

# Friend or Foe

## Alliances and Power Structures in Southern Scandinavia during the Roman Iron Age

BY XENIA PAULI JENSEN

### Abstract

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This article is based on a paper I gave at a seminar in Lund in October 2009. My aim then and now is to challenge previous research on the weapon deposits from southern Scandinavia in the Roman Iron Age. The focus will be on the different weapon rites and their importance for maintaining leadership and control. The deposits from the Early Roman Iron Age of Vimose, Funen, show a striking variety concerning the origin of the sacrificed equipment. This is interpreted as the use of allies from different areas of Northern Europe. Finally, the different ways of visualizing power are discussed, and a new model for power structure is offered.

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The South Scandinavian weapon deposits have experienced a research boost in the past 6–7 years, with the project “The Iron Age in Northern Europe” which preceded the Illerup project (Carnap-Bornheim & Ilkjær 2006). In the case of Vimose the result was not only a registration in full of the find material itself but also an adjustment of various typologies and their dating, as well as new views and interpretations of the finds and their context (Pauli Jensen 2008).

Most research has concentrated on the so-called “war booty sacrifices” from the Late Roman Iron Age (c. 150/60–375 AD) with thousands of weapons and personal equipment deposited. These finds are traditionally interpreted as sacrifices of a defeated army’s equipment by the victorious party after successful battle (Ilkjær & Lønstrup 1982). For many years Danish scholars have discussed whether the present-day Danish area was at-

tacked from Western Norway and Eastern Sweden in period C1b and C2 respectively, or if people within the current Danish area were the aggressors and brought home spoils of victory from abroad (Jørgensen 2001; Pauli Jensen *et al.* 2003). Other interpretations have also seen the light (for instance Lund Hansen 2002, 2003; Christensen 2005; Heidegger 2002, p. 254; Fuglevik 2007, pp. 235 f.), but these have seldom been part of the overall discussions. All these interpretations have their basis in the well-published deposit A from Illerup Ådal in Eastern Jutland, and even though other finds have been mentioned, it is evident that they have not been seriously taken into consideration. With the new knowledge based on re-examinations of the Nydam, Thorsberg, Kragehul and Vimose finds, it is important to emphasize that the weapon burial rite is very complex and varies enormously in both time and space. Each find

and even each deposit shows a different picture and springs surprises on the examiner. It is no longer possible to generalize from just one find to the whole weapon deposit rite of the Roman Iron Age.

As the focus has mostly been on the Late Roman weapon deposits, I believe it will be useful to examine weapon deposits from the Early Roman Iron Age (c. 1–150/60 AD).

## The Vimose find: surroundings and research history

Figure 1 shows a distribution map of the weapon deposits, including both the well-known “war booty sacrifices” of the Late Roman Iron Age of Southern Scandinavia and the deposits from Northern Germany and Poland. Furthermore, the map shows the mono-deposits, i.e. deposits of only one weapon or one type of weapon. The weapon deposit rite seems to differ in distribution, as the mono-deposits are most common in eastern Denmark and southern Sweden, whereas the classic war booty sacrifices are found in Western



Fig. 1. Weapon deposits of the Roman Iron Age. Finds from rivers are not included. Vimose is marked by the red star. Illustration: the author.

