



A view of the royal mounds in Gamla Uppsala, Sweden, which feature large tumuli that were used for the burials of early medieval kings.

## SWEDEN'S MAGNIFICENT PRE-VIKING GRAVES

By Rowdy Geirsson

# GLORY IN DEATH

Sweden's massive burial mounds and wealth-laden boat graves are amongst the most awe-inspiring archaeological sites to have survived from pre-Viking Age Scandinavia. With their connections to *Beowulf* and legendary Norse sagas, no Nordic grave sites are more fascinating than those found in and around Uppsala, the ancient seat of Swedish royalty.

The present boat rested in a pit recently dug into the surface of the hill. The deceased warrior lay inside it surrounded by his finest weapons and protective war gear, cooking utensils, and game pieces, as well as the bodies of sacrificed animals and human slaves. He would need all of these for his voyage to the other side; it was important to journey in comfort and to make a good first impression upon arrival.

In life, he had been a leading member of the network of noble warriors that served the royal family of the Swedes: The Yngling Dynasty. The Ynglings claimed direct descent from Frey himself, the god of the harvest and fertility, who bore the original, dynastic surname of Yngve. According to the Yngling family legend, Frey had received Uppsala as a gift from Odin himself, for his loyal service, and his descendants had ruled Uppsala ever since.

In exchange for his military service to the Ynglings, the deceased warrior had received many extravagant gifts, such as the ornate glass goblets that now accompanied him in death. Like his forefathers before him, he had maintained the hall and its associated territory 30 kilometres north of Uppsala. His son

**T**he warrior's kin and friends gathered around the boat that contained his earthly remains, though they were not standing alongside the seashore. Rather, they had congregated at a natural geographical high point, inland from the sea—a subtle hill rising above the fields surrounding the main hall and workshops, made artificially larger by the multitude of prior boat burials that had been conducted over past generations.

A seventh-century bronze and iron helmet discovered in Vendel, Sweden.

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Dating to 550-800, this fragmentary Vendel sword is decorated with lavish gilt-silver fittings; the scabbard is reconstructed.

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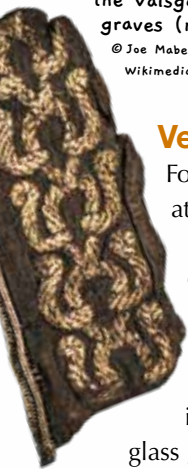


would now assume control of the hall and oversee its operations until his time came to lie in the soil beside his father. Once his father's vessel was ready for its voyage, it would be covered with planks of wood and fresh earth, and possibly outlined with a ring of stones, marking out a subtle new mound among the many already present.

Unlike the kings of the Yngling Dynasty, this deceased warrior's remains would not be cremated. 1300 years later, when his grave was accidentally discovered during a nineteenth-century construction project intended to expand the churchyard at the tiny parish of Vendel, it would cast a new light on an entire epoch of Swedish history.

This tenth-century fragment of silk with silver embroidery was discovered in one of the Valsgarde boat graves (no. 12).

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## Vendel and Valsgärde

Fourteen boat graves in total were found at the Vendel parish churchyard in the 1880s, of which seven date to the Vendel Period and seven to the Viking Age. These were largely damaged when they were discovered, but the artifacts that remained intact were nothing short of spectacular. These included glass goblets from England manufactured according to Roman fashion, elaborate swords, and one of the most iconic helmets of the pre-Christian Germanic world ever found. In addition to the graves discovered on the grounds of the church itself, two lesser-known burial mounds of note also exist nearby.

The first, Vendla's Mound, lies just across the road from the church. Legend states that it is the final resting place of Queen Vendla, a giantess who lent her name to Vendel and who also helped build the church, burying cursed gold beneath its foundation in the process. In actuality, Vendla's Mound contained nine human (not mythical giantess) bodies, only one of which belonged to an adult. The burials occurred at different periods over a span of approximately 400 years, beginning in the Migration Period and continuing to the end of the Vendel Period.

Less than three kilometres south along the same road as Vendla's Mound is Ottar's Mound, which is similarly steeped in legend albeit with a poten-

tially stronger connection to historic reality.

