

Interpretation of the Great Votive Deposits og Iron Age Veapons

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Ever since Engelhardt's excavations in the 19th century of the finds from Thorsbjerg, Nydam, Vimose and Kragehul many imaginative suggestions have been made to interpret this category of finds. Some of these are summarized in Ørsnes 1969: XXI ff.

The two main interpretations were advanced by Worsaae/Brøndsted and Jankuhn, respectively. The former argued that the finds represent sacrifices of war booty, i.e. they consist of objects belonging to a defeated enemy and collected from the battle-field after combat. It was further assumed that in some cases people returned to the same locality to make additional votive deposits of booty (Brøndsted 1960: 228 ff.). This explanation has the advantage of defining the find category and is moreover documented in classical sources (Hagberg 1967: 65 ff.). *A consequence of the war booty theory is that the objects sacrificed did not belong to the local population unless it was a civil war.*

The other interpretation, made by Jankuhn, was based on a study of the Thorsbjerg find. Jankuhn stated that Thorsbjerg had been the scene of sacrifices at different times and that the deposits gradually changed in type (Jankuhn 1936: 202, Ørsnes 1964: 206). The great votive deposits of army equipment in Schleswig were said to have been possibly "a war sacrifice" (Jankuhn 1966: 388 ff.). The concept of "war sacrifice" is not defined, but either Jankuhn accepts the war booty theory or he postulates that it is *the equipment belonging to the local (Anglian) population that is sacrificed.*

In Jankuhn's opinion Thorsbjerg was a central sanctuary for the whole of Angeln (Jankuhn 1977: 231). We agree that from the time during B 2 when the first sacrifice was made of army equipment, Thorsbjerg became a central sanctuary for sacrifices of such equipment. The many clay vessels, the majority of which are of pre-Roman date (Raddatz 1970: 189 ff.), belongs to an entirely different and very common type

of sacrificial find, which has nothing in common with the deposits of army equipment (Becker 1970: 30 ff.).

Any large-scale peat excavation in Jutland and Schleswig invariably yields pottery, and the "bog pottery" from Thorsbjerg may at best constitute a "central sanctuary" for an area the size of a parish. There is nothing to suggest an innate connection between votive deposits of pottery and those of army equipment.

It appears from Raddatz's study of the Thorsbjerg military equipment that it was not deposited continuously over an extended period (Raddatz 1957: 143, Raddatz 1970: 191, fig. 1). Raddatz dates only two objects to B 1, namely the fibula illustrated in Engelhardt 1863: T. 4: 1 and the belt buckle illustrated in Engelhardt 1863: T. 11: 63. The fibula, which shows several repairs, was old when deposited and may well have been sacrificed only during B 2. The buckle, shaped like a figure of eight, belongs to a common B 1 group but is also known from definite B 2 contexts (Albrechtsen 1956: 171 and T. 17 f and g). Both objects may have been sacrificed in B 2, and in our opinion the whole army equipment from the Early Roman period may have been deposited on a single occasion during B 2. The limited distribution within the sacrificial pool of Early Roman army equipment (cf. fig. 1 and note 1) would also seem to support this assumption.

The artefacts assigned by Raddatz to the Early Germanic period (Raddatz 1970: 191 ff.) do not occur during this period. On the other hand, identical objects are known from Ejsbøl-Nord (Ørsnes 1963: 232 ff.), and they must consequently be assigned to the end of C 2. These objects too have a limited distribution within the sacrificial pool, cf. fig. 1. This would suggest that they were deposited on a single occasion.

The great votive deposit at Thorsbjerg containing more than 95% of the military equipment was made during C 1b. Fig. 2 shows the distribution of finds

