Journal of Danish Archaeology vol. 1, 1982, pp. 105–117

# *Iron Age Settlement and Cemetery at Sejlflod in Himmerland, North Jutland*

## Excavations 1973-1980

by JENS N. NIELSEN

Among the many sites photographed from the air by J.K. St Joseph, Cambridge, in the late 1960's was an area at Sejlflod, south-east of Aalborg (1).

Near the burial mound of Tofthøj there were detected c. 25 rectangular and a large number of circular outlines; the latter included large scattered outlines and two groups of small ones (fig. 2).

No immediate positive identification was possible; the rectangles were supposed to be houses, which was confirmed during a small test excavation in 1973 (2) (fig. 3).

The area is the scene of very intensive gravel digging, and in 1976 a concerned inhabitant of Sejlflod approached the Historical Museum in Aalborg. A subsequent inspection revealed that a ploughed mound and a few houses etc. north of it had been removed. Furthermore, two houses, EA and EB, were so close to the edge of the gravel pit that an investigation was necessary.

In the spring of 1979 the museum learnt that an adjacent area was set aside for gravel digging. The aerial photographs indicated that two houses and a number of circular features were endangered, for which reason an excavation had to be carried out.

Very surprisingly, the small circular outlines turned out to be inhumation graves. Judging by the air photographs there is a total of c. 350, and 300 of these are to be investigated.

In 1979 two houses (CL and CR) were investigated, together with 2 wells, post-holes and 82 graves.

At the present time only a small part of the area has been excavated, and the material is not fully analysed. The following is therefore a very tentative account.

### THE SETTLEMENT

The houses at Sejlflod are long houses with the whole floor sunken in relation to the top of the subsoil or any other layer, e.g. shifting sand, beneath the top soil. In other words it is not a question of parts of the floor having been excavated to adapt to a sloping terrain.

This is a fairly new type of Iron Age house construction. So far similar houses have been excavated only at Overbygård near Stae. From aerial photographs they are also known at Uglegård and Tiendegård just south of Sejlflod (fig. 1) (3). In both places pottery from the Early Iron Age has been collected from the surface (4).

At Sejlflod the excavation of EA and CR is complete, while a little of CL still remains and only half of EB was excavated.

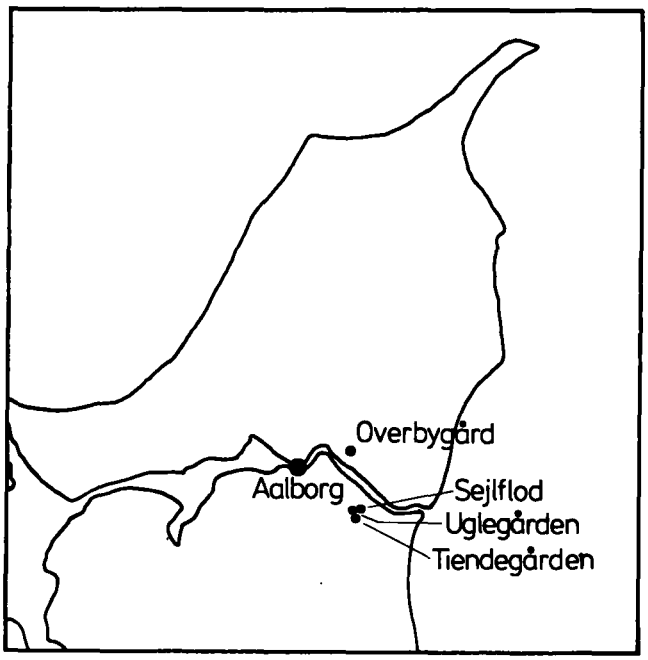


Fig. 1. Map of Early Iron Age settlements in Northern Jutland with houses with sunken floors.

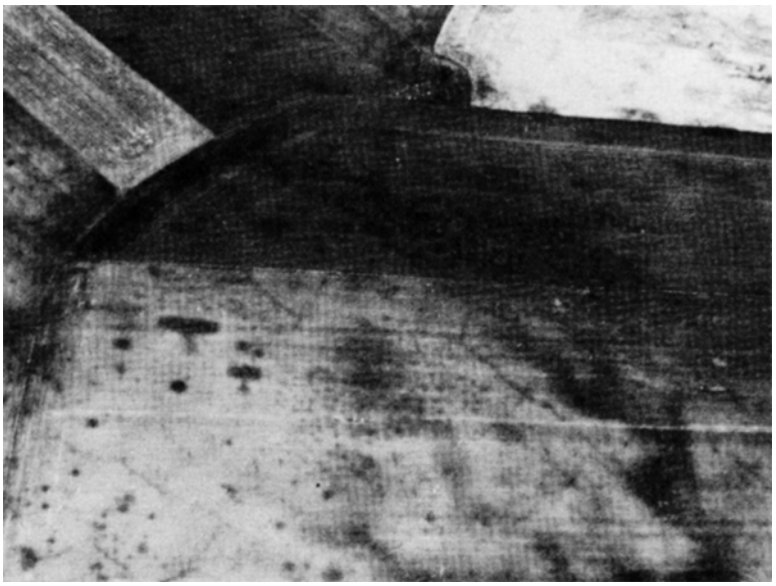

Fig. 2. Aerial photograph of the fields South of Tofthøj at Sejlflod (photo by J.K. St.Joseph, Cambridge).

