

Metal detector finds from Lærkefyrd, Zealand

Votive offerings from the Late Roman Iron Age - Viking Period

by *Søren A. Sørensen*

INTRODUCTION

Lærkefyrd is the name of a farm located in Jørlunde parish, about 1 km east of the village of Jørlunde in North-eastern Zealand (Fig. 1). As early as 1817 an exciting find comprising four gold bracteates was made in a field north of the farm (Fig. 2). These were discovered during cultivation of the field and were handed in to the National Museum¹. In 1833 gold was again found in the field, this time in the form of a broad ribbed finger ring; on the same occasion a number of glass beads were also found. Subsequently, nothing was heard of Lærkefyrd for more than a century, but in 1990, inspired by the early finds, the Museum Færgedgården began metal detector surveys on the fields around the farm with a good degree of success.

As mentioned above, the farm Lærkefyrd lies about 1 km east of Jørlunde and the farm's fields border on to Jørlunde common, the name given to an area of elevated and strongly undulating land. The field where the finds were made slopes first gently, then more steeply, down to the north. The ridge on which Lærkefyrd lies is separated from the village of Jørlunde to the west by an elongated cleft bordered by steep slopes. This cleft bears the name of Rappendam Bog, a name which is probably quite familiar as it was here in the 1940s that a votive find from the Early Roman

Iron Age, comprising 40 wheels and parts of weapons etc., was discovered (Fig. 3). Philologists have linked the name Jørlunde, which is said to mean »wild boar grove« with a heathen offering, so there are clear indications of a cultic aspect in the prehistory of the area. There is only about 4 km as the crow flies from Lærkefyrd to the workshop site of Hørup, which is mentioned elsewhere in this volume.

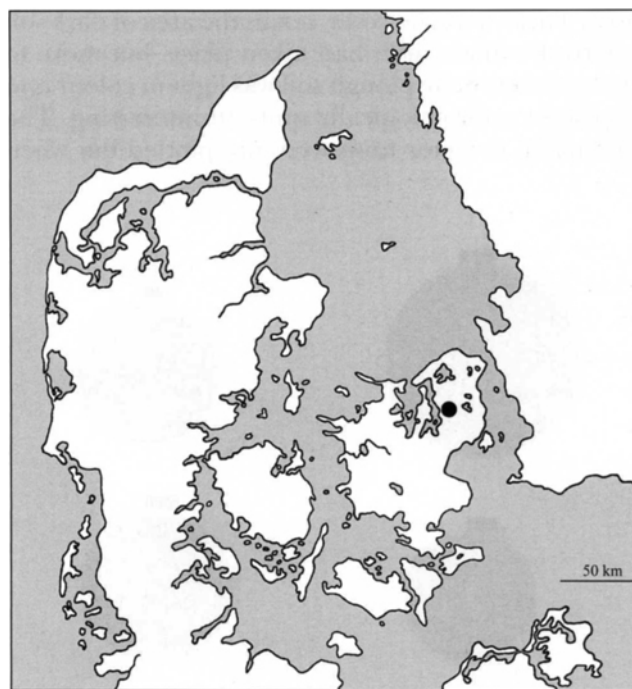


Fig. 1. The location of Lærkefyrd.

¹ The find appears in Mogens B. Mackeprang (1952) under the name of »Hjølunde Mark« (find no. 25), but as there are today several archaeological finds, including some from the Germanic Iron Age, around Jørlunde, the more precise site name of Lærkefyrd has been used in this article.

METAL DETECTOR FINDS

The first problem when checking a find, which was made more than 150 years ago, is often localisation of the precise find site. This did not, however, present a major problem at Lærkefryd. The information in the Parish Archaeological Record is relatively precise and included the following description of the site which was a further help in the localisation: »On a rounded patch, there is 1 foot of black earth under the surface in which there are occasional small stones. Here were found the bracteates (National Museum nos. LXXVII-LXXX), and the gold finger ring (NM 2782), as well as glass and mosaic beads, in addition to a black pendant (from the Stone Age)«. The area with the black soil was localised on the first visit to the site, and in the light of the description given above it was naturally this area, which was searched with a metal detector. The result was, however, negative with regard to metal finds and had it not been for the finding of a green ribbed bead the control reconnaissance of the site may have been abandoned at this point. On the strength of the glass bead it was decided to give the site another chance and this proved to be a fortunate decision.