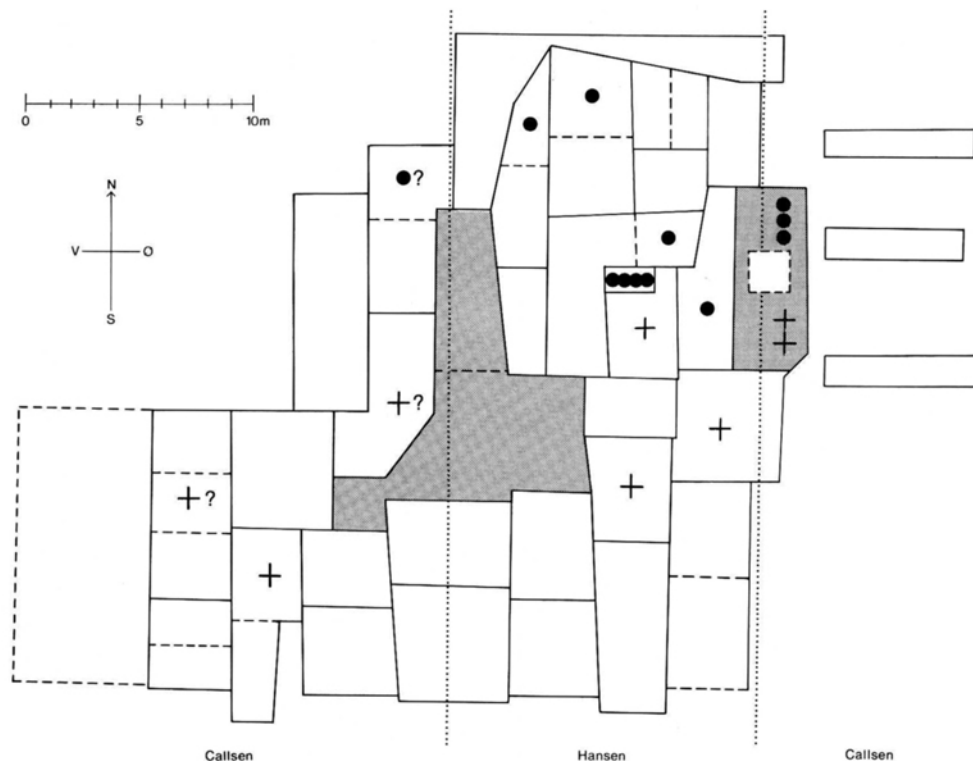


Fig. 1. Thorsbjerg. Artefacts from period B 2 (+) and period C 2 (●). The following symbols have been used: 1) _____ Definite limits of excavation trenches. 2) - - - - Indefinite limits of excavation trenches. 3) Boundaries between plots within the excavation area (names of plot owners are added below) 4) Excavation trenches reproduced by screen process were investigated in 1856 and 1858, and few or no find data are available. 5) ? indicates that an artefact cannot be confidently assigned to the trench given.

within the excavation area. It can be seen that objects were uncovered in practically the whole excavated area, and that the density of finds declines towards the edges of the excavation.

That votive offerings have been made throughout the excavation area on a single occasion during C 1b is apparent from the shield-bosses and shield-handle mountings. The shield-bosses have been subjected to uniform ritual destruction; they show several cuts, and all were removed from the wooden shields prior to the offering. As appears from fig. 3, most of them were deposited within a very small area. This is in accordance with Engelhardt 1863: 15, who states that "there was thus one area where nearly all the shield-bosses were discovered close to each other". The uniform destruction and the heap of shield-bosses indicate the simultaneous offering of all bosses. This supposition is strengthened by a typological analysis which shows

that all the scattered shield-bosses are of types also found in the heap of bosses.

In contrast to the shield-bosses, the shield-handle mountings were dispersed fairly evenly throughout the excavation, cf. fig. 4. The shield-bosses and handle mountings must have belonged together before the ritual destruction of the shields (we know from grave finds that shield-bosses of iron, bronze or silver are associated with handle mountings of the same material). Since all bronze and silver bosses are assumed to have been deposited simultaneously, together with the associated mountings, we have evidence of a very considerable votive deposit from C1b (cf. Godłowski 1970: 13 and 95). This deposit can be traced throughout the excavation area.

At Thorsbjerg there were found a total of 42 fibulae datable to C 1b. Thirty-eight of these (i.e. 90%) belong to Almgren's group VII. Fig. 5 shows the distribution

