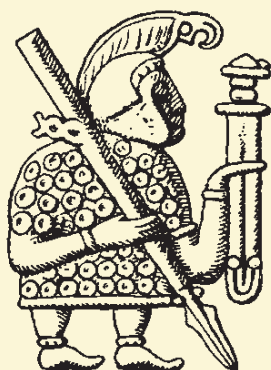


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A cairn in Roslagen with the oldest shoe in Sweden

By Thomas Eriksson, Ylva Telldahl and Maria Neijman

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This article discusses a previously overlooked find from a cairn at Igelsta-Västerängen, Söderby-Karl parish in Roslagen, eastern Uppland, Sweden. In 1943, several graves in a large cemetery were excavated here, one of which yielded a Roman cauldron along with mounts for two drinking horns. Hide fragments found beneath the cauldron were initially interpreted as the remains of a bear pelt. However, a re-examination of the finds at the National Historical Museum of Sweden in 2023 revealed that the hide fragments were actually parts of a shoe dating from around 70–250 AD. The shoe design has some parallels in Roman material. Further, the construction history of the monumental grave where the fragments were found appears to be more complex than previously assumed. Radiocarbon dating indicates the cremated bones found near the cauldron belonged to an earlier burial. The presence of the shoe, along with high-status artefacts, suggests this is one of the most spectacular Early Iron Age contexts in the eastern part of central Sweden. The burial reflects both local traditions and Roman influences, suggesting a hybrid ritual practice that underscores the cultural and symbolic significance of footwear in the Early Iron Age.

Keywords: Prehistoric shoes, Roman Iron Age, Roman imports, Burials

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Introduction

Finds of prehistoric shoes and other types of footwear are extremely rare in Sweden. However, in 2023, the authors rediscovered a remarkable example in the depository of the Swedish History Museum (SHM 23189, Find id/FID 3171690 & 3229013). We were able to identify previously overlooked hide fragments as parts of a shoe. Although originally found in 1943, the

fragments had been interpreted as remnants of a bear pelt. Throughout this article, the terms ‘hide’ and ‘skin’ are used without certainty as to whether the material had undergone tanning.

More or less well-preserved shoes from the Bronze Age and Early Iron Age have been found primarily in wetlands in Norway, Denmark, and northern Germany, but no comparable finds

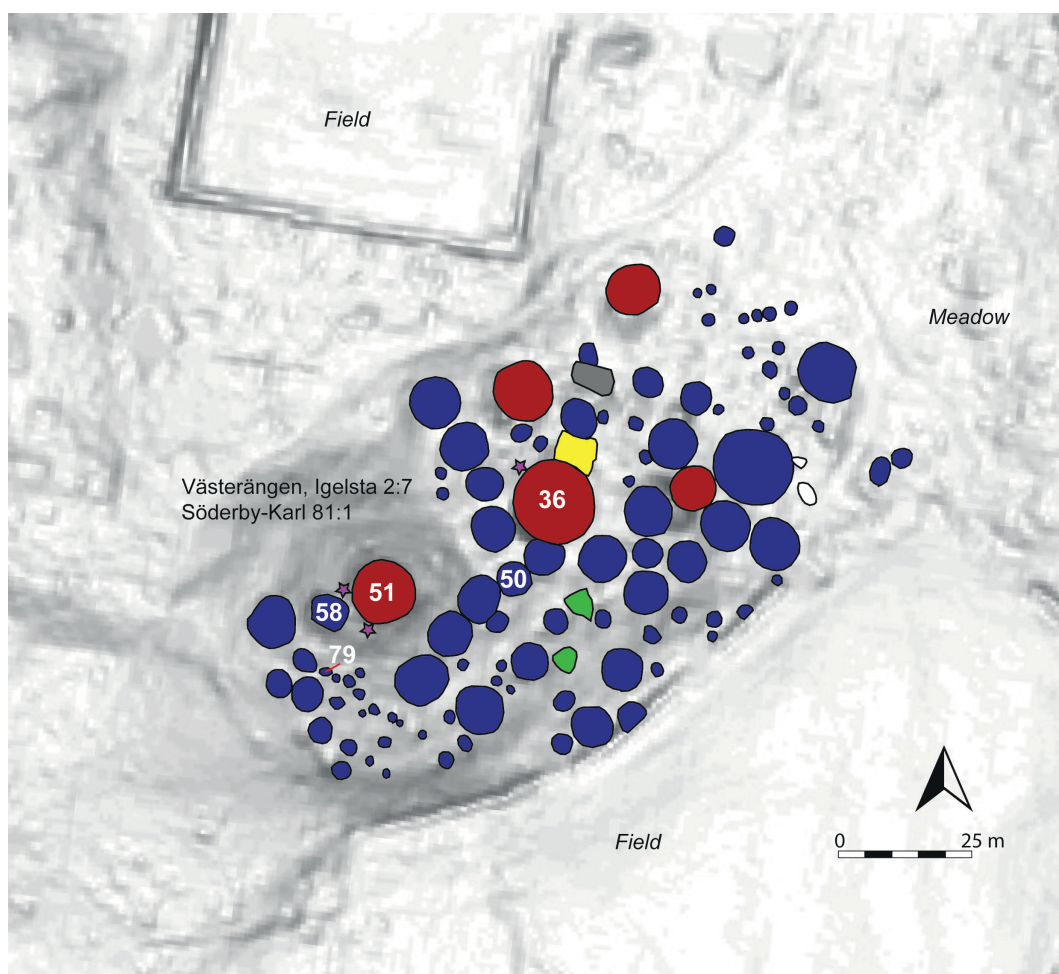


Fig. 1. The cemetery at Söderby-Karl 81:1/L2015:3561. Digitalisation of a map made by Harry Thålin in 1943 with visible graves. Red=cairns, blue=rounded stone settings, green=triangular stone settings, yellow=rectangular stone setting, stars=menhirs, white=recent(?) heaps of stones, grey=gravel pit. Background with topography. The excavated graves are marked with numbers. Illustration: Thomas Eriksson with maps from Lantmäteriet and Antikvariskt-Topografiskt Arkiv (ATA).

have been reported from Sweden (Gräf 2015; Hald 1972; Marstrander 1954; Munksgaard 1974, pp. 89, 181ff; Schia 1986).

