Deconstructing the deviant Burials

- Kopparsvik and the Rite of Prone Burials in Viking Age Scandinavia

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The cross-cultural phenomenon of prone burials, which can be found on several cemeteries in Viking Age Scandinavia, is often regarded as a sign for so-called 'deviant burials', indicating a pejorative and *post-mortem* humiliation, an exclusion of the dead, or an apotropaic rite to avert supernatural threats, based on some famous but single cases of decapitations in prone burials from Viking Age Scandinavia.
The case study of the late Viking Age cemetery of Kopparsvik on the Island of Gotland, Sweden, offers a rather different perspective. Due to their disproportionately high number and the often carefully arranged interment of the deceased, the prone burials at Kopparsvik should not to be regarded as 'deviant', but as a variation of the norm which in most cases seems to indicate a purposefully intended burial-rite with a presumably religious significance and conferring a special identity. According to archaeological as well as historical sources, a burial in prone position seems to indicate a special gesture of humility towards God. Based on these results, it seems necessary to reconsider the traditional interpretation of prone burials in Christian societies as well as our general understanding and utilization of the concept of 'deviant burials'.

The late Viking Age cemetery of Kopparsvik lay on the western shore of Gotland some two hundred meters south of the medieval city wall of Visby (Fig. 1). First findings of skeletal parts and Viking Age jewelry, which indicated the existence of a large grave field, were made at the end of the 19th century, when the site was redeveloped in the course of the then ongoing industrialization. Nevertheless, a complete archaeological investigation of the area did not take place until the 1960s when more than 300 graves were excavated (Pettersson 1966; Mälarstedt 1979).

Around 330 burials in simple grave-pits or beneath stone settings, lying in what appear to be two separate areas, were excavated, most of them dating from ca. 900 to 1050 AD. Based on stray finds of skeletal material and Viking Age dress accessories a quantity of originally 400–450

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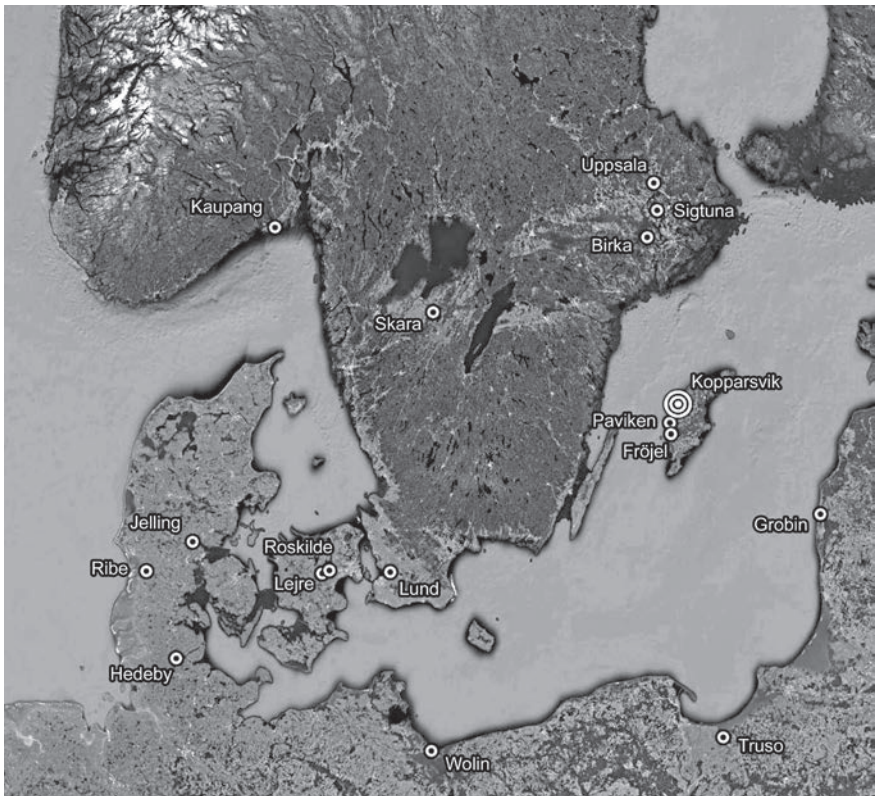


Figure 1. Map of southern Scandinavia with the important trading places in the late Viking Age [Drawing by the author]

graves can be calculated, some of which might have been destroyed in modern times through industrial utilization of the area which is now part of the harbour of Visby. Still, even with around 330 burials, Kopparsvik is largest excavated cemetery from Viking Age Gotland and it is to assume that Kopparsvik did not only serve as the cemetery for a handful of farms, but belonged to a larger community settled around the area of present-day Visby with the medieval harbour of Almedalen as its centre (Toplak 2015; 2016a; 2016b).

In contrast to the southern area of the cemetery, which shows a balanced distribution of female and male burials, there is a remarkable dominance of around 90% male burials in the northern part alongside the former shoreline. The cemetery comprises almost exclusively adult burials: burials of young children are completely missing. Either women and children were buried on a separate grave field which is still unknown, or the population around Kopparsvik consisted mainly of male adults, pointing to comprehensive trading activities.

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The burials of Kopparsvik were astonishingly poor. In most cases the dead were buried only in their clothes, and only some metal dress accessories such as fibulae, belts or jewellery were found, comparable to the late Viking Age churchyard burials on Gotland (Thunmark-Nylén 1995). Grave goods were absent in nearly a third of all burials and true grave goods that are normally expected to be present in a Viking Age cemetery such as weapons, tools or food were extremely rare. In the few cases (2% of all burials) in which weapons – mainly weapon knives, some axes and lances – were deposited, it can be assumed that these artefacts of power and status as reminiscence of traditional ideas of a warrior ideology were used to legitimize or to maintain the claim to power of a conservative elite in face of social and ideological transformations (Jakobsson 1992; Härke 2003; Brather 2009; Staecker 2009, s. 485–491). Swords, shields and armour or riding equipment were completely absent which shows an obvious shift away from a traditional and archaic warrior ideal of Vendel and early Viking Age (Härke 1990; 1992).

Furthermore, several finds point to an external influence or the presence of people of non-Gotlandic origin (Toplak 2016a, s. 175–179), as do the first results of an extensive strontium isotope analysis (Arcini 2010, s. 18).

