

# Viking Age Uppåkra

## Between Paganism and Christianity

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### Abstract

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In 2013 a small archaeological excavation was carried out inside the nave of Uppåkra church, which resulted in the discovery of several children's burials. One of them was dated to the Early Middle Ages, which opens up for the possibility that the medieval stone church may have had a predecessor. The aim of this article is to explore the evidence for pre-Christian and Christian ritual practices, and to address the question of religion in Viking Age Uppåkra. *Ing-Marie Nilsson, Sydsvensk Arkeologi AB, Box 134, 291 22 Kristianstad, Sweden. Ing-marie.nilsson@sydsvenskarkeologi.se.*

Around the year AD 965 the Danish king Harald Bluetooth was baptized. According to legend the turning point was a feast where the priest Poppo was challenged to demonstrate that Christ was mightier than the old gods by performing a trial by ordeal. After Poppo carried a piece of red-hot iron without injuring his hands, the king was convinced of the power of Christ, and declared that henceforth only Christ should be worshipped in the kingdom. The event was commemorated on the famed Jelling runestone where Harald Bluetooth claims to have conquered all of Denmark and made the Danes Christian. Even though the actual conversion probably did not happen as the chronicler describes (cf. Weibull 1948, 269 ff.; Staecker 2006, 203), the fact is that within a fairly short period in the 960s Christianity was nominally adopted in Denmark. The Danish people must however have been exposed to the Christian religion much earlier. In the 9th century for example, churches were built in Hedeby and Ribe, and already in 826 the Danish petty king Harald Klak is

said to have been baptized in Mainz (Sawyer & Sawyer 1993, 101). The events in Jelling were momentous since they marked the point when Christianity was recognized as the official religion.

Less is known about the Christianization of Scania, partly because there are no written records of missionary activities there in the Viking Age (the period AD 850–1050), but it is generally believed to have happened fairly late, in the period *c.* 990–1050 (Anglert 1995, 182; Svanberg 1999, 67 ff.). After this time Christianity seems to have gained ground quickly, and according to the German chronicler Adam of Bremen there were 300 churches in Scania in the 1070s (Svanberg 1984, 208).

In the late Viking Age (AD 990–1050) there were two centres in south-western Scania: a long-established Iron Age settlement in Uppåkra, and a newly founded town in Lund. Uppåkra is often thought to have been all pre-Christian up to the early Viking Age, and the Viking Age is viewed as a time



Fig. 1. Uppåkra is situated in southwestern Scania, Sweden.

of mixed religious currents: a strong Norse tradition, possibly with an emphasis on an Odin cult (e.g. Andréén 1998a; 1998b; Hårdh 2012; Bergqvist 1999), mingled with more ambiguous Christian influences (e.g. Hårdh 2010, 304). The archaeological material could however open up to the possibility of an earlier Christian presence in Uppåkra. The question is whether Lund was laid out as a Christian centre in opposition to a pagan one in Uppåkra, or if Uppåkra already might have been partly Christian in the late 10th century. Or to put it another way: Was Lund the first or the second Christian town in Scania? (Fig. 1)

The purpose of this article is twofold: firstly to present some new excavation results and to review some previously acquired materials pertaining to the question of religion in Uppåkra, and secondly to pursue a more conjectural line of reasoning directed towards the question of the timetable of religious change in Uppåkra.

## Uppåkra before the Viking Age

The Uppåkra site is located on a slight ridge, and it is not surprising to find prehistoric barrows situated on the topographical high points. Today only two remain, Lillehög to the south and Storehög to the north, but 18th-century reports tell of two more; one in the churchyard and another close to the cemetery wall (J. Frostensson Swanander's account from 1796 in Andersson 1958, 82). Material associated with burials has been recovered in the southern part of the cemetery, including a find dated to the Roman Iron Age containing a ceramic vessel and an iron axe (Lindell & Thomasson 2003, 46; FMIS). The barrows have not been scientifically examined but are believed to date from the Bronze Age or early Iron Age, and there is evidence to suggest that they may have been reused for burials in the Iron Age (Larsson 1998, 104; 2001, 57 f.). Some archaeological evidence also points to a reorganization phase in the Roman Iron Age or the Migration Period, when Storehög was expanded and a smaller barrow just north of it was cleared (Anglert 2003, 117; Lindell & Thomasson 2003, 48 f.; see fig. 2).

