

# Just Another Central Place?

## A Critical Description of Vå

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### Abstract

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An evaluation of the central place Vå in north-east Scania is an important task in connection with the project concerning Uppåkra and the structure of Iron Age society in south Sweden. It felt as if Vå had not been given a detailed description for a long time. The opportunity came when the author was able to study the role of Vå and its hinterland as a side track to a work on grave ritual in Scania during the Early Iron Age.

The problems discussed are connected to the questions of how to perceive Vå in particular, and in some respects concerning its role on the Kristianstad plain and its role in a larger perspective, compared to other central places, especially Uppåkra. The questions and the answers raise more questions, and rather than giving a definite interpretation of Vå, this contribution shows the vital importance of further research and excavations in Vå and its hinterland. Hopefully it also brings Vå back to a more evident position in the discussion, where I believe it belongs.

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## Introduction

Ever since the first time I was assigned a small excavation in the village of Vå in north-east Scania, the place has fascinated me. With the years I became more and more astonished by the fact that so little had been done since Berta Stjernquist published her results from the fairly large excavations in the 1940s (Stjernquist 1951). New material was after all being excavated at irregular intervals. When the Uppåkra Project was initiated by the Department of Archaeology at the University of Lund, and the studies of Uppåkra in particular and the central places as a phenomenon started, there seemed to be an obvious opportunity that someone would tackle

Vå, as the closest known parallel in several respects. This has not been the case, however. Since part of my own work on grave ritual during the Early Iron Age in Scania has a special focus on north-east Scania, one of the sidetracks has been to define the role of Vå. This has mainly been done by using a model suggested by Fabech and Ringtved (1995), further discussed by Helgesson (1998).

Today Vå is counted by many as one of the south Scandinavian central places during the Iron Age, in a more or less taken-for-granted way. It is frequently and superficially referred to in argumentation about other central places and in discussions about the political landscape in Iron Age Scandinavia. Some of the questions



Fig. 1. Map of Scania with sites mentioned in the article.

this raises are: Was Vä really a central place? On what grounds has it been pointed out as a central place? Is there anyone who has examined this critically and thoroughly? Did Scania have two central places – or even more? Were they equally important? What area did Vä, or for that matter other central places, dominate? The questions are very relevant in view of the Uppåkra Project and need to be carefully illuminated. To shed some light on these questions a more detailed description of Vä is needed.

## Previous research

Vä lies about 7 km south-west of Kristianstad in northeastern Scania. The site is in a topographical sense situated in a well defined habitation area – the Kristianstad plain – surrounded by ridges and other high terrain with poorer soils. Vä held town status at least from the 13th century until 1614, when Vä and the coast town Åhus were both abandoned on royal command and moved to the newly established town of Kristianstad. This article, however, will deal with much earlier circumstances.

Already at the end of the 17th century three golden bracteates were found, and since then they have attracted much attention (although one of the bracteates only has gold on the

surface). After this find the Iron Age history of Vä was more or less forgotten archaeologically, until it was acknowledged again by Fredriksson, Thorbert and Stjernquist in the 1940s.

Fredriksson was the first to put words to the prehistoric origin of Vä, although very briefly. As he was a teacher interested in local history, and not an archaeologist, he was not very specific about the age of the prehistoric settlement or its importance. He focused mainly on the time of the medieval town. Despite this he believed that the reason for the original localization of a community on the site was because it was a natural ford over the small stream Kyrkbäcken. Finally, he also commented the name of the place, a *vi*, with the meaning “holy place, sanctuary” (Fredriksson 1942, p. 58 f.).

Soon after Fredriksson another local historian and collector of archaeological artefacts, Hilding Thorbert, described the large find material recovered in the ploughed fields west of the village. Besides showing the wide variety of the finds, he also stated that the remains were traces of rich and continual occupation during the Iron Age (Thorbert 1943). In a later article Thorbert gave an interesting review of the find of the bracteates (Thorbert 1955).

It was not until the excavations by Holger Arbman and Berta Stjernquist, however, that the picture of Vä in the Iron Age began to take shape. The large excavations in 1945–46 really put Vä back on the national and international archaeological map. Their excavations covered about 1,000 m<sup>2</sup> of cultural layers in the western part of Vä, rich in finds and remains of houses, pits and hearths. The find material spans from the Roman Iron Age until medieval times, but the majority of finds and structures were from the Roman Iron Age. Studying several different categories of remains and finds, Stjernquist noticed clear indications of the south-eastern connections of the site. Especially the ceramic material showed a strong easterly influence. Her work is still the best description available of the prehistoric remains of Vä (Stjernquist 1947, 1951).

