A Viking boat grave with gaming pieces excavated at Skamby, Östergötland, Sweden

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A Viking Boat Grave with Amber Gaming Pieces Excavated at Skamby, Östergötland, Sweden

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IN THE SUMMER of 2005 the authors directed the excavation of a flat stone setting with a boat-shaped central depression at Skamby, Kuddby parish, Östergötland, Sweden. The stone setting covered a small and poorly preserved boat inhumation, dated by the artefacts recovered to the early Viking period (9th century AD). This is the first excavation of a boat inhumation in the province of Östergötland. The paper reports on the excavations including the discovery of an exceptional collection of 23 amber gaming pieces, which provide a new perspective on Viking-period gaming. The data from this boat grave are considered in relation to the rest of the Skamby cemetery, which remains to be investigated. Judging from a topographical survey of the ridge surrounding the excavated area, and from metal-detector finds recovered from the surrounding fields, the Skamby cemetery appears to be a high-status burial ground divided into two zones, one comprised of boat inhumation graves, the other of circular stone settings likely to cover cremation graves. The results of the excavation lead to a revised picture of boat burial as an élite mortuary rite in southern Sweden during the late 1st millennium AD.

The medieval kingdom of Sweden appears to have come into being about AD 1000 when two groups known as the Svear and the Götar elected a shared king, Olof Eriksson \textit{skotkonungr}.\textsuperscript{3} The fertile lands of these two peoples were separated by the rugged forests of Tiveden and Kolmården and they retained different laws, customs and administration for much of the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{4} The political focus of the Svear was in Mälardalen (the territories around Lake Mälaren), while the Götar occupied two discrete geographical districts to the west (Västergötland) and east (Östergötland) of Lake Vättern (Figs 1 and 2). During the later 1st millennium AD, the Svear and Götar should probably not be seen as clearly bounded and internally coherent political units or ethnic groups. Instead, they were heterogeneous entities forged by political alliances, socio-economic networks, communication routes and environmental constraints. In both regions, kingship was a slowly evolving and perhaps only intermittent
institution until after the élite’s conversion to Christianity. Power appears to have remained in the hands of powerful local magnate farmers during the later 1st millennium AD. The accounts of the Geatas and Scilfingas of the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, in which elaborate funerary procedures involving a boat are portrayed, may dimly reflect the far-ranging contacts and military exploits of these local élites from as early as the 5th century AD. However, the written sources, particularly for the land of the Götar, are so few and terse that the field of study is just barely proto-historical. Any reconstruction of these societies must therefore rely mainly on the archaeological record. Understanding the Vendel- and Viking-period societies of these regions has focused upon questions

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5 Ibid, 96–7, 131–2; see also Sanmark 2004, 84; Svanberg 2003a and b.
Of the two regions, Svealand has received most of the archaeological attention. Boat-grave cemeteries excavated to the north of Lake Mälaren can be interpreted as evidence of élites in Svealand during the Vendel and Viking periods (Figs 1 and 2). This region has been the focus of nation-oriented archaeology’s discussions of kingdom formation and religious conversion.⁷ Also, this region has been most intensively studied from abroad in discussing the links to mortuary practices and socio-political trajectories in north-western Europe and the British Isles.⁸ The land of the Götar has also received some attention but

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⁸ Carver 2005, 303.
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This has, for the most part, focused on Västergötland.\(^{9}\) In contrast, Östergötland has seen much less archaeological investigation and certainly fewer attempts to synthesise and analyse the available data.

A number of factors have contributed to this uneven spread of archaeological interest. Partly it is due to the historical circumstances in which archaeology emerged in Sweden during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The hub of the modern Swedish state is in Svealand with the capital city Stockholm,\(^ {10}\) and it was in this region that scholars most frequently sought Sweden’s 1st-millennium origins, particularly in Uppland.\(^ {11}\) Furthermore, the uneven geographical distribution of Sweden’s university departments of archaeology has meant that Östergötland in particular (equally far from Stockholm to the north-east and Göteborg to the west) has seen relatively few research excavations. To some extent, the work of two high-quality contract archaeology units in Östergötland has remedied this situation. Many new settlements, burial and ritual sites of the later 1st millennium AD have been uncovered, adding important new information to our understanding of the region’s socio-political structure.\(^ {12}\) However, the ample resources devoted to contract archaeology in advance of settlement expansion and road building around and between the towns and cities of Östergötland are painstakingly geared towards the conservation of well-preserved cemeteries.\(^ {13}\) Hence, the situation has persisted that the province’s cemeteries of possible Vendel- and Viking-period date, known from abundant surviving surface features, have escaped the archaeological attention afforded to comparable ones in Mälardalen.

The research reported on here is part of a broader archaeological project aimed at redressing this imbalance. The work will investigate Östergötland’s late-1st-millennium AD social structure and political geography. This is to take place through the synthesis of earlier published and unpublished archaeological data and the execution of carefully focused, research-led excavations at key archaeological sites in the region. The research at Skamby, focusing on the only categorical example of a boat-grave cemetery from the region, forms an element of this broader project.\(^ {14}\)

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS FOR EXCAVATIONS AT SKAMBY**

The cemetery at Skamby in Kuddby parish was recognised and surveyed in the 1940s. From surface examination alone the site was identified as one of Sweden’s rare and characteristic boat-inhumation cemeteries. A number of such cemeteries have been excavated since the late 19th century in the provinces of Uppland and Västmanland north of Lake Mälaren, yielding spectacular finds associated with the upper echelons of late-1st-millennium AD society. They

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9 Eg Fabech 2001.
10 Unless otherwise stated, all places are in modern Sweden.
13 Rundkvist 2007a.
14 Rundkvist in prep.
include the sites of Vendel, Valsgärde and Tuna in Badelunda.\textsuperscript{15} Solitary and less-impressive boat inhumations have been recognised at otherwise typical Viking-period cemeteries in Södermanland, a Svealand province that adjoins Östergötland.\textsuperscript{16} In contrast, archaeologists have recognised only three cemeteries containing suspected boat inhumations in Östergötland: Norra Berga in Mjölby parish, Malm in Styrstad parish and Skamby. While presumed to be late-1st-millennium AD boat graves from their distinctive surface features, the date and character of these three sites remained uninvestigated prior to 2003.

Of the three sites, the project selected Skamby as a prime target for investigation. Key questions included:

- What was burial preservation like at Skamby?
- What was the date of the cemetery?
- Did the boat graves at Skamby compare or contrast with the ones in Svealand?
- What was the level of investment, mortuary symbolism and monumentality of the Skamby boat graves?

These questions promised to demonstrate the importance of field-focused research to complement the increasingly sophisticated and diverse theoretical approaches to Viking-period mortuary practices in Scandinavian archaeology.\textsuperscript{17} They also built upon our wider research themes concerning mortuary and commemorative practices in the later 1st millennium AD.\textsuperscript{18}

THE SITE AND ITS CONTEXT

Skamby is a hamlet on the Vikbolandet peninsula, near the eastern end of Östergötland’s plains belt (Figs 1–5). Situated close to the Baltic coast, the 1st millennium AD inhabitants of the peninsula would have enjoyed extensive communications by river and sea. Hillforts and innumerable cemeteries attest to the dense occupation of the region in the 1st millennia BC and AD (Figs 3, 4 and 5).

