
A ceremonial building as a ‘home of the gods’? Central buildings in the central place of Uppåkra

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Abstract: The field work at Iron Age Uppåkra in south-western Scania, the southernmost part of Sweden, has improved our knowledge of a site that appears to be an important example of the Iron Age central places that have been identified in recent years. The occupation layers covered approximately 40 hectares; settlement began in the 1st century BC and ended in the 11th century AD. The remains of a small building were so well preserved that the ground plan could be established in detail. Subsequent excavation revealed a very complex sequence of layers, suggesting that a tall building with stave walls had been built and re-built in seven major stages. The special finds and structural elements, as well as the sequence of houses, constitute the remains of a very unusual Iron Age building. Further excavations have yielded quite a revealing picture of the building to the west of the small building. A series of large halls dating from the 5th century onwards were intentionally destroyed by fire and contained the remains of several human beings.

INTRODUCTION

In 1996, fieldwork started at Iron Age Uppåkra in south-western Scania, the southernmost part of Sweden, in order to improve our knowledge of a site that appears to be an important example of the Iron Age central places that have been identified in recent years (Fig. 1; LARSSON 1998; 2003). Test excavations were combined with augering, field walking and metal-detector surveys. It was found to be a site of exceptional size: the occupation layers covered approximately 40 hectares. The numerous metal-detector finds outline a settlement sequence that started late in the Pre-Roman Iron Age and continued into the Viking Period (Fig. 2; HÅRDH 2003). Following the identification of thick occupation layers deposited over a long period of time, it was hoped that durable special features – such as halls and other notable buildings, fences, roads, and further elements of economic and social importance – might be found and would be well preserved.

The greatest variety of metal finds – in terms of technology and typology as well as chronology – was found in an area to the south of the extant church of Stora Uppåkra. A relatively high density of glass-beaker fragments was also found in this area. Further extensive test excavations were therefore started in this area in 1999. Intensive field work followed in 2001–2004 (Fig. 3; LARSSON/LENNTORP 2004). During topsoil removal in 2001, the remains of a small one-room building stood out in clear contrast to the surrounding dark occupation layer.

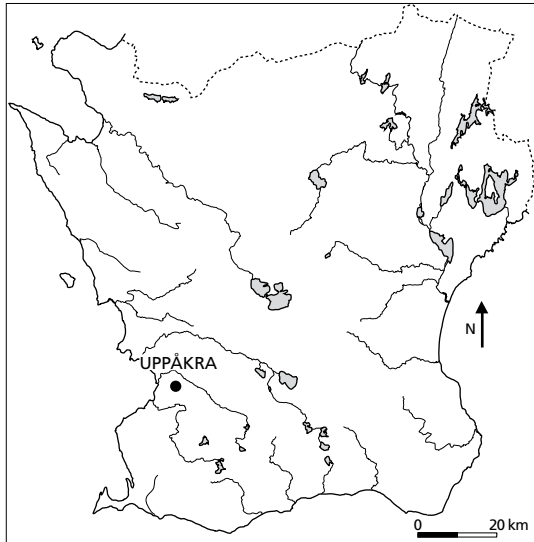


Fig. 1. The location of Uppåkra in Scania, the southernmost part of Sweden.