At the beginning of the 1960s Egon Thun conducted a second important investigation in connection with the installation of modern water and sewage pipes in the community. During this work he was able to document the extension of Early and Late Iron Age and medieval remains fairly well. His main contribution, as far as this work is concerned, was the observation of the large-scale iron production on the site, reaching back at least to the Late Iron Age, and a critical discussion concerning the continuity of the occupation between the different periods. He noted two troublesome gaps between *c.* 550 and 800 AD, and between *c.* 1050 and 1150 AD, with much fewer documented remains and finds than for the other sequences at the site. He also thought that the size of the Viking Age occupation showed that it must have had an important economic role in this part of Scania (Thun 1966, 1982). Together with Mats Anglert, Thun finally gave an updated and complete presentation of the archaeology of Vå, especially focusing on the medieval period. Their work ended in a statement with four aspects that they believed were vital in future research about Vå: the problem of continuity, the localization of Iron Age graves, the localization of the early medieval manor and the localization of the medieval convent and its extension (Anglert & Thun 1984). In a final contribution to the history of Vå, Thun popularized the results of the excavations in a brief article and claimed that the site was the oldest community and had the longest period of settlement in Scania (Thun 1985).

The plain around Kristianstad during the Late Iron Age has been studied intensively, from many different angles, by Johan Callmer since the late 1970s. In a discussion about production, trade and exchange Callmer was the first scholar to suggest Vå as a hypothetical high level central place in the Kristianstad area (Callmer 1982, pp. 160 f.). After this he has returned to the subject and the site on numerous occasions, relating to Stjernquist and Thun, describing Vå as a central settlement with comprehensive

political and religious functions. He strongly emphasizes the size of the settlement, more than twice the size of contemporary agrarian settlements in the area, and the fact that the name in itself underlines a large religious importance (Callmer 1991, p. 32; 1995a, pp. 42, 65). Callmer's long interest in the topic has also resulted in a most important contribution, from my point of view, concerning both Vå and the complex urbanization process in southern Scandinavia. In it he explained the complicated character of the continuity in Vå as a transformation from an early central settlement to a new model centre on basis of local traditions of political structures, using his definitions (Callmer 1995b, pp. 90 f., and see further below). Lately Callmer has used Vå as an example of developing estates in Late Iron Age Scandinavia, a formation that occurred at a time when the settlement structure as a whole changed (Callmer 2001, pp. 120 f., 135).

A somewhat different approach is represented by Fabech, who has also studied the central places in southern Scandinavia. First of all she noticed the congruence between finds of golden bracteates/gold-foil figures and sacred place-names, often connected with Late Iron Age centres and important settlements. In the case of Vå the site kept its position into the Middle Ages (Fabech 1991, pp. 296, 300). In a later work, concentrated on Scania, she distinguished the similarities between Vå and Uppåkra. Both are characterized by thick cultural layers, rich in finds, and both have an origin in the Roman Iron Age. She also noticed that both sites are located in the inland, Uppåkra some 7 km from the sea (Öresund) and Vå about 5 km from a large lake (Hammar sjön). Fabech assigns great importance to the landscape and its topography as central for the division into different occupation areas, and as determining communications. The communication routes are the very cement in her reasoning about where and why power was located in the Late Iron Age (especially the Migration Period). In her view Vå was located in the centre of the north-eastern

plain, with a mainly agricultural economy, in a place where the main (medieval) roads from Uppåkra/Lund, the province of Blekinge, the province of Småland and Ravlunda (a central place to the south) met (Fabech 1993, pp. 218, 233).

As we have seen so far, the more recent studies concerning Vå, or rather involving Vå, have often been on a survey level, and thus seldom with detailed descriptions of the site as such. Since Callmer's and Fabech's contributions many scholars have cited their opinions of Vå as a central place, although they may seem to be based on assumptions full of reservations, and have at least given very brief descriptions.

## Evaluation of old and new material

Nobody, to my knowledge, has so far described in any depth the material remains of Vå after Anglert and Thun. For this reason I would like to give a more detailed account of some of the material relevant for a discussion of the role of the site during the Iron Age. This must begin with a review of the finds from Vå that are rare in general on Iron Age sites in Scania.