Near Skamby hamlet is a low rocky ridge orientated from north-west to south-east and surrounded by ploughland (Figs 5, 6–8).\textsuperscript{19} Along the spine of the ridge are ten large, oval stone settings with diagnostic boat-shaped depressions at their centres (Figs 6–8). At the ridge’s NW end is a cluster of small round stone settings of a kind commonly seen at typical cremation cemeteries of the later 1st millennium AD in Östergötland and found widely in Kuddby and neighbouring parishes in Vikbolandet. However, with its mixture of boat graves and circular monuments, the site looks atypical for the region and very much

\textsuperscript{15} Sandwall 1980; Lamm and Nordström 1983; Nylén and Schönhäck 1994.
\textsuperscript{16} Eg Weiler 1975; Norberg 1998.
\textsuperscript{17} Rundkvist 2007b.
\textsuperscript{18} Eg Rundkvist 2003; Williams 2006; 2007.
\textsuperscript{19} Registered site Raää 158, Kuddby parish.
like the boat-inhumation cemetery at Valsgärde in Uppland did before the first excavations.\textsuperscript{20}

Under the auspices of Östergötland County Museum, the project involved seven weeks of fieldwork during the summer of 2005. The excavations revealed Östergötland’s first boat inhumation and the first set of Viking-period amber gaming pieces discovered in Sweden for over a century. Amidst evidence of settlement activity pre-dating the cemetery, the excavations recovered important copper-alloy casting debris possibly dating from as early as the 2nd century BC, with parallels from the élite metalworking island-site of Helgö in Lake Mälaren.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{20} Ljungkvist 2006, 71.
\textsuperscript{21} The pre-cemetery settlement evidence is reported in Rundkvist et al 2007.
The local setting of the Skamby site. While situated within a wide valley inland from the Baltic coast, the Skamby cemetery was adjacent to a navigable water-course linking it to the sea. In the Viking period, this stretch of the Slatbacken inlet’s shoreline was 3.5 m higher and hundreds of metres north of the present one because of post-glacial shore-displacement. Box locates Fig 5. Map by Howard Williams.
A 2003 metal-detector survey of the ploughland around the Skamby cemetery by co-author Rundkvist had given no finds from the earlier Vendel-period phase of the boat-inhumation custom (late 6th-8th centuries AD). It did, however, turn up a number of Viking-period finds of the 9th and 10th centuries AD along the edges of the cemetery. Fragments of bronze jewellery, a bronze caftan button and a silver-sheet pendant cross indicate ploughed-out graves of Viking-period date situated around the ridge. The dates of these finds correspond with the heyday of the boat inhumation custom and suggest that the ridge with its boat graves once formed the core of a somewhat larger Viking-period burial ground.22

ÖSTERPÖTTLAND’S FIRST EXCAVATED BOAT INHUMATION

The 2005 season’s excavations selected the cemetery’s smallest stone setting with a boat depression: grave number 15 (Fig 8). The rationale for this choice was:

to restrict the amount of archaeological work needed to answer the key research questions identified (i.e., level of preservation, date and nature of the grave) while keeping the disturbance to the cemetery as a whole to a minimum;

- unlike some other graves at Skamby that showed evidence of previous disturbance, grave 15 bore no discernible surface traces of looting or unrecorded antiquarian interventions;
- grave 15 was one of only two entirely turf-covered boat graves on the site, which offered the possibility of better finds preservation compared with other graves, where conditions among the exposed stones in the central depressions are clearly extremely poor due to the perpetual percolation of rainwater;
- grave 15 lay in the centre of the zone of boat graves and it is carefully spaced in relation to the graves on either side. This suggested that grave 15 would date to the main period of the cemetery's use and would not be a chronological outlier.

Given there was no clear relationship between grave wealth and boat size among the previously excavated graves at Swedish boat inhumation cemeteries, there

was no reason to believe that the relatively small size of grave 15 at Skamby would mean that the grave was unusually or poorly equipped.

THE MONUMENT

The grave's central depression measured 5.0 by 1.5 m on the surface and was orientated NE–SW (ie orientated perpendicular to the NW–SE orientation of the ridge). Beneath the turf and topsoil, an irregular octagonal pavement of stone blocks measuring 11.5 x 9 m was uncovered (Fig 9). The stones were mostly local granite (a mixture of pink, grey and white) with some sandstone. The monument was mostly composed of a single layer of stones. Most of them could be carried a short distance by a single adult, although a minority were too large to carry and had to be rolled by hand. A few of the stones were too large for even two people to roll and are likely to have been glacial erratics occurring naturally on the site or moved only a short distance employing draught animals.

An orthostat had been standing at the NW side of the grave-cut, but had fallen into it, perhaps with the decay of a postulated timber roof or cover to the
skamby viking boat grave

Three large stone blocks on the edges of the stone pavement may also originally have been standing up. The edge stones of the pavement did not form a distinctive kerb, although larger stones were more common toward the periphery of the stone setting.

A plan of the Skamby cemetery from survey work conducted by Rundkvist and Williams in 2005. Map by Marcus Andersson.
FIG 9
The superstructure of grave 15. Vertical photo collage by the authors.
The collapse of a perishable cover over the grave-cut containing the boat clearly created the central depression. Stones from the superstructure slumped inwards and filled the grave-cut. They showed no sign of any subsequent disturbance, ruling out the possibility of grave-robbing since the Viking period.

The upper part of the grave-fill was indistinguishable from a surrounding culture layer belonging to an earlier settlement. This meant that it was not possible to document the upper edge of the grave-cut with any certainty. Only the lower, crudely boat-shaped edges of the grave-cut were visible where it cut into the natural subsoil. Radiocarbon (14C) dates, from sunken features sealed by the settlement deposit, place occupation most probably in the 2nd century BC; these features were not related to the boat-grave (contexts 15 and 20 in Fig 10 belong to this group but were not dated).24

Despite the careful choice of monument for excavation and the observation that it had not been recently disturbed, the preservation within the grave-cut proved very poor. Judging from rust stains, preserved clench nails and sections through the boat-shaped grave-cut, a boat had clearly originally been present. However, the underlying moraine was clayey and nearly impermeable to water. Rainwater had repeatedly accumulated and evaporated here, consequently, no unburnt bone or other organic remains were found. Likewise, the grave preserved little iron.

The boat had originally measured c 5 m in length and c 1.7 m across at its broadest point. It was not possible to discern any detailed pattern to the rust stains and preserved clench nails (Fig 10), in contrast to many other excavated boat inhumations. However, the number of clench nails in itself clearly suggests that a clinker-built vessel was placed in the grave.