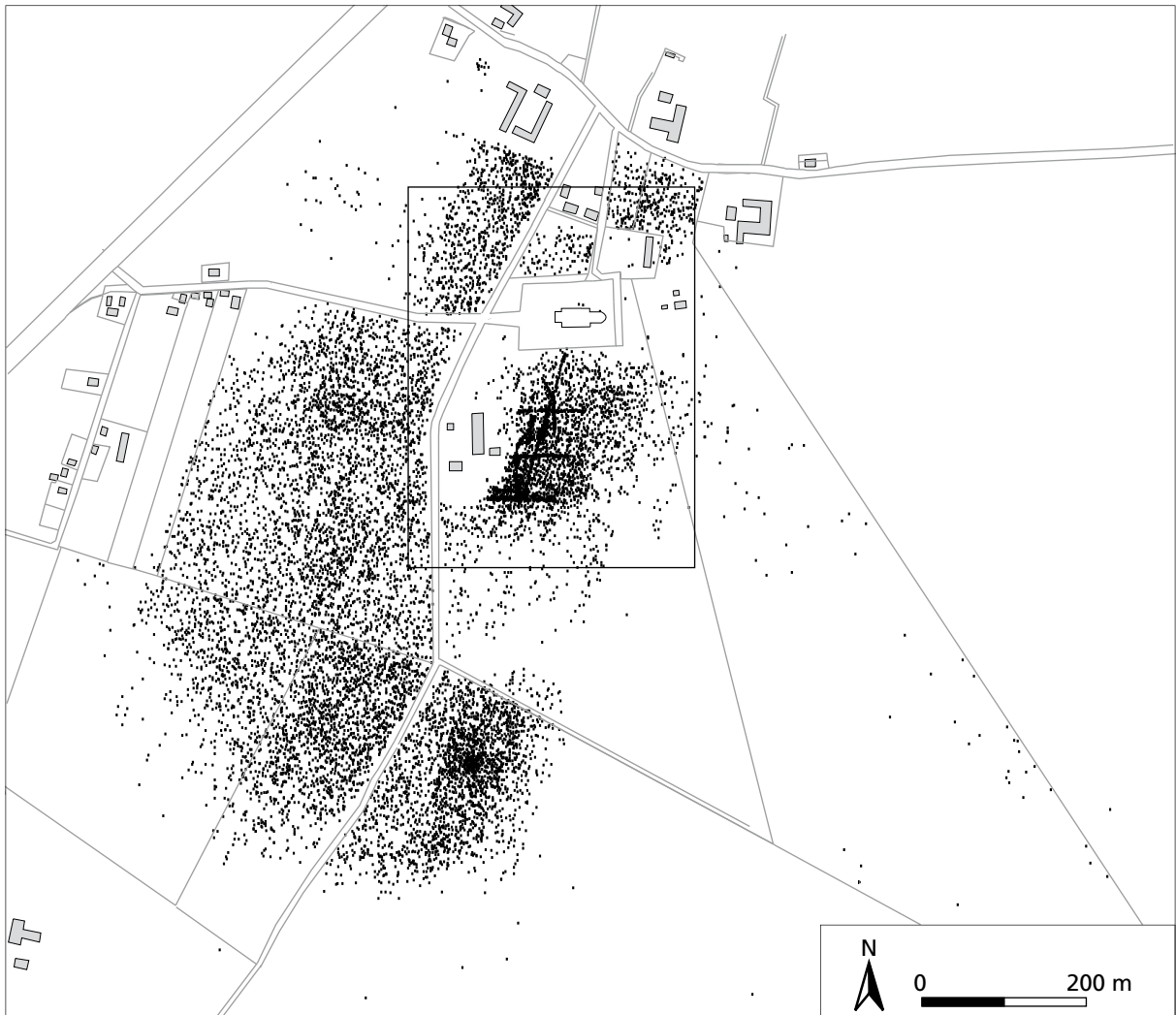


Fig. 2. The finds from metal-detector surveys at Uppåkra indicating the extent of the settlement. The framed area is shown in Fig. 3.

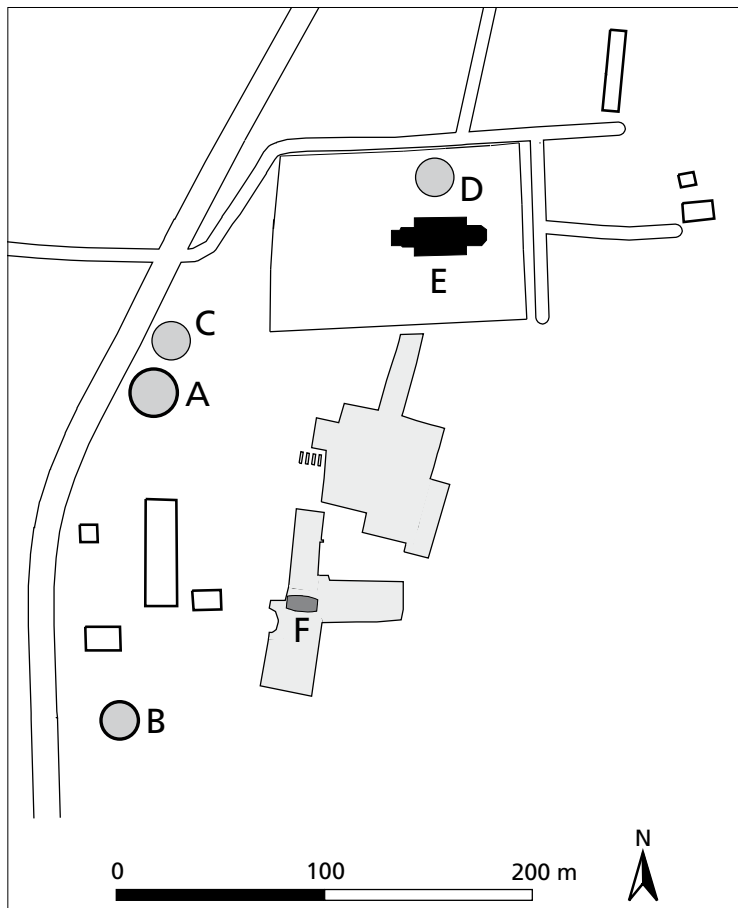


Fig. 3. Areas excavated 2001–2004 (grey shading). A–B) mounds, C–D) destroyed mounds, E) present church, F) ceremonial building.

A SPECIAL-FUNCTION BUILDING

The remains of this building were so well preserved that its outline could be established as soon as it had been exposed by the initial clearance of the topsoil. The house had straight gables and slightly convex walls. It was 13.5 m long and 6 m wide. In the interior, four pairs of large postholes showed that the roof had been supported by posts (Fig. 4). The dark fill of the postholes was clearly visible against the yellow clay of the floor surface. The house had three entrances, one facing north and two facing south. The southwest entrance had two extensions that were probably related to a small entrance structure. In the centre of the house were the remains of a hearth. It was obviously a distinctive building, surrounded by a yard with an exceptional abundance of finds. The surface was littered with an accumulation of fire-cracked stones and a considerable quantity of artefacts.

The initial excavation of the building layers also involved a metal-detector scan. In the top layer of the floor, to the south of the hearth, was a rare find: a cache containing a metal beaker and a glass bowl (HÅRDH 2004; STJERNQUIST 2004a). Stratigraphic analysis indicates that these items were deposited while the building was in use because the clay floor had been dug up in order to deposit the beaker and bowl. The clay floor had then been patched up and levelled over the pit with the offerings.

Subsequent excavation revealed a very complex sequence of layers, suggesting that a tall timber building with stave walls had been built and re-built in seven major stages. The form and structure of these successive stave buildings was strictly maintained throughout the whole sequence, which spanned many generations. It was only in the southwest corner and along the eastern gable that the position of minor sections of the wall trench shifted slightly over time. The number of entrances as well as their

