

The Political Geography of Sixth- and Seventh-Century Southern and Eastern Scandinavia on the Basis of Material Culture

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There is hardly any possibility of reconstructing the political geography of sixth- and seventh-century Scandinavia on the basis of written sources. The sources are few and late, and only one ninth-century source may be used. An analysis of the Region's political geography can therefore be based only on material culture, especially its spatial distribution, combined with analogies, for instance, with the Continent, where both written sources and archaeological evidence are available.

The archaeological sources, however, are no more than stray-finds in some areas. This is an awkward situation, for what does the distribution of an artefact-type express? Are we dealing with the distribution of the customers of a craftsman or workshop, with the travelling salesman problem, a tribal area, a political territory or something totally accidental, or a combination of all of these? On the basis of the Scandinavian material alone we cannot answer this question. If we turn to another contemporary area, such as the Frankish kingdom and its neighbours, we may be able to get an idea of a likely model for ornament-distribution in the early-mediaeval Germanic area.

A comparison of Frankish material culture and historical sources from the fifth-sixth centuries shows that the distribution of female ornaments is strongly connected to the political regions. When the Franks conquered an area, women's ornaments soon changed according to Frankish fashion¹. In these specific circumstances, therefore, it may therefore be possible to delimit political territories on the basis of female ornaments in certain areas of early-mediaeval Germanic Europe.

Chronology

For our geographical analysis of Southern and Eastern Scandinavia, female ornaments, primarily brooches, were used as a basis. The entire Merovingian

¹ The analysis was presented by the present author at the Euro-TAG in Southampton in 1992.

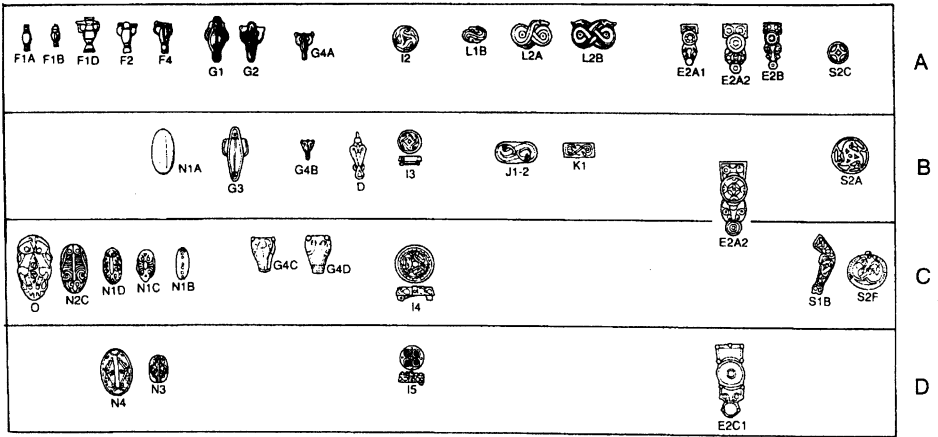


Fig. 1. Chronological scheme for Southern and Eastern Scandinavia in the Vendel Period.

Period in the area is too long for a synchronous analysis, so shorter chronological phases were necessary. A well-founded chronology is necessary to ensure we are considering contemporary regions, not chronological groups. On earlier occasions I developed separate chronologies for Sweden, parts of Denmark, and Gotland, and subsequently a four-phase chronology covering the entire area (Høilund Nielsen 1992; forthcoming). The four phases are named VIIA, B, C

