

Horses and Horsemanship – A visual statement of power

In 2017, a research project was initiated by Museum Skanderborg with the main purpose of excavating and securing the finds from a horseman's grave, uncovered in Fregerslev in eastern Jutland. Despite the incomplete condition of the chamber grave, it has yielded a wealth of new information on the burial practice and the equipment of Viking-Age horsemen. The grave proved to contain hundreds of decorative studs from an impressive harness and saddle. The headstall consisted of a two-linked snaffle bit with silver inlaid, decorated sidebars and cheek plates; along with 36 gilded strap mounts. One of the gilded fittings, a cross-shaped strap mount, is known from three other graves nearby Schleswig and from several detector finds widespread in Denmark, but also abroad. The saddle gear was decorated with several types of silver inlaid tin/lead fittings, e.g. keyhole-shaped, flowerhead-shaped and duckfoot-shaped. Some of which are known from other Danish equestrian graves. Especially the tin/lead fittings present a challenge; in most burials, they have not survived, and the Fregerslev find is therefore a welcome addition, which offers new insight into the many ornamental details of Viking-Age harness.

The primary focus of this paper is on harnesses from 10th century equestrian graves located in Viking-Age Denmark, combined with metal detector finds and moulds from magnate farms and towns. Taking the Fregerslev harness as a point of departure, a visual comparison between the different studs and bits, which share similarities with or have characteristic features to Fregerslev, will be prioritized. Resemblance in patterns, shapes, size, and production method will be reviewed.

The aim of the paper is to present and discuss the horse equipment related to the Fregerslev find and thereby gain a better knowledge of the role of the horse and horsemanship in the expression and maintenance of power the 10th century. Where were the harness sets produced? Are we talking about mass production? Did the harness show the rank and affiliation of the horseman? The deceased at Fregerslev no doubt belonged to the higher echelons of society, and the horse would have emphasized the authority and wealth of its owner. The archaeological evidence from Fregerslev and similar burials stresses the importance of horsemanship in a Scandinavian context, parallels to which can be seen in the written sources of the neighboring countries.

Merethe Schifter Bagge (Museum Skanderborg) & Anne Pedersen (National Museum of Denmark)