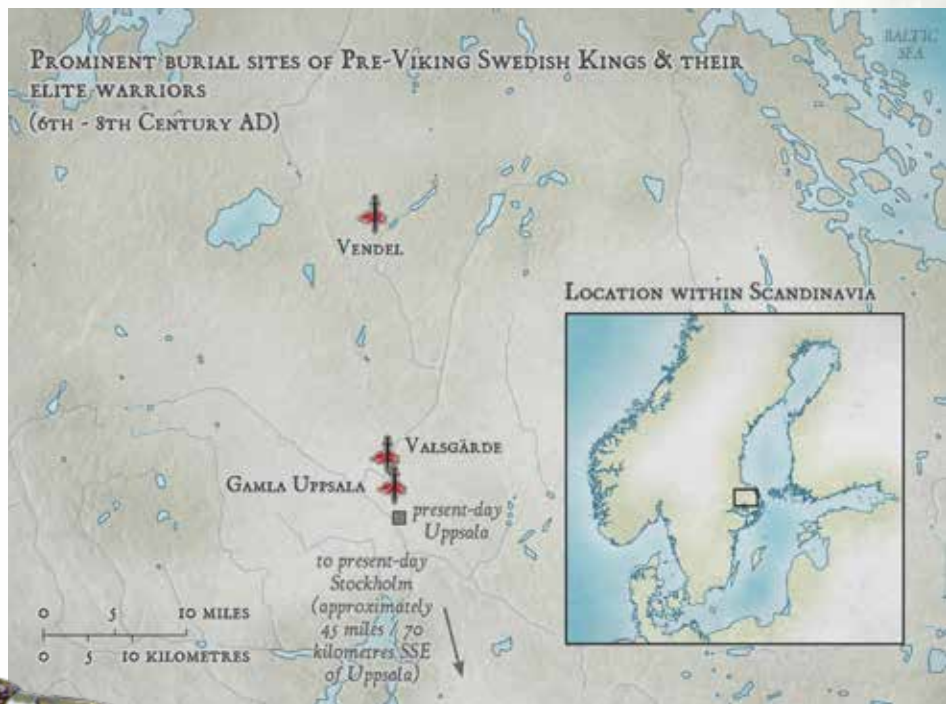
This is because Ottar appears in "Ynglinga Saga" as one of the legendary Swedish kings of Svitjod, who ruled right before the start of the Vendel Period. According to the account, he became embroiled in a war with the Danes, who supposedly killed him and left his corpse exposed on a hill to be feasted upon by the carrion birds. They then crafted a wooden crow and sent this back to Svitjod with the message that King

(Top) Aerial view of Gamla Uppsala Church and its detached Bell Tower. It was built in the eleventh century, likely on the site of an earlier wooden structure.

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(Bottom) Map showing the key burials of pre-Viking Swedish kings, dating between the sixth and eighth centuries.

© Richard Thomson



This glass Proboscis cup (550-800) was found in the burial site at the church in Vendel (no. 12).

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This eighth-century Picture Stone, one of the four so-called Tängelgårdastones discovered in Gotland (Sweden), shows a battle scene with armed men, birds soaring above them, and a dead warrior lying on the ground; a funeral procession; the deceased man riding into Valhalla; and a large ship with crew.

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An illustration of a royal burial at Gamla Uppsala, showing how the grave would have looked shortly after the bodies were interred; at right, an individual is cremated before burial.

© Jose G. Moran

Ottar was worth no more than such a gesture. It remains unknown whether his body accompanied this message and was buried in the mound that now bears his name, or if there is any truth in the legend at all. Under the name Ohthere, Ottar also appears in *Beowulf* in its rendition of the wars between the Swedes and Geats.

About 25 kilometres south of Ottar's Mound lies the extensive Vendel Period grave site known as Valsgärde. The site was excavated in the 1920s and revealed fifteen boat graves (five of which are from the Vendel Period and ten of which are from the Viking Age) and over 60 cremation graves. To this day it remains unknown why some Vendel Period and Viking Age burials involved cremation and others did not.

As at Vendel, the unburned boat graves appear to be generational with each subsequent warrior patriarch receiving this special internment treatment while his contemporaries were buried according to different practices. Unlike at Vendel, no remnants of a local hall have been found in the immediate vicinity.

While Valsgärde may not be shrouded in legend like Vendel, its grave goods have nonetheless taken on a unique degree of mystery of their own. The weapons and armour discovered at the site bear a striking resemblance to those found at the Sutton Hoo grave in England, which dates roughly to the same time period. The helmet from Valsgärde Grave 7, in particular, shares strong similarities

with the famous Sutton Hoo helmet. Consequently, a number of theories attempting to explain the connection between the two sites have been suggested. These range from explanations related to simple trade networks, the visits of royal dignitaries, or an actual union between two prominent families via marriage, but it remains unknown exactly why the grave goods at both sites are so similar.

## Gamla Uppsala

Located only three kilometres south of Valsgärde, Gamla

A shield boss from a boat grave (no. 12) in Vendel, dated to 550–800.

