

Interaktion ohne Grenzen

Interaction without borders

Band 1 | Volume 1

Interaktion ohne Grenzen

Beispiele archäologischer Forschungen am Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts

Interaction without borders

Exemplary archaeological research at the beginning of the 21st century

herausgegeben von | edited by

Berit Valentin Eriksen, Angelika Abegg-Wigg,

Ralf Bleile & Ulf Ickerodt

Band 1 | Volume 1

Schleswig 2017

Gedruckt mit Unterstützung von

Archäologisches Landesmuseum in der Stiftung
Schleswig-Holsteinische Landesmuseen Schloss Gottorf, Schleswig

Carlsbergfondet, København

Dronning Margrethe II's Arkæologiske Fond, København

Farumgaard-Fonden, København

Verein zur Förderung des Archäologischen Landesmuseums e. V.
Schloss Gottorf, Schleswig

Zentrum für Baltische und Skandinavische Archäologie in der Stiftung
Schleswig-Holsteinische Landesmuseen Schloss Gottorf, Schleswig

Redaktion

Angelika Abegg-Wigg und Isabel Sonnenschein
unter Mitarbeit von Ronja Mücke und Nele Voß
sowie Wilson Huntley (englische Lesekorrektur)
und Annika Sirkin sowie Birte Anspach (Ortsverzeichnis)

Einbandgestaltung

Jürgen Schüller

Foto Seite V

Stiftung Schleswig-Holsteinische Landesmuseen
Schloss Gottorf, Schleswig

Layout und Herstellung

Wachholtz Verlag, Kiel/Hamburg
www.wachholtz-verlag.de

Vertrieb

Archäologisches Landesamt Schleswig-Holstein (ALSH), Schleswig
www.archaeologie.schleswig-holstein.de

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der
Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten
sind im Internet über <http://dnb.dnb.de> abrufbar.

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Schloss Gottorf, Schleswig, und die Autoren

ISBN 978-3-00-057735-2



Festschrift für Claus von Carnap-Bornheim

zum 60. Geburtstag

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Size doesn't matter – the small weapon deposit from Villestofte, Denmark

Xenia Pauli Jensen and Mogens Bo Henriksen

One of the central topics of Claus von Carnap-Bornheim's comprehensive *oeuvre* is the Danish and North German Iron Age weapon deposits. The scabbard runners from the classic Danish find from Vimose were the subject of Claus's dissertation, and the Vimose find holds a recurrent and central position in his later studies (VON CARNAP-BORNHEIM 1991; 1999; VON CARNAP-BORNHEIM/ILKJÆR 1996). The Vimose find comprises over 5700 objects and is one of the largest weapon deposits from the time between the beginning of our era till around 600 AD (PAULI JENSEN 2008a; 2011). Vimose or Viemose is a deep and large wetland area situated approximately 10 km north-west of Odense on the northern part of Funen. However, few are aware that a smaller bog find with weaponry is found only 4 km south-east of Vimose and 2 km north-east of the village Villestofte (Fig. 1).

The Villestofte find was discovered more than 150 years ago. It is, however, only recently that the precise find-spot has been located and the material analysed in full (HENRIKSEN/PAULI JENSEN 2007). This paper will present the small but significant find to a wider, international audience and, in doing so, send our sincere birthday greetings to Claus.

Find history

In the summer of 1849, a smallholder, Niels Rasmussen, found three copper alloy fittings, an antler comb and an antler chape during peat digging on the meadow belonging to his property 'Damhuset' at Villestofte Mark. The artefacts were delivered to the National Museum in Copenhagen along with an enclosed letter describing the find circumstances. Unfortunately, the letter did not provide any information on the precise location of the find-spot. In 2007, however, studies of older maps and archive material on ownership in the area allowed us to pinpoint the area of the potential

find-spot to an approximately 2000-m² area on Niels Rasmussen's property.

Prior to a nature restoration project in 2010 a small trial excavation was conducted at the spot. The aim was to determine whether the objects from 1849 were a part of a larger deposit. Apart from a medieval period iron axe, animal bones and a few pieces of processed wood, there were no traces of human activity here. However, some important information on the geological formation processes in the Stavis river valley was retrieved.