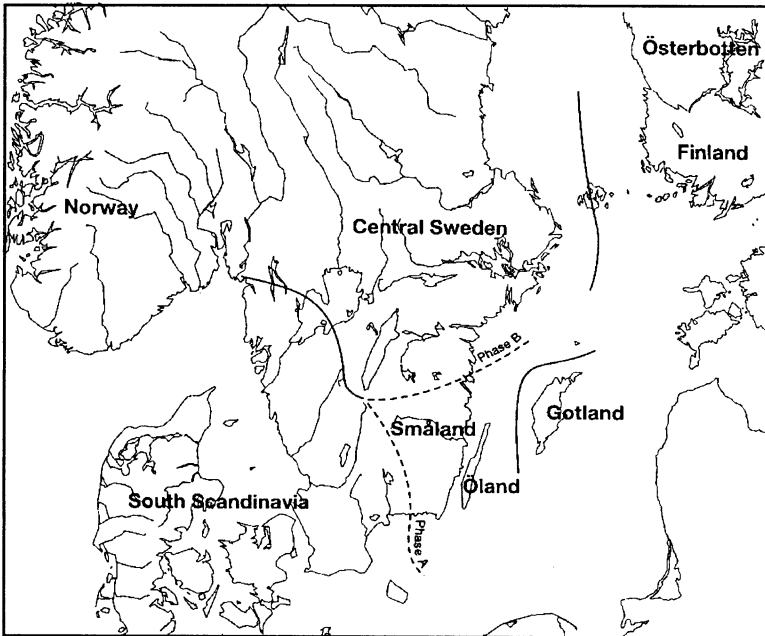


Fig. 2. Territorial division of Southern and Eastern Scandinavia based on an analysis of ordinary objects from the four phases A-D, between AD *circa* 530 and *circa* 800. The border zones for phase A and B are marked. Phase C has the same pattern as phase B, whereas phase D, although badly covered by finds, probably follows phase A. For further information see Høilund Nielsen 1991:130ff.

and D, and they have the following rough dates: c. 530-ca 600; B: c.600 - c.680/700; C: c.680/700 - c.725/50; D: c.725/50 - c.775/800. I shall deal here primarily with phases A to C (Fig. 1).

Territorial development

For each type its distribution in the entire area was analysed (Høilund Nielsen 1991; 1992). None of the brooches has exactly the same distribution. Therefore, to delimit the regions, the centre of gravity of types rather than their maximum distribution was taken as a starting point. This was done phase by phase by help of computer analysis which I shall not discuss further here (Høilund Nielsen 1992; 1997a). The result was a division into three regions, albeit with some variations in the borders between them (Fig. 2).

Denmark, Scania and some parts of Western Sweden constitute one region in phase A. This region is called Southern Scandinavia (Fig. 3a). In phase B the Öland area and the eastern Småland are also included in this region (Fig. 4a). The situation remains almost the same in phase C (Fig. 5a), while in phase D the situation seemingly changes back to what we saw in phase A, although the material is considerably smaller in phase D.

The eastern part of the Swedish mainland (primarily the Mälars Area, Uppland and Östergötland), here called the Mälars Region, constitutes the second region. In phase A this region also includes Öland and eastern Småland (Fig. 3c), but the situation changes in phase B (Fig. 4c) with the latter areas linked to the

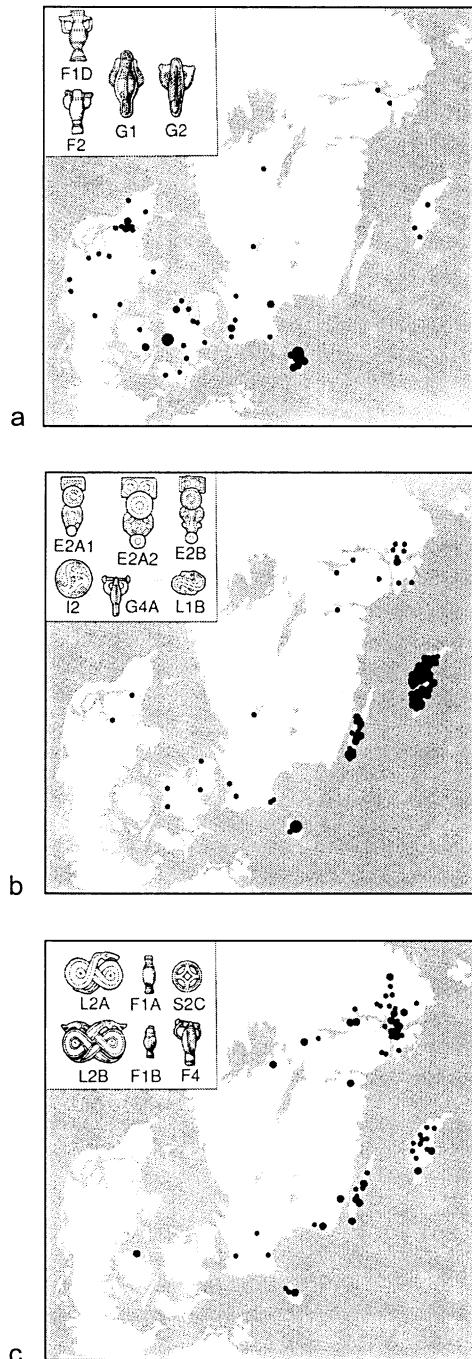


Fig. 3. Distribution of regionally diagnostic brooches of Phase VIIA. a) Southern Scandinavian types, b) Gotlandic types, c) types from the Mälars Region. A small dot indicates 1 find, a medium dot indicates 2-10 finds, a large dot indicates more than 10 finds.

