

# Situne Dei

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Utgiven av Sigtuna museum



# After Birka<sup>1</sup>

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It is generally accepted that Sigtuna was founded at much the same time as Birka ceased to be an important trade and craft centre.<sup>2</sup> It has indeed often been described as Birka's successor; in 1982 I suggested that the move may have been made by a king, much as Godfred moved the merchants of *Reric* to Hedeby in 808.<sup>3</sup> That comparison was unhelpful: Sigtuna was very different from Birka; it was a royal residence in which Olof Skötkonung produced a substantial coinage and in which several churches were built in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.<sup>4</sup>

The recently published reports of major excavations in Sigtuna made between 1988 and 2006 have confirmed that it was founded c. 970 and shown that a century later it imported Byzantine goods via Novgorod, as Lund did at the same time, but contain no evidence to suggest that it quickly, or ever, replaced Birka as a major entrepot in which merchants obtained furs and other Russian produce.<sup>5</sup> Traces of crafts are practically lacking in the first half century. Moreover there is no hint in medieval sources that Sigtuna was a leading participant in Baltic trade comparable with Novgorod, Visby or Lübeck. Two runic inscriptions in Sigtuna show that Frisians were there in the eleventh century, but that is not surprising in such a high-status community.<sup>6</sup>

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1) I am indebted to Ingmar Jansson and Gert Magnusson for their advice and help with references.

2) Jansson, *Ovala spännbucklor*, pp. 152–156 argues that Birka 'ended' c. 975.

3) Sawyer, P. H. *Kings and Vikings*, p. 130. P. Lindbom 'The Assault on Helgö and Birka' has recently speculated that Erik Segersäll was responsible.

4) Malmer, B. m.fl. *Kung Olofs mynthus*; Bonnier, A. C. *Kyrkorna berättar*, pp. 19–21.

5) Tesch, S. 'Sigtuna c.980–1200'; cf. Wikström, A. (ed), *På väg mot Paradiset*; idem, *Fem stadsgårdar*; Roslund, M. 'Crumbs from the Rich Man's Table'.

6) Sawyer, B. 'Vikingatida runstenar'.



*The black earth, Birka, with the ringfort 'Borg' in the background. Photo by Anders Söderberg.*

Birka was abandoned because the growing power of the *Rus* princes, described in the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, reduced the opportunities for Scandinavian (and other) freebooters to operate in Rus.<sup>7</sup> By the eleventh century most Russian produce destined for western Europe, where there was a growing demand for fine furs,<sup>8</sup> was exported from Novgorod, that began c. 930 on the river Volkhov, about two kilometers downstream from Riurikovo Gorodische, then a key centre of *Rus* power.<sup>9</sup> Novgorod grew quickly and was soon a large city in which many western merchants traded.<sup>10</sup> Early in the twelfth century entry to its merchant guild required the payment of 50 pounds of silver and a cloth of Ypres.<sup>11</sup> A hundred years later German merchants were highly privileged and had a base, originally held by merchants from Gotland, with a court, warehouses, and a church dedicated to St. Olaf. The German Kontor survived until 1494.<sup>12</sup>

Novgorod secured its supply of fine furs by establishing posts for the collection of tribute on rivers that flow into the White Sea.<sup>13</sup> The *Primary Chronicle* reports a story told in the early twelfth century by Giurata Rogovold, a leading Novgorodian, about

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7) Franklin, S. & Shepard. *The Emergence of Rus*. The archaeological evidence concerning central places and the Scandinavian presence in *Rus* is critically reviewed by Ingmar Jansson and others in Hansson, P. (ed), *The Rural Viking*.

8) Sawyer, P. 'Anglo-Scandinavian trade', p. 191.

9) Nosov, E. N. 'Ryurik Gorodishche'.

10) Yanin, V. L. 'The archaeological study of Novgorod.

11) Eck, A. *Le Moyen age russe*, p. 477.

12) Riis, T. 'Hanse'; Melnikova, 'Gutagård i Novgorod'.

13) Franklin and Shepard, p. 331.

a retainer he sent north who, after crossing the Pechora river, heard about distant natives who were prepared to supply furs in return for knives and axes.<sup>14</sup> There is independent evidence from Bulgar that in the twelfth century furs were exchanged for weapons in the far north.<sup>15</sup> The Bulgars could obtain weapons in Oxiana where fine swords were made in the ninth century.<sup>16</sup> Novgorod probably made its own. According to Franklin and Shepard, who unfortunately give no reference, “the early twelfth century provides the first firm evidence of a number of specialized craft workshops in Novgorod and from the 1120s and 1130s there was a steep rise in production, coupled with a change to cheaper and simpler methods for the manufacture of, for example, blades for knives, axes and shears.”<sup>17</sup> A huge deposit (c. 7,500 cubic metres) of iron slag discovered in the 1920s under north Visby suggests that Gotland could, and probably did, supply raw material that Novgorod’s workshops needed.<sup>18</sup> The slag was secondary, that is, it was produced in the twelfth century when making an estimated 30,000 tons of steel suitable for making sharp-edged tools and weapons.<sup>19</sup> Although Gotland was not Birka’s successor it probably made a significant contribution to Novgorod’s claim.

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14) *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, pp. 184–185. 15) Franklin and Shepard, p. 333.

15) Franklin and Shepard, p. 333.

16) Hoyland & Gilmour, *Medieval Islamic Swords*.

17) Franklin and Shepard, pp. 331–332; Yanin, ‘The archaeological study of Novgorod’, pp. 73–75.

18) Andersson, H. ‘Järn, Stad och Statsbildning’, pp. 89–93.

19) Magnusson, G., ‘Möre’, pp. 292–294

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## Sammanfattning

Nyligen har rapporter från de stora arkeologiska undersökningarna i Sigtuna mellan 1988 och 2006 publicerats. De visar att Sigtuna inte avlöste Birka som handels- och hantverkscentrum, som förf. tidigare föreslagit, utan etablerades som Olof skötkonungs residens och myntort. Birka upphörde på grund av att den växande furstemakten i Rus satte stopp för skandinavernas verksamhet i deras område. Novgorod, grundat ca 930, växte snabbt och blev pälshandelns nya centrum, Birkas efterföljare, och det är också genom denna stad som bysantinska föremål nådde Sigtuna. Från Gotland importerade Novgorod smidesjärn till stadens omfattande hantverk.