

The Viking Age harbour and trading place at Fröjel, Gotland

A summary of the excavation during the summer of 2002

Introduction

This year's excavation was the fifth since the start of the project. We started in late June with 30 students from Hemse folkhögskola, who excavated for three weeks. Then we had the International Field School together with students from the University of Copenhagen, excavating for four weeks. Altogether we had some 55 students taking part in the investigations. The field season was shorter than previous year and the excavated area therefore became slighter, altogether 133 sqm.

The aim

The aim with this year's investigation was to find out if there was a second grave field or just a single grave situated on the south part of the harbour area, the so-called south grave field. During the excavation in 1990 one grave (no. 1/90) was investigated on this field (Bottarve 1:20). It was detected much thanks to earlier information about artefacts found during cultivation of the field, through a survey with metal detector during field season 2000 and of course through looking at old maps and searching the archives.

The grave from 1990

The grave was situated on the north part of the field and it turned out to be a quite big and deep lying grave containing at least two individuals. The grave was disturbed and it was impossible to judge the exact number of individuals. It contained a lot of grave goods such as: glass beads in different colours, a pennanular brooch, pottery, pieces of bronze, belt buckles, small rings of bronze, iron rivets, one axe of iron in a poor condition, pieces of a wooden handle (maybe belonging to the axe), pieces of wood and fragments from bronze plates.

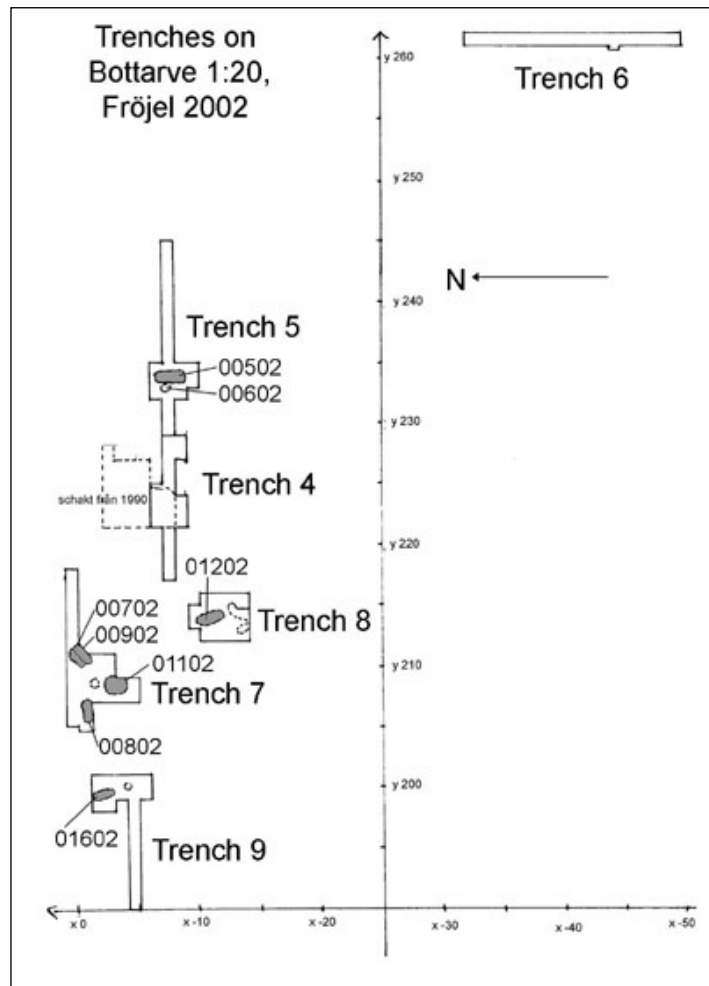


Fig 1. Parts of Bottarve 1:20 with all trenches. Notice that trench number 6 was empty! All graves are in grey colour.

