

## Magyar – Rus – Scandinavia

Cultural exchange in the early medieval period

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**Abstract.** Recent excavations of the military structures at the Viking Age settlement of Birka in Sweden have uncovered artefacts of possible Magyar origin. The archaeological context of these finds has raised questions concerning contacts between Scandinavia and Hungary during the 10th century. This paper is a report of the initial phase of a research project on this subject.

This is a preliminary report of the results from the initial phase of the project Magyar – Rus – Scandinavian Cultural Exchange in the Early Medieval Period. The project was launched in January 2007 with the aim to gain more knowledge on contacts between Eastern Scandinavia and the Magyar region during the Viking Age and Early Medieval Period.

Building upon the results of excavations of Birka's Garrison and my doctoral thesis *The Birka Warrior: The material culture of a martial society* (Hedenstierna-Jonson 2006), this new project seeks to further explore aspects of cultural exchange between the Magyar and East Scandinavians.

In my thesis I demonstrated that the Birka warriors were influenced stylistically by

Steppe nomadic groups as well as the Magyar, and in particular incorporated advanced weapon technology into their fighting technique. This presupposes close and well-developed exchange between these regions – something that should also be visible in the Magyar region. The archaeological material from recent years' excavations in Birka, particularly its garrison, serves as base for the discussion on the influences and exchange between these two regions. Questions that the project will address are, what form did this contact take, and along which geographical route were contacts made? My hypothesis is that the Rus network along the rivers of Ancient Rus was of fundamental importance. The study incorporates archaeological material from both regions and is carried out using the artefact – context – distribution model (Hedenstierna-Jonson 2006).

### Birka's fortifications – excavations and research

Recent excavations of Birka's defences show that the town was fortified, both on land and in the water, from the time of its

foundation in the middle of the 8th century AD. It is now clear that the fortification of Birka was conceived as a sophisticated plan whose components were all in place right from the start. These fortifications were constructed to withstand attack from the only possible threat seaborne warriors.

The excavations were mainly carried out within the project Strongholds and Fortifications in Central Sweden 400–1100 AD and have been published as scientific papers, a number of master studies and conference presentations (cf. Holmquist Olausson 2002; Holmquist Olausson 2002b; Hedenstierna-Jonson 2006; Hedenstierna-Jonson & Holmquist Olausson 2006; Lundström 2007; Hedenstierna-Jonson, Holmquist Olausson & Olausson in press; Lundström, Hedenstierna-Jonson & Holmquist Olausson 2009).

The excavations included the town rampart, with adjacent terraces, the fort and its rampart and the so-called ‘Garrison’, integrating a possible harbour. The Garrison constituted the most comprehensive part with an excavated area of approximately 500 m<sup>2</sup>. It is also the archaeological context in which the indications of close cultural contact with the Magyar region were most prominent (Holmquist Olausson 1993; Kitzler 1997; Hedenstierna-Jonson, Kitzler & Stjerna 1998; Fennö Muyingo 1998, 2000; Hedenstierna-Jonson 2000; Holmquist Olausson & Kitzler Åhfeldt 2002).

### The Garrison

The Garrison constitutes a unique site in Swedish archaeology and has very few parallels abroad. It is interpreted as the working space of the professional warriors of Birka. It was situated in close proximity to the hillfort, in a steep slope leading down to

the waterfront (*fig. 1*). The area has been levelled by several stone-set terraces, but the remaining slope is still considerable. The strategic location of the Garrison blocks the direct path from the water up to the hillfort and while the buildings in the garrison area were protected between two rock cliffs, enclosed by a rampart with a wooden superstructure which stretched up the slope from the waterfront almost the full length of the garrison area.

To the north, the Garrison area borders one of Birka’s wealthiest grave fields, containing several of the islands chamber-graves. Out of the five visible terraces, four have been excavated, each displaying remnants of wooden buildings and constructions. The settlement was compact but well planned with for example wooden lined drains, wooden boardwalks and a cistern.

