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New Aspects on Viking-age Urbanism c. AD 750-1100



Proceedings of the International Symposium
at the Swedish History Museum, April 17-20th 2013.

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New Aspects on Viking-age Urbanism c. AD 750-1100

*Proceedings of the International Symposium at the Swedish
History Museum, April 17–20th 2013*

Lena Holmquist, Sven Kalmring &
Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson (eds.)



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Elites, Networks and the Finnish Connection in Birka

Ingrid Gustin

Introduction

In Viking Age research, urban centers are often studied together with trade and long-distance contacts (e.g. Hodges 1982; Müller-Wille 1989; Callmer 1994; Sindbaek 2007). When it comes to Birka, the connection with the Carolingian Empire and the Frisians was emphasized early by archaeologists and historians (Stjerna 1909; Schüek 1926; Arbman 1937; also Bäck 2007:8 and ref. therein). Later research at Birka has shown that, in its earlier phase, the town had long-distance contacts with not only Western Europe and Dorset, but also the West Slavic coast region in today's Poland and Northern Germany. It has also been pointed out that the West European influence in Birka decreased significantly from the second half of the ninth century. Instead, the town's eastern contacts seem to have intensified markedly. The contacts with the West Slavic region were maintained during this later period in Birka and there were also links to other Scandinavian regions (Ambrosiani 2002a; 2002b).

The eastern connections of Scandinavia and, especially, Central Sweden (mainly Svealand) with what is today Russia, Belarus and Ukraine have also rightly attracted much attention in Swedish archaeological research. The links to these eastern regions have often been addressed (e.g. Arne 1911, 1914; Arbman 1955; Jansson 1987, 1997; Callmer 2000a; 2000b; Hedenstierna-Jonson 2006). When it comes to Birka, the great interest in West and East European contacts seems to have resulted in other regions being overshadowed and forgotten when the connections of the town are discussed. This is evident when it comes to Birka's contacts with the Finnish mainland. Objects originating or showing heavy influences from the western parts of Finland have been retrieved in the Black Earth of Birka, as well as in the cemeteries of the town. However, the contacts indicated by these objects have seldom been addressed by archaeologists in Sweden.



Fig. 1. Penannular brooch with faceted and pegged knobs, an object originating from or showing heavy influence from Finland. This penannular brooch was found in Birka grave 1053B (Photo: Eva Vedin, SHMM).

Objects from Finland Found in Birka

Imported pottery is a find group often used in archaeological reports to indicate contact with other regions. From the Birka project excavations in the Black Earth, the proportion of the imported pottery from the first four years has been published thus far. According to the survey made by Mathias Bäck, the west European pottery amounts to c. 1.5% of all pottery retrieved during these four seasons of excavation. In contrast, the Baltic Finnish ware amounts to c. 6%. When it comes to imported ware, only Slavic pottery turned out to be more frequent. The Slavic pottery amounted to c. 15-17% (Bäck 1995).

The relatively high proportion of Baltic Finnish ware in the Black Earth is consistent with the pottery found in the town's cemeteries. According to Dagmar Selling's study of Viking Age and early Medieval Ceramics in Sweden, the Baltic Finnish ware in Birka's cemeteries accounts for 6 % of all pottery found in the graves. In her study Selling also noted that Björkö,

the island where Birka was situated, is the site showing the largest number of finds of this type of ware in Sweden (Selling 1955:140–144, 153–155, 218, 229).

Studies of metal artefacts in the Birka graves originating from or with heavy influences from Finland¹ show that there are altogether 13 such objects (Kivikoski 1938; Gustin in print). The most frequent object was the penannular brooch with faceted and pegged knobs on the terminals (fig. 1). Besides this type of penannular brooch, there is also a round brooch, comb-shaped bronze pendant, a bird-shaped object (perhaps a pendant), a fire-steel with a bronze grip in the form of an animal head and a fire-steel with a bronze handle in the form of mounted figures.² The objects and their find contexts have been discussed at length elsewhere (Gustin in print).

If these objects are added to the Baltic Finnish pottery found in the Birka graves, a total of 46 graves of the excavated 1100 graves at Birka contained material culture originating from or displaying heavy influences from the Finnish mainland. This means that roughly 4 % of the Birka graves held artefacts from that area (see Gustin 2012; Gustin in print).

The Duration and Consistency of Contacts between Birka and Western Finland

Another reason to highlight the connection between Birka and Western Finland is its long duration. Selling maintained that Baltic Finnish pottery in the Birka graves ranged from the second half of the ninth century to the middle of the tenth century. However in a recent study the datings for other type of objects such as combs, oval brooches, round brooches, sets of beads, and pendants, found in the same graves as Baltic Finnish ware were compiled (Gustin in print). These datings show that the contacts between Birka and Western Finland go back to at least 760, as seen in grave Bj 682.³ This indicates that Baltic Finnish pottery occurred in the Birka graves from early on. The youngest grave with Baltic Finnish ware, Bj 348, has a set of beads that can be dated to c. 935–955. The conclusion is that there was contact between Birka and Western Finland more or less throughout the whole existence of the town.