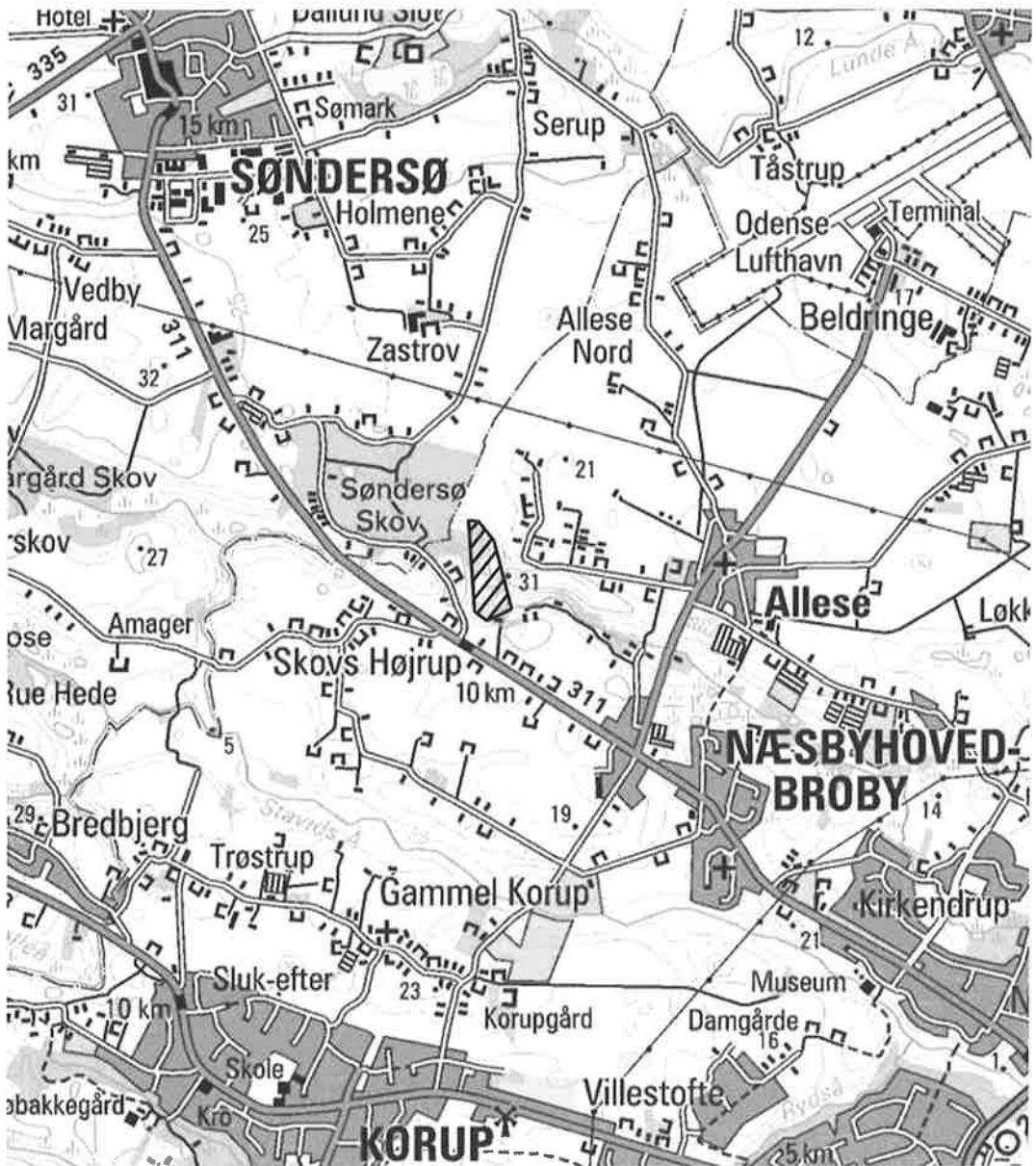


Fig. 2. Vimose (shaded area) is situated north-west of Odense in the bottom of a marked river valley. Copyright KMS.

Denmark, i.e. eastern Jutland and Funen. According to Rasmus Birch Iversen, this should be seen as differences in ritual practice rather than, for example, the results of poorly excavated sites of army equipment (Birch Iversen 2008a, p. 290).

Vimose is located on Funen north-west of Odense in one of the NW–SE oriented valleys that characterize this landscape (Fig. 2). Vimose itself comprises bogland approximately 600 m long and 50,000 m<sup>2</sup> in area, which used to be drained via a little stream,

Vimoserenden, leading to the now dried-out Næsbyhoved Lake. Parallel to Vimoserenden to the south is another valley system, Stavids Ådal, where the weapon deposit of Villestofte was found only 2 km south of Vimose (Henriksen & Pauli Jensen 2007). This valley also comprised non-military offerings including pottery and animal bones, probably from the Early Roman Iron Age. A contemporary weapon burial from Korup and a number of settlements near the village of Villestofte add to the picture of a normal rural Roman Iron Age landscape (Albrechtsen 1956, p. 8, Taf. 10). Few traces of Early Iron Age activity are found in Lunde Ådal, running about 2 km north of Vimose. Most often these consist of reports of pots, burned bones and “traces of blackened soil”. Generally, most settlements are found near the small villages of Sønderlø, Villestofte and Kirkendrup – often in connection with road extensions or modern building activities. The lack of finds immediately north and south of Vimose is probably due to lack of modern building activities resulting in excavations.