### The Hall-building and its inhabitants

The most extensive terrace held the remains of a great building with the character of a hall or assembly building. Measuring 19 x 9 meters, the dimensions are not fully consistent with Iron Age hall-buildings, something that at least partly may be explained by the limited area in which it was built. The roof rested on three pairs of stout posts creating a large open room inside. Even though there were no remaining traces of internal walls, analyses of soil-samples taken from the layer identified as floor and the distribution of finds indicates a spatial division of the interior. The seat of honour was situated in the northwest, defined by a concentration of high-status finds. The eastern part of the house served for storage, with extensive finds of weapons and other objects. The re-occurring finds of padlocks and coffer-mounts along the inner walls of the building

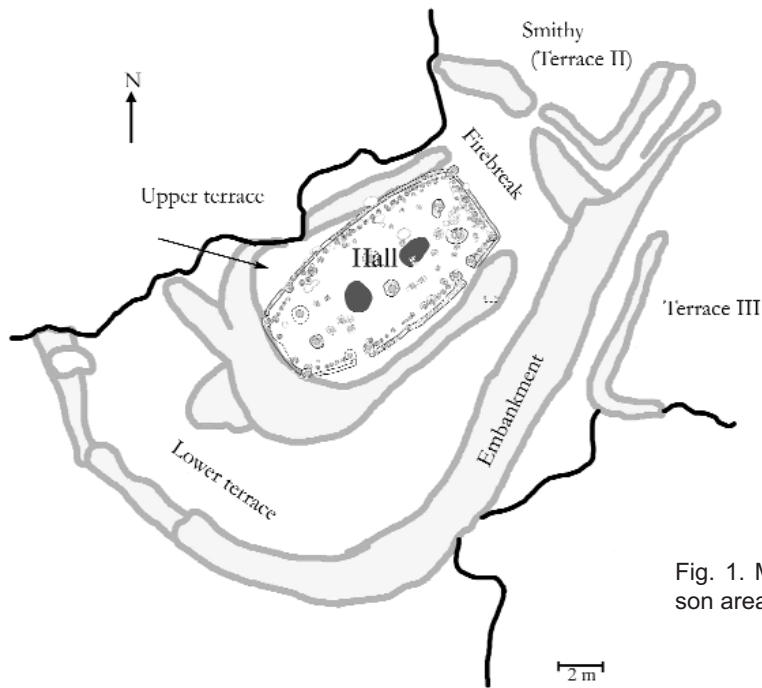


Fig. 1. Map over the Garrison area (by M. Olausson).



Fig. 2. The Magyar migrations during the 9th Century (by the author).

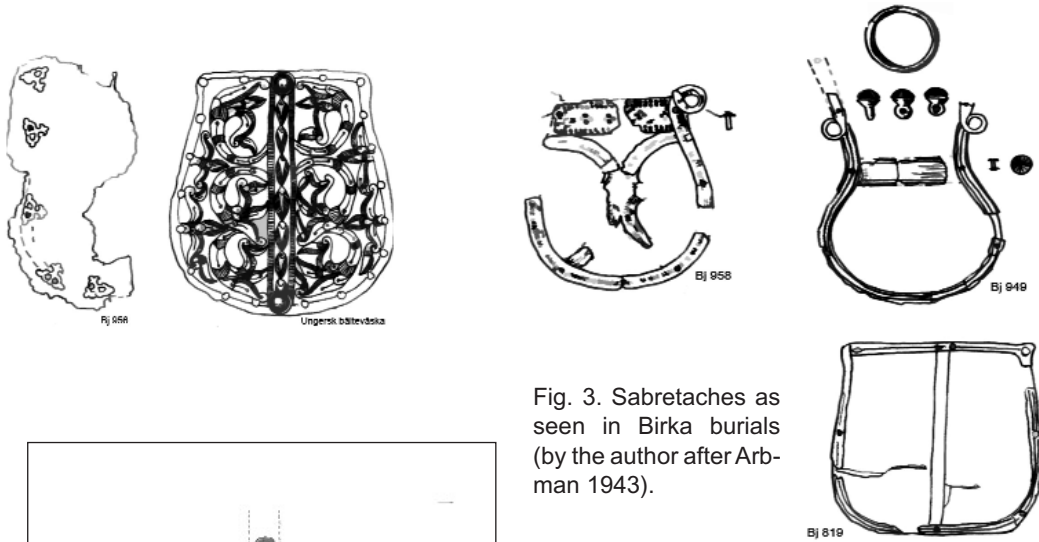


Fig. 3. Sabretaches as seen in Birka burials (by the author after Arbman 1943).