In Uppåkra the cult aspect is primarily associated with one building, variously termed temple, cult house or hall (e.g. Larsson & Lenntorp 2004; Larsson 2006a; 2006b; 2006c; 2007; Larsson & Hårdh 2006). The groundplan is quite small (13 × 6.5 m) and there are traces of four huge, interior posts and heavy stave-built and load-bearing walls, implying that it was a tall structure meant to be seen from afar. The building had a continuity lasting between the 3rd and 10th centuries, and during this period it was rebuilt six times to almost exactly the same groundplan. It had a central hearth and three entrances. Two large iron ring-handles were found close to two of the door openings, and it has been suggested that they may have been deliberately deposited there (Ödman 2003,

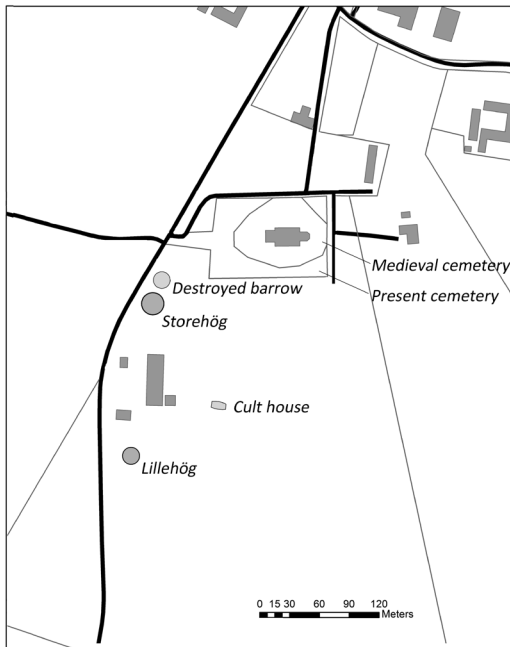


Fig. 2. Map showing the area surrounding the church and the cult house in Uppåkra.

92). Well over a hundred gold foil figures have been recovered from inside the building, mainly in the proximity of the walls and the central posts (Watt 1999; 2004; Helmbrecht 2013, 9 ff.). These thin gold leaves, which are believed to have had religious significance, may have been tacked on to the building's interior or deposited in the post-holes. The artefact material also indicates that sacrificial feasting could have taken place in the building. A surprising discovery consisted of two high-status vessels; a glass bowl and a bronze beaker with embossed gold bands, which in the last stage of the building's life had been deposited beneath the floor. Both items were produced around AD 500 and were consequently over 400 years old when they were taken out of use (Hårdh 2004; Stjernquist 2004). North and south of the ceremonial hall, deposits of weapons, mainly lance-heads and spearheads, have been discovered (Bergqvist 1999, 113 ff.; Hårdh 1999, 127 f.; Helgesson 2004; Larsson

2006c, 147). The weapons are contemporary with the hall and date from the Roman Iron Age to the Viking Age. The objects are usually viewed as sacrificial offerings of war booty since they appear to have been deformed on purpose (cf. alternative interpretation in Andersson 2012), and the weapons might originally have been displayed inside the house as spoils of victory. Human and animal bones have also been recovered, suggesting further ritual activities (Larsson 2006a; 2006b; 2006c; 2007).

Gold objects with figurative representations are often viewed as status objects that may have had a religious significance (cf. Hårdh 2003a, 69; Helmbrecht 2013, 25). Besides the gold foil figures, two gold bracteates and one gilded amulet have been found in Uppåkra. Both bracteates were of the C-type, dating to the late 5th and early 6th century. One of them had a fragmentary runic inscription, and both were found out of context in the southern part of the settlement (Axboe 2001; Axboe & Stoklund 2003; Hårdh 2003a, 64). The amulet dates from the Migration Period and displays a double snake motif. It was recovered near the southernmost deposit of lance-heads (Bergqvist 1999, 115 f.; Hårdh 1999, 128 ff.).

On the whole, the hitherto recovered archaeological material points to pre-Viking Age Uppåkra as being an extremely rich ritual environment, especially when it comes to official high-status cult activities. These seem to be centred around the area between Storehög and Lillehög and further along the southbound road. The material does not, however, indicate any significant Christian influence in Uppåkra before *c.* 800.

