Uppåkra in the 5th to 7th Centuries. The Transformation of a Central Place and its Hinterland

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Abstract

The relations between central places and the magnates' settlements of their immediate hinterland is a phenomenon that has been intensively discussed in south Scandinavian Iron Age archaeology during the last few decades. Central places are characterized by special functions on the local, the regional and the supra-regional levels, i.e. functions that normally cannot be documented at the ordinary agrarian settlements. These special places should not be apprehended as static units but as changing in a way that reflects changes in society. Special functions might also be connected with the magnate settlements but these places play a more local role than the central places. In this paper Uppåkra and some settlements and finds from western Scania during the 5th to 7th centuries will be discussed. At the beginning of the period many finds from Uppåkra are prestigious and continental, and the magnates' settlements are indicated by gold artefacts. Later in the period many Scandinavian standard forms appear at Uppåkra and the magnates' settlements are large with some prestigious material and traces of bronze casting. The reasons for these changes may be explained both as an internal development and in a wider Northern European social and political context.

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Uppåkra and the Scanian settlement

The site of Uppåkra in Scania, Sweden, is increasingly standing out as a rich and important place during the Iron Age. The archaeological record indicates that special functions were connected with the site which are not commonly documented at the ordinary settlements in the hinterland of Uppåkra (Larsson & Hårdh 1998; Helgesson 2002). The site was probably founded in the late Pre-Roman Iron Age, and people are still living in Uppåkra. This continuity, which covers a period of more than 2,000 years, is quite unique for North European circumstances. Obviously the site held a leading position in south Scandinavian society at least throughout the Iron Age and perhaps into the Early Middle Ages, i.e. until the late 10th or early 11th centuries according to Scandinavian chronology.

Uppåkra is often referred to as a central place in an envisaged core area in western Scania, and its authority perhaps extended to some of the neighbouring areas. There has been a huge debate about how the central places should be apprehended, and so far we lack a unitary definition. Perhaps we will never arrive at a definition and perhaps we do not need one. There is of course a great variety
of central places, depending on various prerequisites, and it is perhaps impossible to draw up a definition that covers all types of central places. One thing for sure is that central places cannot be understood if we apprehend them as isolated units. The relation between the central place and its hinterland is one of the things that makes a place central. The main question of this paper is to reveal how Uppåkra and its hinterland changed in the 5th to 7th centuries, and to discuss how the interaction between the central place and the hinterland might be interpreted.

Looking first at the ordinary settlements in Scania, it is obvious that they are quite common in the Pre-Roman period, and also common in the Roman and Viking periods (Jacobsson 2000). Settlements from the Migration and Merovingian periods are not so common. According to a specification made by the National Heritage Board, their excavations for some 30 years have revealed 82 settlements from the Pre-Roman Iron Age, 67 from the Roman Iron Age, 16 from the Migration Period, 26 from the Merovingian Period and 59 from the Viking Age (ibid.). One source-critical aspect must be added here. Ceramics from the Migration and Merovingian periods are not as easy to recognize as those from the Pre-Roman, Roman and Viking periods, and this might be a reason why settlements from the Migration and Merovingian periods are underrepresented in the archaeological record. Looking at the continuity between the Migration and Merovingian periods, this is documented in 9 cases. In 7 cases a settlement ends in the Migration Period and a continuation into the Merovingian Period has not been documented. In no less than 17 cases settlements from the Merovingian Period are newly established.

The Migration Period

The Migration Period in Scandinavia has often been referred to as the "golden age" on account of all the gold objects that have been found (Stenberger 1964). Many other finds are prestigious and of high quality, for example, warriors' equipment, mementos and jewellery. It is supposed that the economic and political strategies of the ruling classes were often based on creating alliances, and conquest, with the demand for tribute as a result. The residences of the ruling classes and other elite groups are indicated by concentrations of prestigious goods or central places. For example, Uppåkra, Vå in north-eastern Scania and Ravlands on the east coast of Scania are supposed to be important residences of the elite. The famous finds from Söderala and Sjörup in central Scania must be apprehended as magnates' residences (Helgesson 2002).