The most striking element at Kopparsvik, which distinguishes this cemetery from any other Viking Age burial place, is the unusual large number of prone burials (Toplak 2016a, s. 93–101). Around 50 deceased – mostly men – were buried in a prone position, the majority of them in the northern area of the cemetery alongside the former shoreline (Fig. 2). By this, the burials at Kopparsvik offer a unique access for a detailed analysis and a better understanding of a little considered but frequently appearing feature in burial rites.[1]

Prone burials as a form of special treatment of the dead are known from many cultural groups and ages – from Palaeolithic to modern times –, ranging between an isolated phenomenon and a frequent burial rite on several burial grounds (Arcini 2009; Duma 2010; Gardeła 2011; Gardeła 2013a; Gardeła 2015a; Skóra 2014; Toplak 2017). One of the earliest examples comes from the well-known triple burial of Dolní Věstonice with one of the deceased buried in a prone position (Klíma 1987; Svoboda 2015), while modern prone burials are to be found in the trenches of the First World War (Silberman 2004), and the Hungarian politician and Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Hungarian People's Republic Imre Nagy and some other defendant were buried face down with their hands and feet tied with barbed wire after their execution for treason in 1958 (Dornbach 1994).

More than 100 cases of prone burials could be located so far in

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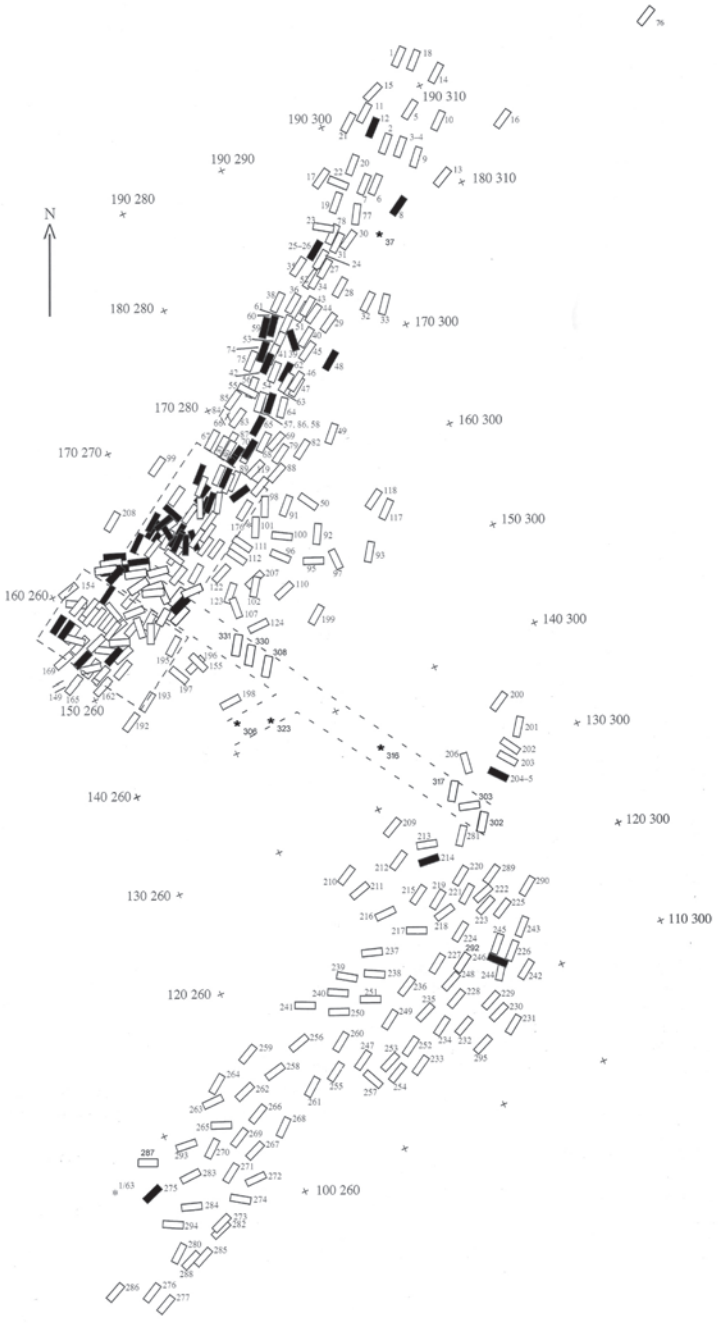


Figure 2. Distribution of prone burials at the cemetery of Kopparsvik. [Copyright by Lena Thunmark-Nylén, reworked by the author. Reproduced from Thunmark-Nylén, Lena 2006. Die Wikingerzeit Gotlands. III:1-2 - Text. Stockholm, Almqvist & Wiksell, s. 632]

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Scandinavia from the first centuries AD until the 11th century, most of them dating to the Viking Age (Fig. 3). Single prone burials occur in the Mesolithic and Neolithic Period, f. ex. in Skateholm, Skåne (Larsson 1984) or in Ajvide, Eksta parish, and Domarve, Hablingbo parish, on Gotland (C. Arcini, personal communication). There are no known cases from the Bronze Age as well as from Migration Period – except for one burial from Maglebjerghøj on Zealand (cat. no. 7) –, probably due to the prevailing funeral rite of cremation burials. In the Roman Iron Age, prone burials are much more numerous, mainly between Kattegat and the southern Baltic Sea. Around half a dozen individual cases are to be found on smaller cemeteries on Zealand, Bornholm and in Skåne, while three bigger cemeteries – Masede Fort (cat. no. 8–12) on Zealand and Slusegård (cat. no. 15–18) on Bornholm, and Hammarsnäs (cat. no. 42–47) in Skåne – comprise each half a dozen prone burials. In present-day Sweden, single prone burials are known from Öland and Gotland.

