

The Iron Age ritual building at Uppåkra, southern Sweden

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Six years ago we reported the discovery of a central place at Uppåkra in southern Sweden which promised to be unusually rich and informative (Hårdh 2000). At 40ha it already stood out as the largest concentration of residual phosphate in the whole province of Scania, with surface finds of Roman and late Iron Age metalwork (second-tenth century AD). Following this thorough evaluation, the project moved into its excavation phase which has brought to light several buildings of the first millennium AD, among them one that has proved truly exceptional. Its tall structure and numerous ornamented finds suggest an elaborate timber cult house. This is the first Scandinavian building for which the term 'temple' can be justly claimed and it is already sign-posting new directions for the early middle ages in northern Europe.

Keywords: Scandinavia, Sweden, late Iron Age, Roman, Migration period, Merovingian period, Viking period, ritual, religion, temple

Introduction

In Iron Age Scandinavia (500 BC-AD 1000), research priority has been given to in-depth analyses of societal conditions during the last decades. There has been lively discussion of topics such as the concentration of political power and socio-economic relations as well as the composition of religious belief including the introduction of Christianity (Gräslund 2001; Price 2002; Nordberg 2003). Research has focused on studies of the significance of certain places as centres in political, economic and religious spheres of interest (Hedeager 2001; 2002; Sundqvist 2002; 2004; Näsman & Roesdahl 2003; Zachrisson 2004b). In Denmark, research has shown how regional political groupings made themselves felt in the middle part of the Roman Iron Age and then become fully distinct in the Migration period (Mortensen & Rasmussen 1988; 1991; Hedeager 1990; 2000; Näsman 1998). From this period we should thus be able to speak of an incipient establishment of what would later, following continental European models, develop into large, coherent states. The magnate and his retinue expressed a new political force in which the initiative for change was to a large extent transferred from the kindred to leading persons or families. In the Migration period and the Merovingian period (AD 400-800) we notice increasingly strong influence from emerging central powers (Näsman 2000). A radical transformation of society is reflected in increased trade, the beginnings of urbanisation, and a change of world view.

While research had been done in both Denmark and central Sweden (Arrhenius & Eriksson 1997; Herschend 1997; Price 2002; Fabech 1994; 1999), the intermediate area,

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that is southern Sweden, had not been credited with the role or attracted the interest that the area must have enjoyed by virtue of its location and its contacts. But in 1996 the research project entitled 'The Social Structure of Southern Sweden during the Iron Age' was initiated. The aim of the project was an investigation of the concepts of central place and power, using, on the one hand, the material expressions of power, such as large farms or the control of highly skilled craftsmen and, on the other hand, the effects of power in steering the exchange of goods (Helgesson 2002). Research into ideology was not emphasised in the initial planning as it was hardly expected that much more could be added to the intensive debate that was going on. Ideological expressions were frequent in the find material, such as the decoration on brooches, but true structures of major importance for religious practice had been ruled out as implausible for decades (Olsen 1966).

Investigations at Uppåkra

The Uppåkra site, situated approximately 5km south of Lund, served as a focus because of its special structure and find material (Figure 1). The site was first recognised in 1934 during building works. A minor excavation revealed occupation layers with a thickness of more than 2m (Vifot 1936; Stjernquist 1996). Small rescue excavations in connection with development work in the form of road widening, house building, or digging for pipelines, along with field surveys, have revealed occupation remains dating from the entire Iron Age. They cover an area of approximately 1.1 × 0.6km – the largest occupation site known so far in southern Sweden (Hårdh 2000, Figure 3). When the 1996 project started, the remains from Uppåkra were felt to have significant potential.

Metal-detector surveys and small excavations were undertaken in the initial phase of the project in 1997-2000, showing the extent and complexity of the Uppåkra site to be even greater than initially expected. The metal detector surveys yielded almost 20 000 finds, suggesting a settlement sequence that starts in the late part of the Pre-Roman Iron Age and continues until the Viking Age (Hårdh 2000; 2003). The occupation zone now extends over 40ha. The largest variety of metal finds, chronologically and technically, was found in an area to the south of the church of Stora Uppåkra. Part of this area lay on a ridge that today is the highest elevation within the settlement, and the material included artefacts of precious metal showing skilled craftsmanship, as well as finds made of special material, such as fragments of glass beakers (Stjernquist 1999).