Little else was discernible of the boat’s characteristics. However, it is worth noting that the medieval provincial law code of Östergötland, codified in the late 13th century, mentions a similar boat in the section on land rights.25 It describes a procedure to determine the border in a body of water between a private farmstead and the commons of the hundred:

If farmstead and commons meet in water: then take a nine-ell boat and put it with one stem in the reeds and one out on the deep; and a man shall stand in the rear stem holding a barge pole in his hand and throw it over his shoulder out into the deep; thus far shall the rights of the farmstead extend, as he can throw, and the commons are outside.26

The ell used in medieval Östergötland measured 53.9 cm. A nine-ell boat would have measured 4.85 m. This suggests that the grave contained a craft that may have been widely employed for transport upon the Baltic inlets and rivers of the Östergötland region. The other nine boats buried at Skamby, however,

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25 Östgötalagen, Byggningsabalken §28:3.
26 Rundkvist’s translation into English of Holmbäck and Wessén’s 1933 translation into modern Swedish of the Östergötland law code, 217.
Boat-grave burial plan. *Drawn by Marcus Andersson, adapted by Howard Williams.*
appear to have been longer. Estimating from the surface features, the largest boats may have approached 10 to 12 m in length, commensurate with the longest boats uncovered at Vendel and Valsgärde in Uppland.\textsuperscript{27} It therefore appears that burial at Skamby may have employed both smaller river-going and coastal vessels as well as larger sea-going ones.\textsuperscript{26}

\textbf{GRAVE FINDS}

Just south-west of the mid-ship was a cluster of 23 well-preserved amber gaming pieces (Fig 11), some located on top of collapsed stones. If this placement was not the result of Viking-period grave-robbing, then the gaming set was probably originally placed on top of the grave’s cover or roof rather than within the burial itself, and had fallen with the stones into the burial space when the roof collapsed. Beneath the gaming piece cluster, a group of iron rivets and nails lay on the bottom of the cut. They may represent a box or a game board, although they formed no observable pattern and there was no sign of the L-shaped mounts typical for Viking-period game boards. Small curved fragments of iron rods here may be from rivets, nails or a simple strap buckle. A small spherical stone was also found here. It is unlikely to have functioned as a 24th gaming piece, as it is much smaller than the amber pieces and has no flat face to keep it from rolling off the game board.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig11}
\caption{Twenty-three amber gaming pieces. \textit{Photograph by Martin Rundkvist}.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{27} Larsson 2007, 46.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid, 71–5.
Other artefacts found in the grave are few and modest, belonging to two functional spheres: personal items and horse gear. The personal items are a red glass paste bead and a small slate pendant whetstone. Both lay beneath the gaming piece cluster at the centre of the boat. They may have accompanied a body (or bodies) of which nothing remained due to the soil conditions. There is also part of a small iron knife, found in a superficial part of the grave-fill mid-ship. This is possibly a residual piece redeposited from the culture layer or a further artefact placed on the grave-covering.

A highly incomplete set of horse gear lay on the bottom of the cut in its SW half (Fig 12). There is a very finely wrought hook (from one of the shafts of a sleigh or small wagon), five frost nails (used to keep the horse from slipping when ridden or yoked to a sleigh in winter), and two iron rings of identical and rather small size, one of them with a straight iron bar looped onto it. The rings look somewhat like pieces of a bridle bit, but are smaller than normal bridle rings of the time. In the fill of the grave-cut were also numerous small residual pieces of various materials, principally burnt clay from fired house walls, originating in the surrounding settlement deposit.
DATE OF THE GRAVE

The range and character of the artefacts, the boat and monument square-
ly date the grave to the Vendel or Viking period. Only the gaming pieces
hint at a more refined date for the grave within the late 1st millennium AD. The
size and proportions of the Skamby gaming pieces (median diameter 36 mm,
median height/diameter = 0.67) find their closest parallels among bone and
antler gaming pieces from the early Viking period.29

Lindquist’s 1978 study of Viking-period gaming pieces treated bone, antler
and glass examples together despite their rather dissimilar designs. This prompt-
ed the misleading statement that Viking-period gaming pieces would generally
have a lesser diameter than Vendel-period ones. This is in fact true only for the
glass pieces that bring down the mean. Instead, Viking-period bone and antler
gaming pieces have about as large a mean diameter as those of the Vendel
period, although they are far more consistent in their proportions. The distin-
guishing feature of Viking-period bone gaming pieces is their greater relative
average height (mean height/width = 0.68 for the Viking period, 0.56 for
the Vendel period, 0.53 for the Migration period, 0.25 for the Roman period).
Scandinavian bone gaming pieces became larger and less squat as the centuries
passed from the Roman period to the Viking period.

The simple domed cross-section of the Skamby gaming pieces, where the
width is greatest at the base, indicates an early date within the Viking period,
c AD 790–900. Conversely, the Birka graves, most of which date from the
interval AD 900–70, predominantly yielded pieces with narrowed bases, many of
them resembling mushrooms. This applies to the single set of amber pieces from
the Birka graves30 which means that those pieces are not very similar to the
ones from Skamby. In terms of context within a boat grave, there is a close
parallel with the discovery of 23 bone gaming pieces within boat grave 1 at
Gamla Uppsala, dated to c AD 900. The form of these gaming pieces more
closely resembles those from Birka and suggests a later date than that of the
Skamby burial.31

We do not know when in the sequence of boat burials at Skamby the inter-
ment uncovered in 2005 occurred. If we assume that only select individuals
in a family or community received boat burial, as has been suggested for the
Mälardalen cemeteries, then perhaps one person per generation received the
rite. If the generation length was c 25 years, it is likely that a cemetery with ten
boat inhumations endured for up to 225 years, from the first burial to the last.
It is therefore likely that boat burial began at Skamby with the beginning of
the Viking period (c AD 800) and ceased with the conversion of Östergötland’s
population to Christianity, possibly from the early 11th century (c AD 1025).
However, a far shorter chronology for the site’s duration is also possible.

30 Arbman 1940–3, 160–1, Taf 149.
31 Nordahl 2001, 18.
The superstructure of grave 15 appears to have respected the grave adjoining it to the north-west, and the graves to the north-west are in a single line on the highest part of the ridge. These are therefore presumably all earlier. It is tempting to suggest that graves 10 and 12, placed closest to the circular stone settings on the top of the ridge, were the earliest, and that boat graves were sequentially added along the ridge moving downslope from the north-west to the south-east. If this hypothesis is accepted, then the boat graves to the south-east can be regarded as later in date. Hence, graves 18 and 20 were probably the last boat graves in the sequence. These graves are the only ones to break with the linear arrangement charted from graves 10 to 19. They also seem to respect the locations of graves 17 and 19 and lie in the lowest position on the ridge. The 2005 grave therefore appears to have been near the middle of the site’s boat-burial sequence. The dating of the gaming pieces appears to agree broadly with the grave’s spatial location.