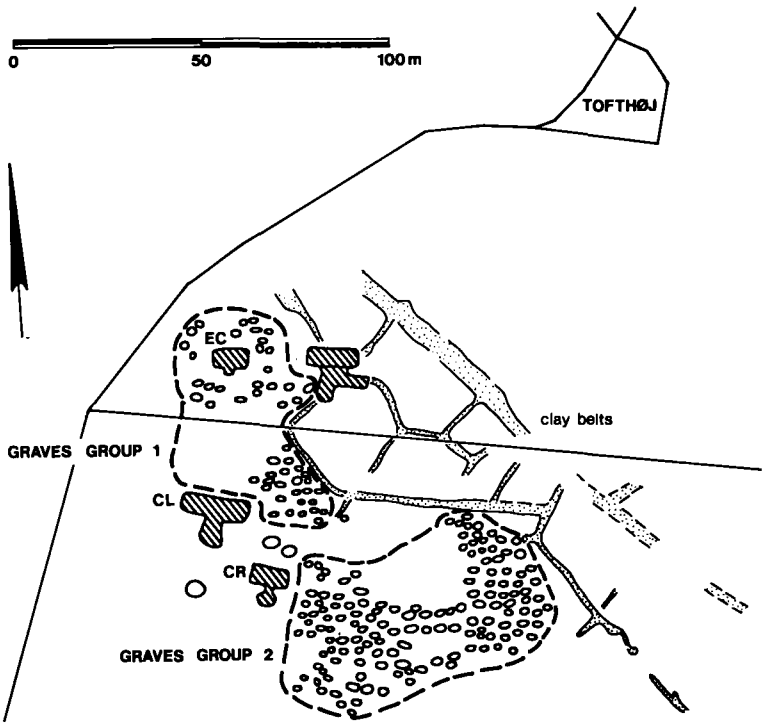


Fig. 3. Archaeological and geological features as detected from the air. CL, CR, and EC are house sites. 1:2000.

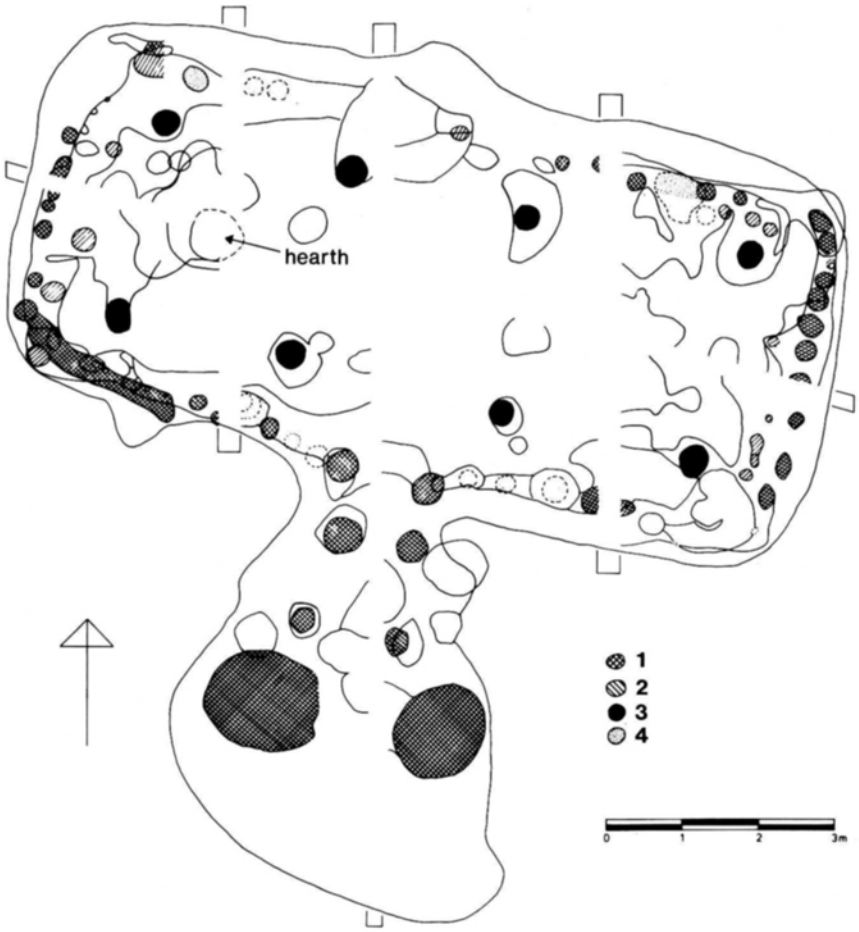


Fig. 4. Plan of house CR. (1) phase 1, wall posts and wall ditch. (2) phase 2, wall posts. (3) phase 1 + 2, roof-supporting posts. (4) wall posts (Jan Slot-Carlsen *del.*).

Excavations up till now have shown that the houses are dug roughly 50 cm into the subsoil. The first house (phase 1) was built at the bottom of this pit. Later this house was abandoned and replaced by a new one (phase 2), which again may have been replaced by a phase 3. The individual phases are generally separated by a 20–30 cm thick layer of cultivated soil or shifting sand. House CR, however, appears to show virtually no difference in level as between phase 1 and phase 2. When a house was abandoned, both roof-supporting posts and wall posts were pulled down.

The building design of the sunken houses is fairly similar to the well-known three-aisled Iron Age long house (fig. 4); there are two rows of solid roof-supporting posts. In many cases close-set posts can be observed in the wall trench. So far no traces have been discovered of filler between the posts.

No definite stall partitions have been found in the houses CR and EA.

The entrance is located in the middle of the south wall. In phase 1 it is on the slightly inclined plane leading from the ground surface down to the floor. There are post-holes west and east of this chute, the posts of the south long wall curving outwards by the entrance. Consequently there must have been a kind of porch at the entrance.

In phase 2 the entrance changes its character, in the houses CL and CR as well as EA, in that it now consists of a fairly large area of paving. At EA there is a single step down facing the south long wall of the house.

