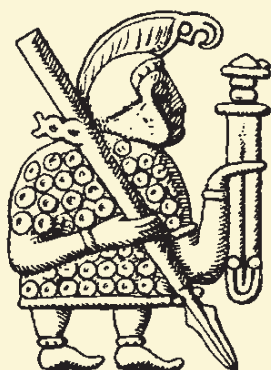


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Some notes on an atypical scabbard chape from Paviken, Gotland

By Ny Björn Gustafsson

Ever since the initial excavations, 1967–1973, the so-called Paviken I-settlement in Västergarn parish has been of fundamental importance for the understanding of Gotlandic harbour settlements in the Viking Period. These first excavations were not formally reported until 2004 (Lindquist et al. 2004), but by then much of the context and the abundant finds had been published through a series of shorter papers (e.g. Lundström 1979) and a more popularising book (Lundström 1981). Through them, Paviken was internationally established as a non-urban Viking-period port with rich remains of various crafts and trade from c. 700 to late 900 CE.

Odd birds

In 2013, 2014 and 2015, the Paviken-complex saw new excavations (Karn 2014a; 2014b; 2015). In 2013, the trenches were laid out as direct extensions of the 1967–1973 trenches in the northernmost settlement area, Paviken I. In 2014, an unexcavated area some 30 m to the southwest was chosen. It stood out as particularly rich in soil phosphates and 100 m² were excavated via five interconnected trenches. There, in the northernmost corner of the northernmost trench (9, square 2) a somewhat disturbed cultural layer was uncovered. It yielded finds connected to various crafts (e.g. slag, garnets, amber, glass tesserae and a possible crucible fragment) as well as bones, beads, a piece of a silver ingot and two fragmentary coins (1 dirhem, 1 unspecified) (Karn 2014b, p. 93). All finds belong to categories previously recorded at Paviken, except one: A cast copper-alloy chape from a scabbard (fig. 1). It was found in a fragmentary state, broken in three pieces (F9023, 9024 & 9025) but could easily be re-assembled. It is 43 mm high and 41 mm wide. In the report, the fragments are interchangeably called “scabbard tip” and

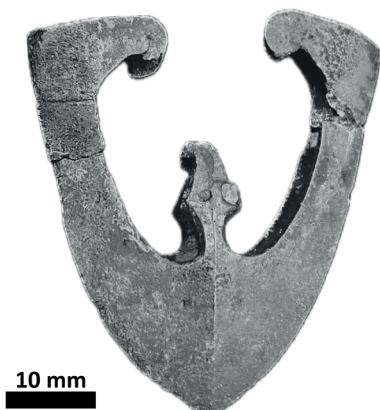


Fig. 1. The scabbard chape from Paviken I.
Photo: Ny Björn Gustafsson.

“sheath tip” and the complete object is, possibly based on its rather small dimensions, described as a “knife sheath tip decoration”. Given its design, ornamentation and find context, that is less likely though as it is clearly intended to fit over the tip of a scabbard for a two-edged weapon with central point.

Other Gotlandic chapes from Viking-period scabbards can normally be dated via their general design and ornamental style (cf. Thunmark-Nylén 2006, pp. 296ff; Androshchuk 2014, pp. 113ff), but the chape from Paviken I is quite different from other local finds. It is U-shaped and each of the side elements feature a highly stylized, inwards looking bird’s head in profile with sharply curved beak. Between and below these are two other bird’s heads, one per face, protruding upwards from the lowest point of the middle-inner part. These are more plasticly rendered with clearly defined features.

