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A LATE ROMAN MILITARY BELT FROM ZEALAND?

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RIMSKA VOJNA OPREMA U POGREBNOM KONTEKSTU · WEAPONS AND MILITARY EQUIPMENT IN A FUNERARY CONTEXT · MILITARIA ALS GRABBEILAGE

INTRODUCTION

The fittings from a late Roman military belt discovered in 1877 in a grave at Varpelev on Zealand have received little attention over the years (Fig. 1). They belong to one of the most fascinating grave ensembles from the Roman Iron Age of Denmark, and even in this context they are highly unusual objects representing one of the northernmost finds of this sort. Like so many other Roman artefacts found so far from the Empire, there are no clear and obvious paths to their origin. As always, the context of the find must help illuminate this path, and therefore a concise introduction to this site is needed.

THE DISCOVERY AND EXCAVATION

As many other magnificent Iron Age finds, this site was discovered by chance in the 19th century, when a local farmer was digging for gravel. The farmer was quick to alert the National Museum, and two days later, the archaeologist Conrad Engelhardt, mostly known for his excavations in the 1860s of the weapons sacrifices, arrived to look at the site. Later that year, excavations began and the whole site was published the following year¹.

¹ ENGELHARDT 1877.

THE GRAVESITE

28 graves, of which one was a cremation burial, were discovered. Based on the depth of the graves and orientation of the bodies, four of the deceased must have belonged to the nobility of the local society. Two of these were very richly furnished; in fact they are some of the wealthiest graves in northern Barbaricum of their time. The National Museum paid the landowner a finder's fee in the amount of 600 kroner, which was more or less the equivalent of two years pay. Traditionally, the gravesite has been dated to the period C2 (AD 250/60 - 310/29). There are, however, some indications that the graves cover more than one period.

GRAVES A AND ALFA

When the excavation was published in 1877, the graves were numbered alphabetically from 'a' to 'z', and when they ran out of letters, they continued with the Greek alphabet from 'alfa' to 'zeta'. This may have seemed a clever thing to do at the time, however, probably to emphasize their importance, Engelhardt marked the two rich graves belonging to a male and a female with the initial letters of the two alphabets in lower case, 'a' and 'α'. Over time this has led to quite a few mis-



Fig. 1. Location of Varpelev on East Zealand, Denmark.

understandings regarding the contents of the Varpelev graves. To add to the confusion, a richly equipped grave from the middle of the 3rd century had been discovered fifteen years earlier only one and a half kilometre away².

VARPELEV IN CONTEXT

Before I turn to the belt fittings, I will briefly describe the context, in which these graves belong. A number of the valuable objects from graves 'a' and 'alfa' suggest that these two graves should perhaps be dated to the early part of the following period C3 (AD 310/20 - 375/400). That makes the Varpelev graves the last of the magnificent burials of the East Zealand power centre³. This centre was the first of its kind in the late

Roman Iron Age and of the longest duration. Established at Himlingøje about 6 kilometres northwest of Varpelev at the turn of the late Roman Iron Age almost 200 years earlier, this dynasty positioned itself as the centre of the northern Barbaricum with a network that reached out to the Scandinavian Peninsula and the Baltic coast in particular, but also to regions further away in south-eastern and central Barbaricum⁴.

The most fascinating aspect for the present topic, however, would be the dynasty's contacts to the Roman Empire. Especially in the first half of the 3rd century, there is a massive appearance of Roman produced banquet vessels in graves in northern Barbaricum. The distribution pattern, that is, both the types of vessels and the amount of vessels found in different regions of northern Barbaricum, suggests that the East Zealand power centre played an important and not least direct role in the distribution of these luxury objects. In other words, the goods were transported by sea from the Roman provincial capital of Cologne to eastern Zealand directly, before they were distributed further⁵. In general, the material cannot support the hypothesis that these goods were transported and redistributed over land from one Germanic chieftain to the next. Apart from the fact that a majority of unique high quality vessels primarily appears on Zealand, there is the small matter of chronology. The Roman vessels simply appear in an earlier context in Scandinavia compared to central Barbaricum.