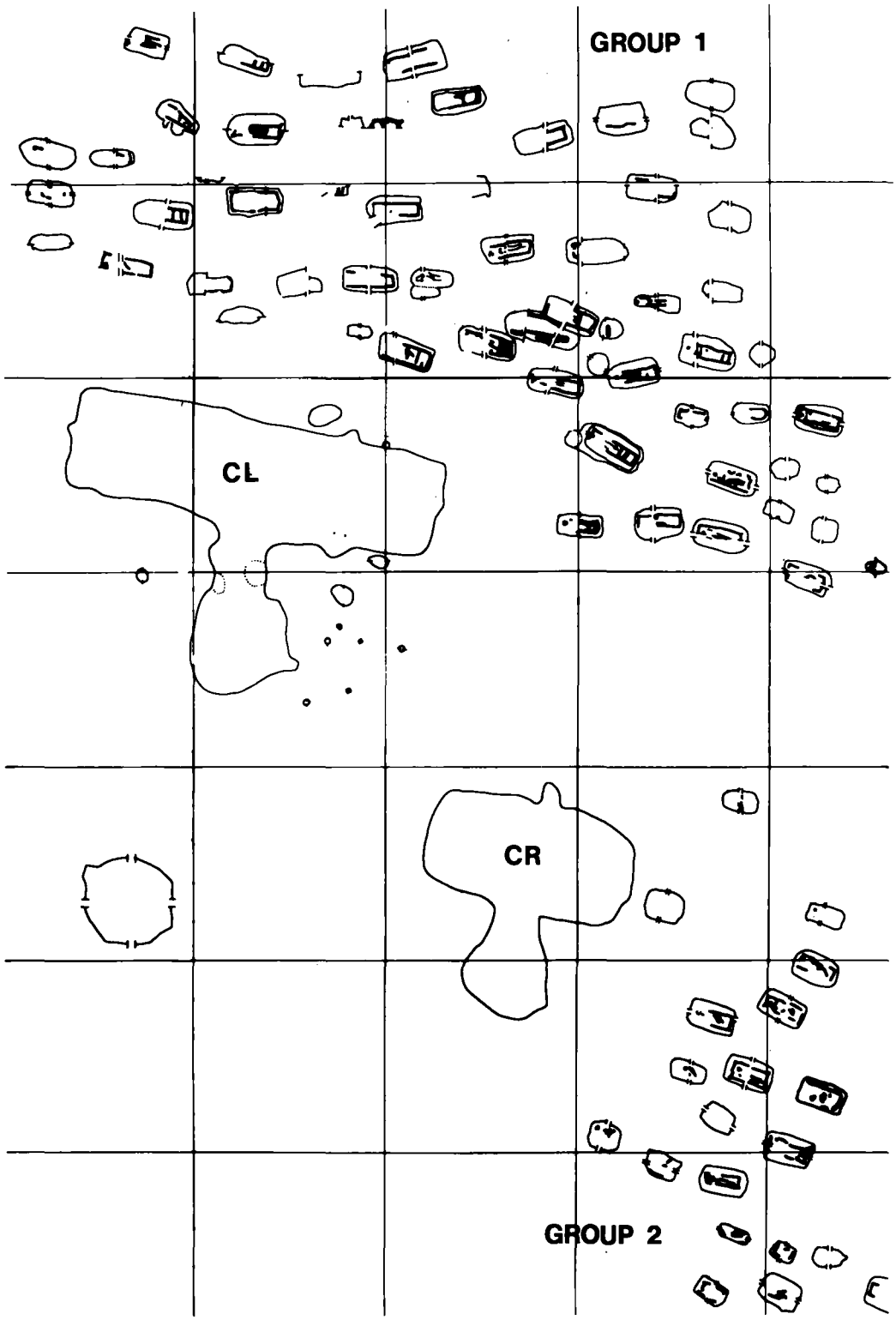


Fig. 5. Part of the excavated area with houses and graves. 1:300.

In the houses CL and CR the hearth is found in the west end. In a slight depression there is a layer of stone, which in CR is covered by a clay mantle. In EA the hearth is placed in the east end. The mantle is of chalk.

The floors in house EA, phases 1 and 2, consist of a layer of fairly compact chalk. CL and CR have simple earthen floors.

To the east of the entrance in house EA there is a small construction which can best be characterized as a kind of cellar. It probably belongs to phase 1 or 2, but neither stratigraphy nor other factors provided definite proof.

In construction the houses CL and CR differ from EA in several respects. The dates of the houses also differ. The first two phases of house CR, and in all probability CL as well, have been dated to the early part of the Pre-Roman Iron Age, period I – II. The first phase of house EA is somewhat later. The pottery dates the house to the Early Roman Iron Age, though a few pieces may be from the Pre-Roman Iron Age, period III B.

In the house CR, nearly 20 cm above phases 1 and 2, there is a layer containing small stones and a good deal of pottery. This layer must be regarded as an ordinary refuse layer, consisting as it does of flawed clay vessels, discarded hammer stones and other refuse. The pottery is from the Late Pre-Roman Iron Age (period III B) or, more likely, the beginning of the Early Roman period. There is nothing to indicate that there was a building phase in this level. The potsherds may well have been used as filler in connection with the building of a phase-3 house at the top of the house pit; the latter contains a layer which may represent the remains of a floor.

Thus at the time of writing it is possible to distinguish at least two settlements on the site. The first, with the houses CL and CR – phases 1 and 2 –, is from the Pre-Roman Iron Age, period I – II. The next settlement, with house EA, is from the Early Roman period, possibly starting during the Pre-Roman Iron Age, period III B.

Until more houses have been examined it is impossible to comment on the exact delimitation of the two settlements, or on the possible presence of a settlement covering the late phase of the Pre-Roman Iron Age (periods III A and III B (?)); in other words whether settlement was continuous.

Fig. 6. Grave AG during excavation. Two boulders were found on top of the grave.

As previously mentioned, Overbygård is the only other place where sunken houses have been excavated. The village was built towards the end of the Pre-Roman Iron Age (period III) and continued to exist during the Early Roman period. The sunken long houses are all from the Early Roman period. The buildings largely display a plan similar to that at Sejlflod, with the possible exception of the deep holes in front of the door and the annexes found at Overbygård.

Thus it appears that both at Sejlflod and Overbygård there were villages with sunken houses during the Early Roman period. Both sites also contain traces of settlement from the Pre-Roman Iron Age; at Sejlflod the houses are from the beginning, at Overbygård from the end of that period. But only Sejlflod has sunken long houses from the Pre-Roman period.

## THE GRAVES

As mentioned above, the graves are placed in two groups. In 1979 a total of 82 were excavated. Of these, 59 belonged to group 1 – the endangered group – and 23 to group 2 (fig. 5).