Excavation was started there in 1999 and continued with intensive fieldwork in 2001-2005 (Larsson & Lenntorp 2004). During 2001, excavations on a larger scale began with the stripping of topsoil by machine within two main areas (Figure 2). The largest stripped area (the most northerly) revealed traces of several house structures (not on plan). Ploughing had seriously damaged the structures, but parts of floors, collapsed clay walls, ovens and accumulations of loom weights could be documented in post-built houses dating to the Merovingian period and Viking Age. The houses are relatively small, with a length of between 12 and 20m. A sunken-floor hut which is dated to late in the Viking Age had a depth of only about 0.1m. This suggests considerable ploughing-off and levelling of the latest occupation layers on the site.

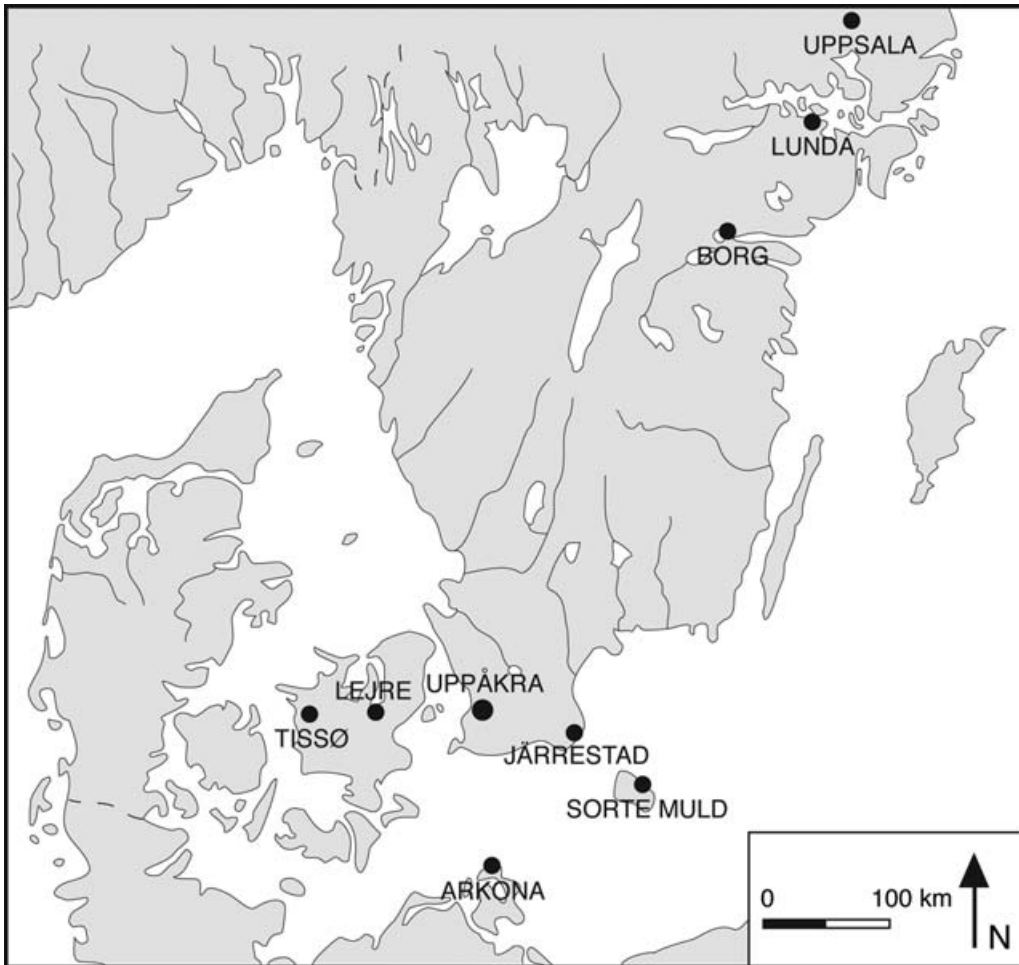


Figure 1. Southern Scandinavia with Uppåkra and other sites mentioned in the text.