Consequently, Vimose is set apart from the landscape around it, but it is not to be considered isolated or marginalized. A similar picture can be recognized both at Ejsbøl Mose near Haderslev and at Nydam Mose near Sønderborg, both southern Jutland. New excavations in recent years have shown a number of contemporary settlements within 3–5 km of these bogs (Leen Jensen 2011).

The name “Vimose” does not refer to a sacred place (Danish: *vi*), but rather to the willow trees and bushes (Danish: *vidjer*) that still grow in the bog and around the little lake of Vimose. The Iron Age artefacts were found at the southern end of the bog. Conrad Engelhardt wrote that most of the objects turned up 2–3 feet (approx. 60–95 cm) below the surface and that the find layer was up to 4 feet deep (approx. 125 cm). He also noted that the find layer ended just above the bottom of the Iron Age lake, which was marked partly by a clay substance, partly by *Anadonta* shells (Engelhardt 1869, p. 2). The little lake in the south of the bog of Vimose is the result of peat digging and archaeological excavations



Fig. 3. Paul Helweg Mikkelsen's excavation in Vimose in July–August 1931. Photo: Odense Bys Museer.

in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The find history of the site goes back to the 16th century, but it was not until well into the 19th century that Christian Frederik Herbst and Conrad Engelhardt conducted their well-known excavations at Vimose (see Ørsnes 1970; Wiell 1999; Pauli Jensen 2008). Also, a local amateur archaeologist, Paul Helweg Mikkelsen, excavated Vimose in 1931 (Fig. 3) and luckily took photos at the site. Mikkelsen did not achieve much, but he found a few artefacts (Pauli Jensen 2009).

Engelhardt published part of the find in 1869 and dated it to the 5th century AD, whereas Herbst a couple of years earlier had placed it in the 2nd century AD (Engelhardt 1869, p. 7; Herbst 1861, pp. 307 ff.). Both worked from the basic assumption that the Vimose find was the result of only one deposit – a premise that later research proved to be wrong. In the 1970s Jørgen Ilkjær dated three main deposits: Vimose 1 (late 1st century AD), Vimose 2 (2nd century), and Vimose 3 (early 3rd century). The basis of Ilkjær's analysis was a bundle of spear and javelin heads and later comparisons with the Illerup find and contemporary grave finds in

Southern Scandinavia (Ilkjær 1975; 1990).

Recently the material from Vimose has been registered in full for the first time, including not only artefacts from Danish museums, but also finds from private collections and museums throughout Europe – all in all well over 5,600 artefacts (Fig. 4). Naturally, this registration has brought new material, new datings and new interpretations (Pauli Jensen 2008). Vimose contains objects from the Stone Age to the Middle Ages, even though the bulk of the material belongs to the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD. Beside the non-military deposits of the Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age, Vimose comprises at least eight weapon deposits belonging to the period from around the birth of Christ to around 600 AD (Fig. 5). In other words, the site must have been a well-established cult location when the weapon deposits first took place.

The character and possible interpretations of these early weapon deposits are discussed elsewhere, and it is now clear that they should not be interpreted like the later war booty sacrifices (Pauli Jensen 2009). The early deposits are very homogeneous and characterized by very few weapon types which were rarely ri-

