

# New Research Project: Uppåkra – The Hall on the Height: Investigating a Long-Term Iron Age Residence

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## Background

Iron Age ‘central places’ were important power nodes in pre-state Scandinavian societies. They comprised large halls, sometimes ritual buildings, workshops, signs of trade and exchange, and numerous exclusive and precious metal objects. To date, some 25 ‘central places’ have been identified in southern Scandinavia, among them can be mentioned Erritzø, Gudme, Tissø, Lejre, Sorte Muld in Denmark, Uppåkra, Ravlunda, Järrestad, Västra Vång, Slöinge, Old Uppsala in Sweden, as well as Aker and Karmøy in Norway. They have been interpreted as large manors controlled by shifting elite groups, which were able to gather people at public rituals, legal assemblies, seasonal markets, and summons of warriors (Näsman 1991; Brink 1996; Callmer 1997; Fabech 1997, 1998; Hedeager 2001; Jørgensen 2009; Høilund Nielsen 2014; Skre 2020). These places can deliver vital information for our understanding of the proto-historical period when Scandinavian chiefdoms took their first steps towards Medieval realms.

Uppåkra is one of the most prominent of these centres, situated four kilometres south of Lund in Scania, southernmost Sweden. Large-scale metal detecting and several minor excavations since 1996 have confirmed the unique and complex character of Uppåkra (Stjernquist 1995; Larsson 2003; Hårdh 2002, 2010; Larsson 2019). The settlement covers an area of c.40 hectares, a size comparable to a large medieval town. It existed for

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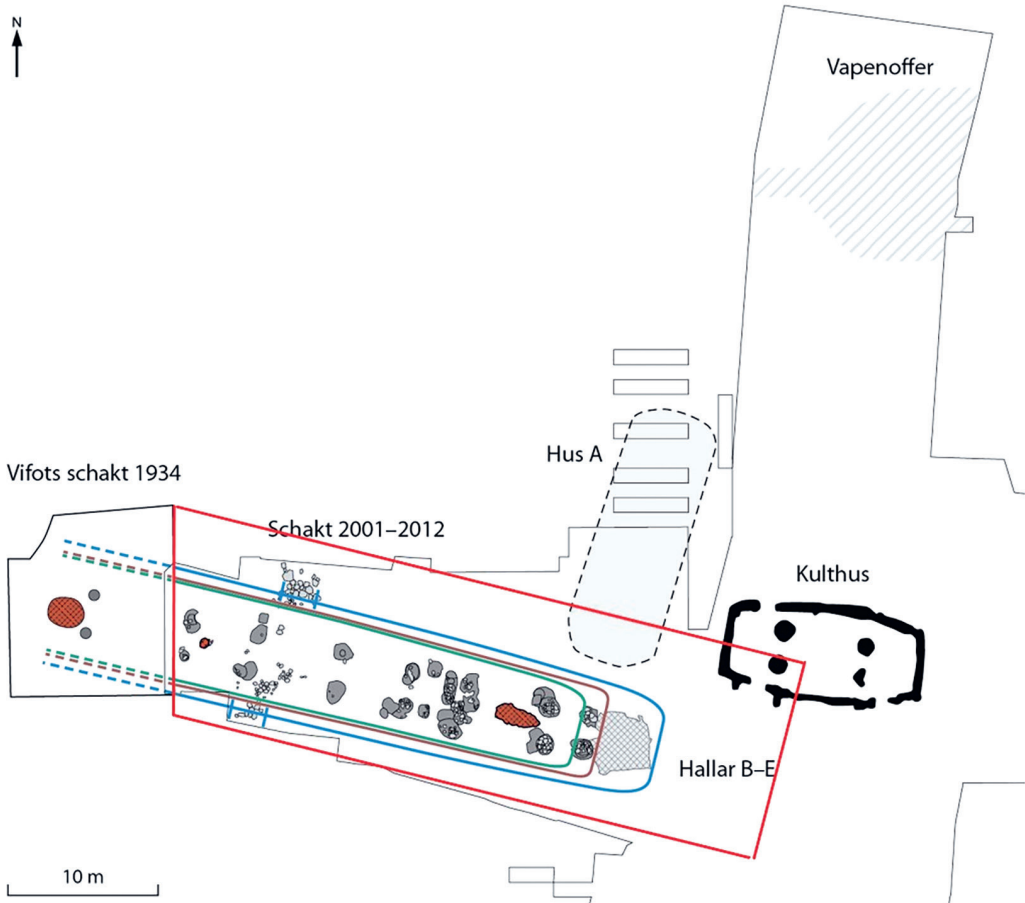


Figure 1. Extent of the investigated surface. The hall building and the cult-house. Based on Larsson & Söderberg 2013.