The question why such a connection could or should come about is, of course, difficult to answer. The short answer is 'politics'! Being in a state of war with their neighbours on a regular basis, the Romans might have welcomed allies among their neighbours' neighbours. The terms of such a treaty could be the supply of a certain amount of luxury vessels, which would have a symbolic meaning to Germanic elite. The supply might also include other types of objects, such as Roman sword blades. The major part of any payment, however, I believe would have been in gold and silver coin, such as the Romans so often dealt with foreign allies.

In the second half of the 3rd century, the relations to Cologne appear to be in a recession. One contributing factor may have been the rise of Postumus in AD 260 and the Gallic Empire lasting to AD 274, covering the first part of period C2. Towards the end of this period or in the beginning of the next, the East Zealand centre once again shows strong ties to the Romans via the

² HERBST 1861.

³ LUND HANSEN ET AL 1995.

⁴ LUND HANSEN 1987, 220-224.

⁵ LUND HANSEN ET AL 1995, 406-410.



Fig. 2. Varpelev, grave 'a'. Photo: National Museum/John Lee.

Varpelev graves. Only, this time the impression is one of closer interaction than before. Whereas the contacts of the 3rd century clearly had a western orientation, when it came to the Romans, the Varpelev grave goods suggest that contacts were now more easterly orientated (Fig. 2)⁶. One of the questions is: Where do the silver belt fittings from grave 'a' belong in this scenario?

THE BELT

The belt fittings consist of one large buckle, complete with plate, three rivets, loop and tongue, and two smaller buckles, one complete as the larger one and one, where only the loop was preserved, and lastly, a

strap-end matching the large buckle (Fig. 3). According to the publication, the two complete buckles and the strap-end were found in the area of the waist of the deceased, while the loop was discovered 'above the head', which, incidentally, was not preserved⁷. I have earlier proposed that the large buckle and strap-end belonged to the military belt, while the small buckle at the waist belonged to the personal belt, a composition that had been demonstrated via the belt assemblies from the Illerup bog finds⁸. Based on analogies to grave finds from Oudenburg and Krefeld-Gellep, I also suggested that the third buckle found above the head, could have belonged to a shoulder strap, such as illustrated by Hermann Bullinger in 1969⁹.

⁷ ENGELHARDT 1877, 352-354.

⁸ ILKJÆR 1993, 373-374.

⁹ BULLINGER 1969, 60-61, fig. 47.3, pl. LXVIII, 3; GRANE 2007, 95-96.

⁶ GRANE 2011.

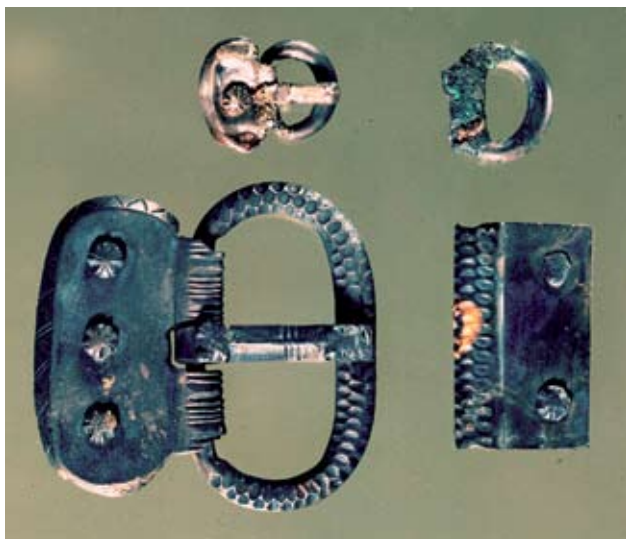


Fig. 3. Varpelev, grave 'a'. Silver belt buckles and strap-end fitting. Photo: National Museum/Lennart Larsen.

