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From handle to head

Öremölla and the oldest male depiction in the Scanian Iron Age

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From handle to head

Öremölla and the oldest male depiction in the Scanian Iron Age

LARS LARSSON & FREDRIK EKENGREN

Since its discovery in 1872, the grave at Öremölla in southern Scania, containing a cremated male with a Roman cauldron and other drinking utensils, has been considered one of the richest graves in Scania from the Roman Iron Age. The cauldron is particularly noteworthy, since it has been modified in an intricate way; the original handle has been removed and replaced with ring handles, and the handle attachments fitted with male face masks in local style. In the 1940s, an

original suspension loop from a Roman bronze cauldron of the same type was discovered in a nearby gravel pit. Some years ago, the authors brought this suspension loop to Stockholm, where the Öremölla find is currently stored. Remarkably, it fitted perfectly onto the rim of the cauldron. The aim of this contribution is to introduce and re-analyse the find, particularly the cauldron, and place it in a wider context.

Introduction

During ploughing in the spring of 1872, a remarkable discovery was made at the homestead Öremölla 3, Skivarp parish, Vemmenhög hundred, in southern Scania (Hildebrand 1876). At the highest point of a south-sloping field, where a number of cremation urns had been discovered the year before, the plough struck a large stone. Under the stone stood a bronze cauldron containing rusted chain mail with fragments of burnt bone, wrapped in what was first thought to be silk. Arranged around the cauldron were a bronze ladle and strainer, two glass beakers, and two pottery vessels. However, most of the artefacts had suffered some damage during the work of breaking up the stone. The site of the find can still easily be located today. From the lowest part of the Skivarp River there is a sharp rise towards the north, which ends in a ledge after about a hundred metres; above this a much weaker rise. On the outermost part of this ledge is a slight elevation that may be the same one where the grave in question was found. From this point there is a view to the south-west, where the river enters the Baltic Sea.

The content of the Öremölla grave

Most scholarly attention has been paid to the objects of Roman manufacture in the grave. The bronze cauldron belongs to Eggers type 46 of fluted or grooved cauldrons (Eggers 1951) (fig. 1). Its original Roman handle has at some point been removed and replaced by two ring handles suspended from attachments decorated with human face masks in Germanic style. The bronze ladle and strainer set is also of Roman manufacture (Eggers type 160), and so are the two identical glass beakers decorated with cut

ovals (Eggers type 187). Together, these imported vessels formed an arrangement intended for the mixing, ladling, and drinking of wine. The two pottery vessels, on the other hand, one of which could be reconstructed, are consistent with vessels of local manufacture.

The chain mail found in the rusted lump inside the cauldron is of a well-known Roman type with small, riveted rings (Künzl 2002, p. 136). On the surface of several fragments of iron there were mineralised textile remains. Analysis of these has revealed three weaving techniques, namely equilateral twill, diamond twill, and tablet weave (Bender Jørgensen 1986, p. 234). These fragments probably belonged to a military mantle of Gallo-Roman type (*sagum*), corresponding to several similar fragments of ceremonial mantles found both in Roman and Germanic territory (Bender Jørgensen 1986, pp. 150ff). The mantle had been wrapped around the remains from the pyre before these were placed in the cauldron.

Hildebrand's description of the grave also mentions an iron fibula, but it has not been possible to locate or identify this piece. The museum catalogue (The Swedish History Museum in Stockholm, SHM catalogue no. 4792) further includes a small bronze object described as a rivet, but which may be a punch. Hildebrand, however, does not mention it in his publication of the find.

