

The Åker Assemblage — Fit for a King?

A New Account and Discussion of a Collection of Treasure of the Norwegian Merovingian
Period

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Abstract

In the second half of the 19th and the early decades of the 20th centuries, an assemblage of stray finds dating to c AD 600 was collected at Åker in south-eastern Norway. The items included a cloisonné-decorated sword-belt buckle of exceptional quality, a pommel from a ring-sword, and various mounts and fittings from a shield, sword belts and hangers. In the early 1990s several metal-detector finds were made at the site, and it was clear that many of those had originally belonged to the same context as the earlier finds. This article presents and discusses the Åker assemblage on the basis of what has been added to the evidence, and of new knowledge about the site of Åker produced by archaeological excavation. The objective is to gain a better understanding of what the assemblage really represents.

The Åker assemblage, with its famous buckle (Fig 1), is a collection of unstratified finds made on the farm of Åker, which lies in south-eastern Norway, alongside the country's largest lake, Mjøsa (Fig 2). The findspot is about 400 m north of the farmstead at Åker, on an outcrop of rock named Smørkollen, on which there formerly stood a barrow. The first objects were found as early as the period 1868–1912, when the land at Smørkollen was cleared of trees and turned into a field. Metal-detecting was carried out over Smørkollen in 1992 and 1993, resulting in a number of new finds, including the second half of a bird-shaped mount, the first part of which had been delivered to the museum in 1889 (Fig 3).² On the basis of these detector finds, and other more recent archaeological discoveries, we can now come to a better understanding of what the Åker assemblage really represents. Archaeological excavations at Åker in the 1980s, the 1990s, and in 2016 and 2017, have also contributed new information about the site in the period between the Roman Iron Age and the Viking period, which in turn provides a basis for new suggestions about the significance of the Åker assemblage. This article features a comprehensive presentation of the Åker assemblage, in which the finds are discussed within the context of recent archaeological finds and research, and a new interpretation of the assemblage itself and of the social significance of the place of the findspot in its period is proposed.

THE MEROVINGIAN-PERIOD FINDS FROM SMØRKOLLEN

The Åker assemblage consists for the most part of pieces and fragments of weapons or weapon-related artefacts which can be dated to the second half of the 6th century, or c AD 600, aligning with the first phase of the Merovingian period in Norwegian archaeology.³ The assemblage includes, among other things, two pommels: a ring-pommel from a long two-edged sword or *spatha*,⁴ and a rather smaller and simpler pommel of copper alloy,⁵ which probably sat on the tang of a cutlass or a short one-edged sword or seax (Fig 4). A scabbard edge-strip of copper alloy, together with a garnet inlaid sword stud, probably ornamented a scabbard for the ring-sword (Fig 4a), while studs of silver and copper alloy may have been fixed on to a sheath belonging to the seax/cutlass (Fig 4c).⁶ A small bird-shaped mount could have decorated the grip of one of these weapons (Fig 4b). The armament also included shield-mounts: the apical mount from a shield boss; a large, domed rivet-cap; an ornamental mount in the form of an animal head with garnet eyes (Fig 5); and three ornamental mounts in the form of birds' heads (Fig 3). The zoomorphic ornamental mounts were probably fastened to the grip behind the shield and are of a type similar to examples known from, for instance, Sutton Hoo (Suffolk, England),⁷ and Högbro, on Gotland (Sweden).⁸

The Åker assemblage also includes buckles, strap-slides, strap-distributors and strap-mounts from sword belts and hangers. A gilt-silver stud (Fig 6), may also have been part of a sword hanger.⁹ The large gilt Åker buckle and a strap-slide with cloisonné garnet work are usually attributed to the same belt on the basis of their dimensions (Figs 1 and 6, lower).¹⁰ It is possible that a gilt openwork mount with zoomorphic decoration (Fig 6, upper), is from a sword belt or baldric, but it could also have been a bridle-mount (see discussion below). Five gilt rectangular mounts (Fig 7), will, however, have belonged to the sword hanger or a baldric for the sword.¹¹ The rectangular mounts may have belonged to the same strap as a small T-shaped strap-distributor (Fig 8c), while a third strap may have been furnished with a gilt shield-on-tongue buckle with an oval plate, an S-shaped belt-slide, a rectangular mount, and a large T-shaped strap-distributor (Fig 8a–b, d–e). This third strap- or belt-set has usually been regarded as a single suite which belonged to a sword hanger.¹² It could be the hanger for the single-edged seax, although shield-on-tongue buckles of this type are normally considered components of sword harness.¹³ A shield-on-tongue buckle of the same form, together with a rectangular mount and strap-distributors, has, however, been found

in a grave from Eltdalen in Trysil (Norway), that contained just a single weapon: a one-edged sword/cutlass/seax. That suite therefore must have served as the harness for the single-edged weapon,¹⁴ supporting an inference of the same function in the Åker assemblage.

Besides weaponry, the Åker assemblage contained riding gear and a horse harness. Two richly decorated, nearly square strap-distributors (Fig 9, upper) are usually identified as bridle-mounts,¹⁵ although some scholars have argued that they were parts of the baldric or sword belt.¹⁶ Among the recent metal-detected finds, there is also a bit and a crampon (Fig 9, lower), together with copper-alloy rings and a number of smaller, tinned fragments of mounts with punchmark decoration, possibly from bridles (Fig 10, lower).¹⁷ A key, a buckle, mount-fragments and iron nails that were found at the site in 1992–3 could also belong to this assemblage.

It is possible that the Åker assemblage originally included a drinking horn, as part of a copper-alloy rim-mount has been identified potentially as a fragment of such an item.¹⁸ A number of fragments of pressed gold foil with Style II and/or ribbon interlace decoration (Fig 10, upper), could be from a metal-covered drinking horn or wooden vessel, or even from the weaponry.¹⁹ No artefacts of organic material have been found at the site, but mineral-preserved traces of wood and textile on some of the objects show that organic artefacts were originally present, but have rotted away, or not been found because such material is less visible than (gilt) metal objects and gives no signal to metal-detectorists.²⁰ However, the absence of larger iron artefacts and the iron components of the weapons such as sword blades and shield bosses is striking.²¹ An eye-witness account of 1869 emphasised the fact that no iron artefacts had ever been found at the site,²² suggesting that no iron components were ever there.