The first detector searches carried out subsequently turned up several Roman denarii and a piece of hack gold. These were, however, not in the area of dark soil where the first search had taken place, but more to the west where the plough soil was light in colour and appeared archaeologically quite uninteresting. The first metal detector finds were not plotted but when



Fig. 2. The four gold bracteates found in 1817 at Lærkefryd.

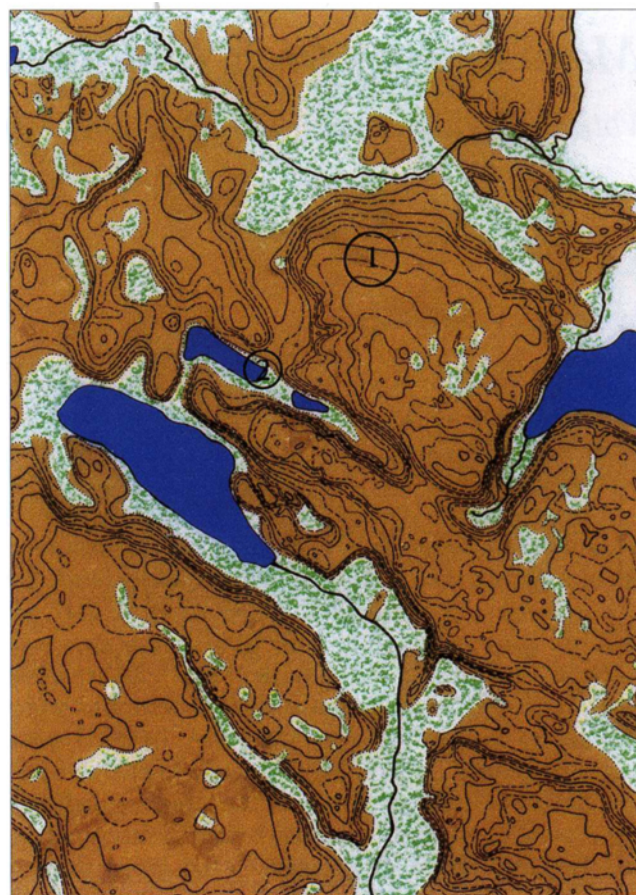


Fig. 3. The topographical setting of 1) Lærkefryd and 2) Rapendam Bog. Scale ca. 1:40.000.

finds continued to turn up after several surveys, two measuring points were set up in the nearby property boundary. Subsequent finds were plotted in relative to these with the aid of a measuring tape, allowing the distribution of finds to be documented.

Up until 1992, 19 denarii were found on the field, leading to the assumption that there was possibly a ploughed-out and scattered denarii hoard at the site. Even though only 11 of these coins had been plotted in, it was enough to give an impression of their distribution. The mapping of the finds had the primary aim of allowing the deposition site for the presumed hoard to be located. In the autumn of 1992 it was decided to carry out a small excavation at this site. The topsoil was removed where the concentration of plotted-in metal detector finds had been greatest and a small field measuring about 30 x 40 m was exposed using a mechanical digger. The excavation was carried out such that a 5-10 cm thick layer of soil was removed, one



Fig. 4. Finds from metal detector surveys in the 1990s and the excavation in 1992. The finds covers the period from the Late Roman Iron Age to the Viking Period. Photo Kit Weiss.

strip at a time, after which the whole strip was scanned with a metal detector. In this way a further 17 denarii were located; these were also plotted in. There is a great degree of agreement between the distribution of the denarii found with a metal detector and that of those found during the excavation. This is taken, as showing that there probably originally was a collective

deposition of denarii at the site. Traces of the actual burial site were, however, not found, as all the denarii were all recovered from the plough soil, which is not very thick here.