AGE AND GENDER

Given the absence of surviving skeletal material and examples of multiple interments in boats elsewhere in Scandinavia and beyond, there is a possibility that the Skamby grave may have contained more than one burial. However, without clear evidence to the contrary and given the precedent of the majority of Scandinavian boat graves, the discussion here will assume a single interment.

The provision of a boat might suggest an adult male, although a significant minority (just under 30%) of Scandinavian boat graves contain female interments. Rites varied between sites, with boat graves at Tuna in Badelunda being exclusively female, while at Vendel and Valsgärde they were exclusively male. The presence of a boat is therefore suggestive of an adult and possibly a male, but is by no means conclusive as an indication of the social identity of the grave’s occupant.

Other sites document horse sacrifice associated with boat inhumations. However, at Skambys no bones were preserved and the grave-cut was not very spacious. In Mälardalen, horses were apparently killed at the grave-side and allowed to collapse into the cut, ending up either in the boat or wedged between its gunwale and the earthen wall, the cut being locally widened or lengthened for that purpose. Given the overall association of horse sacrifice with male-gendered Viking-period graves, the retrieval of artefacts associated with horses might be seen as a further indication of an adult male burial. However, the artefacts actually recovered may equally allude to travel by wagon or sleigh, a mode of transport associated with female-gendered mortuary symbolism in Viking-period Scandinavia.

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32 A chronological progression downslope has been identified at Valsgärde: Ljungkvist 2006, 152.
34 Andrén 1993, 43–5.
37 Gräslund 1981, 49.
38 Andrén 1993, 46.
In the graves of late-Roman-, Migration- and Vendel-period Scandinavia, gaming pieces are mainly associated with the graves of adult males.\textsuperscript{39} With the advent of the Viking period, gaming pieces increasingly enter the female realm, becoming gender-neutral in rural Swedish cemeteries.\textsuperscript{40} They are, however, still associated with adult males in the rich cemeteries of the early town of Birka and in Norwegian graves.\textsuperscript{41} Therefore, the gaming pieces are once more suggestive, but by no means conclusive, of an adult male interment. Co-author Rundkvist has documented male-gender connotations for single beads on late-Viking-period Gotland.\textsuperscript{42} Small slate whetstones are ubiquitous in late-1st-millennium AD burials in Sweden, and appear to be gender-neutral.

The monument may also reveal clues as to the identity of the occupant. Petré has suggested a gendered morphological dichotomy in terms of the central marker stones on late-1st-millennium AD funerary monuments, echoing sexually diagnostic features of human anatomy.\textsuperscript{43} Standing stones tend to accompany male-gender artefact kits and stone spheres female ones. The central orthostat at Skamby suggests a male gender association.

Combining these strands of evidence, the Skamby 2005 boat grave was probably the burial of an adult male. Viking-period weaponry, which is very strongly male-gendered in Scandinavian graves, is exceptionally rare in Östergötland, and its absence from Skamby therefore does not call for special explanation. Inevitably, the osteological age and sex of the deceased must remain unknown in the absence of preserved human bones.

### Social Status and Possible Early Grave Robbing

Was the Skamby 2005 burial a wealthy grave, indicating an aristocratic status for the deceased and the mourners? This question is problematic but the answer is a cautious ‘yes’.

The poor preservation of organic materials and metalwork means that many artefacts and materials (including any parts of sacrificed horses, dogs or other animals) found in boat graves elsewhere were not discernible during the Skamby excavation. Therefore, the relative poverty of Skamby in comparison to some of the Mälardalen cemeteries may partly be a matter of differential preservation rather than differences between burial rites or mortuary investment.

Furthermore, grave robbing is a well-recognised practice among Scandinavian boat and ship graves, complicating the assessment of relative burial wealth. The intact nature of the Skamby stone setting with its distinctive line of stone-collapse seems to rule out any grave robbing in later decades and centuries, after the grave-cover had rotted through. However, in some cases, grave robbing clearly took place in the Viking period itself within months or years of the

\textsuperscript{39} M Sandberg 1994; Rundkvist 2003, 36–42, 47–54.

\textsuperscript{40} M Sandberg 1994; contra Petré 1993.

\textsuperscript{41} Eriksson 1993, 12–13; Solberg 2007, 266–7.

\textsuperscript{42} Rundkvist 2003, 61.

\textsuperscript{43} Petré 1993.
funeral, when both the boat and its roof were intact. Archaeologists may not see such robbing during excavation because it may have only necessitated the removal of a few stones. Disturbance would have been further minimised if those doing the robbing had knowledge of the funeral and the grave’s arrangement. In any case, it is possible from the flat stone setting, grave-roof and monolith that the position of the boat would be clear for all to see. Such hypothetical robbing may have focused on items of greatest value, such as weapons and feasting gear.

The Skamby grave with its scattered gaming pieces and the lack of either brooches or weaponry provides a striking parallel with the c AD 900 boat grave no 1 at Gamla Uppsala, reported by Else Nordahl. Here, better preservation enabled the recovery of the skeleton of an adult male as well as animal bone including the remains of two dogs and a horse. Grave robbing was evident from the prone posture and peripheral location of the human skeleton. The post-robery scatter of artefacts included 23 gaming pieces (here of bone) and the presence of token items of horse gear means that, had preservation been poorer, the grave would have left a nearly identical trace to the remains recovered at Skamby. Hence, the Skamby grave might be simply a less well-preserved version of the Gamla Uppsala burial: a case of the Viking-period grave robbing of a high-status adult male furnished burial in a boat beneath a stone setting.

However, the poor preservation of the Skamby find and the lack of any evidence for the disturbance of the stone setting (in contrast to Gamla Uppsala) leave open the possibility that the Skamby grave was indeed unrobbed. Moreover, the mixing of stones and gaming pieces tends to rule against the idea that their distribution was the result of Viking-period robbing. Whether the grave itself was robbed or not, the temptation is to interpret the gaming-piece scatter as evidence of objects placed on top of rather than in the grave and subsequently falling into it with the collapse of the roof.

Furthermore, it is important to question the expectation that aristocratic male burials should contain feasting gear and weapons. Östergötland’s 1st millennium AD graves are generally not richly equipped, and Viking period male burials there are particularly austere. Therefore, for Östergötland, what is notable is the presence of burial riches (namely the gaming pieces), not the absence of weapons.

Therefore, whether or not grave robbing took place, the presence of gaming pieces indicate a high-status funeral. Within graves of late-Roman-period Scandinavia (AD 150–375), gaming pieces strongly correlate with expensive burials. In the Migration, Vendel and Viking periods (AD 375–1100), they no longer confine themselves to such contexts: the average grave expenditure is middling. This has to do with the proliferation of bone gaming pieces from the

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44 Nordahl 2001, see also Klevnäs 2007, 29–32.
Migration period onward. Gaming pieces of glass or amber generally occur only in richly furnished burials. The Skamby 2005 boat grave is in fact one of the poorest-equipped members of this group, while gaming with high-quality pieces suggests a link with an aristocratic (and even ideals of a heroic) lifestyle. The possibility of grave robbing aside, the scattering of gaming pieces, if interpreted as evidence of gaming pieces placed on the roof of the grave, may indicate that they were gifts from mourners rather than traditional ‘grave goods’ situated with the cadaver.