The Swedish specimen was recovered from a cairn containing a wealth of finds from the transitional phase between the Early and Late Roman Iron Age (Period B2/C1, i.e. 70–250 AD). The context included Roman imports, and the design of the shoe shows influences from the Roman Empire. Moreover, the cairn itself appears

to have a more complex history than previously assumed, with evidence of reuse for repeated burials or ritual activities.

The site and surroundings

The site is located in the eastern part of the county of Uppland, in the Söderby-Karl parish (fig. 1 & 7). During the Roman Iron Age the site was located in the inner part of a vast system of bays and inlets connected to the Baltic Sea.



Fig. 2. Photo of the cemetery from the south-west. The rectangular stone setting A58 in the foreground, the reconstructed cairn A51 in the centre and one of the menhirs to the right. Photo: T. Eriksson.

The parish has a host of ancient monuments including graves, cemeteries, heaps of fire-cracked stones, hillforts and runestones. Most of the visible remains of these features can be dated to the Bronze Age (1700–500 BC) and the Iron Age (500 BC–1100 AD) (Floderus 1946; Rahmqvist & Skoglund 1986, p. 20).

The cemetery has been situated in the western border of the arable fields belonging to the village of Igelsta, first mentioned as *Eghilstadhum* in 1365 (Rahmqvist and Skoglund, 1986, p. 100f). The suffix *-sta* are mostly connected to settlements with roots in the Roman Iron Age (c. 1–400 AD) (Vikstrand 2013, pp. 58ff). The historical village is situated seven hundred meters apart from the cemetery. The neighbour to east is Odenslund, i.e. the holy grove for the god Oden (Vikstrand 2001, pp. 135ff)

The cemetery was mapped in 1943 by archaeologist Harry Thålin (fig. 1), who also restored one of the cairns and excavated five visible graves over a four-week period. The cairn on the northeastern peak, A36, contained pottery and a cremation. The smaller stone settings A50 and A79 yielded no finds. Grave A58 contained a cremation and an iron knife. However, the most exceptional finds came from cairn A51 on the southwestern peak.

Cairn A51, located at the highest point of the terrain, measured 13 m in diameter and 1.5 m in height (figs. 2–3). Two menhirs stand outside the grave, likely indicating two separate burials. The cairn was constructed from boulders measuring 0.2–0.4 m and featured a depression just north-east of the centre. Both A36 and A51 showed surface pits, suggesting grave robbery.

The finds in A51

The most remarkable metal object from the cairn is a fragmented Østland-type cauldron of Roman origin, a rare find in this region (Andersson 2001; 2002). The vessel is most likely of type E 40/Juellinge, or possibly type E 39/Marwedel (Ekholm 1933; Eggers 1955; Lund Hansen 1987, pp. 61, Taf. 6). Sixteen examples of cauldrons of type E 40 are known from Denmark, fourteen from Norway, at least six from Poland, and nine from Sweden (Lund Hansen 1987, pp. 459f; Lasota-Kuś & Madyda-Legutko 2023, pp. 115ff). The most prominent context is the famous female grave IV at Juellinge on Danish Zealand, which also contained mounts for two drinking horns (Liversage 1980, pp. 17ff; Müller & Gram 1911). This group of cauldrons is dated to Periods B1b–C1 in Scandinavia and Poland, and is typically found in richly furnished

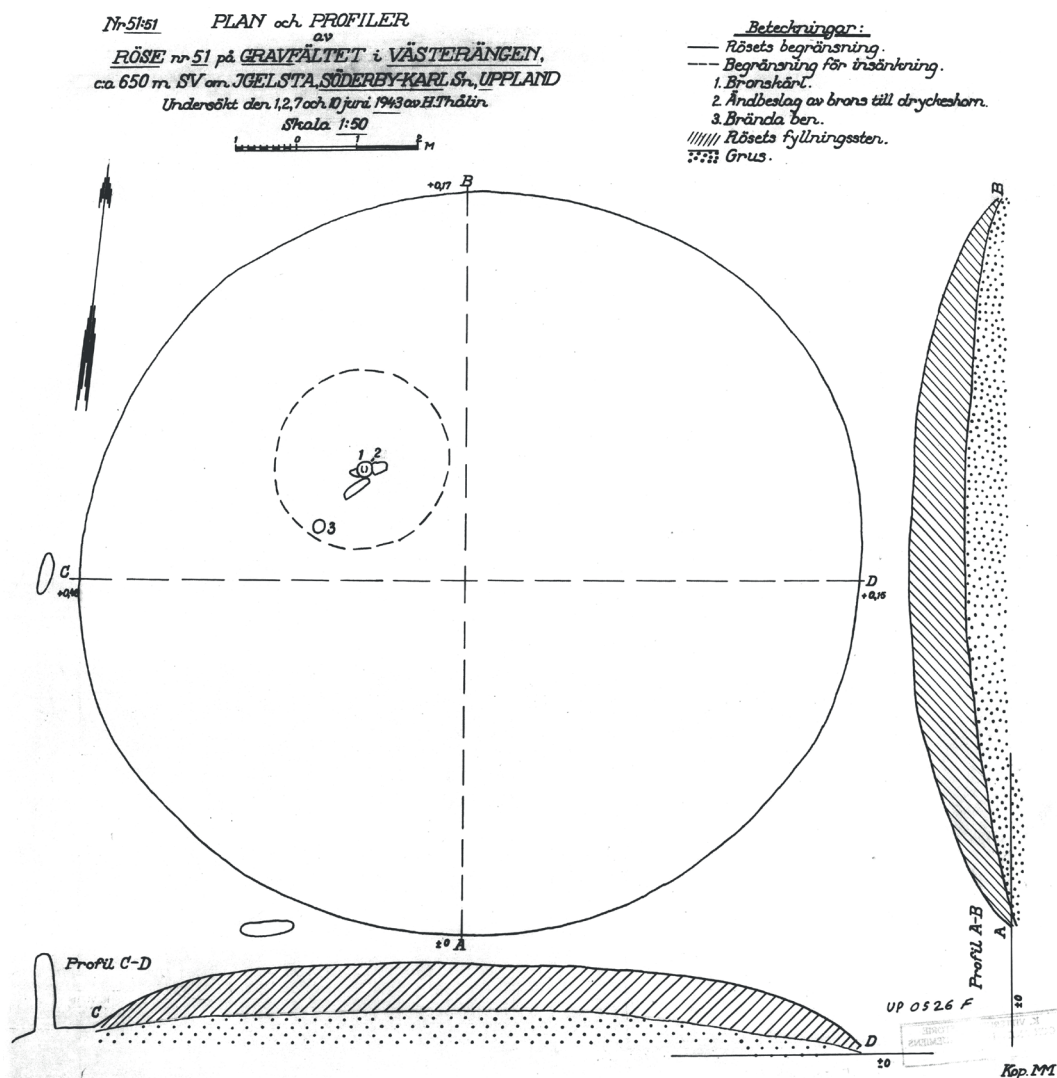


Fig. 3. Plan and section of cairn 51. 1) the cauldron, 2) horn mounts, 3) cremated bones. Illustration: Harry Thälin, ATA.

graves, often along with drinking utensils and weapons, and sometimes in female burials such as Juellinge (Lund Hansen 1987; Lasota-Kuś & Madyda-Legutko 2023, pp. 115f).