The majority of the around 100 cases of prone burials in Viking Age Scandinavia comes from Gotland (Fig. 4) due to the high number at Kopparsvik (cat. no. 53–101), while a dozen prone burials are known from mainland Sweden and

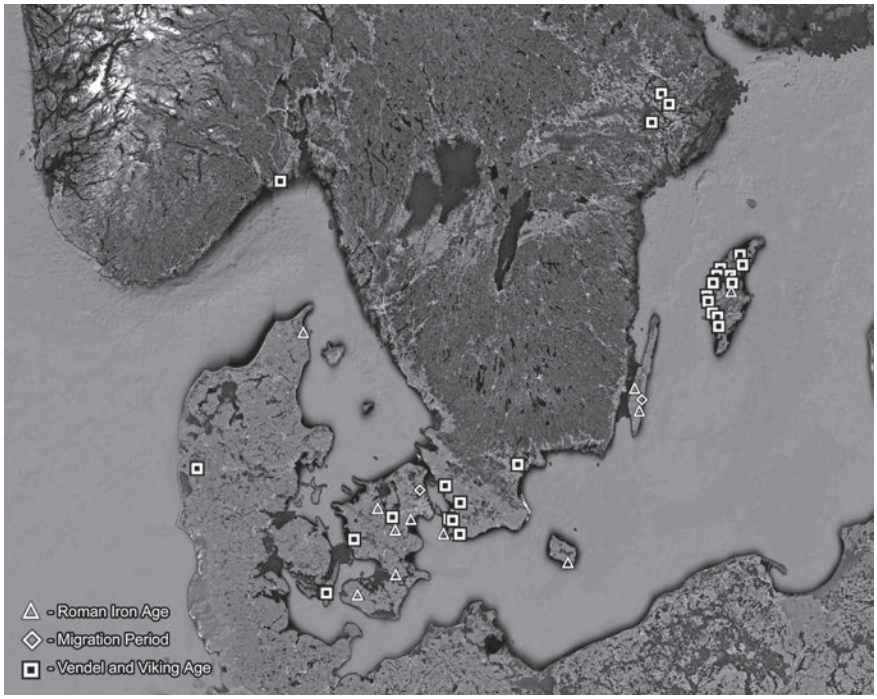


Figure 3. Distribution of prone burials in southern Scandinavia from Roman Iron Age to Late Viking Age. Two burials in northern Scandinavia (cat. no. 21; Haug, Hadseløya, Vesterålen, and cat. no. 34; Björkå, Ångermanland) are not depicted. [Drawing by the author]

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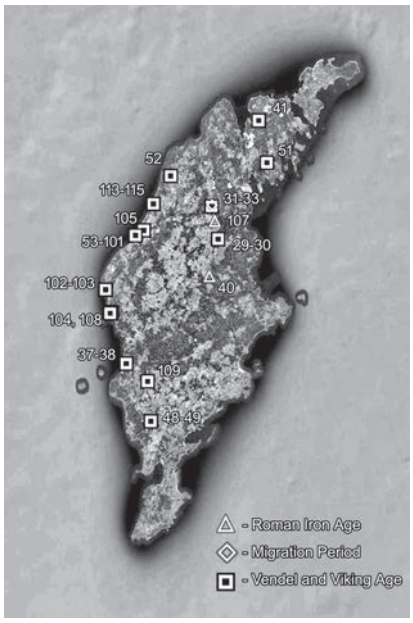


Figure 4. Distribution of prone burials on Gotland from Roman Iron Age to Late Viking Age. [Drawing by the author]

Denmark and only very few cases from Norway. In some of the burials from Kaupang (cat. no. 22–24) the deceased are lying in a twisted and partially prone position, which seems not to be intended. The only known case of an apparently intended prone burial comes from the Christian cemetery of Haug on Hadseløya, Vesterålen, dating to the late Viking Age (cat. no. 21).

The far spread rite of prone burials is interpreted mostly based on ethnographical and Early Modern sources (Zielonka 1957, s. 21–22; Wiegelmann 1966, s. 169–170; Grenz 1967, s. 261–262; Kowalczyk 1968, s. 123–124; Faull 1977, s. 9–10; Handler 1996; Kim 1998; Żydok 2004, s. 43–44; Barber 2010, s. 44–46) whose alleged validity was – except for single criticism on this anachronistic approach (Brather 2001, s. 264; Brather 2007, s. 114–116; Biermann 2009) – oversimplified transferred onto prehistoric societies, and is often regarded as one parameter of a special treatment of the deceased, a so-called 'deviant burial' (Hirst 1985, s. 36–37; Wilson 1992, s. 82; Aspöck 2008, s. 28; Arcini 2009, s. 194–195; Tsaliki 2008, s. 8; Reynolds 2009, s. 68–76; Gardeła 2013a; 2013b; 2015a; 2015b; Gardeła & Kajkowski 2013). Such a 'deviant burial' (which should better be called 'atypical burial' (Aspöck 2008, s. 19–21)), indicated by a prone position of the deceased, is seen as a post-mortem humiliation and exclusion of the dead with a pejorative intent. On the one hand, this could be the case with executed criminals or people that violated some taboo – e.g. suicide, infanticide, rape, non-normative gender behaviour or the violation of religious rules (Faull 1977, s. 9; Harman et al. 1981, s. 167–168; Philpott 1991, s. 74–75; Tsaliki 2008, s. 7; Reynolds 2009, s. 52). On the other hand, it might have been intended as an apotropaic rite to avert supernatural threats such as the 'evil eye' (Wilke 1931, s. 205; 1933, s. 457; Hocart 1938; Lykiardopoulos 1981; Dundes 1992), or to prevent the dead from haunting the living as revenant (Wilke 1931, s. 205; 1933, s. 460; Kyll 1964, 178; Reynolds 2009, s. 89; Gardeła 2013a, s. 116–117; Gardeła & Kajkowski 2013, s. 787),

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– this applies mostly to people who were feared for their magic powers; witches, sorcerers, shamans or other so-called ritual specialists, who might still be dangerous even after their death.

The term 'deviant burial' or 'deviant grave' originates from British archaeology (Geake 1992, s. 87; Aspöck 2008)[2] and was originally used for late Roman and Anglo-Saxon burials that differ from 'normative' burials by aspects of pejoratively intended special treatment of the dead, such as beheading, mutilation, stoning, fastening of the corpse into the grave by stones, bonds or stakes, a twisted posture of the body or a location of the grave apart from the cemetery area or at its outer edges, often connected to so called 'execution cemeteries' (Harman et al. 1981; Philpott 1991; Reynolds 2009). This concept of a 'deviant burial' has been widely adapted in Scandinavian Viking Age archaeology, and was used excessively for graves that might differ from the expected norm only by single aspects as e.g. a prone position of the dead or which show signs of a special treatment of the dead during the funeral rites that seem to be somehow 'odd' in modern eyes and do not fit with our understanding of a proper and careful funeral.