WARRIOR'S GRAVE OR VOTIVE DEPOSIT OF WEAPONRY?

Several scholars have argued that the objects making up the Åker find came from one or more graves,²³ although a number have proposed that they represent a votive deposit of weaponry or a treasure hoard.²⁴ The Åker assemblage does not have the appearance of a typical Scandinavian votive deposit of weaponry, however, as those are usually either large composite and sacrificial deposits of booty made up of large amounts of weaponry in water or wetlands, or smaller caches or single-object depositions of weaponry or weapon parts.²⁵ Large votive deposits of weaponry are also generally found in southern Scandinavia, and are

for the most part dated to the Roman Iron Age or Migration Period. Smaller-scale sacrificial deposition of weaponry in the early Merovingian Period, usually cases of single artefacts or weapons, and/or parts of weapons, consists as a rule of complete swords or sword pommels. Like the major offerings of the earlier Iron Age, these deposits were also usually made in wetland areas, in lakes or the sea,²⁶ although a few individual items, such as pommels, were deposited at central places, in some cases in direct association with buildings.²⁷ There are also some known larger depositions of weapons associated with buildings, but these are in Denmark, and are dated to the Roman Iron Age and early Migration Period.²⁸ A special group of funerary depositions in gravel ridges is known from Skåne in southern Sweden, but these consist almost entirely of horse gear and likewise date to the late Roman- and early Migration Period.²⁹ Both the composition of the Åker assemblage, including components and mounts from several weapons and other artefact types including shields and scabbards, as well as the location of the find on a rocky outcrop some way from both water or wetland and the settlement zone, would seem to argue against its interpretation as a votive deposit. Furthermore, a number of Scandinavian weapon hoards of the early Merovingian period had been subjected to some form of ritual destruction.³⁰ No comparable ritual treatment is detectable in the case of the Åker assemblage. Some of the objects making up the Åker assemblage are broken, but the breaks appear to be natural, and do not appear to be the result of deliberate destruction.³¹

The reported burial mound would also appear to argue against this find representing a hoard. Secondary deposits or votive caches of precious-metal artefacts were indeed made in barrows in both the migration period and the Viking Age,³² and the Åker assemblage has been interpreted as a sacrifice of war booty made as such a secondary deposit in the burial mound.³³ This type of barrow cache, however, normally contains objects that are *not* found in contemporary grave-assemblages, and no Norwegian hoards of this kind are known from the Merovingian period.³⁴ The new finds from 1992 and 1993 also affect the situation, as utilitarian items such as a crampon and a bit, both of them iron, appear to have been part of the assemblage. If this is so, the find is not composed exclusively of fine artefacts of precious metal.

One argument for identifying the Åker find as a hoard rather than a burial assemblage has been the absence of iron components, such as shield bosses and sword blades.³⁵ The assemblage contains no spear or battle-axe, which are standard military

equipment in rich Scandinavian men's graves from this period.³⁶ It is not entirely clear, though, why the lack of iron artefacts or components should be regarded as supporting the case that the find is a votive or safe-keeping hoard rather than gravegoods. As already noted, parts of weapons, usually in the form of sword pommels, do appear in hoards of the Merovingian period, but complete swords are deposited as well.³⁷ The iron components of the weapons are included in the comprehensive southern Scandinavian votive hoards of military gear. In contrast, in the large 7th-century treasure hoard from Staffordshire (England), weapon fittings such as pommels, pyramidal studs and a range of different types of sword-associated mounts had been removed from the weapons before deposition.³⁸ The range of artefacts and artefact components there is reminiscent of the Åker assemblage to a degree, but the Staffordshire hoard consists of many more objects, including at least 74 pommels.³⁹ Moreover, the Staffordshire hoard does not contain any large buckles from sword belts like the specimen in the Åker assemblage,⁴⁰ and unlike the Åker assemblage it has no mounts from sword belts or scabbards.⁴¹ Buckles from sword belts like the Åker buckle do, by contrast, occur in Anglo-Saxon grave assemblages.⁴²

It is not unusual for both pommels and mounts from swords and other types of artefact to be found separately, with no sign of the associated iron components. It seems remarkable, nevertheless, that the Åker assemblage has no shield bosses or sword blades. The absence of iron cannot be explained away through unfavourable preservation conditions, as iron has been found on the backs of several of the mounts, including the one from a shield boss. Many swords, spears, shield bosses and other iron artefacts from the Merovingian and Viking periods have in fact been found around the farm.⁴³ The metal-detector surveys of the 1990s also produced other types of iron object at Smørkollen, including the bit and the crampon noted above.

One very interesting parallel to the absence of the iron components of the weaponry comes from central Sweden. The burial practice in this area does not include large iron artefacts, but only smaller, specific pieces of iron or precious metal which have been removed or detached from larger objects such as swords, helmets, shield bosses, bridles and spears. In addition to relatively 'normal' furnished graves, this is the case in eight richly furnished weapon graves that include fragments of helmets, including the East Mound (Östhögen) at Gamla Uppsala.⁴⁴ In the East Mound, possible scabbard-mounts from a one-edged sword or scramasax were also found, but no sword blade,⁴⁵ while the sword blade in

the West Mound (Västhögen) at the same site is also missing and only the pommel is present.⁴⁶ The dominant mode of burial in central Sweden at this time was cremation. In the cremation burials of central Sweden, large iron objects were removed from their mounts before the mounts were laid upon the pyre, or were possibly sorted out from the ashes afterwards.⁴⁷ There is, however, no sign of the objects in the Åker assemblage having been burnt.⁴⁸ The find could be regarded, nonetheless, as an uncremated variant of the same burial practice, with the opulent fittings having been removed or detached from the weapons before the grave was closed. The absence of weapons such as spears and axes might be explained by the fact that none of these weapons would credibly have provided any precious-metal fittings for deposition in the grave. The deposition of the various fittings can be understood as *pars pro toto* symbolisation, in which the parts represent the whole weapon.⁴⁹ In this context it is of interest that it was also unusual in Denmark to include swords in graves in the earliest phase of the Merovingian period (c. AD 550–650).⁵⁰