The Igelsta cauldron features a bronze handle attached to an everted rim (figs. 4 & 8). The rim measures 23 cm in diameter, and the base 17 cm. It was placed on a wooden tray, with preserved fragments of hide found between the metal and wood. Notably, the cauldron was not

used for holding cremated bones – otherwise a common practice in cremation burials. Instead, the cremated remains were found approximately 1 m southwest of the cauldron. They have been radiocarbon dated to the Early Pre-Roman Iron Age.

Inside the cauldron were two unburnt bone fragments from sheep/goat. The fully fused distal part of a sheep humerus indicates an animal over one year old, dated to the Early Roman Iron



Fig. 4. Reconstruction of the horns and the Østland cauldron found in the grave. Photo of the terminal mounts. Drawings: Faith-Ell, ATA. Reconstruction and photo: T. Eriksson.

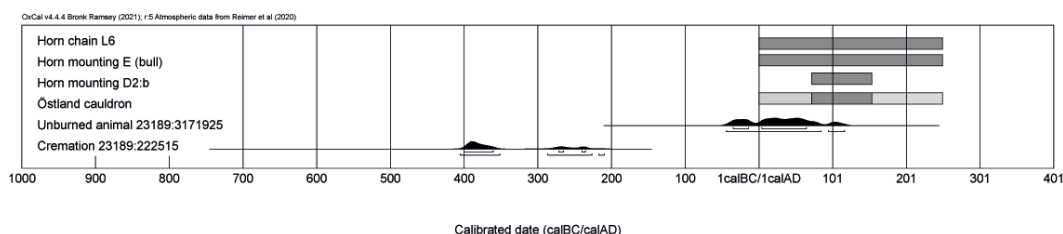


Fig. 5. Calibrated ^{14}C -dates from A51 and dates of artefacts. Illustration: T. Eriksson.

Age, thus contemporary with the metal artefacts. The bones likely represent symbolic food offerings (figs. 3 & 5).

Both inside and just outside the cauldron were parts of two drinking horns (Andrzejewski 1991, 1994), preserved as two terminal mounts and a Y-shaped chain, all made of copper alloy (figs. 4 & 7). The chain cannot be definitively linked to either of the mounts. One terminal features a cornice profile, characteristic of Early Roman Iron Age design. This form is classified as group D2:b and closely resembles mounts found in Gotland, Simris (Scania), and Hade (Hedesunda, Gästrikland), and is generally dated to Period B2 (70–160 AD) (Andrzejewski 1991, p. 29, Ryc. 5 & Mapa 11).

The second terminal is shaped as a bull's or cow's head, with horns, an open mouth and a visible tongue. This type, defined as group E, is known from only about thirty examples in northern Europe (figs. 4 & 7) and is dated to Periods B–C1 (1–260 AD) (Andrzejewski 1991 pp. 36ff; 1994; Stenberger 1946). The chain belongs to group L6, characterised by profiled links connected by small rings, a type known from a few Scandinavian examples dated to Periods B and C1 (Andrzejewski 1991, p. 55).

The placement of the cauldron and drinking horns suggests they were deposited as grave goods symbolising the role of the deceased as a patron of ritual feasting and drinking ceremonies in an inhumation context. This practice has strong parallels in other richly furnished graves in Uppland, such as Gödåker (Tensta parish), Carlsund (Hammarby parish), and Skuttunge (Skuttunge parish) (Andersson 2016, pp. 129ff; Ekengren 2009; Eriksson 2009, pp. 235ff).

The tradition of using elaborately decorated drinking horns in ritual contexts is also evident in a find located approximately 200 m northwest of grave A51. Likely originating from a destroyed grave, this pair of horns features rich decoration in Animal Style I and dates to Period D2 (480–550 AD). These horns are among the most exclusive examples known from Scandinavia (Holmqvist 1951; Enright 1996).

The dating of the artefacts clearly places them within the Early Roman Iron Age, potentially extending into the early phase of the Late Roman Iron Age, corresponding to Periods B1–C1. All artefacts were unburnt, and the cauldron had not been used as a container for cremated remains. However, burnt bones were found approximately 1 m southwest of the cauldron, resulting in some uncertainty regarding the context. To clarify the matter, one unburnt animal bone from within the cauldron and one burnt human bone were selected for radiocarbon (^{14}C) analysis (fig. 5).

The results confirm that the cairn was used on at least two separate occasions. The cremated human remains were dated to the Early Pre-Roman Iron Age, Periods I–II (Ua-83687: 2296 ± 30 BP, i.e., 405–209 BC), while the unburnt animal bone was dated to Periods III and B1–2 (Ua-83688: 1988 ± 29 BP, i.e., 42 BC–115 AD), using two-sigma probability ranges in both cases. The ^{14}C date of the unburnt bone aligns well with the typological dating of the artefacts, although it is slightly earlier. The cremated bones were not associated with any artefacts. It connects to the common burial practice in region during the Early Pre-Roman Iron Age. Artefacts were rarely

deposited in burials during the Pre-Roman Iron Age in the region, except vessels.

In other words, the cairn was originally constructed during the Pre-Roman Iron Age over a primary cremation burial, and the cauldron was deposited later. One hypothesis is that the cauldron belonged to an inhumation grave in which the skeleton has completely decomposed due to the permeable structure of the cairn. The fact that the cauldron was not placed centrally or particularly deep within the cairn may also suggest that it was deposited during a winter thaw, then it was difficult to reach deep in the ground.

