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Varpelev, Denmark – Evidence of Roman Diplomacy?

Introduction

The Roman Iron Age of Denmark covers the period roughly from the birth of Christ to the end of the 4th century AD. As elsewhere in the *Barbaricum*, this period is marked by the massive appearance of Roman objects mainly in the form of silver coins and tableware in bronze, glass and silver. But the region was also influenced by a number of technological and intellectual advances through the contact with the Romans. Regarding daily life, we see an increase in the size of farm animals, and new species such as cats and chicken appear, as well as a range of new crops. Research of Germanic textiles has shown an inspiration from Roman design. In the 2nd century AD, Germanic writing appears for the first time in the form of runes used in a way known from the Romans, as owner's or craftsman's marks on weapons or personal objects¹.

The main tools to analyse these contacts have been Roman coins and tableware. The flow of these find groups into the *Barbaricum* is specialised throughout the period. In various regions, only certain types of vessels appear and a random selection of items only occurs in areas close to the Roman frontier. Unsurprisingly, that indicates a dominance of petty trade among neighbours. In southern, central or northern *Barbaricum* the selections of goods differ from each other. While certain types such as, for instance, the ladle-and-sieve sets are popular in most parts of *Barbaricum*, other forms are only represented in specific areas. Terra sigillata, mainly from the Gallic workshops, is one such type which apparently had no appeal to the Germanic peoples in Scandinavia, while it was relatively popular in other regions. In southern Scandinavia, the selection of Roman types of tableware is limited to few such as ladle-and-sieves, cooking pans, *situlae* and drinking vessels with the occasional exception².

Coins are also found in a limited number in Scandinavia, only c. 12.000 in all for the entire period, and c. 10.000 of these are hoard finds. To compare, more than 60.000 Roman coins have emerged in the Vistula delta in Poland, incidentally, a country where, unlike Denmark, a modern tool like the metal detector has not yet been put to good use. The Roman coins from Scandinavia also constitute a limited selection, as they are almost exclusively *denarii*³.

In short, while the coins show the arrival of a limited selection, the imported tableware relates to a specific purpose belonging to the guest banquet and the Germanic chieftain's meeting with his equals in the drinking ritual.

¹ IMER 2007, 47–8; JENSEN 2003, 339–65, 391–412.

² LUND HANSEN 1987.

³ BURSCHE 2002, 69–73.

For the continental Germanic area a concentration of Roman tableware in Germanic élite graves is seen as a clear indication of diplomatic contacts to the Romans.⁴ Recent research shows that that should be the case no less for élite graves found in Denmark, which incidentally is the only region in *Barbaricum* with élite graves containing Roman luxury tableware in all periods of the Roman Iron Age⁵.

Connections in the late 2nd and 3rd century AD

At the time of the Marcomannic wars, in the second half of the 2nd century AD, a dynasty established itself at Him-lingøje on southeastern Zealand as the first Germanic power centre in the Late Roman Iron Age (fig. 1). Through allies along the sea route from Zealand to the Rhine, strong connections to Köln, the provincial capital of *Germania Inferior*, were obtained and upheld for at least 150 years with a 'golden age' in the first half of the 3rd century AD. This involved a monopoly on the supply of Roman luxury tableware to Scandinavia, as testified by the quality and distribution pattern throughout the Late Roman Iron Age from the middle of the 2nd to the end of the 4th century AD⁶.

However, the 'Golden Age' of Zealand was interrupted by the so-called crisis of the Roman Empire in the middle of the 3rd century AD.

Part of the difficulties experienced by the Romans during the 3rd century AD was the Barbarians' annoying habit of attacking and raiding the peace-loving Roman people. This normally happened at least, when an Emperor died. And they all did just that on a regular and frequent basis. The pattern that emerges from this practice is an indication that the diplomatic contact to the Germanic chieftains constituted a personal contract between the chieftains and the Emperor. Therefore, each new ruler had to deal with renewed attacks on the Empire, as the Germanic chieftains were not compelled to honour a treaty made with a deceased Emperor⁷.