The South Grave Field

The area showed no signs above the turf that could give a clue of a grave field. Therefore we used “search trenches” as a method to get as much information as possible from a small area. Four trenches were put out on different locations, often over smaller bumps or where the vegetation was different. The trenches were one-metre wide and 4- 18 metres long (see map, figure 1). The method amounts to extend the trench when you suspect that it is a construction found. This means that the trenches sometimes become irregular shaped. The method is quite common and has shown out to be most efficient for this purpose.

The soil in the area contained large quantities of stones in different sizes and the work was sometimes quite hard. We didn't find any cultural layers similar to those on the settlement area in the north or on the north grave field. In fact you might say that the area was quite “empty” compared with the rest of the harbour area.

The graves

But at last we started to find traces from graves. The first grave was in trench 5, and got the number 00502, it was connected with construction 00602 (a hearth). The connection between graves and hearths is quite common on Fröjel and one suggestion of interpretation is that it might be traces from some kind of burial ritual or maybe offering. The grave had a wooden cover/lid consisting of ten smaller logs with different length. The shortest was around 110 cm long and the tallest around 220 cm long. There were no signs of a casket, no sides was found, just the lid. The wood was quite well preserved but hard to pick up in bigger pieces. We found quite many animal bones on top of the lid, maybe belonging/connected to the hearth and some kind of offering during the burial rite. The individual inside was a male around 17 – 20 years old and around 181 – 184 cm tall. He had no artefacts what so ever. The skeleton was well preserved and quite easy to investigate. On the right side of the head, above the right eye, there were signs after some kind of injury. It was probably from an inflammation of some kind, which has been ongoing when the man died. It is impossible to say if this injury was the cause of the death or not.

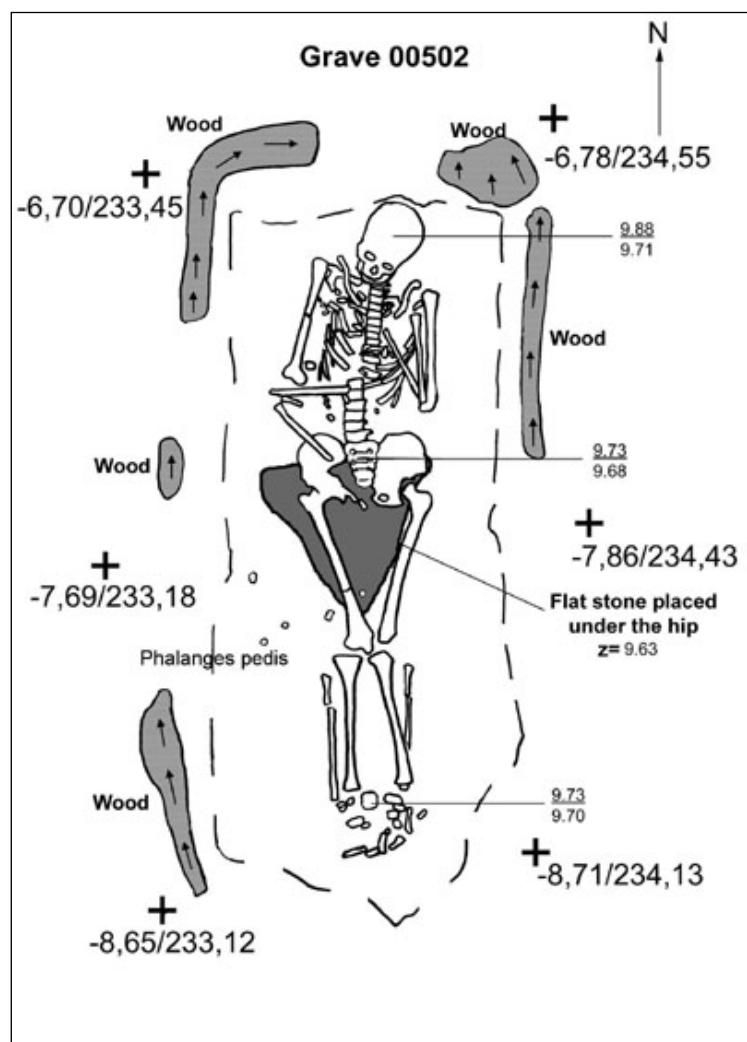


Fig 2. Grave number 00502.