Grave structures containing multiple burials are occasionally found in Early Iron Age contexts. A nearby example comes from a stone setting located a few hundred metres west of Västerängen, which contained both a cremation and an inhumation (SHM 24298; L2015:3419). This cemetery is also notable for the stray find of two of the most elaborately decorated drinking horns from the 5th–6th centuries, see above (Holmqvist 1951).

The context of the hide and metal artefacts may represent an elite burial of an individual of unknown gender, likely belonging to the highest social strata of the region. The absence of contemporary cremated remains raises the possibility that this was a cenotaph for a person whose body was never recovered. Alternatively, the find may represent an inhumation where the skeletal remains have not survived, or it could be interpreted as a ritual offering to ancestors. Comparable sacrificial deposits of Iron Age artefacts in Bronze Age cairns (c. 1400–1200 BC) are known from Södermanland (Appelgren 1993; Hemmendorff 1971; 1978).

The context is best dated to Period B2 or the early phase of C1. The individual associated with the find appears to have had access to an extensive interregional network, with connections to the major Baltic islands, southern Scandinavia, Poland and the Roman Empire (figs. 5 & 7). The distribution of the metal artefacts suggests a contact route from Igelsta via Gotland to the Continent. At this time, Gotland served as a key node in the Baltic Sea trade network (Andersson 1995, pp. 215ff; Eriksson 2018, pp. 104f).

Osteological analysis

A total of 472 g of cremated human bone from grave A51 was recovered from approximately 1 m southwest of the cauldron, but at the same excavated level (fig. 3). Standard osteological methods, made by Ylva Telldahl, were applied to estimate sex and age at death. The analysis identified one adult individual, aged approximately ≥ 35 years, possibly female. However, precise age estimates must be treated with caution, as the methods rely on biological processes that may not directly correspond to chronological age (e.g. Roksandic & Armstrong 2011).

The bone material exhibits characteristics of advanced pyre technology. All fragments display a white, porous, chalky texture, indicating complete oxidation at temperatures exceeding 600°C. High temperatures also cause bone shrinkage. The absence of charcoal and soot suggests that the cremation and the burial did not occur in the same location, which may also explain the relatively small quantity of bone recovered. A typical adult cremation yields between 2 and 4 kg of bones. Factors such as deliberate selection of bones, cleaning prior to burial, and post-depositional processes may have contributed to the reduced amount.

Only human remains were identified, with no fragment larger than 15 mm. Of the total amount of bone, 85% could be assigned to specific body regions, including 30% from the cranium and 36% from the long bones of the arms and legs (fig. 6). One burnt human bone was selected for radiocarbon dating, which yielded a date corresponding to the Early Pre-Roman Iron Age (fig. 5).

Inside the cauldron, two unburnt bone fragments from sheep/goat were found – a humerus and a rib – both bearing cut marks. The fully fused distal end of the humerus indicates an animal older than one year. Radiocarbon analysis of this bone produced a date corresponding to the Early Roman Iron Age (fig. 5).

Hide fragments: pelt or shoe?

Among the finds from cairn A51, two fragments of hide stand out as particularly unique and exceptional (SHM 23189: find IDs 3229013 & 31716909). These fragments were referred to in

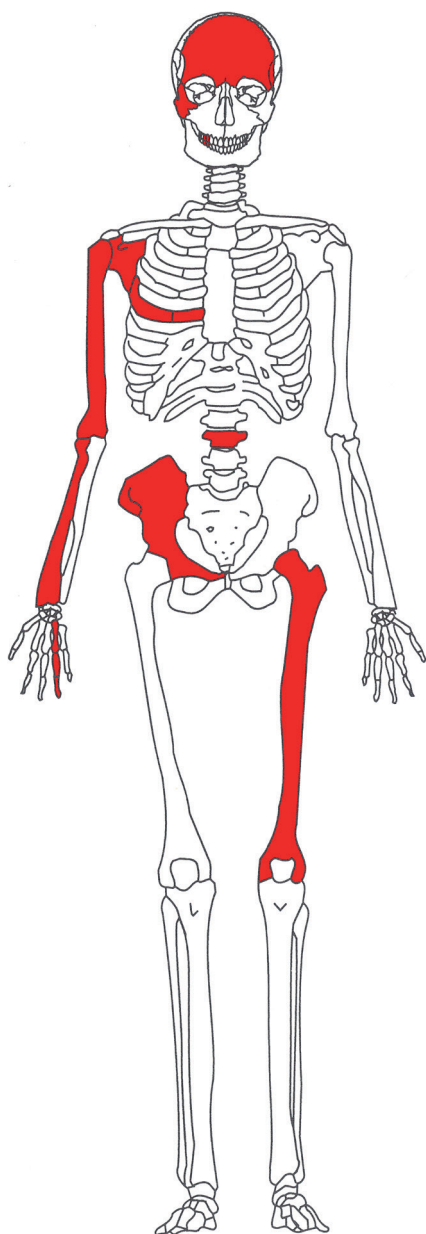


Fig. 6. The illustration shows the bone elements represented, not all are side-determined.
Illustration: Y. Telldahl.

the original excavation report as “bearskin under the cauldron.” They are visible in excavation photographs taken during the removal of the cauldron and the underlying wooden tray (figs. 3 & 8). The fragments were located between the base of the cauldron and the wooden tray. Both pieces have been impregnated and preserved by copper salts from the cauldron, giving them a characteristic greenish hue.

The larger fragment (31716909) retains hair within a fold in the material. In the 1940s, Hjalmar Ljungh identified the fur – based on the presence of down, awn, and guard hairs – as originating from a bear. However, the appearance and condition of the fragments suggest that they do not represent a complete bear pelt. While bear pelts are known from high-status graves dating from around 100 BC onward, they typically appear in the form of burnt or unburnt bear claws (Petré 1980; Wamers 2009, pp. 2ff; Oswaldsson 2010). No claws were found in grave A51.

Nearby examples of graves containing bear or lynx claws from the Late Roman Iron Age and Migration Period include three burials in Tälje, Norrtälje parish, and one in Görle, Frötuna parish. These graves were richly furnished with dress accessories (Mutikainen 2000, pp. 14, 19; Gatti & Vinberg 2015, pp. 52, 119ff).