In the abovementioned study, the consistency of the contact between Birka and Western Finland was also discussed. In this case the datable graves contain-

	Early Birka	Middle Birka/transition early–late Birka	Late Birka
Percentage of graves with datable bead sets	17%	25%	58%
Percentage of datable graves with Baltic Finnish ware	15%	15%	70%

Tab. 1. The percentage of Birka graves per period dated on the basis of bead sets (Callmer 1977:155f.) and the percentage of datable graves with Baltic Finnish ware.

ing objects from the Finnish mainland were divided into three time periods: early Birka, middle Birka/transition early–late Birka, and late Birka. Of the graves containing Baltic Finnish ware possible to date within the three periods mentioned above, two belong to early Birka, two to middle Birka/transition early–late Birka, and nine to late Birka. A comparison can be made with the Birka graves where it has been possible to date the sets of beads (Callmer 1977:155f.). For these dateable graves, 15 belong to early Birka, 21 to middle Birka/transition early–late Birka, and 49 to late Birka.

Tab. 2. Distribution of costume details from Finland and Baltic Finnish ware between different grave types in Birka.

Grave type	Graves with costume details from Finland	Graves with Baltic Finnish ware	Number of graves with objects from Finland	Distribution of different grave types containing objects from Finland	Total distribution of different grave types, based on Gräslund 1980
Cremation graves	104, 197, 776, Seton VI	9, 45A/B, 51, 94A/B, 98B, 104, 155, 201, 226, 326, 329, 348, 352, 370, 415, 418, 428, 437, 458, 679, 682, 714, 811, 912, 1042	28	61%	51%
Coffin graves and other skeleton graves	58A, 478, 480, 759, 1162	531, 971, 1095	8	17%	38%
Chamber graves	644, 954, 1053B, 1074	731, 834, 845, 855, 860, 901	10	22%	11%
Total	13	34	46	100%	100%

The proportion of graves per period is shown in table 1.

Tab. 1 shows that the proportion of graves with Baltic Finnish ware is much larger in late Birka than in earlier periods. However, this seems to apply to graves with datable bead sets as well, and might be due to the fact that many of the graves that cannot be dated are cremation graves, and presumably of an early date. Furthermore, the easily dateable chamber graves were more common during Late Birka (Gräslund 1980:29). Tab. 1 also shows that the percentage per period for graves with Baltic Finnish ware

is roughly the same as for graves with datable bead sets. This indicates that contacts between Birka and Western Finland were virtually constant over time. It should be noted that the continuity displayed by Baltic Finnish ware differs from other eastern material in the Black Earth.

The excavations in the 1990s showed that, while there were a number of artefacts reflecting eastern contacts as early as the first phases of Birka, they were rare in comparison to material from Western Europe and the area south of the Baltic Sea. During the second half of the ninth century, however, the situation changed, and Scandinavian and eastern objects began to exceed western ones in number (Ambrosiani 2002a).

Graves in Birka with Objects Originating or showing heavy Influences from Western Finland

Cremation graves amount to 51% of all graves in Birka. As presented in tab. 2., 61 % of the graves in Birka displaying Finnish provenance or influence were cremation graves. This means that the proportion of graves carrying objects from mainland Finland can be said to more or less follow the general proportion for this grave type in general.

A grave type in Birka that, on the other hand, is over-represented when it comes to objects from mainland Finland is the chamber grave. These graves con-