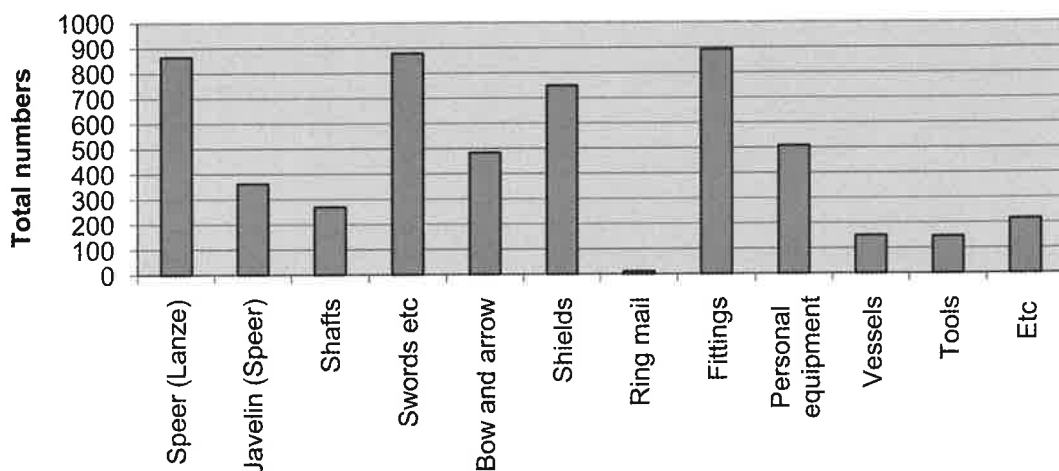


Fig. 4. Overview of the different find types from Vimose. The find comprises more than 5,600 artefacts. Illustration: the author.

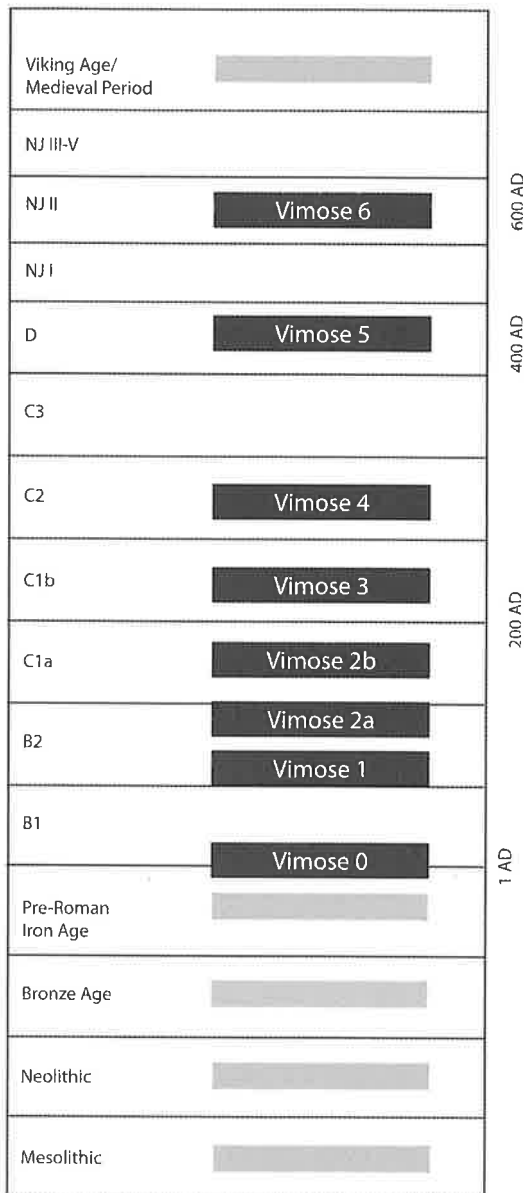


Fig. 5. Depositions in Vimose. Non-military deposits are marked by a light grey and weapon deposits are marked by darker grey. Illustration: Moesgård Museum/Ea Rasmussen.

tually destroyed before being deposited in the Iron Age lake. During the 2nd century AD this type of weapon deposit rite developed into the so-called war booty sacrifices with thousands of weapons and personal equipment, often heavily destroyed before deposition. The weapon sacrificial rite in Vimose ends around 600 AD with the deposition of a seax. This single deposit points towards the new custom from the late Migration Period, Viking Age and Middle Ages, when single swords or axes were deposited near bridges or important roads (Lund 2004; Pauli Jensen 2008, pp. 326 f.). It is worth noticing that the war booty sacrifices are but one of many different weapon deposit rites, and consequently the term “war booty sacrifice” should only be used when dealing with the large and very diverse deposits of the late 2nd to early 5th century AD.

## Material diversity – cultural diversity

One of the most fascinating aspects of the Vimose find is that it contains material which is not found in other weapon deposits or in contemporary burials on Funen and neighbouring areas. On the other hand, some of the artefacts seem to be based locally. Regarding both weapons and personal equipment it is worth mentioning that the many inter-regional types blur the picture of more local elements in the deposits. In other words, the weapons could easily be locally produced, but it would be very difficult to identify this in the material at hand.

