

Stiftelsen

**RIKSBANKENS JUBILEUMSFOND**

The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation

Projekt

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### Sammanfattning

Identitet och självbild har blivit centrala begrepp i den historiska forskningen. Hur betraktade människan sig själv och sin omgivning? Projektet Birka, Rus' och nordiska gentes är en tillämpning av den pågående diskussionen kring tidigmedeltida folk - gentes - i ett nordiskt sammanhang. Birka och dess befolkning utgör ett mycket lämpligt studieobjekt av flera skäl. Som ekonomiskt centrum i regionen fungerade Birka som nav i handel med prestigevaror och avancerat hantverk. Det arkeologiska materialet visar en kulturell smältdegel med långväga kontakter. Samtidigt fungerade Birka förmodligen inte som administrativt och politiskt centrum för regionen. Dess roll som del av ett geografiskt vidsträckt handelsnätverk gjorde att makten låg utanför den regionala kungens kontroll. Troligen tillhörde Birkas befolkning andra kollektiva identiteter än de regionala. Projektet syftar till att ge en ny och fördjupad syn på vad Birka representerar, hur man kan definiera dess befolkning och vad detta kan säga om vikingatidens Sverige. Syftet är även att visa arkeologins möjligheter att bidra till den pågående forskningsdiskussionen kring identitet. Metoden är en jämförelse mellan text, ting och sociala praktiker. Samtida beskrivningar av nordbor jämförs med folkens ackumulerade materiella kultur och den bild vilken de vill ge av sig själva ex. genom begravningsritualer. Ansökan anknyter till Historiska museets projekt Birka, en forskningsresurs som söker medel i kategorin infraprojekt.

## Projektbeskrivning

### BIRKA, RUS' AND NORDIC GENTES

#### Identity, self-image and cultural expression in Viking Age Sweden

The concepts of identity and self-image have since long been of vital importance within the research fields of anthropology and sociology. This has recently become the focus of historical and archaeological research as well. A prominent example is the topic of the early medieval peoples of Europe, as discussed and debated in historical sciences. To avoid being caught in the diverse and complicated definitions of concepts such as ethnicity and cultural affinity, the medieval word for people – gentes – has become the preferred term.

My aim with the project Birka, Rus' and Nordic Gentes is to apply the theories of gentes and identity to a Scandinavian context, and in particular to the Viking Age trading post of Birka and its inhabitants. The trading post was a cultural melting-pot with a far-reaching network of contacts, reflected in the material culture. Birka held an important function in the characteristic gift-based power structure of Viking Age society. The trading post operated as a node in the trade with prestigious objects and advanced handicraft. At the same time Birka's political and administrative function in the region can be questioned. When Birka, during the tenth century became an active part in a trade network reaching as far as Constantinople, the regional perspective on power became too limited. Other structures for power and collective identity were formed.

### CONCEPTUAL OUTLINE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The people of Viking Age Scandinavia shared a common (Northern) culture and could as a group be regarded as Northmen or people from the North. It is clear, however, according to Alfred Smyth, that contemporary Northmen recognised differences between, and divisions within, their own cultural and political sphere (Smyth 1998:27). In order to advance in our interpretation and understanding of the Northmen and their geographical expansion during the Viking Age, we need to recognise these differences, which they themselves were well aware of.

In my research I have claimed that the inhabitants of ninth-century Birka considered themselves as part of an urban culture set apart from the surrounding regional culture of the Lake Mälaren region (Hedenstierna-Jonson 2006; 2009a; 2009c). Affiliation and self-image were manifested in the material and immaterial culture. In this context immaterial culture constitutes the social practices that discern one group of people from another. What does the import of different types of culture tell us about the character and quality of contacts between different cultures? The transfer of immaterial culture from one group of people to another requires deeper and more long-term contacts than material culture. I have suggested that the urban culture of Birka was Rus', like the culture of the trading posts along the Eastern rivers.

The common features of the trading posts and fortified settlements stretching

from Birka to Kiev and beyond have led to questions about the nature of their inhabitants and their inter-relationships. The Rus' culture was polyethnic, formed by the assimilation of different people, joined together by common enterprises in trade, crafts and warfare. It was an urban culture, particular for the trading posts and their inhabitants and activities.

The Rus' as a group developed an expression of their own, adapting the material culture of other groups in new contexts and combinations. The combinations of objects and styles from different cultures and geographical areas were redefined and further developed in the workshops of the Rus' trading posts. What prompted the choices of the different elements that formed the entirety? What contacts, affiliations and models were considered representative of the newly formed group of urban settlers? The cultural identity of the Rus' and their relations to the geographical region within which they moved are of great importance for further understanding the network of trade and political alliances that stretched from Birka to Kiev or Constantinople.

