

The Gjellestad ship burial – a royal burial site and its surroundings

The Gjellestad ship attracted wide international attention when discovered by Ground Penetrating Radar in 2018, followed by a trial excavation in 2019 and a full excavation in 2020. This paper will both present results from the excavation of the ship burial as well as contextualizing the find in its surroundings and comparing it to similar sites.

The surrounding area is rich in prehistoric finds, with C14-datings as old as 1500 BC. Preserved burial mounds in close vicinity to the ship find, geophysical surveys, trial excavation trenches and metal detecting campaigns all contribute to the knowledge about the site.

It is the first time in over 100 years that a Viking ship from a burial mound is excavated in Norway. Although the ship is not as well preserved as the Oseberg, Gokstad and Tune ships, novel archaeological methods like 3d-documentation is a prerequisite for making an accurate reconstruction of the ship. Similarly, archaeometry enables us to analyze poorly preserved organic materials.

The Gjellestad ship compliments the previously known ships from the period and is a welcome contribution to knowledge of the ship technology of the Viking Ages (to be updated, as the ship is not fully excavated yet). Although the ship has been overploughed, the excavation has also revealed insights on the construction of the burial mound with turf layers pressed down on top of the ship.

Ship graves of this size were built for persons from the uppermost echelons in society, and should thus be interpreted as a royal burial. The excavation have revealed (will reveal in the time of writing) insights of who was buried within the Gjellestad ship. This new discovery changes our view of the political milieu of the Viken area in the Viking Age. The site seems comparable to Borre which is presumably the burial place of ancestors of the royal dynasty of the Ynglings known from the skaldic poem Ynglingatal and Snorris Heimskringla. The Gjellestad site now stands out as a counterpart across the fjord.