This interpretation as some form of 'deviant burial' seems to be plausible for some Scandinavian prone burials, mainly for double graves, in which one of the deceased was buried prone and decapitated – mostly in superposition of the regular burial (Skaarup 1989) – and can be regarded as a human sacrifice or an immolation of a slave, a prisoner (of war?) or a follower (Fig. 5). The prone position in these burials seems to be an intended dehumanization or objectification of the dead. Those decapitated individuals in prone position were not buried as human beings but degraded into an object as grave good for the regular burial. Known examples come from the cemetery of Slusegård on Bornholm (cat. no. 15, 17), dating to the Early Roman Iron Age, or from

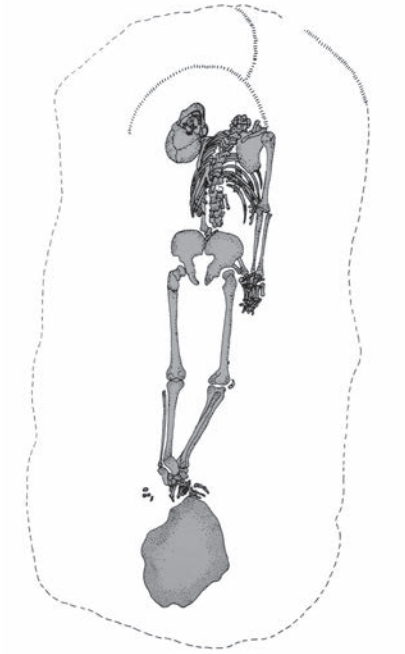


Figure 5. Drawing of the decapitated male from Lejre, grave 55 (cat. no. 5), which was buried in a prone posture above another male. [Copyright by Steen Wulff Andersen, reworked by the author. Reproduced from Andersen, Steen W. 1993. Lejre – skibsætninger, vikingegrave, Grydehøj. Aarbøger for nordisk oldkyndighed og historie 1993, s. 24]

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Viking Age cemeteries in Birka (cat. no. 27) or in Bollstanäs (cat. no. 35, 36) and Kumle Høje (cat. no. 4) and Lejre (cat. no. 5). In three burials from the cemetery of Nordre Bikjholberget at Kaupang (cat. no. 22–24) the twisted, prone posture of the dead might rather result from a careless funeral of executed criminals or slaves as the examples of the typical Anglo-Saxon 'execution cemeteries'.

Furthermore, in single cases a prone posture might in fact relate to a special treatment of the dead, that reflects apotropaic intentions, as e. g. the immobilization of the corpse through stones that were placed directly upon the body and blades of sword or knife as symbolic fixation. Possible examples might be found in a burial from the Viking Age cemetery of Bogøvej (cat. no. 2), or in a Late Vendel Period burial in Bjärs on Gotland (cat. no. 31), even if these aspects of a potential apotropaic rite are difficult to be unquestionable proven in the archaeological record from a source-critical point of view and must therefore often be treated with caution.

This widely accepted and constantly repeated scientific view of a prone position of the dead as an indication for a 'deviant' burial – an exclusion of the deceased or an apotropaic rite – is difficult to align with the setting at Kopparsvik because of the pure number of the prone burials at the cemetery as well as because of the manner of the burials itself.

It would be implausible to assume that Kopparsvik should be regarded as the cemetery of a society in which around 1/6 of the population was either a criminal or a dangerous dead. In addition, the prone burials at Kopparsvik are missing these factors that are often postulated to be associated with 'deviant burials', as beheading, stoning or twisted posture (Philpott 1991, s. 71–74; Buckberry 2008, s. 150; Cherryson 2008, s. 121–122; Taylor 2008, s. 91–92; Reynolds 2009, s. 62–89). [3] There is no clear evidence for decapitation or mutilation and no safe evidence for ravishment or stoning. Single cases in which the body seems to lie in a negligent position – halfway in a ventral, halfway in a lateral position – might result from taphonomical processes (Nilsson Stutz 2003, s. 131–159). Based on the position of the legs in relation to the upper part of the body it is to assume that the dead was buried in a crouched position and that the body later collapsed into a twisted posture. In single instances, it has to be taken into consideration that the prone position of the skeleton might result from taphonomical processes through which the corpse, that was laid down in a crouched or lateral posture during the funeral, collapsed into a ventral position. This might be possible when the dead is buried in a hollow space without surrounding soil that bears the corpse as f. ex. in coffins, stone cists or even within coarse and stony ground. Possible examples might be

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the prone burial in a stone cist from the Iron Age cemetery of Algutsrum on Öland (cat. no. 26) or two graves from the late Viking Age cemetery of Havor, Hablingbo parish, on Gotland (cat. no. 48, 49) with individuals lying in a half-ventral posture on their left side, possible due to a lack of care in the deposition of the corpses during the funeral.

The majority of the prone burials differed from the supine burials merely in their ventral position, the deceased were arranged in a careful manner, the legs were stretched, the arms were lying beside the body or were crossed beneath belly or chest in the same position as in supine burials (Fig. 6). Many of the deceased were buried in their dress with metal elements such as fibulas, belts or knifes as it was custom on late Viking Age cemeteries and churchyards. The prone burials lay among the 'normal' graves, however clearly orientated towards the former shoreline and with the head in a southwestern direction, and in every one of the few double graves at least one of the dead was lying prone. A female individual was buried with rich dress accessories and jewelleries lying prone in a double or perhaps triple burial with two men in supine and crouched position (cat. no. 77); the man in crouched position was holding his hand on the woman's hip (Fig. 7). This intimate contact between man and woman indicates a close relationship and signals affection towards the dead woman despite or perhaps even because of her



Figure 6. Prone burial of an adult male at the cemetery of Kopparsvik (grave 178, cat. no. 83). [Copyright by ATA, Riksantikvarieämbetet, Documentation of the excavation by Mälarstedt 1964–66]

prone position, a feature that can be traced in some more double graves with prone burials in Kopparsvik. These double burials with at least one deceased in prone position as well as the disproportionately high number of prone burials and the in most cases carefully arranged interment of the deceased contradict the classical and at times even overhasty interpretation of prone burials as something odd, as 'deviant burials', that should exclude and humiliate the dead. Instead, the characteristic of the burials in Kopparsvik suggest that a prone position of the dead has to be regarded as a variation of the norm which seems to indicate a pur-

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Figure 7. Tripple burial at the cemetery of Kopparsvik (graves 138–140) with a female in prone posture (cat. no. 77). [Copyright by ATA, Riksantikvarieämbetet, Documentation of the excavation by Mälarstedt 1964–66]

posefully intended burial-rite with a cultural or religious significance and conferring a special identity.