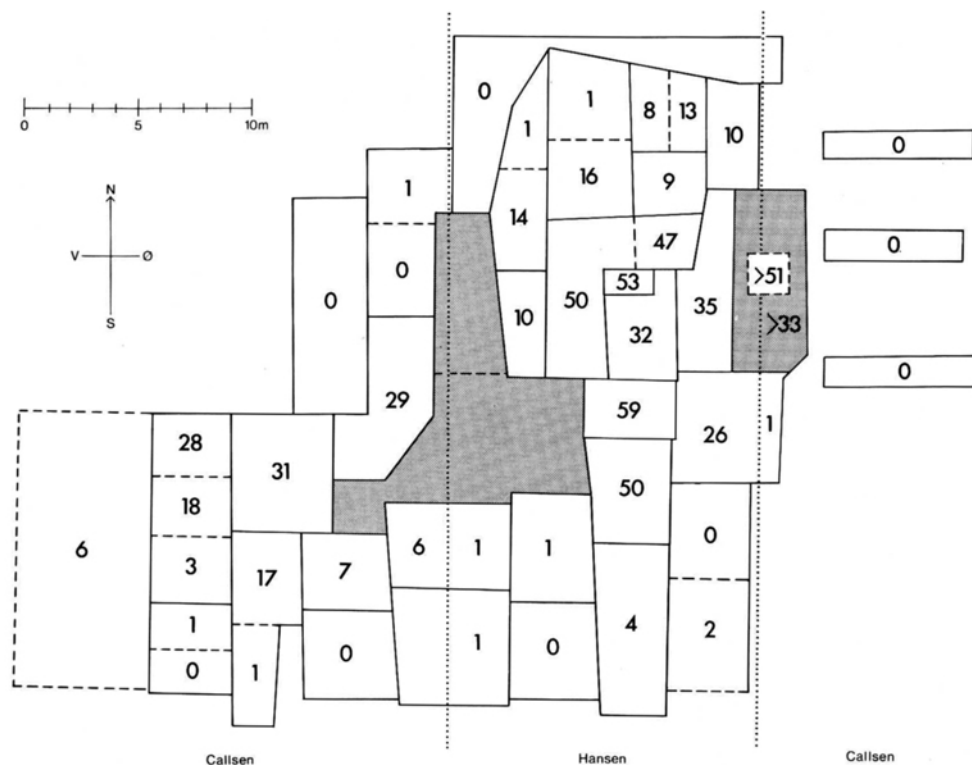


Fig. 2. Thorsbjerg. The number of artefacts from period C 1 in each excavation trench. The map includes only artefacts of metal (but not objects of iron and buttons of bronze and silver) as well as artefacts of glass and stone. Cf. the map in fig. 1.

of the fibulae within the votive area. It can be seen that their pattern of distribution is almost the same as that of the shield-handle mountings, and that both series 2 and 3 are evenly distributed. Because of this uniform distribution over a large area the fibulae from Thorsbjerg cannot be interpreted as a votive find *à la* Pymont (Frischbier 1922: 1 ff.), where the fibulae were concentrated within a very small area. Consequently, for reasons of distribution and chronology these fibulae must be interpreted as an integral part of the army equipment from C 1b. We know from the finds at Ejsbøl-Nord (Ørsnes 1963: 241) and Illerup site 1 and 2 that this category of votive finds includes fibulae.

In 1957 Raddatz classified the Thorsbjerg fibulae according to Kuchenbuch's typology. He established that the fibulae belonging to Almgren's group VII were of Elbe-Germanic shape and explained this by assuming that Angeln was a transition zone between the Scandinavian and Elbe-Germanic culture areas

(Raddatz 1957: 109 ff.). As early as 1930 la Cour had pointed out that some of the fibulae from Thorsbjerg were "Saxon" in shape, and he concluded that the find testified to an unsuccessful Saxon invasion (la Cour 1930: 186 ff.).

In the following we shall employ Kuchenbuch's typology with a few modifications (2). Fig. 6 maps grave finds of fibulae belonging to Kuchenbuch's series 1 and 2. It will be seen that fibulae of these series are found within the whole area mapped – their presence in Angeln being particularly noteworthy. Outside the area studied these types are common in Scandinavia (especially the western part) and in the Elbe region (especially the northern part). At Thorsbjerg there were found only 7 specimens of series 1 and 2, as opposed to 19 of series 3. Fig. 7 maps grave finds of fibulae belonging to series 3. As will be seen this series is not met with north of the Eider. In Holstein the series is very common, and outside the mapped area it is commonly found in the northern

