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THE THORSBERG BOG FIND: SOME REMARKS ON ROMANO-GERMANIC RELATIONSHIPS REGARDING EARLY THIRD CENTURY *MILITARIA*

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Abstract

Thorsberg has revealed a large amount of Roman originals and Germanic copies as regards weaponry and status symbols of third-century Germanic elites. The weaponry of Thorsberg is ideal material to analyse the mechanisms of contacts between Barbarian societies and the so-called “advanced civilizations”. This concerns craftsmanship, signs of power and the choice of different precious materials.

Key words: war booty sacrifice, bog find, the third century, military equipment, Romano-Germanic contacts, Romanization, sword sets, chapes.

The importance of bog finds

Certainly no other type of find from the Roman Empire in *barbaricum* permits such differentiated insights into the role of war and the military as the war booty sacrifices from southern Scandinavia. Today more than 25,000 objects are known, most importantly from Illerup, Nydam, Thorsberg and Vimose, providing us with crucial information on the material culture ranging from military shipping and cavalry to soldiers’ weaponry and personal equipment, as well as insights into social and military relations and their dynamics in the first four centuries AD. Especially in the past 15 years, considerable advances have been made here. The material has been chronologically integrated into a convincing framework (Ilkjær 1990), and in addition we are able today to work with a national model based on origin and mobility (Ilkjær 1993). On the basis of progressively documented finds and features, it is now at last possible to once again assemble large sets of complex pieces of weapons and equipment, thereby isolating individual sets from the massive amounts of finds (v. Carnap-Bornheim and Ilkjær 1996). The complete publication of material excavated long ago has also led to the material basis being significantly broadened (Raddatz 1987; Bemann and Bemann 1998). In numerous specialist studies, light has been thrown on individual aspects of the find material (eg Werner 1941; Raddatz 1957; with numerous references too in Jørgensen *et al.* 2003). With the exhibition “Sejrens Tri-

umf – Norden i skyggen af det romerske Imperium” in summer 2003 in Copenhagen, the state of the research was recorded impressively, in the comprehensive catalogue containing many important articles (Jørgensen *et al.* 2003). With the research project “Jernalderen i Nord Europa” (Carnap-Bornheim and Ilkjær 2006; Abegg-Wigg 2005; Abegg-Wigg and Rau, forthcoming; www.kaiserzeitimnorden.de) international cooperation is allowing the reappraisal of other complexes (Nydam, Thorsberg, Vimose) so that by 2009/2010 the academic reappraisal of these and other bog finds will be completed provisionally some 150 years after they were first approached scientifically by Conrad Engelhardt (for research history see Ørsnes 1969, Vff.).

The potential of the Thorsberg finds for answering questions of Romano-Germanic contacts is examined below using several selected examples. We have concentrated on examples which elucidate especially clearly the existing possibilities and future exercises in research in and about Thorsberg.

The Thorsberg *militaria*

It is well known that a large number of Roman objects were imported into the *barbaricum* (Erdrich and v. Carnap-Bornheim 2004), making the Roman influence visible in many parts of Germanic life. However, it has been the non-military imports, be they objects of bronze or glass, as well as coins, which have hitherto

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come to the fore in the discussion. From bog finds, just single groups of Roman *militaria* have been registered so far (v. Carnap-Bornheim 1991). Only now, with studies completed on the swords from Illerup, has a great leap forward succeeded in enabling these important groups of weapons to be interpreted against the background of comparable Roman finds (Biborski and Ilkjær 2007). These studies show that when it comes to military equipment, adoption from the Roman Empire becomes more significant, and this is so in the material culture as well as in those areas concerning Germanic societies which, especially from the middle of the second century onwards, were becoming ever more heavily militarized.

The frame of a *phalera* from Thorsberg, for example, reveals a connection to the Roman military awarding system (Engelhardt 1863, Taf. 18, 5; Raddatz 1987 No. 184, Taf. 16, 7; Erdrich, v. Carnap-Bornheim 2004, XXIV-12-22/7.77, Taf. 37, 23). A completely preserved specimen from Dambach, Ehingen, in southern Germany, illustrates the composition of such a decoration (Garbsch 1983, pp.108-109). A stamped sheet of bronze was framed and fixed on to an iron plate below. The central plate usually depicts the image of a Roman god or emperor. Other specimens have been found in the province of *Raetia* (Garbsch 1986; Fischer 1990, pp.167-168, 28 B, 8).