THE SMALL BUCKLES

As it turns out, such a composition for the Varpelev belt is extremely unlikely. After closer examination, I was able to combine the single loop with a silver plate that had not been discovered at the initial excavation. Along with three other silver objects, it had been added to the finds later supposedly belonging to grave 'a'. That this was indeed the case has now been confirmed. A problem concerning my theory was that the three rivets in the plate protrude about one centimetre on the back of the plate, which rather suggests that it had been attached to a piece of wood or something similar and not a leather strap, which would probably have required only short rivets with heads on the back as well. That it belongs to the rest, however, is indicated by the stellar ornamentation of the rivet heads, which are identical to the rivet head on the other small plate. If we turn to the other small buckle, it is not likely that it belongs to the personal belt, as the loop only allows for a strap of a width of eight millimetres. Probably, it was attached to the lower edge of the belt-strap along with a small plain fitting (Fig. 4). It was another one of the four additional silver objects belonging to grave 'a'. The fitting has a plain rivet piercing the two flat ends. The pipe-shaped middle part would have held a ring or strap.



Fig. 4. Varpelev, grave 'a'. Silver belt buckle and fittings in presumed correct 'anatomical' order. Photo: National Museum/John Lee.

THE MAIN BUCKLE AND STRAP-END FITTING

Let us now turn to the main buckle and strap-end (Fig. 5). The front side of the loop and the strap-end edge are decorated with three staggered rows of small indentations. The two pieces are not equally elaborate, as the indentations on the strap-end are shallower, as if more carelessly made. Furthermore, the loop has two rows of small concave lines on the outer rim underneath the indentations. The back 'invisible' sides are undecorated. The preserved rivets of both plate and strap-end each have three indentations, while the spaces in between are each divided by two grooves. The overall impression is that they belong together. The indentations indicate that the strap-end was added later, but the rivet heads are identical.

The strap-end is rectangular, made by one piece, bent on the middle with a pipe-shaped terminal.

The loop is oval, almost super-elliptic. The plate is oval as well or so-called 'bag-shaped'. The edges of the plate are bent sharply and are decorated with a single or double zigzag line. The hinge parts on each side of the tongue are decorated with lines separated by two wider 'roof-shaped' zones in a two-three-two pattern. The tongue has a triangular cross section with slightly convex upper sides, except at the base, where it is rectangular and is decorated on the top with diagonal lines and three indentations on the sides and end. The point of the tongue does not exceed the loop and is shaped as an animal's head, most likely of a lion.

LATE ROMAN MILITARY BELT TYPES

Late Roman military belts are found in most of the Roman provinces, especially Gaul and Pannonia and belong to the 4th and 5th centuries. Normally, they are made of bronze, but occasionally one of silver, gilt silver or even gold appears. When that happens, it is believed to have belonged to either a commander or a member of the guard. The types, however, do not differ.

DATING THE BUCKLE

Fortunately, the Varpelev belt was included in the dissertation by Markus Sommer on 'Die Gürtel und Gürtelbeschläge des 4. und 5. Jahrhunderts im römischen Reich', published in 1984. Sommer had placed it in his sort 1, 'buckles with loops forming a complete circle', sub-sort A, 'buckles with bag-shaped plate', sub-sub-group a, 'buckles with round, D-shaped or oval loops'¹⁰. Furthermore, there is a variant (var. 1), which constitutes buckles with decorated loops, to which Varpelev does also belong. This variant is primarily found in Barbaricum. In fact, Sommer believes that the Varpelev example is locally made and modeled after a Roman 1Aa buckle¹¹. Sommer's many sorts and sub-sorts are placed in four chronological belt groups. Sort 1a belongs to belt group 1, which he dates to AD 310 to 350 for the Rhine region and Gaul, and from AD 290 to 400 for the Danube region¹².

DATING THE STRAP-END

Sommer also included strap-ends in his examination. They are divided into four forms, of which form D are rectangular strap-ends. These belong to his belt group 2, which is dated to AD 364/70 to 407 for the Rhine region and Gaul, and from AD 380 to the early 5th century for the Danube region¹³. Moreover, the rectangular strap-ends are particular to the west. But, a date this late for Varpelev grave 'a' creates yet unsolvable problems.