The ritual building

During topsoil removal in the southern trench, the remains of a small building stood out clearly in contrast to the surrounding occupation layer. The building's remains were so well preserved that the plan could be established immediately after being exposed by the initial topsoil clearing. The house had straight gables and slightly convex walls. It was 13.5m long and 6m wide, and four large interior post-holes, placed in pairs, had supported the roof (Figure 3). The dark post-hole fills as well as the fills for the wall-trenches were clearly visible against the yellow clay of the floor surface. The house had three entrances, one facing north and two facing south. The south-west entrance had two enlargements that probably relate to a small entrance structure. In the centre of the house were the remains of a fireplace. Obviously, this was a distinctive building.

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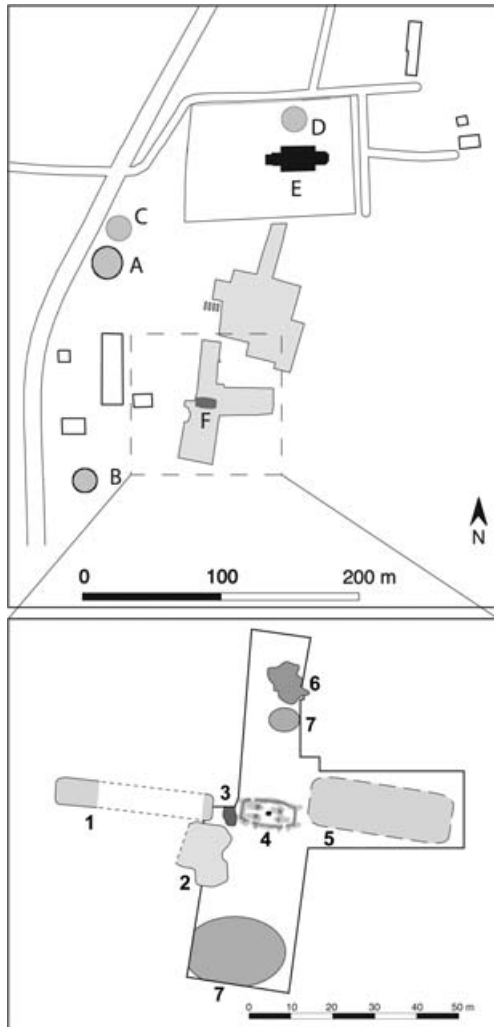


Figure 2. Above: The excavation areas within Uppåkra during the field campaigns 2001-2004 (grey shading). A-B: mounds; C-D: destroyed mounds; E: present church; F: the special building. Below: The location of features around the cultic building. 1: house partly excavated in 1934 and in 2006; 2: stone paving; 3: concentration of fire-cracked stones and bones; 4: the house sequences; 5: area with several long-houses; 6: concentrations of weapons; 7: sparse distribution of weapons

A yard with an exceptional abundance of finds surrounded the building. The surface was littered with an accumulation of fire-cracked stones and a considerable number of artefacts. The initial excavation of the building also involved a metal detector scan. In the floor surface, south of the fireplace, was a rare cache consisting of a metal beaker and a glass bowl (Larsson 2001; Hårdh 2004; Stjernquist 2004a). Stratigraphic analysis indicates that these items had been deposited while the building was in use, since the clay floor had been dug up to deposit the beaker and bowl. The clay floor had then been patched and levelled over the offering pit.

Subsequent excavation revealed a very complex sequence of layers, suggesting that a high timbered building, with a stave-wall structure, had been built and rebuilt in seven major phases. The form and structure of the stave-house buildings were closely maintained throughout the sequence, which spanned several generations. It was only in the south-west corner and in the eastern gables that minor parts of the wall trench shifted slightly in location over time. The number of entrances, as well as their locations, was the same throughout the building sequence.

Most of the phases included a centrally located fireplace, but a couple of instances of double fireplaces were documented. Fireplaces were indicated by red-burnt clay and ash and charcoal concentrations but without special delimitation. In some of the phases, pits containing embers were found.