© The Swedish History Museum



Uppsala sits along a ridge in a bucolic setting at the northern periphery of modern Uppsala's urban core, which itself was once a trading post known as Östra Aros. After the Archbishop of Uppsala was founded in the twelfth century, it eventually relocated to Östra Aros and took the name with it. As a result, the original Uppsala declined in prominence and became known as Gamla Uppsala, which simply



means 'Old Uppsala' (Uppsala itself means 'Upper Hall').

It was from Gamla Uppsala that the Yngling Dynasty ruled over Svitjod for the better part of a millennium. As the most important political, religious, and cultural centre in Svitjod, the site featured several monuments that first appeared during the Vendel Period, and they were built to impress. These included the famous temple described by Adam of Bremen, a massive fence-like monument extending 862 metres north-south and 725 metres east-west adorned with cow and horse heads on its eight-metre tall pinewood poles, and an enormous hall (50 metres long by twelve metres wide by ten metres tall) that rested upon a ten metre tall manmade earthen plateau built directly into the side of the ridge—so it really was an upper hall. Along the crest of the ridge itself were the monuments that still exist: the Royal Mounds.

Although many other graves exist at Gamla Uppsala, including two Viking Age warrior boat graves that were only discovered as recently as 2019, none can compare to the three massive Royal Mounds. Dating to the early Vendel Period in the late sixth century, the mounds were formerly known as Odin's Mound, Frey's Mound, and Thor's Mound, but are now referred to as the East Mound, Middle Mound, and West Mound, respectively. They were built of slightly varying sizes, each measuring nearly ten metres tall and approximately 70 metres in diameter. Two other massive mounds are also known to have existed: the Thing Mound, which still partially stands and served as a focal point for gatherings up until the nineteenth century, and another that was destroyed when the church was built.

Only two of the mounds have been excavated: the East Mound and the West Mound, and both were found to involve burials in which the deceased was burned on a funeral pyre before the mound was constructed over the grave. Because of the cremation, the excavated remains have not survived in the same condition as those found at Vendel and Valsgärde. Despite this, a set of bones found in the East Mound were preserved well enough to prove that they belonged to a woman, though it remains unclear whether she was a member of royalty herself or a slave chosen to accompany her



master on his journey. Unfortunately, the sex of the bones found in the West Mound is indeterminable. In both cases, the artifacts suggest overall that the burials were conducted for the Swedish kings themselves.

In the past, it was thought that the Royal Mounds were the final resting places of Egil, Ottar (who was also designated special propriety to the mound bearing his name in Vendel), and Adils (Ottar's son)—the legendary trio of kings that appear in both *Beowulf* and "Ynglinga Saga." But if the legends are to be believed, those kings died about a century before the Royal Mounds were constructed. The iden-

**(Top)** Ottar's Mound is steeped in legend as the final resting place for King Ottar — who featured in the Old English epic, *Beowulf*.

© Rowdy Geirsson

**(Bottom)** The double stone ship at the base of Anundshög is surrounded by smaller tumuli. Anundshög is the largest tumulus in Sweden (9 metres high and 64 metres in width), and dates to 500-1050.

© Gunnar Creutz / Wikimedia Commons



A lavish early-seventh-century shoulder clasp from the Sutton Hoo ship burial.  
© Aiwok / Wikimedia Commons

The remains of a pair of leather shoe soles, dated to 800-100, discovered in the burial site no. 12 at Vendel.

© The Swedish History Museum





This seventh-century warrior's helmet from Valsgärde in Sweden was discovered in grave boat no. 8, near Gamla Uppsala, which preserves Vendel and Viking remains.

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## The Vendel Period and the Domain of Svitjod

Named after the boat graves found at Vendel, the Vendel Period partially overlaps with the more broadly known Early Medieval Period and existed from the end of the Migration Period in the middle of the sixth century to the start of the Viking Age at the end of the eighth century. The term is unique to Sweden and represents an era that was born of the devastating global effects created by volcanic eruptions in the 530s and 540s AD—eruptions that may have also given rise to the myth of Ragnarök, the final battle of the gods when all of creation will be consumed in fire.

During the Vendel Period, Sweden as we know it today did not exist. Instead, it was an expansive territory consisting of multiple petty kingdoms, each with its own unique tribal affiliations. The most dominant of these was known as Svitjod, located immediately north of modern Stockholm. The kings of the Swedish people, or Svea as they were known at the time, ruled from their ancestral power base of Uppsala over Svitjod and its constitu-

ent territories in a manner that resembled a federation more than an absolute monarchy. Beyond its special provenance as the cradle for the eventual emergence of the nation of Sweden, Svitjod with Uppsala at its centre also carried extra weight in the annals recorded during the Middle Ages. In the thirteenth century, Snorri Sturluson noted the significance of Uppsala in his “Ynglinga Saga”—a legendary record of the royal dynasty of the same name that also serves as the first chapter of his larger work, *Heimskringla*.