This distinct result corresponds quite well with the overall impression of the rite of prone burials in comparative perspective within Scandinavia and strengthens the assumption to regard even the majority of the other prone burials in Late Iron Age – or at least in Viking Age Scandinavia – as normative and regular burials, perhaps as a marker of identity according to the funerary traditions of a cultural, religious or ethnical defined social group. Examples for this assumption can be traced among the prone burials at Masede Fort on Bornholm (cat. no. 8–12), at Hammarsnäs in Skåne (cat. no. 42, 43, 45–47), and some other minor cemeteries from the Roman Iron Age in Denmark (cat. no. 1, 3, 6, 14, 20), as well as in some Viking Age prone burials in Denmark (cat. no. 13, 19), on Gotland (cat. no. 30, 32, 33, 37, 41, 51, 52, 103, 104, 109, 113, 115) and in Skåne (cat. no. 39, 118, 119), that show no aspects of a 'deviant' special treatment of the deceased.

Further evidence for intentional prone burials without an apotropaic or punitive function can be found in historical as well as archaeological sources. One of the most important parallels is the famous description of the burial of the Frankish king Pepin III the Short, father of emperor Charlemagne, who wished to be buried prone beneath the entrance of the cathedral of St. Denis to expiate for the sins of his father Charles Martell (Philpott 1991, s. 74; Arcini & Jacobsson 2008, s. 192; Reynolds 2009, s. 69; Schmitz-Esser 2014, s. 603–605). In his book *Liber de rebus in administratione sua gestis* Suger, abbot of St. Denis, describes Pepin's burial:

> *Accessimus igitur ad priorem ualuarum introitum et deponentes augmentum quodam, quod a Karolo Magno factum perhibebatur honesta satis occasione, quia pater suus Pipinus imperator extra in introitu ualuarum pro peccatis patris sui Karoli Martelli prostratum se sepeliri non supinum fecerat, ibidem manum apposuimus.*

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Text after Speer & Binding 2000, s. 318–321]

„We then began with the former main entrance, dismantling a certain addition which is thought to have been built by Charlemagne on the very honorable occasion, because his father, the Emperor Pepin, had ordered that he be buried not lying supine outside that entrance door, for the sins of his father Charles Martel."
Author's translation

This quotation shows an explicit connection between a prone position of the deceased and a distinct concept of Christian piety, that was the background for some attempts to interpret a prone position in burials as a sign of penitence for concrete sins (Rahtz & Hirst 1974, s. 33; Ernst 1992, s. 142; Rahtz 1993, s. 120–121; Meier 2002, s. 147–148; Brather 2007, s. 113; Schmitz-Esser 2014, s. 603–605).

Similar archaeological features have been known from a larger number of Merovingian cemeteries, where several people were buried lying prone, sometimes with small lead crosses around their neck or their arms spread out like a cross (Salin 1952, s. 221–222) as well as on high and late Medieval monastery graveyards in Continental Europa and Britain (Schütte 1989, s. 259; Ernst 1992, s. 142; Fehring & Scholkmann 1995, pp. 41, 50-51; Berszin 1999, s. 134; Weber 1999, s. 141–142; Meier 2002, s. 147–148; Eibl 2005, s. 232; Prehn 2005, s. 460; Jungklaus 2009, s. 199–200; Wittkopp 2009, s. 183–185) and in Scandinavia (Dahlbäck 1982, s. 119–120; Pettersson 1991). Based on these features the prone burials in Kopparsvik can be seen as a Christian gesture, not necessarily as pertinence for a concrete committed sin, as was postulated by some scholars before, but as a voluntary act to show a special personal humility towards God. This form of piety is still visible in Orthodox and ultraconservative Catholic Church with the so called 'Metanie' or 'Proskynese' as a prostration in front of the altar (Onasch 1981, s. 313–314; Kunzler 1999, s. 648). A contradictory aspect in this interpretation might be seen in the orientation of these graves along the former shore line on a southwestern/northeastern direction, unlike the expected Christian orientation towards east, which can be found in some probable Christian burials in the southern area of Kopparsvik. However, a closer look upon several other early Christian burial places in Viking Age Scandinavia shows, that this 'typical' Christian burial direction facing east does not have to be taken as absolutely indispensable. The majority of all graves, with pagan as well as with Christian elements, on the cemeteries of Birka was roughly orientated between a northwestern to a southwestern direction (Gräslund 1980, s. 84). On the late Viking Age churchyard of Fröjel parish, Gotland, one grave was lying in opposite direction with

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the head towards the east, while the other burials were facing east (Carlsson 1999a, s. 14–15) and the early Christian burials at Haug on Hadseløya in Norway were orientated in a northwestern direction (Sellevold 1989, s. 26). At all three places prone burials could be detected (cat. no. 21, 28, 37, 38). Furthermore, around three dozen burials on the Christian churchyard at Humlegården, Sigtuna, deviated from the general east-western orientation by a shift towards a head position in a northwestern or southwestern direction (Kjellström & Wikström 2008, s. 171) as do some of the early Christian burials around the predecessor of St. Hans church in Visby (Swanström 1982, s. 79–80). These examples show that the orientation of the graves facing east as the usual direction for Christian burials can be regarded as one indication for the religious background of a burial, but that this orientation is no obligatory requirement for early Christian burials and may vary due to several circumstances.

The background for an interpretation of the prone burials at Kopparsvik as some kind of Christian influenced burial rite is clearly given by further archaeological evidence for the existence of an early Christian community around Kopparsvik already at the end of the 10th century: A couple of graves – all of them in the southern area of the cemetery, in close vicinity to each other, and with the deceased buried in supine or crouched position



Figure 8. Cross pendant from a female burial at the cemetery of Kopparsvik, indicating an early Christian community already at the end of the 10th century. [Copyright by Lena Thunmark-Nylén. Reproduced from Thunmark-Nylén, Lena 1995. Die Wikingerzeit Gotlands. I – Abbildung der Grabfunde. Stockholm, Almqvist & Wiksell, fig. 307)]

– bear resemblance of Christian burial rites; a distinct orientation facing east in contrast to a prevailing southwestern orientation, charcoal in some burials which resembles the Christian burial rite of charcoal burials e. g. in Lund cathedral (Jonsson 2007, s. 58; Holloway 2008; 2009, s. 139–142), stone enclosures around the burial, that might symbolize a border between the unconsecrated pagan ground and the consecrated Christian soil inside the stone enclosure (Gräslund 1996, s. 28–29), and a small cross pendant in a female burial (Staecker 1999, s. 479–480) (Fig. 8). According to the Guta saga, a legendary compilation of the history of Gotland, written in the 13th century (Peel 1999, pp. xlii-xlv, 9-10), the first church at the spot of present-day Visby was built at the end of the 10th century and

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a grave slab with runic inscriptions from the second half of the 11th century, found in the ruins of the church of St. Hans in Visby, proves the existence of a Christian community in the late Viking Age near Kopparsvik (Gustavson 1982):

> „Herþin at brenna mann ella kirkiu hans, þy et han standr i Vi, firir niþan klintu."
> Guta saga, Chap. 3. Text after Peel (1999, s. 8)

> „Do not burn the man or his church, since it stands at Vi, below the cliff."
> Author's translation

With this interpretation of the prone burials at Kopparsvik as some special form of a Christian burial rite, probably connected to ideas of piety and humility towards God, there remains the question which cultural or religious background distinguishes the supine burials that clearly contain 'traditional' Christian elements such as the cross pendant or the stone enclosures from the presumably Christian prone burials with a divergent orientation.