The dates of the excavated graves are as follows. Group 1: one Early Neolithic and the rest Late Roman

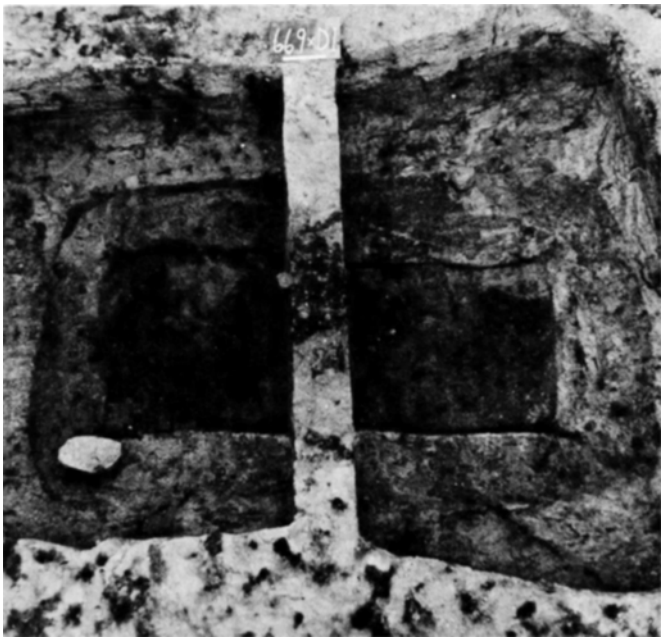

Fig. 7a-b. Grave DI showing traces of wooden coffin.

(4th century). Group 2: two Early Roman and 23 Early Germanic. Judging from the graves excavated so far the two groups cover the Late Roman period and the Early Germanic period. The remaining graves must be characterized as accidental intrusion.

Only in one case do two graves overlap. This happens in group 1, where a Late Roman grave (AT) partly covers an Early Neolithic grave (AS). Considering the great time gap between the two graves one may assume that the traces of the Early Neolithic grave were gone by the Iron Age.

In all other cases early graves were evidently visible and were respected. The question is how were they visible?

Some of the graves excavated in 1979 had marking stones placed slightly west of the middle of the grave. Usually there was only one stone, but the grave AG, for instance, contained two stones, one of which had clearly been placed on top of the other (fig. 6). It is impossible to ascertain how many marking stones the graves originally contained, or whether all graves had them. Many of the stones must have been removed when the area came under cultivation, if not before. None of the graves contained traces of other forms of marking, e.g. wooden posts as found in the burial place at Slusegård (Klindt-Jensen 1978 I: 11f).

The graves must also have been visible as low mounds. Though there is no direct proof of this it may be assumed that the excavated earth was thrown back over the coffin. Only when the coffin collapsed would the mound have more or less disappeared. And by then the next grave had probably been dug already.

The situation of the graves was influenced not only by the presence of earlier graves. None of the graves belonging to the two main groups were placed on top of the house sites. The southern boundary of group 1 is clearly determined by the house CL, and an area around the house EC is completely devoid of graves.

The subsoil consists mostly of fine sand. Furthermore there is an extensive system of clay bands, c. 50 cm wide. These are so-called fossil ice-wedge polygons formed during the last (Weichsel) glaciation (see figs. 1–2). They too have influenced the placing of the graves. Air photographs show clearly that the graves to the east stop precisely at the clay bands. The probable explanation is that the bands were too difficult to dig using the tools of the time.

Three factors therefore affected the location of the graves: the presence of earlier graves, the presence of house sites, and the nature of the subsoil.

The Early Neolithic grave obviously differs from the Iron Age graves: at the bottom, parallel to both the

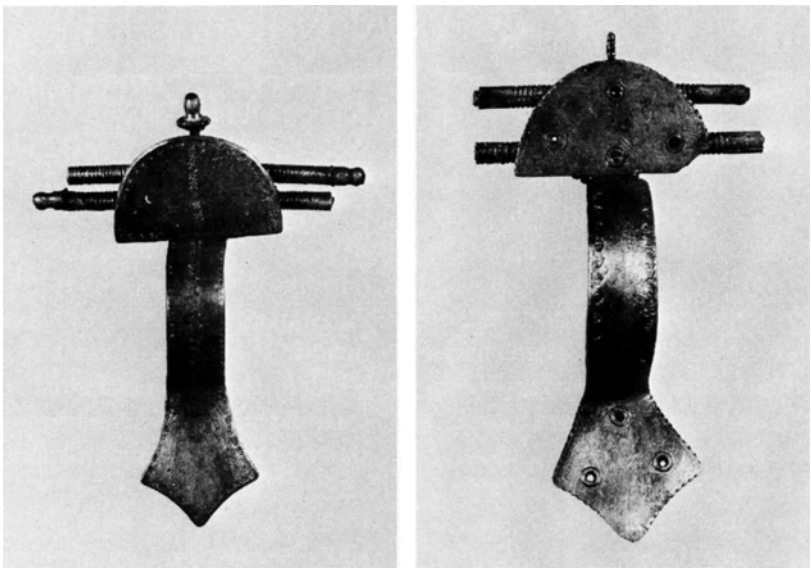

Fig. 8a-b. Two small sheet silver fibulae from grave AE. 1:1.

long sides, there was a c. 10–25 cm wide band containing carbonized organic material – apparently plant matter – well mixed with grave fill. The grave goods uncovered in the western end consisted of a thin-butted flint axe, a collared urn, almost 200 amber beads – including 3 lanceolate ones – and 2 copper pieces.

The Iron Age graves are orientated in an east-west direction, with minor deviations. They are dug 30–120 cm into the subsoil. The coffins are plank-built except for a few of the child burials where another type of coffin, probably made from a hollowed tree-trunk, was used. The lid and bottom consist of transverse boards which, judging by the few reasonably preserved specimens, were over 10 cm wide and c. 1.5 cm thick.