When we compare the objects from the Åker assemblage with the grave goods from rich, uncremated weapon graves of the same period, it is evident that, apart from the lack of iron artefacts or components, the find corresponds closely with such grave assemblages. Even though, in the future, more finds may well be expected from Smørkollen, it is nevertheless striking that the finds made so far could all belong to a single assemblage, as there are no 'doubles'. It therefore appears highly likely that the Åker assemblage represents a grave, and that the objects come from a single burial: an inhumation grave of the second half of the 6th century or around AD 600. The objects were probably ploughed up as the burial mound on Smørkollen was progressively destroyed.⁵¹ On the evidence of contemporary and better recorded graves with the same range of weaponry as Åker, such as Vendel graves 12 and 14 and Valsgärde grave 8 (both from Uppland, Sweden),⁵² it can be considered probable that the find may originally have included imported glass beakers and/or metal vessels, together with wooden vessels or a drinking horn with metal mounts. This is also supported by the metal fittings from the find (see above), gaming pieces (cf note 21), and bone from various species of animal.⁵³ The deposition of animals is also documented in high-status Merovingian-period graves in Norway, but since both glass and metal vessels are extremely rare in Norway in this period it is quite possible that the lack of such finds is a 'real' absence. Nevertheless, another richly equipped Merovingian-period female burial from Åker itself did include, exceptionally, both a glass beaker and a metal

vessel,⁵⁴ and so it is certainly possible that originally the Åker assemblage also included such items. The three graves in Sweden referred to are boat graves, but there are no signs that the Åker assemblage is from a boat grave. There is also no evidence as to how the original grave was constructed, other than that it was covered by a large barrow; since, however, the barrow was sited upon an outcrop of rock, it is likely that its location gave it a monumental appearance.

WEAPONRY AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS: THE FRANKISH ARCHETYPE

Many of the objects making up the Åker assemblage have Frankish prototypes, and the understood set of military equipment was based on a Frankish model.⁵⁵ Both ring-swords and shield bosses with apical mounts are found in rich weapon-graves of the 6th and 7th centuries throughout the Germanic zone: in Scandinavia and England, and on the Continent.⁵⁶ Ring-swords, like helmets, are interpreted as symbols of special rank within the Germanic societies of this period. According to Heiko Steuer (1987), ring-swords and helmets were used by members of the warrior retinue of the Frankish kings: in other words, the military aristocracy. It has been argued that the reason why military equipment was virtually identical throughout the Germanic zone in this phase is that military organisation was also consistent. It was organised according to a Frankish archetype, and in Scandinavia was centred upon chieftains or petty kings with their personal retinues.⁵⁷

In this light, like other Scandinavian finds, the ring-sword in the Åker assemblage has been explained in terms of its owner maybe having entered the service of, and/or undertaken diplomatic relations with, Frankish royalty.⁵⁸ It is highly probable nevertheless that the sword pommel was a Scandinavian product.⁵⁹ Since Scandinavians and Franks had the same type of military equipment and probably also similar military organisation, it has conversely been possible to argue *against* the supposition that Scandinavian weapon-graves containing ring-swords and helmets necessarily represent returned warriors.⁶⁰ While the earliest finds may be best interpreted in this way, it has been pointed out that warriors who were buried with such equipment could also have been in the service of petty kings *within* Scandinavia.⁶¹ In keeping with this theory, it has alternatively been proposed that the Åker assemblage represents a man who might have been in the service of the kings of Uppland.⁶² The kings of Uppland had a seat at Gamla Uppsala, and it has been suggested that they were over-kings in parts of eastern Norway in this period. The kings of Vestfold, with their seat at

Borre, have also been suggested as a power-centre to which the man of Åker could be connected.⁶³ According to all of these hypotheses, the graves with ring-swords and/or helmets represent men who were members of the retinue, and *not* the king himself.⁶⁴ This is, for example, a common view of the graves with ring-swords or display swords and helmets at Vendel and Valsgärde. They are interpreted as the burials of a warrior aristocracy, while the central power/ king himself is presumed to be represented by the graves in the great barrows at Gamla Uppsala.⁶⁵

This interpretation differs from earlier thinking on the Åker assemblage, which labelled it as the grave goods of a chieftain or petty king.⁶⁶ Moreover, it is problematic to transfer inferences from the situation in the Frankish regions to Norway and Scandinavia or indeed any other non-Frankish area in such a way. There was, for example, a helmet not only in the East Mound at Gamla Uppsala,⁶⁷ but also in Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo in East Anglia (England).⁶⁸ According to Steuer's theory, helmets were distributed to the uppermost ranks of the military retinue, but both of these graves are usually regarded as royal burial monuments. Steuer also makes an exception for the Sutton Hoo helmet, believing that, as the only silver helmet, it functioned like a crown.⁶⁹ Fragments of one or more silver helmets have, however, been found in the Staffordshire hoard,⁷⁰ which could indicate that such helmets were found more widely than previously supposed. Ring-swords also continued to be used longer in Scandinavia than on the Continent,⁷¹ which implies a distinctly Scandinavian reformulation of the social praxis centred upon the use of these types of weaponry and armour.

In the Mälär region (Sweden), both the royal and a subordinate aristocratic warrior class were buried with essentially the same range of equipment, a suite which included, among other things, helmets and display swords (including ring-swords).⁷² What sets the royal graves apart are high-quality artefacts: gold and silver objects or objects with details produced in pure gold or silver,⁷³ textiles with gold threads woven in, several imported objects, and/or imported exotica. Examples of graves which pertain to this class are the graves in the East and West mounds at Gamla Uppsala and a distinctly small number of other burials.⁷⁴ This illustrates how a Frankish social structure need not necessarily be implied, even if the weapons and other artefacts have Frankish prototypes.⁷⁵ To generate an idea of what social status, rank and/or position the man who was buried at Åker had in his lifetime, it is therefore necessary to approach the question from another angle. In this

regard it is pertinent that, in the view of John Ljungkvist, weapon-graves as a phenomenon marking an elite have to be assessed and examined separately for every region.⁷⁶ It is consequently necessary to evaluate the Åker assemblage in a Norwegian context — specifically a south-eastern Norwegian one — in order to determine what social importance or rank the deceased man held in life.