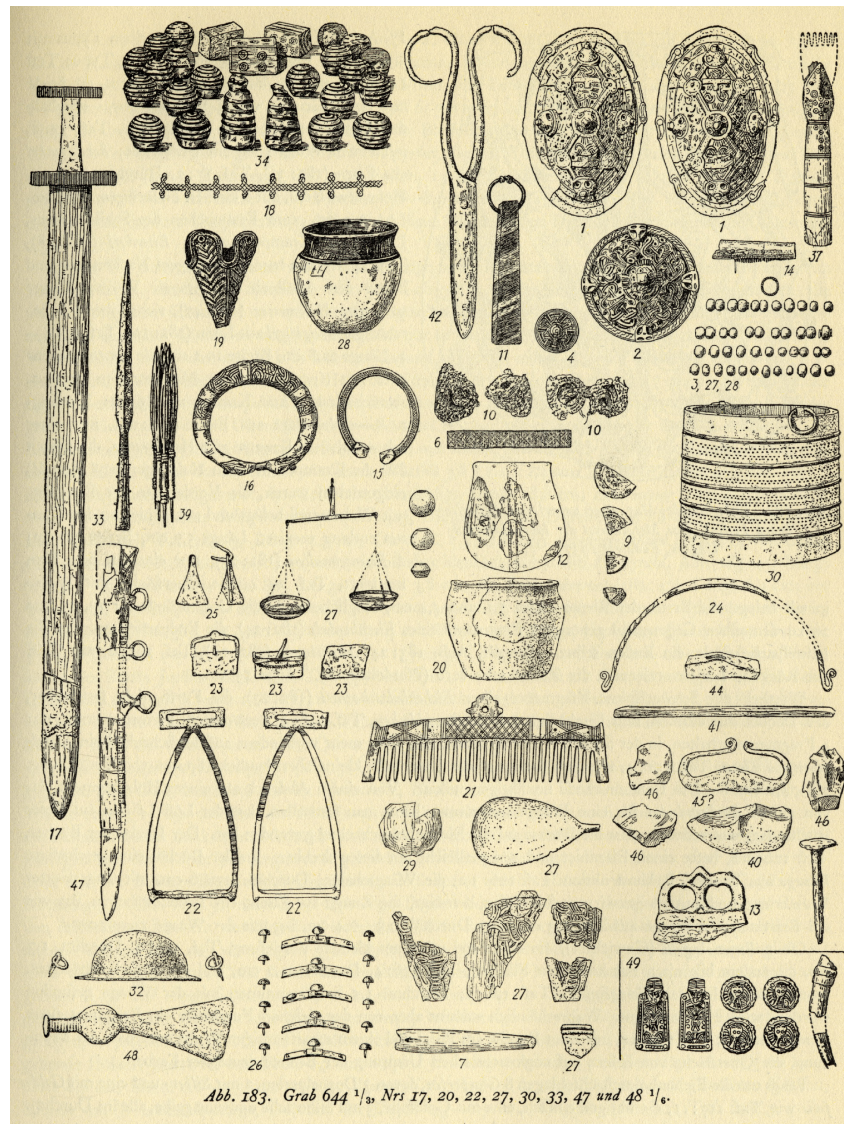


Fig. 2. Chamber grave Bj 644 with a fire-steel likely to have been brought to Birka from Finland (from Arbman 1943:223 pl. 183).

stitute c. 11% of all graves in Birka, but as many as c. 22% of them carried objects originating or showing heavy influences from Finland. The Birka chamber graves have often been considered representative of an elite consisting of warriors or merchants with long-distance contacts (e.g. Stenberger 1971:704; Gräslund 1980:80; Steuer 1987:119; Clarke & Ambrosiani 1991:69f., 137; Ringstedt 1997:111f., 115; Callmer 2008:123f.).

The high proportion of chamber graves containing costume details from Western Finland and Baltic Finnish ware indicates that the elite in Birka was over-represented when it came to burials with objects with provenance or influence from the Finnish

mainland. It is particularly remarkable that one of the chamber graves, Bj 644, a double grave, is among the graves on Björkö with the greatest wealth of artefacts (cf. Ringstedt 1997:101). In this grave there was a fire-steel with a bronze grip in the form of an animal head. This type of fire-steel is known from Finland and the Perm region. Even if it is hard to establish where this type was produced, it is likely that the fire-steel found in Birka came there via Finland (see Gustin in print). In grave Bj 644 there were also objects such as scales, weights, a pouch, a sword, stirrups, an axe, shield boss, game pieces, gilded oval brooches, shears, and comb beaters (fig. 2). Likewise Bj 834 and 845, which contained Baltic Finnish ware, were very