In addition to the denarii, five pieces of gold were found during the excavation. Four of these were hack gold, the fifth a ribbed finger ring, which had been

hammered flat. The gold finds were rather more scattered than the denarii and there was no overlap between the plots for the gold pieces found with a detector and those which were found by excavation although the two groups lay very close to one another. Further to the gold and the denarii, various other types of find were recovered during the metal detector searches. The picture, which emerged from these, was further supported by the results of the excavation.

This small excavation had had the aim of clarifying the extent to which there were undisturbed parts of the buried treasure hoard below the plough soil. Detector searches of the field have, however, continued since 1992 and up to the present day, and the field still produces finds, although not so many as in the first years (Fig. 4).

In summing up the finds from Lærkefryd, it can be said that they are widely scattered both chronologically and typologically, but two groups of finds appear with greater frequency than any other: Roman denarii and hack gold. 47 denarii and 15 pieces of hack gold have been found to date, in addition to five gold finger rings, including the one found in 1833. The finger rings are not all of the same type; there are three ribbed rings, one smooth ring and, finally, one badly damaged snake-head fingerring. The gold finds also include two thin gold wires which could either be so-called adjustment wires or spiral finger rings that have been straightened out, as well, of course, as the four bracteates found in 1817. Silver finds, besides the denarii, include a quantity of hack silver and a single dirhem. The dirhem was, however, found a good distance from the concentration of denarii and should most probably not be seen as part of the denarius hoard. The hack silver comprises several cut up pieces of thin rectangular silver plates, originally decorative mounts on harnesses. Very similar pieces are known from the Illerup site (Ilkjær 1996, vol. 7, tab. 7). A fragment of a gilt silver scabbard mount, with carved decoration in the Nydam style, was found during the small excavation at the site, together with a piece of gilt silver foil of unknown function. The latter was decorated with punched ornamentation and a chequered margin. A small piece of crumpled silver foil could not be identified to type, but is very reminiscent of decorative sheet silver from the magnificent sword scabbards found in Nydam Bog (Engelhardt 1865; Rieck 1994) (Fig. 5). Further to this, there are two damaged silver fibulae; one, which cannot immediately be identified to type and

a damaged rosette fibula. A fragment of a finger ring with a flower-like motif concludes the unburned finds of silver, but mention should also be made of a small piece of melted silver found on the field.

Artefacts of gilt bronze were found in large numbers on the field, but some of these are cut up pieces from the same equal-armed fibula (Fig. 4, centre). This was a magnificent fibula, made in gilt bronze as already mentioned, but further decorated with riveted-on plaited silver wire and, uppermost, the plastic animal form. Further to this, two circular pendants have been found, also of gilt bronze, as well as two fragments, presumably from a circular bronze ferrule and equipped with a gilded silver rivet.

Finds of bronze or corresponding copper alloys include a cast hourglass-shaped sword hilt in three parts (Fig. 4, top left and Fig. 7), the foot of a cruciform fibula and a melted lump of bronze (possibly an almost completely melted cruciform fibula), a bronze bridle hook of bronze and no less than 12 bronze rings (Fig. 4-5). The largest of these rings has an outer diameter of 5.1 cm, whereas the others all have a diameter of around 2.5 cm. Corresponding rings are known from the Ejsbøl find, where it can be shown that they come from harnesses and saddles (Ørsnes 1988). A similar interpretation of the rings from Lærkefryd seems reasonable in the light of the certain finds of harness fragments from the site. The remaining bronze finds include an oval plate brooch with an animal in »costal pattern«, clearly a cow or



Fig. 5. Lærkefryd. Fragments from horse harness and sword scabbard from the Late Roman Period. Photo Færgøgården Museum.

a bull with a large pair of horns, two fragments of strap buckles, a possible weight, several fragments of a thick bronze handle as well as many unidentifiable bronze fragments.

Only a single iron artefact has been found which can, with certainty, be linked with the other finds. This is a slender iron axe head, of a type, which is known from sites such as Nydam Bog and Lundeberg (Fig. 6). During normal metal detector searches iron is not collected, but after the finding of the axe, iron was, for a period, also collected from the site, which gave a large amount of finds. Unfortunately, all the recognisable finds were on this occasion of recent date.