By examining the distribution of the material of the deposits of Vimose it becomes clear that:

- In all deposits both material represented in the local area around Vimose and material not represented on Funen and neighbour-

ring areas occurs.

- The material of the different deposits in Vimose shows different areas of possible contact or inspiration.
- Most local groups can be identified towards the end of the Early Roman Iron Age (Vimose 2a) – a tendency which can be recognized in other types of material including settlement patterns, pottery, and burial customs.
- A marked change in weapon types and their distribution can be identified at the transition between Early and Late Roman Iron Age. This change can also be recognized in other material groups, and is often interpreted as a transition from local to larger units.

As mentioned above, many different local groups could be identified in the deposit Vimose 2a from the first half of the 2nd century AD (later phase B2). Both weapons with an inter-regional distribution and weapons with very local or regional distribution outside Funen are found (Fig. 6). Not only weapons from other areas than Funen are found in Vimose 2a; some weapon types have characteristic elements which point towards other areas, especially the Elbe-Germanic area and the Przeworsk culture, e.g. distinguishing features concerning the cross-section of the socket and details on the shield bosses (Pauli Jensen 2008, pp. 85, 171). A number of other weapon types, however, have a very wide distribution including the area around Vimose.

The personal equipment presents a similar picture (Fig. 7). Types with a very broad distribution, e.g. the one-layer combs of Ilkjær's type 1b or the spurs of Bantelmann type 4, have been identified alongside types with a narrower distribution, such as the spurs of Bantelmann type 3. All these types occur in grave finds on Funen and surrounding areas. In contrast, the spurs of Ginalski type E2 or fork-thorn buckles of Madyda-Legutko type

G35 are extremely rare in southern Scandinavia (exceptions: Kvie (Almgren & Nerman 1923, Fig. 200) and Husby grave 383 (Radatz 1974, Taf. 80)).

It is characteristic that both the weapons and the personal equipment of Vimose 2a seem to point in many directions: the middle Danube region, the eastern part of the Przeworsk culture, the Elbe-Germanic area, and different areas within southern Scandinavia. The question is how these many possible areas of contact or inspiration are to be interpreted. Traditionally, researchers have searched for one common denominator in terms of one area of origin of the sacrificed equipment (Ilkjær 1993, pp. 374 ff.). In my opinion, it is no longer convenient or useful to narrow the search to only one common denominator.

One simple explanation for the very confusing pattern of distribution is that the diversity in material mirrors a cultural diversity. In other words, if the objects seem to come from many different places then maybe the people who carried these objects also originate from many different places and populations. With the basic assumption that the Vimose find from the 2nd to early 5th century comprises weapons carried (and used) in battle, the material diversity could be explained by the use of alliances. The different areas of contact or inspiration of the various weapon deposits of Vimose could be explained by changing alliances. Germanic alliances are notoriously short-lived, as the battle of the Teutoburger Forest in 9 AD has shown, remembering that Arminius himself was killed because of yet another broken alliance. In a North Germanic context I regard alliances as co-operation between at least two parties with a common, if temporary, mission or goal. I also think we should understand alliances in the broadest terms possible. The connections may not always be equally balanced power structures; one could easily imagine the whole spectrum of direct coercion, recruitment of soldiers, tri-