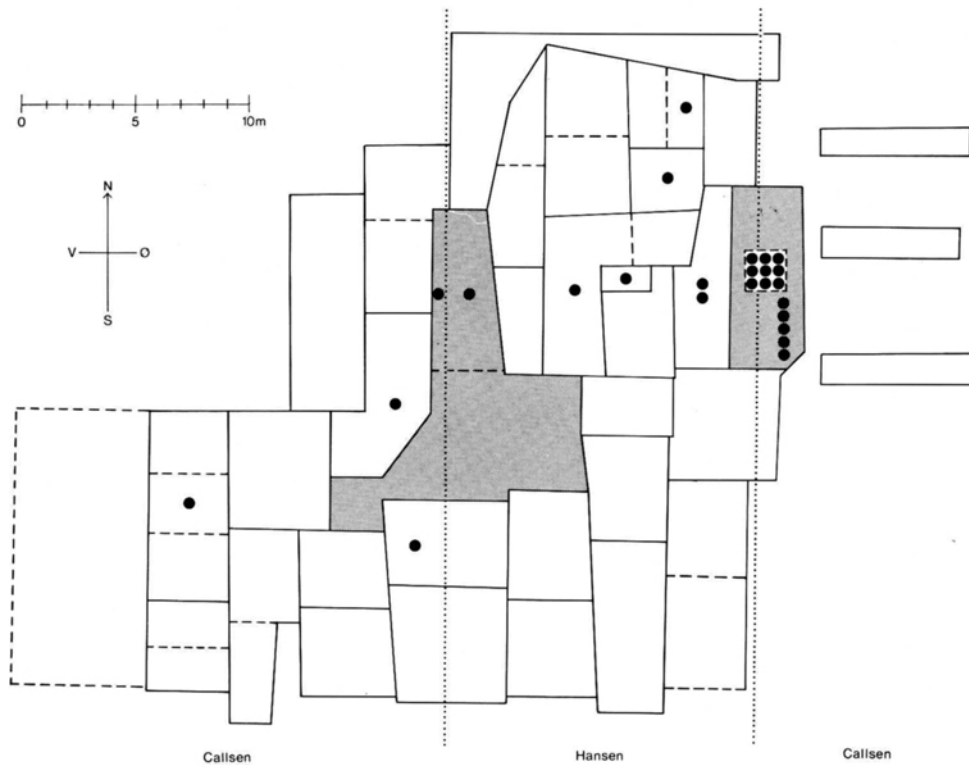


Fig. 3. Thorsbjerg. Shield-bosses of bronze or silver (small fragments not included). Cf. the map in fig. 1.

part of the Elbe region and in the Rhein-Weser area (Kuchenbuch 1938: 76 ff Liste 5 and Böhme 1972: Table 22, figs. 893–99). Kuchenbuch's series 4 has not been mapped. Series 4a is very common in grave finds from Scandinavia as well as West and East Germany. By contrast, series 4b, three specimens of which are known from Thorsbjerg, has a significantly more restricted distribution. In graves and settlements it is restricted almost exclusively to the area between the Elbe and the Rhine (Kuchenbuch 1938: 79 ff Liste 6 and Böhme 1972: Table 22, figs. 900, 901, 904 and Table 23, fig. 907). We may therefore conclude that *during C 1b, in terms of fibulae, Angeln is not a transition zone between the Scandinavian and the Elbe regions. Angeln definitely belongs to the Scandinavian culture area, the south boundary of which is the Eider.*

Since more than half (22 out of 42) of the Thorsbjerg fibulae from C 1b are not of Anglian provenance, but must have been manufactured at least south of the Eider, the find may be interpreted in one of the following ways:

- 1) The C 1b deposit is a votive offering of war booty.
- 2) The fibulae were imported to be used solely in votive offerings. This does not agree with their horizontal distribution at Thorsbjerg which strongly indicates that they are an integral part of the C 1b offering.
- 3) Series-3 fibulae are not contemporaneous with those of series 1 and 2, which is the reason for the absence of series 3 in grave finds from Angeln. Against this it may be argued that there is no indication that the series are not contemporaneous.
- 4) The number of fibulae found in graves from Angeln is not particularly large, and it may be accidental that series 3 is not represented in the graves. This is at variance with the frequent presence of series 3 in Holstein and its complete absence on Funen, which is culturally very close to Angeln.