Apart from copper alloy *phalerae*, there are also some examples made of silver and glass. A whole set of silver *phalerae* was found in Moers-Lauersfort (Curle 1911, p.176; Matz 1932). It consists of nine circular bronze discs covered with thin silver plates and a further one shaped like a downward-pointing crescent. On the back, each one has three small loops for fastenings, while the front shows the heads and figure of a double sphinx in high relief.

Phalerae were generally given in an unequal number and worn on a pectoral network of leather straps over the body armour. In most cases, the soldiers displayed in monuments are wearing nine to 13 *phalerae*. They were all legionaries up to the rank of centurion, and could alternatively also be awarded with *torques* and *armillae*. The high-level officers, in contrast, could gain a *corona*, *hasta pura* or *vexillum* as decoration (Clauss 1999, pp.39-40). As the legionaries were recruited from Roman citizens, the owner of the Thorsberg *phalera* must have been in possession of Roman citizenship too.

During the Principate, several methods existed for obtaining Roman citizenship. Germanic tribesmen could serve in the Roman auxiliaries, and after their term of service they were rewarded with Roman citizenship for themselves and their children. Second-

generation descendants could already serve in the legions. In the year 212 the situation changed with the so-called *Constitutio Antoniniana*, an edict from the emperor Caracalla, which declared that all free-born men in the Roman Empire were to be given full Roman citizenship. Therefore, the owner of the Thorsberg *phalera* was a retired auxiliary soldier, at least a second-generation descendant or a soldier who had served during or after the reign of Caracalla.

Another connection to the Roman world becomes apparent by examining the chapes from Thorsberg. Some of them are undoubtedly of Roman provenance, like the pelta-shaped one of the so-called *Novaesium* type. Roman chapes are typically made of one cast piece of copper alloy, whereas copies mostly consist of several parts. From the Thorsberg site, 23 of the total amount of 53 chapes are cast in one piece. The origin, however, of some of the chapes found in Thorsberg cannot be determined. Because of the sort of decoration they bear, some cast chapes seem to have been reworked. The ring-and-dot decoration, hammer engraving, and in one case even runic inscription, are motifs that are hardly known from provincial Roman sites of the second and the first half of the third century AD. One exception is a chape from *Siscia* (Sisak, Croatia) that bears the ring-and-dot motif (Radman-Livaja 2004, No. 55). Therefore, the assumption of a Germanic revision of these chapes seems most likely.

The majority of the Thorsberg chapes can be identified as unquestionably Roman or Germanic. However, there are a number of indefinable specimens which have characteristics of both. These hybrids can be classified in three different categories, according to the manufacturing technique, the form and the decoration: 1) one-piece chapes with Germanic decoration; 2) multi-piece chapes with Roman or slightly modified form and Germanic decoration; and 3) multi-piece chapes derived from an adapted and modified Roman form.

The first group contains cast chapes with Germanic decoration (Fig. 1. 1–3). The chape with parallel lines and ring-and-dot motif is very close to the *Novaesium* type chapes of Roman origin, but the pelta-shaped opening is not as accurately made and aligned as could be expected from a Roman artefact (Fig. 1. 1). The second chape is again decorated with the ring-and-dot motif (Fig. 1. 2). As proof of its Germanic origin, it bears a runic inscription. On both sides of the chape there are ten runes of the Elder Futhark inscribed upside down, representing presumably the owner's name. The third chape of this group (Fig. 1. 3) bears only little resemblance to the Roman pelta-shaped chapes. It is proportionately narrower and higher than the other chapes of this type. Again, the ring-and-dot motif and a line