Aim and hypothesis:

With this project I aim to give a new and deeper view of what Birka represents, how we can define its inhabitants and what this means for Viking Age Sweden. The aim is also to show that archaeology as a field of research can contribute to the ongoing discussion of identity. The main questions are:

- How did the inhabitants of Birka consider themselves and their environment?
- How and in comparison to what was affinity defined?
- What are the implications of this in the interpretation of Birka and Viking Age Sweden?
- How does the archaeological material reflect identity and self-image?

Theoretical background:

The concept of *gentes* has primarily been discussed within the discipline of History and thus been based on written sources. However, this type of source material is not uncomplicated, as Walter Pohl emphasises when he questions the objectivity of the reality of the texts, but also underlines that this is the reality at hand and studied by researchers (2003:4). The concepts of identity and self-image, on the other hand, are in general dealt with in the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, where studies usually are conducted about the identities of modern-day people (cf. Insoll 2007). In both cases I consider the discipline of archaeology to have great potential in broadening the discussion, giving new perspectives, and increasing the general understanding of relations between people, material culture and identity. The issue of identity in archaeology is much debated and, alluding to Heinrich Härke, even though archaeologists in general agree with the concept of "active" material culture, they are "fashionably uneasy with the idea that it might actively signal ethnic identity" (Härke 2004:454). However, I would maintain that material culture very aptly reflects groups of people and their intercommunication with others.

I base my study on the definition of identity stipulated by Margarita Diaz-Andreu and Sam Lucy in the volume *The Archaeology of Identity* (2005). They consider

identity as directly linked to the feeling of belonging. It is through identity that we see ourselves and the others experience us as part of a particular group. Participation requires an active engagement, making identity non-static, but a continual process. By supposing that identity is manifested in the material culture, the discussion can be given greater width. The theories and methods of archaeology create openings for new perspectives (cf. Meskell 2007).

Apart from identifying particular objects as deliberate symbols, it is also maintained that material culture reflects groupings of people, leading to the problematic issue of group identity and ethnicity. I have acceded to subjectivists in ethnology, such as Fredrik Barth (1969a; 1969b), Thomas Hylland Eriksen (1995; 1996) and Siân Jones (1996; 1997), who state that ethnicity involves an active process of creating boundaries and defining “us” as a group against “them”. Creating a cultural expression does not necessarily mean inventing new and particular objects, but can include new combinations of objects and social practices that as a complex represent a particular group of people.

#### METHOD AND MATERIAL

The manipulation of cultural behaviour, symbols and material culture is one of many mechanisms used by societies to distinguish themselves vis-à-vis others. In the formation process of a new society, symbols were chosen and altered to represent the desired self-image of the members of that society (cf. Hayeur Smith 2004). The method at hand is a comparison between text, object and social practices. Contemporary accounts of Northerners will be compared to their accumulated material culture and the self-image that they display in e.g. burial-rituals and grave goods. The basic method used corresponds to three different levels of investigation, from the study of the individual artefact to the overriding cultural implications. An initial premise is that specific objects showing particular designs are regarded as communicators of people, cultural groups, political structures and networks of contacts. In order to understand how and by whom the artefacts were used, it is of vital importance to consider their site context, i.e. the circumstances surrounding the finds and their relation to other objects and structures in the field. By considering the site circumstances of the finds and their relation to other artefacts, it is possible to conceptualise the context in which the wearer or user of the objects acted. At this stage, excavation, excavation reports and archive studies all constitute important source material.

The archaeological material from Birka:

The archaeological material from Birka constitutes the basis of the research project. Birka is one of the most renowned prehistoric sites in Sweden. The island has been an object of antiquarian interest and research for centuries. During the nineteenth century approximately one third of Birka’s known burials were excavated and documented (Stolpe; Arbman). The archaeological material from these excavations forms the basis for knowledge of the material culture of Eastern Sweden during the Viking Age. Today this material is an important part of the Museum’s collections of Viking Age finds. The first half of the 1990s saw the first systematic excavations of Birka’s town area – the Black Earth. Complex stratigraphy and the multitude and depth of cultural layers resembled the succeeding medieval towns rather than the contemporary settlements and farmsteads in the hinterland. The archaeological material from these excavations

will be incorporated in the Museum's collections during 2010, and through this project part of the material will immediately be studied and published. The material culture related to the martial aspects of Birka was in focus in the research project Strongholds and Fortifications in Central Sweden AD 400–1100, conducted by the Archaeological Research Laboratory (AFL) at Stockholm University. The martial structures consist of a hillfort, town rampart and garrison. The material deriving from the excavations that took place in the years 1996–2005 allows a unique insight into warfare, threats and martial life during the Viking Age. My thesis was a result of this project. The archaeological material is available for research at AFL.