## The pre-Christian Viking Age

A major event in the early Viking Age was the abandonment of the ceremonial building, which ought to have taken place sometime in the 10th century. The deposition of the cup and bowl under the floor can be interpreted as a ritual closing or a desecralization of the site through the burial of the main temple vessels. Two things concerning this event are especially significant. The ordered dismantling of the building means that it must have been sanctioned, and in all probability implemented, by the leaders of the community. The act also signals a clear break with a more than 600-year-long and apparently very firmly rooted pre-Christian tradition. The importance of the event has been highlighted in earlier research, and it has been suggested that the building no longer played a part in the staging of power and had become ritually obsolete (Larsson 2006c, 151; 2007, 187; Hårdh & Larsson 2007, 84). The possibility that a Christian church succeeded the cult house has also been mentioned (Hårdh 2012, 35).

A number of small items with possible religious significance have been found at Uppåkra, for example two simple Thor's hammer amulets made of iron (Bergqvist 1999; Stolt 2001). These are widely understood as symbols of Thor's hammer Mjöltnir, which ties them closely to Norse mythology, although the possibility that some hammer amulets could have had a Christian meaning has been pointed out (Wamers 1997). One striking find is a small, one-eyed figure with a U-shaped object on its head (Fig. 3). It has been dated to the early Viking Age (Helmbrecht 2013, 22), and has generally been interpreted as a representation of Odin (e.g. André 1998b, 29; Larsson 2001, 59; Hårdh 2010, 274; Helmbrecht 2013, 22). Among the Viking Age finds are also parts of three female figures shown in profile. These types of figures are often viewed as Valkyries



Fig. 3. One-eyed male figure from the early Viking Age, often interpreted as a depiction of Odin. Photo by Lund University Historical Museum.

since they are depicted with drinking horns in greeting gestures, and one of the Valkyries' functions was to welcome fallen warriors into Valhalla. They may however also have had a more general meaning relating to aristocratic hospitality (Bergqvist 1999, 119; Hårdh 2010, 275; Helmbrecht 2013, 14 ff.). Another item that might be associated with Norse mythology is a small, male silver figure with baggy trousers from the early Viking Age (Hårdh 2008; 2010, 274 f.). In 2011 a

mount depicting a winged human figure was discovered outside a large Viking Age house. It has been dated to the 10th century, and interpreted as a representation of Wayland the smith who, according to Norse mythology, fled from captivity by air using a feathered device (Helmbrecht 2012; 2013, 24 f.). In addition to this, one face-pendant and two mask-pendants have been found. The mask-pendants depict bearded faces with large protruding eyes, and have been interpreted as pre-Christian protective amulets (Helmbrecht 2013, 17 ff.). Five miniature pieces should perhaps also be mentioned: three swords, one lance-head and one pair of shears. Their symbolism is however debated, and they have also been given widely differing dates, spanning from the 4th century to the Viking Age (Capelle 2003; Rosengren 2010).

From this brief account a few conclusions can be drawn. The figurative aspect of metal craftsmanship seems to have become increasingly important in the Viking Age. Moreover, the objects were portable and visible and could therefore have acted as personal identity markers regarding for example religious identification or social

status (cf. Helmbrecht 2013, 26). There is also a more apparent connection between many of the figures and Norse mythology as we know it from medieval written sources.

## Viking Age Uppåkra – Christian influences

Viking Age Uppåkra also displays features that relate to Christianity. In 1997–1998 remains of an inhumation grave, <sup>14</sup>C-dated to the period 710–1020, were excavated underneath the chancel of the modern church, and the deceased had been buried in a manner that could be interpreted as Christian (Anglert & Jansson 2001, 31). The current church dates from 1864 but it replaced an older medieval building on the same spot dated to the latter part of the 12th century or around 1200 (Anglert 1998, 40; Anglert & Huttu 1999, 288; Anglert & Jansson 2001, 30). This was the first hint that the medieval stone church might have been erected on an older Christian burial ground (Fig. 4).