First of all we have the finds indicating people with high status in the community. The gold bracteates are probably the artefacts from Vå that have been exposed most, on various occasions (e.g. Stjernquist 1951, p. 19; Thorbert 1955, pp. 11 ff.; Strömberg 1961, p. 24). Another find that has attracted considerable attention is a patrix for a gold-foil figure (e.g. Stjernquist 1951, pp. 113 f.; Callmer 1995a, p. 53). Both these finds fit well into Fabech's early model of what constitutes central places (see above). Finally we have a less observed silver arm-ring from the Viking Age and a Late Iron Age sword ornament, also in silver (Strömberg 1961, pp. 23 f.; Hårdh 1976, p. 72). In these four finds we actually have a chain indicating a high-status milieu from the

Migration Period to the Viking Age, which in itself is rare.

A category of finds that has not been particularly noticed from the angle of centrality is the weapons. The oldest weapons we know of are a spur and a couple of pieces of ring mail, from the Roman Iron Age (Stjernquist 1951, pp. 112 f.; Nicklasson 1997, p. 252). In addition to these, Thorbert mentioned five spearheads and lanceheads found in Vå before Stjernquist's excavations. As far as I can tell, nobody has examined them since he wrote his initial work on Vå. Judging from his description, we are dealing with two lanceheads and three spearheads, unfortunately not dated (Thorbert 1943, p. 27). With the above-mentioned find of the three bracteates in the 17th century, an unknown number of swords and "arrows" were also found (Stjernquist 1951, p. 19; Thorbert 1955, p. 16). The latter were most probably spearheads and/or lanceheads, and the find can be interpreted either as an offering or as a "store for the troops". Finally, we have a find of a Viking Age spur (Thun 1982, p. 78) and a number of arrowheads that seem possible to date mainly to Viking and medieval times (e.g. Thorbert 1943, pp. 26 f.). In the Vå material we clearly have weapons representing more or less the whole Iron Age, though the dating of part of the material is unknown.

Other find categories that may be considered rare are, to begin with, one bronze and one lead object with runic inscriptions. The first one is a part of a balance house, undoubtedly from the Viking Age (Stjernquist 1951, p. 116; Salberger 1980, pp. 55 ff.). It is a clear signal of trade activities.

Gaming pieces, beads and fibulae are other objects found in Vå (Thorbert 1943; Stjernquist 1951; Stjernquist 1961; Thun 1982) that are rare, or at least not very frequent on Scanian Iron Age sites. As far as fibulae are concerned, this was true at least until searches with metal detectors began in different research projects in the 1990s. The fibulae from Vå are quite evenly spread from the Roman Iron Age until the Viking Age.



Fig. 2. Late Viking Age brooch from western central Vå (Thun 1982 p. 41, F.no. 410). Actual size about 2 x 3 cm. Photo by Daniel Nilsson, The Regional Museum of Skåne.

The total number is somewhere over 20, not counting the ones that have been recently found by Callmer's ongoing project. These do, on the other hand, seem to confirm the picture, and to be fairly evenly spread through the Iron Age (Helgesson, pers. com.).

Since Thun's excavations in the 1960s it has been known that the remains in Vå contain large quantities of iron slag. The slag deposits have been dated mainly to the medieval period (Thun 1982, pp. 90 f.; Anglert & Thun 1984, pp. 53 f.; Ödman 1995, p. 150). The fact that some quantities of iron slag were deposited in the fill of the pit houses, as well as between Early Iron Age layers and the medieval layers, has been interpreted as showing that iron production was of great importance already in the Late Iron Age (Ödman 1993, pp. 27 f.; Björk 1994, pp. 6, 9; Callmer 1994, p. 92; Helgesson 1997, pp. 128 f.).

In this context, finally, it is interesting to mention three Roman coins, from the period 92–163 AD, that were found at Munkeberg, approximately 1000 metres west of Vå (Stjernquist 1951 p. 162), and a find of an arm-ring of bronze, in private possession and unfortunately not localized closer than to Vå parish, which is supposed to be from the Iron Age, probably the Migration Period (ATA 4273/65).

With this presentation of the material as background, it is time to take a stance on whether Vå can be interpreted as a central place in some respect, based on the quality of the finds. To evaluate this I have used the hypothesis developed by Ringtved & Fabech (1995) and Helgesson (1998). How does Vå fit into their models, which are based on a number of find categories with supposed social, economic, religious and/or political significance? In this task we must remember the traps. Helgesson has shown very clearly how static the models are, calling for more nuanced models that can take into consideration the many variations over time and space (Helgesson 1998, p. 44). Until more solid attempts are made to explain the central places in a model that can take notice of the full complexity, we will have to make do with the ones we have. Table 1 presents the finds representing different levels of centrality in Vå and Uppåkra. It is evident that Vå fits very well in to the pattern on a superficial level. Obviously there are no large quantities of status-indicating finds, and there are no masses of finds indicating large-scale production of bronze objects in Vå. The material for each period is not always impressive and there is of course reason to involve the size of the site and the structural continuity in the discussion as well, which will be attempted below. There is, however, evidence both of an elite milieu and of iron production that seems to be of importance long before the medieval town period, and people involved in trade during the Viking Age.