The most visible diplomatic contacts are reflected in the Haßleben-Leuna horizon, which is limited to the second half of the 3rd and the beginning of the 4th century AD. The materialisation of this horizon appears to happen at the expense of the Himlingøje horizon, as the Zealand dynasty was cut off from Köln in AD 260, when Postumus made it the capital of the 'Gallic Empire'. The Zealandic chieftain was replaced as an ally to the western provinces by the 'Haßleben-Leuna centre' in central *Germania* (fig. 1). A strong connection between this centre and the 'Gallic Empire' has been documented among other things by certain types of silver vessels and by an overweight of 'Gallic' *aurei* in the graves. When present, official Roman coins never



Fig. 1 - Map of key sites mentioned in the article.

⁴ WOLTERS 1995, 116.

⁵ GRANE 2007, 279–80.

⁶ LUND HANSEN *ET ALII* 1995, 385–416.

⁷ GRANE 2007, 276.

post-date the 'Gallic Empire' indicating that the alliance came to a halt, when the 'Gallic Empire' was dissolved by the emperor Aurelian in AD 274. The flow of Roman vessels to Scandinavia diminishes drastically at the rise of Haßleben and Leuna. Once Postumus usurped power of the western part of the Empire in AD 260, he found that he could get what he needed in means of military support or Germanic allies from the middle Elbe region. Quite possibly such an alliance could have been the result of a peace agreement between the two sides, once Postumus had cleaned up his side of the Rhine. A treaty would have made other alliances redundant and most likely too expensive to uphold. Once the Emperor Aurelian had regained control of the Gallic Empire in AD 274 the situation changed. The Emperor may not have trusted the diplomatic alliances of the 'Gallic Empire'. As stated, such an alliance would have been personal, and the Emperor might have had reason to be concerned that they would remain loyal to the last 'Gallic Emperors', Tetricus I and II, whom Aurelian had reinstated in Roman society. Therefore, he sent the Haßleben-Leuna warriors packing. That would have left a vacuum, and following this scenario, it is my hypothesis that this gap could have been filled at some point by a brief re-establishment of earlier relations between the Romans and eastern Zealand, which, at this time, would once again be useful to the Romans.

This hypothesis is supported by the fact that no 'Gallic' coins are found in Scandinavia, except one from Postumus from a hoard find. What has been found is a number of *aurei* from Probus, of which most are hoard finds and one example comes from Varpelev grave *a*. That Probus did make use of Germanic *foederati* is attested by the literary sources, but naturally we cannot deduce from where they originated (Scripores Historiae Augustae *Probus* 18.5)⁸.

Varpelev

In the first decades of the 4th century AD, the last members of the Himlingøje dynasty were to be inhumed in a visually magnificent fashion. The two, a man and a woman, were buried near the present village of Varpelev, just a few kilometres from the Himlingøje site (fig. 1). The gravesite consisted of around thirty graves, but only two were richly furnished⁹.

Grave a

The most spectacular of these was grave *a*. The deceased, an adult male, based on the anthropological remains, had been given a large amount of jewellery as well as high quality Roman vessels. The most spectacular object was a blue glass bowl that had been blown into the openwork frame of a silver *kantharos*, decorated with wine leaves and rosettes (fig. 2). Near the rim, in openwork, was the Greek word 'ΕΥΤΥΧΩC', meaning 'for (your) happiness'. Most likely of Syrian origin, the only parallel to this masterpiece is in the Hermitage museum in St. Petersburg. Apart from this, the grave contained three other high quality glasses and a glass phial (fig. 3).

The phial was an unguent container, known from most parts of the Empire and almost exclusively related to Roman burials in the 4th or 5th century AD. The Varpelev example is broken in both ends. Possibly, the top had been heat sealed, why the neck had to be broken, when the content was used perhaps at the fu-



Fig. 2 - Varpelev, grave *a*. Roman *kantharos* of blue glass blown into an openwork frame of silver, decorated with wine leaves and rosettes. Photo: The National Museum of Denmark/Lennart Larsen.

⁸ GRANE 2007, 126–31, 276; WERNER 1973, 21.

⁹ ENGELHARDT 1877, 349–59; LUND HANSEN 1987, 65, 122 note 13, 416; 2006, 77–80.