All the planks show traces of singeing, which does not appear to have happened in the grave itself (fig. 7 A-B). It is natural to interpret it as a ritual purification of the coffin before the dead body was deposited in it; or could it be a more practical consideration, namely an attempt to increase the durability of the planks?

The bones are almost invariably completely destroyed, but traces of the dead person often remain in the form of a brownish, fatty deposit. In a few cases dental enamel has been preserved.

The head of the dead body always faces west. Sometimes the body is laid out on its back, sometimes on its side, in which case it generally faces south.

The absence of bones makes it difficult to identify the sex of the burials. On the basis of grave goods such as ornaments and spindle whorls it is sometimes possible to distinguish female graves. Likewise one may reasonably assume that the presence of axes and arrow-heads signify male graves.

It is also difficult to determine the number of child burials because of the small quantity of teeth. Occasionally the graves are so small as to leave no doubt. The coffin in grave BC, for instance, measured only c. 85 × 35 cm. Obviously, only a minimal number can be identified by size alone; in most cases additional information is required to distinguish between graves of adults and children.

Nearly all the Iron Age graves show disturbance at the west end. The worst disturbances comprise up to half the grave at subsoil level, but are less marked towards the bottom of the grave. The fill in the disturbed area is richer in humus than the remaining grave fill. In several cases the disturbance affects the remains of the coffin, though there are instances where it extends only a short way down into the grave without reaching the coffin itself.

The disturbance is unlikely to have been caused by grave robbers. In several graves with proven distur-

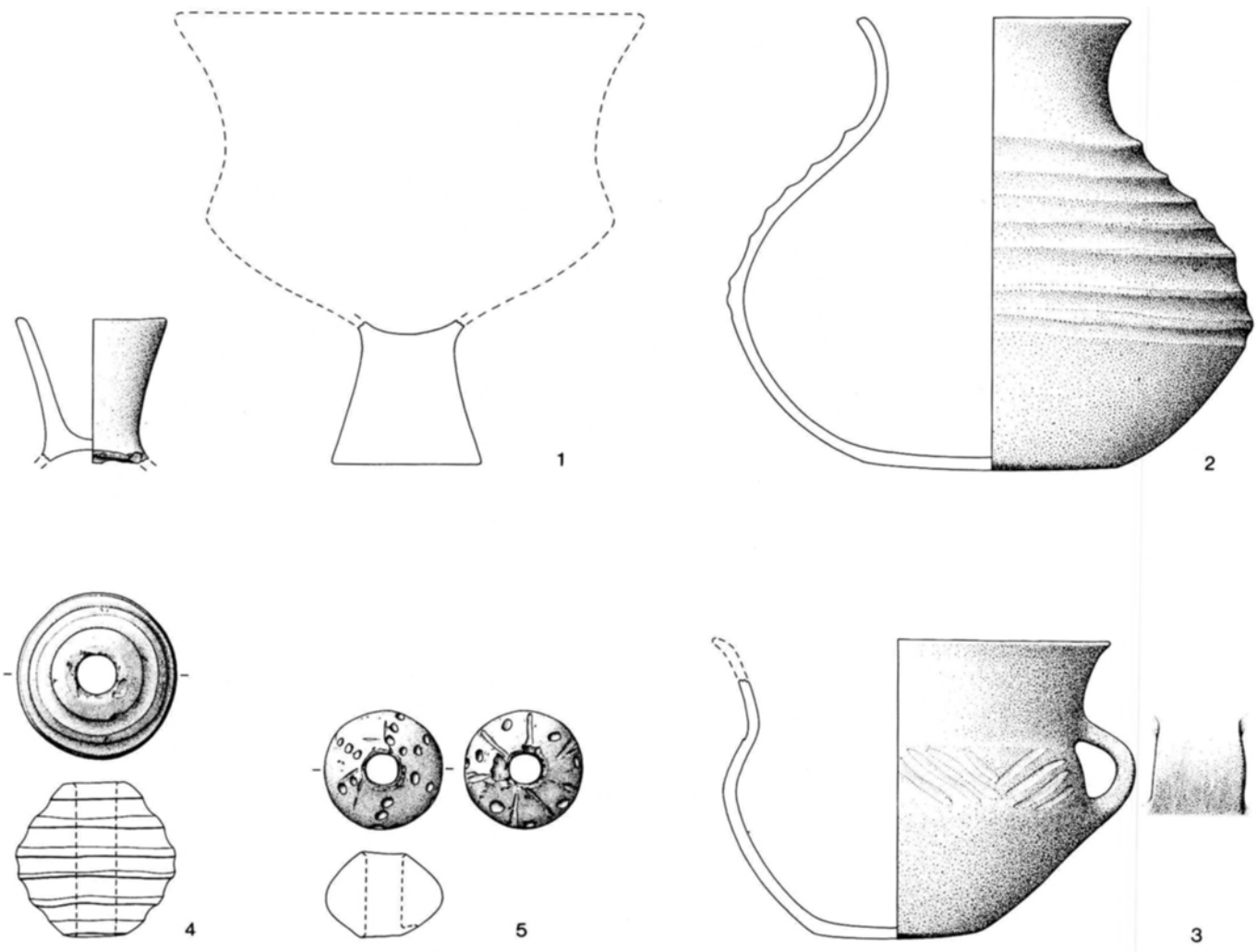


Fig. 9a. Finds from grave U. Pottery 2:5, loom weights 2:3 (Orla Svendsen *del.*).

bance there were artefacts *in situ*, e.g. strings of several hundred beads, as in the graves U and AE. In grave U the disturbance could be traced beyond the coffin lid.

Other theories that have been discussed refer to traces of the removal of marking stones, different times of covering the east and west ends of the graves, symbolic destruction of earlier graves etc. However, none of the explanations are adequate.

## GRAVE GOODS

The various aspects of the graves discussed so far have revealed no differences between the Late Roman and Early Germanic periods, i.e. between group 1 and group 2. Such differences become noticeable only when we look at the grave goods.