The landscape around Villestofte

The area north-west of Odense is characterized by a number of north-west to south-east oriented river valleys shaped by the melting of the ice cap at the end of the Weichselian glaciation. In the bottom of these more or less marked valleys run a number of streams and rivers which all originally ended in Funen's largest wetland area, Næsbyhoved Lake. Vimose is located in the bottom of one of these river valleys and is drained by a small stream, 'Vimoserenden'. Parallel and one kilometre south-westwards, the more distinctive Stavis river valley cuts through the landscape. North-east of Villestofte, the River Stavis meets the River Ryds coming up from the south-west. The River Stavis was originally one of the largest rivers of the area and also ended in Næsbyhoved Lake, approximately 2 km south-east of the meeting point of the two rivers.

The find-spot is on the south side of the approximately 100-m broad river valley, 150 m north-west of the meeting point of the two rivers. To the north, the area is outlined by the River Stavis, and steep slopes of the river valley mark the border to the south. Between these natural boundaries, the find-spot was identified as an almost 40-m wide meadow, which is regularly flooded but still solid with an

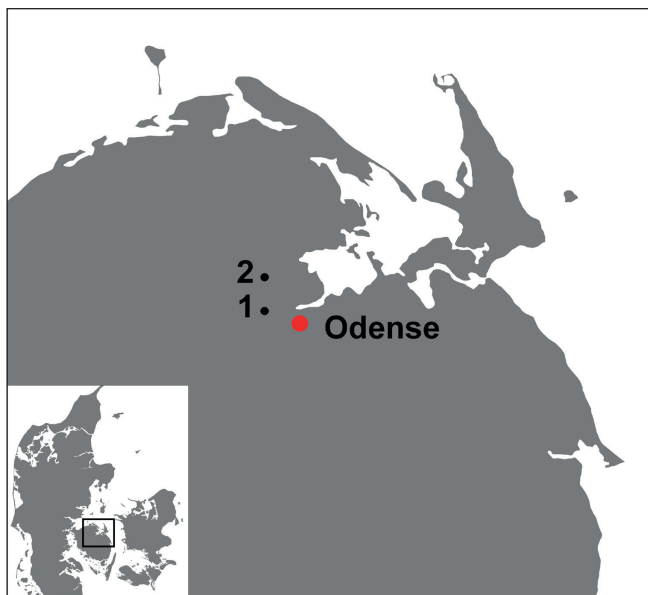


Fig. 1 The area north-west of Odense: Villestoft (1) and Vimose (2) (Drawing: Per Dahl Johansen).

even surface (Fig. 2). The archaeological examination in 2010 showed that the top metre consisted mostly of greyish yellow to reddish brown layers. Under these layers a substantial, dark reddish brown peat layer emerged. This was not excavated in full but was followed to a depth of at least 2 m. The peat comprised large amounts of twigs and small trunks that had been accumulated during millennia by the river's ever-changing stream.

This must be the peat layer that Niels Rasmussen was targeting in 1849, but whether the artefacts were found here or in the gyttja layers above cannot be determined. However, the patina might give a clue: the two antler objects from the 1849 excavation are slightly lighter than the two bones found in 2010 in the peat layer. With reservations regarding the various processing of the layers this might indicate that the finds from 1849 were found in the gyttja layers.

There is no doubt that the level of the groundwater and the course of the river has changed since the Iron Age, but in general it can be concluded that the deposition area was an even surface in the area between the river and the slope down to the river. It is unlikely that the objects were deposited in the river itself, as they hold no traces of the effects of running water. They were probably placed on a surface of low, stagnant water.

The Villestoft find

There is no information on whether the peat digging in 1849 resulted in more finds. A couple of non-military deposits are the only other reports of similar deposits from the river valley. On the other hand, finds from the valley as well as finds from the adjacent areas show intense settlement activity since the Stone Age. This means that the objects found in

the excavation in 2010 cannot for certain be linked with the 1849 deposit but could be the result of both earlier and later activities at the find-spot.

It is noteworthy that the Villestoft find's small and humble objects were identified in the dark and moist peat at all and that they were even recognized as artefacts. It is also remarkable that the finder acted correctly by sending them to the right authorities. In the years around 1849, however, large quantities of objects were recovered from Vimose by peat diggers, and this might have facilitated an interest and awareness in the local society.

The objects from Villestoft are remarkably well preserved and were never subject to ritual destruction. Furthermore, the finder was very careful in handling the artefacts and today they seem almost unharmed by time. It is therefore easy to identify the different find types, which will be presented in the following (Fig. 3).