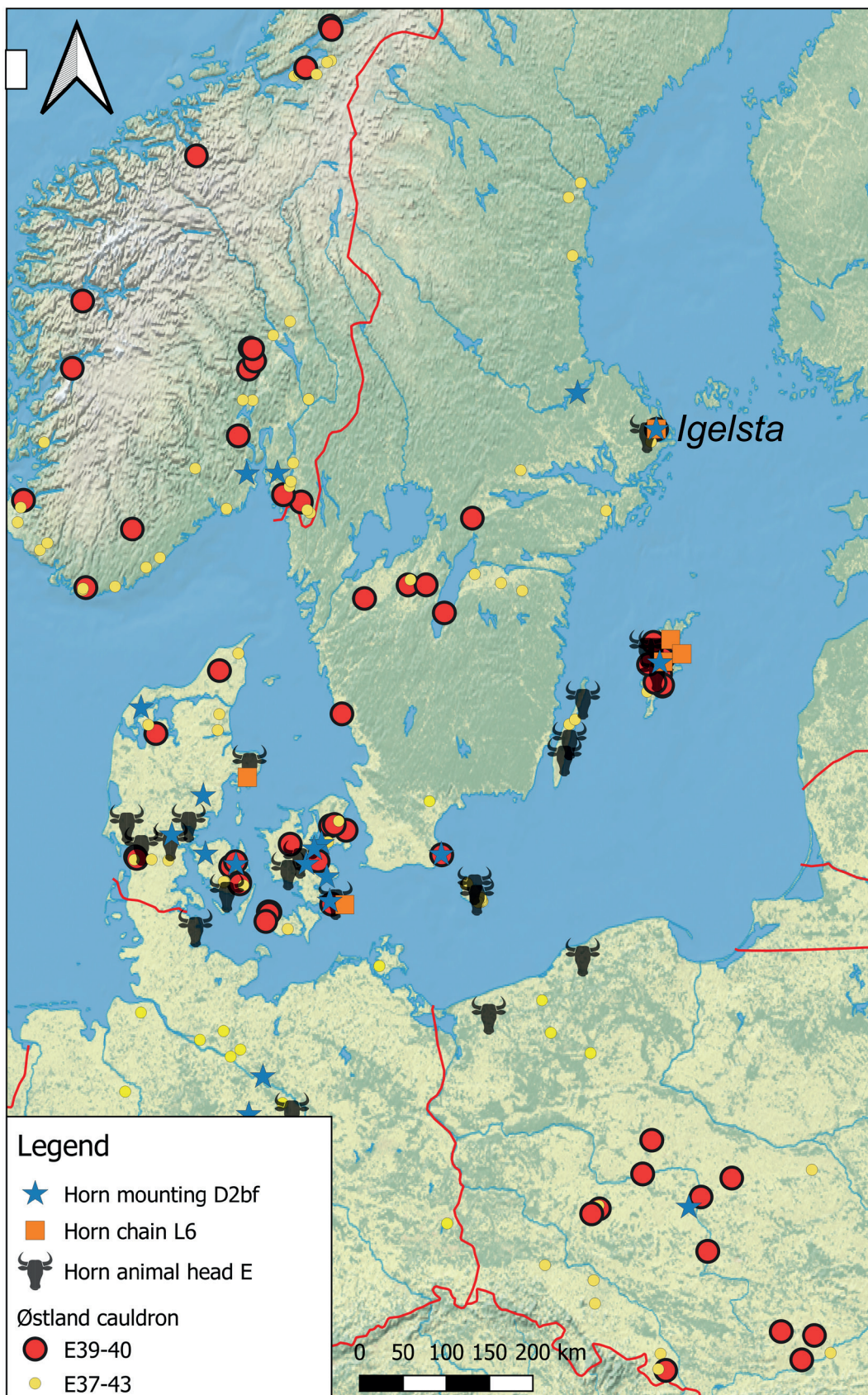
The fragments from A51 likely represent something far more unusual in the preserved archaeological record – most plausibly parts of Sweden’s oldest known shoe.

Description of the fragments

The smaller hide fragment (FID 3229013) is notably flattened and has a smooth surface (fig. 9). The hide is dark brown with a greenish tint, hardened and somewhat brittle, with traces of fur still adhering to the surface. The piece is arched and tapers toward the centre, measuring 130 mm in length and 35 mm in width at its widest point, although it was originally larger.

→

Fig. 7. Some of the artefacts from grave 51 and their analogues in Northern Europe. Distribution of Østland cauldrons from Ekholm and Lund-Hansen (Ekholm 1933; Lund Hansen 1987). The material from Germany and Poland is not fully charted or categorised. Diverse types of chains and mounts for drinking horns based on Andrzejowski (Andrzejowski 1991; 1994). Illustration: Thomas Eriksson.