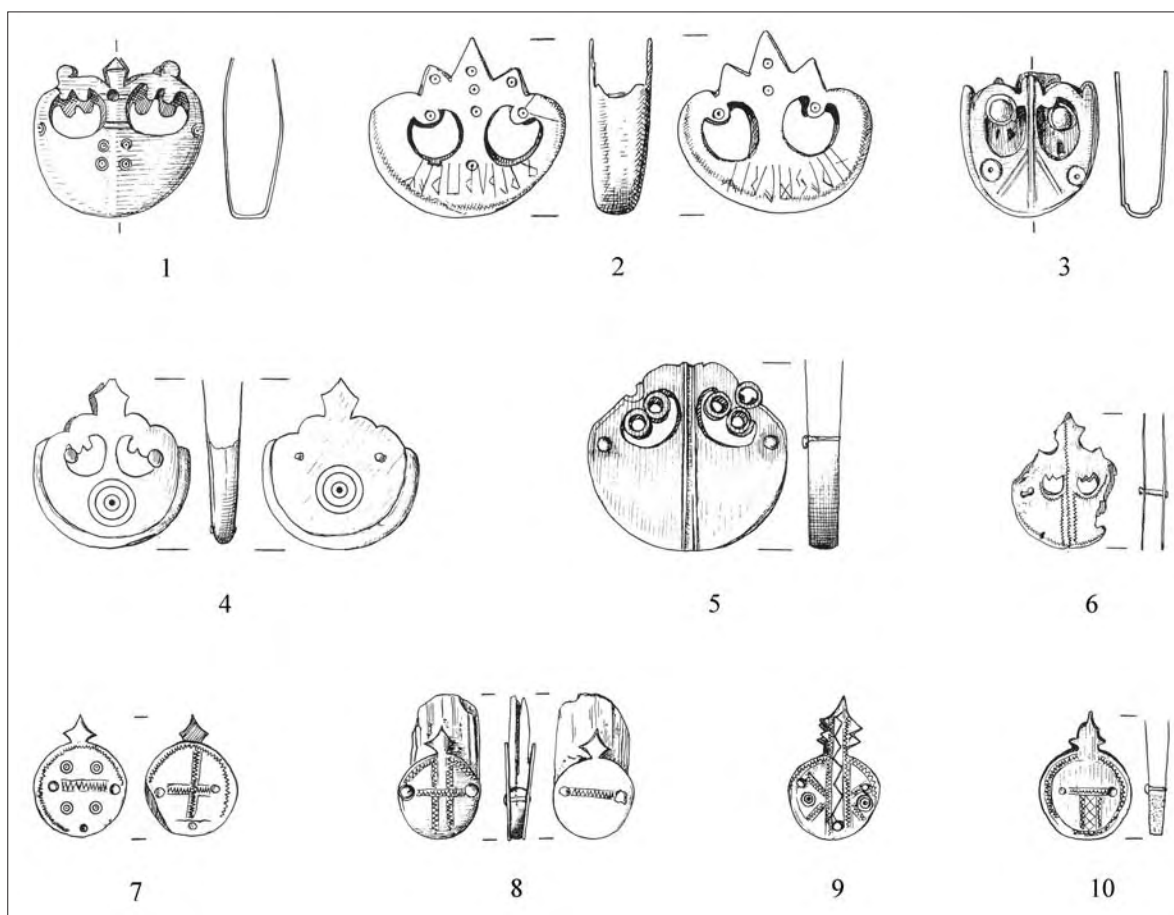


Fig. 1. Chapes from Thorsberg: 1–3 one-piece chapes with ring-and-dot decoration, hammer engraving and runic inscription; 4–6 multi-part chapes with adapted Roman shape and Germanic decoration; 7–10 multi-part chapes derived from an adapted and modified Roman shape (after Raddatz 1987, 1. 121; 2. 124; 3. 129; 4. 134; 5. 135; 6. 136; 7. 149; 8. 150; 9. 151; 10. 152). Scale 1: 2.

pattern are engraved on its front. The lines resemble the rune Algiz, as on the previous chape turned upside down.

In the second group are chapes consisting of several parts, copying the Roman chapes of the *Novaesium* type with a slightly modified form, but with Germanic decoration. The first chape of this group (Fig. 1. 4) is a very close copy of the Roman type, but it consists of one U-shaped and two pelta-shaped sheets. In the centre of the front and back a ring-and-dot motif is engraved. The top point of the fleur-de-lys motif is expanded to a rhomb or diamond. The chape was fixed to the scabbard with two rivets, which are still preserved.