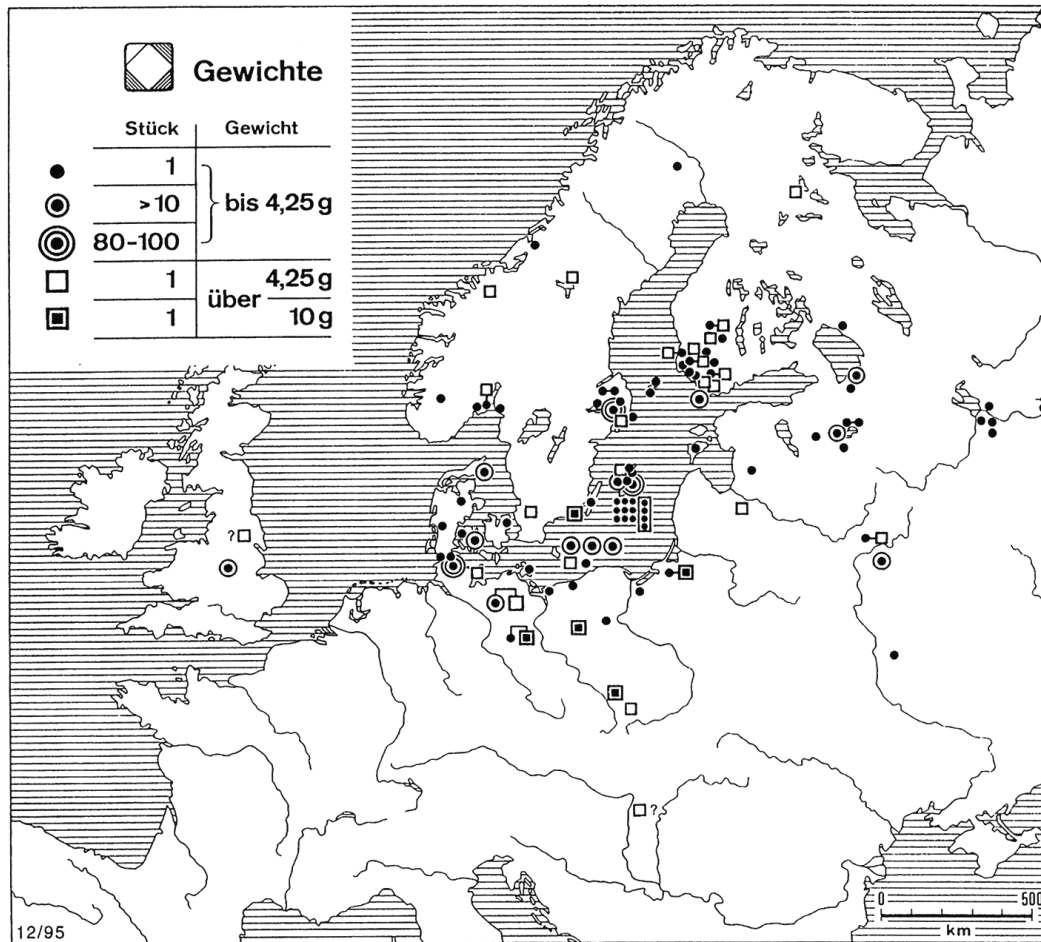


Fig. 3. Distribution map for cubo-octahedral weights (from Steuer 2002:139).

rich in artefacts. In both graves there was a staff, often interpreted as a measuring rod (Gustin 2004; Gustin 2010; but see Price 2002 for different interpret.). In chamber grave Bj 954 there was a well-equipped woman buried with a penannular brooch with faceted and pegged knobs. Furthermore, her grave contained two oval brooches, a trefoil brooch and other female dress details and accessories as well as a weight and Islamic coins.

Lavishly furnished chamber graves in Birka like Bj 644, 834, 845 and 954 indicate that the elite in the town were part of a network that was directly or indirectly connected to groups in Finland. It is likely that foreign objects, as the ones relating to the Finnish

mainland, were used by groups in Birka to assert and increase status and social position.

Several studies have shown that objects acquired from remote regions are actively used in the ideological legitimation of the group that controls their acquisition, distribution and use (Helms 1988; 1993:165; Lucy 2005:108 with ref.; Tsigaridas Glørstad 2012:36). Furthermore, items such as scales, weights, and measuring rods, as well as Islamic coins in the graves of some of the persons in Birka buried with objects from Western Finland, show that these persons belonged to groups involved in the trade and exchange of goods. In Western Finland there are many finds of normative and standardized weights of

the same types as in Birka.

The high amount of these weights in this region is clearly illustrated by the distribution map for cubo-octahedral weights compiled by Heiko Steuer (fig. 3). The presence of same types of weights in Birka and Western Finland is a clear indication that both were part of a common supra-regional network in the Viking Age. Not only the objects from Finland found in Birka, but also objects from Scandinavian and especially Central Sweden found in Western Finland confirm that there has been a close connection between Eastern Scandinavia and Birka on the one hand and Western Finland on the other. The Scandinavian finds in Finland have been discussed by Ella Kivikoski and Ingmar Jansson. Their results will be presented below.