The stave-wall structure also included pits for four sturdy posts and wall trenches. The four posts were placed in each corner of the structure. The four additional posts mentioned above were placed in pairs in the interior of the building as roof supports. The pits for the large posts had depths of about 2m (Figure 4). In three of the inner post-holes, stone packing was found, showing that the posts had a diameter of at least 0.7m. The corner post-holes had the same dimension as the inner post-holes. In the bottom of the wall trenches were obvious depressions indicating the use

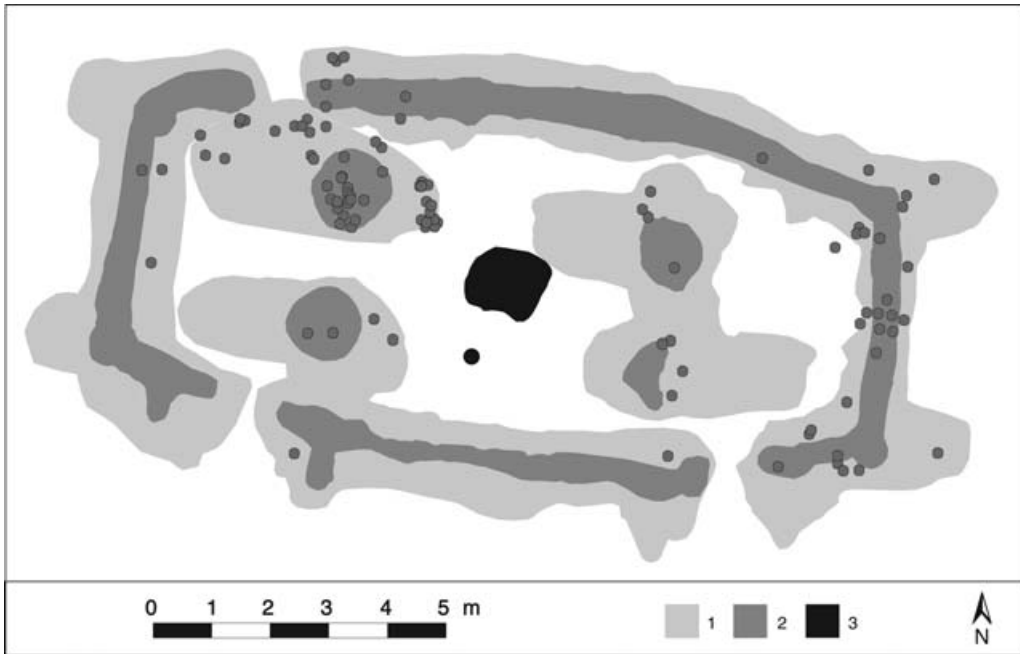


Figure 3. Plan of the special building. 1: pits; 2: roof-supporting posts and walls; 3: fireplace. The ritual deposition of a beaker made of bronze and silver as well as a glass bowl is marked by a black dot. The grey dots mark the positions of the gold-foil figures. This plan is a combination of the last phase of the building – the post-holes and the wall-trenches, while the floor has been ploughed away. The remaining inner part of the house with the fireplace belong to the second-last stage.



Figure 4. The holes for the roof-supporting posts, like this one in the north-western part of the building, were about 2m deep.

of the stave technique. The oldest clay floor had been laid on the ancient ground surface. However, this floor sealed four post-holes, indicating an earlier traditional long-house, the floor of which was not intact. The post-holes of the earlier long-house were ovoid, with dimensions of 0.9 by 0.3m, an unusually large size for an Early Iron Age building. Radiocarbon dating shows that the first building in the sequence of seven was built in the third century AD (Table 1). Finds associated with the latest intact stave house indicate that it was in use into the early Viking Age. Thus the structural sequence extended over more

than six hundred years. The type of building with slightly curved sides and large posts at the corners fits very well into a local building tradition in southern Sweden during the Late Roman period and the Migration period (Artursson 2005). However, the long sequence and the oversized support of posts and walls make it unique.