The silver chape (Fig 1. 5; Plate IV.1) is bigger than most of the Roman chapes of this type. The front side and back are again riveted together, and the decoration is made of two vertical lines in the centre and three rings on each pelta-shaped opening. But the main feature of this chape is its material. Unlike Roman chapes, it is made of silver, and thus must have belonged to someone of a higher social rank than average.

The smaller copper alloy chape number 6 (Fig. 1. 6) was, like those described above, made of several parts,

but the U-shaped sheet is lost. The outline and the diamond on top of the chape still refer to the Roman specimens, but the contour is more rounded and the hammer engraving in a zigzag pattern is a new ornamental element.

This chape seems to have been the archetype of the four round silver chapes (Fig. 1. 7-10), which have to come in the third group, ie multi-piece chapes which are derived from an adapted and modified Roman form. These deduced chapes have a round outline and a diamond on top. As ornamental decoration, they bear the ring-and-dot motif and hammer-engraved decoration in a zigzag pattern.

All four chapes are made of silver sheets which were riveted together. In two cases, the chapes (Fig. 1. 9-10) have an elaborate ornamental pattern and the diamond on top is slightly altered. The chapes seem to have evolved from an adopted and modified Roman type of chape. But considering the fact that the depositional circumstances are still not known, conclusions can only be drawn reservedly. The chapes could be variants which were in use at the same time, as with the Roman chapes of the *Novaesium* type which also

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form a group of miscellaneous variants. A typological development would have to be proved by comparing finds from well-dated graves.

It becomes increasingly apparent that the Roman influence was not limited simply to the import of goods. The adoption of drinking culture and burial customs, for example, can be detected through archaeological finds. This displays the Germanic esteem for Roman culture and related habits. Before adopting any new custom, one must have been exposed to it for a long period of time. Therefore, these indications of Romanization in the Germanic *barbaricum* display the knowledge and experience Germanic tribesmen must have collected within the Roman Empire.

Military service was the easiest way for a foreigner to gain access to Roman culture. There, he got used to Roman weapons, as well as to the cultural mindset. The Thorsberg chapes contain a number of originally Roman chapes without alterations and display their simple adoption. But apart from that, the modified chapes with a visibly Roman form and Germanic decoration are proof of a deeper process of Romanization. Since a copy always displays an appreciation of the original, the Thorsberg material mirrors the Germanic esteem for Roman military equipment, and also the barbarian willingness to receive it.

The Roman influence on splendid Germanic sets of gear can be shown to exist, especially in the decisive details of some elaborate sword sets. Two impressive examples come from the Thorsberg bog and are presented here. The basis for the reconstruction of such sets are the sets assembled from findings in Illerup (v. Carnap-Bornheim and Ilkjær 1996, p.299 ff.), which provide a good impression of the great variety

found in such sets in the early third century. On this basis, the Thorsberg material was examined for objects of a similar function whereby, it should be noted, there is no information available as regards the find situation. However, typological and formal criteria permit us to combine individual pieces with logical sets, producing suggestions for reconstruction with strong plausibility.

The basis for the reconstruction of Set 1 (Tab. 1; Plate IV.2) are the components richly decorated with gilt *pressblech*: clear-cut silver rivets and silver beaded wire which render a formally unified picture by way of the pommel, grip, guard (not shown in Plate IV.2), sword belt mounts and suspension loop. For every component, the high-quality workmanship is convincing. The suspension loop, in particular, must be one of the finest examples of Germanic smiths' craftsmanship of the early third century AD. As no examinations have been made on the actual material of this set or other sets (ie metal analysis), the question as to whether the simple silver scabbard side fittings can be assigned here must remain open. There is no doubt, however, that the fittings which are predominantly made of silver were hardly equipped with bronze or iron mounts. In principle, the corresponding hilt sets with a large round pommel and a half-rounded guard can be derived from corresponding Roman weapons, even though in this case components such as the grip decorated in *pressblech* may be of Germanic manufacture. Also notable are the round mounts of the sword belt, which were presumably attached to the belt directly beside the wooden scabbard, as seen in finds from Illerup and Scandinavia (sword group 5: comp. v. Carnap-Bornheim and Ilkjær 1996, p.309 ff., 318 with Fig. 215). The find from Illerup in particular, with its possible Roman scabbard with a simple bronze strap loop and crossover strap,