Scandinavian Objects found in Finland

Viking Age artefacts originating from Scandinavia and Central Sweden found in Finland have been surveyed and described by Ella Kivikoski (1938:232–241; 1964:214). The objects Kivikoski noted consist of about twenty equal-armed fibulae, some oval brooches, bronze dress pins with barrel shaped head (Sw. med tunnformigt huvud), arm rings with line ornamentation (Sw. med våglinjedekor), some twenty arm rings with interlace ornament (Sw. bandflätning), scabbard chapes with animal style ornamentation, silver pendants with swirl motives (Sw. silverbleck med virvelmotiv), iron rings with amulets, mount to a fire steel, a needle case etcetera. Line ornamented equal-armed fibulae of the Ljønnes type found in Finland may also have come from Central Sweden, where they are numerous. According to Kivikoski, Scandinavian objects of types common in Central Sweden have above all been found in Western Finland, but, for example, oval brooches also occur in the eastern and north-eastern parts of the country (Kivikoski 1938).⁴

More recently Ingmar Jansson has studied the Scandinavian female ornaments found in Finland (Jansson 1990). Jansson's study confirmed that the material chiefly consists of equal-armed brooches.⁵ The brooches belong to the ninth and tenth centuries, and some of them are of types typical for Eastern Sweden. The Scandinavian female ornaments have above all been found in Finland Proper and Satakunta, that is, in the south and west (fig. 4). According to Jansson, the Scandinavian equal-armed brooches were retrieved from graves showing local features. Only rarely more than one object from Scandinavia was found in each grave. According to Jansson, this shows that the Scandinavian objects found in Finland hardly derive from migration.

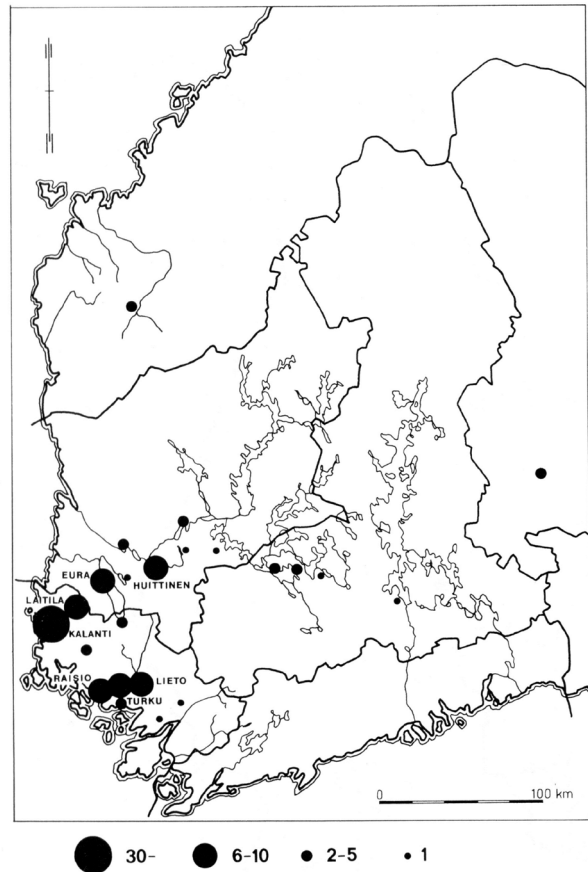


Fig. 4. Map showing the distribution of Scandinavian ornaments in Finland (from Lehtosalo-Hilander 1982:72 fig. 14).

Kivikoski pointed out that the objects from Sweden appear on most of the larger grave fields in Western Finland. However, ninth and tenth century objects are mainly found in Vakka Suomi, a region that, in her view, had close ties to Birka and central Sweden (Kivikoski 1964:215). In much later archaeological research in Finland, it has also been stated that Vakka Suomi had closer ties with Birka and Central Sweden (Edgren 1992:249; 2008:481). So what characterizes Vakka Suomi?

Vakka Suomi

Vakka Suomi is a sub-region within Finland Proper and it is situated in the north-western part of the latter region (fig. 5). In Vakka Suomi there are two districts, Laitila and Kalanti, which are considered to be core areas of settlement in Iron Age Finland. From cemeteries in these districts, finds have been retrieved which are unique to the archaeological record of this