One possible explanation for the difference between 'normal' early Christian burials and a Christian prone burial rite can be found in historical accounts as well as in the Old Norse literature in the ritual of the 'primsigning', a primary benediction which signifies a convert as catechumen under instruction of the Christian community before receiving the final sacrament of baptism (Sandholm 1965; Gräslund 1980, s. 85; Staecker 1999, s. 341–342; Zimmermann 2003). During this time of instruction into the Christian belief the catechumen was allowed to interact with the Christian community and visit the mass even without receiving the Eucharist and being a fully-fledged member of the Christian church. The importance of the rite of the primsigning for the Christianization of Viking Age Scandinavia as a first possibility of contact between pagans and Christianity is elucidated in a chapter of Rimbert's 'Vita Anskarii' about Ansgars efforts to Christianize the inhabitants of Hedeby;

> *Quia libenter quidem signaculum crucis recipiebant, ut catechumeni fierent, quo eis ecclesiam ingredi, et sacris officiis interesse liceret, baptismi tamen susceptionem differebant, hoc sibi bonum diiudicantes, ut in fine vitae suae baptizarentur, quatenus purificati lavacro salutari, puri et immaculati vitae aeternae ianuas absque aliqua retardatione intrarent.*
> Vita Anskarii auctore Rimberto, Chap. 24. Text after Waitz (1884, s. 53)

> „For they were willingly signed with the cross in order to become catechumens, so that they might enter church and attend the celebration of mass; but they refused the reception of baptism, because they thought it to be of advantage to receive the baptism at the end of their life, so that they might, purified by water unto salvation,

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> pure and spotless and without any delay enter the gates of eternal life."
> Author's translation

The rite of the primsigning allowed the catechumen to trade at Christian emporia (Ebel 1987, s. 272; Blomkvist 2005, s. 492) or to be in the retinue of a Christian king, which were two important assets of Christianity as can be deduced from several accounts in Old Norse literature;

> „Konungr bað Þórólf ok þá bræðr, at þeir skyldu láta prímsignast, því at þat var þá mikill siðr, bæði með kaupmǫnnum ok þeim mǫnnum, er á mála gengu með kristnum mǫnnum; því at þeir menn er prímsignaðir vóru hǫfðu alt samneyti við kristna menn ok svá heiðna, enn hǫfðu þat átrúnaði, er þeim skapfeldast."
> Egils Saga-Skalla-Grímssonar, Chap. 50. Text after Nordal (1933, s. 128)

> „The king asked Thorolf and his brother that they should take the primsigning, because it was custom among traders as well as among those men that were in service of Christian men; those men that had taken the primsigning could interact with Christian as well as with heathen men but had the faith that suited them most."
> Author's translation

The benefits of the primsigning especially for merchants that can be concluded from the historical sources matches well with the situation of the society around Kopparsvik. The high number of graves at Kopparsvik and in particular the disproportionately high ratio of male burials confirm the traditional assumption of a close, immediate relationship between the cemetery and the establishment of the predecessor to the later Visby as the central harbour and trading place for Gotland (Toplak 2016a, s. 7–14). The settlement belonging to Kopparsvik, around the medieval harbour of Almedalen in present-day Visby served not only as the starting point for seasonal trading enterprises of Gotlandic 'farmannabönder', but was established as a supra-regionally frequented, well-organised trading centre with a permanent settlement of foreign merchant groups already at the beginning of the 11th century as can be proven by a broad range of findings and the analysis of Sr-isotopes (Toplak 2016a, s. 175–180). A similar situation seems to become apparent in the Viking Age trading place of Fröjel on Gotland (Kosiba et al. 2007, s. 399). In this environment of a supra-regional trading centre with a more or less widespread Christian community the rite of the primsigning might have attracted foreign people to get in closer contact with the new faith or was used by merchants with an opportunistic aim to get access to Christian market places or to gain advantages in trade. As quoted in Rimbert's 'Vita Anskarii' the final sacrament of baptism was often

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delayed to the death bed of the primsigned individual or was perhaps never intended, because the primsigning was not taken because of personal faith but of mercantile benefits, so that the individual died in the state of a catechumen.

Based on these facts, it seems possible to interpret the burial-rite of prone burials in Kopparsvik as a special gesture of Christian humility towards God, which seemed to be necessary or was favoured in case of the death of a catechumen, who had not yet been freed from original sin by the final sacrament of baptism. In particular because most of the people that were buried prone at Kopparsvik, were men and the absolute majority of the prone burials lay in the northern area of the cemetery, which shows an absolute domination of male burials, perhaps explained by the presence of foreign merchants.

This interpretation can be supported by several regulations in Old Norse law collections about the burials of catechumen. These had to be buried in a special 'liminal space', either outside of the cemetery, as in the Yngre Västgötalagen, Kb 1 (Collin & Schlyter 1827, s. 82), or on the outer edge of the graveyard or through a burial on the shoreline between sea and consecrated ground;

> „Ef barn andazk primsignt. oc hefir eigi verit scírt. oc scal þat grafa við kirkiu garð út. þar er mætisk vigð mold oc ö vigð."
>
> Grágás, I, 1. Text after Finsen (1852, s. 7)
>
> „If a child dies after the primsigning but has not been baptized yet, so should it be buried at the margin of the graveyard where consecrated and non-consecrated ground meet."
> Author's translation
>
> „Þat er nu þvi nest at mann hvern scal til kirkiu föra er dauðr verðr. oc grava i iorð helga. nema udaða mann.
> [...] En þa menn er nu talda ec. scal grava i flöðar male. þar sem særr mötesc oc grön torva."
> Gulaþingslag. Text after Keyser (1846, s. 13–14)
>
> „And this is next that any deceased should be brought to church and be buried in consecrated soil, except for criminals.
> […] And those men from whom I spoke should be buried at the shoreline, where sea and green land meet."
> Author's translation