Table 1 An attempt to reconstruct two rich sword sets from Thorsberg

object	component	Set 1 (after Raddatz 1987)	Set 2 (after Raddatz 1987)
sword hilt	Pommel	Cat. No. 6; Taf. 5, 5; 75, 1.	Cat. Nos. 8 & 13; Taf. 3, 2 & 5, 1.
	Grip	Cat. Nos. 47 & 49; Taf. 7, 2 & 6; 76, 1 & 2.	Cat. Nos. 47 & 48; Taf. 7, 1. 3 & 4; 76, 3 & 5.
	Guard	Cat. No. 9; Taf. 5, 10.	Cat. No. 7; Taf. 5, 3.
scabbard	mount of scabbard	Not present	Cat. No. 66; Taf. 8, 1.
	mouth		
	Strap loop	Cat. No. 95; Taf. 75, 2	Cat. No. 87; Taf. 10, 8.
	Side fittings/mounts	Poss. Cat. Nos. 324 & 325; Taf. 30, 4. 9. 10. 11.	poss. Cat. Nos. 324 & 325; Taf. 30, 4. 9. 10. 11.
	chape		Cat. No. 135; Taf. 14, 3. (after Raddatz 1957 & 1987 a.)
sword suspension	belt buckle		Cat. No. 350; Taf. 20, 10.
	belt fittings		Cat. Nos. 349 & 351; Taf. 20, 9 & 11. Cat. No. 847; Taf. 108, 26. 27.
	Strap-end fitting (?)	Cat. No. 382; Taf. 32, 32.	