## Vimose 2a

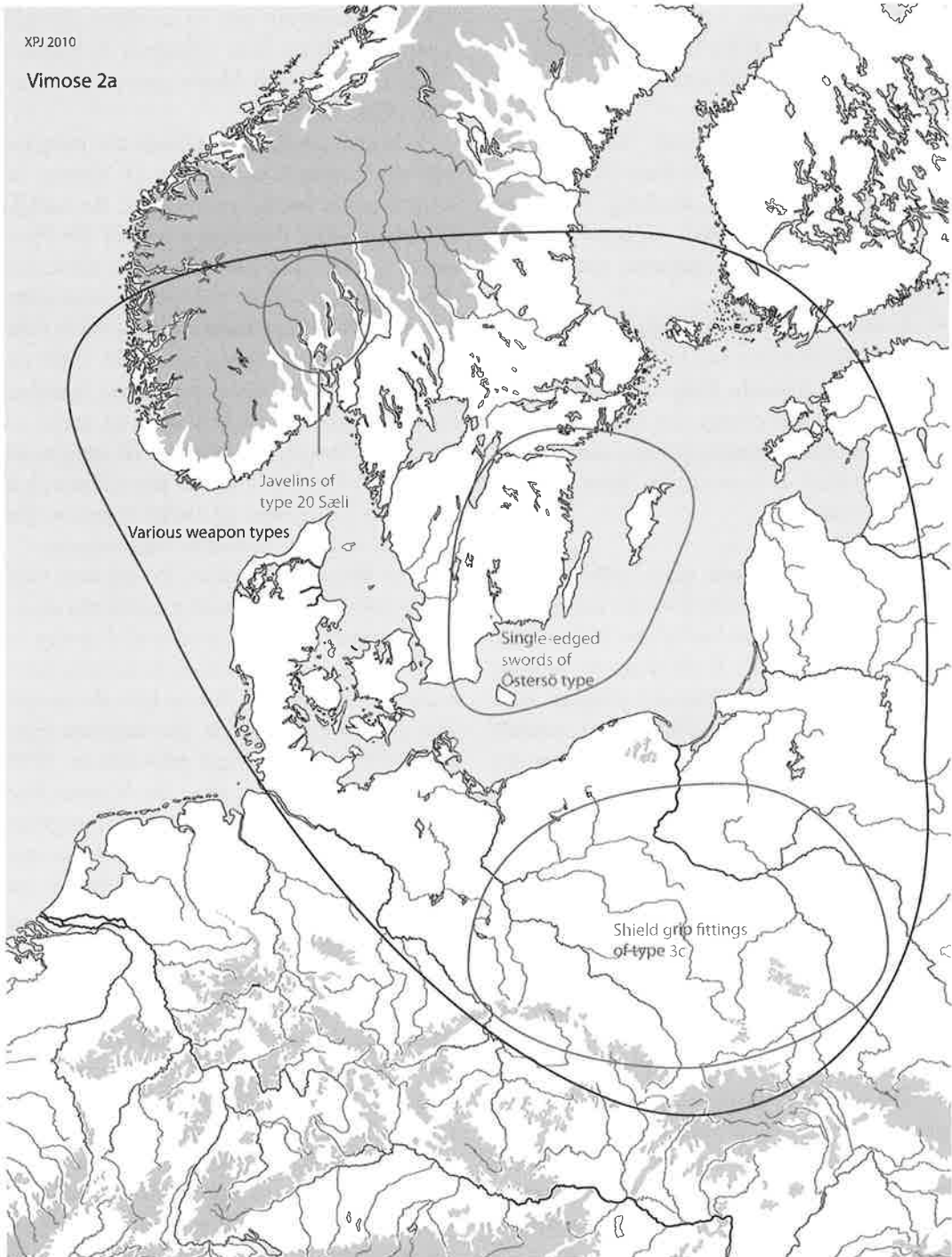


Fig. 6. Simplified distribution map of selected weapon types belonging to the phase B2 deposit of Vimose 2a. Vimose is marked by a star. Note that neither javelins of Illkjær's type 20 Sæli, single-edged swords of Nicklasson's Östersjö type, nor Illkjær's shield grips of type 3c are found on Funen or neighbouring areas. Illustration: the author.