There were occasional finds of glass beads in connection with both the excavation and the metal detector searches. In all eight beads were found, in addition to those found in the 19th century.



Fig. 6. Battle axe from the Late Roman Period C3 or Early Germanic Iron Age. Photo Færgedgården Museum.

DATING OF THE ARTEFACTS

On the basis of the four gold bracteates which were first found at Lærkefryd, the site was originally perceived as a locality with one or more hoards from the Early Germanic Iron Age, despite the fact that the Roman denarii are earlier than this date. Denarii, in particular, are often deposited together with much later artefacts², which demonstrates the rather long circulation period for these coins. There is, accordingly, nothing to hinder the fact that the denarii

²The classic example of this is the hoard from Smørgene on Bornholm where, in addition to c. 500 denarii, there also was a solidus from the 5th cent. (Kromann & Watt 1984).

were first deposited in the Early Germanic Iron Age. With time, however, as other artefacts began to turn up which very probably were deposited either prior to or subsequent to the Early Germanic Iron Age, the question of the dating had to be reconsidered. It could be established that several depositions must have taken place on the field, over a long period of time. This is not unusual in the case of a settlement, but the composition of the finds is not suggestive of a normal settlement; an impression supported by the results of the small excavation.

The earliest group of finds comprises the Roman denarii, of which the oldest was struck under Vespasian in 72-73 AD. The youngest is an example from Commodus from 190-191 AD³. If this is, as presumed, a collective deposition of coins, the youngest coin gives a terminus post quem for the deposition which could have taken place around 200 AD at the earliest, corresponding to the Late Roman Iron Age phase C1a. The finding of the damaged rosette fibula, which is dated to C1b and the serpent's head ring from C2, supports the fact that the first depositions at Lærkefryd took place as early as the Late Roman Iron Age⁴. The harness components also seem to have their best parallels in Late Roman Iron Age finds and finds from the transition between the Late Roman and the Early Germanic Iron Age (Carnap-Bornheim & Ilkjær 1996; Ørsnes 1988). It is more difficult to determine whether the many pieces of hack gold also come from the Late Roman Iron Age. The fact that gold was deposited on the field in this period is shown by the serpent's head ring. Similarly, hack gold of the same form as the pieces from Lærkefryd is known from secure Roman Iron Age contexts, for example at Lundeberg (Thomsen *et al.* 1993). Hack gold, and

³It should be noted that when Anne Kromann dealt with the coins from Lærkefryd in 1995 in the book on Himlingeøje (Lund Hansen *et al.* 1995), only 36 denarii had been found. Since then a further 11 denarii have been recovered and the date for the striking of the latest coin is now 190-191 AD and not 180-186 AD, as stated in Kromann's article. At the same time, the increased number of denarii means that Lærkefryd is the second largest denarius find from Zealand.

⁴The ring is of Beckmann's type 39c which is normally placed in period C2 (Beckmann 1969).

other gold finds which are difficult to date, have traditionally been dated to the Early Germanic Iron Age but, in the light of finds from recent years, one should perhaps keep a more open mind with regard to the age of these gold finds.

The Early Germanic Iron Age is securely represented by the four gold bracteates and the foot from a cruciform fibula. The sword hilt and the iron axe head are presumably also from this period, although a date in the Late Roman Iron Age period C3 is also possible. The only secure find from the Late Germanic Iron Age is a small tortoise brooch. The dirhem dates from the Viking Age, as does the heavily fragmented equal-armed fibula and the two circular gilt bronze pendants. The find intensity appears to be greatest in the Late Roman and Early Germanic Iron Age, after which it falls almost to zero in the Late Germanic Iron Age, only to recover slightly in the Viking Age.

RITUAL DESTRUCTION OF THE OBJECTS?