Provisionally ruling out grave robbing, and given that frost nails survived at the bottom of the grave where rainwater collected and preservation conditions were particularly poor, the absence of other metalwork is a clear indication that the grave did not originally contain any weaponry or other large iron objects such as stirrups, spurs or kitchen and feasting gear. In this sense, the Skamby grave is clearly inferior to the richest intact coeval graves found at other Swedish boat inhumation cemeteries. On the other hand, no other Swedish boat grave contains a comparable amount of amber, an expensive material imported from the SE shores of the Baltic or the SW coast of Jutland. The nearest known site with evidence of contemporaneous amber working, including the making of gaming pieces, is Birka on an island in Lake Mälaren. Rich similar craft finds are known from Ribe on the Jutish amber coast (Denmark), Hedeby in Schleswig-Holstein (Germany) and Dorestad in Frisia (Netherlands).

Mortuary technologies further bias our assessment of the grave’s relative wealth. Most Swedish Viking-period graves are cremations. Amber burns easily leaving a slight residue indistinguishable from that of resinous pine wood. The cremation of the Skamby 2005 assemblage prior to burial would have entailed a greater expenditure than the investigated inhumation. But cremation would have obliterated the amber and, even if a greater number of clench nails had survived in such a cremation deposit due to fire patination, it would have appeared to us as a poorly equipped burial. Hence, while undeniably possessing high-status associations, the unique status of the amber gaming pieces may owe as much to the choice to inhume the dead at Skamby as to the rarity of the objects themselves.

Stone superstructures of the form identified at Skamby are unknown from other Swedish boat inhumation cemeteries and represent quite a respectable labour expenditure. More important is the size of the monument; here status was afforded not through the building of a large barrow to serve as a landmark, but by demarcating an exclusive space through the construction of the stone setting that framed the grave. The monument is also distinctive for its unusual oblong and irregularly octagonal shape. Rural Swedish Viking-period cemeteries are usually dominated by modestly sized mounds and flat round stone settings, with a few four-sided, boat-shaped and triangular stone settings occurring too.

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49 Arwidsson 1989b.
51 Gräslund 1981, 67–70.
Such shapes may have embodied social information about the deceased and religious symbolism. While the precise choice of an irregular eight-sided monument at Skamby remains enigmatic, it might be an adaptation of local monument forms rather than a radical innovation. While both boat inhumation and oblong monuments are extremely rare, flat stone settings (although generally built with smaller-size stones) are the rule in both Mälardalen and Östergötland at the time, regardless of grave contents. This choice of rite places the boats beneath stone settings somewhere between the established categories of ‘boat grave’ and ‘stone setting’. Building the monument covered the boat from view, but only by a modest layer of stones that may have allowed it to be distinguished from the surface. Therefore the choice of employing a boat in funerary ritual at Skamby (itself a considerable investment) was followed up by a distinctive variant in monument form and hence a means of marking the grave as different from other contemporary burials.

The Skamby 2005 burial presents an unbalanced inventory, caused either by the initial choices of the mourners or by early robbing, itself possibly performed by the same mourners. It presents a single very expensive set of objects, a boat and a distinctive monument combined with relatively unassuming traits. Overall, the grave represents above-average expenditure in goods and labour, yet far from top level for its time in southern and central Sweden. For the region however, the grave is unique in qualitative as well as quantitative terms. For instance, the distinctive choice of inhumation in a largely cremating region and the choice of a boat may themselves have constituted a statement of wealth and status, setting the Skamby graves apart from other contemporary mortuary practices and therefore likely to have served to mark aristocratic status. Equally, the location and form of the monument distinguished the social standing of the deceased and mourners even more than the materials and artefacts invested in the grave itself. Since it is clear that the boat grave was not the first on the site, the mourners may have deemed status-by-association with an enduring tradition on the same location, and the use of an abbreviated symbolic message, to be sufficient to evoke their social status and that of the deceased.

It is likely that the mortuary symbolism as well as the expenditure and form of the Skamby grave also served as a social statement. The presence of gaming pieces may have formed a clear statement of both status and mythological beliefs. Likewise, Viking-period Scandinavian death rituals seem to have employed boats and their representations as symbolic allusions to afterlife journeys, as well as to symbolise heroic worldly ideals. The presence of horse-related material culture may allude to the same symbolism of both social status and perceptions of an afterlife journey. The Skamby grave was therefore an exclusive statement that defined the transformed identity of the deceased in relation to a vision of the afterlife as well as aristocratic culture.

52 Eg ‘tricorns’ (three-cornered stone settings) that may evoke the idea of the world-tree Yggdrasill known from Norse mythology: Andrén 2007a, 125.
53 Andrén 1993, 45.
54 Andrén 1993.
A CONTEXT FOR THE GRAVE

With such a poorly preserved grave, conclusions concerning the affinities of its occupant(s) must remain somewhat vague. As Lidén et al have pointed out, the Svealand boat-inhumation custom was in any case not strictly uniform. There is considerable variability even when comparing coeval graves: ‘The overall impression is that the major common, and maybe the only common, denominator is the boat’ — to which should be added the choice of the inhumation rite at a time when cremation was the dominant practice. Nevertheless, the grave excavated at Skamby does stand apart from the ones in Mälardalen with a number of unique features. At Skamby we see a large, distinctive stone setting with at least one standing stone. Unless robbed, there were no weapons or feasting gear, the horse gear is minimal, and then somewhat incongruously there are rare and exclusive amber gaming pieces, possibly placed over, rather than within, the boat.

REGIONAL CONTEXT

How did the Skamby cemetery fit into its region? The answer is that it did not. As with other parts of late-1st-millennium AD Scandinavia, Östergötland’s mortuary practices are varied. However, most Viking-period graves excavated over the decades in the environs of Skamby on the Vikbolandet peninsula and the plains of Östergötland to the west are cremations surmounted by small mounds or stone settings. As repeatedly stated, Viking-period male burials in Östergötland are rarely rich in grave goods. Most of the six known weapon graves of the period are early finds with poor documentation. Some members of the era’s élite appear to rest under great barrows judging from two that have been trial-trenched and 14C-dated. None of these have, however, been excavated in full, and their burials’ gender affiliation is unknown. An enormous oval barrow at Aska in Hagebyhöga parish has been trial-trenched and 14C-dated to cal AD 660–880 (1 sigma), but in this case it is uncertain whether the monument is a grave barrow or a building platform, and it most likely pre-dates the Viking period. Certainly, boats may have been more widely employed in late-1st-millennium AD cremation ceremonies than has previously been recognised in southern Sweden, but the deployment of boat inhumation is exceedingly rare.