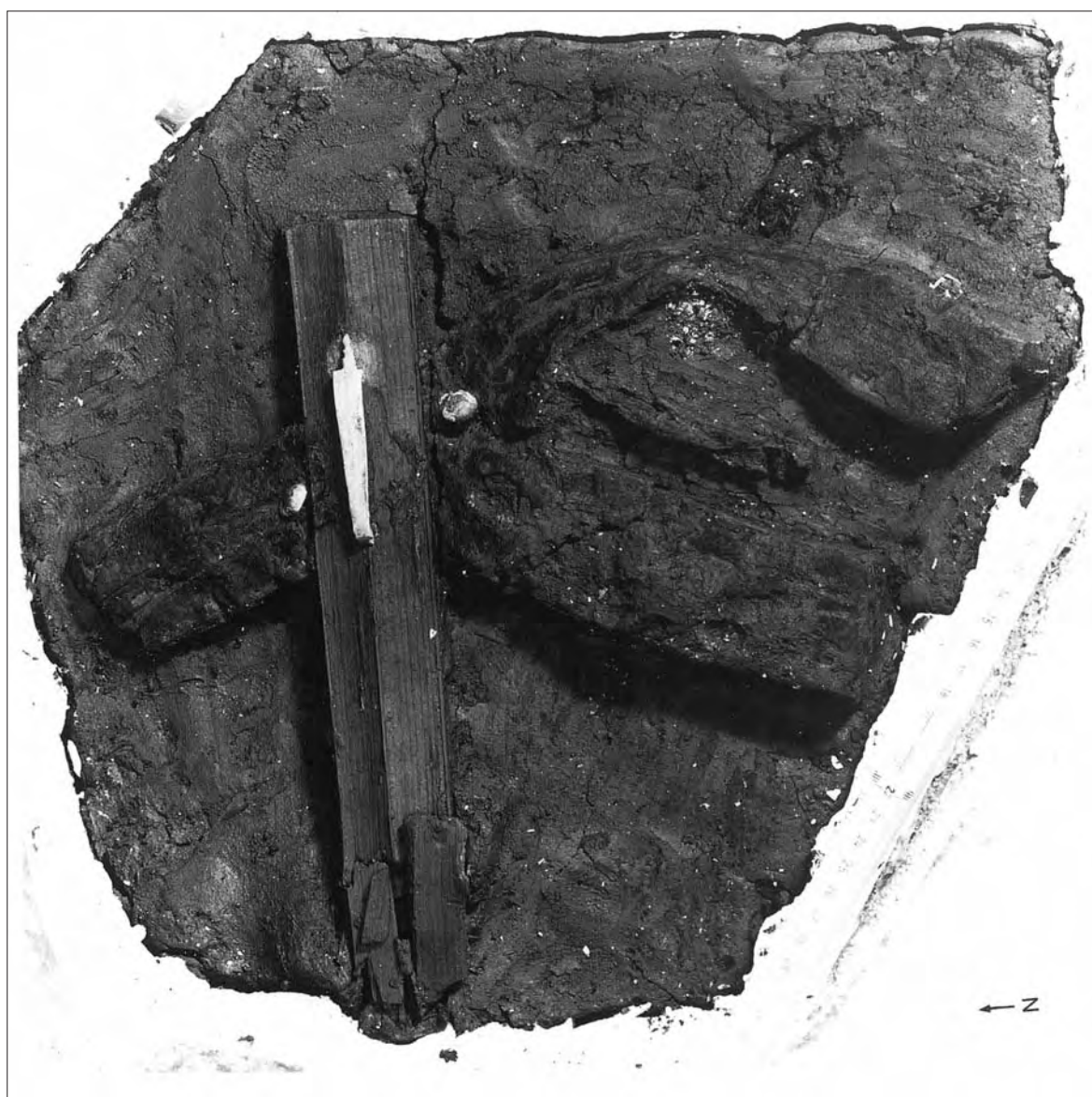


Fig. 2. A scabbard from Illerup with rounded sword belt mounts (after von Carnap-Bornheim and Ilkjær 1996, Vol. 6, 64).

allows the function of the two simple bronze heads to be clearly recognized (v. Carnap-Bornheim and Ilkjær 1996, Vol. 6, p.140 f., Figs. 63-64; here Fig. 2).

The basis for the composition of Set 2 with its silver mounts is the decoration of important components with arched ornamentation (Plate IV.1). This ornamentation is on all the fittings of the scabbard (mouth mount, suspension loop, chape) and can also be followed on the sword belt. Here, the buckle as well as two silver mounts decorated with gilt pressblech are correspondingly ornamented. In the case of the two belt mounts with the crescent-shaped motif, the question could be posed as to whether they could be derived from those X-shaped mounts which are to be found with the *Utter Felix*-Sets (warrior grave from Lyon; comp. Feugère 1993, Fig. p. 149; Bishop and Coulston 2006, p.160, Fig. 101) or from mounts with double *peltae* as from Eining (Gschwind 2004, Taf. 47, C416). Hypothetical but still probable is the classification of the two

rectangular side mounts of the sword belt which are placed beside the suspension loop on Plate IV.1. The tongue-shaped pattern of one of the two long sides of the mounts is reminiscent of the arched ornamentation and, in addition, their width corresponds to that of the suspension loop. If this reconstruction is correct, we thus have here an example of a sword suspension with rectangular side mounts. Corresponding models are known from Illerup (sword group 1-4; comp. v. Carnap-Bornheim and Ilkjær 1996, Vol. 5, p.303 ff.); comparable mounts of Roman provenance are known from Thorsberg (Raddatz 1987, Cat. 173, Taf. 16, 12, Fig. 3) as also from Dura-Europos, from Aldborough and, in similar form, from South Shields and from Abusina (Eining) (James 2004, pp.75-76, No. 36; Gschwind 2004, Taf. 41, C265). They verify the provenance of appropriate systems from the Roman military which were obviously adapted and further developed by Germanic craftsmen in the third century.