The Migration Period settlement of Uppåkra is a very large unit, covering an area of almost half a square kilometre. The archaeological material from the site indicates that the place held a very special position in society compared with the ordinary agrarian settlements in western Scania. Specialized craft is indicated by many lots of fibulae and other objects, many of which were obviously produced on the site. Some of them are of very high quality. It is interesting that several fibulae are the results of experiment, combining several traits of Scandinavian and continental styles. Even gold was worked, indicated by patrices for gold foil figures. Uppåkra was also part of a long-distance exchange system of goods, and several fibulae, mountings and sherds of glass vessels are of continental manufacture. Uppåkra was also a central place for religious activity. Most striking is a cult house with finds of gold foil figures, a silver beaker, a glass beaker and other finds that might be of religious importance. Not far from this house, spearheads and lanceheads were deposited in a restricted area, probably for religious purpose. This deposition started in the Roman Iron Age and lasted well into the Migration Period. Also military activity is indicated in the Migration Period material. Weapons, pieces of weapons and pieces of warriors' equipment have been found (Larsson & Hardt 1998; Helgesson 2002). It is also obvious that a ruling class had its residence in Uppåkra. This is indicated by the many foreign, prestigious and valuable finds, but also by the structure and the size of the settlement and the structure of the hinterland. Powerful leaders, a powerful organization and an administration were needed to maintain and develop the place and the region.

The Migration Period of Scania is characterized by gold finds, which have a noticeable concentration in the western parts of the province (Fig. 1). Two distinct find groups are visible in the material, namely, gold bracteates and large gold necklets. The necklets (two in number) are found in the vicinity of Uppåkra, and the gold bracteates show a rather even spread all over western Scania.

Less than five kilometres north-west of Uppåkra, in Flackarp, one of the golden necklets was found close to the River Höje. The necklet is of Bragnum type, according to Ekholm (1918), and it is the largest known from the Migration Period in Scandinavia.
the area around Flackarp an unusual concentration of prestigious finds and special places is known, covering almost the entire Iron Age and also the Middle Ages. North of the river, a large cemetery dating from the Late Roman Iron Age and also a cavalry grave from the late 8th century have been found (Helgesson 2002). On the north side of the River Hjörsjö is the medieval village of Värpinge, where a large silver treasure from the late Viking Age has been found. On the south side of the river is the large farm of Trollberg, known as the medieval manor of Värpinge. Close to Trollberg is the site of the medieval church of Flackarp, demolished in 1864.

A complex not unlike that in Flackarp is situated around Skabersjö less than 15 kilometres to the south of Upplåker. This complex is gathered around the larger River Sege. Here too, a golden necklace is one of the most spectacular finds. Finds from the area also include a golden finger-ring from the Roman Iron Age, a large rectangular brooch from the Merovingian Period (the Skabersjö brooch) and a silver hoard from the late Viking Age. Skabersjö is known as a medieval manor from at least 1349. It is obvious that Flackarp and Skabersjö were important places, not only in the Migration and Merovingian periods, but for a rather long time. These two concentrations of special finds and places are exceptional compared with the surrounding areas. They might therefore be interpreted as residences for noble groups during the Iron Age and the Middle Ages (Helgesson 2002).

The gold bracteates from western Scania have a rather even spread in the plains in the coastal zone and the border zones of the central Scanian highland (Fig. 1). Bracteates have even been found high up on the Ronnele ridge in the south-eastern part of the province. Most bracteates are found as single finds or in treatises. Many bracteates are chronologically and geographically isolated finds, i.e. the periods before and after are not archaeologically documented in the vicinity of their find places. On the other hand, there are some source-critical aspects. Many bracteates are found in areas which are poorly investigated archaeologically, and this picture may be revised in the future. The bracteates might be apprehended as noble symbols of an elite class, used in a redistributive system with the purpose of forming friendships with others and creating alliances (Fonnesbech-Sandberg 1991). Their spread may therefore show the distribution of magnates’ farms and elite groups during the Migration Period.

The spread of the bracteates is probably rather representative, bearing in mind that no bracteates have been found since 1954, Upplåker excluded. It is difficult to speak about representativeness in the case of the golden necklaces of Scania, but it is striking that two of the only three examples have been found very close to Upplåker.