Surface features indicate that the Malm (Fig 3) and Norra Berga cemeteries also contain boat graves. However, neither site resembles Skamby. Instead they have individual boat graves integrated into cemeteries comprised of a range of local, late-1st-millennium AD grave forms. They also lack evidence of any linear sequence of boat graves suggesting an enduring and organised tradition.

56 Andrén 2007a, 115; Svanberg 2003b.
57 Ledberg, St-8656, 1140±80 BP; Sjögestad, Poz-18593, 1210±30 BP.
58 St-11326, 1270±100 BP; Claréus and Fernholm 1999.
59 Nicklasson 1999.
Therefore, in its regional context, the Skamby cemetery is unique, being similar to the Mälardalen cemeteries.

From this evidence, it is possible to suggest that the cemetery constituted a distinctive and overt symbolic statement through the choice of inhumation, boat burial and (to some extent) the material wealth and symbolism deployed in the grave. It had at least one standing stone (possibly originally four including those along the edges of the stone setting), and it was part of a series of visually uniform boat burials. Therefore, rather than a one-off occurrence, it was part of a distinctive mortuary expression by an élite social group perpetuated for select individuals over decades and perhaps centuries.

INTER-REGIONAL CONTEXT

Elsewhere along the coasts of the Baltic, boat graves have been regarded as evidence of the cultural origins and world-views of Swedish immigrants practising the rite, or of shifting political connections between centres (ie Svealand) and ‘peripheries’. Archaeologists have adopted a similar perspective for the Atlantic context, with the similarities between the boat-grave traditions of western Norway with Scotland and Man perceived in terms of migration and dynastic links between homelands and newly settled territories. Alternatively, boat graves are regarded as an element of a pan-Scandinavian (supra-regional) élite mortuary repertoire without a single point of origin; boat burial, in this view, transcended local variability in mortuary practices.

For Skamby, these models are difficult to apply fully and adequately. To regard the Skamby cemetery as serving a settlement of immigrants from, or subordinates to, a dynasty from Uppland would be to ignore the local adaptation of the rites in terms of both grave and monument. Moreover, the Vikbolandet peninsula is strategically positioned between Östergötland’s heartlands to the west and excellent seaborne communications linking it to all areas of the Baltic, including Mälardalen to the north and Öland to the south (Figs 1–2). It was in this sense a micro-region in its own right. In such a situation, dynastic and political connections with Svealand are certainly likely, yet there is no evidence to indicate that these would have been exclusive. Even if they were, boat graves were not the only choice available to the community burying in the Skamby cemetery. Hence the choices of the local élite’s mortuary customs need not be regarded as ideas exported from a single centre (such as Uppland) and passively adopted by a peripheral region, nor simply as a permutation of an ubiquitous Scandinavian élite rite. Neither are the grave and the monuments’ unusual designs likely to have been due either to poverty or to ignorance of customs elsewhere.

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61 Andrén 2007b, 298.
62 Müller-Wille 2007, 294.
63 Eg Andrén 1993; 2007a, 123; see also Svanberg 2003a, 142; 2003b, 130–4.
64 Näsman 1991, 29.
Instead, it is likely that the social group interring select individuals at Skamby adapted the prestigious boat-grave symbolism of the élites of neighbouring coastal regions, but did so in their own way and for their own purposes. Their mortuary repertoire evoked (but did not copy) aristocratic customs from Svealand and elsewhere in the Baltic region, and it contrasted with the cremation rites and mound burials employed within elsewhere in Östergötland. Indeed, the relatively peripheral locations of the long-lived Vendel and Valsgärde cemeteries in relation to Lake Mälaren finds a parallel in the peripheral (and yet simultaneously strategic) location of Skamby on Vikbolandet in the far east of Östergötland and in proximity to the Baltic coast (Figs 3–5).

VIKING-PERIOD GAMING

The gaming pieces (Fig 11) have so far been described and discussed in terms of their age, gender and status associations. Here, this striking find is considered further and its implications for understanding the mortuary practices at Skamby are addressed.

Gaming pieces occur in Scandinavian graves from the late Roman period through the Viking period until the abandonment of furnished burial (c AD 150–1000). Most were made of bone or antler with occasional glass pieces occurring in richly equipped graves, for example, the Viking-period ones on Birka. Amber gaming pieces are rare and tend to come from boat and ship graves (Tab 1; the decontextualised Østby find harks from the vicinity of Kaupang with its numerous boat inhumations). Their rarity may in part reflect the low likelihood of their identification in the ubiquitous cremation burials of the period. Yet the repeated association with wealthy graves suggests that amber playing pieces denoted the power and connections of the mourners and deceased.

The Skamby grave contained 23 amber gaming pieces. Taphonomic factors complicate a reliable assessment of what number would be normal for use: cremation shatters many bone or antler gaming pieces and preserves the fragments, while soil chemistry may destroy unburnt bone in inhumations. The best opportunities to find out how many gaming pieces there should be to a Viking-period set are offered by inhumation graves with glass gaming pieces or occasional good bone preservation (Tab 2; gaming pieces are unknown from the Viking-period graves of Gotland, where calciferous soil provides good preservation conditions).

The median number of gaming pieces per grave in this sample is 25. Therefore, there is statistically speaking no reason to suspect that there had originally been any additional bone or antler gaming pieces in the Skamby grave, obliterated by the soil conditions. All the Skamby pieces are roughly the

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65 On contemporaneous contrasting élite mortuary practices in central Sweden, see Ljungkvist 2006, 190.
66 On the 'liminal' locations of select 1st millennium AD élite graves on a regional scale, see Carver 1986; Williams 1999.
67 Lindqvist 1983.
**Table 1**

SCANDINAVIAN GRAVE FINDS WITH AMBER GAMING PIECES

Inv no refers to museum finds ID number; SHM = Statens Historiska Museum, Stockholm; NO = Norway; SE = Sweden

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inv no</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Date, structure</th>
<th>Ref</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oslo 11772</td>
<td>NO, Vestfold, Tjølling parish, Østby</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10th-century, no documentation</td>
<td>Petersen 1914, fig 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oslo 23457</td>
<td>NO, southern part of Vestfold</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>No documentation</td>
<td>Dr Augustad’s collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oslo 24743</td>
<td>NO, Hedmark, Furnes parish, Alu</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Grave mound, no documentation</td>
<td>Gaming piece untouched by fire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oslo 35251</td>
<td>NO, Østfold, Trogstad parish, Grevegg</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9th/10th-century cremation grave</td>
<td>Petersen 1914, fig 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bergen 5150</td>
<td>NO, Sogn og Fjordane, Gloppen parish, Hauge</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9th-century boat grave</td>
<td>Shetelig 1912, fig 521</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bergen 4438</td>
<td>NO, Rogaland, Torvastad parish, Gunnarsaug</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10th-century ship grave</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHM Bj 524</td>
<td>SE, Uppland, Adelsö parish, Björkö, gr. 524</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10th-century chamber grave</td>
<td>Arbman 1940-3, 160-61, Taf 149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pending allocation</td>
<td>SE, Östergötland, Kuddby parish, Skamby, monument 15, 2005</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9th-century boat grave</td>
<td>Rundkvist and Williams 2006</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2**