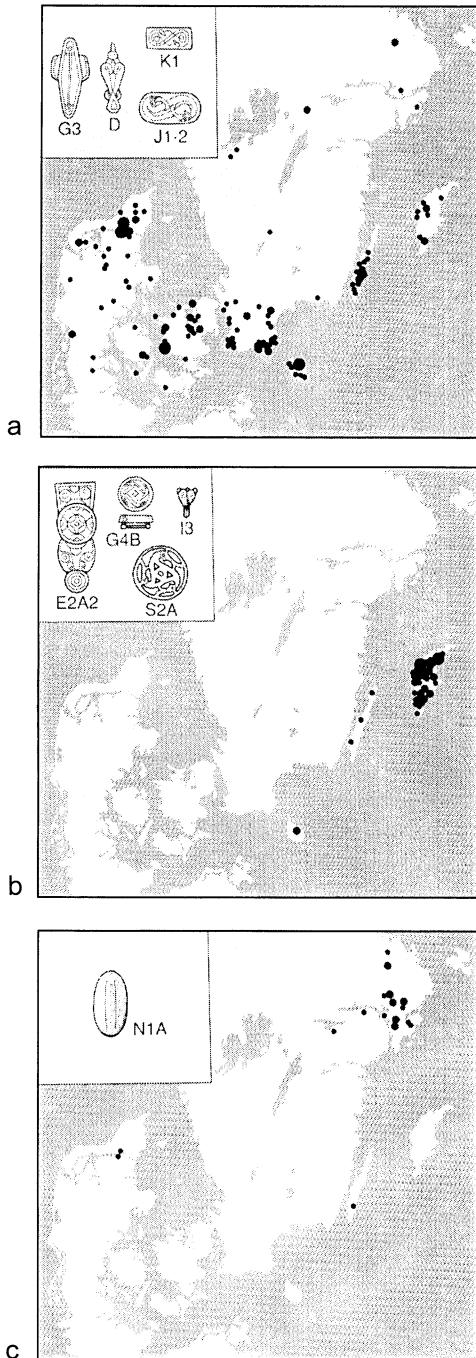


Fig. 4. Distribution of regionally diagnostic brooches of Phase VIIIB. a) Southern Scandinavian types, b) Gotlandic types, c) types from the Mälars Region. A small dot indicates 1 find, a medium dot indicates 2-10 finds, a large dot indicates more than 10 finds.

Southern Scandinavian region on the basis of material culture. The situation remains that way in phase C (Fig. 5c), but changes in phase D back to the situation of phase A: i.e. the Öland area again seems to be more closely linked to the Mälars Region.

Gotland constitutes a distinct area through all four phases (Fig. 3b, 4b, 5b).

To confirm this territorial structure from other sources, we have Wulfstan's description of a journey from Hedeby to Truso in the later 9th century (Lund 1983). According to this, Langeland, Lolland, Falster (the islands southern and south-west of Zealand) and Scania belong to Denmark; Bornholm has its own king; Blekinge, Møre, Öland (parts of south-western Sweden) and Gotland belong to the *Swear* (cf. Lund 1983: 24f). The only difference from the analysis of phase D, which is almost identical to the picture of phase A, is that Gotland is mentioned as belonging to Sweden and Bornholm as having its own king. However, this may be due to the 75 years or so between phase D and the date of the written source, and it is clear from analysis that Bornholm differs increasingly from the rest of Southern Scandinavia in material culture (Højlund Nielsen 1992).

Finland was not included in my analysis, but undoubtedly constitutes one or more separate regions with more or less contact with Southern Scandinavia, the Mälars Region and Gotland. The same applies to Norway.

It is interesting to see how the borders between the Southern-Scandinavian region and the Mälars Region change over time. It is of course important to ask why Öland changes its material culture. Com-

pared with what happened in the same period between the Franks and their neighbours, a conquest of the island is not an unrealistic idea. In the later High Middle Ages Denmark also fought for control of Öland and Gotland (Carlsson 1949; Cedergreen Bech 1970; Hørby 1989), and *Skjoldunga saga* (Friis-Jensen & Lund 1984) mentions an attack on Öland which made the island tributary to the Danish king. It is not impossible, therefore, that Öland was conquered by or made tributary to the Southern Scandinavians during the transition to phase B.