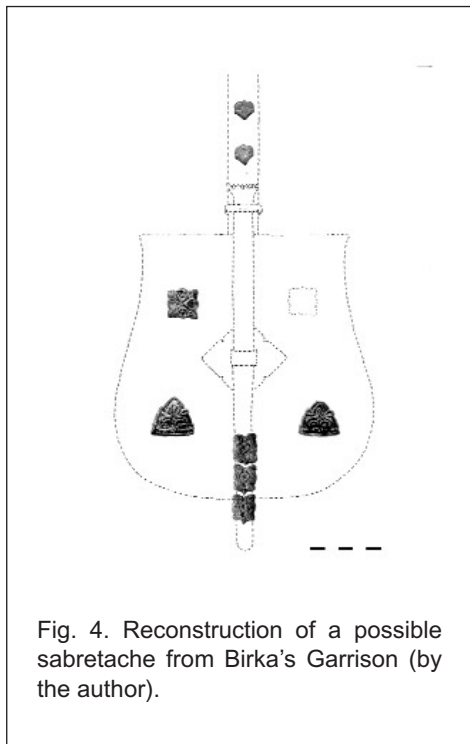


Fig. 4. Reconstruction of a possible sabretache from Birka's Garrison (by the author).



Fig. 5. Equipment of the Eastern archer found in Birka's Garrison: mounts from closed quivers, arrowheads and a possible thumb-ring.

have been interpreted as the remains of storage-boxes or chests. Weapons were also found lined up against or hanging from the walls – shields, spears and lances. The hall was built according to a thousand-year-old longhouse tradition that ceased towards the end of the 10th century. The archaic tradition of construction was adopted as a deliberate link to former ways and to pre-Christian religion.

#### What the archaeological material and its context tell us

What actually happened in the garrison? Early on in the excavations it became clear that the archaeological context showed the frozen image of the last attack on the area. The garrison was attacked and burned down, not to be rebuilt or used again. Based on the find material this would have taken place at the end of the 10th century, or possibly at the beginning of the 11th century.

The remarkably rich find material from the garrison area show that the inhabitants were well equipped with all known types of Viking Age weaponry. A tendency of standardisation together with the character of the weaponry indicate a high level of organisation and professionalism. There was also a strong presence of foreign elements. Both weaponry and dress were influenced by other cultures in a way that indicates close contacts and thorough knowledge of other customs.

#### The road from the Varangians to the Greeks

Eastern Europe and its borders constituted the area in which the East-Scandinavians were known to travel, and where the majority of influences on their equipment and dress are to be found. Strong influences nat-

urally came from the cultural capital of the region and period – Constantinople, including everything from dress to court procedures and diplomatic code. The mounted nomadic tribes of the steppes constituted another important element. When seen in the context of the trading posts of Ancient Rus this mixture of cultures usually is identified as the Rus.

#### Defining the Rus

By my definition the Rus were societies of men, women and children inhabiting the network of proto-urban settlements or trading posts along the Eastern trade route. Their main occupations were travel, trade and warfare. Even though at first these societies consisted essentially of Norsemen or Scandinavians, soon enough they became poly-ethnic, incorporating Slav groups as well as others (cf. Androschuk 2004; Hedenstierna-Jonson 2006). The close correspondence between the proto-towns like Gnezdovo, Staraya Ladoga, Kiev and Birka, suggests a cultural manifestation of its own, linked to activities such as trade and warfare, and to the intermixing of nomadic groups. Balts, Scandinavians and Slavs met Turkish nomadic groups such as the Khazars and Volga Bulgars. This melting pot gave birth to its own culture – that of the Rus – with its own material expression. It is to this world that the warriors at Birka seem to have belonged.

#### Hungaria Magna and the Carpathian Basin

The focus of previous work has been concentrated to the east, and little research has explored the relationships between East Scandinavia, East Central Europe and the Carpathian Basin, regions that are known to

have been in contact throughout earlier periods of prehistory. A number of Hungarian coins are known from Viking Age contexts in Eastern Scandinavia, and have been interpreted as indicating possible trading contacts (Fodor 1981:87; Jonsson 1988:95ff; Horváth 2008:4).