A SAMPLE OF SCANDINAVIAN VIKING-PERIOD GRAVES WITH WELL-PRESERVED GAMING SETS, ALL FROM UPPLAND IN SWEDEN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inv no</th>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Number of pieces, material</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SHM Bj 523</td>
<td>Adelsö parish, Birka, grave 523</td>
<td>20 glass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHM Bj 524</td>
<td>Adelsö parish, Birka, grave 524</td>
<td>15 amber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHM Bj 581</td>
<td>Adelsö parish, Birka, grave 581</td>
<td>28 antler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHM Bj 624</td>
<td>Adelsö parish, Birka, grave 624</td>
<td>27 antler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHM Bj 644</td>
<td>Adelsö parish, Birka, grave 644</td>
<td>22 glass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHM Bj 750</td>
<td>Adelsö parish, Birka, grave 750</td>
<td>26 glass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHM Bj 886</td>
<td>Adelsö parish, Birka, grave 886</td>
<td>25 bone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHM Bj 986</td>
<td>Adelsö parish, Birka, grave 986</td>
<td>17 antler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHM 20348</td>
<td>Långtora parish, Långtora</td>
<td>26 (21 glass, 4 bone, 1 soapstone)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

same size, shape and colour, except for find no 382 that is visibly larger than the others. This is a common occurrence in gaming sets of the time: one piece is often visibly distinct. One of the Harby amber gaming pieces from Småland is the bust of a bearded man. This observation tallies well with the rather sketchy information given in the Icelandic literature about a game called *hnefatafl*, ‘hand
board’. Here, the distinctive piece is ‘the king’. In a game of *hnefatafl*, the objective seems to have been for the king and his retinue to fight their way out of a surrounding hostile troop and off the board or to the corner squares.

Gaming sets from 1st millennium AD Scandinavian graves, including Skamby, are rarely divisible into visibly distinct teams for two players. This remains an unsolved problem despite long discussion. Petersen suggested that some of the pieces in the uniform bone or antler sets had originally been painted, therefore distinguishing them as a team. But this seems unlikely with amber playing pieces and impossible with glass ones. Sandberg’s attempt to divide the gaming pieces from Birka into teams based on small visual differences is not convincing. Instead, it can be suggested that the gaming sets found in graves were intended for only one player, and that the Viking-period custom was for each player to bring their own set of pieces to the board. This would add another aspect of friendly competition to the game playing: first one player would impress the other with the fineness of his pieces, then the other could try to revenge herself by winning the actual game.

As we have seen, the evidence from Viking-period inhumation graves indicates that one player would possess c 24 identical pieces plus a king. In 1732, Carolus Linnaeus documented a game played among the Saami. They called it *tablut* (*cf* *tafl*) and played on a 9 × 9 square board with a king at the centre. *Tablut* may hypothetically have preserved some or all features of Viking-period *hnefatafl*. In the reconstructed *hnefatafl*, the defensive player has some multiple of four identical pieces plus one king, while the attacking player has twice the number of identical pieces but no king. What multiple of four is used depends on the size of the board (Tab 3).

If, therefore, the 23 Skamby playing pieces were for use by one player in a game of (reconstructed) *hnefatafl*, they could, at a pinch, be used to play attacker on up to an 11 × 11 square board, or to play defender on up to a 15 × 15 board. 17 × 17 boards were probably rare, as sets of at least 48 identical gaming pieces are very uncommon. Also, a 17 × 17 board with 4 cm squares

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Board size</th>
<th>Defender</th>
<th>Attacker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7 × 7 sq (28 cm)</td>
<td>1 × 4 = 4 + king</td>
<td>2 × 4 = 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 × 9 sq (36 cm)</td>
<td>2 × 4 = 8 + king</td>
<td>4 × 4 = 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 × 11 sq (44 cm)</td>
<td>3 × 4 = 12 + king</td>
<td>6 × 4 = 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 × 13 sq (52 cm)</td>
<td>4 × 4 = 16 + king</td>
<td>8 × 4 = 32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 × 15 sq (60 cm)</td>
<td>5 × 4 = 20 + king</td>
<td>10 × 4 = 40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 × 17 sq (68 cm)</td>
<td>6 × 4 = 24 + king</td>
<td>12 × 4 = 48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

69 Petersen 1914, 86; cf Grieg 1947.
70 C-A Sandberg 1976.
71 Linnaeus 1995.
(large enough to accommodate the largest Skamby piece) would measure over 68 cm a side including the edges. This is more than any known Viking-period gaming board. The Gokstad ship burial (c AD 900, Norway) contained a 13 × 13 gaming board measuring 69 cm on one side including edges.\(^2\) A late-10th-century Insular-Scandinavian-style gaming board found at Ballinderry, Ireland, measures 25 × 24 cm and has 7 × 7 peg holes.\(^3\) The boards in the Birka chamber graves 624 and 886 measured c 35–40 and 50 cm a side respectively.\(^4\) Large gaming boards are, however, known from earlier in the 1st millennium AD. The one in the 7th-century Valsgärde 8 boat grave measured 85–90 cm a side.\(^5\)

Among the group of 11th-century rune-stones with rich figural scenes from the Swedish province of Gästrikland, a near-contemporary depiction of people playing a board game can be seen. The stone from Ockelbo church only survives in archival documentation since it was destroyed by fire, but depicted two bearded men sitting to either side of a square board, drinking from horns.\(^6\) The board has a frame, inside of which are five small squares: one in each corner and one at its centre, connected by diagonal lines to the corner squares. The Ballinderry board has a similar arrangement. The Ockelbo board’s side reaches from the lap to the top of one player’s head, and from the lap to the chin of the other. It is therefore rather large, assuming that the carver accurately rendered the board at the same scale as the players.

The implications of this interpretation of the gaming pieces for the symbolic message of the Skamby grave are intriguing if not conclusive. Rather than mourners placing gaming pieces on a board for playing within the grave, the deposition of a single gaming set would denote the social class of the deceased as perceived by the survivors. It may also anticipate future games, perhaps imagining a lordly lifestyle of gaming, feasting and fighting in the next world.\(^7\) Alternatively or additionally, the gaming pieces may relate to the ritualised associations of gaming with concepts of fate and divining as recently suggested by Solberg.\(^8\) In the mortuary context, gaming may have been regarded as a means of assisting the transformation of the deceased into the afterlife or ancestral state.\(^9\)

Gaming pieces in Viking-period graves may be yet another piece of evidence that people regarded mortuary practices at this time as ritualised transformations, involving the engagement of the living with the dead. They perceived graves as places of communication with the dead. In this sense, the placing of one set of gaming pieces with the deceased is a means of social exchange between the living and the dead focusing on the grave monument. What could be a more apposite means of communicating with the dead than to provide the deceased with only one set of gaming pieces? Perhaps the survivors

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\(^2\) Nicolaysen 1882, pl VIII:1.
\(^3\) O’Neill Hencken 1933.
\(^4\) Selling 1940.
\(^5\) Arwidsson 1954, 93–4.
\(^7\) Hall 2007; Jennbert 2006, 136.
\(^8\) Solberg 2007.
were expected to bring their own to the side of the grave, and ancestors in the afterlife to bring theirs! Certainly, the selection of gaming pieces over other expensive artefacts indicates the centrality of gaming as a practice and metaphor of high-status life and death in Viking-period southern Sweden.