As mentioned above, our analysis of territorial structure is based on the centre of distribution of various brooch-types. As a result, some brooches are found on what could be called foreign territory. Some of these are explained by the somewhat fluid nature of border zones and by frequent contact across these border zones. Nevertheless, a small number of brooches is found totally outside their expected geographical context. There must be another explanation for this phenomenon.

Two or three occurrences of Mälär-types in central Southern Scandinavia correspond to a similar number of Southern Scandinavian types in the Mälär Area in each of the phases. A similar situation occurs only between Gotland and the Mälär Area in phase A and slightly in phase C, and between Gotland and Southern Scandinavia in phase A and B. This minimal spreading of female ornaments may probably be explained in terms of cross-regional marriages. Apparently, this was not a frequent phenomenon and seemingly involved only the upper social strata (Høilund Nielsen 1992).

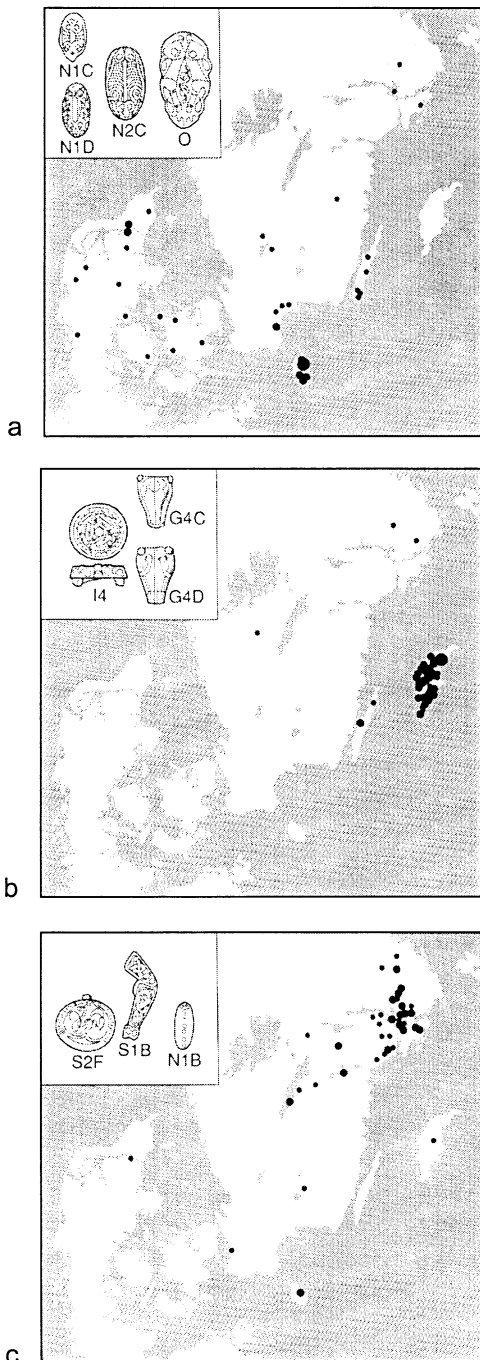


Fig. 5. Distribution of regionally diagnostic brooches of Phase VIIC. a) Southern Scandinavian types, b) Gotlandic types, c) types from the Mälär Region. A small dot indicates 1 find, a medium dot indicates 2-10 finds, a large dot indicates more than 10 finds.