Re-examination of the find

The presence of chain mail is indicative of weaponry, but no weapons were recognized when the grave was discovered (Hildebrand 1876). However, little attention seems to have been paid to the find as a whole, apart from the Roman objects, because of the state of the iron. A re-examination of the corroded content of the cauldron



Fig. 1. Some of the artefacts from the Öremölla grave, including the cauldron, ladle and strainer, two glass beakers, one of the pottery vessels, as well as a broken-off handle attachment. Photo: Sören Hallgren, The Swedish History Museum (CC BY 4.0).

using X-ray photography was therefore commissioned (the analysis was carried out by conservator Åsa Norlander at the Department of Antiquities, Swedish National Heritage Board, Stockholm), and this made it possible to trace and identify several additional iron artefacts. Among the rusted lumps, one chair-shaped spur was identified

in almost intact condition, with the shank and the chair easily distinguishable. Some fragments belong to a shield boss, among them parts of the flange and the apex. The fragment of the apex is slightly flared towards the tip. One triangular end of a shield handle was also identified, with the remains of a rivet in the centre. The grave goods

further included a double-edged sword, several fragments of which have been identified. A ribbon-shaped iron fragment, 15–16 mm wide, could possibly be a fitting for the sword scabbard. An alternative function would be as an edge fitting of the shield. Among the iron fragments there were, in addition, significant parts of a lancehead with a clearly defined centre ridge, as well as fragments of a spearhead. Lastly, a clearly discernible rivet was also identified, as well as a small lump of molten bronze on a lancehead or spearhead fragment – possibly the remains of a bronze rivet that fixed the point to the shaft. Based on the overall assessment of the find, taking into account the types of Roman imports as well as the weaponry types, it is dated to the period B2–C1a (150–200 CE).

The authors also commissioned an osteological analysis of the bones, most of which were embedded in the lumps of corroded armour (the analysis was carried out by Therese Hedlund, M.A.). They were identified as the remains of an adult individual, possibly a man, as well as remains that may represent a dog. Based on this, it appears that an adult individual dressed in armour and spurs was placed on the pyre together with a sword, a shield, a lance and a spear, and possibly a dog. The remains were later wrapped in a mantle and placed in the cauldron, which was deposited in the ground surrounded by the other vessels for drinking.

A Roman suspension loop

Of particular interest in relation to the Öremölla grave is a stray find of a Roman suspension loop in the collection of the Lund University History Museum (LUHM 28920). Its design corresponds to similar attachments for cauldrons of Eggers types 44–49 (Lund Hansen 1987, no LH 324). The cauldron would have had two such suspension loops, one on either side of the mouth, to which a parabolic bail handle would have been fastened. According to the museum catalogue, the stray find was submitted by the archaeologist Folke Hansen around 1950, shortly before his death in 1951. It was found in a gravel pit in Öremölla, in the same part of the parish as the grave find in question. Unfortunately, the documentation does not mention on which property the find was made. However, it should be possible to establish approximately where in Öremölla gravel extraction was carried out before 1950 by using LIDAR maps. Suitable areas for gravel extraction are rather limited, due to the level topography of large parts of the Öremölla area. West of the Skivarp river, which forms the boundary of Öremölla, there are traces of gravel pits only in three areas (fig. 2). Of these, the one nearest to the grave site is the most likely candidate. It is located about 300 m north of the site and situated on the west side of the valley that contains the Skivarp river, on a rise overlooking both the find spot of the grave and the Baltic. During a survey and test excavation, flint debitage, ploughed-out hearths, scattered stones, and post holes were discovered (Ancient Monument no. L1989:6469, assessment investigations by The Archaeological Exca-