With a violent history of their own, the people that became known as Magyars, migrated from the East to the West (*fig. 2*). After Attila's death (in AD 453) and the fall of the Huns towards the end of the 6th century, power in the area north of the Black and Caspian Seas, was taken over relatively quickly by nomadic Turkish tribes from the East. Until the 7th century, the area was ruled by different tribal groups of these nomads, most dominant of whom were first the Avars, followed by the Khazars, Bulgars and Magyars. One group made its way northwards to the area where the River Kama flows into the Volga and established its own realm there. They were known as the Volga Bulgars and maintained their hold until the Mongolian invasion in the Middle Ages. The Hungarian tribes who lived together with Khazar and Bulgar tribes in the Khazar-dominated territories, were driven westwards towards the Danube during the 9th century. The term Magyar, that which the Hungarians used for themselves, first appeared at this time when the tribe established itself north of the Black Sea. Civil war broke out within the powerful Khazar realm in the 820's–830's and the rebels were identified as the Kabar. The event was described in *De Administrando Imperio* (chap. 39; p. 175), written around AD 950 by the Byzantine emperor, Constantine Porphyrogenitus. Here it is related that the Kabar revolt was crushed, and that the Kabar subsequently sought refuge among

the Turks in the territory of the Petchenegs, who have been described as Hungarian tribes (Dienes 1972; Zuckerman 1997). The alliance that was formed between the Hungarians and the Kabar was probably a major contributing factor to the events at the end of the 9th century, whereby the Hungarians were driven further west over the Carpathians to the plains where they would establish their own realm. This area, centred on present-day Hungary, had been dominated since the 7th century by the Avars, another Turkish tribe from the eastern steppes. Owing to inner conflicts, the Avar hold over that area had been weakened successively since the 630's. The Franks and Bulgars finally overcame the Avars around the year 800, and when the Magyar conquered the area there was little trace of the Avars remaining (Dienes 1972; Fodor 1996:16; Zuckerman 1997).

#### The Magyar element

Returning to the men in the Birka garrison, there is a clear indication of closer contacts with the Magyar culture, in particular the martial culture. The weapon assemblages from Birka's Garrison, in general, give an impression of being more eastern than the Rus material, showing closer links with the warrior equipment of the nomad horsemen of the steppes. The Magyars were important in this respect as their horsemen still retained their steppe-nomadic roots in their fighting techniques and equipment.

#### The Sabretache

A well-known insignia of the steppe nomadic warrior was the composite belt, commonly referred to as the oriental belt, and present in many cultures along the Eastern river routes. Even in Birka there are several



examples of this type of belt and of mounts re-used into pendants. The types found in Birka, and in the Garrison are not of a predominantly Magyar type, but rather of Volga Bulgarian or Khazar origin. Closer links are instead to be found in the pouch material. The so-called *sabretache*, carried by the belt together with weapons like the *sabre/sword*, was made of leather and its flap was decorated with various types of metal mounts. The tradition of decorating pouches with increasing numbers of individual mounts, eventually led to the flap becoming totally covered by one single plate. In some cases even the bow case was decorated (*fig. 3*).

There are a number of pouches in the Birka graves, some of which are of undisputable Magyar origin. Different types are represented and in the Garrison mounts from what can be interpreted as a *sabretache* have been identified (*fig. 4*). The closest parallels to the Birka *sabretaches* are concentrated in the upper Tisza region in the northeast of Hungary (cf. Horváth 1996; Nepper 1996; Révész 1996; Hedenstierna-Jonson & Holmquist Olausson 2006).

#### Bow and archery equipment

The Magyar, as did the other steppe nomads, used a particular type of archery equipment known as the composite bow and the closed quiver. The quiver in particular required a high degree of skill in order to be used effectively in combat. Both bow and quiver were designed to function from horseback – hence the well-known mounted archers of the steppes, but there were a number of advantages with this type of equipment even regarding foot soldiers. The quiver was in the form of a box and the arrowheads, instead of pointing into the bot-

tom, were exposed upwards. The design of the quiver enabled the archer to grab a handful of arrows and thus shoot them at high speed. Particular iron mounts are characteristic artefacts of these quivers, that otherwise were made of organic materials. The bow, composed of different parts in differing materials was highly flexible and gave, if the archer was skilled, a higher accuracy than the contemporary Western bows. The bow was kept in a bow case, adorned with mounts. The mount fastening the case had a particular design imitating spread wings. Another important feature was the thumb-ring, not often found in archaeological context, but something that increased the archers' speed and strength.