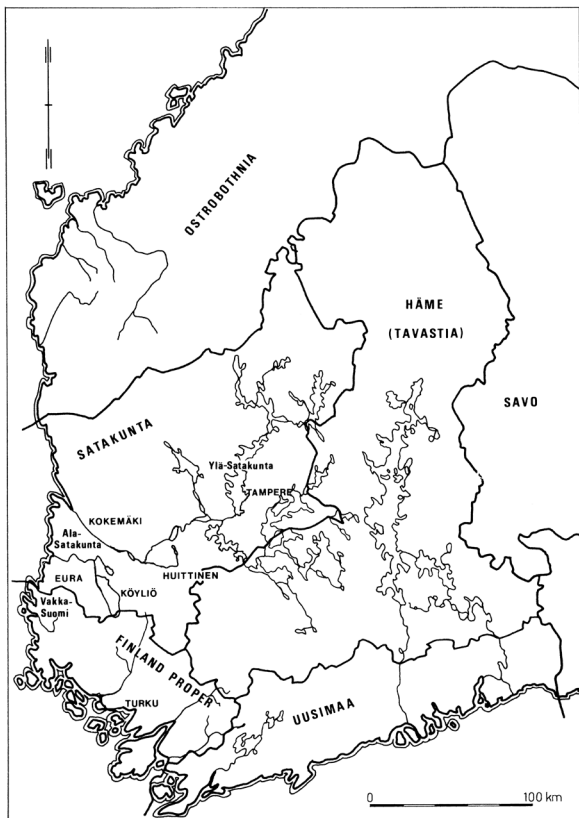


Fig. 5. Map of Western Finland showing places and areas mentioned in the text (reworked after Lehtosalo-Hilander 1982:75, fig. 19).

country. Grave goods, non-local forms of burial as well as stray finds show that the people in these districts had

long distance contacts from the Early Roman Iron Age onwards (Purhonen 1996:13–15).

According to Marianne Schaumann-Lönnqvist, there appear to have been several small seats during the Finnish Merovingian period where petty noblemen represented the power elite on a local level. Since the tightest concentration of Merovingian Period nobility cemeteries known to date lies in Vakka Soumi, Schaumann-Lönnqvist has stated that this district was the leading community in Finland at the time (Schaumann-Lönnqvist 1996:133).

The region seems to have been wealthy not only during the Merovingian Period but also during the Viking Age. Kivikoski pointed out that the parishes of Laitila and Kalanti were especially wealthy and densely populated during the latter time period. According to Kivikoski, the long distance contacts were still important during the Viking Age and the region seems

to have had permanent contacts, initially with Gotland, then Birka and then again Gotland (Kivikoski 1969:55–58). However, Vakka-Suomi was not very fertile; the soil was barren and rocky and there could hardly have been any agricultural surplus during the Viking Age (Kivikoski 1964:217). So how come groups in Vakka Soumi were involved in a network that supplied them with prestigious goods? What was the economic basis for groups living there? What kind of surplus products could have been handled and distributed? The views of Finnish archaeologists differ.

According to Ella Kivikoski, furs and fur trade were the general basis for the prosperity of Western Finland. The inhabitants in south-western Satakunta had excellent hunting opportunities in the north and those who lived in Häme had vast hinterlands rich in fur-bearing animals. Kivikoski pointed out that the routes from south-western Satakunta probably went through Vakka Soumi on the way to the coast. She therefore maintained that the reason for the prosperity of Vakka Soumi could be due to export trade with fur from the inland as well as to shipping, fishing and seal hunting. Kivikoski also suggests that groups in Vakka Soumi were involved in the extraction of furs from the Sami people (Kivikoski 1964:215–217).

According to Torsten Edgren, Vakka Soumi's western connections were based on the region's geographical location and the fact that it constituted a link between the Baltic region and the prosperous inland districts of Kokemäki, Eura and Köyliö. Also trade routes from Häme to the coast may partly have gone through Vakka Soumi (Edgren 1992:249). It is possible that the importance of the northern and north-eastern trade routes leading through Vakka Soumi should be viewed in the light of an increasing trade with furs. In his research J. P. Taavitsainen has found an intensification in the utilisation of wilderness during the Viking Age, as seen for example in Häme and Satakunta. In these regions, as well as in Savo, Karelia and Northern Finland settlements were established which can be described as trapper stations. Taavitsainen maintains that these regions experienced a change in commercial wilderness economy characterised by fur trade during the Viking Period (Taavitsainen 1990:112f.).

Even though furs and fur trade are regarded as an economic basis for the trading peasants in Vakka Soumi, other products might also have played a role. Torsten Edgren and Pirko-Liisa Lehtosalo-Hilander have suggested that part of the prosperity of Vakka Soumi during the Viking Age can be explained by wood working. They argue that the inhabitants in this district could already have been producing and

exporting moulded splint vessels, the wooden containers known in Finnish as *vakka*, and in Swedish as *svepask*. These containers were a very profitable export product during much later centuries (Lethosalo-Hilander 1982c:75; 1983:297; Edgren 2008:481). Another product which possibly could have been of importance when it comes to export is iron. Edgren has pointed out that ready access to ore and unlimited supplies of charcoal for smelting made Finland a strategic centre of North Baltic iron production (Edgren 2000:110f.).

However, it was probably not only the local products distributed by the elite in Vakka Suomi that attracted people in Eastern Sweden and Birka. Seen from an Eastern Scandinavian point of view, the elites in Western Finland were intermediaries' when it came to early contacts and networks that stretched further east. These contacts are evident from the early Islamic coins that have been retrieved in Vakka Suomi.