We may thus conclude that the fibulae form part of a votive offering of war booty from C1b, and that the army whose equipment was deposited at Thorsbjerg must have originated



Fig. 4. Thorsbjerg. Shield-handle mounting of Jahn's type 9. Cf. the map in fig. 1.

in the area between the Elbe and the Rhine. Only this assumption provides a reasonable explanation of the types of fibulae and shield-bosses discovered. Nine of the shield-bosses found at Thorsbjerg (i.e. 32%) (Engelhardt 1863: 33 ff.) are of Roman provenance (or come from an area under heavy Roman influence). These shield-bosses, which are decorated with incisions of concentric circles having a common centre with the boss, are unknown among the rich grave goods found in Scandinavia and Poland. On the other hand, the type has been found twice in the Elbe culture area (3), where graves with weapons are very rare.

One of the Thorsbjerg fibulae was definitely manufactured on Funen or in Schleswig-Holstein (Raddatz 1957: 109 and map 12). It must have belonged to a local assistant (forced or voluntary?), or it may have been looted by the invaders before they were finally defeated in or around Angeln.

The two small deposits of army equipment from B 2 and C 2 cannot in the same way be demonstrated to represent war booty offerings. Their limited distribu-

tion within the votive pool probably indicates that only two deposits are involved. Since votive offerings of war booty have been demonstrated at Thorsbjerg, and the two lesser deposits can be interpreted as such without difficulty, we must interpret these deposits too as votive offerings of war booty, until an acceptable alternative explanation is put forward.

There is also no evidence of continuous votive deposits of army equipment in the Skedemosse find on Öland (Sweden). Unfortunately, the find is difficult to evaluate as almost 90% of the material had been destroyed before systematic excavations began (4). From an initial study of the material in Statens Historiska Museum, Stockholm, we were satisfied that from a chronological point of view the find can be regarded as consisting of two deposits from the Late Roman period and at least one from the Early Germanic Iron Age. A distinct sorting of the Skedemosse material had clearly taken place before the votive offering was made. The actual deposition normally happened from a boat, i.e. in exactly the same way as the earliest sacrifice at Illerup (Ilkjær and Lønstrup 1977: 156 ff.).

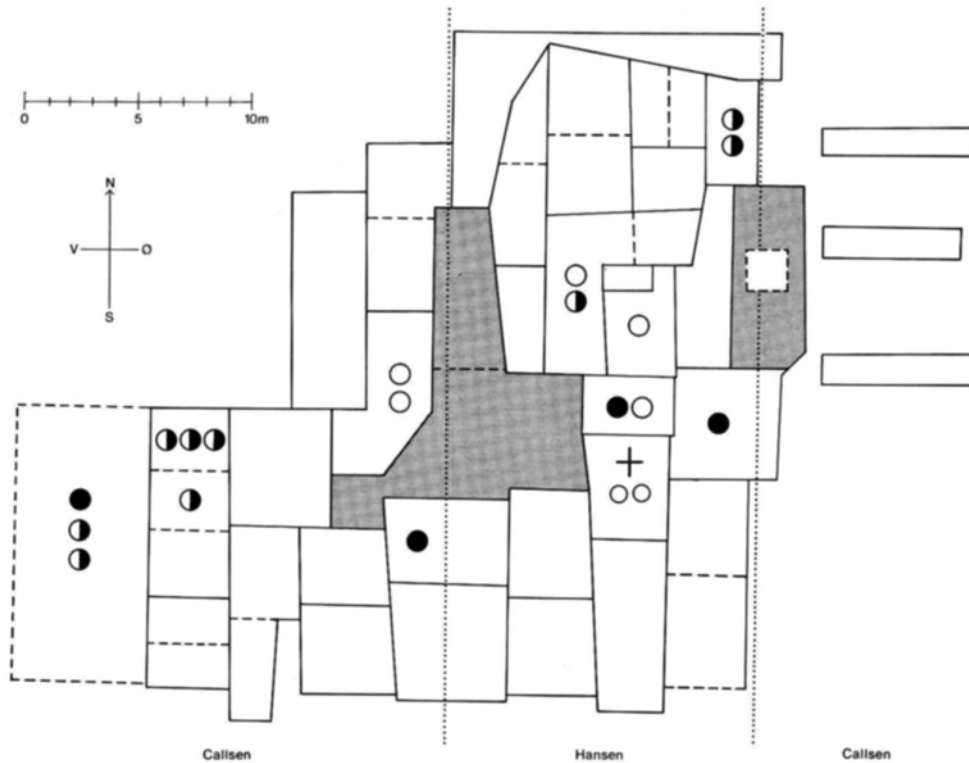


Fig. 5. Thorsbjerg. Fibulae of Almgren's group VII. Series 1 (+), series 2 (o), series 3 (●), series 2 or 3 (◐). (N.B. Of the latter, two at most belong to series 3, the others to series 2). Cf. the map in fig. 1.