The western Scanian concentration of gold finds is reflected on Zealand in Denmark (Fig. 1). Most finds of gold bracteates and gold necklaces come from the eastern parts of the island (Fonnesbech-Sandberg 1991). The central island is empty of bracteates and from the most western part of the island only one bracteate is known. Just as in western Scania, the eastern Zealandic concentration of bracteates has an even spread and probably also shows the residences of elite groups.

The early Merovingian Period

In the early Merovingian Period the gold finds disappear, and this is a phenomenon that is seen all over Scandinavia. This period has been problematic for a long time, lacking source material, but in recent decades many new places has been discovered (cf. Nüman 1991). Many of these places have revealed rich material, indicating that there were different kinds of central places. There are few continental finds from these settlements in Scania and objects made of gold are totally absent. Instead the finds are domestic and consist largely of fibulae. The material from Upplåker and Rynhula is still rich and varied, but with few continental finds. These two places seem to be the most important sites and may have been the leading central places in western and eastern Scania respectively (Helgesson 2002).

Focusing on western Scania, Upplåker shows the largest and richest material from this period. The site is still very large, covering approximately the same area as in the previous period. There is a marked change in the composition of the source material. The prestigious goods that stood out in the Migration Period change character, and domestic fibulae and brooches are the most valuable objects, for example disc-on-bow brooches. The continently produced finds are few in number, consisting of sherds from glass beakers, and perhaps some fibulae. The domestic material is large and bronze objects are numerous, especially fibulae (about 700 in January 2002). Many of these fibulae were surely manufactured at Upplåker, and production waste has been found on several occasions. The material from bronze working is rather large, indicating large-scale, and probably also continuous production. It is also obvious that the fibulae, mountings, needles and so on became more and more standardised during the early Merovingian Period. Weapons, pieces of weapon and details from warriors’ equipment are also quite numerous and probably there were still many warriors stationed at the place. Also several objects that might have had religious significance are seen in the material. This rich and varied material speaks for a highly organised place and a ruling class probably still had its residence in Upplåker (Helgesson 2002).

Upplåker is the place in western Scania where special functions are most pronounced in the source material, but there are other places that probably also held a special position in society during the Merovingian Period (Fig. 2). In Västra Karaby, some 25 kilometres north-west of Upplåker, traces of bronze working have been found. Close to the bronze working area a richly ornamented sword pommel and beaker glass were found (Olsson 1971:29 pp.). The Västra Karaby site is rather large and the find material mentioned above was found in a restricted area of the settlement. In Dagstorp, situated only some kilometres north-east of Västra Karaby, moulds were found in a pit outside the remains of a house. At least bezek-shaped fibulae were cast, and perhaps also rectangular fibulae and pins. Also in Dagstorp this special material was found in a restricted area of the settlement (Hård 2001:197 pp.). In Lilla Isie, on the south coast of Scania, bronze casting was carried out on a small scale (Helgesson 2002). Moulds for bezek-shaped fibulae have been found in a sunken-floor hut, which also contained a continental balance scale. The settlement is very large, extending into the parish of Östra Torp. In Lilla Isie the special material is likewise connected with a minor area of the settlement. A special find from another area of the settlement is a Frisian comb from the 8th century (Stenqvist 1988; Callmer 1995; Jacobsen 2000). These three settlements seem to have been newly established in the late 6th or early 7th centuries, i.e. in the early Merovingian Period.

There are other places in western Scania which might have had the same structure as...
the ones mentioned above. They have been found rather recently, for example in Önsvala, Mölleberga parish, in Venum, Knästorparish, and in Djurslev, Tørrarp parish, by surveys and metal detectors (Fig. 2). The material from these places is rich, and especially the early Merovingian Period is well represented (Helgesson, manuscript).

There are some important aspects of source criticism concerning these early Merovingian settlements. The indications of noble milieus during the Migration Period, i.e. the gold objects, were almost all found in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Later gold finds are rare and the representativity is probably rather good. In contrast, the noble milieus of the Merovingian Period have all been revealed during the last 25 years or so, and new places are continually found by the surveys and metal detectors. The representativity of these Merovingian places is therefore probably very poor. Another aspect is the comparison between Våsra Karaby, Dags Torp and Lilla List on the one hand and Mölleberga, Knästorp and Tørrarp on the other. The former were found by archaeological excavations and metal finds are scarce. The plough layers above the settlements were never excavated. The latter settlements were found by metal detectors and the metal finds are numerous. These settlements have not been archaeologically excavated. These two different types of archaeological records probably mirror the same type of settlements, and these relations must be investigated in the future.