¹⁰ SOMMER 1984, 19, Pl. 1.1-8, 41.1.

¹¹ SOMMER 1984, 20.

¹² SOMMER 1984, 59-62, 74-76.

¹³ SOMMER 1984, 55, 63, 76-78, Pl. 23, 41.2.

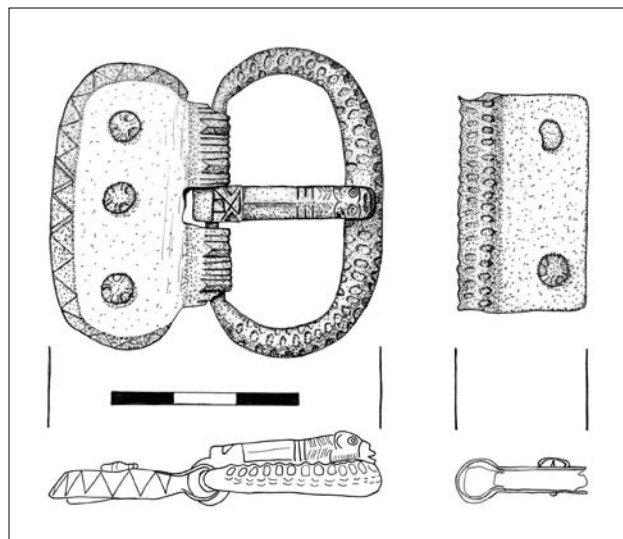


Fig. 5. Varpelev, grave 'a'. Silver belt buckle and strap-end fitting. Drawing by the author.

PARALLELS

It is all very well that we can date it to the 4th century, no big surprise there, but how about parallels to identify some sort of origin? A review of the present state of research on this topic makes it quite clear that there are a lot of oval-looped, bag-shape plated buckles around. Furthermore, the line ornamentation of the hinge part of the plates is very common.

KREFELD-GELLEP 2922

One buckle found in grave 2922 in the late Roman part of the gravesite at Krefeld-Gellep came close¹⁴. From the publication drawing, it appeared as if the proportions were very much alike, except for the concave loop. Closer examination, however, showed that what looked like indentations were actually lines cut into the loop. On the other hand, the wider areas on the hinge turned out to be 'roof-shaped', albeit not so clearly marked as those on the Varpelev buckle.

¹⁴ PIRLING 1989, 49, pls. 7.3-5.

¹⁵ GOMOLKA-FUCHS 1999.

SPANTOV

Another parallel to the loop, I found on the cover of a conference publication on the Sintana de Mures Culture¹⁵. The buckle came from a grave on the gravesite of Spantov in Romania on the left bank of the Danube. The loop alone is very similar in shape and it appears as if it has two rows of indentations in the same style. In fact, this is the only other loop with indentations like that, which I have come across. Whether the rivets are ornamented or not is difficult to see on this picture. The grave was published in the 1960s before the piece had been restored¹⁶.

CARSIMUM

In order to find decent parallels, I needed to look for details rather than complete buckles. In two different exhibition catalogues, one from 1994¹⁷ from an exhibition on ancient Romania and one from 2008¹⁸ from an exhibition on Rome and the Barbarians, a number of objects were presented, which had been discovered in the excavations of the necropolis of the Roman town of Carsium, present day Hârșova on the bank of the Danube. Among these objects were several fittings from one or more late Roman military belts of silver. The belt fittings have been dated to around AD 320¹⁹. Unfortunately, the find is not yet published, which limits the information available. Although the fittings were not exact matches to those of the Varpelev belt, it became clear that a number of elements both regarding shape and ornamentation were comparable. The main belt buckle would belong in Sommer's sort 1Ac, although his examples are all made of bronze²⁰. This variant is equipped with animal's heads on the loop. Although the Varpelev loop has no animal's heads, it has almost the exact same dimensions. The elements of the tongue are identical, although it is not possible to verify, whether it has a triangular cross section. At the hinge it has a rectangular or square part, and the point is shaped as an animal's head. Some of these features are the same on some of the smaller buckles. The shape of these is much similar to one of the small Varpelev buckles, although it has only one rivet. The hinge ornamentation on one of the small buckles consist of two lines parted by a 'roof-shaped' zone, some-