Non-Gotlandic parallels

The closest parallel to the chape is an old find from a Slavic fortified settlement at Fresendorf,

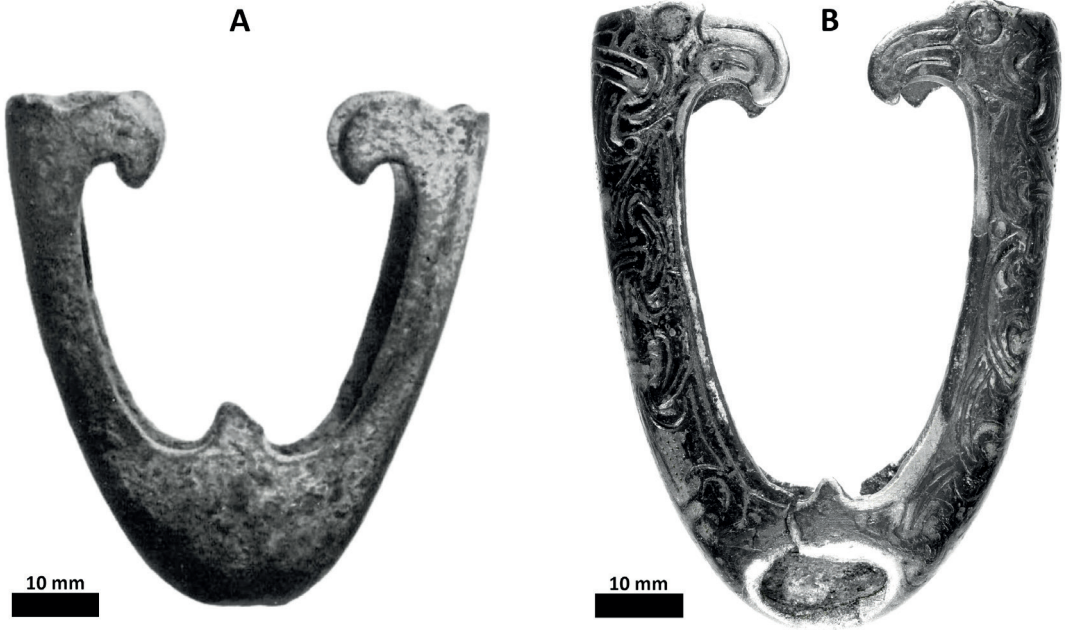


Fig. 2. a) Scabbard chape from Fresendorf, Germany (after Asmus 1934, fig. 6), b) Scabbard chape from Haithabu harbour, Germany (Photo: C. Janke, Stiftung Schleswig-Holsteinische Landesmuseen Schloss Gottorf, Schleswig).

south of Rostock, Germany (Asmus 1934, p. 28). It is larger than the chape from Paviken (62 mm high and 58 mm wide), but the sides feature similar non-identical inward-looking bird's heads. There are no central heads, but the lower middle parts protrude upwards in points on each of the chape's faces (fig. 2a). In 2016 Normen Posselt remarked that despite general attempts to connect the Fresendorf chape to early medieval types with central ornamental features such as crosses and fleur-de-lys, its closest parallel is a chape found in the Viking-period harbour of Haithabu (Posselt 2016, p. 197). Recently, this resemblance was also discussed by Volker Hilberg in connection with the Haithabu chape (2022, pp. 156f). It is larger still (70,5 mm high and 52,5 mm wide) and decorated in Mammen-style (fig. 2b). Both the Fresendorf and the Haithabu chapes appears to be incomplete: Each of the central protrusions of the Fresendorf chape is visibly asymmetrical at the top, as if something has been broken-off. The Haithabu chape is evidently very worn; it currently appears to only

have a lower-middle protrusion on one side, but that area is also rather damaged. It is of course impossible to say if the two chapes from present-day Germany also, originally, were fitted with central features such as bird's heads – but the possibility cannot be ruled out.

Three of a kind?

All in all, the similarities between the three chapes are so large that they form a defined type of their own. Posselt (2016, p. 197) pondered the possibility that the Fresendorf chape originated in deposits from the 12th or 13th century CE, but this is questionable given its high resemblance to the Haithabu and Paviken chapes which were found in connection with considerably older contexts. Hilberg suggested that the Haithabu chape ended up in the bottom sediments of the harbour some decades into the 11th century and the general chronology of Paviken also firmly speak against a date of production, use and deposition later than that.

Alas, given the lack of more precisely definable contexts it is hard to say much about in which cultural milieu these three chapes were originally produced. However, the lower, central bird's heads of the Paviken chape has no direct parallels in Gotlandic metalwork. Hence it is tempting to interpret it as an imported piece from the west Slavic cultural sphere, south of the Baltic Sea.

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