Given the political and religious significance of Uppsala, it is not surprising that such a high density of extravagant graves has been found in its vicinity. Whereas similar burials also occurred during the Migration Period and Viking Age, the Vendel Period proved to be an especially active time for the construction of massive burial mounds and lavish boat graves throughout Svitjod. The artifacts found at burials in Vendel and Valsgärde remain the most impressive.

tities of the individuals who were buried in the Royal Mounds remain unknown, and the monumentality of their graves was never again matched at Uppsala.

## Legacy

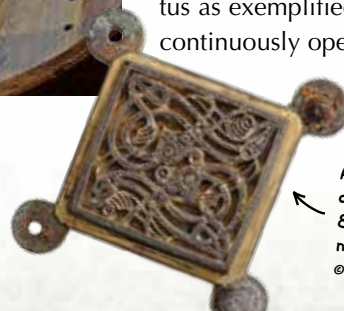
The extravagance of the burials at Uppsala waned over the course of the Vendel Period.

By the start of the Viking Age, it is possible that the Swedish kings were no longer actually buried at their ancestral home but rather at Hovgården on Adelsö—an island in Lake Mälaren 50 kilometres south of Uppsala at the periphery of Svitjod. Just a half of a kilometre across the water from Adelsö lies the island of Björkö, home to Birka, the famed Viking Age trading settlement. Hovgården functioned as the royal residence that oversaw Birka's activities, and burial mounds of similar scale to the Royal Mounds at Gamla Uppsala have been found there, but never excavated.

Birka represents just one of the thriving Viking Age trade settlements established in Scandinavia during the latter part of the Vendel Period. Whereas there may have been an economic and political shift toward sites such as Birka and Hovgården, Uppsala remained the single most important religious and cultural locale in Svitjod throughout the Vendel Period and the Viking Age. Even after the Viking Age, Uppsala (in its current location) continued to maintain an elevated status as exemplified by the fact that the oldest continuously operating university (as well as

This reconstruction of the burial chamber of the Sutton Hoo ship burial shows the arrangement of the site and the objects that would have accompanied the deceased.

© Gernot Keller / Wikimedia Commons



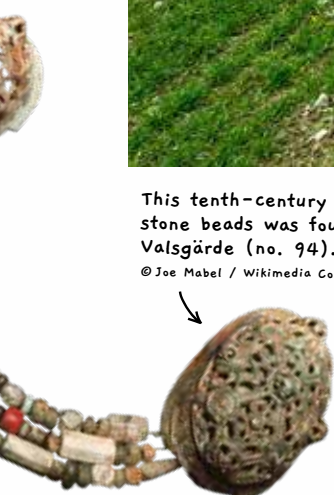
A square gilt bronze bridle fitting, dated to 550–800, discovered in grave no. 12 in Vendel.

© The Swedish History Museum



This tenth-century brooch with glass and stone beads was found in a cremation grave in Valsgårde (no. 94).

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one of the most prestigious) in Scandinavia was founded there in the fifteenth century—Uppsala University.

Today, the Vendel Period and its associated legends and historic sites in Sweden tend to be overlooked in popular culture. Despite the increased popularity of all things Viking-related in the English-speaking world, Sweden generally sits on the sidelines in favour of stories concerning Denmark, Norway, and Iceland. A notable exception exists in the form of several isolated segments found in the History Channel's *Vikings* television series and its follow-up, *Vikings: Valhalla*, both of which highlight the significance of Uppsala (albeit in a very historically and geographically inaccurate manner). Perhaps it is just a matter of time before the kings of Uppsala and the warriors of Svitjod receive a similar level of attention as the Danes, Norwegians, and Ice-

landers that populate both *Vikings* series, *The Last Kingdom*, and *The Northman*. **MW**

**Rowdy Geirsson is the author of *The Scandinavian Aggressors*. His writing also appears in the *Scandinavian-American Foundation's Scandinavian Review* and the *Sons of Norway's Viking Magazine*.**

#### FURTHER READING

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The extensive grave site of Valsgårde looms over the fields surrounding it.

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The Årby boat, dated to 800-1110, was discovered as part of a ship burial in 1935. It is one of the best-preserved Viking-era boats from Sweden.

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