In 2013 another small archaeological excavation was conducted underneath the nave

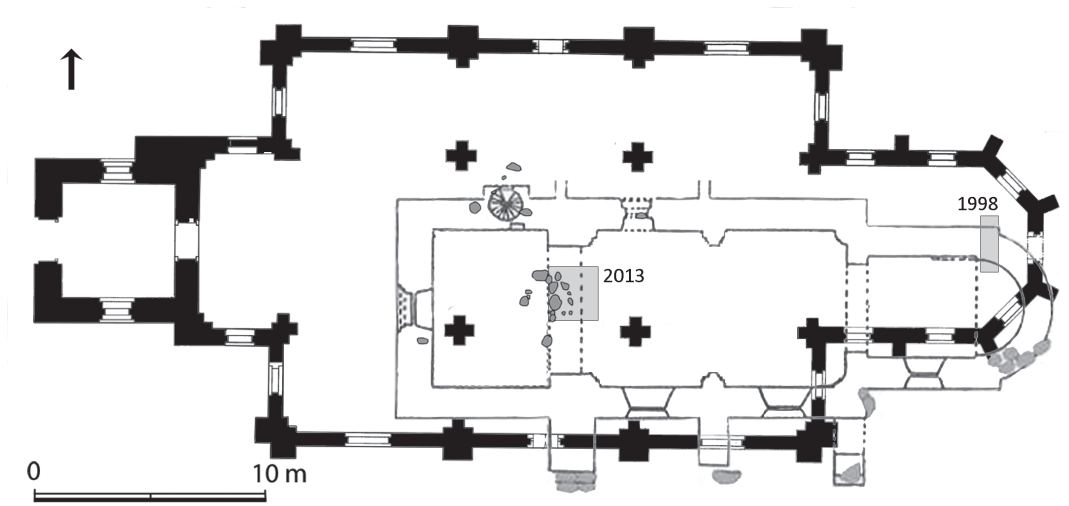


Fig. 4. Plan of Uppåkra church with the modern church outlined in black, the medieval church (hollow) and the position of the excavation trenches from 1998 and 2013 (light grey).



Fig. 5. Two burials next to the western wall of the nave of the medieval church. The individual in the middle of the photo was *c.* two years old at the time of death and the one to the right four to six years old. The former was  $^{14}\text{C}$ -dated to the early Middle Ages. Photo by Ing-Marie Nilsson, February 2013.

of the present church. This time too, remains of older interments that appear to have been made according to Christian tradition – that is, facing east and with no accompanying grave-goods – were revealed. Parts of two graves were encountered *in situ*, and remains of a further three were indirectly detected through unarticulated bones. Surprisingly, all skeletal material belonged to children or young persons. The osteological remains were assessed in the field and the two *in situ* graves were found to belong to a two-year-old and a four-to-six-year-old. The unarticulated bones belonged to a newly born or prematurely born child, one individual in the early teens, and one younger child (Wilhelmson 2013). Both the *in situ* graves were found inside the medieval church, adjacent to the western wall. Although a stratigraphic relationship

between the wall and the graves could not be established, in the field it seemed somewhat unlikely that the graves should be connected to the medieval church. This impression was strengthened when minute fragments of bone were found right next to the wall and deeply embedded between the foundation stones. This seems to prove that the trench for the medieval church's foundation wall was dug through existing graves. A  $^{14}\text{C}$  analysis was made of a tooth belonging to the individual in the best-preserved grave, and after calibration  $2\sigma$  it was dated to the period 1024–1155 (uncalibrated date 950 BP $\pm$ 20 years, UGAMS 14225). This means that the grave, like the one found in 1997–1998, in all likelihood predates the medieval stone church (Nilsson 2013). Due to limited time and resources, the trench was not dug deeper than this topmost

layer of intact graves, which means that it could not be ascertained whether or not the graves were superimposed on older interments (Fig. 5).

One important find directly related to early Christianity in Uppåkra is an encolpion that was found north-east of the cemetery during a metal detection campaign in 1997. This portable, cross-shaped reliquary dates to the 11th century and it was probably manufactured in Germany (Staecker 1999). It is a high-status object that could have belonged to a member of the social elite, a missionary or a local church, and it has sometimes been seen as indicative of a late Viking Age church in Uppåkra (e.g. Bergqvist 1999, 123 ff.; Tegnér 1999, 235, 237; Hårdh 2003b, 57; Hårdh 2010, 279; Hårdh & Larsson 2007, 74; see fig. 6).