thing that is also hinted at on three of the smaller fittings, which along with an undecorated piece, have the exact same shape as the small fitting from Varpelev. And last but not least, the strap-end is equipped with three clover-shaped rivets that could be construed as inspirational to the rivets from Varpelev. In general, I have come across no late Roman belts with decorated rivets, except this one. The fact that the parts are made of silver, only supports the comparison.

GLASS

As a relevant detail, I will briefly mention another object group from Varpelev grave 'a'. When the grave was excavated, it contained the remains of six glass vessels. One was not preserved and three were of a type with faceted zones (See Fig. 2). I will deal with one of them here; one with no good parallels. There is today, some uncertainty concerning the origin of faceted glasses, as some are believed to be of a Gothic origin. According to Ulla Lund Hansen the very high quality of craftsmanship applied indicates that it must have come out of a workshop in the region of Constantinople²¹. A major problem has been finding parallels, as the only one resembling, again only regarding elements, comes from the incredibly rich second grave from Apahida near Cluj in Romania²². This grave is dated to the middle or second half of the 5th century, but the glass has been repaired with gold foil indicating that it was already an antique, when it was placed in the grave. This glass is 16 cm high, which is two cm less than the Varpelev piece. Particularly, a double concave rim is alike on the two glasses. An interesting parallel to the Apahida piece comes from the unpublished necropolis of Carsium. Like the one from Varpelev, it is 18 cm high²³. The faceted area is very similar to the Apahida piece, although the spacing is different. Below the rim, there is a zone with a Greek inscription, not entirely legible on the illustration and unfortunately not mentioned in the catalogue. Most likely it is the otherwise well known Greek inscription, ΠΙΕ ΖΗΧΑΙC ΚΑΛΟC, or 'Drink and you will live well'.

In my view, the combination of these three glasses supports the assumption made by Ulla Lund Hansen regarding a relation to the region of Constantinople.

¹⁶ MITREA 1966, p. 20, no.8, fig. 10/3.

¹⁷ ROTH 1994, 225, Kat.-Nr. 94.

¹⁸ FRINGS 2008, 149, Kat.-Nr. 642-648, 650-656.

¹⁹ Personal communication. Liviu Petculescu, Bucharest.

²⁰ SOMMER 1984, 19-21.

²¹ Personal communication Ulla Lund Hansen, Copenhagen.

²² ROTH 1994, 249, Kat.-Nr. 101.35.

²³ FRINGS 2008, 149, Kat.-Nr. 663.

SUMMATION

All in all, locating parallels to the Varpelev belt parts has been a complicated task. I have mentioned the few that come close, but in fact only the Carsium belt really qualifies. Along with the glass vessel parallels, this points towards a connection to the Roman provinces in the Eastern Danube region. Based on the entire grave ensemble, the general picture of the Varpelev prince must be one of a person, which had close personal relations to the Romans, relations that had brought him through many parts of the Empire from the West to the East.

The belt parts, as demonstrated, have a close resemblance to late Roman belts, but there are also details, which are almost unique, something that indicated to Markus Sommer that we are dealing with a Germanic imitation. He suggested that it was produced somewhere outside the Roman Empire by a local blacksmith based on a Roman model. However, based on the close resemblance of a number of elements to the Carsium example, I would suggest that it is more likely that the belt was made somewhere within the Romans provinces by a blacksmith trained in the production of this type of belt, and that special features were part of the order. The quality of the rectangular strap-end, however, suggests an attempt by an inferior blacksmith to manufacture a fitting to match the buckle. The date of this fitting may well be somewhat later than the buckle, but the last third of the 4th century AD maybe pushing it too far considering the rest of the grave goods of grave 'a'.

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