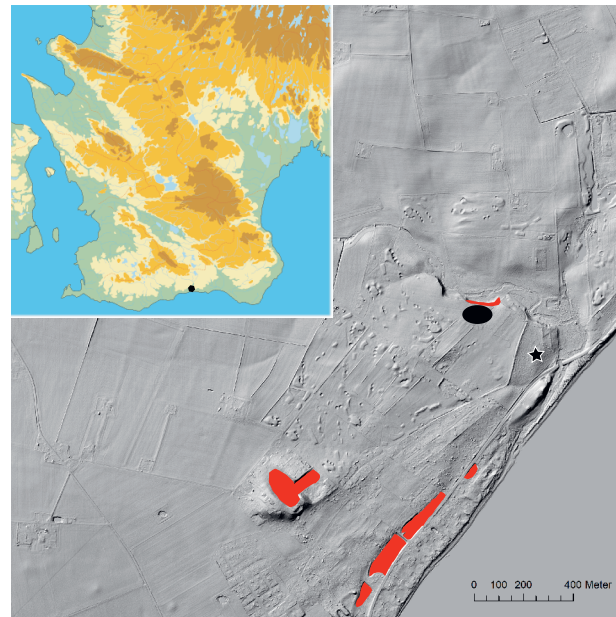


Fig. 2. The location of the Öremölla grave in southernmost Sweden (above left) and the area around the burial site. Legend: star – the burial site; black oval – Iron Age settlement; red areas – traces of gravel pits. Map: Lars Larsson. Basemap © Lantmäteriet.

vations Department at The National Heritage Board, UV-Syd). The post holes may suggest the presence of an Iron Age settlement.

But what prompts this search for the original location of a stray suspension loop? Firstly, the find is the only one of its kind in Scandinavia (Lund Hansen 1987). Secondly, it may have been attached to a cauldron of similar type to the one found in the grave. As stated above, the original suspension loops had been removed from the cauldron and replaced with ring handles. Could this stray find be one of those originally attached to the cauldron? In order to arrive at an answer to the question, permission was obtained to take the attachment to the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm, where the grave find is kept. It turned out to fit perfectly to the rim of the cauldron (fig. 3). Traces of the removal of the suspension loops were still clearly visible on the rim, and these traces perfectly matched the outline of the extant suspension loop. Therefore, we dare to suggest that the attachment is most likely one of the originals belonging to the cauldron. If this is correct, it would mean that the handle was removed in the Öremölla area, presumably at the site previously occupied by the buried individual. It follows that the handle attachments with face masks and ring handles would have been made in the same place.

The Germanic face masks and their context

The added attachments with face masks should be considered products of Germanic craftsmanship (Stupperich 1993, p. 145; 1995, p. 75; 1996, p. 20). Alterations and repairs to Roman metal vessels are a well-known and relatively common phenomenon. In most cases, these



Fig. 3. Detail of the cauldron, with the Roman suspension loop fitted onto the rim. Photo: Lars Larsson.

involve simple repair or replacement of lost parts, especially handle attachments. Sometimes, however, as in the case of Öremölla, we see examples of a deliberate transformation of the visual expression of the object (Drescher 1963).

The two face masks, one loose and one still attached to the cauldron, are characterised by highly stylised, pear-shaped faces in semi-relief with pointed chins, horizontal open mouths, angular noses, pronounced brow ridges, and sunken round eyes marked with a white mass. Above the brow ridges are horizontal lines marking the hairline, and the calotte-like hairstyles consist of two groups of oblique lines forming a parting at the centre. There are no markings of a moustache or beard on either mask, or any other gender-coded features for that matter (see fig. 3). A comparison between the two face masks, however, reveals some minor but clear differences in the execution, proportions, and dimensions of the features, indicating

they were not cast in the same mould or based on the same model.

The closest parallel to the face masks in Öremölla can be found in a stray handle attachment from a cauldron of type E 46, found in 1899 in a bog in Thorup (NM I C 9532) in the northern part of Funen island, Denmark (Ekholm 1935, p. 74 note 48; Lund Hansen 1997, p. 404). It is, unfortunately, badly worn; but the pear-shape of the face, the marked hairline, and parted hairstyle are still discernible (fig. 4). While in the case of Öremölla the attachments themselves are undecorated, the one from Thorup is adorned with (what look like) concentric circles forming a border around the face mask.

Besides the find from Thorup, the shape and composition of the faces are comparable to both face masks of sheet metal and statuettes found in various parts of early Iron Age Scandinavia (Rasmussen 1995, pp. 67f;



Fig. 4. The stray handle attachment from Thorup in northern Funen, Denmark. Photo: Jana Treppe, National Museum of Denmark (CC-BY-SA).