## Continuity

In my view there are no problems with continuity as such in Vå. As we have seen, all periods are represented, even if we restrict a search to the bronze objects. Because previous discussions about Vå to a large extent have concentrated on the continuity, this must be commented on further (Strömberg 1961, pp. 171 f., 181, 206; Thun 1966, p. 205; 1968, p. 276; 1982, p. 106;

Table 1. Find categories reflecting different levels of centrality (after Fabech & Ringtved 1995) and the categories that are represented at Uppåkra (U) (Helgesson 1998) and Vå (V). \*The find of a Roman coin in Vå according to Helgesson (pers. com.).

<b>Supraregional importance</b>		
exclusive helmets	U	
continental gold artefacts	U	
unusual find combinations	U	V
objects of high artistic quality	U	
<b>Regional importance</b>		
solidi		
denars	U	V*
bracteates		V
gold-foil figures	U	V
glass	U	
gold fragments	U	
weapons	U	V
parts of statuettes	U	
raw garnets	U	
metal scrap	U	
moulds		
melting-pots	U	V
iron bars		V
iron slag	U	V
preparatory work	U	
<b>Ordinary settlement</b>		
ceramics	U	V
tools	U	V
grindstone	U	V
strike-a-light	U	V
millstone	U	V
distaff	U	V
loom weight	U	V
fibulae	U	V
ornament needle	U	V
glass beads	U	V
amber beads	U	V
gaming pieces		V
animal bones	U	V

Callmer 1995b, pp. 87, 90 f.). Thun was very puzzled by the weak representation of remains and find material from the Vendel Period and

from the transition from Viking to medieval times. When we study Thun's results today, with calibrated values, it is clear that the radiocarbon analysis he made, especially for the Late Iron Age/early medieval pit houses, fills the gap very neatly (Fig. 3). Even if we consider that there are a weak point in the Vendel Period and the Early Middle Ages, judging from the find material, the presence of habitation cannot be questioned. It is sufficiently covered both by finds and by the C-14 datings. Further, the early medieval period was in fact represented already in Stjernquist's and in Thun's own material, for example by a pit house with a coin from 1146–54, and pottery from the Late Viking Age/Early Middle Ages (Thun 1982, p. 74). Viking Age/early medieval pottery has also been observed recently in connection with early occupation layers in the western and central parts of the site (Björk 1994; Dahlén 1997).

The problem with the continuity at some of the central places from the Late Iron Age into the medieval period has been given a general explanation by Johan Callmer, which I find very plausible. Besides, his explanation was exemplified with the development of Vå. Callmer sees the lack of continuity after the 10th century in combination with a gap between the decline of an old system of central settlements and the rise of "new model centres" (Callmer 1995b, pp. 86 ff.). The seemingly weak representation of Vendel Period remains in Vå does not quite fit into this model, but I believe that it may be explained by the emergence of the trading places at Åhus. It is probable that they dominated the exchange and distribution of goods in the area at that time, although it is highly possible that the people supporting or ruling the development lived elsewhere.

Turning back to the subject of pure continuity in habitation in Vå, it really does not need any further investigation, in my opinion. Instead there are several other questions that need more attention. One is the nature of the religious, economic and political structure in the immediate hinterland of the site.

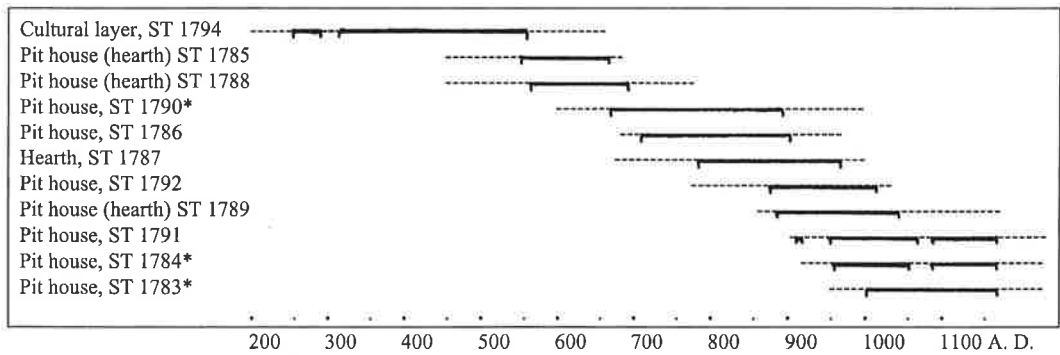


Fig. 3. Radiocarbon analyses from Vä 1962-63 (Thun 1966). Calibrated dates with 1 and 2 Sigma. Samples from different layers in the same house marked with \*.