THE ÅKER ASSEMBLAGE IN THE CONTEXT OF SOUTH-EASTERN NORWAY

The weapons within the Åker assemblage are rarities in a Norwegian context. Ring-swords are known from only four Merovingian-period finds in Norway, all of them incomplete.⁷⁷ No blades have been identified in any of those finds, which could indicate depositional practice or burial customs like those of the Åker assemblage and in central Sweden. The type of shield with a boss with an apical mount found at Åker is represented in just three other finds from Norway,⁷⁸ and it is only in the Åker assemblage that the type is combined with a ring-sword. Very few contemporary Norwegian finds combine the whole range of types of weaponry that constitute the Åker assemblage, although a weapon-grave from Torgård, south of Trondheim, comprised a similar weapon set, consisting of a shield with a boss with an apical mount, both a two-edged sword and a one-edged sword or seax, together with an axe, and a beautifully decorated bridle with pyramidal mounts.⁷⁹ The Torgård find, however, contained no ring-sword or helmet, nor was the grave covered with a barrow.

The weapon belts and sword harness with all of the buckles, strap-slides and strap-mounts stand apart in the general Norwegian range; no other Norwegian find includes a corresponding number or such a diversity of belt-fittings. The Åker buckle is the only one of its type in Norway, and is of a quality that stands out, not only in the Norwegian and indeed the Scandinavian contexts, but even in European terms. It is also noteworthy that possible parallels to the Åker buckle with cloisonné on the loop are finds from the West Mound at Gamla Uppsala and from the Taplow grave (Cheshire, England),⁸⁰ while comparable buckles also occur in mound 1 (the 'King's Mound'), at Sutton Hoo: in other words, in graves that are regarded as royal. The shield-on-tongue buckle with the oval plate is also of a higher quality than other Norwegian finds.⁸¹

Eight shield-on-tongue buckles with oval plates have been found in Norway; all of them are from the south-east,⁸² and most were made of iron.⁸³ Additionally, the 'Frankish' rectangular belt-mounts make the Åker assemblage stand apart in both Norwegian and

Scandinavian contexts. Although these presumably do not represent importation from outside of Scandinavia, such mounts are extremely rare in Scandinavia, and they were without doubt exotic pieces that attracted attention in their original context. The quantity of rectangular belt-mounts, furthermore, renders the Åker assemblage distinct in a broadly *European* context. Among a total of 93 finds recorded by Wilfried Menghin,⁸⁴ as many as five such mounts occur together in only three finds. A further find has six such pieces, but the great majority have only one or two.⁸⁵ Among the three finds with five mounts is the grave assemblage from Sutton Hoo Mound 1,⁸⁶ which may mean that quantity was related to status.

There was a general shortage of both gold and silver in the early phase of the Merovingian period in Norway, and silver, gold and imported artefacts disappeared from the burial inventory in this period.⁸⁷ The Åker assemblage, however, includes several objects with details produced in silver and gold,⁸⁸ rendering the find quite distinct in the context of Norway. A gold arm- or neck-ring has also been found in the vicinity of the findspot, and there has been speculation as to whether this could originally have belonged to the find but been transported along with soil that was carried away when the barrow was levelled.⁸⁹

The Åker assemblage is also outstanding in respect of the quantity of garnets used to decorate the objects, and not least for the cloisonné decoration found on the large belt buckle, one strap-slide, the bridle-mounts, and more. Altogether, there are 11 objects with garnet decoration. Both garnets and cloisonné are extremely rare in this period in Norway, where besides the Åker assemblage this style of decoration occurs on only a few brooches. On the Continent, there is also a marked change and a decrease in the use of this type of decoration at the end of the 6th century, or around the year AD 600, when the importation of garnets from India and Sri Lanka came to an end.⁹⁰ From this date onwards, garnet decoration was associated primarily with high-status artefacts which either come from especially rich grave finds or represent ecclesiastical treasure, such as reliquary shrines, liturgical vessels and episcopal crosses.⁹¹ It is also from this period that cloisonné garnet decoration flourishes as a form of ornamentation in England and Scandinavia.⁹² At the date at which the burial at Åker took place, then, garnet decoration was associated with the elite in Europe *as a whole*.⁹³

The zoomorphic decoration, which is found particularly on the sword belt, harness, and the shield, also makes the Åker assemblage special in a Norwegian context. In other

weapon finds from this phase, a relatively simple form of punchmark decoration predominates, and this is also the most common decoration on other types of artefact of this phase, such as jewellery.⁹⁴ Apart from the Åker assemblage and a relatively small number of other finds, such as the hilt-grip on the cutlass in the Torgård find, and crest-mounts from helmets, at the beginning of the Merovingian period in Norway animal style is found only on a few brooches. This is significant because, like garnet decoration, animal style is perceived as a marker of the social elite of this phase.⁹⁵ Both the forms of decoration, and the artefact inventory of the Åker assemblage were thus *exceptional* in the context of Norway in this phase, and the objects are undisputedly of higher quality than those from any other contemporary Norwegian find.⁹⁶

So far the case for the special place in the context of Norway of the Åker assemblage, and thus of the deceased individual, has been based principally on the artefacts from the find. This is logical, because the assemblage, as noted by way of introduction, consists of a collection of stray finds. There is, however, a broader context for the Åker assemblage — the barrow on Smørkollen and the farm of Åker itself. In order to fully understand the significance of the find, it has to be assessed in connection with the status of the farm in the early Merovingian period.

A RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL CENTRE

The farm of Åker has held a special position and been significant through long periods of prehistory and well into more recent times.⁹⁷ According to an account of the site from the end of the 18th century, there were a large number of burial mounds at Åker and on neighbouring farms.⁹⁸ Immediately south of the findspot on Smørkollen, there is a large barrow from the Bronze Age, a relative rarity in the interior of south-eastern Norway (Fig 11).⁹⁹ By the farmstead, there was a stone cist grave of the late Roman Iron Age. This grave was disturbed or robbed in antiquity, but the particular form of the grave and surviving finds, including a gold finger ring, indicate that it was originally richly furnished.¹⁰⁰

Åker occupies an outstandingly central and strategic position in respect of communications,¹⁰¹ and excavations in the farmstead area have revealed continuity of settlement at the site going back to around AD 200. Several buildings were documented alongside the existing farmstead, spanning from the Roman period to the Viking period/Scandinavian Early Middle Ages. The archaeological material from the settlement

area is characterised by a range of evidence of high social status, including broken glass vessels, both in association with a Merovingian-period building and also scattered more generally in a cultural layer covering part of the area of settlement.¹⁰² Several finds of gold from the early Iron Age have been made around the property, and the cumulative quantity of gold is greater than that from any other contemporary Norwegian farm.¹⁰³ The wealth of gold indicates the presence of an elite at the site at least one or two generations before the Åker assemblage. Several farms situated around Åker have names of a cultic character (see below), and the name 'Åker' itself could also refer to cult practices. In the early historical source *Morkinskinna*, the name appears as *Skjaldarokr*.¹⁰⁴ This can be associated with a cult focussed around the mythical Danish king Skjold (OE *Scyld*), the eponymous ancestor of the royal dynasty of the Skjoldungs (*Scyldingas*).¹⁰⁵ The cultic significance of the site is underscored by the fact that excavations in 2016 produced two gold-foil figures (*gullgubber*), at Åker: one was found in a layer overlying a great hall and the other at the bottom of a layer of fire-cracked stones/cooking-stones.¹⁰⁶ Large areas of cooking pits at Åker, dated to the Roman Iron Age and Migration Period, further demonstrate that the site was an assembly place, where many people would congregate on a regular basis.¹⁰⁷ All in all, this may well indicate that the farm of Åker played a key role in public ritual in both the earlier- and later Iron Age.¹⁰⁸

Traces of comb making have also been found, along with evidence of smithing, jewellery production, and/or metal crafts, showing that specialised production took place at Åker in the late Roman Iron Age and Migration Period.¹⁰⁹ Specialised craft production, associated with cultic functions and finds of gold, are particularly connected with what are called 'central places'.¹¹⁰ An extensive ritual and cultic landscape can be traced around Åker, which recalls the central places at, for instance, Gudme (Denmark), Gamla Uppsala and Helgö (both Sweden).¹¹¹ This is reflected, among other things, in the cultic names of surrounding farms, such as Torshov, Vidarshov, Disen, Dystingbu and Vang.¹¹² Sites further off may also have been related to Åker as an important cult centre; for instance, the site of Hov, some 40 km to the north-west, on the far side of Lake Mjøsa, where more than 20 gold-foil figures have been found.¹¹³ At Starene in Stange, 5 km south-east of Åker, the ritual deposition of animals, eg horses, in the migration and Merovingian periods has been documented.¹¹⁴ This widespread cultic zone serves to emphasise the special position of this site in both eastern Norway and in the country as a whole.

In the creek of Åkervika, which lies on the Åker estate and is not far from the farmstead, there is also a boat-house suitable for a large ship. This boat-house has been radiocarbon dated to the end of the Viking period or the early Scandinavian Middle Ages, but pottery and other things found at the site, indicate that there was a boat-house at the same location back in the Roman Iron Age/Migration Period.¹¹⁵ Metal-detecting in or around the boat-house site unearthed a conical brooch of the early Merovingian period (ca. AD 550–650),¹¹⁶ which may show it was still in use in the earliest phase of that period. Large boat-houses of the early Iron Age have been interpreted as signs of control over communication routes and of military sea power,¹¹⁷ which is significant as Åker lies alongside Norway's largest inland lake, Mjøsa, which in turn probably had a navigable link to the Oslofjord in the Iron Age, and also possibly over to Sweden via river systems.

As noted above, helmets appear to have had a special significance in Merovingian-period society, but very few finds of helmets have been made in Norway. Altogether in Norway there are just five finds with parts of helmets or helmet-mounts, and all of these are fragmentary. The finds are, moreover, concentrated in the area around Lake Mjøsa: two were found in the cemeteries at By and Vestre Englaug in Løten, which is situated on the Black River (*Svartelva*), 8–9 km as the crow flies east of the mouth of the river into Åkersvika at Åker, while a third is from Stabu in Toten, which lies opposite Åker on the other side of the lake.¹¹⁸ A new find from Gran in Hadeland can probably be viewed in connection with the 'Mjøsa finds'. The graves containing helmets in this area surround Åker and can thus be regarded as having been related to it, and to the important socio-political and religious function this site had in the first phase of the Merovingian period.¹¹⁹ The helmets were found on farms which lie along important transport routes running from east to west and from north to south (Fig 12). It may have been that farms with a strategic location in the landscape around Åker were granted to the leading members of the military retinue or the warrior aristocracy.¹²⁰

The earliest phase of the Merovingian period stands out as one of transition in Norway, when gradually power was gathered into fewer hands,¹²¹ at the same time as group identities were in the process of changing from smaller regional units to a common, super-regional identity that covered the majority of what later became a 'Norwegian' territory.¹²² In these circumstances, selected sites, such as Åker, which were important public assembly places, may assume even greater importance than before, because they

were contributing to the formation of a common cultural and trans-regional focus within a larger geographical range.¹²³ The selected site serves in turn to structure society through the special status with which it is attributed. This may perhaps be precisely why at just such a place the highest representative of the society — the king — was buried.

THE KING'S GRAVE

Both the immediate and the wider context of the Åker assemblage, and the unique place of these finds within Norway in terms of the inventory of artefacts, their style and their quality, indicate that whoever was buried on Smørkollen was royal. The Åker assemblage thus represents the princely grave of a warrior king at the apex of a group of aristocratic followers/retinue, and who ruled over an eastern Norwegian territory. The origins of this king have been debated, because it is not a matter of course that he would have grown up on the farm. In Eva Nissen Fett's view he was probably of Danish lineage: one of the Skjoldungs.¹²⁴ Gutorm Gjessing, by contrast, was of the opinion that the Åker find represented an eastern Norwegian chieftain, who used the Skjoldung name as a 'solid social stamp' but not because he necessarily belonged genealogically to the Danish branch of this kin group.¹²⁵ The Åker find has also been taken as evidence that a 'forced conquest by Upplandic chieftainly dynasties' had taken place,¹²⁶ and that the Åker king was one of the Ynglings.¹²⁷