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Table 1. The radiocarbon dates from the cult house and bones of probably sacrificed animal and humans

Lab no.	Material	Value BP	Context
Ua-22073	Charcoal	2080 ± 45	The fossil surface
Lu S 6246	Charcoal	1880 ± 50	The earliest building
Lu S 6248	Charcoal	1785 ± 50	First stage of high timbered building
Lu S 6249	Bone	1730 ± 50	First stage of high timbered building
Lu S 6247	Charcoal	1745 ± 50	Third stage of high timbered building
Lu S 6250	Bone	1620 ± 50	Fifth stage of high timbered building
Lu S 6244	Charcoal	1590 ± 50	Fifth stage of high timbered building
Lu S 6251	Tooth from <i>Bos taurus</i>	1585 ± 50	Sacrificial deposition
Lu S 6252	Tooth from <i>Homo</i>	1550 ± 50	Sacrificial deposition
Lu S 6253	Bone from <i>Homo</i>	1425 ± 50	Sacrificial deposition

Finds of special character

The finds from the floors were numerous. They included fibulae, beads, fragments of crucibles and potsherds, dating from the Pre-Roman Iron Age up to the Viking period. Among the finds from the stove-house sequence, some groups of objects have a character or a distribution that might be especially relevant for understanding its role in the Iron Age occupation at Uppåkra. First of all, we may consider the beaker and the glass bowl deposited below the floor level of the second-last stove building (Figure 5). The beaker is made of bronze and silver, covered with embossed gold bands with figurative representations of humans, snakes and horses. These figures are represented on other contemporary objects but it has not been possible to identify them with any special event known from Norse mythology. The beaker was probably produced around AD 500, perhaps on the site itself (Hårdh 2004).

The glass bowl is made of two layers of glass, a colourless transparent under-layer and a cobalt blue overlay, which is cut so that the bands form a rosette with petals encircling the body (Stjernquist 2004a). The bowl is dated to the same time as the beaker and probably originates from the Black Sea region. Besides the bowl, a number of glass sherds of bowls and beakers was recovered (Stjernquist 2004b). Most sherds were in a very fragmentary state, but judging by the shape, colour and decoration, they represent about ten vessels.

The finds in the filling layers of the wall trenches and post-holes were particularly rich. A total of 111 gold-foil plaques bearing images of figures was found, representing more than fifty dies, constituting the second-largest collection in Scandinavia (Watt 2004) (Figure 6). Most figures represent human males with different attributes, a somewhat smaller numbers of females and a few with male-female pairs. Some gold-foil figures show similarities to the figures from the Sorte Muld site on the island of Bornholm (Watt 1991), and in several cases, they are made from identical dies. In the building there were two spatial concentrations on the ground: at the north-western inner post and the eastern gable and both gable corners (Figure 3). The different motifs on the plaques showed no particular pattern within the overall distribution (Larsson & Lenntorp 2004: Figure 16).



Figure 5. A: A beaker (height 168mm) made of bronze and silver with embossed gold bands with figurative representations of humans, snakes and horses. It dates to about 500 AD and is a Scandinavian product (photograph by B. Almgren). B: A glass bowl (height 97mm) made in two layers of glass, a colourless transparent under-layer and a cobalt blue overlay cut so that bands form a rosette with petals encircling the body. Probably made in the area close to the Black Sea and dated to the sixth century (photograph by B. Almgren).

Other small objects of gold were also found. These include a pendant, a socket and a capsule filled with granulated decoration (Larsson & Lenntorp 2004: Figure 18). Fragments of objects made of gold foil of different thickness are included in this category, along with twisted thread and fragments of small bars. In a few cases, the foil sheets have a Y-shaped end. The strips might thereby be regarded as some kind of substitute for figures, especially as they have the same distribution as the gold-foil figures. A fragment of a gold bracteate is also included in the find material. That the manufacture of gold objects was performed close to the stave house is demonstrated by fragments of crucibles with remains of gold grains found to the south as well as the north of the building.