Two of the graves contained weapons; they got construction number 01202 and 01602. Grave 01202 was found in trench 8 and grave 01602 in trench 9. Construction no. 01202 contained a man 30 – 45 years old. The skeleton was in a bad condition and some parts were missing. He had two pennanular brooches of bronze put on his chest, two blue glass beads, one axe made of iron with parts of the wooden handle still left placed on the right side of his head, a knife on his hip, fragments of a silver coin, a belt buckle of iron and small textile fragments from the clothes was also found. The situation in the trench was odd, directly on the south side of the grave there were two big waste areas containing much wood, iron objects and pottery. If they are to be considered as belonging to the grave or not is still not analysed. These two areas was the strongest evidence of some kind of settlement or other human activity remains besides the graves. We did find some traces in trench 7 to but not as obvious as this. But still it's a question of interpretation.

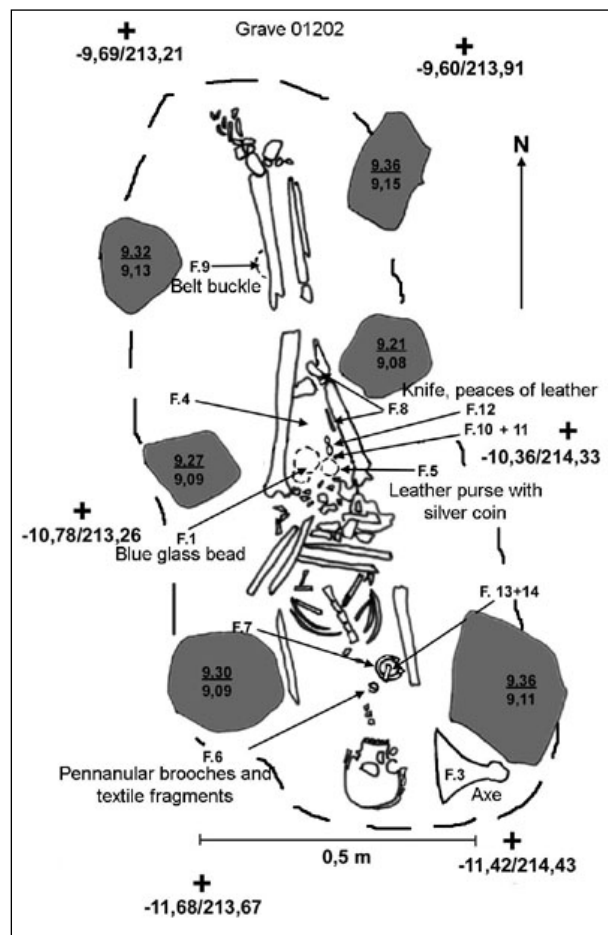


Fig 3 to the left. Grave number 01202 with artefacts pointed out with numbers (F.4 for example).