Finds of Early Islamic Coins in Vakka Suomi and the Eastern Link

In Finland, coins were scarce before the 10th century (Talvio 2002:130). An interesting phenomenon when it comes to Vakka Suomi is that the district has some of the earliest finds of Islamic coins in Finland and that the inhabitants were pioneers of coin import from the east. Among nine early Islamic coins from Vakka Suomi, dated to AD 650/703–807/808, four are from Vainionmäki in Laitila. These coins were found on a cremation cemetery from the Merovingian Period.

The four dirham fragments from the Vainionmäki cemetery have been described by Tuukka Talvio (Talvio 1996; 1999; 2002:86). Two of the fragments were dated to AD 705–15 and AD 737–39. They belonged to the Umayyad dynasty, which came to an end in AD 750. The other two were Abbasid coins dated to AD 758–65 and AD 803–04. According to Talvio, these coins were not associated with any dateable objects. Due to the dating of the cemetery to the Merovingian Period, and the fact there were no finds dating later than c. AD 800, Talvio finds it likely that the earliest three of the Islamic coins reached Finland before this time. If this assumption is correct, the coins from the cemetery in Laitila belong to a small group of very early arrivals of Islamic coins that precede the large scale import that began in the early 9th century. Islamic coins dated so early are neither common in Scandinavia nor in Northern Russia. Talvio points out that finds of this type are restricted to one from Sweden (Tuna in Alsike, Uppland) and one or two from north-western Russia (Talvio 1996 with

ref.).

Talvio's conclusion about the coin finds from the Vainionmäki cemetery and other finds of Islamic coins with early datings from places like Mynämäki and Mietonen in Finland Proper is that a small amount of coins reached south-western Finland around AD 800 and possibly even earlier (Talvio 1999). Other archaeological finds confirm that there were established contacts between Western Finland and regions in Russia before the Viking Age. In this case, the connections between Western Finland and the Kama and upper Volga region in Russia are of special interest.

Permian Belts

A find group showing early links between Western Finland and areas much further east in Russia is belts. A considerable number of ornamental belts of the so called Nevolino type reached Finland during the eight century. These belts have a wide distribution; they are found from Tomsk in the east to Gamla Uppsala in the west. However, they appear most frequently in the basin of the Kama River and in Western Finland. The number of finds from Finland amounts to 19 (Callmer 1980:209; 1990:22).

The belts, often referred to as Permian belts, are thought to originate from the regions around the river Kama and its confluence with the Volga River west of the Ural mountains. The Kama region was an international hub as shown by graves on burial grounds along the Kama River. Here rich women's graves from the 7th and 8th centuries contain not only belts, but also artefacts from Caucasus, Central Asia and Iran such as silver coins, carnelian and crystal beads (Hirviluoto 1986:72f.). So even before the Viking Age, trade routes along the Volga River and the steppe linked the Kama region to civilizations in Western and Central Asia. During the Viking Age it is known that furs and walrus tusks from the north were exchanged for Oriental luxuries on markets along the Kama and Volga rivers (Jansson 2000b:15–17; Roslund in print).

Permian belts and their mounts have been found in male graves from the late 7th and 8th century in Western Finland. Between Western Finland and the Kama region there are only few known finds.⁶ There have been various suggestions as to how the link between Western Finland and the upper Volga and Kama-region could be maintained (see Hirviluoto 1986:71f.; Ryabinin 1986:217f.). Christian Carpelan has noticed a correspondence in time between Central Russian axes found in Finland and the Permian belts and he has therefore maintained that goods from the Kama area were first transported by traders

to Central Russia. From there local traders from the Volga-Oka region transported axes and other objects such as belts towards the northwest as far as Finland. However, the groups from Western Finland involved in this long distance exchange network did not know that the impressive belts were originally the belts of women. Therefore, the belts ended up in high status male graves in Finland (Carpelan 2002:179). That the groups on the Finnish mainland as well as the groups living in the Volga-Oka region belonged to the same language family and the same cultural community, the Finno-Ugric, has most probably contributed to the upholding of the contacts (Callmer 2000b:54; Jansson 2000b:15–17). Due to these far-reaching contacts, groups in Finland became involved in the developing west-east trade on the Volga River in the 8th century (Callmer 1980:209 with references; Roslund in print).