An antler comb

Combs of antler are some of the most common grave goods in graves from Funen in the phases B2–C3/D1 (approx. 1st–4th centuries AD). Most of the combs from the graves are three-layer combs, whereas two-layer combs – like the one from Villestoft (Fig. 3a) – comprise only approximately 30 pieces. It has not been possible to examine whether the raw material is red deer or moose, and consequently the provenance of the comb cannot be identified.

More than 20 of the known two-layer combs are found in Vimose, including one with the oldest runic inscription, the name Harja (HENRIKSEN 1996). In the original publication of the war booty sacrifice of Kragehul, a fragment of a two-layer comb is depicted (ENGELHARDT 1867, pl. IV, 14), but both R. B. Iversen and X. Pauli Jensen have convincingly argued that this piece originates from Vimose, as it was entered under Vimose in the National Museum's archives (PAULI JENSEN 2008b, 138; IVERSEN 2010, 109).

Besides the bog finds from Funen, the two-layer combs occur in a number of grave finds from Funen and the eastern part of southern Jutland. Furthermore they are known from two north-west German settlement finds from Tofting and Feddersen Wierde and from Balm on the northern coast of Vorpommern (Western Pomerania; HENRIKSEN/PAULI JENSEN 2007; PAULI JENSEN 2008a; HENRIKSEN 2009, 153 f.; LEUBE 2009, fig. 42; PAULI JENSEN forthcoming). The burials with two-layer combs are found in the context of brooches and pottery dating to phase B2–C1 – a dating that fits well with the other find types as well (Fig. 4).

Horse harness fitting

The almost quadratic, pyramidal fitting with a rivet placed in circular extensions in the corners is made from copper alloy and measures approximately 5 × 5 cm (Fig. 3b). The short rivets indicate that they have been mounted on leather, and the fitting can be identified as a strap junction fitting



Fig. 2 The Stavis Å river valley seen from the north-west. The find-spot is marked to the right of the river (Photo: Mogens Bo Henriksen).

(*Riemenverteiler*). It is used to fit or join two straps together or to join or hold crossing straps in place.

This type of fitting is known from the war booty sacrifice of Illerup Ådal and is a part of the bridle joining the brow band and cheekpieces and holding them in place (see for instance VON CARNAP-BORNHEIM/ILKJÆR 1996, fig. 198). There is some variation in these strap junction fittings, but generally the rectangular and quadratic fittings are especially linked with the 3rd-century weapon deposits and to horse burials with bridles from the former East Prussia (LAU 2014, 170f.). Some of the closest parallels to the Villemstoftte piece derive from Thorsberg Moor in northern Germany – these are only slightly larger than the Villemstoftte specimens (LAU 2014, pl. 45). An identical fitting is found in Vimose (ENGELHARDT 1863, pl. 13, 10), along with an almost identical piece which carries a discrete ornamentation along the base of the pyramid (PAULI JENSEN forthcoming).

Remains of a balteus: a double button

The seemingly most insignificant artefact of the Villemstoftte find is not the least interesting. It is a small cast double button of copper alloy (Fig. 3c). Contrary to the composite buttons often used for belts, the cast double buttons belong to the Roman style sword belt or balteus. The advantage of the double buttons is that the balteus can be opened and

can fit different soldiers as opposed to the Germanic sword belt that is custom-made (VON CARNAP-BORNHEIM/ILKJÆR 1996, 308).

This fact has led researchers to suggest that the Roman style balteus was stored centrally and handed over to the soldiers from an arsenal – an interpretation which is supported by the standardization of the spears, javelins and shields that has been identified after 200 AD (VON CARNAP-BORNHEIM/ILKJÆR 1996, 483f.).

In the Roman Empire, the double buttons are in use from the middle of the 2nd century AD till the late 3rd century AD. They are known from a number of forts along the *limes*, as well as from a number of burials north of the *limes* (OLDENSTEIN 1976, 168ff.; VON CARNAP-BORNHEIM/ILKJÆR 1996, 320ff.). One of the earliest examples was found in the fort Neckarburken in Baden-Württemberg and is dated within the first half of the 2nd century AD (OLDENSTEIN 1976, 168f. pl. 46, no. 483). The head of the button from Neckarburken is decorated with a rosette, similar to two specimens from Thorsberg (ENGELHARDT 1863, pl. 18, 6; MATEŠIĆ 2015, pl. 43, M315–16).