The importance of the shore ridge as liminal space for Christian beliefs can also be seen in a famous passage from Landnámabók about the burial of Auð in Djúpúgða, one of the most important female characters in Old Norse literature,[4] who died before the Christianization of Iceland, and therefore asked to be buried at the shore ridge, because she did not want to lie in unconsecrated ground, as she was baptized (Almgren 1904, s. 345);

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> „[…] ok var grafin í flæðarmáli, sem hon hafði fyrir sagt, því at hon vildi eigi liggja í óvígðri moldu, er hon var skírð."
> Landnámabók, Chap. 19. Text after Benediktsson (1968, s. 146–147)

> „[…] and she was buried at the shoreline as she had ordered before, because she did not want to lie in unconsecrated ground as she was baptized."
> Author's translation

Especially the last regulation from the Gulaþingslag and the description of the burial of Auð correlate quite well with the spatial location of most of the prone burials at Kopparsvik – and also with sporadic prone burials in some other Viking Age cemeteries on Gotland as e.g. at Krokstäde, Tofta parish (cat. no. 120, 103), at the western coast of the island (Toplak 2016a, s. 187) – alongside the former shoreline in the northern area of the burial ground, that seem to be dug directly in the shore ridge, as can be detected by fish bones and mussel shells in and around some of these graves.

Catechumen were not yet fully-fledged Christians but people that received the primsigning either on grounds of personal faith (with the aim to be baptized someday) or because of pure opportunistic reasons and those regulations in Old Norse laws prove that catechumen had to be buried in a separate, deviant way, that marked their state within the Christian community. This deviance might have manifested itself in the prone position of the corpses, and the catechumens' status on the threshold between paganism and Christianity might be one reason for disregard of other common Christian burial rites, in the case of Kopparsvik f. ex. the orientation facing east.

Conclusion

While there can't be any doubt, that in some famous and often referred burials – as the double burials in Lejre (cat. no. 5) and Kumle Høje (cat. no. 4) or the triple burial at Bollstanäs (cat. no. 35, 36) – a prone position of some of the deceased is connected with typical aspects of a 'deviant' special treatment and seems to reflect ideas of punishment, humiliation and perhaps apotropaic intentions, the overall picture is much more ambivalent. It contradicts the traditional and often repeated tendency to regard already the prone position of the dead as sufficient indication for a discriminating and marginalizing burial. The majority of the prone burials in Late Iron Age and Viking Age Scandinavia differ only in the ventral position of the dead from the surrounding 'regular' supine burials and it seems likely, that the rite of prone burials might be regarded as a normative burial custom of some specific community, related to other aspects than punishment or fear of the dead. Beside the here presented

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theory of the prone burial rite as an indication or presentation of identity within a certain group – defined by social, religious or ethnic bounds –, some of the graves show a flexed or crouched prone posture with the lower extremities in lateral and the upper body in ventral position, that reminds of a sleeping pose and might reflect ideas of the death as eternal sleep, f. ex. grave 495 from the Migration Period cemetery of Maglebjerghøj on Zealand (cat. no. 7), or grave 363 from the Viking Age cemetery of Fjälkinge, Skåne (cat. no. 39).

The case study of Kopparsvik highlights this possibility impressively. There are several good arguments for interpreting the phenomenon of the prone burials at Kopparsvik as a consciously intended special burial rite connected to Christian ideas of piety and humility towards God. This rite was perhaps reserved for or especially created for catechumen who died without the final sacrament of baptism and should thus demonstrate an exceptional abjection through their position lying face down or who were simply not allowed to be buried according to regular Christian burial rites.

This interpretation of the majority of prone burials as graves of catechumen emphasises the strikingly insignificant heathen character of the whole cemetery, and taken in conjunction with the reference to a first church „under the cliffs“ at the area of present-day Visby in the Guta Saga, it confirms the exist¬ence of a consolidated Christian community around the harbour of Almedalen by the end of the 10th century. It can be discussed if the special gesture of prone burials as a sign of Christian humility and piety originates in beliefes of the western church or if it might be a result from endeavours of orthodox missions or at least the presence of orthodox Christians at Kopparsvik. Gotland shows strong religious influences of east European and Byzantine culture in the late Viking Age and early Christian period (Sjöberg 1985); cross and crucifix pendants or Kievan Easter eggs, small glazed clay eggs, that symbolize the resurrection, with connection to the Russian-Byzantine area (Staecker 1996, s. 79; Thunmark-Nylén 1998, s. 171; Carlsson 1999b, s. 106), Byzantine chalk paintings in churches (Andrén 2011, s. 154–155) or the rite of clothed burials on early Christian churchyards which might be traced back to east European influences (Staecker 1999, s. 320–321).

The results of the analysis of the prone burials at Kopparsvik as well as a general overview over the burial rite of prone burials in Iron Age and Viking Age Scandinavia show, that even an unexpected and to modern and Christian influenced eyes somehow ‘odd’ appearing special treatment of the dead during the funeral rites has to be considered not as ‘deviant’ but first of all value-free as some other forms of burial rite (Murphy 2008, p. xiii). Hence

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it seems necessary to abandon the overhasty usage of the concept 'deviant burial' as a simple explanation for everything that somehow differs from the expected 'norm'. Thus, the utilization and meaning of this term should be critically scrutinized and reconsidered. Every potential 'deviant burial' needs an individual and accurate investigation concerning potential evidence of special treatment; there has to be e.g. clear proof for decapitation, mutilation or stoning to death as classical indications for 'deviant burials', which should be visible in the bone material trough cut marks or smashed bones to distinguish taphonomical dislocation of the skull from an intended post- or perimortal decapitation which may relate to a 'deviant' special treatment of the deceased. Even then we have to accept that some form of violation of the physical integrity of the deceased – however impious it might appear to us – might have been intended as a 'normal', respectful burial rite which was deemed ritually necessary (Härke 1993, s. 143; Taylor 2008, s. 102). Vice versa it must be taken into consideration, that a high status and social prestige in lifetime does not necessarily prohibit apotropaic rituals that are considered mandatory to prevent f. ex. a return of the deceased into the world of the living. The social reputation of a person in lifetime must not be valid in death as well. Even a high-ranking warrior as the man buried in grave 18 in Bjärs, Gotland (cat. no. 31), with weapons, riding equipment and horse or dog, has been regarded as a potential threat to society after his death, as it could be assumed because of thy symbolic fixation of his corpse by stones and blades. In the same way, a bound position of the body does not necessarily reflect a fixation of the deceased – if hands and forearms are not clearly bent behind the deceased's back –, but might result from a Christian burial rite which included wrapping the body in a shroud. So, physical remains of bonds or other forms of fixation should be present in the archaeological record, before taking a fixed posture of the dead as indication for a burial of an executed criminal or as an attempt to avert the return of a revenant. Moreover, it still has to be considered that only a fractional amount of the graves from the Viking Age is archaeologically known and excavated so it is indeed impossible to define an absolute norm for Viking Age funeral rites – which furthermore show a broad diversity within different regions and even within single cemeteries (Svanberg 2003; Gardeła 2012, s. 48–64). In addition, it has to be differentiated between the static grave as a fixed end result of a funeral ceremony and the burial itself as a highly dynamic, ritualized and socio-political as well as religious process (Price 2010; 2012a; 2012b) from which only particular elements are visible in the archaeo-