The extent of archaeological material from Birka will necessitate a selection. Objects defined as cultural markers, communicating different types of contacts with other people, will be in focus (cf. Hedenstierna-Jonson 2006; 2007; 2009a, 2009c). The studied material will derive from the three contexts mentioned above: town area, burials and defence structures. The town area represents everyday life and activities while the burials present a produced image of how the Birka inhabitants perceived life and wanted to depict themselves. The fortifications show a perception of the outer world, the estimated threat and society's level of power and organisation. They also contribute knowledge of a particular group of people – the warriors, who enjoyed a special status in society and had a vast network of contacts (cf. Hedenstierna-Jonson 2006; 2009b). The martial contexts display examples of the transformation of immaterial as well as material culture, advanced knowledge and re-interpretations to better suit the new conditions.

The written sources are an important complement to the archaeological material. Though communicated with aims other than to provide details of what we today call reality, these accounts still give valuable insight into contemporary conceptions otherwise impossible to obtain (cf. Halsall 2003, chap. 1). As the Scandinavian Viking Age written sources are extremely few, one has to turn to the sources from others. Still, many contemporary sources provide valuable information on general questions that concern people from the North as well as Franks, Normans, Anglo-Saxons, etc. Among these, some sources in particular should be mentioned such as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles and the Royal Frankish Annals. The ninth-century Annals of St Bertin provide the first known mention of the Rus', identifying them as East Scandinavians (Svear). Another important source of information on Viking Age Northmen or Rus' is the Islamic texts. Interesting accounts can be read in the works of, e.g., Ibn Rusta, Al-Masudi and Ibn Hurdadbih. Other informative sources are works of two Persian geographers dating from the late tenth and eleventh centuries (Hudud al-'Alam, Gardizi). Even Byzantine texts include descriptions of the Rus' (Porphyrogenitus's *De administrando Imperio*). The primary source on the emergence of Ancient Rus' is the Russian Primary Chronicle written in the 11th century.

Case studies:

In addition to these directed surveys, the project will contain two case studies:

1. Contacts between Birka and Magyar Hungary constitute an example of the transfer of advanced knowledge and social practices. In earlier research I have

demonstrated that the warriors in Birka's garrison were influenced stylistically by, among other people, the Magyars, and in particular incorporated advanced weapon technology into their fighting technique. This presupposes close and well-developed exchange between these regions. 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 indicates deeper cultural contacts over a longer period of time.

The case study is based on the results from the projects "Magyar – Rus' – Scandinavian" and "Östligt bågskytte i Birka" (Eastern Archery in Birka) and is conducted in cooperation with the Academy of Science in Budapest and Prof. Csanád Bálint (Lundström et al. 2009; Hedenstierna-Jonson 2009c).

2. The cultural contacts between Birka and the Persian/Iranian region show that the inhabitants of Birka adopted Persian elements of style and dress. Beside this somewhat uncomplicated form of import there is also the question of transmitted advanced knowledge in the use of Arabic weight systems in trade. A parallel transfer of knowledge and culture can be seen in the contacts between Sweden and Iran during the last century. Through a cooperation initiated with the Swedish-Iranian Society, an opportunity will be given to discuss parallels in present-day cultural exchange. The results of this cooperation could become part of the Museum's activities in the form of a display or minor exhibition.

#### INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH

The study of the identity and self-image of the Birka inhabitants relates to the ongoing research on gentes. By using the archaeological material as a starting point, this study can provide new perspectives and develop the ongoing discussion. My previous research on the warriors of Birka and their material culture will act as a starting point for the project. The overall resemblance between the material from tenth-century Birka and the material from ports of trade in Ancient Rus' has led to the assumption that there was a shared identity and cultural identity among the inhabitants of these "urban" settlements. The cultural identity of the Rus' and their relations to the geographical region within which they moved are of great importance for further understanding the network of trade and political alliances between Scandinavia, Ancient Rus' and Byzantium of which Birka was an active part.

Archaeological identities have been discussed by researchers such as Martin Wobst (1977) and Siân Jones (1996; 1997). The issue has been linked to the stylistic expressions of material culture, mainly Stone Age material (Weissner 1985; 1989; Sackett 1977; 1985). To understand the complex process of state formation and its effects on people and cultural expression requires a higher level of problematisation. Issues like these have been in focus in the extensive research

programme funded by the European Science Foundation - "The Transformation of the Roman World". In collections of articles such as *The Construction of Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (2003) and *Strategies of Distinction* (1998), researchers like Patrick Geary, Susan Reynolds and Janet Nelson address complex questions related to gentes during the early stages of state formation in post-Roman Europe. Gentes in a Scandinavian perspective is addressed for the first time in the volume *Franks, Northmen, and Slavs* (2008).