An aspect, which has not been mentioned so far, is the almost ritual destruction, which many of the recovered artefacts had been exposed to prior to deposition. The serpent's head ring is fragmented and hammered flat; on the basis of impressions in the soft gold this was done using a stone as a base. One of the other gold finger rings has been treated in the same way and appears today as hammered completely flat. The rosette fibula lacks spirals, pin, part of the catch plate and the rosettes. The other silver fibula consists only of the foot and part of the bow. The silver ring is also fragmented. The hack gold is not just cut up into small pieces but the individual pieces also often show many cuts from blows with both the back and the edge of a knife. The sword hilt has a severe cut in the edge as if from a sharp instrument and the bronze ferrule has been broken into several pieces of which only two have yet been found. The metal foil from a scabbard mouth has been cut in two and several pieces of gilt silver foil are also strongly deformed and crumpled. The decorative silver plates from the harness are bent double and have been cut or chopped into quite small pieces. The robust cast bridle hook has been broken into pieces. The large equal-armed fibula from the Viking Age has so far been found in eight pieces; all the pieces have not yet been recovered.

The melted lump of silver, as well as several lumps of melted bronze, of which one can possibly be inter-

preted as an almost completely melted cruciform fibula, shows that destruction of artefacts by fire also took place at the site. Several of the other artefacts are also damaged but this could be the result of cultivation or other activities. The above-mentioned damage appears, however, to be the result of formal ritual destruction of the artefacts in connection with deposition. It should, however, be mentioned that there are some artefacts which have not suffered this treatment; primarily the gold bracteates, the denarii and the two circular pendants from the Viking Age.

THE EXCAVATION

The small excavation, which was carried out at the find site, had, as already mentioned, the sole aim of establishing the existence of a ploughed-up denarii hoard, possibly with intact parts below the plough soil. The latter was not the case, so we can only speculate as to



Fig. 7. Lærkefryd. Cut up sword hilt of bronze from the Early Germanic Iron Age. Photo Færggården Museum.

whether the denarii originally were deposited together or not, although their relatively close distribution suggests a collective deposition. The excavation gave an additional piece of information, namely the fact that apart from a very few cooking pits, a small pit lacking in finds and two isolated postholes, there were no other features below the plough soil. The excavation field was not so large as to allow the drawing of too broad conclusions, but nothing appeared which could be interpreted as traces of an actual settlement. In view of the long period over which the site functioned, as shown by the finds, a massive occurrence of settlement traces would be expected if the artefacts have been buried or lost on a settlement.

INTERPRETATION OF THE FIND

The interpretation of the character of the site has developed in pace with the appearance of new finds and through comparisons with other finds of the same age. The earliest interpretation, based on the find of the gold bracteates, gold ring and glass beads was that this was a single buried hoard. When the metal detector surveys began to produce finds over a large area, with a broader chronological range, it seemed obvious to interpret the area as a rich settlement on a par with Sorte Muld and Gudme, where small hoards are found buried on the settlement itself together with large amounts of more ordinary settlement material. This interpretation was, however, again abandoned in the light of the find assemblages of finds from the site, their treatment and observations made during the small excavation.

With a full awareness of the dangers inherent in basing interpretations on negative evidence, i.e. the absence of certain categories of finds, it must be emphasised that finds typical of ordinary settlement material are totally absent in the finds from Lærkefyrd. The find categories, which do appear at the site, are, in the first instance, precious metals, weapons and jewellery. Furthermore, it appears that these artefacts were, for the most, damaged prior to deposition, possibly as a ritual act.

Ritual destruction of this type is known from both burial and votive finds. As the possibility of the presence of graves at Lærkefyrd can be immediately excluded, an interpretation of the locality as votive site remains. As mentioned in the introduction, the possibility has already been raised that there was