Besides gold objects, other finds were recovered from the fill of the north-western roof-supporting post. These include a door ring-handle made of iron. The ring has a diameter of about 150mm and is fashioned with four forged knobs arranged regularly around the ring. Yet another larger iron ring-handle was found in the ploughed soil horizon during the metal-detector survey, about ten metres from the building. The formal similarities between the two ring-handles indicate that not only the post-hole finds, but also the topsoil finds relate to activities focusing on 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 gods (Vierck 1981: 78).

Neighbouring activities

Of special importance in understanding the ritual role of the building are the depositions of weapons to the north and south of the house (Helgesson 2004). The

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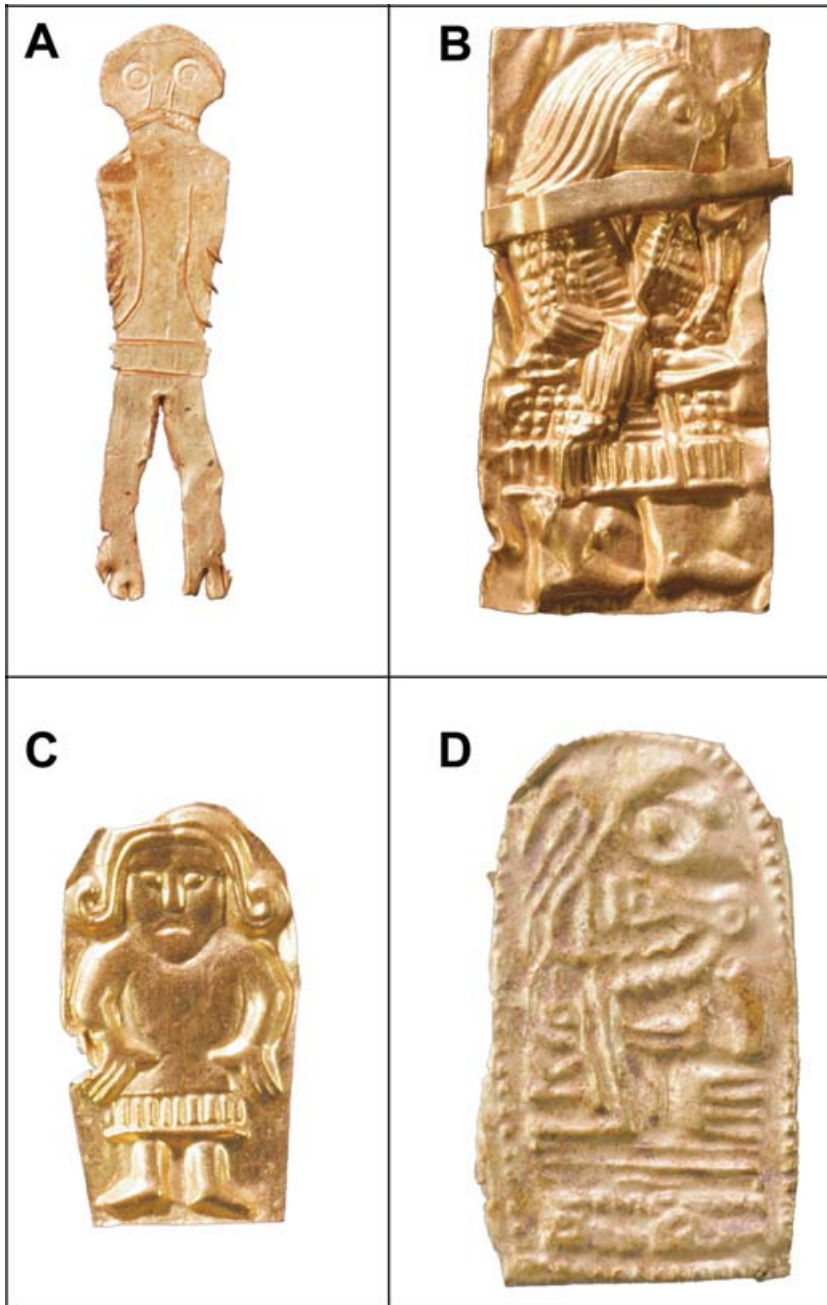


Figure 6. Gold-foil figures. A-C: male representations. D: female representation. Heights: A: 24mm; B: 21mm; C: 14mm; D: 22mm (photograph by B. Almgren).