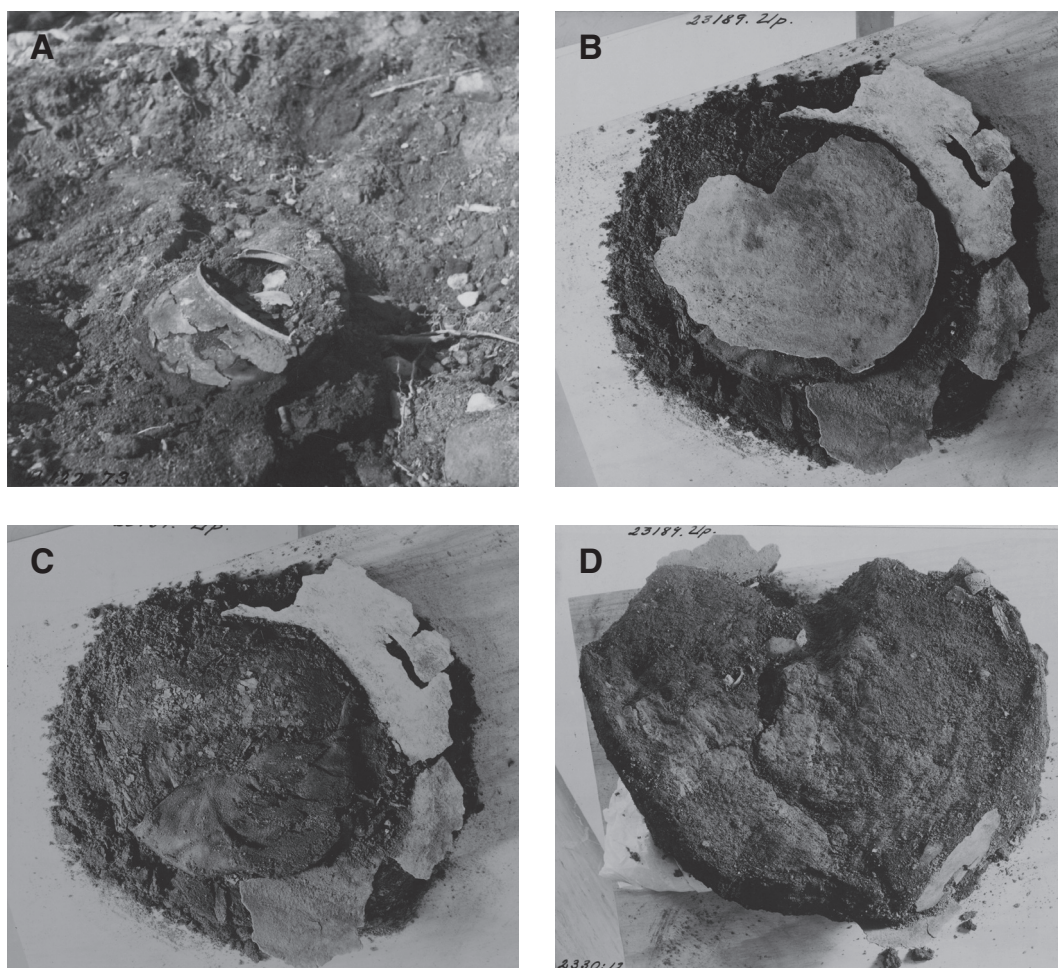


Fig. 8. Pictures from ATA of the excavation of the cauldron and the underlying hide fragments. A) The rim of the cauldron and mounts in situ. B) Bottom and sides of the cauldron during excavation in the laboratory. C) The bottom of the cauldron is removed. The larger fragment of hide is visible in the lower part of the cauldron. D) The wooden tray under the hide and cauldron. Photos by SHM in Antikvariskt Topografiskt Arkiv, ATA.

At each end, the hide features large cut-out holes – one of which is incomplete. The complete hole is D-shaped and measures 25 × 40 mm. Given their similarity, it is reasonable to assume that both holes originally had the same or a very similar shape (fig. 10).

The holes and outer edges are cut at a 90-degree angle to the surface, resulting in clean, straight edges. Toward the centre, the hide is compressed in thickness and exhibits a

slight gloss, likely caused by mechanical abrasion. Based on its shape, wear patterns, and construction, the fragment may represent the heel and ankle section of a shoe – a type with several parallels in Roman Iron Age contexts.

The D-shaped holes may have served as attachment points for a broad strap across the front of the ankle, known as an ankle fastening or *lanchet* (Driel-Murray 2001a, p. 345, fig. 12). Comparable examples include the Comacchio



Fig. 9. The hide fragments from A51, SHM 23189. Fragment FID 3229013 above and 31716909 below. Note the diagonal crease on the larger fragment and the small holes for lacing at top of same fragment. Photo: SHM, Thomas Eriksson.

and Panopolis models from the early Imperial period, which also feature D-shaped front lanchets, though typically smaller than those on the Igelsta specimen (Volken 2014b, pp. 88ff, fig. 103).

If this interpretation is correct, the absence of a seam at the back of the heel suggests that the fragment belongs to a Volken's Type I shoe – a design in which the heel, foot, and toe are constructed as a single unit, typically with a separate sole. This type was common during the Early Roman Iron Age, as evidenced by finds from the Continent and Britain (Volken 2014b, pp. 93ff, figs. 112, 116 & 122). Such one-piece heel constructions are rare or absent in Danish and North German assemblages (Hald 1972; Gräf 2015, pp. 68–107), but several parallels exist in Roman provincial contexts (fig. 10).

Some of the closest analogies come from Vindolanda, Ramshaw, and Billingsgate in Britain, as well as Saalburg and Bonnerberg in Germany (Volken 2014b, pp. 278–282, cat. nos. 10.01–19). According to Driel-Murray's typology, the Igelsta shoe shares many features with her Type VI, the Roman Eyelet Boot, particularly the Ramshaw style, dated to c. 175–355 AD. The Igelsta

fragments appear to resemble the higher-ankle variants of the Type I construction, similar to the so-called "Fell boots" from Vindolanda. These Roman boots were well-suited for harsh weather and long-distance marching. Unlike the Igelsta example, however, many Ramshaw-type boots were equipped with hobnails for improved traction (Driel-Murray et al. 2003, fig. 17:1–2; Volken 2008).

The larger hide fragment (FID 3229013) is not smooth but slightly undulating, featuring a prominent secondary fold in which the hide is layered in three folds. The fragment is somewhat boat-shaped, tapering to a point at one end and terminating in a relatively straight edge with a small protrusion at the other. This latter end is fragmentary and frayed, indicating that the piece was originally larger. Within the fold, remnants of dark brown hair or fur are preserved. The rounded portion of the hide is torn and incomplete.

The fragment measures 145 mm in length and 65 mm at its widest point. The upper edge of the hide has been sharply cut, while the central section lacks a clean edge, having instead a torn area approximately 35 mm long. This torn section may represent the remains of an integrated shoelace, as seen in Ramshaw-type shoes, where the lacing is incorporated into the side of the shoe.

Along the edge of the fragment are seven horizontally oriented holes, spaced at intervals of 15–30 mm on either side of the torn section. Three of these holes show clear signs of wear, with creases indicating tension and stretching during use. The pull direction appears to have been toward the adjacent, cut edge rather than toward the wider part of the fragment. The remaining four holes are more notch-like and show less evidence of wear, suggesting they may not have been subjected to the same stress. The holes are not perfectly round, but appear to have been slit-cut, taking on an oval shape through use.