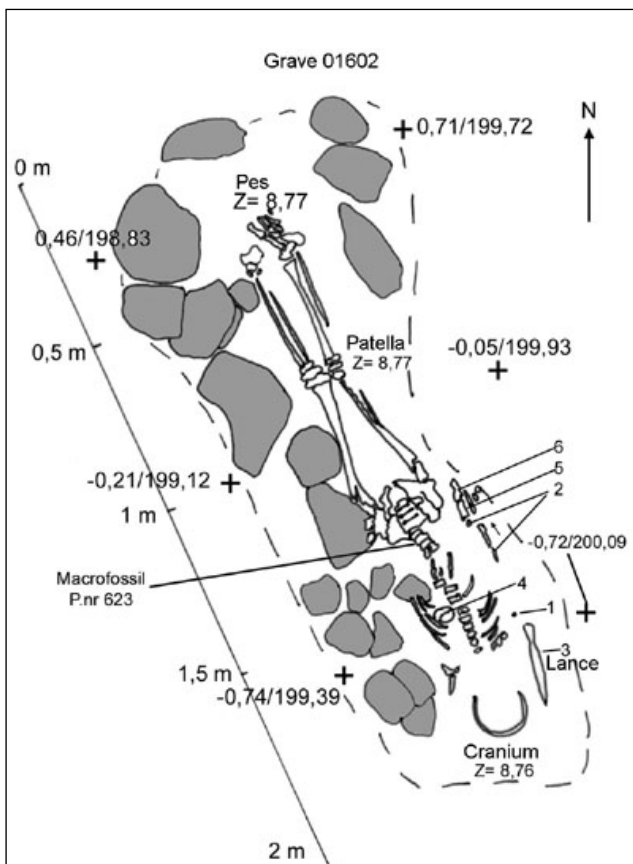


Fig 4 to the right. Weapon grave number 01602. All numbers are pointing out artefacts. 2, 5 and 6 is pieces of the iron knife with bronze mountings.

The other weapon grave also contained a man, 17 – 20 years old (Fig 4. to the right). Unfortunately the skeleton was in a poor condition with parts missing or very fragmentary. The man had one pennanular brooch of bronze placed at his chest, a glass bead, a lance placed on the right side of the head, a knife on the right hip with mountings of bronze. Both the lance and the knife were made of iron and quite much eroded. Some 1,5 metres to the south of the grave there was a quite big posthole. On the north grave field it's quite common with postholes that have an obvious connection to the graves but in this case were not so sure.

Four graves were found in trench 7 (Fig 5), one uncertain grave with just one femur (construction no. 01102). Grave no. 00702 and 00902 were placed close to each other. They looked more like a double grave than two separate ones. They were found shallow which

probably is the reason that 00702 were so damaged by ploughing. Both individuals were males.

The man in 00702 was 27 – 50 years old and around 177 – 180 cm tall. He had no artefacts in the grave and parts of the skeleton were missing. The man in 00902 was 17 – 20 years old and around 181 – 184 cm tall. He had a pennanular brooch of bronze placed under his right femur. This probably belongs to the clothing; it is quite common to find those brooches in different spots in graves. Worth notice is the direction of these two graves, they were oriented in east west direction and together with the strange grave no.00802 (see below) the only in this direction on the grave field. The rest of the graves had a north south direction.

The only female grave this year was no. 00802 in trench 7 (Fig 5). The grave was odd and quite tricky to excavate as well as interpret. Parts of the grave were covered with a thick clay packing (around 10 – 15 cm thick). Parts of the skeleton lay in non-anatomic positions. For example left femur was found behind the left tibia, notice that it were no signs of any violence on the actual bones so they have been mouldered away. Maybe this grave should be considered as a secondary burial and that's why peaces of the skeleton have been moved around. All together there were some 50 artefacts in the grave. Mostly iron rivets or rivet heads found in the clay packing. Close up to the skeleton we found an area with wood that could be from a coffin. However this grave is very hard to understand and we have not found anything like this before on Fröjel.