In my view it is not yet possible to say exactly where in Scandinavia the man who was buried at Åker was from, but the massive investment in his funerary monument may point to a change of dynasty: the grave could be what is known as a 'founder's grave', which announced the establishment and legitimation of a new ruling line.¹²⁸ This may also be indicated by the proximity of the grave to the large Bronze Age barrow on Smørkollen. It could have been important to emphasise a link with the older, probably mythically charged barrow. By locating the new funerary monument in physical proximity to it, they may have legitimised the rights of a new dynasty by founding a mythological, if not a real, relationship with the place, with former leading families, and with a legendary origin. In this way, an illusion of continuity and tradition could be created around a newly established ruling dynasty. This is a phenomenon that is found repeatedly in the case of contemporary Anglo-Saxon elite graves, as, for instance, at Taplow, where the grave mound was constructed in close juxtaposition to several prehistoric barrows, probably as a form of deliberate visual

appropriation of a prehistoric landscape in order to legitimise authority.¹²⁹ It is possible that the robbing of the rich stone-cist grave of the Roman Iron Age by the farmstead at Åker can also be viewed in connection with a change of dynasty. Bjørn Myhre has outlined a course of political development in which larger territorial units were formed from smaller kingdoms, and in which a kingdom of eastern Norway, with its origins in a ruling dynasty based at Borre in Vestfold, was established in the early Merovingian period, and gradually gained control over other petty kingdoms in eastern Norway.¹³⁰ It is tempting to interpret the Åker assemblage as a stage in this process.

In a pre-state society, the presence of the king was a precondition for maintaining control and/or demonstrating power and authority over an area.¹³¹ For instance, Charlemagne's extremely well-documented travels show that his reign was, in effect, a continuous journey.¹³² Similar mobility is implied by the burial patterns of the higher elite in the 7th and 8th centuries on the Continent and in England.¹³³ A petty king in south-eastern Norway could presumably travel around his kingdom in the same way; it is very plausible that Åker served as one of the sites at which such a king was regularly resident — a royal seat. Whether the king died while he was at Åker is less certain. However, irrespective of where he was when death overtook him, he might have been carried to the cultic 'centre' of the kingdom and to its natural focal point.¹³⁴ The unique position of Åker made this farm an obvious place at which to inter a king, and perhaps especially so if this king had to be immortalised as an indisputable link in the chain of what was in reality a new line of inheritance. The grave monument was constructed at a highly conspicuous location in the terrain, and by raising the monument on a rocky outcrop it is possible that the illusion of a truly monumental barrow was created — conceivably comparable with the great barrows at Gamla Uppsala, the Storhaug on Karmøy (Norway), and the burial mound at Taplow, all of which were constructed on raised ridges or terraces.¹³⁵ Through the size of the funerary monument, and a funeral rendered both spectacular and unforgettable through the investment in the unique and conspicuous grave goods, the collective memory of the king's death was yet another dimension that made Åker a thoroughly special place, in its time and for future generations.¹³⁶

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CAPTIONS

FIG 1

The Åker buckle.

Scale: 1:1. *Photograph by Lill-Ann Chepstow-Lusty, © Museum of Cultural History, Oslo.*

FIG 2

The location of Åker on Lake Mjøsa in Norway.

Illustration by Magne Samdal. Base map from Statens kartverk.

FIG 3

Shield-grip mounts.

(Centre) The beak from the mount was found in 1889; (Bottom) The remainder of the bird's head and the beak were found in 1992; (Top) The complete bird's head was found in 1868.^{cxxxvii} Scale 0:0. *Photograph by Lill-Ann Chepstow-Lusty, © Museum of Cultural History, Oslo.*

FIG 4

(a) Ring-pommel and scabbard edge-strip with sword stud. (b) Bird-shaped hilt-fitting (?). (c) Pommel and decorative studs from a sheath.

Scale 0:0. *Photograph by Lill-Ann Chepstow-Lusty, © Museum of Cultural History, Oslo.*

FIG 5

Shield-mounts.

Scale 0:0. *Photograph by Lill-Ann Chepstow-Lusty, © Museum of Cultural History, Oslo.*

FIG 6

Openwork mount, strap-slide and ornamental stud.

Scale 0:0. *Photograph by Lill-Ann Chepstow-Lusty, © Museum of Cultural History, Oslo.*

FIG 7

Sword-belt mounts.

In order, from bottom to top, C38000/5 to C38000/–9. Scale 0:0. *Photograph by Lill-Ann Chepstow-Lusty, © Museum of Cultural History, Oslo.*

FIG 8

a) Strap-distributor; b) Shield-on-tongue buckle; c) Strap-distributor; d) S-shaped belt-slide; e) Mount. Scale 0:0. *Photograph by Lill-Ann Chepstow-Lusty, © Museum of Cultural History, Oslo.*

FIG 9

(Top) Strap-distributors; (Bottom) Bridle bit and crampon (scale 0:0). *Photograph by Lill-Ann Chepstow-Lusty, © Museum of Cultural History, Oslo.*

FIG 10

Fragments with punchmark decoration (below), and pressed gold foil with repoussé decoration (top, left). Scale 0:0. *Photograph by Lill-Ann Chepstow-Lusty, © Museum of Cultural History, Oslo.*

FIG 11

The Åker site. 1) find spot of the Åker assemblage on Smørkollen; 2) Bronze-Age barrow; 3) existing farmstead; 4) settlement and production area with finds of gold foil figures; 5) area with cooking pits; 6) boathouse. *Illustration by Magne Samdal. Base map from Statens kartverk.*

FIG 12

The distribution of helmet finds in the area around Åker. *Illustration by Magne Samdal. Base map from Statens kartverk.*

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² Nybruget 1992, 37; Rolfsen 2000, 54; 2015, 113–15. See also the accession register of the Museum of Cultural History, Oslo: C38000/1–63.

³ The collection of finds discovered in the late-19th and early 20th century became well known in Norwegian archaeology as *Åkerfunnet* literally ‘the Åker find’. The term ‘Åker assemblage’ is used here to refer to the full range of finds made over the past 150 years, leaving ‘Åker find’ as a historical term for the earlier collection and its impact on Norwegian archaeology. See Grieg 1918; Cleve 1943, 17–22; Fett 1947, 18; Gjessing 1934, 25–31; Slomann and Christensen 1984, 173–5, 180.

⁴ Grieg 1918, 97, 156–62; Gjessing 1934, 31.