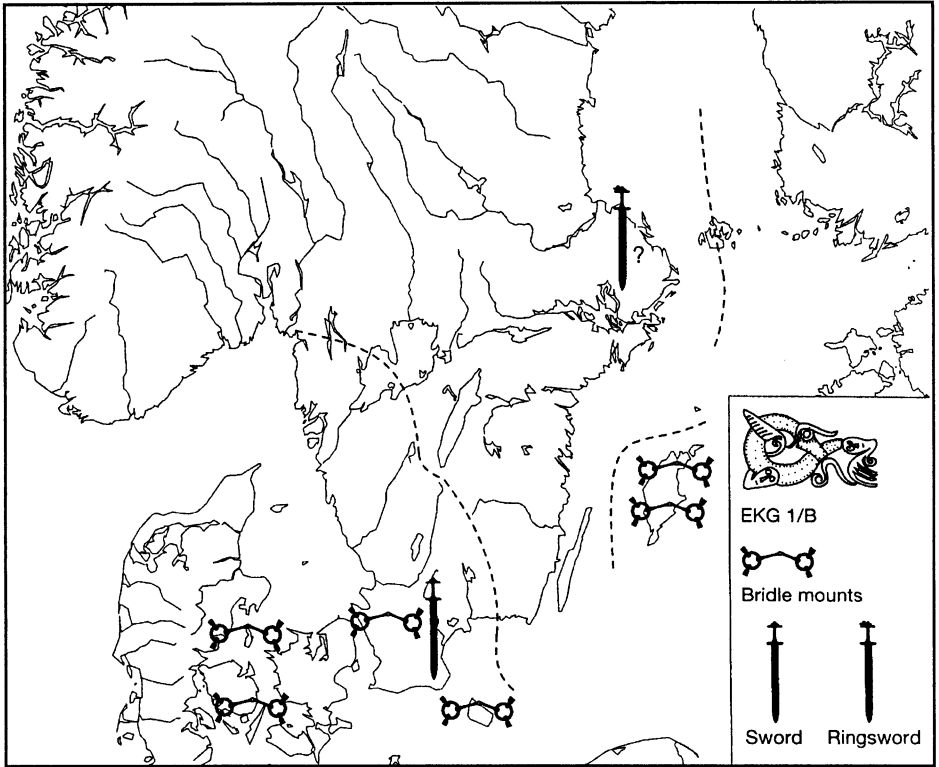


Fig. 6. Phase A. Distribution of EKG1/B. The territorial borders are indicated.

Ornaments on probably foreign territory in the border zones also have an interesting development (Høilund Nielsen 1992). In phase A there are many Gotlandic-type ornaments outside Gotland, but only a small amount from the Mälars Area on Gotland. In phase B the amount decreases considerably, and Gotlandic ornaments seem to have spread only to Southern Scandinavia. Gotlandic contact with the Öland Area is independent of the affiliation of this area, but previous direct contact with the Mälars Area has gone in phase B. After the Southern Scandinavian conquest of the Öland Area, direct contact between Gotland and the Mälars Area has gone, to judge by the female ornaments. In phase C there are hardly any ornaments spread over the borders. Gotland has contact practically only with the Öland area. The distribution of ornaments to the Baltic countries, primarily Latvia, seems largely, though not exclusively, to be a result of contacts with Gotland in the phases B and C², which is the period when Gotland was isolated from the Mälars Area and partly also from Southern Scandinavia.

Thus, during the transition from phase A to phase B a series of changes occurred: the Öland area was conquered by Southern Scandinavia; Gotland's

¹ The types fit roughly into these phases, but it is doubtful whether their context in the Baltic area is really contemporary with these periods. Furthermore, the Latvian Gotland-type brooches are not always imported, but locally made imitations of Gotland brooches.