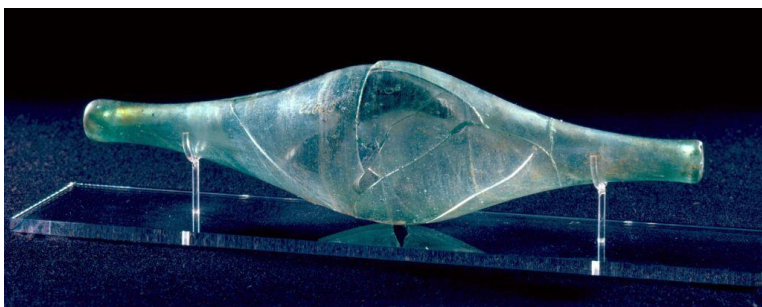


Fig. 3 - Varpelev, grave a. Roman phial. Photo: The National Museum of Denmark/Lennart Larsen.



Fig. 4 - Varpelev, grave a. Gold jewellery. Arm or neck ring with snake's head terminals, two finger rings, a pin and an aureus with an eyelet from the reign of Probus (AD 276-82). Photo: The National Museum of Denmark/Kit Weiss.

right ear was an aureus with an eyelet from the reign of Probus (AD 276-82). On his right hand he had two gold finger rings (fig. 4).

Furthermore, there were three silver buckles and a strap end fitting of silver (fig. 5). Two of the buckles, a large and a small, as well as a strap end fitting were found at the waist of the deceased. The last small buckle was located above his head. While the two buckles and the strap end fitting could have belonged to the personal belt and the military belt, such as identified by J. Ilkjær through the material from the war booty sacrifices, the third buckle is harder to explain¹¹. The shape of the military belt buckle and strap end fitting highly resemble late Roman examples from the middle of the 4th century AD, although no exact matches can be found. A considerably more elaborate example from the 4th century comes from the war booty sacrifice at Nydam.

The Varpelev set is not as elaborate as is often seen in the 4th century AD, which could indicate that the Varpelev warrior may have been the owner of an early example. The closest parallels are an undecorated piece from grave 2 at Monceau-le-Neuf

neral itself. That is the theory concerning other examples. According to H.E.M. Cool, this type of container may have had something to do with cults believing in an afterlife, such as those of Mithras and Bacchus or Christianity. In a richly furnished 4th century grave from Zülpich-Enzen such a phial was accompanied by a colourless glass skyphos decorated with wine leaves with the greek inscription: 'ZHCAIC KAAOC', 'May you live well'¹⁰.

What we find in Varpelev grave a, is a combination of a pair of Roman glass vessels, unique in *Barbaricum*, which reflect specific Roman burial customs.

The only bronze vessel in the grave was a platter. Also belonging to the banquet sphere were two silver fittings from what was probably a signal horn, although it has until now been described as a drinking horn.

By the neck of the deceased lay a gold arm or neck ring with snake's head terminals and a gold pin. By the

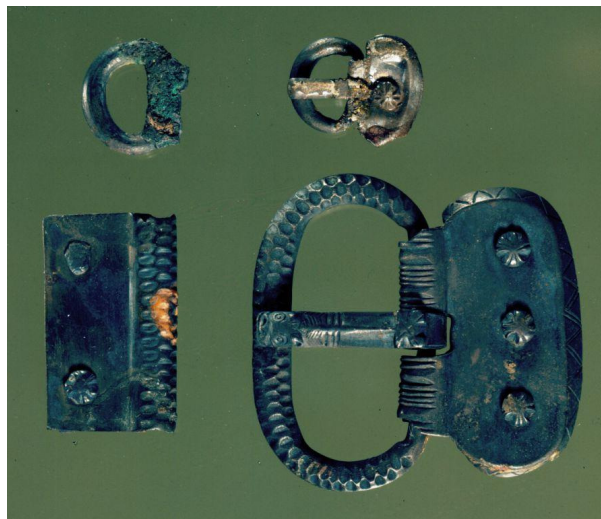


Fig. 5 - Varpelev, grave a. Silver buckles and belt end terminal of late Roman military style. Photo: The National Museum of Denmark/Kit Weiss.

¹⁰ COOL 2002, 144–5.