Two of the continental finds stand out from the rest due to their rich equipment, namely the graves from *Aquincum* / Budapest in Hungary and Silistra in present-day Bulgaria (BURGER 1984, 65ff.; VASILEV/MITANOV 1974; FISCHER 1988,



Fig. 3 The Vilestofte find
(Photo: National Museum/
Pia Brejnholt).

177ff. figs. 4 and 6; VON CARNAP-BORNHEIM/ILKJÆR 1996, 320f.). In both graves the relatively large and ornamented double buttons found are together with silver fittings from an officer's sword belt. A coin minted in 287 AD provides a *terminus post quem* for the *Aquincum* grave, whereas the dating of the Silistra find is more problematic; probably it also belongs to the 2nd half of the 3rd century AD (FISCHER 1988, 177; VON CARNAP-BORNHEIM/ILKJÆR 1996, 321).

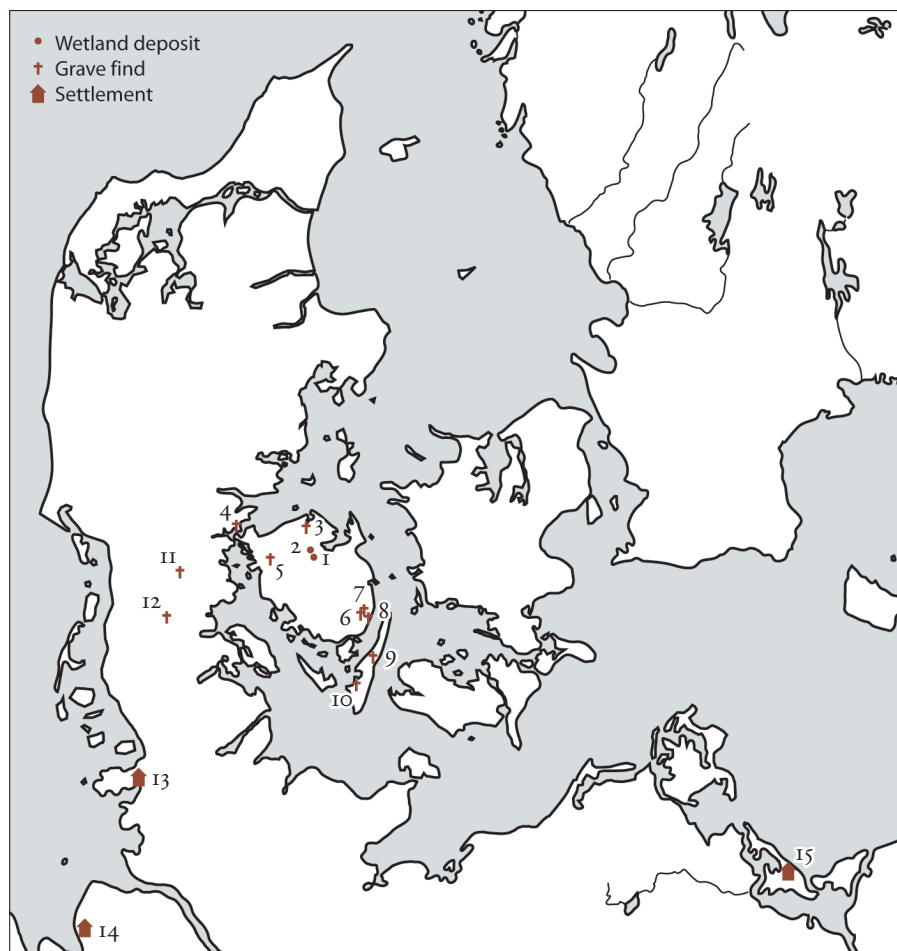
The buttons have most likely not been produced in the central *fabricae*, but rather in the *vici* and *canabae* near the *limes* forts. This is indicated by one interesting find of semi-manufacture of the production line from a *vicus* outside the fort in Regensburg-Großprüfening, where fragments of double buttons from serial productions were excavated during the 1980s (FISCHER 1982, fig. 23,3).

Both the button from Vilestofte and the one from Vimose have a smooth, vaulted head. This type of head occurs from the middle of the 2nd century AD in Roman provincial contexts, but the majority of the double buttons are to be dated to the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries AD (OLDENSTEIN 1976, 169 pl. 46, nos. 485–489). They are especially common in the weapon deposits of Illerup Ådal, Vimose, Thorsberg and Nydam. Mostly, only a few pieces have been excavated, except from Vimose where approximately 100 double buttons of the same type as the Vilestofte specimens have been found (PAULI JENSEN 2016).

