topsoil and indicate that they have been deposited at the same time.

On figures 12 and 13 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 southwestern side of the house. However, there are also some arrows that overshot the target and landed behind it. The figure also shows that there were a lot of arrows that belonged to the Rus-type M 62 (*map 12*). Figure 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 Skallagrimsson's saga, where the chieftain Thorolf is attacked by the Norwegian King Harald, who after some failed attempts to storm the house sets it 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! Thorolf and his men broke down the wall and made a desperate attempt to fight off the enemy. King Harald then kills Thorolf, and the fight is over (Lindbom 2006; cf. Egil Skallagrimsson's Saga.).

Maybe it was the opposite case at Birka, as there are signs of disturbance in the corner nearest the hill in the northwest, 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 (*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 the figures in Holmquist Olausson & Kitzler

Åhfeldt 2002). The entire southern part of the house has been heavily disturbed, and it is from here that the majority of the finds come.

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 victims of the attack were buried.

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 10th 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 when the trade from Birka moved there.

In a recent article Sten Tesch explains the building of the town of Sigtuna as a joint venture between the King and the expanding Christian Church, where King Erik Segersäll is the prime mover in the start of “the Swedish urbanisation project”. The town was originally planned with “parcels” of land that were assigned to different merchants, craftsmen and towns people, which indicates the existence of structured plan for the town, probably drawn up by the King (Tesch 2007). It would seem that the merchants and chieftains who controlled the trade on Birka somehow were a threat to the ambitious King’s plans, and that they had to be removed in order for the King to carry through his ideas.

One or two attacking parties?

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 attack 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.

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 on 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 southeast 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 10th 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 have even heard about! However, we have also to accept that the Rus, or Russian influence, has been more important in Sweden than hitherto realised, and it is the Svear or Rus that traditionally are assumed to have the role of the aggressor or colonisers. If we accept the fact that the arrow types found at Helgö and Birka both belong to the same foreign types, which are very rare in Sweden and date to the late 10th Century, the most logical answer is a large-scale attack with the strategic aim to destroy and kill the inhabitants. The attack on Birka is only possible if the sufficient number of warriors is available to deal with both 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 Birka’s lifeline to Adelsö, in order to stop any reinforcements coming to the aid of the island. Perhaps there even was a third attack group that as-

saulted Adelsö at the same time they attacked Birka.

In order to wrap up this case scenario, I will try to point out a probable perpetrator, and suggest why he or rather they had motives to assault both 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's, had an interest to 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. According to Nestor's Chronicle, Prince Vladimir seems to have been ousted from Novgorod by his brother sometime during the 970's, 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 (Nestor's Chronicle; Franklin & Shepard 1996).

We do not know how and why Vladimir was able to return as a successful war leader

in the 980's, 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 not only the extraordinary occurrence of several hundred foreign arrowheads on Helgö and Birka, but also their distribution outside and inside the houses. More importantly, this scenario starts 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 of Sigtuna which heralds the beginning of the new era of the Middle Ages.

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