Figure 7. Part of the concentration to the north of the building with intentionally destroyed weapons.

concentration to the north contained more than 300 objects, and of these, lance- and spear-heads formed a marked group (for location see Figure 2). There were also shield bosses and handles, arrowheads and many other iron implements (Figure 7). During excavation, it became quite clear that the concentration of weapons was deposited on small rises formed by a layer of stones. Much of the weaponry had been destroyed and deposited in a manner not unlike the famous bog finds, especially well-known from Denmark (Ilkjær 1990). But at Uppåkra the weapons were found in dry ground on top of occupation layers. Even if the best parallels for the deposition of weapons are found in bogs there are obvious differences. The deposit at Uppåkra had a more limited variety of weapons than that found in the bogs. A large number of bones were also found in this deposit, including bones from humans.

Radiocarbon dating shows that these animals and humans were probably sacrificed during the sixth and seventh centuries AD (Table 1). There is a chronological spread among the lance- and spear-heads, from the Early Roman Iron Age until the beginning of the Viking period. The majority of the lance- and spear-heads, however, could be dated to the Late Roman Iron Age and the early part of the Migration period (Helgesson 2004: Table 1).

To the south of the building, several objects belonging to warriors' equipment have also been recovered. The most notable is the eyebrow arch belonging to a helmet from the seventh century (Figure 8). To the south-west of the building there was a large stone pavement (Figure 2). A special feature was located just west of the house gable, filled with fire-cracked stones and animal bones. In the excavation of a trench a few metres to the west of the ritual building, the remains of a building at more than one level were



Figure 8. The eyebrow arch made of gilded bronze with silver inlay (68mm) and two mountings shaped like boars of bronze belonging to a helmet. Probably of local manufacture and dated to the Merovingian period (photograph by B. Almgren).



Figure 9. A gold bracteate (diameter 30mm) found on top of a building floor to the west of the cult house. The bracteate shows a human figure surrounded by a runic description that does not form a reasonable sentence. It dates to the Migration period (photograph by B. Almgren).

identified. A golden bracteate was found on top of a collapsed clay wall (Figure 9). This might indicate a special function for the building. Less than 5m to the east of the building, a mosaic of different features such as fireplaces, fragments of clay floors and post-holes was identified, covering an area of 35 by 15m (Figure 2). Post-holes from as many as five long-houses have been identified here. A number of shallow pits with a fill of quern stones, both fragmentary and intact, were also found almost in a straight row.

In the context of the stove-house area, we can focus on the quern's symbolic meaning in the Iron Age world-view. For instance, we may consider the mill of Grotti grinding gold. The quern also symbolised peace and good fortune, war and disaster (Hultkrantz 1991: 41; Zachrisson 2004a: 363), as well

as being a symbol of a world pillar. These quern stones might have served as bases for some special poles.

Discussion

The building under consideration was situated within the central part of the settlement site (Larsson 2002: Figures 2 and 3). The area around it is characterised by many special features, altogether forming a special milieu. To the west and north of the building, there were at least four burial mounds, two of which are still visible (Lenntorp & Piltz-Williams 2002: 46) (Figure 2). They were probably erected during the Early Bronze Age or Early Iron Age. These mounds were obviously respected by the Iron Age citizens of Uppåkra, and it is most likely that they played an important role in the social and religious life of the community. The location of the building at the edge of a plateau might have been deliberately intended to provide a monumental setting. The house had a remarkable position, visible over a large area from the south-west to the south-east.

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

Whether the building at Uppåkra should be regarded as a cult house, a hall or a temple might be a semantic detail. From a holistic perspective, it is rather a question of whether there are any real differences between these three hypothetical structures in terms of the role they would have played for the Iron Age societies at Uppåkra.

The connection between rituals and buildings during the Late Iron Age has been an intensively discussed archaeological topic (Andrén 2002). It is not until the Viking Age that buildings with a specific ritual function are described in written sources, such as the temple at Uppsala (Adam of Bremen [1959]: 207; Nordahl 1996). The twelfth-century description of the Slavonic temple at Arkona on Rügen is also of interest (Saxo Grammaticus [1924]: 49ff.).