## The sacred Vä and its hinterland

Discussing place-names is not an easy task for a layman. Nevertheless, it is something that must be dealt with in some way as the discussion about the central places of the Iron Age in Scandinavia have increasingly involved place-names as indications of the religious and political organization of the landscape. Kousgård Sørensen's thoughts about sacral place names in southern Scandinavia has had a great impact on archaeologists studying central places. In an overview of the topic he pointed out Vä as one of several sacral names in north-eastern Scania. The others are Torseke, Norra Åsum and Gualöv (Kousgård Sørensen 1992).

The name Vä has been acknowledged as a sacred name for a long time. Already when Stjernquist wrote her main work about the site she thought that the name spoke for itself, indirectly referring to the importance of the site as out of the ordinary (Stjernquist 1951, p. 18). The meaning of the name seems clear enough (Pamp 1983, p. 23), but how about the area surrounding Vä? Are there any other place-names that give indications of the nature of the religious or political organization of the area?

There are in my opinion several other place-names in north-eastern Scania that could have a

sacral meaning. I have tried to look up some more or less probable sacred names, in an attempt to connect them with status-indicating finds to evaluate whether the combination can tell us something about the landscape, the settlement structure and the geography of power. The place-names and the finds presented in Fig. 4 have been presented earlier by different authors except for Viby, Snäckestad (Villand härad), Hovby, Heljestad, Mosslunda (Gärd härad), Ålsåkra, Friggatofta (Göinge härad) and Helge Å ("the holy river"), which runs like a vital artery through the landscape. I have asked Göran Hallberg at DAL (The Department of Dialectology and Onomastics in Lund) about some of the suggested names, but he has several reservations about apprehending any of them as sacral names. For instance, he explains that Hovby in its oldest known form is spelled *Hugby*, later *Haaby* and *Hoby*, and can be a compound of either farm/village with a cult place (*hov*), or a combination of height/hill and farm/village. Heljestad could be derived either from the male name *Hælghi*, or a meaning of holy place (Pamp 1983; Hallberg pers. com.). Recently Brink has evaluated the place-names of north-eastern Scania in a discussion about central places and occupation areas. Brink observed that there are less possibilities to trace central places through place names in south Scandinavia than in east Scandinavia, due to some sort of radical