In all probability the Illerup deposit represents a single major offering made partly by throwing from the edge of the lake and partly by boat. *In our view the army equipment from Skedemosse should be interpreted as three or more war booty deposits*, since there is nothing in the find to contradict such an interpretation. The meat offerings on the same site during the pre-Roman and Early Roman Iron Age (Hagberg 1967: 61 ff.) should in our opinion be compared with the contemporaneous votive deposits of pottery at Thorsbjerg. Consequently, they have no other link with the votive offerings of army equipment/war booty than a shared place of deposition. There are no indications that a local tradition of pottery or meat offerings is automatically succeeded by offerings of army equipment.

On the basis of the ship finds from Nydam and Hjortspring Jankuhn has proposed a theory about a regional find group of ships sacrificed in special "ship sanctuaries" (Jankuhn 1966: 394). The two intact ships from Nydam were discovered filled with army equipment, and from the records of the Flensburg Collec-

tion, Engelhardt's publication and the find report by the royal gamekeeper Jørgensen it seems likely that the two ships were sacrificed at the same time. We may assume that both ships were part of a war booty offering since their contents of weaponry classify them as part of a votive deposit of military equipment, and since one of them was built of pinewood, a tree not growing in Denmark at the time (personal communication from P. Wagner, Botanisk Centralbibliotek, Copenhagen). Boat sacrifices are also known from Vimose (Engelhardt 1869: 26) and Ejsbøl (Ørsnes 1963: 247), but there the boats themselves had been burnt and only rivets were deposited. As we have seen, some votive offerings of war booty include ships, and there is no reason to assume that they were not sacrificed to the same deity as the remaining booty.

Engelhardt rejected the "battle-field theory" already after the first excavation at Thorsbjerg (5). It was later adopted by H. Kjær and C. J. Becker as a result of the finds from Illemose and Krogsbølle (Kjær 1901: 26 ff. and Becker 1948: 170). In both finds the swords in

particular had been subjected to a secondary, ritual destruction, which makes the "battle-field theory" very unlikely. Nothing in these two finds argues against an interpretation of them as classic votive offerings of war booty.

CONCLUSION

The great C lb votive deposit from Thorsbjerg can only be interpreted as a war booty offering. The fibulae show that the invaders whose weaponry was deposited in the then existing lake originated from the region between the Elbe and the Rhine. In this particular region graves with weapons are virtually unknown, and we have no previous knowledge of weaponry at the beginning of the Late Roman Iron Age. The Thorsbjerg find fills this gap and provides a very detailed insight into the military equipment.

The two small deposits of army equipment from Thorsbjerg as well as all the other Iron Age deposits of this type can be readily interpreted as votive offerings of war booty. No other theories are supported by the archaeological evidence, and there is no reason to accept other interpretations.

From the Early Germanic Iron Age a group of votive offerings is known containing sword and belt mountings. Whether these finds – Nydam II (Kjær 1902: 23 ff.), Porskær (Engelhardt 1881: 128 ff.) and Ejsbøl Syd (Ørsnes 1963: 243 ff.) also represent deposits of war booty is uncertain. It is significant, however, that these *pars pro toto* offerings are found only in places with previous deposits of war booty.

Translated by Ole Bay-Petersen

NOTES

¹ The distribution maps of artefacts from Thorsbjerg are based on Engelhardt's excavation plan and excavation diary. Unfortunately, we possess detailed information only about the excavation project in 1860, though it has been possible to locate a few finds from 1856 and 1858. A new assessment of Thorsbjerg as illustrated by archival findings has been completed and will be published in the Jutland Archaeological Society Publications.

² The typology used is that advocated by Kuchenbuch 1938: 26 ff., but with the following changes:

1) In his series 1, Kuchenbuch includes fibulae the bow of which terminates in a knobbed catch-plate, i.e. the whole of Almgren's



Fig. 6. Grave finds of fibulae belonging to Kuchenbuch's group VII, series 1 and 2, from South-West Denmark and North Germany. (N.B. Only fibulae with flat-ended feet are included). Series 1 or 2 (●), series 1 b (+), series 2 (○), Thorsbjerg (□). For a list of finds see note 2 and Appendix.