⁵ Cf Olsén 1945. The term ‘cutlass’ has been used here to translate the Norwegian *sverdkniv*, literally ‘sword-knife’.

⁶ Cf Menghin 1983, 253, no 104:2 and 292, no. 147:3; Olsén 1945, abb 19–23.

⁷ Bruce-Mitford 1978, figs 60 and 84.

⁸ Gjessing 1934, 30–1.

⁹ C38000/13, very similar to Bruce-Mitford (1978, fig 399) or Nerman (1969, taf 58, fig 558).

¹⁰ Nybruget 1992, 31; Slomann and Christensen 1984, 176–9.

¹¹ Cf Ament 1974; Menghin 1983, 40, 145; Werner 1951, 52–3.

¹² Gjessing 1934, 27; Nybruget 1992, 31; Slomann and Christensen 1984, 176.

¹³ Jørgensen 1999, 116.

¹⁴ C32693; Skjølvold 1969.

¹⁵ Bakka 1977, 28; Slomann and Christensen 1984, 179.

¹⁶ Grieg 1918, 91.

¹⁷ C38000/22–25.

¹⁸ Grieg 1918, 97.

¹⁹ C38000/30, 37 and 38. The ornament on C38000/37 matches that on helmet-mounts from Vendel grave 14 (Stolpe and Arne 1912, pl xli, fig 2) and is also similar to the decoration on shield-mounts from Sutton Hoo mound 1 (Bruce-Mitford 1978, fig 64)

²⁰ According to Museum of Cultural History’s catalogue, inventory no C50199, bone gaming pieces have been observed at the site, but these have not been delivered to the museum.

²¹ Nybruget 1992, 26, 32; Slomann and Christensen 1984, 175.

²² Nybruget 1992, 25–6.

²³ Bakka 1977, 28; Fett 1947, 3; Gjessing 1934, 25–31; Grieg 1918, 89–90; Hagen 1992, 18; Martens 1973; Slomann and Christensen 1984, 173–80.

²⁴ Lindquist 1936, 220; Nybruget 1992.

²⁵ Geisslinger 1967, 56–9; Zachrisson, forthcoming. See also Slomann and Christensen (1984, 175).

²⁶ Fischer et al 2013; Geisslinger 1967, 56–9, 107; Jensen 2009, 138; Zachrisson, forthcoming.

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- ²⁷ Fischer et al 2013; Geisslinger 1967, catalogue no 222; Zachrisson, forthcoming. A find from Uppåkra stands on its own with more than 20 sword pommels of the early Merovingian period deliberately deposited within a defined area (Fischer et al 2013, 115–18). A discovery of a similar deposition of 16 pommels has recently been done at Fæsted in Jutland, Denmark (Grundvad et al 2019).
- ²⁸ Grundvad et al 2019.
- ²⁹ Fabech 2017.
- ³⁰ Fischer et al 2013.
- ³¹ It has, however, been alleged that the objects had been deliberately destroyed (Nybruget 1992, 33).
- ³² Ryste 2005, 56–7.
- ³³ Nybruget 1992, 33.
- ³⁴ Ryste 2005, 21, 57–8, 61.
- ³⁵ Nybruget 1992, 26, 32–3; Slomann and Christensen 1984, 175.
- ³⁶ Jørgensen 1999, 197; Ljungkvist 2000, 180; Solberg 2000, 191–2.
- ³⁷ Geisslinger 1967, 56–9; Zachrisson, forthcoming.
- ³⁸ Fern and Speake 2014; Leahy and Bland 2014; Leahy et al 2011; Webster et al 2011.
- ³⁹ Hines 2019; Leahy et al 2011, 211.
- ⁴⁰ Fern and Speake 2014; Leahy and Bland 2014.
- ⁴¹ Webster et al 2011.
- ⁴² Leahy and Bland 2014, 55.
- ⁴³ Hagen 1992, 18; Slomann and Christensen 1984, 175.
- ⁴⁴ Bratt 2008, 79, 87; Ljungkvist 2000, 166–75; 2005, 251–2.
- ⁴⁵ Sjöberg 2000, 16.
- ⁴⁶ Duczko 1996b, 76–7.
- ⁴⁷ Bratt 2008, 79, 87; Ljungkvist 2000, 174–5; 2005, 252; Petré 1984.
- ⁴⁸ Martens 1973.
- ⁴⁹ Cf Ljungkvist 2000, 175–6.
- ⁵⁰ Nielsen 1991, 147. The dating of the chronological phases follows Ørsnes 1966.
- ⁵¹ Cleve 1943, 17–22; Fett 1947, 3; Gjessing 1934, 25–31; Grieg 1918, 89–90; Slomann and Christensen 1984, 173–80.
- ⁵² Arrhenius 1983, 64, 68, fig 6.
- ⁵³ Arrhenius 1983; Arwidsson 1977; Stolpe and Arne 1912.
- ⁵⁴ Cf Røstad 2019.
- ⁵⁵ See Jørgensen (1999, 197) and Steuer (1987, 213).
- ⁵⁶ Menghin 1983; Steuer 1987.
- ⁵⁷ Jørgensen 1999, 164–8, 197–8; Näsman 1991, 174; Steuer 1989.
- ⁵⁸ Arrhenius 1985, 146, 197; Jørgensen 1999, 199; Solberg 2000, 200–01; Steuer 1987, 223; 1989, 108–9, 113.
- ⁵⁹ Bakka 1977, 32–5.
- ⁶⁰ Jørgensen 1999, 199.