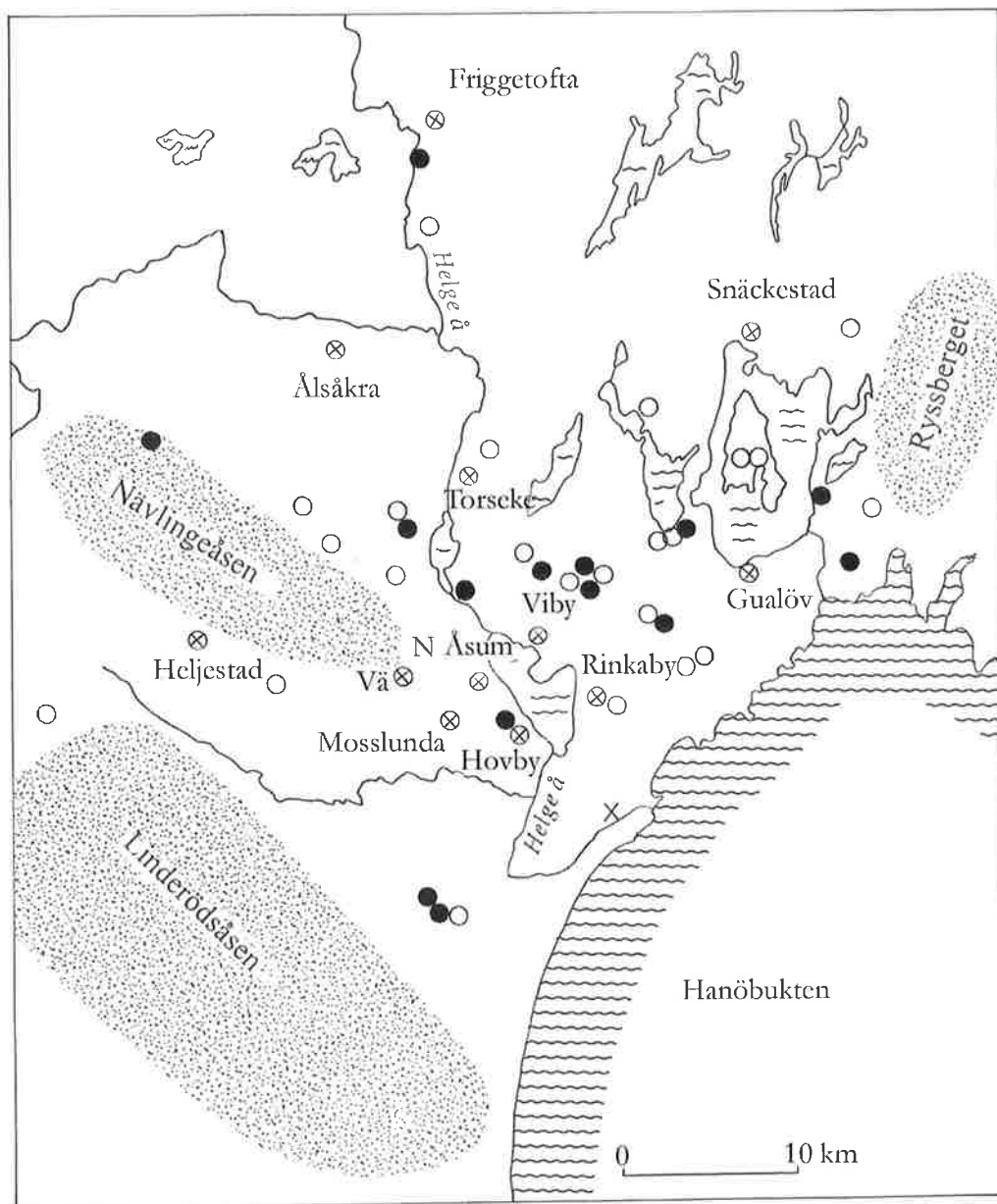


Fig. 4. Places with sacred names (certain and presumed by the author) and Iron Age finds reflecting status (gold, silver, weapons, import; Early Iron Age = filled dot, Late Iron Age = unfilled dot). After Stjernquist 1955; Strömberg 1961b; Mildner 1971; Hårdh 1976; Pamp 1983; Kousgård Sørensen 1992; Fabech 1993; Helgesson 1997; Nicklasson 1997; Brink 1998; Söderberg 1998; Björk 1999.

reorganization of the settlements in the former area, which wiped out many of the older names already in prehistoric time. Brink suggests Vä and Rinkaby as the two most obvious names

indicating centrality in this area (Brink 1998 p. 301, 320).

Turning back and viewing the correlation between the sacred names and the status-



indicating finds, we see that there is no obvious concordance. Two massive gold rings from Vittskövle, a weapon grave in Färlöv, a bracteate from Önnestad, a rune-stone from Färlöv and a silver hoard from Fjälkinge are some of the finds that show the complexity of the centrality on the Kristianstad plain, since they have little concordance with the recognized sacred names. It seems as if the central markers are spread out in a way that makes the phenomenon more like a network of connections than as a single place dominating everything and everyone. In a way this is very similar to the situation in the Gudme area in Funen (e.g. Fabech & Ringtved 1995). Each of the places with status-indicating finds deserves to be studied in its own right, and in a discussion like this we must also remember that very few of the sites have been excavated.

The landscape, with its rivers, forests, dwellings and so on, was full of divinity. When dealing with the Vå area, it seems very difficult to rank or judge the sacral names as evidence for anything else. To define the hinterland of Vå (and possibly Fjälkinge?) – in my view an area connected by a network of mutual relations and obligations – I believe that we must instead use a combination of studies of the landscape (like Fabech 1993) and regional variation in the material culture (like Svanberg 1999). Indeed Callmer's, Fabech's and Svanberg's works convincingly point out north-east Scania as a well-defined settlement area.

If we study the immediate hinterland of Vå we see that it is full of settlements and graves/cemeteries (Fig. 5). The known settlements are, with one exception, from the Pre-Roman Iron Age. The graves are mainly from Pre-Roman and Roman Iron Age, bearing in mind that a large number have not been excavated. It is, however, plausible to date most of the unexcavated graves to the Early Iron Age, as they consist of round, filled stone settings (Carlie 1994, pp. 61 ff.). This could be interpreted as meaning that several small settlements in the area disappeared in the Pre-Roman or Roman Iron Age. We must however be aware that this

may be an illusion, since only very small areas and few settlements have been excavated. The answer could just as well lie in a changing settlement pattern at some point between Early and Late Iron Age. The fact that the Vå area was dominated by few, but very large villages, at least from the Middle Ages (Callmer 2001 p. 121) could be the result of a general process towards more stable and larger occupations during the Late Iron Age. At this point it is hard to make a more definite statement about this. Further excavations are vital to shed light on the settlement situation in the area surrounding Vå.