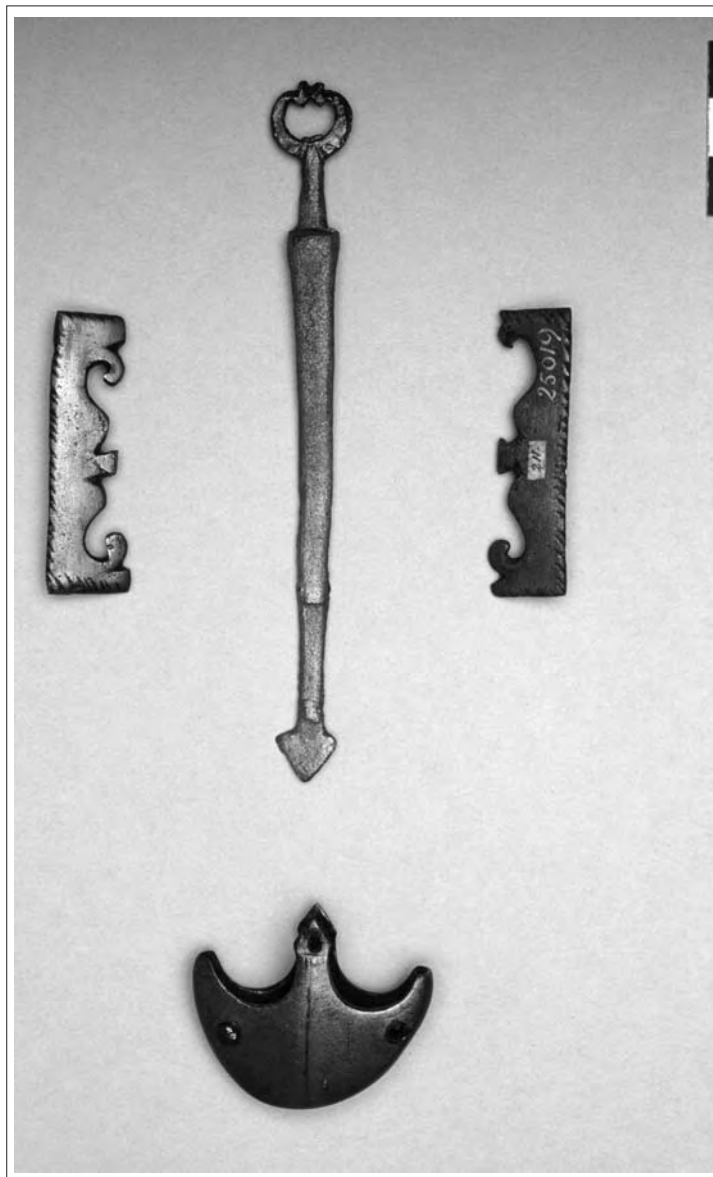


Fig. 3. Thorsberg: components of Roman scabbard fittings, attempted reconstruction (photograph by Archäologisches Landesmuseum, Schleswig).

These two examples make it clear that a good possibility for ordering the stock of finds from the Thorsberg bog lies in the combination of single finds. The starting point for such considerations must first of all be secure findings such as those from Illerup which are documented accordingly. If this, as in the case presented here, is linked with Roman military equipment, a most interesting picture for the intersection between Roman and Barbarian weaponry in the third century emerges. Here transitions, adaptations and imitations are recognizable to a degree far larger than originally presumed. Together with the Roman weapon imports in Thorsberg, new and far-reaching insights are gained into Romano-Germanic contacts in central Europe in the period directly prior to the dramatic events along the Limes in the year 260.

Conclusions

Thorsberg has revealed a large amount of Roman originals and Germanic copies as regards weaponry and status symbols of third century Germanic elites.

The weaponry of Thorsberg is ideal material to analyse the mechanisms of contacts between Barbarian societies and the so-called “advanced civilizations”. This concerns craftsmanship, signs of power and choice of different precious materials.

In terms of the history of mentalities the Thorsberg finds can be compared with other finds on the interface between Barbarians and civilization!

Translated by Amanda Loughran

Abbreviations

Jutland Arch. Soc. Publ. – Jutland Archaeological Society Publications
Kl. Schr. Vorgesch. Sem. Marburg – Kleine Schriften aus dem Vorgeschichtlichen Seminar der Philipps-Universität Marburg
BWPr – Winkelmannsprogramm der Archäologischen Gesellschaft zu Berlin

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THORSBERG PELKĖS RADINIAI: KELETAS PASTABŲ APIE ROMĖNŲ IR GERMANŲ RYŠIUS, KALBANT APIE III A. PRADŽIOS MILITARIA