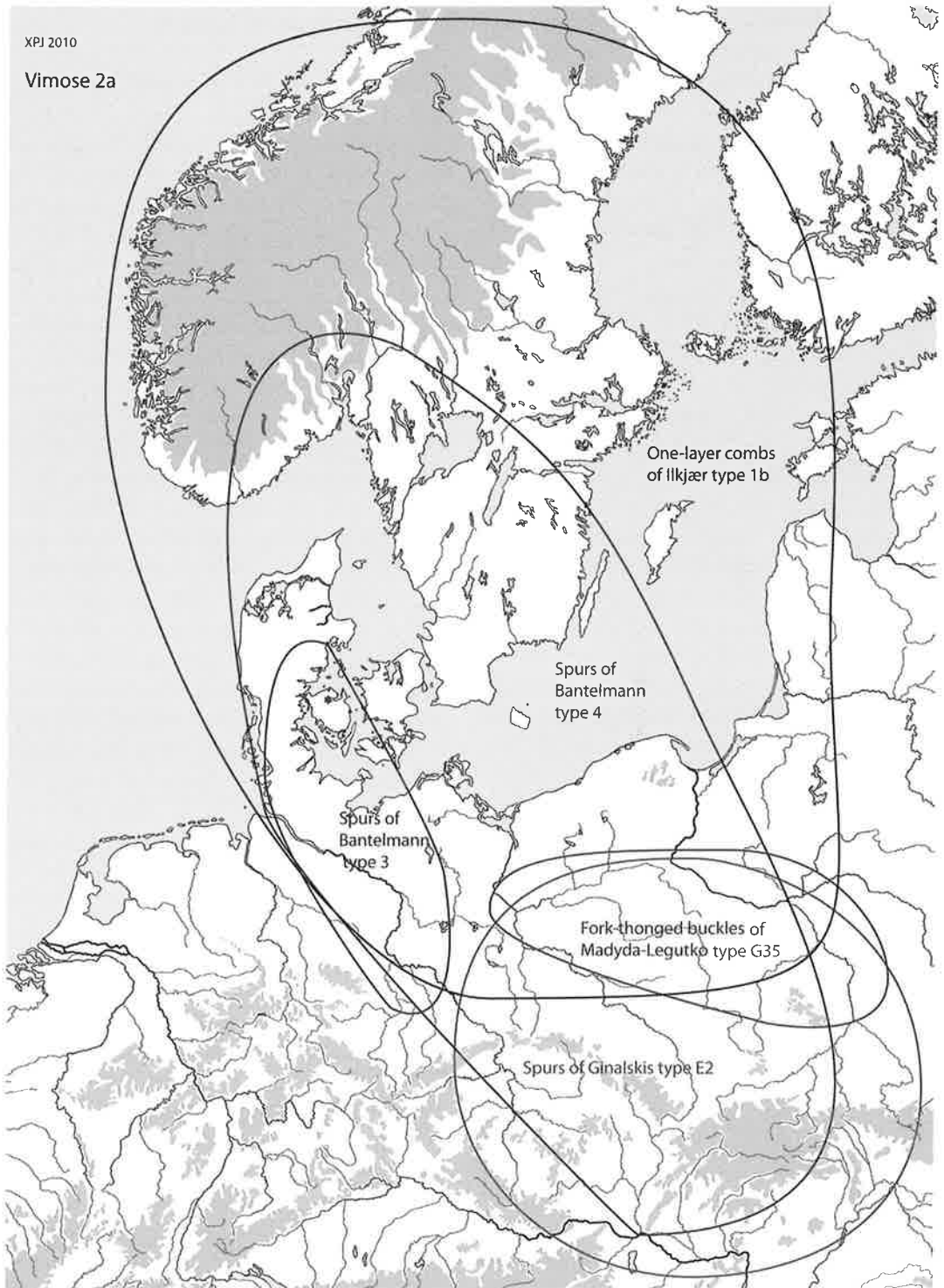


Fig. 7. Simplified distribution map of selected personal equipment from Vimose 2a. Vimose is marked by a star. Illustration: the author.

bute or gift exchanges, and family federations with personal bodyguards, not to mention the use of mercenaries. These examples do not rule each other out, but can be combined in a variety of arrangements depending on when and how we examine the material.

Consequently, the Germanic armies should no longer be regarded as one closed unit, but rather as consisting of a number of different units and groupings. An obvious parallel is the Roman armies, which have previously been regarded by archaeologists and military historians as a unit or a “war machine” (Peddie 1994). Lately, however, researchers have concentrated on the diversity of the Roman armies and a new focus on various aspects, for instance, the soldier’s identity or the army as a “community within the community”, has developed. Scholars have now realized that the Roman armies should not be seen as homogeneous, mechanical units. The armies consisted both of soldiers and officers originating from many different areas with different cultures and social backgrounds, and of non-combatant members of the armies, including servants, family members, craftsmen and veterans (Coulston 1988; James 2001; Allason-Jones 2001).

This much more complex picture fits very well with the North-Germanic armies of the period, regarding both the soldiers’ different cultural backgrounds and the different social levels of the armies (soldiers, officers, craftsmen, family members etc.). It is very likely, however, that more than one explanation is at play regarding the very complex weapon deposits of Vimose, and it is most probable that a whole new picture will emerge if we analyse other locations and other deposits.

