

# Horse and Rider in the late Viking Age

Equestrian burial in perspective

Papers from a conference  
Skanderborg 27-28th of June 2019

EDITED BY ANNE PEDERSEN  
& MERETHE SCHIFTER BAGGE



Aarhus University Press

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Few archaeological excavations can have been more keenly anticipated than that of the chamber grave at Fregerslev in East Jutland. The reason was at least in part that the excavation had been a long time coming. As early as 2012, the first traces of a very unusual grave were discovered in an archaeological survey prior to the development of a suburban area outside the town of Hørning (Fig. 1).

On this occasion, parts of a richly decorated horse harness were found lying immediately below the topsoil in the outline of a large feature cut into the subsoil. The discovery immediately made it clear that the feature was almost certainly the remains of an equestrian grave from the 10th century – one of the most distinctive forms of burial known from Viking-Age Denmark.

Finds of Viking-Age elite graves are rare. The custom of burying the most powerful men of the time in chambered graves with equestrian equipment is known from c. 78 finds from the Viking Age in the old Danish area, i.e. present-day Denmark together with Skåne, Halland, Blekinge and Schleswig Holstein. Few of these burials are well documented; the majority are old, incomplete investigations or simply finds made during the clearings of mounds. The most recently excavated equestrian grave thus appeared more than three decades ago, in 1983 at Grimstrup near Esbjerg.

It was therefore clear from the outset that the chamber grave was a valuable archaeological

discovery. It was first attempted to preserve the find *in situ*. In 2016, however, a follow-up investigation revealed that the grave and its contents were undergoing major degradation. Therefore, it was decided that an excavation was necessary if the finds were not to be lost. A project group consisting of Anne Pedersen (The National Museum of Denmark), Silke Eisenschmidt (Museum Sønderjylland), Søren M. Sindbæk (Aarhus University), Merethe Schifter Bagge, Ejvind Hertz and Lene Høst-Madsen (Museum Skanderborg) was formed, and thanks to funds from The Augustinus Foundation, A.P. Møllerske Støttefond, The Agency for Culture and Palaces and Skanderborg Municipality it was possible to plan for a proper research excavation of the complex.

Archaeological investigations are notoriously characterised by the fact that it is rarely possible to foresee what the excavations will bring. Planning must therefore be based on as well-founded an estimate as possible. In this case, the starting points were, in fact, unusually comprehensive: the preliminary finds and the size of the burial pit indicated that the chamber was unusually large. This was supported by geophysical studies, which suggested that there might be up to three individual graves, and that in some areas there might be substantial deposits of metal objects.

When the long-awaited excavation finally took place in the summer of 2017 (Fig. 2), we were surprised both by the things that were found, and by what we did not find. The eastern part of the monument – the area of the supposed additional graves – proved to be a modern disturbance. In the grave itself, no direct trace of any skeletal remains could be seen. Large areas of the grave appeared at first to be empty, and the objects exam-

**Cover figure.** *A six-metre-tall, embroidered equestrian statue, created by Kate Skjerning for the 2018 eSCAPE event, was part of the story of the Viking on site. Photo: Per Bille.*





**Figure 1.** Drone image from the site, the excavation in the middle almost surrounded by brand new houses. Photo: Businessfilm.dk.

**Figure 2.** One of the first days of the excavation. Photo: Museum Skanderborg.

**Figure 3.** The public was given access to the site during excavation, and about 5000 people, both locals and visitors from far and wide, took advantage of this opportunity. Photo: Museum Skanderborg.

ined at the site were severely degraded. In areas where traces of metal objects were observed, large blocks of soil were taken out for subsequent excavation in the laboratory. When the excavation in the field was completed after a few weeks, it therefore appeared as if very little had been found. Fortunately, that was only the beginning.

Since then, results of the meticulous excavation in the laboratory have begun to emerge. As the large blocks of soil have been examined, more than 700 metal objects have been uncovered – far more than anyone would have dared to guess. Several of them are rare or quite unknown object types. The severe degradation seen both before and during the excavation was not understated. Many of the items that came to light in the lab were so corroded that they would probably have been destroyed without a trace by a conventional excavation. At least as revealing were the results of the scientific analysis, some of which are presented in this publication. They brought to light the presence of the deceased and of multiple deposited items, which had not otherwise been detectable during excavation.

The burial that we are now beginning to reconstruct fully stands up to the high expectations raised before the excavation. This is due not only to what was actually buried in the Viking Age, but to a great extent also to the way in which it was excavated. If the excavation at Fregerslev had not been assigned the care it was given, with the use of the most modern technologies, we would have understood only a small part of the find and its significance.

The excavation of the equestrian grave from Fregerslev shows how much investigation methods can mean for the value of a find. We can only speculate as to what might have been revealed in

the many seemingly empty or half-empty graves which have been documented over the course of time by more typical excavations, had these been investigated with similar methods. Fregerslev has thus helped to improve the potential of field archaeology, and may help to raise the bar for the investigation of graves.

Archaeological work in Denmark today is largely based on rescue excavations under Chapter 8 of the Museum Act, which sets a very restrictive framework for the approaches that can be applied, and in particular for the extent to which new methods can be experimented with. For this reason, it is imperative that, in addition to developer-led excavations, research-based excavations such as the Fregerslev investigation, which can develop and explore new approaches, are also carried out.