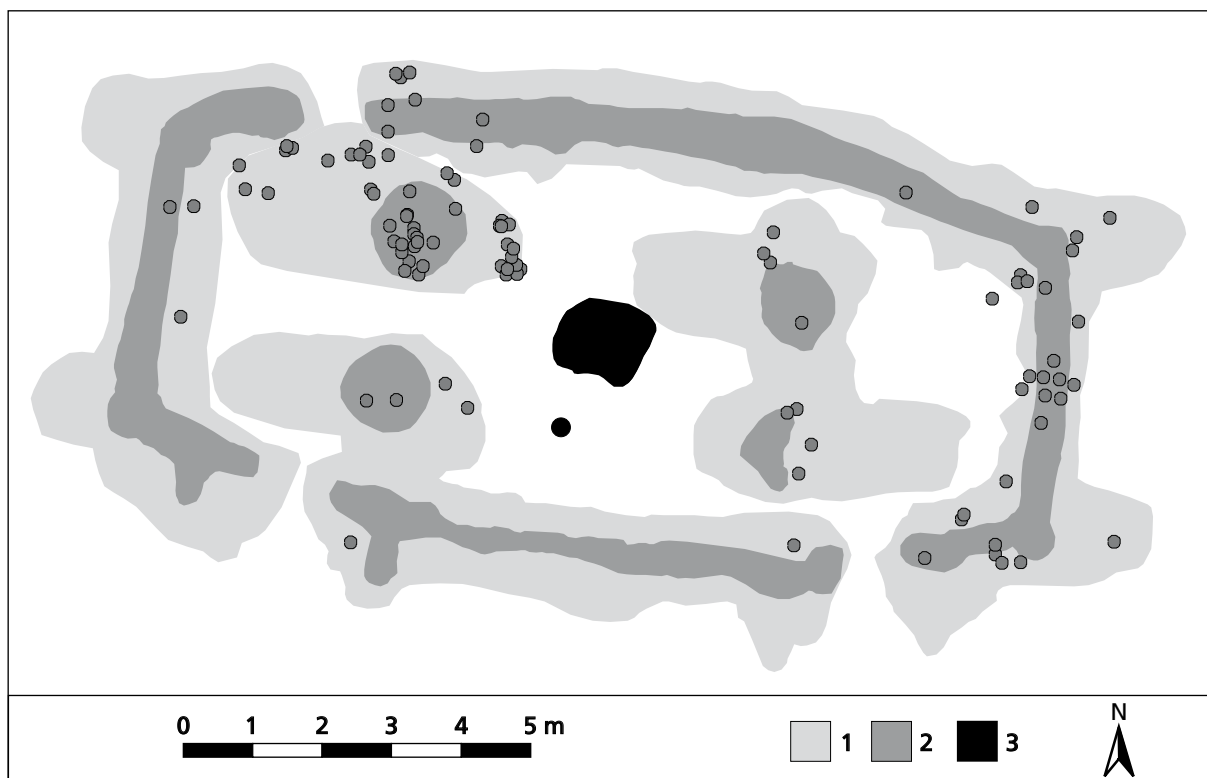


Fig. 4. Plan of the ceremonial building with the gold-foil figures. 1) pits; 2) roof-supporting posts and walls; 3) hearth. The location of the ritual deposition of the beaker made of bronze and silver and the glass bowl is marked by a black dot. The grey dots mark the positions of the gold-foil figures.

location remained the same throughout. However, certain differences are visible. In the first stave house, part of the floor was paved with small stones, a feature that no longer existed in the overlying layers. Most of the stave-house stages included a centrally located hearth, but instances of double hearths are also documented. The hearths are indicated by fire-reddened clay and a concentration of ash and charcoal, but have no special demarcation. Ember pits were found in some of the stages.

The stave-wall structure included pits for four sturdy posts and wall trenches: the four posts were placed in the corners of the structure. The four additional posts mentioned above were set in pairs in the interior of the building to support the roof. The holes for the large posts were about 2 m deep. In three of the inner postholes, stone packing to stabilise the roof-bearing structure was found, showing that the posts had been at least 0.7 m in diameter. The corner postholes had the same dimensions as the inner postholes. At the bottom of the trenches there were obvious depressions, circular or semi-circular, indicating the use of the stave construction technique.

The finds in the fill layers of the wall trenches and postholes were particularly rich. They also reflect the archaeological challenges associated with the long duration of the occupation of Uppåkra. The finds include fibulae, beads, fragments of crucibles and potsherds, dating from the Pre-Roman Iron Age to the Viking Age.

The clay floor of the oldest stave house lay immediately on top of the old ground surface, dated to 2080±45 BP (Ua-22073), cal. 210 BC–AD 30 (two sigma). However, the stave structure had a forerunner: four postholes indicated an earlier traditional longhouse, the floor of which was no longer intact. The postholes of this longhouse were ovoid in shape and measured 0.9 x 0.3 m, which is unusually large for the posts of a late Pre-Roman Iron Age or early Roman Iron Age building. A radiocarbon assay confirmed the early date of the first house, 1880±50 (LuS 6246); with an interval of two sigma, the calibrated date is AD 20–245.

The finds connected with the last intact stave house indicate that it continued in use into the Viking Age. Radiocarbon dates indicate that the final stage may have ended as late as the 10th century. The dates for the bones found in the postholes included 1148±30 (Ua-38989), cal. 770–980 AD, and 1118±30 (Ua-38988), cal. 860–1020 AD. There were even traces of a later building, indicated by pit features that had been truncated by modern ploughing. No remains of the floor of this house have survived, and it does not seem likely that it resembled the underlying, well-preserved stave-house sequence that had previously stood there. One suggestion is that one group of pits represents the remains of a later overlying building erected on a stone sill.

The sequence of houses with such a huge supporting structure of posts and walls makes this situation unique.

SPECIAL FINDS

Among the finds from the stave-house sequence are some groups of artefacts of a character or distribution that might be especially relevant to our understanding of the role of this building during the Iron Age occupation of Uppåkra. First, we should consider the beaker and glass bowl deposited beneath the floor of the second-to-last stave building. The beaker is made of bronze and silver, covered with embossed gold bands bearing figurative designs. It was probably produced around AD 500 (HÅRDH 2004). The glass bowl is made of two layers of glass: a colourless transparent under-layer and a cobalt blue overlay, which has been cut so that raised blue bands form the petals of a rosette that encircles the body (STJERNQUIST 2004a). The bowl dates to the same period as the beaker. In addition to this bowl, a number of sherds from other bowls and beakers were found (STJERNQUIST 2004b). Most of the glass sherds are only small fragments but, judging by their shape, colour and decoration, they represent about ten vessels.