¹¹ ILKJÆR 1993, 373–4.

in northern France and one with punched decoration on the bow from grave 2922 from Krefeld-Gellep¹².

One type of Late Roman belt also had a shoulder strap. For this there is evidence in a grave from Oudenburg¹³. Although the shoulder strap buckles are normally rhomboid, a small buckle was found in grave 2991 from Krefeld-Gellep¹⁴.

Both Krefeld-Gellep graves belong to the late Roman part of the cemetery, while the Monceau-le-Neuf grave contained a silver coin from the reign of Constantius II (AD 337-61)¹⁵. Possibly a shoulder strap could explain the extra buckle in grave *a*. If this were the case, then the Varpelev warrior might have been equipped with a Late Roman style military belt. Also in this light, the Varpelev grave may prove important.

At a follow-up investigation, two silver fingerings, a square double silver plate and another silver plate were found. He also had 42 gaming pieces of bone and four bear's claws with him. All in all, these grave goods make Varpelev grave *a* the richest grave in Denmark from the 2nd half of the 3rd and beginning of the 4th century AD.

Grave *a* not only has a high resemblance of a Roman provincial burial, but it also has a likeness to the contemporary rich graves of the Haßleben-Leuna horizon. These graves, as mentioned, have been connected to the 'Gallic Emperors' of the late 3rd century AD based, among other things, on the dominating presence of 'Gallic' *aurei* and the fact that no *aurei* were later than the last 'Gallic Emperor'¹⁶. In grave *a*, the *aureus* was minted under Probus. This coin combined with strong Roman provincial element of the grave, indicate that diplomatic relations had once again been initiated between the Romans and eastern Zealand.

Grave *a*

This image is enhanced, if the evidence of grave *a* is combined with that of the other rich grave from Varpelev, grave *a* (alfa). Grave *alfa* is contemporary with grave *a*, and contained an adult female and a large amount of gold jewellery among other things. Although one should be cautious with such suggestions, I will risk proposing a scenario in which we interpret the two deceased as closely related, for instance, husband and wife.

Apart from an amber bead necklace and a gilt swastika fibula with an amber rosette, the jewellery consisted of a gold snake's head fingering, a gold hair pin with three pelta-shaped pendants, and a Roman gold finger ring (fig. 6).

The gold ring of Beckmann type 17b had a blue gem, although it was not engraved. Although Christa Beckmann believed this type to be Germanic, Kent Andersson, giving this type of ring a thorough examination, placed the origin in the Roman province of *Pannonia*.

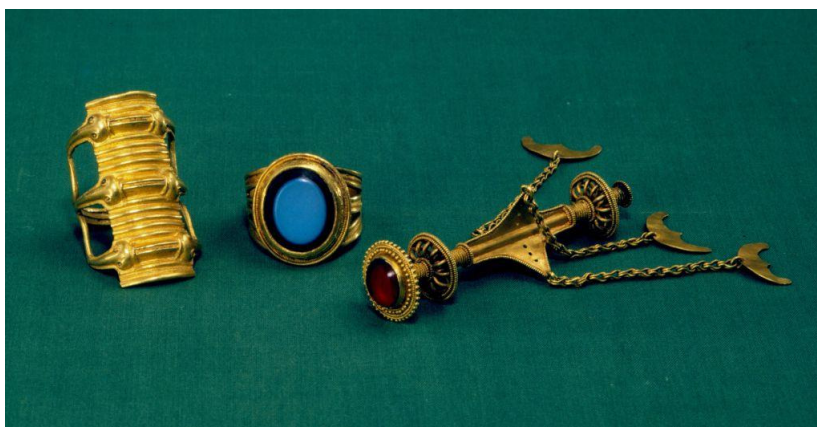


Fig. 6 - Varpelev, grave *a*. Gold jewellery. Finger ring with snake's heads, hair pin with pelta-shaped pendants and a red carneole and a Roman finger ring with blue carneole. Photo: The National Museum of Denmark/Kit Weiss.

¹² BÖHME 1974, pls. 130–1, map 19.37; PIRLING 1989: 49, pls. 7.3–5.

¹³ BULLINGER 1969, 60–1, fig. 47.3, pl. LXVIII, 3.