Practically all burials contain two or three clay vessels at the foot of the grave. In group 2 one of the pots may be placed in the west end. Close to the pots there nearly always lies an iron knife, often with a preserved wooden handle,and bronzes. Sometimes the sheaths are also present. Finally, the east end contains iron rivets from a comb.

At the top end of the grave there are often beads, generally 10–30 pieces, but the graves U and AE contained c. 400 and 377, respectively. The western end of the graves also contain bronze pins and fibulae.

In the middle of the graves two groups of artefacts predominate: hooks and eyes as well as buckles. The

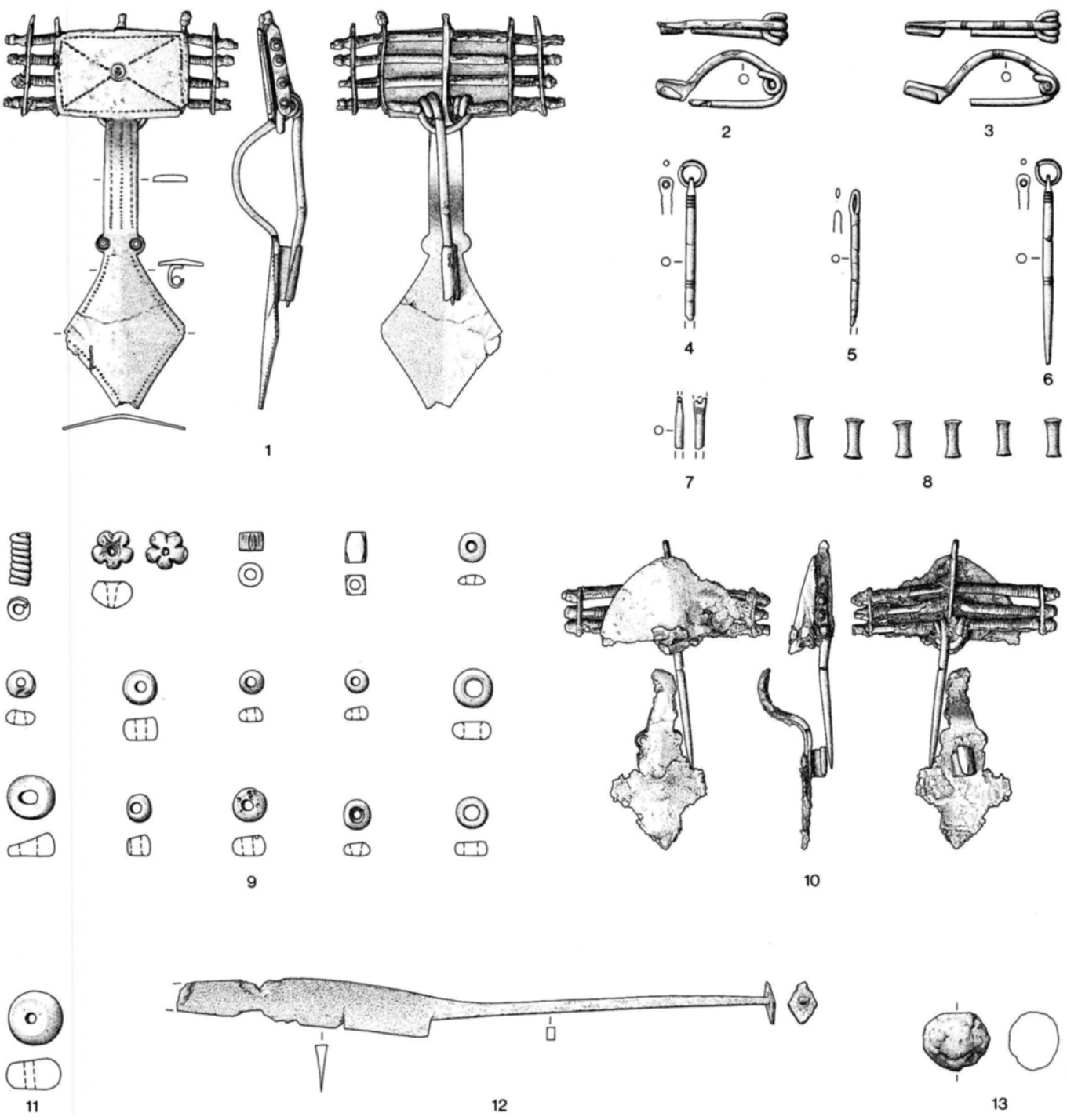


Fig. 9b. Finds from grave U. 2:3 (Orla Svendsen *del.*).

hooks and eyes are arranged in sets near the chest. The most common type is shaped like a figure of eight and is approx. 6 mm long. Some are of bronze, others of silver, occasionally gilded. The buckles come in many different shapes: D-shaped, O-shaped, rectangular etc.

Other grave goods include one glass beaker, gold finger rings, two iron axes, both with a preserved wooden handle c. 10 cm long, three iron arrow-heads, spindle whorls, clay beakers, two stave-built wooden buckets with bronze hoops and handle etc. Finally there is an exceptionally large quantity of organic material, e.g. fabric remains.

Among the quaint and rare objects there are two clay beakers which are evidently imitation glass beakers.

On average each grave contains 2 clay pots, 4 metal objects, a number of beads etc. A closer look at individual graves reveals differences in the quantity and composition of grave goods.

Child graves are always sparsely furnished: one or two pots, usually atypical, and possibly a very few beads.

Adult graves also differ. The most poorly furnished have only one or two clay vessels. But the majority, as previously mentioned, also contain a knife and rivets. The most marked difference in grave goods appears in the western end of the graves.

The graves AE and U were among the most richly furnished in group 1. Thus *grave AE* contained 2 sheet silver fibulae (fig. 8 A-B), 1 Haraldsted fibula, 1 bronze fibula, three bronze pins, 1 bronze ring, 1 gold finger ring, 377 beads of amber, glass and bronze, 3 spindle whorls, 1 spindle hook (?), iron rivets, 1 iron comb, 3 clay vessels, 1 clay beaker, 1 iron knife etc. The beads show great variation in material and form. It is the only grave where berloque-shaped amber beads have been discovered.