A total of 111 gold-foil figures were found, representing more than fifty dies and constituting the second largest collection in Scandinavia (Fig. 5; WATT 2004). Most of them depict male figures with various attributes. There are somewhat fewer female figures and a small number of male-female pairs. These gold-foil figures are similar to those from the Sorte Muld site on the island of Bornholm (WATT 1991). In several cases, they seem to have been made from identical dies. Almost all the gold-foil figures were found in the fill of the wall trenches and postholes. Two exceptions are finds from a floor levelling layer. Two spatial concentrations are clearly visible: by the northwestern inner post and near the eastern gable, especially the central part of the gable and both corners. The distribution patterns for figures with particular motifs do not seem to differ from the overall distribution pattern.

A number of other small gold objects were found. They include a pendant, a socket and a capsule filled with granulated decoration. This category of gold finds includes fragments of objects made of foil of various thicknesses as well as scraps of gold, such as twisted thread, and fragments of small bars. In a few cases, the foil sheets have a Y-shaped end. These can possibly be regarded as highly stylised anthropomorphic figures, similar to the Iron Age depictions of humans in wood (CAPELLE 1995). Gold objects were manufactured near the stave house, as is demonstrated by the fragments of crucibles with the remains of grains of gold found just to the south of the building.

In addition to the gold objects, other finds were recovered from the fill of the northwestern roof-supporting post. These include a ring-shaped door handle made of iron. The ring has a diameter of about 15 cm with four forged knobs spaced regularly around the ring. Another, larger, iron ring handle was found at Uppåkra during a metal-detector survey, about 10 m from the building. The formal similarities between the two ring handles indicate that not only the posthole finds but also the topsoil finds relate to activities connected with the stave house. The door handle is a symbolically charged object. The ring as such was a sign of power and wealth, as well as a symbol of the gods (VIERCK 1981, 78).



Fig. 5. Gold-foil figures from the ceremonial building. Sc. 4:1 (photo B. Almgren, LUHM).

A total of 19 nails were found concentrated in the middle section of the trench for the northern wall. The close association of the nails suggests intentional deposition. The deposition of nails may be related to the *reginnaglar*, i.e. the nails of the gods, which were hammered into the High-Seat pillars (SIMEK 1984, 262).

The special finds and structural elements, as well as the sequence of houses, constitute the remains of a very unusual Iron Age building. That the house had solid corner posts can only be explained in terms of a need to strengthen the large structure. If the house had extremely high walls and roof, the large corner posts and the inner posts would all have been key weight-bearing structural components. The convex shape of the walls on the long sides of the house would have provided additional support for a tall building (HERSCHEND 1998, 43).

The house at Uppåkra was situated on the edge of a plateau, within the central part of this approximately 40-hectare site (LARSSON 2002, Figs. 2 and 3). About a hundred metres to the north is the highest part of the site: this has been partially excavated, revealing evidence of long settlement continuity from the Roman Iron Age to the Viking Age and comprising houses that do not stand out in any respect (LENNATORP/PILTZ WILLIAMS 2002).

The present church is located about a hundred metres further to the north. This church was erected in the 1860s, but its predecessor was built in about 1200 (ANGLERT/JANSSON 2001). An excavation in the choir indicated that the foundations of this medieval church had partly destroyed a Christian grave that was radiocarbon dated to 710–1020 cal. AD (1160±65 BP, Ua 14936). Most probably, there was already a wooden church on the same site as the present church during the late Viking Age. Underneath the present church and churchyard, occupation layers to a depth of 1.5 m below the present surface have been documented. A sample from the bottom of the occupation layers under the choir was dated to 60–340 cal. AD (1845±55 BP, Ua 14937).

The area around the house has many special features, which, taken together, form a special milieu (Fig. 3). To the west and north of the building were at least four burial mounds, two of which are still visible: *Storehög*, with a diameter of 20 m and a height of 3 m, and *Lillehög*, about half as large. A trench dug partly into *Storehög* revealed a fill with no occupation debris (LINDELL 2001). Consequently, it must have been erected before or early in the Iron Age settlement period. These mounds were obviously respected by the Iron Age inhabitants of Uppåkra, and it is most likely that they played an important role in the social and religious life of the community.

To the west of the building was a 40 m² stone pavement. Just to the west of the house gable was a special feature, at least 5 m long, which contained fire-cracked stones and animal bones. Less than 5 metres to the east of the building was a mosaic of different features, such as hearths, fragments of clay floors and postholes, covering an area of 35 x 15 m. Postholes from as many as five longhouses were identified. Of special interest was a row of pits with a fill containing quern stones – both intact and fragmented. The pits were shallow, so the quern stones, most of which were in horizontal position, could not have been used to stabilise the posts.

Several intact quern stones were also found in the area to the south of the house, as well as in the features connected with the burnt house to the west.

Weapons had been deposited to the north and south of the house (HELGESSON 2004). As excavation proceeded, it became quite clear that these concentrations of weapons had been deposited on small mounds, each consisting of a layer of stones. Much of the weaponry had been destroyed and deposited in a manner not unlike that documented for the famous bog finds, the best-known of which are from Denmark (ILKJÆR 1990). The concentration to the north consisted of more than 300 objects, with lance-heads and spearheads forming a distinct group. There were also shield bosses, shield handles, arrowheads, sling-stones and a large number of other iron implements, including many whose function cannot be determined. A large number of bones were found in connection with these concentrations of weapons, including human bones.

The lance-heads and spearheads were of several types and covered a long span of time, from the Early Roman Iron Age to the beginning of the Viking Age. However, the majority could be dated to the Late Roman Iron Age and the early part of the Early Germanic Iron Age.