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- ⁶¹ Jørgensen 1999, 199.
- ⁶² Gudesen 1980, 113; Solberg 2000, 200–01.
- ⁶³ Lillehammer 1994, 221; Myhre 1992; Solberg 2000, 200–01.
- ⁶⁴ Steuer 1987, 203, 213, 225.
- ⁶⁵ Bratt 2008, 109, 112; Ljungkvist 2005, 256–7; 2006, 144; Nielsen 1991, 149–50. Ljungkvist (2006, 43–5, 144), however, regards Valsgårde grave 6 as pertaining to the highest elite.
- ⁶⁶ See, for example, Fett 1947, 16–17; Gjessing 1934, 31; Slomann and Christensen 1984, 182.
- ⁶⁷ Duczko 1996b, 76–7; Ljungkvist 2005, 251.
- ⁶⁸ Bruce-Mitford 1978; Carver 1998.
- ⁶⁹ Steuer 1987, 200, fn 32.
- ⁷⁰ Leahy and Bland 2014, 26–8.
- ⁷¹ Jørgensen 1999, 198.
- ⁷² Ljungkvist 2006.
- ⁷³ See also Bratt (2008, 109), on whether gold objects distinguish a higher social class than the warrior aristocracy.
- ⁷⁴ Ljungkvist 2006, 43–5, 144; 2010, tab 1, 428, 433–5.
- ⁷⁵ Näsman 1991, 174; see further Vierck (1981, 94) and Näsman (2008, 38–42) on the significance of an *imitatio regni Francorum* in Scandinavia in the Merovingian period.
- ⁷⁶ Ljungkvist 2006, 41.
- ⁷⁷ Gjessing 1934, 103–4; Grieg 1918, 161–62; Gudesen 1980, 40–1; Jørgensen 1999, 163–70; Solberg 2000, 199–200.
- ⁷⁸ Gudesen 1980, 52; Solberg 2000, 192.
- ⁷⁹ Gjessing 1934, 32–5.
- ⁸⁰ Ljungkvist 2005, 254; Speake 1980, 53–4.
- ⁸¹ Ørsnes 1966, 75.
- ⁸² Grindkåsa 2012, 77–80, 87; Gudesen 1980, 68; Jørgensen 1999, 116; Solberg 2000, 192.
- ⁸³ Grieg 1918, 105.
- ⁸⁴ Menghin 1983, 357–62.
- ⁸⁵ See also Werner (1951, 53).
- ⁸⁶ However, one of the five mounts served as a strap-distributor.
- ⁸⁷ Bakka 1977, 37; Solberg 2000, 186–8.
- ⁸⁸ Grieg 1918. According to Grieg (1918, 95) the find includes a gold bar (C10378), but the accession register at the Museum of Cultural History records that this gold bar or wire was found at another location on the farm.
- ⁸⁹ Nybruget 1992, 34–6.
- ⁹⁰ Hilgner 2016, 2–3; Quast and Schüssler 2000.
- ⁹¹ Franz 2016; Quast and Schüssler 2000, 89.
- ⁹² Hamerow 2017, 77.
- ⁹³ See also Arrhenius 1985, 198 and Hamerow 2017, 71.
- ⁹⁴ Røstad 2016, 49, 52–92; Ørsnes 1966, 184.

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- ⁹⁵ Kristoffersen and Magnus 2010, 82; Nielsen 1991, 139; 1999, 195.
- ⁹⁶ See also Hagen (1992, 18).
- ⁹⁷ In the following, I only accentuate findings from Åker of immediate interest to the theme treated here. For a more in-depth treatment of the site, cf Røstad forthcoming.
- ⁹⁸ Rolfsen 1992, 50–1.
- ⁹⁹ Nybruget 1992, 29, 33.
- ¹⁰⁰ Hernæs 1989, 8–9.
- ¹⁰¹ Hagen 1992, 13.
- ¹⁰² Pilø 2005; Hernæs 1989.
- ¹⁰³ Hagen 1992, 19.
- ¹⁰⁴ Fett 1947, 13.
- ¹⁰⁵ Fett 1947, 13–17; Gjessing 1934, 31–2; Hagen 1992; Sæther 1992, 71–2.
- ¹⁰⁶ McGraw 2017.
- ¹⁰⁷ Hernæs 1989, 11–12; Pilø 2005, 93–105.
- ¹⁰⁸ Fett 1947, 16–17; Lillehammer 1994, 208.
- ¹⁰⁹ Hernæs 1989; Pilø 2005, 93–105.
- ¹¹⁰ Hedeager 2001; Jørgensen 2009; Ljungkvist 2006, 90–5; Zachrisson 2004.
- ¹¹¹ Hedeager 2001; Jørgensen 2009; Ljungkvist 2006, 182–3; Zachrisson 2004.
- ¹¹² The suffix ‘hov’ in the names Torshov and Vidarshov means ‘heathen temple’ and Tor (Thor) and Vidar are names of Norse gods. ‘Disen’ and ‘Dystingbo’ derive from the name of the Norse goddesses ‘disene’, while ‘Vang’ means ‘holy place’.
- ¹¹³ Sandodden and Smiseth 2016.
- ¹¹⁴ Bukkemoen and Skare 2018.
- ¹¹⁵ Rolfsen 1992, 46–7.
- ¹¹⁶ Accession register of the Museum of Cultural History, Oslo: C38001.
- ¹¹⁷ Myhre 1997, 171; Opedahl 2005, 131, 133.
- ¹¹⁸ Grieg 1923; Gudesen 1980, 55; Martens 1969, 15, 70–2; Solberg 2000, 200.
- ¹¹⁹ Lillehammer 1994, 221.
- ¹²⁰ Cf Hedeager 1992, 203–6; Opedahl 2005, 140–5; Steuer 1989, 110.
- ¹²¹ Lillehammer 1994, 181, 206–12, 223; Myhre 1992; 2003, 87–9.
- ¹²² Røstad 2016, 341–3, 381–5.
- ¹²³ Williams 1998, 104.
- ¹²⁴ Fett 1947, 17.
- ¹²⁵ Gjessing 1934, 31.
- ¹²⁶ Mikkelsen 1973, 114.
- ¹²⁷ Slomann 1969, 42–4.
- ¹²⁸ Hedeager 1992, 193, 207; Opedahl 2005, 125; Steuer 1989, 107, 109.
- ¹²⁹ Webster 2007, 69; Williams 1998, 101–3.
- ¹³⁰ Myhre 1992.
- ¹³¹ Opedahl 2005, 124–5; Steuer 1989, 101.

¹³² McKitterick 2008, 171–86.

¹³³ Ljungkvist 2006, 80; Steuer 1989, 118.

¹³⁴ Hedeager 2011, 148–63; Opedahl 2005, 39–40, 124–5.

¹³⁵ Silver 1996, 54; Opedahl 2005, 144; Webster 2007, 69.

¹³⁶ Opedahl 2005, 119; Williams 1998, 96; 2006, 146.

^{cxxxvii} Nybruget 1992, 25, 37.