There are obviously several places in western Scania that held a special position in society during the Merovingian Period. On eastern Zealand many places have been excavated (Boye & Fonnesbech-Sandberg 1999; Tornberg 1999), and at least one place stands out as a noble milieu. The settlement of Tørgedel (Fig. 2) in Strevy parish has revealed a rich amount of bronze ornaments, gold foil figures, sherds from glass beakers, garnets and workshop ware (Tornberg 1998, 1999). At Tørgedel most of this special find material is found in connection with a major farmstead, probably a magnate’s farm. The settlement is large and probably begins in the 8th century or perhaps earlier.

To conclude

There was obviously a shift in the structure of settlement and society in western Scania at the transition from the Migration to the Merovingian Period as it is expressed in the archaeo-

logical material. How might this be apprehended? In the Roman Iron Age Scania was divided into several units of different character (Helgesson 2002). Most of these units were probably rather small, and the chiefdoms’ residences are indicated by rich grave-finds. The immediate surroundings of Uppåkra, the plain around Lund and some adjoining regions in south-western Scania, probably had another structure. Here rich grave-finds are absent and the chiefdoms’ residence and central place is instead indicated by the rich settlement material from Uppåkra. Probably a rather large district was tied to the place (Helgesson 2002).

In the Migration Period there is a new situation. The residences of the ruling classes become fewer as reflected in the archaeological record (Nässman 1996). In Scania there are perhaps five or six residences with probable authority over rather large areas (Helgesson 2002). Older units grew together and the systems might be apprehended as tribal confederations (or parts of) according to Wessenius (1961). The area around Örsund is one of the major distribution areas of gold necklets and gold bracteates (Mackleprang 1952; Fonnesbech-Sandberg 1991; Helgesson 2002), indicating a condensation of elite milieus. Western Scania and eastern Zealand might be apprehended as two separate areas with different political systems, but it is more likely that they constituted the same tribal confederation. This is strengthened by the idea that central Zealand and central Scania should be apprehended as borderlands (Fabeck & Ringqvist 1995; Fabeck 1993). This unit was gathered around Örsund, and was probably one of the most important parts of the Danish realm. The Danes as a historical phenomenon are indicated in the written sources from at least the Migration Period (Nässman 1996; Nässman 1998). Uppåkra with its rich archaeological material was probably the most influential place in this Örsund area of the Danish realm.

The Migration Period social system was hierarchically constituted (Helgesson 2002). A fourfold hierarchical division might be indicated in the archaeological material. Uppåkra is the superior place in the Öresund area, and the gold necklets may indicate the most noble milieus which were directly connected with the rich central place. The even spread of gold bracteates indicates several elite groups, and then there are the ordinary agrarian settlements. The confederation was probably held together by certain systems of dependence, in which the payment of tribute...
to the central place and the circulation of prestigious goods played an important role. It has been suggested elsewhere that several regions might have been incorporated with this tribal confederation by means of conquest and alliances (ibid.).

The redistributive system did not only cover the Oresund area. There are many finds from Upplåka that suggest contacts with the continent as well as central Scandinavia (ibid.). Upplåka might have been a part of a Northern European redistributive system where prestigious goods and perhaps marriage played an important role creating alliances. Some of the foreign objects might of course have been booty or tribute after warfare.

The gold disappears in the Merovingian Period, and it is uncertain what kind of material replaced it in the redistributive systems. It might have been the elaborate disc-on-bow fibulae but, on the other hand, perhaps the need for prestige goods was decreasing. This might suggest a shift in the social structure. In the Merovingian Period, many fibula types became standardized. The majority of the Merovingian Period fibulae and waste from fibula production has been found at Upplåka, but the place was not the only production site.