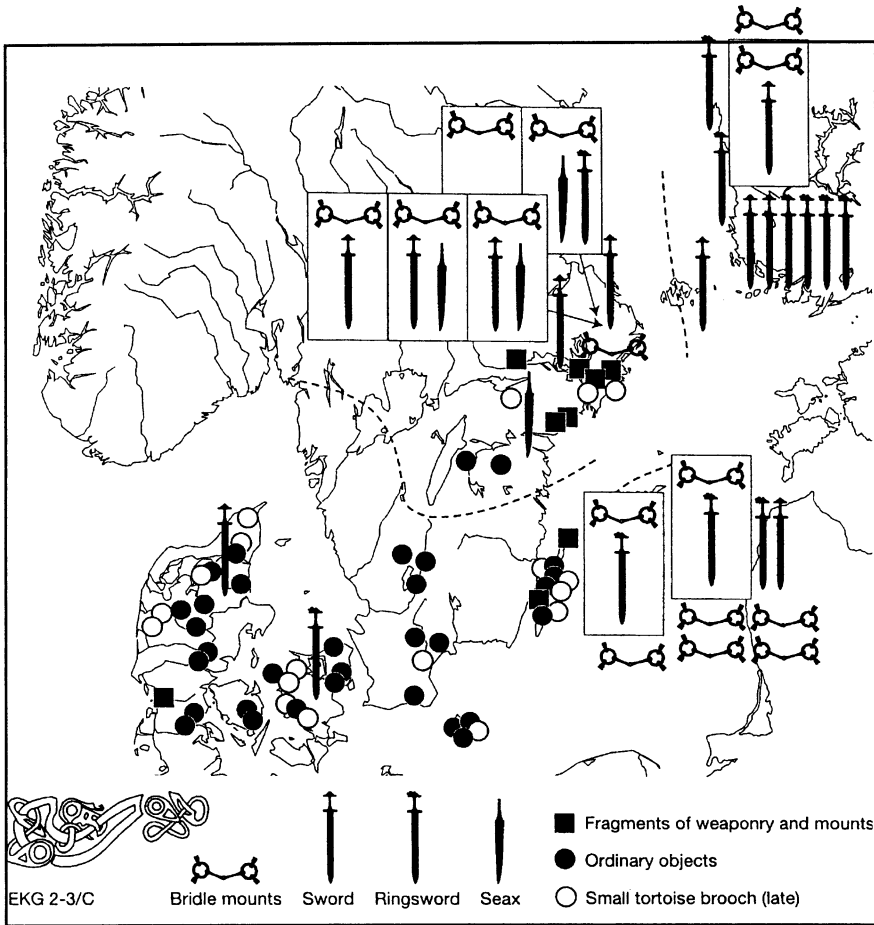


Fig. 7. Phase B. Distribution of EKG2-3/C. The territorial borders are indicated. Framed objects indicate that the objects are associated.

external contacts decline to nearly nothing, and only weak contact with Southern Scandinavia was preserved in phases B to C, while contact with the Eastern Baltic may have been intensified instead.

Animal Style

In phases A to C Salin's Style II flourishes in Scandinavia. Various researchers have subdivided the Style (Arwidsson 1942; Ørsnes 1966). I have recently divided the material into groups on the basis of combinations of stylistic elements. These "sub-styles" are called EKG1-4 (EKG is short for element combination group). Roughly EKG1 covers Vendel Style B, EKG2-3 Vendel Style C, and EKG4 Vendel Style D, but the identity is not direct, as the two systems are based on different criteria both methodologically and stylistically. Chronologically EKG1 is dated to phase A, EKG2-3 and a part of EKG4 to phase B, whereas the remaining part of

E and F, whereas EKG7-8 comprise the Eastern Scandinavian Styles of Bjärs and Broa also called Style III, which I shall not discuss in this paper (see Høilund Nielsen 1991; 1992).

EKG1-4 are found in all three regions and in some cases also in Finland and Norway, but there are great differences in the context of the style and the material on which it occur in the various regions (see for instance Fig. 7). In Southern Scandinavia many ordinary brooches with Animal Style are found. In addition a small amount of weaponry and horse-harness with the same decoration is found either from burials or as stray-finds. On Gotland, in the Mälars Region and in Finland, almost only high status weaponry and horse-harness with this sort of decoration is found, and where the context is known, it is nearly always a rich weapon burial. Few artefacts are found in Norway, and most of them very late.

The whole course of development of Style II is represented in Southern Scandinavia, whereas only parts of the sequence are found in the other areas (Høilund Nielsen 1991; 1992). This may indicate primary production in Southern Scandinavia. Furthermore, the distribution of ordinary objects in the centre of production, and luxury objects from the same production centre primarily far away at the periphery, is a picture we also meet at Helgö and the distribution of material from this workshop, although the material from Helgö is somewhat older and only Style I appears (Høilund Nielsen 1997b; Holmqvist 1972). This model strengthens the case for Southern Scandinavia as the primary centre of development and production of Style II. For Style III the picture is the same, as it shows the same distribution pattern and development, but this time with Eastern Scandinavia, perhaps even Gotland, as the centre of production. If it is correct that Style II was produced primarily in Southern Scandinavia, there must be an explanation of how the Style II-decorated weaponry and horse-harnesses spread to the Mälars Region, Gotland and Finland.

Prestige-goods and royal retainers

Nearly all the material found outside Southern Scandinavia is in the form of weaponry or horse-harness. There may, of course, be several explanations for the diffusion of such material. Tacitus mentions that swords were given at weddings (*Tacitus* 1974: 18.2-3), but the paucity of brooch-finds in foreign regions speaks against frequent marriage between the upper social groups; something ought to be given in return. Political alliances are often sealed by marriages between members of both families, although this is not a necessity. This ought to be seen primarily among the uppermost part of the society, but the material at our disposal does not present obvious examples.

