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Jane C. Waldbaum Summer Field School Scholarship

Report 2012

Finding Fjäle

When the Danish King Valdemar invaded Gotland in 1361, up to 40% of the male population of the semi-autonomous island were killed defending their farms and the capital of Visby in an event recorded in both the historical record and in mass graves outside nearby Solberga abbey. At the time, Valdemar and his army were only the latest in a series of unwelcome visitors to the rich Baltic trade-stopover; ten years before, Norway rats, host to fleas and to the Black Death, had come to Gotland and the Gute people lost an estimated 60% of their population in the ensuing plague. The turmoil of this single decade was so profound that the island's economy never fully recovered to the levels of prosperity it had achieved during much of the Viking and early Middle Age, a shift visible at many archaeological sites on the island.

This summer, I was able to witness and study the archaeological remains of this time period while working at Fjäle, a farmstead that was precipitously abandoned around 1360 and remained undisturbed until the 1980's, providing ideal preservation conditions for a vanished way of life. Working under the direction of Dr. Dan Carlsson, an emeritus professor at the University of Gotland, my teammates and I excavated more than one-hundred square meters spread over eight experimental trenches in order to better understand the settlement and abandonment of Fjäle over its 1200-year history. The experience provided me the opportunity to step beyond the confines of the classrooms and electronic databases where I had previously explored archaeology and get into the field.

Previous surveys and excavations of Fjäle had established the longevity of habitation at the site and determined the approximate date of abandonment using phosphate mapping, numismatics, carbon-14 dating, and dendrochronology. The extremely shallow soil in the area made it easy to pinpoint the locations of constructions, but because of the limited scope of prior excavations, the exact purpose of many of the

visible constructions had never been conclusively determined prior to this summer. One of the main objectives of our dig was to uncover evidence of the forms and functions of the previously unexcavated structures and to find datable materials to contribute to a more precise timeline of the site. In the course of our excavations, we uncovered the remains of two early Medieval Age manor houses and one late Viking Age house, one on top of another, and several Viking Age outbuildings, probably stables and a smithy.

Each day, we made the half-mile hike from the staging area into the nature preserve where Fjåle lies, and each day as we labored in the mild weather of a Scandinavian summer, we made some truly spectacular finds. On the first day as we de-turfed the trenches, we found animal bone fragments and horseshoe nails, and by the end of six weeks we had uncovered hundreds of artifacts including ceramic sherds, iron tools and knives, a silver earring, a woman's brooch, a bone hairbrush with bronze tines, a Germanic coin from the 900's, whetstones, bronze needles, a stone jewelry mould, and thousands of mass finds including faunal remains, charcoal, and burnt clay. By comparing the artifactual evidence at the site with the previous digs and similar sites on the island, we were able to firmly establish the location of the settlement area during the Viking and early Middle Age and to hypothesize that the farmstead had been abandoned in a sudden act of violence related either to the arrival of the plague or the Danish invasion. Fjåle was an incredibly rewarding site, and even after six weeks we had only scratched the surface.

Gotland's archaeological heritage is remarkably rich, and each weekend we went on day-trips to better experience the cultural heritage of the island. We visited Iron Age cairns, Viking Age hill forts, Middle Age churchyards, and the highlight of my trip, the capital, Visby, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the best-preserved Medieval city in Europe. These trips helped me to better understand the history and culture of the island and prepared me to form a broader schema of what had occurred at Fjåle. If we had never left the site for the entire six weeks, the dig still would have been engaging and fun, but the addition of being able to explore Gotland through situated learning made the trip absolutely phenomenal.

I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Jane C. Waldbaum and the Archaeological Institute of America for contributing to my education with the 2012 Field School

Scholarship. My trip would not have been possible without their generous support. This fall, I am transferring from community college to Stanford University to finish my bachelor's degree, and I am thrilled to continue my education in archaeology. My experience in Gotland has proven formative for my course selection this autumn, and I am excited to learn more about bioarchaeology and GIS as I begin to think about graduate school. I will always cherish the memory of working at Fjåle this summer, and I hope to return some day.