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THEME: Making a Living: Trade, Networks and Towns/ Power, Wealth and Resources

TITLE: BIRKAS' TOWN RAMPART STADSVÄLLEN AND THE END OF THE VIKING TOWN

ABSTRACT (300–500 words)

The town rampart of the Viking town of Birka in Lake Mälaren in East Middle Sweden survived as a well-preserved on a stretch along a ridgeline separating the Black Earth-settlement area from the burial ground Hemlanden. It has been a long standing academic assumption that the town rampart originally traversed a low lying meadow between the ridgeline and the hillfort Borg on the opposite side of the Black Earth settlement area forming a semi-circular rampart proper. First empirical support for this hypothesis was offered by Wåhlander in 1997 by means of electromagnetic induction (EMI) and phosphate surveys; later geomagnetic surveys of the Boltzmann Institute in Vienna followed.

While transections through the preserved part of the town rampart were dug by Arbman in 1932 and by Holmquist in 1987, physical evidence of some considerable, ploughed-away section still had to be provided. In 2018/19, a 26 metres long trial trench was established across the former rampart, but even across a geomagnetic anomaly suggesting the existence of mound on the inside the town rampart. That way, next to information on the closer nature of the rampart, even the chronological relationship between defensive structure and burial should become clarified. Seeing the deviant requirements to a line of defence in the enclosed basin between the elevated ridgeline and hillfort, an existence of a hitherto unknown moat in front of the rampart was tested, too.

The rampart proved to be badly preserved – only some decimetres high – and appeared to be a two-phased structure with a younger wattle-and-daub façade supported by an inclined outer beam. This second, younger phase was charred as a result of a fire event. The suspected moat could become verified by a 4.3 metres wide and at least 0.8 metres deep ditch filled with rubble and a thick burned layer in front of the 6 metres wide rampart and a berm of c. 0.9 metres. A large bolder stone at the bottom of the moat prohibited insights on whether it was originally V- or U-shaped. In the mound on the inside of the rampart a secondary cremation burial in a stone cist was discovered. However, the

stratigraphic sequence between mound and rampart proved to be interrupted by a pit filled with Black Earth-settlement debris.

Via analogies with the Kovirke within the Danevirke-border complex – indicated by the inclined outer beam in front of the younger rampart and a possible V-shaped ditch – suggest a chronological placement to c. AD 980 for the younger rampart. Seeing that Birka ceased to exist around AD 975 the second phase of construction would fall into the towns final phase. The fire-event proven by the charred façade and the debris in the moat seems to fit with comparable observations at the hillfort Borg, the Garrison and the preserved part of the town rampart. Came Birka to an end by an act of concerted violence instead of some economical downfall?