A bird caught in flight ...?

The purpose of a scabbard runner is to hold the straps of the scabbard in place. The scabbard runner from Vilestofte

Fig. 4 Distribution of the two-layer combs: 1 Villestoft; 2 Vimose; 3 Sandagergård; 4 Erritsø; 5 Kræmmerled; 6 Brudager; 7 Møllegårdsmarken; 8 Egelygård; 9 Stengade II; 10 Harnebjerg; 11 Hørløkke; 12 Galsted; 13 Tofting; 14 Feddersen Wierde; 15 Balm.



depicts a stylized bird's head (**Fig. 3d**) – a type defined by Claus von Carnap-Bornheim as type IA (VON CARNAP-BORNHEIM 1991, 7ff.). The Villestoft specimen is made from copper alloy, but runners are sometimes made of gilded silver and occasionally with eyes of glass (**Fig. 5**).

This type of scabbard runner is only known from southern Scandinavia, primarily from war booty finds, but also from a couple of Norwegian graves from Hauge Østre in Vest-Agder and Vennolum in Hadeland (GRIEG 1926, 32 fig. 27; 1938, 32 figs. 37–38; ILKJÆR 1990, cat. no. 260; cat. no. 784 fig. 187). It is also known locally from Funen from a grave in Brandsby, found as a secondary burial in a dolmen mound. The Brandsby find comprised among other things a sword in a preserved scabbard where the fittings (including a copper alloy type IA scabbard runner) were still attached (KJÆR 1900, 122f. fig. 6; KLINDT-JENSEN 1952, fig. 6; ALBRECHTSEN 1968, 16 pl. 15e.f; PAULI JENSEN 2013, 179f.).

Scabbard runners of von Carnap-Bornheim's type IA are found in a number of weapon deposits, including Thorsberg, Illerup and Vimose. Again Vimose holds the highest number of specimens, 20 pieces, but unfortunately they are not found in context with other scabbard fittings. This is also the case for the eight IA scabbard runners from Thorsberg (PAULI JENSEN 2008a, 36; MATEŠIĆ 2015, 44). In Illerup, however, 13 pieces have been found and seven of these are

found in combination with circular chapes of the Germanic type (BIBORSKI/ILKJÆR 2006).

The find from Vennolum also comprised a circular copper alloy chape, whereas no chape is found in Hauge Østre (GRIEG 1926, 32 fig. 27; 1938, 32 figs. 37–38; ILKJÆR 1990, cat. no. 260; cat. no. 784, fig. 187). The grave finds all belong to phase C1b and, as the type IA scabbard runners from Illerup belong to deposit A from shortly after 200 AD, they support the overall dating of this type of scabbard runner (VON CARNAP-BORNHEIM 1991, 10).

Circular chape

The small, circular chape of antler used to be placed at the bottom of a sword scabbard (**Fig. 3e**). The piece from Villestoft is unadorned and has two rivet holes on the upper half of the chape. It is made of antler from either red deer or moose, but the precise raw material has not been determined. With a diameter of only 45 mm, it is within the smaller range of chapes, and only two of the ten Vimose chape finds are this size. The chape is worn on the bottom right side and the bottom is worn-out too. This might indicate that the sword was carried on the right side, as argued by Jørgen Ilkjær and Claus von Carnap-Bornheim (see for instance VON CARNAP-BORNHEIM/ILKJÆR 1996, 303; ILKJÆR 2001, fig. 3). Recently, however, Suzana



Fig. 5 A silver scabbard runner from Vimose found at Engelhardt's excavation in 1865 (NM inv. no. 23102; photo: National Museum/Pia Brejnholt).

Matešić has challenged this interpretation (MATEŠIĆ 2015, 119 ff.).

Circular chapes are common in the 3rd century AD. They are often made from copper alloy and sometimes of iron. Illerup and especially Vimose hold a number of specimens made of ivory – a study that Claus von Carnap-Bornheim again has examined more closely (VON CARNAP-BORNHEIM 1994). Generally, chapes of organic material are rare, but the environment of some of the bog finds provides excellent conditions for the preservation of antler and bone. This is the case with the ten circular chapes of antler from Vimose; such chapes are often provided with rivets of copper alloy or even silver (PAULI JENSEN 2016).