## Vå in perspective

The relationship between Vå and the successive trading places at Åhus, in the Vendel and Viking periods, is very interesting to study, not least in a regional perspective. The places are of different character, as Callmer has shown (1982, 1995b), and therefore I have chosen not to go into any close comparison of actual material in this context. The places are purely oriented towards production and trade, and they have a strategic location on the river Helge Å, connecting them to inland areas as well as the Baltic Sea. As mentioned earlier, the emergence of the sites at Åhus and a reorientation of trade activities towards places with more favourable communication positions could be the reason for a decline in Vå in the 8th and 9th centuries.

Another important place to study in terms of centrality and for its relationship to Vå and Åhus is Fjälkinge (Callmer 1982, 1991; Helgesson 1997). Fjälkinge seems to resemble Vå more than Åhus in several respects. The material gives a more rural impression without the dominance of craft and trade, which are so distinct in Åhus. Fjälkinge has its peak in the Late Iron Age, with only vague traces of Early Iron Age activities. In the Late Iron Age Fjälkinge can be estimated to have had an occupation area of at least 500 by 250 m, thus more than half the size of Vå.

Helgesson has given an interesting suggestion as to how this triad developed into medieval

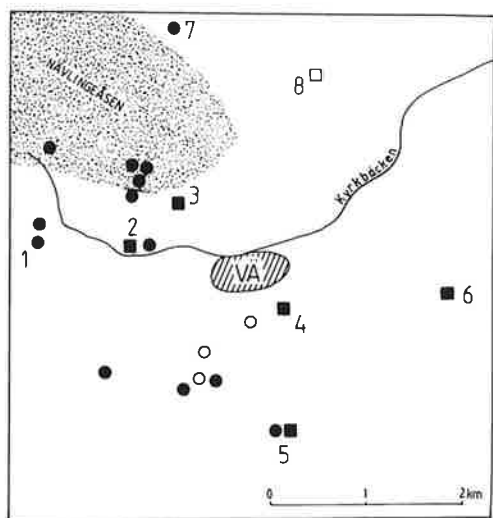


Fig. 5. The immediate hinterland of Vä (5 km radius). Circles show graves/cemeteries, squares show settlements (Early Iron Age = filled, Late Iron Age = unfilled symbols). 1. Mansdala (Strömberg 1961), 2. Tingsgården (Björk & Hök in press), 3. Talldalen (Nordell 1995), 4. E 22 (Ekerow in press), 5. Mosslunda (Ideström 1985), 6. Snårarp (Edring in press), 7. Skepparslöv (Stjernquist 1955), 8. Öllsjö (Björk, ongoing excavation in spring 2001).

times. He believes that the importance of Åhus as a trading port was unquestionable and that the iron production at Vä was a strong magnet for the royal interest in the area. The Danish kingdom had several rich agricultural centres in the rest of its domain, and thus it had no need for Fjälkinge as such, while on the other hand iron was lacking in most parts of the land (Helgesson 1997, pp. 128 f.).

The natural choice to direct comparison with Vä is Uppåkra, as they resemble each other in origin, size and inland location. The reason for interpreting a site as central is often a combination of size, or quantity, and the qualities in finds and functions at the place. Our knowledge of the sizes of the Vä and Uppåkra sites has changed over the years. Without giving a full account of the "growth" of the sites, we can content ourselves with establishing that the Late Iron Age habitation in Vä is believed to cover an area of approximately 750 by 250 m (Callmer

1994, p. 91), while the comprehension of Uppåkra is that it was approximately 1100 by 600 m (Stjernquist 1996, p. 103; Hårdh 2000, p. 198). Uppåkra was thus more than three times larger than Vä, not considering variations over time.

In western Vä the overwhelmingly Iron Age cultural layers are up to 0.8 metres thick, but mostly between 0.1 and 0.4 metres, with a clear stratigraphy with up to three different major layers and a variety of structures, although mostly with a simpler stratigraphy with one or two layers (estimation from Stjernquist 1951; Klasson 1985; Björk 1994). Where there are medieval cultural layers the stratigraphy is sometimes much more complex and the full depth varies between insignificant deposits in the southern part and more than 2 metres in the northern part of the town (estimation from Thun 1982; Anglert & Thun 1984; Helgesson 1991; Dahlén 1997). In comparison, the depth of the cultural layers in Uppåkra varies between 0.1 and 2.0 metres, with the deepest deposits in the central parts (Larsson 1998, pp. 100 ff.). It is very hard to make an immediate comparison between the thickness of the cultural layers of Vä and Uppåkra, since Vä functioned as a town in medieval time and because the soils of the sites are partly different and have different preservation qualities. This would of course need a separate examination.