The contents of *grave U* deserve a full description (see figs. 9a – 9b).

x 441. Base of footed beaker used secondarily as a beaker (fig. 9a, 1).

x 439. Pot with circumferential furrowing on upper part of body. Black burnished surface. Height 17.2 cm, rim diameter 9.7 cm, and maximum diameter 19.8 cm. (fig. 9a, 2).

x 438. Handle cup with slight ledge at base of neck with below it grooves arranged in a triple to quadruple chevron pattern.. Strap-shaped handle. Burnished brown-black surface. Height 10.7 cm and rim diameter 14.1 cm. (fig. 9a, 3).

x 437. Clay spindle whorl ornamented with broad encircling grooves. Diameter 3.6 cm. (fig. 9a, 4).

x 1119. Clay spindle whorl, one face ornamented with roughly radial rows of pits and a couple of thin lines, the other with radial lines with pits between them. Diameter 2.5 cm. (fig. 9a, 5).

x 1099. Sheet-metal fibula of bronze with band-shaped bow ornamented axially with small struck pits and laterally with aligned arcs. Rectangular head-plate with under it four mock spring-axles of iron held in bronze tubes. They are held in place by four bronze strips, all of which, together with the iron axles and the front extension of the bow, originally ended in moulded bronze knobs. The head-plate only covers parts of the mock spring construction and bore stamped ornament consisting of concentric arcs along the edges and diagonals and of concentric circles in the middle.

The true spring is of bronze with cross-bow construction and four turns.

The foot is rhombic with ridged section. Along the edges it is ornamented with pits. At the transition to the bow there are two small lobes ornamented with concentric circles. The corners of the foot are missing.

The catch-plate is a short vertical plate close to the bow. (fig. 9b, 1).

x 2001. Sheet-metal fibula of bronze, fragmentary and badly corroded. The bow was band-shaped and the head-plate was semi-circular with three mock spring axles of iron in transversely ribbed bronze tubes. They are held at the ends by bronze strips. There were originally moulded bronze knobs at the ends of the mock axles and front extension of the bow. The true spring is of bronze with cross-bow construction and four turns.

The head-plate is semi-circular with a tendency to the triangular and it only partly covers the three mock axles. The foot is badly corroded but appears to have been rhombic. At the transition to the bow there were two semi-circular lobes on each side, one with stamped ornament preserved in the form of concentric circles. The catch-plate is a short bronze plate close to the bow. (fig. 9b, 10).

x 2003 and x 2006. Two Haraldsted fibulae, one of them with three groups of encircling lines on the bow. Lengths respectively 3.4 and 4.0 cm. (fig. 9b, 2 and 3).

x 2005. Bronze pin like x 2004 but less well preserved. (fig. 9b, 4).

x 2008. Bronze needle. Point missing. Length preserved 3.5 cm. (fig. 9b, 5).

x 2004. Bronze pin, ornamented with encircling lines at head and middle. Flat perforated head through which passes a bronze ring. Surviving length 4.8 cm. (fig. 9b, 6).

x 390. Bronze pin, fragment. Head flat with perforation for ring. Ornamented with four encircling lines. (fig. 9b, 7).

x 451. 6 iron rivets from a comb. Drawn from radiograph. (fig. 9b, 8).

x 440. Iron knife (point missing). Single-edged with slightly curved back. The rectangular-sectioned tang is in line with the back and ends with a rhombic bronze plate. Surviving length 15.3 cm. Drawn from radiograph. (fig. 9b, 12).

x 1089. Selected beads of glass and amber from a chain with altogether 387 beads. (fig. 9b, 9 and 11).

x 443. Globular clay lump, diameter ca. 1.5 cm. (fig. 9b, 13).