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logical record while other aspects, acts and rituals leave no or perhaps misleading traces in the grave.

It seems to be imperative for Viking Age burial archaeology to dispense itself from a traditional expectation of what a grave should look like and to accept that Viking Age mortuary customs were far more extensive and diverse than generally assumed, and not always compatible with modern attitudes towards respect and care for the deceased.

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Notes

1 A database with the collection of the published cases of prone burials in Middle, Northwestern and Northern Europe from Roman Iron Age to Late Middle Ages comprises at present more than 1.000 burials.

2 See Saxe (1970, s. 10–12) for the concept of 'social deviancy'.

3 In contrast to this often repeated assumption of a frequent combination of several forms of a special 'deviant' treatment – such as decapitation or tied limbs – with a prone position of the deceased, first postulated by Harman et al. (1981), a thorough analysis of the prone burials in late Roman and Anglo-Saxon England shows only individual cases of these combinations, see Toplak (2017).

4 Auð is also known from several other sources in Old Norse literature, e.g. Eiríks saga rauða, Eyrbyggja saga, Brennu-Njáls saga and Laxdœla saga in which she is known as 'Unn in Djúpúgða' and was buried in a ship in a grave mound (Laxdoela saga, chap. 7).

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Table – Catalogue of the prone burials in Scandinavia from Roman Iron Age to Viking Age

Nr	Grave field	Region	Country	Period	Grave
1	Bannerslund mark	Nordjylland	DK	RIA	
2	Bogøvej	Langeland	DK	VA	P
3	Græsbjerg	Zealand	DK	RIA	K
4	Kumle Høje	Langeland	DK	VA	F
5	Lejre	Zealand	DK	VA	55
6	Lyregård	Zealand	DK	RIA	
7	Maglebjerghøj	Zealand	DK	MP	B
8–12	Masede Fort	Zealand	DK	early RIA	Ø, CC, HH, MM, Ii
13	Muldbjerg	Zealand	DK	VA	
14	Regnemark	Zealand	DK	RIA	2
15–18	Slusegård	Bornholm	DK	early RIA	309, 328, 989, 996
19	Trelleborg	Zealand	DK	VA	132
20	Tveje Merløse	Zealand	DK	late RIA	5
21	Haug, Hadseløya	Vesterålen	N	late VA	D1
22–24	Nordre Bikjholberget	Kaupang	N	VA	274–276
25	Albäcksbacken	Maglarp, Skåne	S	RIA	
26	Algutsrum	Öland	S	RIA	A32:e
27	Birka	Adelsö, Uppland	S	late VP/VA	A 129
28	Birka	Adelsö, Uppland	S	VA	Bj 724
29, 30	Bjärge	Vallstena, Gotland	S	VA	52/1992, 112/1992
31	Bjärs	Hejnum, Gotland	S	VP	18
32, 33	Bjärs	Hejnum, Gotland	S	VA	67, 78
34	Björkå	Ångermanland	S	VA	34 (F)
35, 36	Bollstanäs	Uppland	S	late VP/VA	A29F58, A29F59
37, 38	Bottarve	Fröjel, Gotland	S	VA	12/88, 25B/89
39	Fjälkinge	Skåne	S	VA	363
40	Gardese	Ganthem, Gotland	S	RIA	
41	Grodde	Fleringe, Gotland	S	VA	17
42–47	Hammarsnäs, Halör	Skåne	S	RIA	6, 27, 33, 42, 52, 57
48, 49	Havor	Hablingbo, Gotland	S	VA	34, 77

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50	Hulterstad	Öland	S	early RIA	1094
51	Ire	Hellvi, Gotland	S	VA	226
52	Kambs	Lummelunda, Gotland	S	VA	k. N.
53–101	Kopparsvik	Visby, Gotland	S	VA	8, 12, 26, 39, 42, 48, 58–60, 62, 65, 70–72, 74, 105, 109, 115, 126, 128/129, 131–133, 140, 146, 158, 159, 167, 173, 178, 180–183, 185, 187, 188, 205, 214, 246, 275, 279, 301, 304, 320, 324, 329, 336*
102, 103	Krokstäde	Tofta, Gotland	S	VA	2/1947, 7/1947 (5/1945)
104	Kronholmen	Västergarn, Gotland	S	VA	1
105	Kv. Melonen, Visby	Visby, Gotland	S	VA	k. N.
106	Ljungbacka	Lockarp, Skåne	S	VA	26 (4a-b)
107	Ösarne	Bäl, Gotland	S	RIA	
108	Paviken	Västergarn, Gotland	S	VA	Mafrids Grab I
109	Pejnarve	Levide, Gotland	S	VA	25/1957 (3/1956)
110	Råga Hörstad	Asmundtorp, Skåne	S	VA	28
111	Sandby Borg	Öland	S	MP	1109
112	Sigtuna	Uppland	S	VA	
113–115	Skälsö	Väskinde, Gotland	S	VA	1, 5, 6
116	St Clemens 8, Lund	Skåne	S	late VA/MA	
117	Valsta, Märsta	Uppland	S	VA	A69
118	Vannhög, Trelleborg	Skåne	S	VA	13
119	Vintrie Park, Malmö	Skåne	S	late VP/VA	11125B
120	Vintrie Park, Malmö	Skåne	S	early RIA	A13464

Abbreviations:

RIA – Roman Iron Age

MP – Migration Period

VP – Vendel Period

VA – Viking Age

MA – Middle Ages

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