To complicate matters even more, weapons are also present in other types of deposits. In the following, a couple of other types of weapon deposits and their possible connection with the bog finds will be mentioned briefly.

## Visualization of power

During the Roman Iron Age weapons were used as part of different rituals, as wetland deposits or part of the mortuary practices. Furthermore, it was not uncommon to deposit weapons between the graves of a burial ground. These can best be described as dryland deposits on sacred ground (Henriksen 1989; 2010, pp. 115 f.).

During the 2nd century AD settlements characterized by workshop and trade activities, such as Gudme/Lundeberg on Funen, Sorte Muld on Bornholm and Uppåkra in Scania, appear. At Uppåkra several depositions of spears and javelins have been excavated (Larsson & Lenntorp 2004; Helgesson 2004). Most of them were found inside what is interpreted as a “temple area”, near a possible cult building, in smaller or larger clusters or find concentrations. The weaponry seems to be deposited more or less continuously from just after the Birth of Christ until around 500 AD, with the majority of the material from the late Roman Iron Age and the early Migration Period. A similar scenario can be observed at Sorte Muld, where two concentrations of spears and javelins have been found at the same place as a large number of gold foil figures (Lund Hansen & Vennerdorf 2008, pp. 31 ff.; Birch Iversen 2008b). The presence of a cult house has not yet been proven, but the context of the two find groups within a limited area on the settlement points in the direction of a “temple area” or at least a well-known offering site.

If we consider the increasing emphasis on weapons and power throughout the Early Iron Age it becomes clear that the weapon sacrifices should not be regarded as a custom isolated from the local society, but rather as yet another aspect of that visualization of power which can be recognized within other find groups of the period. As power begins with the means of exercising authority, the means

of military power are the weapons, the skill and the will to use them. It is only logical to assume that power and authority also derive from a continuous visualization of power and military force.

One way to visualize power is control of ritual practices. Ceremonies and rituals are used to create a more uniform view of reality (Nøteliid 2001; Engström 2007). This is essential in order to fabricate a mutual understanding of the world around us and in doing so creating and maintaining social units, like an Iron Age village or an administrative group, for instance a military squad. This happens through what could be called ritual communication, that is, the process where reality is produced, maintained, repaired and changed.

It is evident that someone in power staged the so-called war booty sacrifices of the 2nd to 5th century AD in southern Scandinavia. Dare we assume that ritual communication in this case was the tool to achieve ritual manipulation in order to inspire allies and enemies with respect? If so, the primary aim of the spectacular ceremonies was to maintain power and consolidate the leader's position. Consequently, the army's function as an internal power source could be the most important purpose of the military, which makes previous discussions of whether the army was the defender or the aggressor less meaningful. In other words: control over ritual communication equals a possibility of ritual manipulation equals power. But how then are we to understand the different power structures of the Early Iron Age?

By embracing and crossing the borders of the different find groups, it is possible to identify at least three different methods of visualizing power in the Roman Iron Age in southern Scandinavia in this simplified model of power:

a) Military power is visualized by weapons. Weapons are found in all possible con-

texts, as mentioned above. This leads to the conclusion that military force was present throughout society, in the form of larger armies or smaller armed units of more policing character. The latter could be especially important at the trade and craft sites.

- b) Political power is visualized by important connections and diplomatic skills. These are normally linked with the richly furnished graves with Roman drinking vessels and Germanic insignia. The specialized craft and trade sites, which began to emerge in the late 2nd century AD, could also be seen in this connection, including legal functions.
- c) The spiritual leader is visualized by ceremonies, mortuary practices and larger rituals as the weapon deposits. Spirituality is here to be understood in the broadest terms possible.

One of the challenges for future research is to reveal the relationship between this trinity of power: How close is the relationship? How many people does this model really represent? And is this number constant? Where and when can we identify the conflicts between the three? We should not expect them to be mutually exclusive, nor static over time. They are constantly fluctuating.

In the case of the staged war booty sacrifices from the Late Roman Iron Age, the three power sources work together in symbiotic co-existence in the ultimate representation of ritual manipulation. In my opinion, the motive is to legitimate power by reaching back in time to the early weapon-sacrifice rite and transforming this custom into a political statement.

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