There are, as we have seen, considerable difference in size between Vä and Uppåkra, and the difference in the find material is first of all the lack of extreme high-status artefacts and large-scale bronze production at Vä. From these observations it feels safe to suggest that Uppåkra perhaps was a multifunctional site on a very large scale. Uppåkra could have been a central settlement with an elite residence with important religious activities, *and* a major production site, *and* a major market area, to use some of Callmer's vocabulary (Callmer 1982, 1995b). Vä was clearly smaller and in this sense subordinate to Uppåkra. As yet we have little information on the economic circumstances of Vä, except for

the iron production, and perhaps it only had the first level of central settlement attributes – the large settlement with an elite residence involved in religious activities – at least at the early stage of the central settlement. The picture gets much more complex with the emergence of Fjälkinge and the Åhus sites. Although Vå seems to be subordinated to Uppåkra in an economic sense, it is not necessarily so in a political one. It is dangerous to give the places a static role in the political development, which could, and probably did, change rapidly and several times during the Iron Age.

The last question is how large areas we can expect to have been connected to the different central places. If we believe that the size and the functions developed at Vå were to a large extent dependent on the size of the area connected to it, this would suggest that Uppåkra was connected to a much larger area, or rather a much larger population. The primary sphere of interest for Vå must have been the immediate hinterland, of uncertain size but probably on the western side of the Helge Å. Callmer has on numerous occasions pointed out the plain around Kristianstad as a settlement area well defined by natural borders such as the sea and the ridges (e.g. Callmer 1994, p. 77; 1995b, p. 87). It seems natural to view this area as the secondary sphere of interest for Vå, including the Helge Å as a link to the north and the Baltic Sea as a link to the east and south, at least in the Roman Iron Age and the Migration Period, before the development of Fjälkinge and Åhus. For Uppåkra the sphere of interest could be expected to have been even larger during the same period of time. The fact that we have no indications so far of central places or settlements of the same nature as Vå and Uppåkra in other parts of Scania is not equal to a situation without independent, powerful constellations of people elsewhere in the landscape before the Late Iron Age. We cannot at this stage take it for granted that Uppåkra dominated the rest of Scania politically in the Early Iron Age, just on basis of the lack of obvious remains of centrality like those in the

north-east and the south-west. Several finds and excavations indicating high-status milieus, such as Simris, Järrestad, Östra Vemmerlöv and others in south-east Scania, indicate this. How the people of, say, south-east Scania were organized in political or economic terms is, however, well beyond the task of a description of Vå.

## Final comments

As we have seen, there are several separate phenomena that make Vå stand out as an Iron Age settlement out of the ordinary. Despite this, nobody has evaluated and presented Vå as a central place in depth before, at least not publicly in writing as far as I know. I hope I have shed light on some details in this contribution. As a whole, the conclusions drawn through the years seem to be accurate on a generalized level.

There are several different levels of centrality in Iron Age society, and the complexity within central places and between them makes it a delicate task to analyse them. I have tried to give an objective account of the evidence documented at Vå thus far. My personal opinion about long-lived, everyday structures, as can be seen in regional studies, probably colours the description. But I ask myself how else we can explain the long-lasting, unbroken continuity of a site this size, if there were no continuation in functions. Although the functions were transformed, gradually or rapidly, over more than a millennium, a continuity in political and economic functions seems like the most probable explanation for the phenomenon of Vå. In this respect I share Callmer's and Fabech's opinions about what Vå and other known central places represent. Future excavations and surveying with metal detectors can of course prove us wrong. The importance of further and more detailed research and excavation, both in Vå and its hinterland, as one key to understand the emergence and development of the central places is a fact that I claim to be unquestionable.

One thought that still intrigues me is what the picture would be like if we had put the same

effort into investigating “ordinary” villages and their surroundings. How would we have looked upon the central places then? I would like to challenge any bright scholar to give us an alternative explanation of the central place problem. I have not been able to do it, but I believe that we must question the explanations and widen the discussion about the meaning of the central places in a process to reach a better understanding of the phenomenon. The history of Vå, or the discussion about central places for that matter, evidently does not end here. It has just started.

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