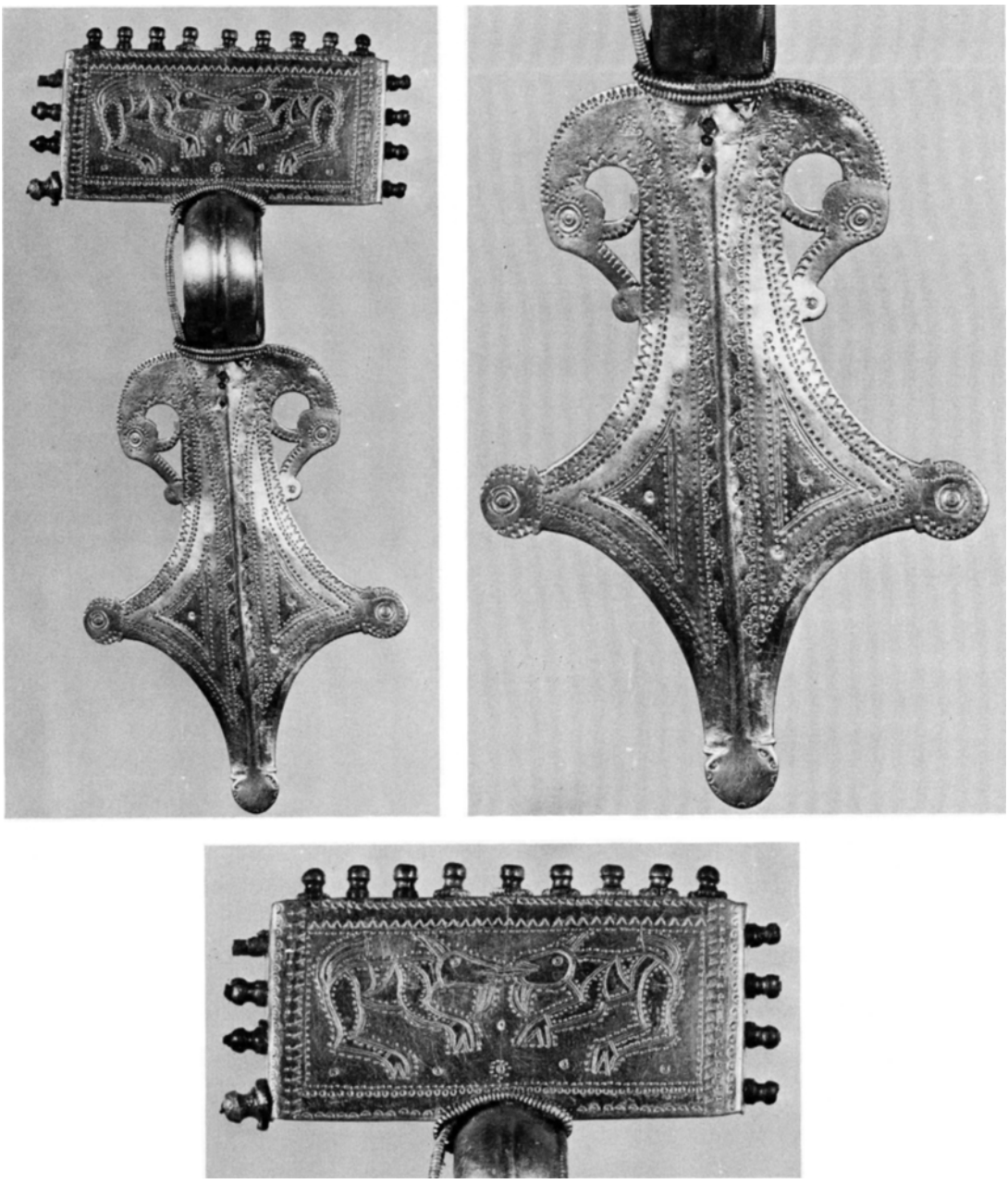

Fig. 10. Sheet silver fibula from grave DI. Length: 16.9 cm.

In group 2 *grave DI* was the most richly furnished. Apart from 3 clay pots (fig. 11) it contained more than 20 different metal objects including 4 fibulae, namely one sheet silver fibula with an animal head in profile (fig. 10) and three cruciform fibulae (fig. 12).

The silver sheet fibula has small silver knobs on three sides of the head-plate, their bases wound with fluted silver thread. On the two short sides the knobs are fixed on 4 spiral axes on the underside of the plate, whereas on the long sides they are placed on a bronze plate. On the head-plate punched ornamentation has produced two animal figures facing each other (fig. 10). The bow has an elongated groove in the middle and is surrounded with fluted silver

Fig. 11. Pottery from grave DI.

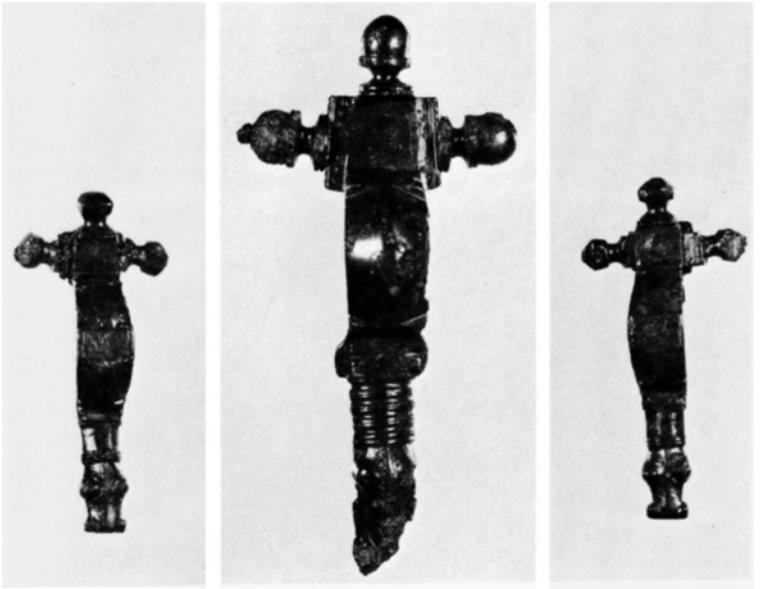

Fig. 12. Three cruciform fibulae from grave DI. 2:3.

threads, one on each long side and two at the ends. Both the bow and the head-plate are richly decorated with punched ornamentation, and they are both partially gilded. The three main parts of the fibula are joined together by means of a bronze band placed at the bottom of the bow and extending somewhat into the head-plate as well as the foot-plate. When the fibula was deposited in the grave it was fairly old, as appears from the wear, repairs etc.

Only three specimens of this type of fibula are known from Denmark: two from Kvarmløse and one from Mejlby. From Sweden and Norway we know, respectively, one and three silver sheet fibulae with animal heads in profile (Lund Hansen 1969: 84).

The cruciform fibulae include two small almost identical ones, and one largish fibula. The two small ones were silver-plated. The foot of all three fibulae terminates in an animal head (fig. 12).

This summary account of the grave goods from graves AE, U and DI gives an indication of the great prospects inherent in the material as regards e.g. typology and chronology.

The difference in grave goods between individual graves must be regarded as a reflection of social and economic stratification in the society of that time. This is also true of the clay beakers mentioned above (p. 114). For the time being we can only state that there are sparsely as well as richly furnished graves. It is quite conceivable that further excavation and a closer study of the material will enable us to classify them further.

The excavation at Sejlflod is planned to last up to and including 1982.

*Translated by Ole Bay-Petersen*

## NOTES

[1] J.K. St Joseph's air photographs are kept at Forhistorisk Museum, Moesgård.

[2] By J. Lund, Aarhus University, Moesgård.

[3] Sejlflod: Sejlflod parish, Fleskum district, county of North Jutland. ÅHM journal No. 669. FHM journal No. 1791. Overbygård: V. Hassing parish, Kær district, county of North Jutland. FHM journal No. 1790. Uglegård: Lillevorde parish, Fleskum district, county of North Jutland. ÅHM journal No. 1012. FHM 1807. Tiendegård: Lillevorde/Gudum parish, Fleskum district, county of North Jutland. ÅHM journal No. 97. FHM journal No. 1806.

[4] J. Lund 1976: 129–50. This is also based on personal observation during the excavation, as well as conversations with J. Lund.

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