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Santrauka

Neabejotinai karinio grobio aukos, kaip nė vienas kitas Romos imperijos radinys *barbaricum*, leidžia daryti išvagalą apie karo ir kariuomenės svarbą pietinėje Skandinavijoje. Šiandien iš Illerup, Nydam, Thorsberg ir Vimose pelkių žinoma per 25 000 svarbiausių radinių, suteikiančių mums pagrindinę informaciją, pradedant nuo išymiųjų karinių laivų, kavalerijos iki kareivių ginkluotės ir jų asmeninės aprangos detalių, kaip ir supratimą apie I–IV a. socialinius bei karinius ryšius ir jų dinamiką. Per pastaruosius 15 metų šioje tyrinėjimų srityje buvo padarytas didžiulis žingsnis į priekį. Thorsberg pelkės medžiagos tyrinėjimai, remiantis keliais pavyzdžiais, leidžia įvairiapusiškai aptarti romėnų ir germanų ryšius. Straipsnio autoriai koncentruojasi į Thorsberg pavyzdžius, kurie ypač aiškiai nušviečia esamas tyrimų galimybes ir numato būsimų tyrinėjimų gaires.

Gerai žinoma, kad didžiulis romėniškų dirbinių kiekis buvo importuotas į *barbaricum* teritoriją, tuo skleidžiant romėnų įtaką, matomą daugelyje germanų gyvenimo sričių. Tačiau tai buvo ne karinis importas, o bronziniai ar stikliniai indai, taip pat monetos (pastarosios ir dabar kelia daugiausia diskusijų). Iki šiol iš pelkių radinių buvo užregistruotos tik atskiros romėniškos *militaria* grupės. Tik dabar, kai užbaigti Illerup pelkėje rastų kalavijų tyrinėjimai, ginkluotės tyrinėjimų srityje galima daryti didžiulį šiuolaikišką šuolį, įgalinantį šias svarbias radinių grupes interpretuoti ne kaip romėniškas, nepaisant panašumų. Tyrimai rodo, kad kalbant apie ginkluotę, Romos imperijos pasiekimų adaptacija tampa gerokai svarbesnė tose germanų bendruomenių gyvenimo ir materialinės kultūros srityse, kurios tapo stipriai militarizuotos, ypač nuo II a. vidurio ir vėliau.

Karinė tarnyba užsieniečiui buvo lengviausias kelias „pasiiekti“ romėnišką kultūrą. Karinėje tarnyboje užsienietis išmokdavo naudotis romėnų ginklais ir įgudavo romėniškajai aplinkai būdingos mąstysenos. Thorsberg pelkėje rasta romėniškos kilmės kalavijų makščių galų apkalų, kurie buvo adaptuoti nesudėtingai, be didelių pakitimų (1: 1–10 pav.). Išsamiau tyrinėjant romanizacijos procesą, galima patvirtinti, kad, be pastarųjų

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nesudėtingai adaptuotų dirbinių pavyzdžių, žinomi ir pakeisti kalavijų makščių galų apkalai, kuriuose akivaizdžiai matoma romėniška forma ir germanams būdingas dekoras (1: 1–10 pav.).

Kelių ypač prašmatnių germaniškų kalavijų komplektų dalių (kalavijo makščių, galo, kalavijo rankenos apkalai, buoželė, diržas ir kt.) svarbiausiose detalėse aiškiai matoma romėniška įtaka. Straipsnyje aptariami du išpūdingi Thorsberg pelkės kalavijų komplektai, kurių rekonstrukcija atlikta remiantis panašiais komplektais iš Illerup pelkės, kurios radiniai teikia išpūdį apie didelę panašių dirbinių įvairovę III a. pradžioje (IV iliustr.: 1–2).

Straipsnyje aptariami du rekonstruoti kalavijų komplektai rodo, kad panašiu principu derinant atskirus dirbinius vienus su kitais, galima susisteminti visus Thorsberg pelkėje slypėjusius radinius. Tokiems svarstymams išeities taškas yra tikros radinių, tokių kaip Illerup pelkės, aptikimo aplinkybės, kurios yra dokumentuotos. Romėnų ginkluotė leidžia tyrinėti III a. romėnų ir barbarų ginkluotės sankirtą, ir tai yra įdomiausias faktas. Čia gerokai akivaizdžiau atpažįstama perėjimas, adaptacija ir imitacija, nei buvo manyta pradžioje. Iš Thorsberg pelkės radinių, turint omenyje ir romėniškų ginklų importą, galima daryti naujas išvagas apie romėnų ir germanų ryšius Vidurio Europoje prieš dramatiškus 260 metų įvykius Romos imperijos pasienyje.