A variety of small objects with proposed Christian connotations have also been found in Viking Age Uppåkra. Some mountings of Irish provenance were probably once attached to a box or a reliquary. One item has been interpreted as the roof ridge of a house-

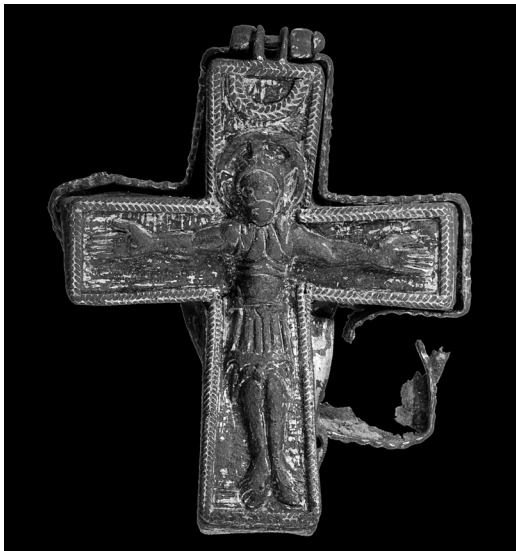


Fig. 6. Encolpion dated to the 11<sup>th</sup> century, found northeast of the cemetery. Photo by Lund University Historical Museum.

shaped reliquary, and another as a hinge for a shrine (Helgesson 2001; Hårdh 2010, 276). Christian symbolism has also been linked to a small animal-shaped silver statuette of western European origin, dated to *c.* 800 (Helgesson 1999), but this is perhaps debatable. Several mountings and brooches with cross-shaped central motifs have been recovered. Among them are one openwork disc-brooch with a cross from the Continent, dated to the late 7th century or around AD 700, some enamelled mountings of Irish origin, dating from the 8th or 9th centuries, and three round enamelled brooches from the Continent, dating to the 9th or 10th centuries (Helgesson 2001; Koch 2003; Ulriksen 2003; Hårdh 2010, 278). The objects clearly reflect a Christian symbolism, but varying interpretations have been made of their contextual meaning in Uppåkra. Some have seen them as possibly related to a Christian missionary effort (Tegnér 1999, 235; Helgesson 2001), others have connected them with visiting foreigners, or seen them as reflecting new trends in costume and clothing. They have also been viewed as exotic novelty items, devoid of all original meaning (Ulriksen 2003, 211 f.).

Up till now, the argument has mainly been based on the archaeological material and the inferences that have been made from this. The rest of the article is an attempt to draw some more far-reaching conclusions about the religious situation in Uppåkra in the late Viking Age on the basis of this rather flimsy source material. The objective is to point to some new interpretative possibilities.

## Winds of change

The Viking Age appears to have been a time of religious transformation. Figurative representations are more often iconographically linked to mythological characters known from medieval written sources for Norse myth-

ology. This could signify that the traditional pantheon had become more individualized, perhaps in reaction to the clearly organized Christian cosmology. In Uppåkra the increase of religiously significant items to be worn and displayed on the body could be viewed as corresponding with this idea of an ongoing ideological conflict. Another clear indication of change is the ordered decommissioning of the ceremonial hall in the 10th century. This meant the break-up of an exceedingly long ritual continuity and the advent of something new. This new thing might have been a reshaped Norse religion, but it could also be Christianity.

The newly discovered graves underneath the church seem to prove the existence of an early medieval Christian burial ground in Uppåkra. Moreover, the skeletal remains indicate a spatial division, where a particular area of the cemetery was designated for the burial of children. The older grave discovered in 1997–1998 underneath the chancel, <sup>14</sup>C-dated to the period 710–1020, hints at a much longer Christian burial tradition on site, although the evidence is still inconclusive. Still, if this grave is accepted as Christian, it implies that the area around the medieval church could have been established as a place of Christian ritual importance already in the Viking Age.