To the south of the building, several other objects that were part of a warrior's equipment were also found; most notable was an eyebrow arch from a magnificent 7th century helmet (Fig. 6).

The location of the house on the edge of a plateau may well have been deliberately chosen to provide a monumental setting. The house occupied a prominent position, from where it was visible over a wide area that stretched from the southwest to the southeast.

Indications of ritual activity in the vicinity of Uppåkra have been found in the bog called *Gullåkra mosse*, about 2 km to the southeast. Finds made during peat-cutting in the 19th century included Neolithic flint axes, a bronze lure dating to the early Bronze Age, a bronze torque from the Pre-Roman Iron Age and four Roman Iron Age spearheads (STJERNQUIST 2001). As these finds were accidentally recovered and included in a museum collection, the number of deposited artefacts may have been much higher. A metal-detector survey was undertaken, but the only finds were pieces of farming equipment that had been dropped in the old peat-cutting trenches. The bog at *Gullåkra mosse* may have been the site of ritual depositions over several centuries by the inhabitants of a wider region than just the immediate vicinity of Uppåkra.



Fig. 6. The eyebrow arch (68 mm) and two boar-shaped mountings (34 mm) from a magnificent helmet (photo B. Almgren, LUHM).

A SEQUENCE OF LARGE BUILDINGS

An excavation in 2006 yielded a revealing picture of the building to the west of the ceremonial building. In the course of this new excavation, layers of burnt clay were recorded less than 5 m to the west of the ceremonial building (Fig. 7). These proved to be walls made of daub, which had collapsed in-

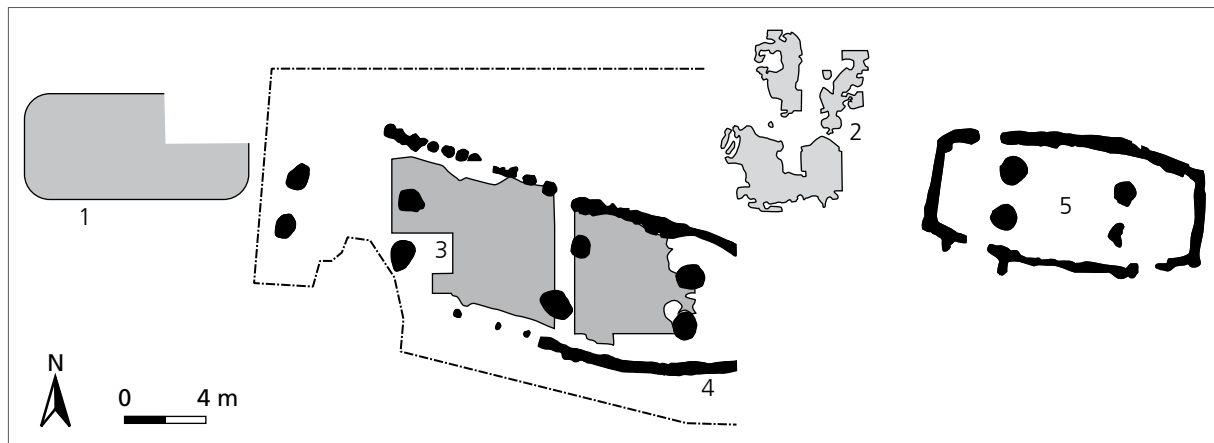


Fig. 7. The 2009 excavation plan. 1) gable of the burnt house excavated in 1934, dated to about AD 400; 2) burnt clay walls from a house dated to about AD 400; 3) parts of the floor of a burnt house from the Migration Period; 4) postholes from a large house of the Merovingian Period; 5) the cult house.

wards. When the trench was enlarged, the gable of a house that had burnt down in about AD 400 was identified. The most striking finds were the remains of three human beings who had died in the fire. Their bodies were found lying on the floor beneath the clay walls.

Further excavation in an area somewhat further to the south revealed two rows of large holes for roof-supporting posts that cut through the clay layers. The length of this large house cannot be determined as it continues beneath present-day farm buildings, but the recorded length is more than 30 m. Finds from the postholes of this large building can be dated to the 8th century AD. Due to ploughing, nothing remains of the floor of this building.

The heat-affected clay walls recorded previously could be connected with two or more buildings, dated to between the 5th and 8th century. So far, only parts of the clay layers have been excavated. It has been established that there are the remains of at least two large houses oriented in the same direction and of a size similar to the youngest one. In most cases the deep postholes show traces of having been reused several times. A rich find layer was discovered resting on the floor of the best-preserved building. It contained a number of fragments of glass vessels, some of the Snartemo type, thus dating the fire to the Migration Period (NÄSMAN 1984).

The finds also included gold objects, such as a ring made of several wires with a gold band wound around them and a gold bracteate. Fragments of clay vessels and a considerable quantity of carbonized seeds indicate a domestic use of the house.

However, the most remarkable finds were the remains of at least five human beings with traces of burning, thus proving that they had been burnt together with the house. The remains of a somewhat later building, also with traces of burning, have only been excavated to a very limited extent so far.

The area to the west of the ceremonial house does not relate only to domestic functions. The building closest to the ceremonial house, burnt during the late Roman Iron Age or early Migration Period with the remains of three human beings, is covered by a layer containing a considerable number of bones. Unarticulated parts of at least three persons were identified in this layer. Two samples from two different persons produced identical radiocarbon dates, 1660±50 BP (LuS 8339; LuS 8340), indicating that they died between 310 and 535 cal. AD. In addition, three gold bracteates and a gold pendant were found in the same layer (Fig. 8). These finds seem to be parts of a chain of bracteates, augmented with other pendants, which was deposited in this area.

Based on these finds, a tentative sequence of events can be suggested. The house, with at least three of its inhabitants, burnt down in the transition period between the Roman Iron Age and the Migration



Fig. 8. Two gold bracteates found above the remains of a burnt house, Ø 26 mm each (photo L. Larsson).