These features suggest the holes were used for lacing across the top of the foot, from the toe area to the ankle. The fragment likely represents part of the medial front and rear section of a shoe (Volken 2014b, fig. 33). The lower portion of the shoe, including the side down to the sole

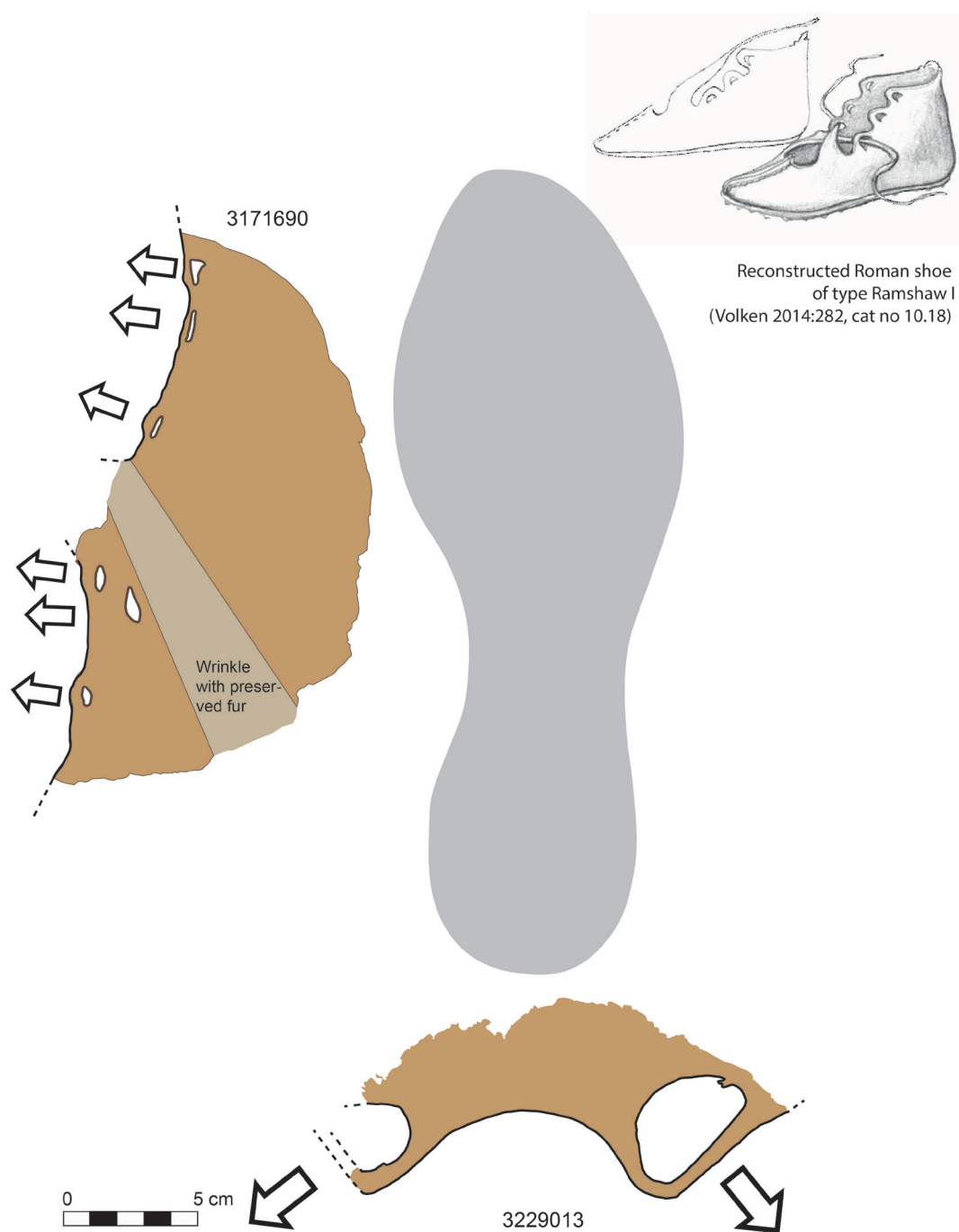


Fig. 10. Drawing of the hide fragments found in A51. No traces of the sole were found, but a schematic footprint is shown here to exemplify the construction. Cut, outer edges are shown with bold lines. Reconstructed outer edges are marked with dashed lines. Arrows show tension directions in holes for lacing. A reconstructed shoe of Ramshaw model I is shown in the upper right corner. Illustration: M. Volken 2014b, p. 282 and T. Eriksson.

and the presumed seam between the upper and the sole, is entirely missing. Based on the wear patterns, it is plausible that the fur was turned outward, a fashion known from continental Roman contexts (Volken pers. comm.).

The most likely interpretation is that this fragment formed one side of a shoe, with lacing or stitching running along the dorsum of the foot. Although no direct parallels are known, similar shoe sides among Volken's Roman Type I shoes include examples from Zwammerdam and Ramshaw, which feature comparable seam or lacing holes and integrated lacing systems (Volken 2014b, cat. nos. 10:03 & 16). These comparisons further support the identification of the Igelsta fragments as part of a locally made shoe displaying Roman influences from the Early Roman Iron Age.

Shoes during the Roman Iron Age

The hide fragments from the Igelsta grave can be dated to approximately 1–250 AD, making them the oldest known shoe remains from Sweden. This find is particularly significant, as no comparable footwear material is known from the Swedish region prior to the Viking Age. However, parallels exist in neighbouring regions, including Denmark, Norway and northern Germany, with examples dating from the Bronze Age and Early Iron Age (Marstrander 1954; Hald 1972; Munksgaard 1974; Volken 2014b). Several shoe finds from Denmark, although older, originate from Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age contexts, including finds of bog bodies, oak-log graves, and war booty deposits (Hald 1979). The comparative material can also be expanded to include finds from *Germania Libera* in northern Germany. In Norway, somewhat later shoe finds may also contribute to the interpretation of the Igelsta material (Gräf 2015).

From the Roman world, a relatively large corpus of footwear has been recovered from military forts, with key sites including Welzheim and Saalburg in Germany, and Vindolanda in Britain (Hartmann & Driel-Murray 1998; Driel-Murray 2001a & b; Driel-Murray et al. 2003; Volken 2014b). Many shoes and sandals from both Roman and Germanic contexts feature openwork or fishnet-style uppers, a design

well-suited for summer use in milder climates. In contrast, the Igelsta shoe appears to have had a more closed construction and preserved fur, both of which suggest it was designed for colder conditions – possibly serving as a winter boot.

In the 1940s, the hairs preserved in a fold of the hide were identified as bear fur. However, during visual re-examinations in 2024, this identification was questioned. As a result, samples from both fragments were submitted to the Swedish Museum of Natural History for DNA analysis. Although the DNA was fragmentary, the results indicated that the hide may originate from two different mammalian families: squirrels (*Sciuridae*) and dogs or wolves (*Canidae*) (Gyllenstrand 2025).