more than a millennium as a central site from 100 BCE to 1000 CE. Undisturbed cultural deposits are mainly preserved from 100 BCE to 550 CE, whereas most deposits from later periods have been impacted upon by modern agriculture. This means that the period from about 550 CE to 1000 CE can be reached mainly through study of artefacts found in the plough soil (Hårdh 2010). The most spectacular discovery is a cult house, built and rebuilt on the same spot from the third to the tenth centuries CE. Ordinary farms, areas for the sacrifice of animals, weapon deposits, workshop areas and about 12,000 objects of bronze, silver and gold have been recorded. Amongst the locally produced artefacts are many foreign exotica. The quantity and quality of the immense data set makes it possible to study both the resilient infrastructure of the site, as well as social and economic internal change. The political elite probably lost their power to the

Jelling dynasty in the late tenth century CE. As a pagan place of worship, and compromised by the former rulers, it was abandoned in favour of the new king's royal estate in Lund. However, it still played an important role as the 'granary' for the king.

## New research project

During the years 2022 to 2026 the project 'The Hall on the Height', with a budget of 50 000 000 SEK, will be implemented by the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History at Lund University. Several private and corporate donors have contributed to the project; the Tetra Laval Group, the Crafoord foundation, the LMK foundation, the Thora Ohlsson foundation, Sparbanksstiftelsen Finn, Länsförsäkringar Skåne, the Kronqvist family, Lund University and several anonymous donors. Eleven archaeologists and specialists are engaged in the project, all with several years of experience from contract archaeology. The aim is set on investigating the core of the Uppåkra manor, the hall building with adjacent cult-house down to the natural ground. It will also be possible to include the important area between the two buildings, with remains from ritual behaviours. Together with the cult-house, the hall created a physical and spiritual centre of the comprehensive landed estate, with control over resources and influence on world views.

Uppåkra is the only central site to contain artefacts and ecofacts from throughout the Iron Age. This provides us with an incomparable opportunity to grasp 1000 years of processes of creating a resilient society. Within the carefully selected volume of 800 m<sup>3</sup> of cultural deposits lie the shifts of the periods we wish to explore.

Our aims with 'The Hall on the Height' are several, some are presented here (for further information follow the project at [www.uppakra.lu.se](http://www.uppakra.lu.se)). Primarily, we will document and analyse the spatial use of the hall building and actions performed through time. To achieve this, micro level analyses of the deposits will expose spatial divisions, household activities and ritual behaviour. We collaborate within Lund University with the high energy light source facility MAXIV and other laboratories where synchrotron light and x-rays reveal materials and elements at electron level. Analyses of bones, plant residues, pollen and microscopic remains of objects down to DNA level uncover patterns in animal breeding, agriculture and the division of space in the hall. The distribution of artefacts and ecofacts will give us a unique opportunity to study the duality of sacral and political power. Our project will present an outstanding example for the study of social resistance and resilience.



Figure 2. The upper deposits in the trench investigated March 2023 by Fredrik Lundgren and Elin Säll. Photo: Håkan Aspeborg.

On a second level, we will be able to ask questions about the site's agrarian economy and ecological resistance and resilience. Remains from climate fluctuations and responses to these are encapsulated in the deposits, making process directed research possible. The resources created a basis for non-agrarian activities, keeping of retinues and artisans, as well as political network building. This is relevant with respect to the *c.*540 CE horizon, with both volcanic driven climate perturbations and the possible outbreak of the Justinian plague.

Theoretical and methodological considerations are thus focused on ecological and social resistance and resilience, i.e. a society's ability to adjust to changing living conditions. Social changes were always negotiated within the community. The rulers were able to stay in power by expressing continuity through rituals and recurrent meetings with repercussions far away from the settlement. An important vehicle for a community is a coherent world view. At Uppåkra, the most obvious expression of this are the residence hall and the cult house. Together with assembly places in the landscape and the settlement itself, they represent monumental institutions with long-term use. Repeated rituals, both as feasts and political meetings, as well as seasonal religious celebrations and juridical negotiations, were

opportunities where those in power could confirm the order of the world, but also could be challenged. The institutions as physical monuments survived altered political content and stabilised the community.

‘Central places’ in southern Scandinavia represent regional expressions of a general development in society. Since their discovery, constant theoretical renewal and supplement of data have given new insights. There are strong proponents for the study of diversity among them to arrive at the shifting biographies of these places and their function as institutions in a defined settlement district. The use of social models about community building above the level of the individual village is essential. With this double background in empirical knowledge and theoretical approaches, it is possible to integrate the sites with the surrounding landscape, in which they were strongly embedded. With the project ‘The Hall on the Height’, Uppåkra will be consolidated as a vital exponent for a period when ruling by an elite preceded realms that covered larger territories.

The project results will be published as a primary technical report and a volume dedicated to further interpretations based on the results. In the extended volume, the project participants focus on the structures and artefacts on an intra-site and inter-site level. We also plan to publish articles in international journals as well as a popular book for the public. Welcome to follow the project at [www.uppakra.lu.se](http://www.uppakra.lu.se).

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