Period. Some of the victims may have been partially recovered, but more likely just left, and the area levelled. Less than a century later, a large number of bones, including human bones, were deposited together with the gold objects on top of the remains of the house. It is interesting to note that the age of these bone deposits agrees well with that of the bone deposits connected with the large number of deformed weapons found to the north of the ceremonial building. Here, the remains of at least two individuals were found. The human bones have been dated to between 400–610 cal. AD (1550±50, LuS 6252) and 540–680 cal. AD (1425±50, LuS 6253).

At about the same time as the deposition of the bones and gold objects, a large building was burnt down with at least five human beings. Two samples of human bone have been dated to between 130–585 cal. AD (1665±100, LuS 8376) and 380–600 cal. AD (1585±50 BP, LuS 8375). The disarticulated state of the body parts shows that some kind of disturbance occurred. This proves that the walls were standing for a certain time after the fire, yet valuable things like gold objects were not removed.

There seems to be a marked disparity between these two closely related areas – the distance is not more than about 5 m. The ceremonial building was rebuilt with the same layout at least six times during more than six hundred years (LARSSON/LENNTORP 2004). No evidence has been found of sudden changes, such as destruction by fire. This is proof that traditional behaviour patterns and regulations were followed – exceptional continuity for Iron Age buildings. In the domestic area, disaster struck in the shape of fire at least three times within about two hundred years. The number of such events might be even higher, as only parts of the area have been excavated. This presents a picture of an unstable society with a stable building for ritual and ceremonial purposes.

What is the explanation for these events, which led to the repeated burning of houses that, judging by their location, must have been part of an important residence at Uppåkra?

It must have been a dramatic takeover: the hall with some of its inhabitants was burnt down and the people were left to rot where they lay. The disarticulation of human body parts could be the result of animals entering the gutted building before it collapsed.

One explanation could be that the fire was the result of internal antagonisms. Several houses dating from the middle of the Iron Age and regarded as ‘halls’ show traces of burning: examples are the resi-

dences at Dejbjerg and Dankirke in Denmark, and probably at Helgö in central Sweden (JARL HANSEN 1990; CHRISTENSEN 1993; HERSCHEND 1995, 227; HANSEN 1996). But these examples do not contain the remains of humans who were burnt with the buildings: they seem, at least, to have been emptied of people before they were set on fire. In these cases, we may have evidence of the custom of setting fire to a house after it had ceased to serve its function – a custom that is found in much of the prehistory of Scandinavia (LARSSON 2009).

The Norse sagas include some accounts of how enemies or opponents were locked into houses that were set on fire, thereby eliminating a potential danger. Perhaps the best example is found in *Njáls saga* (1960, ch. 34).

The social system in force during the Migration Period seems to have been based on individual authority that might be questioned after a generation or two. Very few Germanic kingdoms were capable of perpetuating themselves for more than a couple of generations. This social order has been regarded as a cleptocracy within a martial society (FISCHER 2005). There were always wars going on, with threats of attacks or raids. However, these were small-scale affairs, mostly with a specific target, such as the destruction of a single hall or a single family. By defaming the defeated family, by not only killing them but also by burning their hall, the advent of a new leader was established by means of an action that was functional, but also symbolic.

Although there is a marked difference between the profane area to the west and the sacred area to the east, both areas have an accumulation of remains from a long sequence of house construction. The ceremonial house was rebuilt six times, and the remains of two more building stages were identified above and below these, i.e. a total of nine house generations. The evidence from some of the deep postholes of the large buildings to the west of the ceremonial house indicates at least ten house floors. The depth from the last to the earliest recorded surface is almost the same as that in the area with the ceremonial building, approximately 1.4 m. A date from the western area, 1945±50 BP (LuS 8635), 50 BC–180 AD, indicates that the earliest house there is about the same age as the one in the eastern area.

HALL BUILDINGS

In his recent book about the Early Iron Age of Southern Scandinavia, Herschend interprets the ceremonial building as a hall (HERSCHEND 2009, 255). There is great conceptual confusion about halls. Too often, houses of large size are identified without further ado as halls. Herschend, however, has determined five criteria for halls (HERSCHEND 1993, 182f.): (1) they are part of a large farm; (2) originally, they consisted of one room with a minimum number of posts; (3) they are singled out by their position on the farm; (4) the hearth was not used for cooking or crafts; (5) the objects found in the building are different from those found in the dwelling section of the main house on the farm. Other elements also accentuate the specific character of a hall, such as more entrances than a standard house would have, a prominent location and monumental graves in the vicinity. Herschend envisages different stages of hall architecture directly related to changes in its political and ritual importance. He identifies several embryonic halls towards the end of the Roman Iron Age, such as house 16 at Vallhagar and house VII at Ronnerum, both on the island of Gotland (HERSCHEND 1993, 184). Similar early halls are found in Jutland, such as Nørre Snede and Dankirke. These are rather small buildings with a maximum length of 20 m, while the main buildings of contemporary farms are 30–40 m in length (HVASS 1988, 70). The hall as such appears when rituals and ceremonies related to the local leader become activities included in those of a wider regional community. Thus the need emerges for a building where the representatives of aristocratic groups can meet, displaying their position of power by constructing a High Seat, for example. The location of entrances and exits in relation to the High Seat is determined by specific rules and customs. The function of openings and their location in the building not only depend on

power relationships between the living but are also of utmost importance in connection with visitors from an imaginary world. “Uppåkra is a chieftain’s hall and thus a well-known room also among those who were never invited to visit. It adheres to original hall values with little to remind one of a permanent dwelling” (HERSCHEND 2009, 255).