Vair – the winter fur of the red squirrel – was highly valued and exported from Scandinavia during the Medieval period. However, squirrel fur would not have been suitable for the structural components of footwear, though it may have been used for linings or decorative elements. In Swedish vernacular clothing traditions, cat and hare fur were used for similar purposes (Campbell 1942, p. 124, fig. 12). Dog and wolf fur, on the other hand, were commonly used for winter garments. Dog fur was especially popular for caps and gloves, and remained in use into the 18th and 19th centuries (Lloyd 1979, p. 26; Holmberg & Ågren 1983, pp. 6–14; Gullback 2021, pp. 79f). One plausible interpretation is that the upper part of the Igelsta shoe was made from dog or wolf hide – a practice also known from Medieval Norway (Swann 2001, p. 54).

Reconstruction of the Igelsta shoe

The most plausible interpretation of the fragments is that they represent parts of a shoe (fig. 10). However, due to the absence of substantial portions – such as one side of the shoe, the lower heel section, and the sole – the reconstruction remains tentative. What can be stated with confidence is that the shoe featured lacing across the top of the foot and had protruding attachments for a broader strap at the transition between the foot and the lower leg.

Three main interpretations are possible:

1. O-cut (hide shoe): The first possibility is that the shoe was a hide shoe, in which the sole and upper were constructed from a single piece of hide. In Volken's typology, this corresponds to an O-cut shoe – one of the oldest and most enduring footwear designs (Volken 2014a, p. 55). Roman *carbatinae* share similar strap attachments but typically include a seam at the heel (Volken 2014b, pp. 99ff).
2. I-cut (boot-type shoe): The second possibility is that the shoe was an I-cut type, with a separate sole stitched to the upper. This design has several parallels in Roman contexts, particularly the Ramshaw type. Such shoes are generally interpreted as boots and often associated with colder climates or military use (Volken 2014a, pp. 105ff).
3. Regionally adapted type: A third possibility is that the shoe represents a unique or regionally adapted type, inspired by Roman footwear but produced within a local Swedish tradition. This interpretation would reflect both cultural influences and local innovation in footwear design during the Early Roman Iron Age.

The role of the shoe in the grave

The preserved shoe from Igelsta is unique in the Swedish archaeological record. This is largely due to the poor preservation conditions for organic materials, particularly in cremation graves, which represent the dominant burial practice in eastern Sweden during the Roman Iron Age. In contrast, footwear is often found in graves, military camps, and wells inside the Roman Empire. In some inhumation graves, shoes or pairs of shoes were placed beside the deceased. Parallels to this practice are known from Roman provinces in North Africa, France, Britain, Greece and Germany. Notably, examples from Roman Africa are dated to the same period as the Igelsta find – the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD (Driel-Murray 2001a, p. 373; Stirling 2008, pp. 2268–2272). At Igelsta, however, the shoe was not worn on the foot but instead symbolically placed between the wooden tray and the Roman cauldron.

A comparable symbolic tradition appears in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, an Icelandic saga from the early 13th century AD, which mentions *helskór* or “Hel-shoes.” In the saga, the deceased Vestein is given shoes to aid his journey to the realm of Valhalla, Odin's realm for the fallen heroes. Hel is both the name of the underworld for the dead and its female guardian (Alving 1979, pp. 26f; Strömbäck 1961, pp. 411f). Although this burial likely occurred in the 10th century AD – nearly 800 years after the Igelsta grave was made – it offers an intriguing parallel. If the Igelsta shoe was made of wolf fur, it may have carried mythological connotations. Two of Odin's companions were the wolves Geri and Freki, and the *Úlf-hédnar* – warriors clad in wolf skins – are also part of Norse tradition (Nielsen 2002, pp. 207ff). The proximity of the site to Odenslund, just 1500 meters to the east of the grave, further strengthens this symbolic association.

The unusual placement of the shoe likely held ritual or symbolic meaning, especially when viewed in light of contemporary Roman practices. During the Late Pre-Roman and Early Roman Iron Age, objects associated with leatherworking – particularly in women's graves – were commonly deposited. Awls and crescent-shaped knives were frequently included in burials and occasionally as offerings in domestic contexts (Eriksson & Lang 1998, p. 49, fig. 36). Examples of such tools have been found in Valloxsäby (Östuna parish) and Åsby (Edsbro parish), both in Uppland (SHM 10794: grave 2). The crescent-shaped knife from Valloxsäby, found alongside an awl, had an ornate sheath and iron fittings and was likely worn on a belt (Ekholm 1939, pp. 22ff).

Leatherworking and the production of shoes and other hide-based goods must have been vital to the economy, both for the farm and the region. The presence of curved knives is often interpreted as evidence of hide processing for export to the Roman Empire (Hagberg 1967, pp. 115ff). At Igelsta, we encounter a more complex scenario: a locally produced shoe, preserved beneath a Roman bronze vessel, placed in one of the richest graves of the period in Uppland. The burial reflects both local traditions and Roman

influences, suggesting a hybrid ritual practice that underscores the cultural and symbolic significance of footwear in the Early Iron Age.

Discussion

The Igelsta cairn, with its Roman imports and exclusive mounts for drinking horns, has long been recognised as one of the richest Roman-period graves in central Sweden from the Early Roman Iron Age. However, recent analyses have revealed a more complex picture. Radiocarbon dating of the cremated bones found approximately 1 m southwest of the cauldron places the original construction of the cairn in the Early Pre-Roman Iron Age, Periods I–II. This makes the cairn and its primary burial one of the few securely dated monumental graves from this early period.

The area surrounding Igelsta shows multiple signs of being a hub within a broader contact network extending southward along the fjords and coast of Uppland. Two other Østland cauldrons have been found 15 km away in the Lohärad parish (SHM 5767 & 6428), and a better-preserved example was recovered from Norrby in the Söderby-Karl parish, just 1 400 m from Igelsta (SHM 24845; Andersson 2001). A stray find of a coin minted under Antoninus Pius (reigned 138–161 AD) has also been found in the Söderby-Karl parish (Wiséhn 1989, p. 212). The neighbouring site of Odenslund – with its theophoric name – and the nearby burial ground containing some of the most exclusive Migration Period drinking horns in Sweden, point to a long-standing local tradition in which ritual drinking ceremonies and external contacts played a central role. The symbolic deposition of a shoe, made from wolf or dog skin, beneath a large Roman cauldron should also be seen as a remnant of burial rituals whose traces are normally not preserved. This gesture too – involving the placement, rather than the dressing, of a garment in a grave – has Roman parallels. However, the rituals have been renegotiated into a Scandinavian context.

English revised by Lindemark Text

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