FINAL REMARKS

Not all Scandinavians practised boat burial at all times in the later 1st millennium AD. Moreover, they could deploy boats in different ways — burnt, buried, monumentalised in stone settings and depicted upon stones. In cases where boats were employed in inhumation practices, they show considerable variability in terms of the size of the boat, the range and character of grave furnishings and the nature of the monument raised over the boat. Hence, boat graves were a variable and strategic mortuary custom that served to commemorate the aristocratic dead and articulate the world-views and social identities of the survivors.

The evidence presented above shows that boat burial at Skamby involved elaborate ritual performances and the deployment of material culture linked to both aristocratic lifestyles and metaphors for afterlife journeying. These included the provision of a clinker-built boat, horse gear and gaming pieces. A distinctive stone setting upon a locally prominent ridge, which would have created a striking presence for the aristocratic dead overlooking the surrounding inhabited landscape, memorialised these performances (Figs 5 and 7). The excavated monument at Skamby possibly formed part of a tradition of boat-inhumation that may have persisted for more than two centuries.

This form of mortuary practice allowed the local aristocracy of the Vikbolandet peninsula to define their social identities and political allegiances. Moreover, this was a multi-scalar statement, operating on local, regional and supra-regional stages. In particular, the amber gaming pieces provide a new perspective on the significance of gaming in both Viking-period aristocratic culture and death rituals.

Further research is required at Skamby to ascertain the duration, extent and overall character of the cemetery. Moreover, the investigation of the landscape context of the cemetery in relation to other coeval cemeteries and settlements on the Vikbolandet peninsula remains a priority for future research. Finally, a fuller exploration is required of the regional context of the cemetery in relation to other high-status burial sites and central places throughout Östergotland. Yet the 2005 excavation results serve to illustrate the potential of research-driven fieldwork targeting late-1st-millennium AD burial sites that are effectively off-limits to contract archaeology in Sweden.

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82 Rundkvist in prep.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to the Pettersson family of Skamby for their support and hospitality, and to the Östergötland County Museum and the Linköping office of the National Heritage Board for their generous support for the project. The text has benefited from suggestions by Ing-Marie Back Danielsson, Alf Ericsson, Ingrid Gustin, Mark Hall, Alison Klevnäs, Olwyn Owen, Alex Sanmark, Pierre Petersson, Frans-Arne Stylegar, Elizabeth Williams and an anonymous referee. A 50-page excavation report is available on-line at <http://www.archive.org/details/Skamby2005report> [accessed 3 May 2008].

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Grant Acknowledgements

The fieldwork and Martin Rundkvist’s involvement enjoyed financial support from a number of institutions, notably the Berit Wallenberg foundation, the Helge Ax: son Johnson foundation, The Royal Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities in Stockholm, the Anér foundation and the Rausing foundation. A British Academy Small Research Grant and the Student Fieldwork Fund of the Department of Archaeology at the University of Exeter supported Howard Williams’ involvement.

French, German and Italian Abstracts

Résumé

Excavation d’une tombe à navire contenant des pièces de jeu en ambre, à Skamby, Östergötland, Suède par Martin Rundkvist et Howard Williams

Pendant l’été 2005, les auteurs ont dirigé les travaux d’excavation d’un arrangement de pierres couchées comportant une dépression centrale en forme de bateau à Skamby, dans la paroisse de Kuddby, en Östergötland (Suède). Ces pierres recouvraient une tombe à navire de petite taille et en mauvais état, qu’on a pu dater du début de la période viking (IXe siècle) grâce aux artefacts récupérés. C’est la première fois que l’on découvre une tombe à navire dans la province d’Östergötland. Nous relatons les fouilles, y compris la découverte d’une collection exceptionnelle de 23 pièces de jeu en ambre, qui offrent une nouvelle perspective sur le jeu à l’époque viking. Nous considérons alors les données tirées de cette tombe à navire par rapport au reste du cimetière de Skamby, qui n’a pas encore été étudié. Si l’on en juge d’après une étude topographique de la crête entourant la zone mise au jour, et les découvertes faites au détecteur à métaux dans les champs environnants, le cimetière de Skamby semble être un lieu de sépultures de haut rang, divisé en deux zones: l’une contenant des tombes à navire, l’autre des cercles de pierres qui recouvrent probablement des tombes à crémation. Les résultats des fouilles permettent de remettre en question l’idée que dans le sud de la Suède, à la fin du premier millénaire, les tombes à navire étaient un rite funéraire réservé aux élites.

Zusammenfassung

Ein Schiffssgrab aus der Wikingerzeit mit Spielsteinfunden aus Bernstein in Skamby, Östergötland, Schweden von Martin Rundkvist und Howard Williams

Im Sommer 2005 leiteten die Autoren die Ausgrabung einer flachen Steinsetzung mit einer bootsförmigen Vertiefung in der Mitte in Skamby, in der Gemeinde Kuddby in

Riassunto

Rinvenimento di una barca funeraria vichinga con oggetti da gioco in ambra in uno scavo a Skamby, nella provincia di Östergötland, Svezia di Martin Rundkvist e Howard Williams

Nell’estate del 2005 gli autori hanno diretto lo scavo di una pietra posata con una depressione a forma di barca presso Skamby, nella parrocchia di Kuddby nell’Östergötland, in Svezia. La pietra ricopriva una barca funeraria piccola e mal conservata che, in base ai manufatti rinvenuti, viene fatta risalire al primo periodo vichingo (IX secolo d.C.). Si tratta del primo scavo di barca funeraria nella provincia di Östergötland. La relazione parla degli scavi, compresa la scoperta di un’eccezionale collezione di 23 pezzi da gioco in ambra, che offrono una nuova inquadratura sui giochi del periodo vichingo. Quindi i dati della barca funeraria sono messi in relazione con il resto del cimitero di Skamby, che rimane da investigare. A giudicare da una rilevazione topografica del rilievo che circonda la zona degli scavi e da alcuni oggetti rinvenuti con metal detector nei campi circostanti, il cimitero di Skamby sembra un terreno di sepoltura di alto status, diviso in due zone, una di inumazioni in barche funerarie, l’altra di pietre circolari che probabilmente ricoprivano tombe a cremazione. Gli esiti degli scavi creano un quadro riveduto delle barche funerarie come riti funebri elitari nella Svezia meridionale verso la fine del primo millennio d.C.