During the later part of the Iron Age, the hall became an extended hall – a dwelling house with several rooms and thus also part of the permanent living quarters, due to a growing concentration of power and maintaining of status (HERSCHEND 2009, 254). This is well illustrated by the two large buildings at Borg, Lofoten, northern Norway, dated to the Migration Period/early Merovingian Period and Viking Age respectively (HERSCHEND/MIKKELSEN 2003; JOHANSEN/MUNCH 2003). In both, a specific hall-room has been identified (HERSCHEND/MIKKELSEN 2003, Fig. 6A.19). In the latter, a structure 83 m long, the hall is represented by a room measuring 14 x 8 m, i.e. not much larger than the house at Uppåkra. Not until the Late Viking Age does there seem to be a need to move the ceremonial hall function into small free-standing buildings (HERSCHEND 2009, 370).

Some of the criteria for the definition of a hall presented by Herschend emphasize the ceremonial and ritual importance of such buildings (HERSCHEND 1993, 182). The hall as such appeared when rituals and ceremonies came to involve meetings of local leaders from a wider regional community.

Finds and find distribution have been used to emphasise the ritual function of ordinary longhouses and halls (CARLIE 2004). Gold-foil figures have been found in connection with halls, including the two successive buildings at Slöinge, southern Halland (LUNDQVIST 1996, 13ff.; 2003, 62ff.). At Toftegård, on Zealand, a gold-foil figure was found in a posthole of a building (TØRNBJERG 1998, 227). In the hall at Borg, northern Norway, high-status finds, including gold-foil figures and sherds of glass beakers, were found in the northeastern posthole (MUNCH 2003, Fig. 9H.13). Such finds are regarded as marking the location of the High Seat.

BUILDINGS OF IMPORTANCE FOR CEREMONIALS AND RITUALS

The connection between rituals and buildings in the late Iron Age is an intensely discussed archaeological topic (ANDRÉN 2002; LARSSON 2007). It is not until the Viking Age that buildings with a specific ritual function are described in the written sources – such as the temple at Uppsala (ADAM AV BREMEN 1984, SKL 138). The 12th century description of the Slavic temple at Arkona on Rügen is also of interest. The outer wall was covered with carvings, and a single entrance led into the structure, whose roof was supported by four wooden posts (Saxo GRAMMATICUS 1924, 49f.).

In earlier, as well as more recent excavations, the remains of features and buildings with a unique or difficult-to-classify structure have been interpreted as relating to ritual or ceremonial activities. During the excavation of a farmstead dated to the Viking Age at Borg, Östergötland, a small house measuring 7.5 x 6 m was identified (NIELSEN 1997, 381ff.). The house was divided into two rooms, with a passageway down the centre of the house. On a paved yard outside the entrance, 98 amulet rings and a large quantity of bones were found. The large proportion of skulls and jaws suggest that the animal bones were not ordinary food refuse, but rather the remains of sacrificial meals.

Some smaller buildings close to the large halls at Lejre and Tissø have been interpreted as structures of ritual importance (CHRISTENSEN 1991; JØRGENSEN 1998, 242ff.). They seem to represent a variety of building styles: square, rectangular or subcircular in shape (JØRGENSEN 1998, Fig. 10). Some include central roof-supporting posts, while others have only weight-bearing posts in the walls or wall trenches. Ritual activities are thought to have taken place here from the 6th century until the early 10th century (JØRGENSEN 2002, 234).

A similar relationship between a main building and an enclosed area has been documented at Järrestad, southeastern Scania, dating from the 8th century (SÖDERBERG 2005, 229). The presence of a number

of entrances, and a posthole deposit of a hammerhead and a socketed axe of iron, suggest a special identity for the house.

At Lunda in Södermanland, a small house with one row of roof-supporting posts about 10 m long was discovered. It was oriented parallel to the north wall of a longhouse 50 m in length (ANDERSSON et al. 2004, 14; SKYLLBERG 2008, 30). In the smaller building, a lightly-built structure, two small human figurines were found. The building is therefore presumed to have been some kind of cult house.

At Hov in eastern Norway, the partial excavation of a house, 15 m long, indicated a building of ritual importance (HARALDSEN 1998). In just a few test pits, a gold-foil figure and several strike-a-lights were found. A recent excavation has revealed additional finds of gold-foil figures.

Houses that have been linked to ritual or ceremonial activities differ considerably. Most of them are viewed as having been smaller than ordinary residential buildings. However, the shape, as well as the construction, varies. Some, like the buildings at Uppåkra, are extremely solid while others, as at Sanda, are described as lightly-built. Except for Tissø and Lejre, it seems difficult to identify similarities relating to common traditions or rules.

If they are to be interpreted as ceremonial buildings, one would expect to find much greater conformity. Ceremonies are intended for groups of people who share common values by taking part in a series of actions of special significance. This is not only of importance for local society, but perhaps even more so for events where representatives from different societies meet. Outsiders have to know how to behave in order to be accepted by the society they are being invited to join or by which they are confronted. Rituals might in some cases have developed out of local traditions; in other cases they could have been of regional or interregional origin.

NEW INTERPRETATIONS

Although some years have passed since the excavation was published, the interpretation of the ceremonial hall has only recently been questioned. The development identified by Herschend, from a special hall building to a residential building, did not take place at Uppåkra. The building was rebuilt several times, but not extended. Such extensions are exemplified by the remains found at powerful centres, which could afford to undertake such work (HERSCHELD 2009, 153). But why was the situation at Uppåkra so different from all other sites?

Herschend interprets the situation at Uppåkra in terms of a sequence of events that relates both to different stages of the houses and to the dating of the weapon deposits found mainly to the north of the building (HERSCHELD 2009, 372). He uses the chronology of the weapons to date the small building. The deposits seem to end in the 6th century. He suggests the following sequence of events.