¹⁴ BULLINGER 1969, fig. 49.1; PIRLING 1989: 57–8, pls. 12.2–8.

¹⁵ PIRLING 1979, BEILAGE 1; WERNER 1949: 250–1.

¹⁶ See discussion above.

How does this ring relate to the Romans in particular? Andersson has suggested that the Roman rings may have functioned as Roman *dona*, gifts to Germanic chieftains from Romans.

Gold rings in the Roman society were originally reserved for the *nobiles* and *equites Romani*, members of the senatorial and the equestrian order. During the Principate their use was widened to include all with Roman citizenship. The gift of a ring from a Roman commander to a Germanic prince could be a reflection of the patron-client relationship¹⁷. For instance, the work of L. Allason-Jones in the Sudan has shown that rings could have been given as diplomatic gifts to the leaders of Rome's neighbours¹⁸. Perhaps it could even have been a token of the granting of Roman citizenship. The Byzantine emperor Konstantinos Porphyrogenitos († AD 959) reports that the Emperor Constantine gave away gold finger rings to loyal *Barbari* (Konstantinos Porphyrogenitos 53.191).

Although the significance of the ring might have changed once it entered *Barbaricum*, I find it very likely that whoever gave it away, would have done so in concordance with his own belief and that the ring symbolised either a personal or official friendship. Therefore, I agree with Andersson, who states that to see the Roman rings as indications of direct contact between Romans and Scandinavians does not seem too farfetched¹⁹.

If it was a gift from a Roman, it is my impression that it would have been given to a man as a token of friendship from one head of a household to another, whether this household was a family or a tribe. However, once the Roman objects entered *Barbaricum* their meaning or symbolic value may have changed. Therefore, the husband could have given it to his wife later. Another possibility is that she got it after his death.

Considering the grave goods of Roman origin from grave *a*, and the combined value of the two graves including local 'insignia' such as a snake's head neck and finger ring, a swastika *fibula*, as well as three other finger rings of gold and two of silver, two gold pins, an *aureus*, a military belt with silver buckles and a signal horn, I believe that this scenario is possible.

The political implications

The assemblage from Varpelev did most certainly not come out of the ordinary Germanic prince's order catalogue of Roman luxury items. The uniqueness and special composition of objects, with which any provincial Roman patrician would proudly be inhumed, indicates close connections to the Romans and a knowledge of their cults. At the same time the presence of a magnificent military belt and a signal horn shows the prince's significance as a military commander. If we view the site in the same light as the Haßleben-Leuna centre, the Probus *aureus* could indicate a re-installation of earlier relations. Incidentally, this hypothesis is supported by the fact that no 'Gallic' *aurei* found their way to Scandinavia. A Roman gold ring was originally a status marker for the *nobiles* and the *equites*, and later a sign of Roman citizenship. Such a ring given to a Germanic prince could be a *dona militaris* or a token to seal a personal or official friendship, or possibly a patron-client relationship, between the prince and a Roman governor or the Emperor, such as is stated above regarding the Emperor Constantine.

Did the Varpelev prince in fact ride with Constantine along with the imperial court as an ally in the early decades of the 4th century, picking up 'local' customs and precious objects as he travelled across the Roman Empire? Perhaps he even reached the eastern provinces, before he returned home in time to be buried as the last ruler of the dynasty of southeastern Zealand, ally to Rome for almost 150 years? That may not be for archaeologists to say, but it is nevertheless an intriguing idea.

It is clear, though, that one of his markers of military rank, the silver belt, is one of, if not *the* earliest known example of a type, which was to be adopted by the late Roman army as the dominant military belt

¹⁷ ANDERSSON 1985, 135–9; HURSCHEMANN 2001, 1021.

¹⁸ L. Allason-Jones, Newcastle: Personal communication.

¹⁹ ANDERSSON 1985, 137.

worn by Roman officers in the late 4th and 5th century AD. This belt form and style with animal decorations like those on the pin of the Varpelev example was brought along by Germanic warriors in Roman service. By way of the grave assemblage the Varpelev prince is placed in the centre of the changes that transformed both the Roman and the Germanic world in the 4th century AD.

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