Fig. 7. Grave finds of fibulae belonging to Kuchenbuch's group VII, series 3, from South-West Denmark and North Germany. Series 3 a (+), series 3 b (●), Thorsbjerg (□). For a list of finds see note 2 and Appendix.

group VII, series 1. As these fibulae are of no interest in this context, we have not included them in the Appendix.

2) Kuchenbuch distributes the fibulae belonging to Almgren's group VII, series 4 (the "monstrous" fibulae) between the other groups. We have accepted this except for fibulae decorated with embossed tinplate rosettes. In this case series 4 should be kept as an independent type.

3) To be able to use Kuchenbuch's typology it is necessary to define the concept "foot-plate" (*fodskive*). We have used the following definition: a fibula is said to have a foot-plate if the foot is thickened and lies below the line in the fibula's symmetry plane that is tangent to the top side of the end of the foot and the spring catch. N.B. In the Appendix we have included only fibulae that can be definitely classified according to type, i.e. fibulae that are illustrated or so accurately described that their type can be identified without doubt.

³ Bischleben, Kr. & Bez. Erfurt (e.g. Godłowski 1970: Plate XVII, fig. 5) and Schafstedt, Kr. Merseburg, Bez. Halle (Mildenberger 1970: 147).

⁴ Personal communication from the excavator, U.E. Hagberg.

⁵ Cf. letter from Engelhardt to Thomsen dated September 5, 1858 (the National Museum, Dept. I, Topographical Archives).

APPENDIX

Abbreviations: s. = sogn (parish), h. = herred (district)
a. = amt (county).

Kuchenbuch, Group VII, Series 1 a 2:

Fravde, Fravde s., Åsum h., Odense a.: grave 15 (Albrechtsen 1968: 57 & T. 77:e) – grave 27 (Albrechtsen 1968: 58 & 59, fig. 20) – grave 44 (Albrechtsen 1968: 63 & T. 12:g).

Ferreslev, Rolfsted s., Åsum h., Odense a.: single find (Albrechtsen 1968: 71 & T. 83:g).

Ørbæk, Ørbæk s., Vindinge h., Svendborg a.: grave 3 (Albrechtsen 1968: 77 & 306, fig. 62 e).

Rejstrup, Avnslev s., Vindinge h., Svendborg a.: single find (Albrechtsen 1968: 144 & T. 15:a, b) 2 brooches.

Ringe II, Ringe s., Gudme s., Svendborg a.: grave 27 (Albrechtsen 1968: 85 & T. 85:c 5) – grave 28 (Albrechtsen 1968: 85 & T. 5:h).

Møllegårdsmarken, Gudme s.&h., Svendborg a.: grave 60 (Albrechtsen 1968: 99 & T. 13:e) – grave 417 (Albrechtsen 1971: 63 & T. 238:a 2) – grave 978 (Albrechtsen 1971: 73 & T. 74:g & T. 244:a 3) – grave 979 (Albrechtsen 1971: 73 & 75:b) – grave 1358 (Albrechtsen 1971: 84 & T. 91:g) – grave 1587 (Albrechtsen 1971: 92 & T. 103:b).

Espe mark, Hillerslev s., Sallinge h., Svendborg a.: grave 2 (Albrechtsen 1968: 124 & T. 14:f, g) 2 brooches.

Lundehøj, Hillerslev s., Sallinge h., Svendborg a.: grave 35 (Albrechtsen 1968: 127 & T. 12:j) – grave 40 a (Albrechtsen 1968: 128 & T. 8:i).

Husby, Kr. Flensburg, Schleswig: grave 537 (Raddatz 1974: 46 & T. 107:537 b) – grave 780 (Raddatz 1974: 60 & T. 149:780b) – grave 791 (Raddatz 1974: 60 & T. 150:791 b).

Nottfeld, Kr. Schleswig, Schleswig: grave (Mestorf 1894: 14, fig. 18).

Thorsbjerg: 2 brooches (Raddatz 1957: T. 16:19 & T. 17:2).

Kuchenbuch, Group VII, Series 1 b:

Ringe II, Ringe s., Gudme s., Svendborg a.: grave 7 (Albrechtsen 1968: 82 & T. 3:f) series 1 b 2.