The graves containing Permian belts in Western Finland were well-furnished. The finds indicate that the buried belonged to the local population. Interestingly enough, in some cases these burials also contained a sword of Scandinavian type with animal ornamentation. The find combination thus shows that these persons belonged to families with connections not only with Finno-Ugric groups in the Permian region, but also with Scandinavian groups on the western side of the Baltic Sea. Furthermore, two mounts from a Permian belt were retrieved from one of the graves, Gullhögen, in Gamla Uppsala, Uppland, the religious and political center of the “Svear”. It is likely that Gullhögen was a large mound situated on Högåsengravfältet, south-west of the so-called Royal mounds. This mound was excavated in the middle of the 19th century. Unfortunately, the documentation of the excavation is poor. However, it seems clear that Gullhögen contained a fragment from a vessel from Gotland or the continent, a gold cloisonné fragment as well as two mounts from a Permian belt. The grave is difficult to date but it has been suggested that it originates from the 7th century (Ljungkvist 2013:41–44).

The find of the Permian belt mounts shows that there were early links between the elite in Uppland, the elite in Western Finland and the groups in the Permian region. It has been pointed out that it probably was through these elite contacts between “Svear” and groups in Western Finland, that the “Svear” found out about the routes along the Finnish Gulf and how to travel to Lake Ladoga and further east (Jansson 2000a:124f.; 2000b:16f.; Carpelan 2002:180).

Summary

The study of trade and long distance contacts is essential for understanding Viking Age urban centers. However, there has been an inclination to emphasize the importance of long-distance contacts with some particular regions, while others have been much less discussed despite the rich material. Research on contacts with these overlooked regions would certainly bring new aspects in the study of Viking Age urbanism to light.

In research on Birka, a strong focus has since long been directed towards long-distance contacts with Western as well with Northeastern Europe (today's Russia, Belarus and Ukraine). The great attention paid to West and East European contacts has likely contributed contacts with Finland falling out of the discussions. However, as seen from studies of the pottery in Birka, the Baltic Finnish ware constitutes the second largest group when it comes to imports to the town.

Baltic Finnish ware has not only been retrieved from town layers in Birka. There are finds of this type of ware in the graves as well as of dress details deriving from or showing heavy influence from the Finnish mainland. Some of these finds derive from the most lavishly furnished chamber graves in Birka, indicating that the elite in the town were part of a network that was directly or indirectly connected to groups on the Finnish mainland. Besides Baltic Finnish pottery or dress details from Finland, these graves also contained objects such as weights, scales and Islamic coins – items indicating an affiliation to groups involved in the trade and exchange of goods.

Finds of standardized weights in Western Finland clearly indicate that this region was part of a supra-regional network in the Viking Age, just like Birka. Objects with provenance or influence from Finland found in Birka on the one hand and objects from Scandinavian and Central Sweden found in Finland on the other confirm that there has been a close connection between the Mälaren region and Western Finland. Probably products such as furs distributed by the elite in Vakka Suomi attracted groups in Eastern Sweden and Birka.

However, the elite in Birka might also have had other reasons for maintaining contacts with groups in Western Finland. As has been shown by the early Islamic coins in Laitila, as well as by the finds of Permian belts in Vakka-Suomi, groups in Western Finland were linked to routes and networks spanning much further east. The Birka artefacts deriving or showing heavy influences from Western Finland thus express

access not only to products from the Finnish mainland, but also, in a wider sense, to contacts and routes further east and by extension also to the riches of the Caliphate.

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Endnotes

¹ Finland Proper (Varsinais-Suomi) and Satakunta in Western Finland, along with Häme (Tavastland), were the areas of ancient settlement (Edgren 2008:470). The settlements were mainly located along the sea coast and inland waterways (Lehtosalo-Hilander 1992:62). When the terms “Finnish” or “Finland” refer to a prehistoric context in this text they designate the populated areas in these districts.

² Recent published findings of this type of fire-steel

from Russia show that they are more frequent in Northern Russia than previously assumed. The Russian finds might lead to renewed discussions about the origin and place of manufacture for fire-steels with bronze handles in the form of mounted figures. Even if the production area for these fire-steels will continue to be matter of debate, it is still likely that the fire-steel brought to Birka came via Finland and that it thus represents contacts with this region

³ A large number of the Birka graves were excavated by Hjalmar Stolpe in the late 19th century. They are generally designated by Bj and a number as in the works by Holger Arbman who later published the finds (Arbman 1940; 1943). The letters “Bj” refer to Björkö, the island where Birka is situated.

⁴ It should be added that some of the Viking Age Scandinavian artefacts found in Ladoga-Karelia and in Eastern Finland were probably mediated through encounters between Scandinavians and the population of the Karelian isthmus in the area around Lake Ladoga and via the trading site of Staraja Ladoga (Uino 1997:113f., 179ff.; Uino pers. comm.)

⁵ Local forms of equal-armed brooches were produced in Vakka-Suomi. These brooches were based on types imported from Central Sweden and had a vast distribution in the populated areas of Finland (Edgren 1992:242).

⁶ One such find derive from Staraja Ladoga, the trading center close to Lake Ladoga.