All of the different specific objects of the Eastern archer are represented in Birka. There are examples of mounts from closed quivers, as well as a worked bone attachment to a composite bow, the wing-shaped mount from a bow case, and possibly even a thumb-ring. In the Garrison several quiver mounts have been found, allowing for at least four quivers (Lundström et al 2009) (*fig. 5*).

#### Visitors or locals?

How should the archaeological material in Birka be understood? As traces of visiting archers or as evidence that Scandinavians had acquired the advanced archery techniques, the dress, and the customs of the Steppe nomads, in particularly that of the Magyar? To my mind it is clear that there were warriors in Birka fully accomplished in the fighting techniques and weaponry of the steppe nomads. That the Magyars constituted a major contributing factor is indicated by the specific parts of equipment and dress. The bone detail of a bow found in Bir-

ka's "Black Earth" can be seen as an indication that bows were at least repaired, if not constructed in Birka. The find context in the Garrison show that the quivers were not the property of the attackers as they have been found inside the hall building along the walls, much like the other (Scandinavian) weaponry.

There is another strong indication that the Magyar element in Birka was something that concerned the locals. Burial 1125b, usually disregarded as incomplete, plundered or tampered with, should to my mind be reconsidered as it contains the full equipment of a mounted oriental archer – and nothing more. The man has been buried with a horse and archery equipment, complete with bow case and all (cf. Arbman 1943a, 1943b). The mount on the bow case is definitely of Magyar origin, and the arrows were kept in a closed quiver of steppe nomadic or Magyar type. Interestingly, the set up of arrows are a mixture of different types, and not necessarily typical for an Eastern archer (Lundström et al 2009).

#### Similarities and differences

The archaeological remains from Birka's Garrison show traces of well-equipped warriors. Their dress style and weaponry were apparently modelled on eastern tribes from among the mounted nomads, especially the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars, and possibly also the Magyars. The composition of their attire indicates that rather than importing them merely for prestige, they had adopted not only the warring techniques but also ideals that lay behind the borrowed items.

Still, with all the strong influences we must consider the significant differences between the mounted tribes and the war-

riors from Birka's Garrison. The settled character of the warriors in the Garrison would have affected both their fighting techniques and their equipment. Furthermore, there was a strong sense of the Old Norse religion in the Garrison – the evidence of offerings to Odin and the manufacture of Thor's-hammer rings speak for themselves (Kitzler 2000; Nordberg 2004). A further important contrast was the association with horses. The eastern warriors were, first of all, riders and their armaments show an art of war adjusted to life on horseback. When the Scandinavians took up the custom of wearing eastern warrior attire, they must have been conscious of this association. But the Scandinavian warrior was not likely to have been mounted to the same extent as the nomad.

#### Scandinavian influences in the Magyar Region

As stated in the introduction cultural contacts go both ways, and there should therefore be Scandinavian remains in the Magyar region. Nándor Fettich acknowledged the Scandinavian–Magyar link in his renowned work *Die Metallkunst der landnehmenden Ungarn* published in 1937. Since that time very little research has been focused on this question, and much work remains to be done. Scandinavian artefacts have been identified in the Hungarian / Magyar material, characterised by typical Nordic styles as well as shapes and techniques. The artefacts are mainly weapons and weaponry and are generally thought to have belonged to a northerner as the equipment would not have been useful in the typical fighting technique of the Magyar mounted archer (cf. Horváth 2008; Fettich 1937; Paulsen 1933; Hidán 1996).



### Preliminary results and conclusions

In conclusion, the preliminary results of this research project: Magyar – Rus – Scandinavian: Cultural Exchange in the Early Medieval Period, consists of a introductory study of Magyar artefacts and their archaeological context in Birka, Eastern Sweden. Most prominent is perhaps the indications of Eastern archery. While the presence of objects indicates a connection between the two cultures, the character of these contacts remains to be fully understood. The Scandinavian material in Hungary could, at present, be interpreted as the result of temporary contacts, that is to say indicating the presence of Scandinavians in Magyar territory, or, that they were exotic prestige items. In

Birka however the presence of advanced fighting techniques and weaponry indicates cultural contacts that go beyond trade or occasional warfare. The use of the closed quiver and composite bow required skills that took years to learn and master and indicate deeper cultural contacts over a longer period of time.

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