Nybølle, Hillerslev s., Sallinge h., Svendborg a.: single find (Albrechtsen 1968: 138 & T. 138:c 4) series 1 b 1.

Møllegårdsmarken, Gudme s. & h., Svendborg a.: grave 1017 (Albrechtsen 1971: 75 & T. 76:h + T. 244:c 2) series 1 b 3 – grave 1431 (Albrechtsen 1971: 87 & T. 99:b) series 1 b 2.

Husby, Kr. Schleswig, Schleswig: grave 1955/42 (Raddatz 1974: 9 & T. 6:42/1955 b) series 1 b 3 – grave 494 (Raddatz 1974: 43 & T. 96:494 b) series 1 b 3 – grave 757 (Raddatz 1974: 58 & T. 145:757 c) series 1 b 3.

Gøting, Föhr, Kr. Südtondern, Schleswig: grave (Genrich 1954: 56 & T. 12:B 3) series 1 b 1.

Preetz, Kr. Plön, Holstein: grave 110 (Brandt 1960: 84 & T. 16:110 b, c) 2 brooches series 1 b 3 – grave 116 (Brandt 1960: 84 & T. 24:116 b) 2 brooches series 1 b 3.

Reinfeld, Kr. Stormarn, Holstein: grave 36 (Hingst 1959: 386 & T. 121:36) series 1 b 2.

Thorsbjerg: 4 brooches (Raddatz 1957: T. 16:15, 18, 20 & T. 17:1).

Kuchenbuch, Group VII, Series 2:

Ringe II, Ringe s., Gudme h., Svendborg a.: single find (Albrechtsen 1968: 88 & T. 88:a).

Husby, Kr. Flensburg, Schleswig: grave 176 (Raddatz 1974: 21 & T. 42:176 b).

Nottfeld, Kr. Schleswig, Schleswig: grave (Mestorf 1894: 14, fig. 20).

Preetz, Kr. Plön, Holstein: grave 9 (Brandt 1960: 77 & T. 5:9 c).

Krummensee/Pötterberg, Kr. Eutin, Holstein: grave 2 (Genrich 1954: 62 & T. 16:E 3) 2 brooches of series 2 – grave 8 (Genrich 1954: 62 & T. 16:D 3).

Thorsbjerg: one brooch (Raddatz 1957: T. 15:11).

Kuchenbuch, Group VII, Series 3 a:

Preetz, Kr. Plön, Holstein: grave 41 (Brandt 1960: 80 & T. 20:41 c) – grave 119 (Brandt 1960: 85 & T. 8:119 b).

Krummensee/Pötterberg, Kr. Eutin, Holstein: grave 10 (Genrich 1954: 65 & T. 17: K 5).

Thorsbjerg: 6 brooches (Raddatz 1957: T. 16:5, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17).

Kuchenbuch, Group VII, Series 3 b:

Schellhorn, Kr. Plön, Holstein: single find (Genrich 1954: 70, find 3).

Preetz, Kr. Plön, Holstein: grave 24 (Brandt 1960: 78 & T. 2: 24 d, e) 2 brooches of series 3 b – grave 26 (Brandt 1960: 78 & T. 6:26 c).

Krummensee/Pötterberg, Kr. Eutin, Holstein: single find (Genrich 1954: 65 & T. 27:1).

Gleschendorf, Kr. Eutin, Holstein: grave 1 (Genrich 1954: 55 & T. 10:A 2).

Thorsbjerg: 8 brooches (Raddatz 1957: T. 15:12, 13 & T. 16:1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 21).

Kuchenbuch, Group VII, Series 3 c:

Preetz, Kr. Plön, Holstein: grave 135 (Brandt 1960: 86 & T. 13:135 d).

Thorsbjerg: 5 brooches (Raddatz 1957: T. 16:3, 4, 9, 10, 11).

Kuchenbuch, Group VII, Series 4 a:

The grave-finds are not mapped, but the type is extremely common within the whole area.

Thorsbjerg: 8 brooches (Raddatz 1957: T. 17:3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 11, 12, 15).

Kuchenbuch, Group VII, Series 4 b:

No brooches from graves are known from the mapped area.

Thorsbjerg: 3 brooches (Raddatz 1957: T. 17:6, 9, 10).

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