As one would expect, the graves provide us with only few chapes of organic material. One possible example, however, was found in Fredsø in northern Jutland and is probably similar to the specimens from Villestoft and Vimose (KLINDT-JENSEN 1952, fig. 5). In grave 354 from Grødbygård on Bornholm, the deceased was buried with a full weapon set including spear, javelin, shield, and a Roman sword in a leather-covered scabbard with an ivory chape and silver fittings (WATT 1985, 57 fig. 14). Another very special burial was found in Føre in Nordland, Norway. Here the deceased was laid to rest in a stone cist under a mound. He carried a full set of weapons including sword, remains of a painted wooden shield with fittings and a couple of spearheads. He was probably wrapped in a bearskin, but only the claws were preserved. His dog was buried with him as well. The most remarkable item was perhaps the ornamented circular chape made of whalebone (SJØVOLD 1962, 75 f. pl. 15).

The three components of the scabbard and baldric, the double button, the scabbard runner of type IA and the circular chape, could in theory belong to the same sword equipment with a Germanic-Roman combination of fittings not unlike the find from Brandsby mentioned earlier. The problem is that until now we have not seen a single example of this combination. There are, however, examples of the combination of both double buttons and bird-head scabbard runners and of the combination of bird-head scabbard runners and circular chapes (see for instance VON CARNAP-BORNHEIM/ILKJÆR 1996, pl. 18–22). Therefore it is not unreasonable to suggest that these three fittings belonged together, especially as neither dating nor distribution speaks against this interpretation.

The Villestoft find reconsidered

The absence of any find data makes it difficult to re-evaluate the find. We lack basic information on whether the objects were found together, whether bones, iron or wood were found as well, but discarded at the spot, not to mention how deep in the meadow the artefacts were found. This basic information is needed in order to establish, for instance, if the find comprises one or more depositions. However, the dating of the artefacts provides some indications on this matter.

The different parts of the sword belt and scabbard are considered to be contemporary, and they could have belonged to one and the same warrior. Seen from a chronological point of view, he could also be the owner of the bridle with the pyramidal copper alloy fitting, as this is especially linked with the 1st half of the 3rd century AD (phase C1b). The main question is whether the two-layer comb is contemporary with the rest of the find, that is: did the comb perhaps belong to the owner of the sword belt and the bridle?

Up till now, two-layer combs (ILKJÆR 1993, type 5) are not identified in 3rd-century contexts. As mentioned earlier, the two-layer combs from datable contexts all belong to the late 1st, first half of the 2nd and perhaps even most of the 2nd century AD. On the other hand, two-layer combs derive from burials with sparse equipment and they tend to be difficult to date precisely. Furthermore, type 5 combs are relatively rare and it might be pure coincidence that they have not been found in 3rd-century contexts. This leaves us with an open question: is the Villestofte find to be considered a unit? A horseman's equipment deposited *pars pro toto*? Or is the Villestofte find a part of a larger and yet unknown weapon sacrifice with several depositions from the Early and Late Roman Iron Age – as was the case in Vimose? Only additional excavations in the meadows of 'Damhuset' will provide answers to these intriguing questions.

Villestofte in perspective

It is understandable that the Villestofte find has been in the shadow of the far larger weapon deposits with huge amounts of equipment from large armies. In spite of the Villestofte find's humble size, it is not less interesting than the larger and more complex deposits. One of the main questions is whether it represents the same type of activity as, for instance, the Vimose find. As mentioned above, a significant problem with the Villestofte and other small weapon deposits (see for instance HENRIKSEN 2016) is that we do not know whether the objects represent the whole deposition or if they are only a small part of a larger deposition. This is of course crucial for the interpretation of these finds.

During the last decade, a number of interpretations of the Villestofte find have been presented, and we would like to round off our birthday greetings to Claus with an overview of different interpretations.

With reference to Charlotte Fabech's unpublished master's dissertation from 1987, Ulf Näsman has suggested that the objects may have belonged to a single horseman who rode into the swampy Stavis river valley and drowned with his equipment (NÄSMAN 2012, 220). He also suggests that the horseman was fleeing from the battle reflected in the Vimose find. Firstly, the archaeological survey of the find-spot in 2010 showed that even though geological sediments of this kind are always damp they are not necessarily unstable. It is hardly possible to sink and drown here – especially not with a horse. Secondly, there are no indications that the battles leading to

the various depositions in Vimose were in the neighbourhood. We consider the drowned horseman interpretation highly unlikely.