Heroic poetry of the Early Medieval Period, such as *Beowulf*, for instance, indicates that it was a common practice among lords to give their retainers and warriors gifts of rich weaponry and riding-equipment (Høilund Nielsen 1997b). For the Continental area Heiko Steuer (1987) also links ring-swords and helmets to royal Frankish retainers as a symbol of their status. Steuer has traced retainers through such material over large parts of Europe. On this basis, it would sound reasonable to regard weaponry and horse-harnesses of Style II primarily as gifts given by a Southern Scandinavian leader to his retainers from other areas, who had chosen to "win their spurs" by fighting in the retinue of this leader. This would imply that some of the rich graves in the Mälars Region, Finland and on Gotland represent the property of local

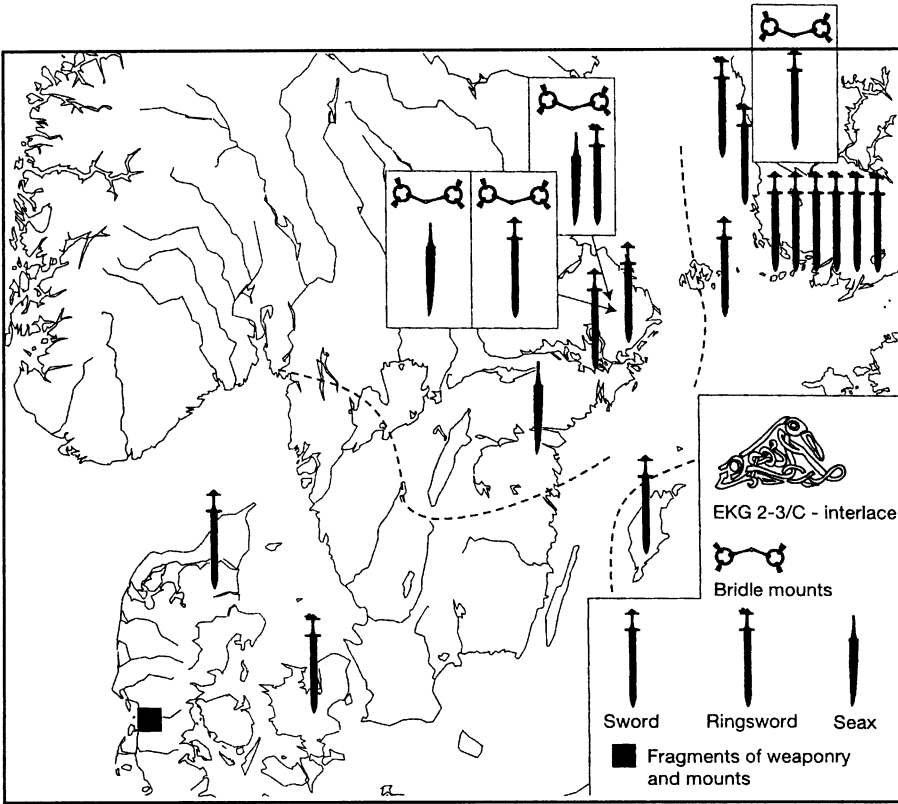


Fig. 8. Phase B. Distribution of EKG2-3/C-interlace. The territorial borders are indicated. Framed objects indicate that the objects are associated.

graves in the Mälars Region, Finland and on Gotland represent the property of local chieftains, who in their youth had been in foreign service, before they returned home and took over their inherited lands. With such an interpretation, the gifts reciprocated by these chieftains were services given in their youth and not material goods.

Military strategies

The rich Southern Scandinavian weapon deposits from the Roman and early-Germanic Periods represent army units equipped with rather uniform weaponry. As suggested by Claus von Carnap (1992), it is likely that weaponry of rather uniform make was produced for distinct campaigns. This may also have been the case in the Southern Scandinavian leader's retinue. In this case, weaponry and horse-harnesses were produced in series and larger campaigns may actually be reflected in this equipment. But it is necessary that the style on these objects has many characteristic traits in common.

The distribution of EKG1 in phase A (Fig. 6) outside Southern Scandinavia comprises only a few horse harnesses on Gotland. This is a period in which there is pronounced contact between the Mälars Region and Gotland, while there are hardly any contacts between Southern Scandinavia and the Mälars Region. This is also the

period when Southern Scandinavia finally conquered Öland. Retainers from Gotland or alliances with Gotland must have been important on such an occasion.

