

Excavation of a Vendel or Viking period boat grave at Skamby, Östergötland, Sweden, summer 2005

[Martin Rundkvist](#) & [Howard Williams](#)

Introduction

The proposed excavations at Skamby (Östergötland, Sweden) in the summer of 2005 are intended as a pilot project, the first stage of an international collaborative project between co-directors Dr Howard Williams and Dr Martin Rundkvist, entitled *Death and Identity in Vendel- and Viking Period Sweden*. The project aims to explore the role of mortuary practices in constructing socio-political identities in Östergötland, eastern Sweden, during the later first millennium AD, through new fieldwork at a range of sites and the application of new theoretical perspectives to the data uncovered.

Background

Excavations in the Lake Mälaren region (Svealand) of eastern Sweden have revealed a series of boat grave inhumation cemeteries, often regarded as the resting-places of aristocratic families of the Vendel and Viking Periods (c. AD 500-800 and 800-1000; cf. Lamm & Nordström 1983; Lidén et al. 2001). However, the boat grave burial rites of neighbouring Östergötland have



Figure 1. Plan of the Skamby boat-grave cemetery. G.-A. Hellman & G. Ekelund 1947. ATA archives, Stockholm. [Click to enlarge.](#)

received no investigation despite evidence for the presence of a powerful Early Medieval kingdom in this region. The project focuses on one of the three known but uninvestigated boat grave cemeteries in Östergötland. The cemetery is located at Skamby in the easternmost part of the province near the Baltic Sea. The surviving earthworks include many flat stone settings including ten with characteristic boat-shaped depressions, all on the same alignment (figures 1 & 2).



Figure 2. The Skamby boat-grave cemetery prior to excavation, aerial view from the south-east. Photograph by M. Rundkvist.

Survey Work

A metal detector survey in 2003 by Martin Rundkvist of the fields surrounding the site located metalwork from disturbed graves on the edge of the cemetery, demonstrating its use in the ninth and tenth centuries AD (figures 3-5). The boat graves may also be of Viking Period date, but excavation is required to assess the possibility that they date to the Vendel Period (Rundkvist 2004).

Research Aims

The proposed excavations at Skamby are likely to reveal a richly furnished boat burial of the Vendel or Viking Period. The excavations will provide the opportunity to assess: 1) the date of the grave, 2) the quality and character of archaeological preservation on the site, 3) the range of artefacts and structures associated with the grave, and 4) the sequence and complexity of the burial rites.

The project will be a research-led excavation that blends together innovative theoretical perspectives and contemporary fieldwork techniques. The project also forms part of what is intended to be a broader investigation of the socio-political structures and religious transformation of the region in the later first millennium AD (Rundkvist in prep.). The excavations will also allow specific comparisons with the better-known sites of the Lake Mälaren region to the north (Lamm & Nordström 1983; Lidén *et al.* 2001). A particularly important question is if the boat graves of Östergötland follow the same symbolic code as those of Svealand, or if they speak a language of their own.



Figure 3. Copper alloy knob from a tortoise brooch, type P52, dating to the tenth century AD. Probably from a ploughed-out grave. Photograph by M. Rundkvist.



Figure 4. Fragment of a copper alloy equal-armed brooch, type Ljønes, dating to the ninth century. Probably from a ploughed-out grave. Photograph by M. Rundkvist.

The excavations may allow the first assessment of how the region's boat grave cemeteries compare with wealthy furnished burials of the later first millennium AD found elsewhere throughout Scandinavia and north-west Europe, in terms of the wealth, provenance and range of material culture employed, the structure and sequence of the mortuary practices, the choices of monumentality employed, and the wider ideological statements made by the funeral (*cf.* Rundkvist 2003). Of equal importance is an understanding of why such displays of wealth took place in the mortuary context in the form that they did, when they did and where they did (*cf.* Carver 2001).

Excavation Strategy

Following an earthwork survey to be conducted by Martin Rundkvist in the spring of 2005, the aim is to conduct an 8-week field season in July and August to

completely excavate a single boat grave. The field season will be co-directed by Martin Rundkvist & Howard Williams with a team of eight archaeology students from the Department of Archaeology, University of Exeter as well as volunteering Swedish professionals. Stratigraphic methods borrowed from urban archaeology (Harris 1989) will be employed.

Dissemination of Results

During the autumn and winter of 2005, the directors will compile an archive report to be made available on *Antiquity's* project gallery. The form of the final publication will depend upon the discoveries made, but it is currently the intention that it will take the form of a co-authored monograph.

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Figure 5. Silver cross pendant of ninth or tenth century date. Probably from a ploughed-out grave. Photograph by M. Rundkvist.

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