Choosing a research approach also involves a high degree of risk. Some of the study methods tested in Fregerslev have not yielded immediately useful results. This is an integral and important part of the research premise that the Fregerslev excavation shares with other large complex research projects, such as – to mention some well-known Danish examples – at the medieval settlement Viborg Sønderød, the Jelling monument complex or the Bronze-Age mound Skelhøj. Each of these have been instrumental in developing archaeology's potential in directions that could not always be anticipated.

In addition to this purely scientific value, the project also contained an important dissemination element. The public could be in no doubt about the significance of the find: the many neighbours followed the excavation closely. During the actual research excavation, there was continuous dissemination in the form of, among other





things, public access, guided tours (Fig. 3), live updates and daily updates via the website and Facebook. More than 100,000 unique users have visited the website of the Fregerslev Viking ([www.vikingfregerslev.dk](http://www.vikingfregerslev.dk)). Another most welcome visitor on site and in the preliminary exhibition at Museum Skanderborg was Her Majesty Queen Margrethe II, who showed great interest in the find.

The grave from Fregerslev also became the subject of the 2018 eSCAPE event. The eSCAPE is an annual/biannual event in Skanderborg Municipality. It aims to blend art and cultural heritage on sites with a strong archaeological DNA. eSCAPE is a collaboration between Museum Skanderborg, Art Council Skanderborg, Visit Skanderborg and Skanderborg Municipality. The big event took place on 31 August at the site. Three plots around the grave were still empty, while the rest of the area was almost fully developed with suburban houses, so there was plenty of room for the activities. More than 1500 people participated (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCp5bjzHJo>; Cover figure).

As part of the future development of the neighbourhood, the plot where the grave was found is going to be a place where children can play, and grown-ups can meet. So the Viking from Fregerslev will no doubt be remembered in the modern local community and bring a special pride to the inhabitants of Vestergårds Allé.

Between research and outreach, there was a research conference entitled *Horse and Rider in*

**Figure 4.** *The participants of the conference Horse and Rider in the late Viking Age – Equestrian Burial in Perspective, June 2019. Photo: Museum Skanderborg.*

*the late Viking Age – Equestrian Burial in Perspective*, which was held at Skanderborg Town Hall on 27–28 June 2019 with the participation of 67 researchers from Denmark and abroad (Fig. 4). One session of presentations outlined the many results from the investigations of the graves, while a second placed them in a wider context and discussed the many issues arising from the find. This book brings together the contributions and emphasises that the Viking grave in Fregerslev is a valuable archaeological find which, thanks to the use of modern survey methods, makes several important additions to our knowledge of Viking-Age society.

The Viking from Fregerslev has thus gained an afterlife in the local community, where the story of him lives on, and he has gained a place in the national and global research scene, where the finds and results of the multi-faceted investigations will help to set new standards.

*Happy reading,*

*Lene Høst-Madsen & Søren M. Sindbæk*







# The Equestrian Chamber Grave, Frejerslev II

## Initial results from an elite Viking-Age burial in East Jutland, Denmark

MERETHE SCHIFTER BAGGE & EJVIND HERTZ

### Introduction

Societal structures in southern Scandinavia developed gradually throughout the Viking Age, and a kingdom ruled by Gorm the Old was in place in the beginning of the 10th century. Around 958 AD, the kingship was passed to Harald Bluetooth. Not much is known regarding the administration of this kingdom – how it was facilitated and by whom – but it seems likely that the king had a network of trusted chieftains and/or allies who saw to the daily management of various local areas (Pedersen 1997). Such local administrators were probably in charge of everyday societal organisation, including taxes and the maintenance of local infrastructure, as well as military-based management of the local army and defence structures. Such a role must have required a certain amount of power within the local area (Lund 2005). Thus, these administrators were probably confidants of the king. Perhaps the findings from the 2012 excavation of a burial in Frejerslev, south of Hørning, are the remnants of a person of such standing?

The discovery of a previously unknown Viking burial, let alone an unusually rich one, was

unexpected to say the least. Nevertheless, a large, promising-looking grave was found in 2012 during an archaeological survey in Frejerslev, a cadastral district beside the town of Hørning close to Skanderborg in Jutland. A stone had been removed from one of the corners of the grave relatively recently, which revealed several metal objects, such as gilded harness mounts and a fragmented horse bit. Thus, it was immediately evident that the burial was that of a high-status equestrian individual from the mid-900s.

88 burials with horse gear and/or a horse are known from Viking-Age Denmark (including Schleswig in Germany and Scania). The majority of these burials were excavated in the 1800s and the early 1900s, so just 15 of these graves are considered to have been professionally excavated (Pedersen 2014.2, 176 and find list 8). The equestrian grave from Grimstrup is the most recently found; it was excavated in 1983 (Stoumann 2009). Expectations of this new find were therefore great, when the research project “Vikingen fra Frejerslev – Blandt rigets mægtigste” (“The Frejerslev Viking – a powerful man”) was launched in 2017.

This article provides an introduction to the Frejerslev find. First, the background for the project is outlined, and the local topography, the nearby contemporary finds and the cemetery at Frejerslev II are described. Then follow descriptions of the methodological aspects of the excavation, the grave structure and contents, and the results of the various scientific analyses. A discussion of the conspicuous lack of weaponry, along with a summary of the results and some perspectives for future work, concludes the introduction.

**Cover figure.** *Excavating the equestrian burial at Frejerslev II. Redox layers appear as we reach the bottom of the grave. The small plastic swords mark traces of metal. Photo: Merethe Schifter Bagge.*