In phase B the material is much larger and comprises especially sub-styles EKG2-3 (Fig. 7). The material is now found to a great extent on brooches in Southern Scandinavia, including Öland, and on weaponry and horse harnesses in Eastern Scandinavia, and finally also on some examples from the Eastern Baltic. Within this material there are several groups based on stylistic elements and also on other stylistic phenomena, of which special attention will be paid to the group with interlace ornament. This group on its own (Fig. 8) shows the clear isolation of Gotland, which was also indicated by the brooches. At the same time, growing contact is seen between Southern Scandinavia, the Mälars Region and Finland, and even a single occurrence in Latvia (Nerman 1958). If there is any explanation for this distribution, it must be a political transaction pointing to a further target. If we jump about a century forward to the transition to phase C, late Style II begins to appear in Southern Norway, and from some time in phase B Southern Scandinavian brooches slowly begin to appear in Southern Norway. Further on in time, in the late eighth century, the Ribe-version of the Berdal brooches totally dominates in the Vestfold area (Brinch Madsen & Nielsen 1984: 192), while from historical sources we know that in about 813 Danish kings claimed inheritance rights over parts of Norway, especially Vestfold, arguing that this area was connected to Denmark from days of old (Kroman 1976: 65). It is not impossible that the many robbed barrows in Vestfold also clearly express military dynasties, one of which could very well have come from Southern Scandinavia (Myhre 1992: 282f). A plausible explanation of the actions deciding the distribution of the style with the interlace ornaments would be some attempt to conquer parts of Norway or make them tributary. At the same time the distribution of this style shows something of the extent of Southern Scandinavian influence.

Groups of retainers were not only found at the Southern Scandinavian royal court, but also with other Scandinavian kings and forceful chieftains. Gotland at least seems to have an example from the period when the island was almost isolated from the western parts of the Baltic (Høiland Nielsen 1997), where the distribution of horse harnesses with certain stylistic developments changing over time indicates local retainers and a lord in the northern part of the island. This is also the area where the most magnificent examples of the later Style III appear.

Conclusion

On the assumption that the analogy with the Continent - that the political dominance of territories is mirrored in the distribution of material culture - also holds for Scandinavia, which the comparison with a written source of the 9th century suggests it may, then it is possible to discover the political geography of Scandinavia, albeit only in a rough outline. A study of the Style II-decorated weaponry adds to the description of the development of political geography. The impression of the political situation in Scandinavia based on the old Norse sagas seems in fact to find a counterpart in material culture through these analyses, although more detailed studies of and comparisons between the regions are needed to support the hypothesis presented, as well as a more intensive study of Norway's relationship with the Mälars Region and Southern Scandinavia.

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VI–VII a. pietų ir rytų Skandinavijos politinė geografija materialinės kultūros duomenimis

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Santrauka

VI–VII a. Skandinavijos politinę geografiją rekonstruoti remiantis rašytiniais šaltiniais yra sunku. Šaltinių nedaug ir jie tik iš IX a. Tai padaryti galima remiantis materialine kultūra, ypač atskirų dirbinių paplitimu, pritraukiant analogijas iš žemyno, kur rašytiniai šaltiniai ir archeologiniai duomenys yra gausūs. Tam tikslui labai paranki frankų medžiaga, kuri rodo, kad V–VI a. moterų papuošalai buvo susieti su politiniais regionais. Pietų ir rytų Skandinavijos geografinei analizei tiesiogiai taip pat tinka moterų nešiotos segės. Visas Merovingų laikotarpis yra per ilgas analizei, būtini trumpesni periodai. Jau anksčiau buvo padarytos chronologijos atskiroms teritorijoms – Švedijai, Danijos dalims ir Gotlandui, vėliau – 4 chronologinės skalės visam regionui. Jos pavadintos: VIIA, B, C, D ir datuojamos A – 530-600; B – 600-680/700; C – 680/700-725/50; D – 725/50-775/800. Šiame straipsnyje bus analizuojamos A–C fazės (1 pav.).

Geografinei situacijai pietų ir rytų Skandinavijoje analizuoti paimtos moterų segės (3–5 pav.), prestižiniai ginklai ir žirgo aprangos reikmenys (6–8 pav.). Buvo nagrinėjama kiekvieno dirbinių tipo paplitimo teritorija. Išsiskyrė 3 regionai (2 pav.). Danija, Skonė ir kai kurios vakarų Švedijos teritorijos sudaro vieną regioną fazėje A. Šis regionas yra pietų Skandināvija. Fazėje B prie jų prisijungia Elandas ir rytų Smolandas. Ta pati situacija išlieka ir fazėje C. Suomija šioje analizėje nebuvo įtraukta, tačiau be abejo sudarė atskirą vieną ar keletą regionų daugiau ar mažiau susietų su pietų Skandināvija, Melareno ežeru ar Gotlandu. Tas pats tinka ir Norvegijai.

Prielaida, kad politinis dominavimas teritorijose atsispindi materialinėje kultūroje, pasitvirtino ir Skandinavijoje. Analizuojant segių, ginkluotės ir žirgo aprangos reikmenų paplitimą bei pasitelkiant rašytinius šaltinius išaiškėjo, kad politinę geografiją galima sėkmingai tyrinėti archeologinių dirbinių pagalba.

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