Two inferences can be made from this assumption. One is that this new ritual place would not have been allocated a relatively central position within the settlement if Christianity had not been accepted by the society and sanctioned by the leadership. In this respect it expresses the same sentiment as the dismantling of the ceremonial hall; these are both actions anchored in the community. Another is that the Christian graveyard (perhaps in conjunction with a still hypothetical wooden church) was situated in an “old” location, meaning on an older burial ground and in close proximity to pre-Christian

barrows. The non-Christian meaning of these barrows should perhaps not be overestimated; the significant factor may instead be that they were old, perhaps viewed as ancient. To me, this placement of the “new” within a context of “old” suggests an intention to forge a bond with history, to visualize a perceived continuity between past and present. It thus represents a reinterpretation of the past to demonstrate that what may seem novel was in fact long-standing and deep-rooted.

## Turning the tide

Christianization is an elusive concept. It can refer to personal inner beliefs as well as outward signs, and it can relate to individuals as well as society as a whole. It covers the period from the initial contacts till the time when most people were converted. It can mean the point when Christianity became the only lawful religion, or when an area was incorporated into the framework of the Catholic Church. All in all, this ought to have been a lengthy process (e.g. Schjødt 1989; Gräslund 2001; Brink 2004). Initially the story of the conversion of Harald Bluetooth was related. This event should not be perceived as the beginning of Christianity in western Denmark, but rather as the tipping point when the new religion outweighed the old; when more people were in favour of change than were opposed to it. However, this would not have happened without a build-up phase. In the Roman Empire for example, this lasted almost 70 years, from 313 when Christianity was officially recognized, till 380 when it was proclaimed the state religion. We do not know how long this phase might have been here, but in my opinion it seems reasonable to assume that there were some Christians in south-western Scania in the 10th century. The problem is finding them in the archaeological material. Objects with Christian symbolism are usually viewed



as trade-goods, loot or the property of visitors from afar, and east–west oriented inhumation graves in pre-Christian burial grounds are generally cautiously interpreted as only displaying “Christian influences” (Svanberg 1999, 55 ff., 67; Anglert 2006, 96). One must remember, however, that it would have been very difficult for people to be “proper” Christians in a time when there were few qualified priests available. And even if they were, we are now largely unable to discern it, since these early expressions do not necessarily conform to what later became the norm.

We do not know when Scania was Christianized, but the establishment of Lund around 990 can be said to represent a defining moment for when the religion was officially accepted. The oldest finds from Lund come from a Christian burial ground in Kattesund. The cemetery was brought into use around AD 990 and was decommissioned in the middle of the 11th century (Carelli 2000). What is unusual about this site is not just the relatively short duration of use but also the large number of interments. Some 2,700 graves have been excavated, and it is estimated that up to 3,400 individuals may have been buried there (Kriig 1987, 32). Based on this, a theory has been formulated that the graveyard had an extensive catchment area, and functioned as the main burial place for early Christians in south-western Scania (Carelli 2000; cf. Kriig 1987). Remains of a wooden church have also been found; a rectangular building with a later added chancel. This idea of a Christian ritual centre could not have come from nowhere. There ought to have been a local Christian population base large enough to warrant the enterprise. Conny Johansson Hervén has argued along these lines and proposed that the Kattesund cemetery may have started out as a Christian burial ground attached to population groups within the Uppåkra settlement (Johansson Hervén 2008, 263), and this seems like a

plausible theory. The main point is that some of the people buried in Lund were probably new converts, while others could have been Christians for generations.

The contemporary chronicler Widukind of Corvey writes in relation to the conversion of Harald Bluetooth: “the Danes were of old Christians, but they nevertheless worshipped their idols in pagan rites” (Jacobsen 1910, 122 f.). Is this perhaps also a credible description of 10th-century Uppåkra—a society characterized by religious heterogeneity, where some inhabitants considered themselves Christians, while others stuck to the old tradition, and to outsiders the difference would have been hard to discern? For the balance to tip in favour of Christianity, I maintain that there would have had to be some Christians in Viking Age Uppåkra. I would even hazard to state that a partly Christian Uppåkra might be a prerequisite for a Christian Lund.

## Footnotes

- 1 The event is described in Widukind of Corvey’s Saxon Chronicle *Res gestae saxonicae sive annalium libri tres*, book 3 chapter 65, written in the 960s (Jacobsen 1910, 122 f.).
- 2 The building is now believed to have lasted into the 10th century (Hårdh 2012, 33). Older de-commission dates are presented in earlier publications (e.g. Larsson 2006b, 9; 2006c, 147, 151; 2007, 175; Hårdh & Larsson 2007, 84; Rosengren 2007, 14).

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