Blankenfeldt 2015). The parted hairstyle, in particular, is reminiscent of the statues from Alböke (SHM 11700), Himmelsberga (SHM 8428), and Laxeby (SHM 8268), as well as the face masks from Gårdby (SHM 14198) and from the Borgholm area (SHM 14428), all found on the Baltic island of Öland and dating from the Roman Iron Age (cf. Björklund 1996, p. 88). Similar expressions can be found on a group of roughly contemporary statuettes and face masks from Denmark (e.g. Thrane 1975; Henriksen 2020). Several of the contexts in which face masks similar to Öremölla appear – such as the ornamental face masks of gold from the shield board fittings found in the war booty find at Illerup and the face masks decorating two silver beakers from Brokær – further suggest that the motif is associated with an elite milieu in Germanic society, primarily belonging to the second and third century CE (Blankenfeldt 2015, pp. 33ff).

In order to contextualise the cauldron from Öremölla even further, we may stress that the grave has lent its name to an elite burial horizon in the Roman Iron Age – the Czarnówko-Öremölla Horizon – together with the richly furnished graves at Czarnówko in Pomerania, Poland. Chronologically, the Czarnówko-Öremölla Horizon is dated to the transitional period B2/C1a, placing it between the princely graves of Lübsow type and those of Leuna-Haßleben-Sackrau type (Schuster 2018, pp. 116f). Particularly the composition of grave goods in grave R430 from Czarnówko offers a striking parallel to Öremölla, with its grooved cauldron (Eggers type 44), a ladle (Eggers type 60), and a glass beaker (Eggers type 187), found together with, among other things, an additional cauldron decorated with three ring-handle attachments with semi-relief heads of bearded men wearing a so-called *nodus suebicus* – a Suebian knot hairstyle (Schuster 2018). This type of representation of male heads with Suebian knots is mainly found along the upper Danube, perhaps the most famous find being the ring-handle attachments on the cauldron from Mušov in Bohemia, dated to the transition between periods B2 and C1a, at the end of the second century CE. These are generally regarded

as Roman works that catered to Germanic tastes and were associated with Rome's efforts to strengthen the local elite and through diplomatic gifts win them over during the Marcomannic Wars in 166–180 CE (Krierer 2002; Schuster 2018, pp. 116f; Krierer 2021; Onyščuk & Schuster 2021). A comparable example of this phenomenon can be observed in the two ring-handle attachments featuring busts in full relief found at Västra Vång in Blekinge. One of them is again believed to be of provincial Roman origin, crafted in a style intended to appeal to “barbarian” tastes beyond the *limes*. Although it lacks the *nodus suebicus*, its execution shows clear similarities to the ring-handle attachments from Mušov, mentioned above, and can therefore be placed within the same chronological and cultural context. The other bust, on the other hand, appears to be a locally made replica, likely produced to accompany the Roman original (Lidh 2014; Helgesson & Svensson 2024, pp. 152f).

Although the Öremölla face masks are simpler, more stylised in their execution, and lack the *nodus suebicus*, they undoubtedly represent a related expression to primarily the cauldrons with Suebian ring handle attachments. The compositional similarity to the Czarnówko cauldron, with faces in half relief, hook-shaped fasteners for ring handles extending from the tops of the heads, and the notching of the ring handles themselves, are unmistakable. Through an act of deliberate transformation (or imitation), the original handle attachments of the Öremölla cauldron were removed and replaced by Germanic-style face masks, giving it a transregional expression that aligned it to the network of Germanic elites extending from the southern Baltic down to the Danube at the time of the Marcomannic Wars (Schuster 2018, pp. 44f, 120f; Onyščuk & Schuster 2021, p. 31). Perhaps in the case of Öremölla we are dealing with an individual who had served in the conflicts along the *limes* at this time, either as an auxiliary or allied *foederatus* on the Roman side of the conflict, or on the Suebian side together with the Marcomanni. Diplomatic gifts in the form of Roman vessels are a well-known phenomenon in the Roman Iron Age (cf. Grane 2007), and perhaps the cauldron from Öremölla was modified with inspiration from the Danube area to reflect his social and political affiliation in this volatile time.

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