Walter Pohl defines the Western kingdoms that emerge after the fall of Rome as defined as "communities under construction" (Pohl 2003:1). Pohl acknowledges that the construction of nationhood has been discussed in a rather controversial manner and that there must be awareness among the researchers when dealing with topics such as these. Pohl concludes that "the issue is not so much whether the gens existed prior to its perception, or whether 'ethnic discourse' created it", either way the process involved is quite complex (Pohl 2003:4).

In the Introduction to *Franks, Northmen, and Slavs* the editors Garipzanov, Geary and Urbańczyk state that the different authors of the volume seek to understand the relationship between ethnic identities and state formation in an era when "recognizable medieval polities emerged" (Garipzanov et al 2008:5). The important question being to what extent the common identities assisted in the consolidation, centralisation and control of the early medieval kingdoms. The issue of group identity and state formation in more peripheral regions, such as Scandinavia and Western Slav territories is particularly in focus. For the project *Birka, Rus' and Nordic Gentes*, I find Stefan Brink's paper on *People and Land in Early Scandinavia* of particular interest. He stresses the connection between how societies were organized and how geographical space was identified and emphasises how important this is for our understanding of the earliest polities and social formations in Scandinavia (Brink 2008).

The quest for knowledge of Rus' identity is of an old date and has sometimes been heavily tainted by politics. The interpretations of both archaeological material and written sources have been used by political lobbyists on both sides of the Baltic during different periods of time in more recent history. The core of the issue known as the Normanist dispute is the role played by the Northmen in the formation of Ancient Rus'. The Normanist ideas have at times been an offspring of Western historicism, while the Anti-Normanist arguments have supported Pan-Russian ideas (and still do). Only during the late twentieth century was there any resolution of the subject. The definition of Rus' identity delivered by Simon Franklin in his paper "The Invention of Rus(sia)" from 1998 constitutes an important element in the discussion. According to Franklin, the people of Rus' shared no common ancestry, but consisted of individuals from different ethnic groups. The region in which they moved was not fixed by geography, but rather by common interests and activities. And they were, in contrast to other contemporary people, not medieval in the sense that they were a newly formed group, without a common history behind them. However disparate in origin, together, they formed a society with a strong sense of "us". Franklin's paper is included in the volume *Medieval Europeans*, which is a starting point for the discussion of medieval identities in general (1998).

## WORK SCHEDULE AND PUBLICATIONS

The research project is planned as a three-year 75% employment at the Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm. The archaeological material from Birka's graves is a part of the Museum's collections, and during 2010 the material from the excavations of Birka's settlement – the Black Earth – will also be included in the collections. The current project will study the Black Earth material and thus make it accessible to other researchers. The artefacts and contexts of this material are of the utmost importance for understanding the material culture, as it represents another and complementary aspect of the Birka inhabitant alongside the image conveyed by the graves. The archaeological context of the fortifications and martial features of Birka were in focus in my thesis *The Birka Warrior* (2006). The material is accessible for further study at the Stockholm University Archaeological Research Laboratory.

During the first year research will focus on the handling and interpretation of the archaeological material. The second year will involve processing and writing, but also field research in the collections of the National Museum of Hungary, Budapest. Finally, the third year will focus on conclusion and writing, though some processing of the material will continue.

I aim to publish the results of the project in publications such as *Viking, Medieval Scandinavia and Fornvännen*. There will be a monograph published in the Museum's series *Studies II*. The results will also be presented at conferences and seminars, together with a minor public exhibition at the museum. The results will constitute an important part of the accessibility of the archaeological material from Birka. The project will be synchronised with the digitisation work of the archaeological material and the construction of a research platform for Birka which is planned in the infrastructure project "Birka – an archaeological research resource" (Birka – en arkeologisk forskningsresurs), also an applicant to RJ.

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## Projektdeltagarnas publikationer

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- Hedenstierna-Jonson, C. 2006. The Birka Warrior – the material culture of a martial society. Stockholm. Diss.

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- Hedenstierna-Jonson, C. Creating A Cultural Expression – on Rus' identity and material culture. Proceedings from Crossing cultural boundaries. Communicators and communication in the Baltic and beyond ca. 400-1200. Conference in Lund, June 7th to 9th 2007. Lund. Accepted.
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