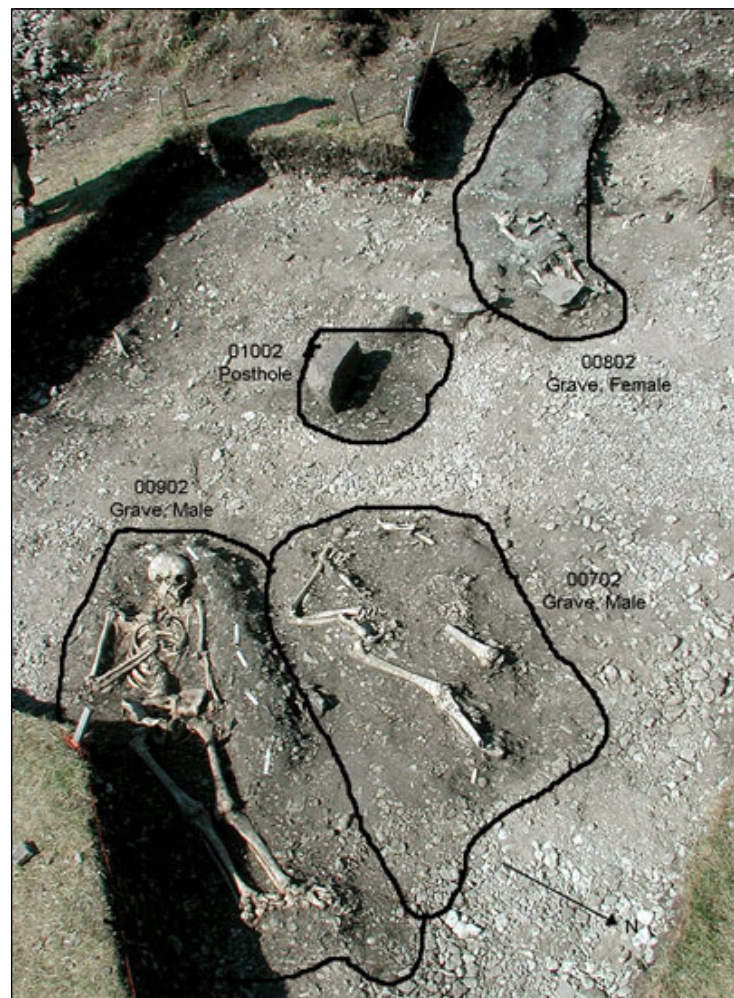


Fig 5 to the left showing trench 7 with all constructions except for 01102, uncertain grave. This construction can be seen as a dark patch in the south section, just south of posthole 01002.

Summing up!

Among the graves there were some traces from postholes and waste areas (mostly in trench 8 and 7!). However there were no signs of a settlement like the one we find on the north grave field. It's interesting to notice that we found more males than females this year and that two of the graves were so-called "weapon graves". The structure between the north and south grave fields differentiates quite a lot. The north grave field has more females than males and the mixture with production, waste dumps and settlement remains is much more obvious than on the south.

Worth notice is that the graves differed much. For example; some were placed in north south direction while other were in east west. Some scholars assert that it is a sign of paganism or Christianity. North south is then to be considered as pagan and east west is a Christian grave

direction. That could be the reason with reference to the early Christian graves we have found and they are in east west position.

But we also have this position on some pagan graves so it's hard to say that the direction is a direct indicator of the religion in use. Maybe it's more a question about to orientate a grave after something in the nature or on the settlement!

We found graves both with and without artefacts that is also common on the north grave field. Worth call attention to is that we often find more artefacts (like jewellery and costume related artefacts) in the female graves on the north grave field. Here on the south the male graves seems to be more equipped compared with the male graves on the north.

The graves were found on diverse levels, some really deep down and some shallow. It's a complex picture we got but still an important piece of considerable value for the all over view of the burial custom at Fröjel. All together we found 7 graves: 5 males, 1 female and 1 uncertain grave (construction no. 01102 in trench 7 were just a femur was found), 2 postholes, 2 dark patches/ waste dumps and 1 hearth.

Conclusion

The aim with this years investigation was to se if there was a grave field or just one single grave on Bottarve 1:20. The conclusion we can make is that it is a grave field; it can be dated to around 900-1000 AD according to the artefacts. We don't know the exact size or the composition of it yet a further investigation has to be done for that. The structure is "new" for Fröjel and maybe we should consider this grave field to be something in between the north grave field and the early churchyard placed close to the school building. Maybe the graves are both pagan and Christian if we consider the direction of them, both north south and east west and the artefacts found in them. This is however a very uncertain way to decide whether a grave is pagan or not and we also have to think about that we only have 8 graves investigated from this grave field and that's not much to draw bigger conclusions on.

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