The production of fibulae in Upplåka and at other places seems to be quite similar as results the types that were produced. It might well have been the same craftsmen that were responsible for the production. There may have been a situation where the craftsmen had a rather free position and the metal supply was the responsibility of the customer. The archaeological material indicates that craftsmen according to this model worked most of the year at Upplåka, and were bound to the work. On occasions they worked at other places. An alternative situation is that Upplåka tried to achieve a monopoly, controlling both the production and the metal supply. In this case there must have been craftsmen closely tied to Upplåka, and the production at the other places was either sanctioned by the ruler at Upplåka or a sign that the control did not succeed totally. In both cases, Upplåka was the superior production site with the most varied production, and this is indicated in the source material.

The standardization of fibulae and the fact that they are found in large quantities perhaps indicates a change in their use. They must have been available for new groups in society and therefore played a smaller role as prestige goods than the gold in the Migration Period. Fibulae lost some of their value in the redistributive system, and many of them became ornaments, perhaps with symbolic significance, and practical objects in women’s dress.

Instead, another structure for keeping society together could have developed. In the Late Roman Iron Age there is a tendency for the importance of towns to decline in the Roman Empire. A new form of power base was the kind of large estates that evolved in the countryside. This became even more accentuated in post-Roman times, and the power in many of the Germanic realms was based on a military aristocracy and on the magnates’ estates (Harrison 1999).

Perhaps a similar development occurred in southern Scandinavia. The old type of economy largely based on conquest might have reached its peak. There were no more areas to conquer and no more alliances to be forged. Instead, the ownership and exploitation of land became a new base of power. New areas may have been cultivated and land may also have been granted. A new class of landowners emerged as the embryo of the magnates’ estates well-known on the continent in the Early Middle Ages (ibid.) and in Scandinavia during the Viking Age (Rundsberg 1980). This embryo of a property class of magnates is here dated earlier than the Viking Age, as proposed by Rundoborg (1980). A pre-Viking development of magnates’ farms has also been discussed by Callmer (2001).

Dagsgorp, Västra Karaby and Lilla Isie were newly established in the 7th century and so were also many of the places found with metal detectors. The bronze working material and the more exclusive finds from Dagsgorp, Västra Karaby and Lilla Isie are concentrated in restricted areas of the settlements, perhaps on a single farm. These might have been the early magnates’ farms that gradually attained a leading position in the village. In other cases the magnates’ farms might have been single farms perhaps connected with cultivation of new areas. In the Merovingian Period too, a hierarchical society is indicated, with Upplåka as the central place, but the economic and social circumstances of the elite groups may have been different.

From Upplåka and the Oresund area there are few objects dating from the Merovingian Period which were not produced in south Scandinavia. This might be interpreted as showing that there was little contact with other regions in Northern Europe. The truth might be different. From the Merovingian Period there are many graves with weapons and other warrior equipment, and similar graves have been found in several places in Northern and Central Europe. They are common on Gotland and Bornholm, and also in Norway. Quite a lot have been found in other regions in Scandinavia. They are also quite common in several areas on the continent (cf. Nærgård Jørgensen 1999). A characteristic of these graves is that much of the warriors’ equipment is rather standardized, but there are of course regional variations (ibid.). These warriors’ graves are not found at all in the Oresund area, but many pieces of the warriors’ equipment have been found at Upplåka, for example, strap ends, mountings for shields and lanceheads, sword pommels, buckles, and even mountings with animal ornamentation similar to those in the richest weapon graves on Bornholm and Gotland (Nærgård Jørgensen 1999). This find material might therefore indicate another kind of external contact between Upplåka and many societies in Northern and Central Europe. Uniform warriors’ equipment evolved, and perhaps there was some kind of common warrior ideology. A difference between Upplåka and most of the other sites in the 6th and 7th centuries is that the warriors’ equipment is found at a settlement and not in the graves. This might indicate a special situation with a centralized defence, in which warriors were bound to the settlement and the equipment belonged to the rules of Upplåka. Perhaps this is the embryo of a military aristocracy, later seen in the rich warriors graves of the 8th century in western Scandinavia.

This brief examination has pointed out a rather marked shift at the transition between the Migration and Merovingian periods in Upplåka and its hinterland in the 5th to 7th centuries. The reasons for this shift might be seen both in the development on the continent in post-Roman times as well as in the social system of the Migration Period in southern Scandinavia, which had reached a point where it was unable to evolve.

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