Rasmus Birch Iversen has suggested that the Villestofte find is a fabrication. It could be artefacts found in Vimose and then sent to the National Museum with invented information on find-spot and find circumstances (IVERSEN 2010, 147 note 171). There is of course a possibility that the small-holder Niels Rasmussen was slightly dishonest and found the objects during peat digging in Vimose (or received them with a stack of peat from Vimose). He was then tempted to claim the find-spot to be his own meadow. This is absolutely a possibility to be reckoned with. However, the find-spot was perfectly chosen for such a scam. The dramatic landscape surrounding the alleged find-spot represents a classic setting for 3rd-century war booty sacrifices in the bottom of deep river valleys. The spot was visible from several hundred metres from the north-west and south-east through the distractive river valley with its steep slopes, even if it was not covered in alder scrubs. The slopes and the plateau above would provide an audience with a full view of the activities that might have taken place in connection with the deposition of the objects. Taking this into consideration, we carefully accept Niels Rasmussen's information regarding the location of the find-spot.

A third possibility is that the Villestofte find does indeed represent a war booty sacrifice of equipment of a defeated enemy, but as the result of a smaller battle, perhaps a village raid or raiding parties forming part of a greater military design. Throughout history there are many examples of raiding parties against neighbouring villages, not to mention engagements which never developed into actual battles. This could perhaps also explain some of the other small war booty sacrifices, for instance the earliest weapon deposits of Vimose (PAULI JENSEN 2009, 58f.).

A fourth possibility is that the Villestofte find represents part of the spoils from a larger war, and that the booty was distributed by the victorious parties to the allied forces to bring home in order to carry out their own sacrificial rituals. The consequences of this interpretation are that the objects from Villestofte could be a part of the same battles represented in the Vimose 2b and/or Vimose 3 deposits. This would explain the conspicuous similarities of the objects from Villestofte to artefacts from Vimose – in fact all the Villestofte objects have identical or almost identical parallels in Vimose (HENRIKSEN/PAULI JENSEN 2007). If the information on the find had not been present, one would not hesitate to assign the five objects to Vimose itself. After all, Vimose is only 4 km from Villestofte.

In recent years, the find material from Vimose has been re-evaluated and has led to the identification of at least eight weapon deposits within the 1st–7th centuries AD (PAULI JENSEN 2008a; 2011). The largest, Vimose 3, is dated in phase C1b, where the general number of weapon deposits increased massively. The largest from this time is the war booty sacrifice

of Illerup Ådal with more than 12 000 objects, and Vimose comes in second place with ‘only’ a few thousand objects (ILKJÆR 1990; PAULI JENSEN 2008a; 2011).

The decades around 200 AD are some of the most intriguing throughout prehistory, and the fact that the large war booty sacrifices flourished in this innovative phase of the Iron Age provides us with a multitude of ‘frozen times’ where individual events can be analysed and discussed. The Villestoftes find with its similarities to both Illerup and especially Vimose has the potential to renew and nuance our ideas and interpretations. We hope that the years to come will accommodate more research within this field and that the combination of military studies, cult practices and Iron Age settlement structures and society will help us answer some of our questions.

Catalogue

NM 10719

Two-layer comb (ILKJÆR 1993, type 5), antler. Length: 80 mm. Height: 60 mm. Height back: 26 mm. Height tooth piece: 34 mm. Max. depth: 10 mm. Originally 33 teeth. Teeth per cm: 5.

NM 10720

Circular chape with rivet holes, antler. Length: 45 mm. Height: 42 mm. Depth: 13 mm. Opening width: 31 mm. Opening depth: 7 mm.

NM 10721

Scabbard runner with stylized bird's head (VON CARNAP-BORNHEIM 1991, type IA), copper alloy. Length: 185 mm. Length top part: 19 mm. Length bridge: 72 mm. Length foot: 94 mm. Max. depth top part: 15 mm. Max. depth bridge: 20 mm. Min. depth bridge: 7 mm. Max. depth foot: 9 mm. Max. height main part: 2 mm. Max. height bridge: 6 mm. Max. height foot: 2 mm. Max. strap width: 6 mm.

NM 10721

Quadratic, pyramidal fitting, copper alloy. Length: 49 mm. Width: 50 mm. Height: 13 mm.

NM 10722

Cast double button, copper alloy. Height 13 mm. Diameter: 14 mm.

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