In the poem *Beowulf* [1995], the hall of the Danish king Hrothgar has a central role. It is frequently described as high (e.g. l. 82, 114, 713) and its inner height was said to be impressive (l. 983). It is also mentioned that king Hrothgar's high hall was held together by iron bands (l. 772). At Uppåkra the architectural solution to support a tall building was not with iron bands, but rather with solid corner posts to which the walls as well as the roof could be fixed. Other poems or sagas present tall wooden buildings. These include *Völuspá* 7 and *Grímnismál* 16, where they are referred to as *harg* (*The Poetic Edda* [1996]: 5, 54).

The high timbered house from Uppåkra and its finds might in its total constitute a kenning (Siemek 1984: 183) for the hall of Odin, Valhalla, at Asgard and a concentrated earthly manifestation of the cosmology of Norse mythology. In the *Edda*, Valhalla is said to be as high as three high seats placed one above the other (Snorri Sturluson 1997: 8). In the hall spears were used as rafters, and shields covered the entire building (Nordberg 2003: 199). The mixture of spearheads of different ages in the deposits just outside the building

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at Uppåkra may reflect the storage of spears, probably for generations, inside the building. Following spear- and lanceheads, parts of shields are the second-most numerous group of finds in the deposits, and these might also have been from shields displayed in the building.

In earlier as well as more recent excavations, remains of features and buildings have been interpreted as relating to ritual or/and ceremonial activities (Figure 1). Some smaller buildings close to the large halls at Lejre and Tissø, Zealand, dated to the Merovingian period and Viking age respectively, have been interpreted as structures of ritual importance (Christensen 1991; Jørgensen 1998: 242; 2002). They seem to represent a variety of building styles with square, rectangular or subcircular shape (Jørgensen 1998: Figure 10).

A similar relation between a main building and an enclosed area has been documented at Järrestad, south-eastern Scania, dating to the eighth century (Söderberg 2005: 233). A number of entrances and a post-hole deposition of a hammerhead and a socketed axe of iron suggest a special identity for the house. At Lunda in Södermanland, a small house was discovered, oriented in parallel along the northern wall of a long-house (Andersson *et al.* 2004: 14). In the smaller building two small figurines representing humans were found. Therefore, the building is presumed to be some kind of cult house or *hof* for the larger hall.

During the excavation of a farmstead dated to the Viking age at Borg, Östergötland, a small house was identified (Nielsen 1997: 381 ff.). The house was divided into two rooms, with a passageway along the centre of the house. At the end of the passageway, opposite the entrance, a stone foundation was documented. On the paved yard outside the entrance, several amulet rings and a large quantity of bones were found. The large proportion of skulls and jaws suggests that the animal bones were not ordinary food refuse, but instead the remains of sacrificial meals. There seems to be a significant variety in the structures or finds among those buildings that are interpreted as being related to ritual or/and ceremonial activities. This might indicate that no institutionalised religion with associated buildings of special design existed before Christianity. One also has to bear in mind that the sites cover a time span when the society underwent marked changes that might also have affected rituals and ceremonies.

Conclusion

The Uppåkra site differs from most south Scandinavian central places by its considerable continuity from the late part of the Pre-Roman Iron Age until the late Viking period. The striking sequence of stave houses might mirror the long and seemingly unchanged continuity in Uppåkra's religious, social and political importance. Unchanged by the dramatic events of centuries, Uppåkra stands out as an especially stable central place. Through the centuries the stave house would have become a core representative of a solidly established social order. The shape of the building probably went out of fashion and might even have been viewed as ancient, almost atavistic.

Despite the logistical challenges in constructing and maintaining a high, heavy-timbered stave hall, the house at Uppåkra continued to be used and protected. Just like the site *per se* (Larsson 2003: 20), the building became a testimony to the long and stable continuity of a secular and sacred order for several centuries. The finds – the beaker, glass vessels and the extraordinary number of gold-foil figures – also highlight the specific use of the building.

One also has to take in account the weapons deposited to the north and the south of the building. The display function might have become less important with an increasing ritual function.

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