Uppåkra was attacked, the defenders defeated and their weapons deposited next to the destroyed hall. "Ritually speaking Uppåkra combines battlefield and sacrifice as a manifestation of the end of an era. The hall was eventually built up again, but it hardly belonged to a place as central and dominant as before and probably to someone who, contrary to earlier lords, did not mind having the memorial battleground and the offerings next to his hall" (HERSCHELD 2009, 375). His interpretation of the destruction of the last hall as having occurred already in the late Migration Period has no relevance, especially in the light of the new radiocarbon dates for the bone finds in the postholes. In addition, the traces of destruction of the dwelling houses to the west are not comparable with the remains of the small building. Except for the traces of fire in the central area with one or two hearths, there is no evidence of destruction by fire. This is even more puzzling given that the distance to the burnt houses was between 5 and 10 m. A house built completely of wood must have been very easy to set on fire. On the contrary, the situation seems to suggest that efforts were made to prevent the building from catching fire. According to Herschend, the house may have been rebuilt, but then why keep to the

traditional shape and standard? Was the only reason for continuity simply that it "... commemorated victory rather than defeat" (HERSCHEID 2009, 375). Also, the new excavation indicates not one, but at least three separate episodes of the living quarters being destroyed by fire. The explanation presented by Herschend may fit into his understanding of the social processes of the Iron Age, but seems at times to be somewhat far-fetched.

THE NAME UPPÅKRA

Uppåkra is first mentioned as *Upaccri* in a donation letter to the cathedral in Lund from the Danish king KNUT, dated 1085 (1985). In the letter the king donates 4½ hides (*bol*) in southern Uppåkra and the same amount in the other Uppåkra. These names might relate to the existing villages Stora (Great) Uppåkra and Lilla (Small) Uppåkra at the northern and southern ends of the prehistoric site. The name Uppåkra means 'the fields on the hill'. If it relates directly to a description of the landscape it could either be very old, since the 40 ha site was used for settlement or other purposes from about AD 100, or very young, dating to the 11th century, when the settlement was abandoned.

It might also be a theophoric name meaning the metaphorical fields in heaven, in contrast to the underground fields in the realm of the dead (ANDRÉN 1990, 142).

Another explanation is based on the saga of the well-known poet and warrior Egill Skallagrímsson, written down in about 1200 (*Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* 1938, 103ff.). According to this saga, Egill Skallagrímsson and his men were passing northwards through the strait of Öresund when he asked the crew whether there was anything to plunder. He was told that there was a town on the eastern coast. So, after some debate, they anchored and attacked the town, plundering and burning it. According to the saga, the name of the town was Lund (*Lundar*). It is stated that the attack took place shortly after the death of King Gorm, which occurred in about 960. At that time, the town of Lund did not exist. The earliest find from the town of Lund, situated 4 km to the north of Uppåkra, is a coffin dated to about 990. This is the most important reason why, for a century, historians have not regarded this part of the saga as a historical description (WEIBULL 1910). We now know that an urban site existed here in the 10th century. As is also known, a name can be transferred from one site to another, as with Old Uppsala and Uppsala in central Sweden. Consequently, Uppåkra might have been referred to as Lund or Lundar, which should be regarded as theophoric names. Apart from this, theophoric names seem to be almost non-existent in the region around Uppåkra (HALLBERG 1991).

That some form of memory of the prehistoric settlement still existed hundreds of years after the disappearance of the site is indicated by the field maps of the village of Stora Uppåkra in 1776 and Lilla Uppåkra in 1703 (RIDDERSPORRE 1998, Fig. 5). In the southern and northern parts of the former and latter, respectively, the fields are named *Toftåkrar* (Toft fields). At the time when the maps were drawn, a *toft* was the name of the area closest to the farm, used for a special purpose such as gardening. However, the *Toftåkrar* are in the most peripheral areas of the village maps, but coincide well with the central area of the prehistoric settlement.

GRAVES AND CEMETERIES

Despite the size and continuity of the settlement, the number of graves within the settlement and its vicinity is small. A man's grave with a comb and three vessels dated to the Roman Iron Age was found in the central area when the farm was established in the 1930s. A vessel and a socketed iron axe found in the churchyard could also be the remains of a grave.

Five inhumation graves, as well as cremation burials, dating to the Roman Iron Age were found while digging a water conduit on a ridge about 500 m to the east (STJERNQUIST 1996, 101ff.). Despite the later removal of topsoil in trenches at the find-spot, no further graves have been found (LARSSON 2003, 12). Two mounds, *Lillehög* in the south and *Storehög* in the north, are still visible within the settlement. A third mound, indicated by the remains of a ring of stones, was observed a few metres to the north of *Storehög*. A fourth mound, in the churchyard, is said to have been removed in the 18th century already. According to a written report, a grave containing objects dating to the Roman Iron Age was found in a mound at Uppåkra: unfortunately, we do not know which mound. The mounds may date from the Bronze Age, but an Early Iron Age date cannot be ruled out. The largest mound, *Storehög*, has a flat top, which could indicate an Iron Age origin. There is still no sign of a large cemetery or cemeteries that could have served a larger number of the inhabitants of Uppåkra!

FINAL REMARKS

The architecture and contents of the ceremonial building are remarkable, with no true equivalents in Iron Age Scandinavia. It formed part of a residence of major importance within the Uppåkra settlement. It seems to have had a special status, not only in the eyes of the owner of the residence, as it was not burnt down despite the repeated destruction by fire of the large houses in its immediate vicinity. It seems to have been used for more than seven centuries (approx. AD 200–950) and was rebuilt several times with the same layout.

During this period, society experienced considerable changes in its social structure as well as in its world-view. Nevertheless, the building continued to be used, retaining a concept that dated from the 3rd century AD. To call the structure a ‘home of the gods’ is to suggest just one of probably several purposes. For example, there is no evidence to indicate that statues of any of the gods were located in the building, as was the case at Gamla Uppsala and Arkona. However, one has to remember that the building at Uppåkra was demolished at least a century before the references to the two other sites were written. The ceremonial building might have been the venue for rituals for the purpose of making contact with the gods and other divine beings, but its main use was probably for ceremonies in honour of the ancestors, of special meaning to a small group of people in leading positions.

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