a heathen cult site at Jørlunde; a theory, which is based on interpretation of place names in the area⁵. If one considers the c. 700 years represented by the finds, then the amount of finds is not very impressive. However, it should be remembered that this is a terrestrial deposition on a site, which has been ploughed for centuries. The possibility that artefacts have been found and removed from the site prior to the finding of the four gold bracteates in 1817 seems particularly obvious. Similarly, artefacts comprising iron and organic materials will largely have decomposed and disappeared. Accordingly, the possibility cannot be excluded that the original amount of finds was much greater and that it also was of a much more complex character with regard to artefact type. In this respect it is worth mentioning a more traditional votive site, which lays only a few hundred metres west of Lærkefyrd, i.e. Rappendam Bog. It was here that numerous wagon wheels, parts of weapons, a human skeleton and several animal bones were found in the 1940s (Kunwald 1950; 1970). This find dates from the Late Pre-Roman Iron Age and the Early Roman Iron Age and as such pre-dates the Lærkefyrd finds. If the finds from Rappendam Bog had been deposited at Lærkefyrd, there would today not be the least trace of these offerings. Recent excavations carried out in Nydam and Ejsbøl Bogs have shown that even in these wetland depositions the destruction of the sacrificed artefacts is almost total in the driest areas on the margins of the bog. Under these circumstances only artefacts of gold, silver and bronze are preserved, exactly the situation we see at Lærkefyrd. Well knowing that interpretations of archaeological finds as being the expression of cultic or religious manifestation is most commonly met with severe criticism, this is the interpretation which, on the basis of the available finds, appears most obvious for Lærkefyrd today. The possibility that there has been a settlement here cannot, however, be completely excluded. A clear answer to this question is a matter, which should be addressed by a future excavation.

Finally, if an assessment is to be made of the signi-

⁵ In the publication of »Valdemar's Cadastre« (Aakjær 1980, 156ff.) the following is written: »The name of Jørlunde presumably comes from an old cult site and on this and Skænkelsø village's land there are occasional field names which suggest the worshipping of heathen gods.« The name Jørlunde is said to mean Wild Boar Grove and to refer to an offer grove.

ficance of the metal detector for a find such as Lærkefryd, then this must be said to have been crucial. The metal detector surveys of well known find sites which were initiated in 1990 have shown that many of these still contain finds and can provide information of great cultural historical value. It has also become clear that the sites can develop quite differently. The two sites, Lærkefryd and Hørup, dealt with in this volume, are an excellent example of this.

Translation: David Earle Robinson & Anne Bloch Jørgensen

Søren A. Sørensen
Museet Færgedgården
Færgelundsvej 1
DK - 3630 Jægerspris
mufae@get2net.dk

Manuscript submitted 2000

REFERENCES

- Beckmann, C. 1969: Metallfingerringe der römischen Kaiserzeit im Freien Germanien. *Saalburg-Jahrbuch* 26. Berlin.
- von Carnap-Bornheim, Claus & Ilkjær, Jørgen, 1996: *Illerup Ådal bd. 5 - 8. Die Prachtausrüstungen*. Jysk Arkæologisk Selskabs Skrifter 25, 5-8, Højbjerg 1996.
- Engelhardt, Conrad, 1865: *Nydam Mosefund 1859-1863*. København.
- Kromann, Anne, 1995: Die römischen Münzfunde von Seeland. In Ulla Lund Hansen *et alii* 1995.
- Kromann, Anne & Watt, Margrethe 1984: Skattefundet fra Smørenge: en nedgravet skat fra folkevandringstid på Bornholm. *Nationalmuseets Arbejdsmark* 1984, pp. 29-41. København,
- Ulla Lund Hansen *et alii*, 1995: *Himlingøje-Seeland - Europa. Ein Gräberfeld der jüngeren römischen kaiserzeit auf Seeland, seine Bedeutung und internationalen Beziehungen*. Nordiske Fortidsminder ser. B 13. København 1995.
- Kunwald, George, 1950: Nogle offerfund fra nordsjællandske moser. *Fra Frederiksborg Amt. Årbog for 1949*, Hillerød 1950.
- Kunwald, George, 1970: Der Moorfund im Rappendam auf Seeland. *Præhistorisches Zeitschrift* 45, 1970.
- Mackeprang, Mogens B., 1952: *De nordiske guldbrakteater*. Jysk Arkæologisk Selskabs skrifter Bd. II. Aarhus 1952.
- Rieck, Flemming, 1994: *Jernalderkrigernes skibe. Nye og gamle udgravninger i Nydam Mose*. Vikingeskibshallen i Roskilde 1994.
- Sørensen, S. A., 1993: Skattefund fra Lærkefryd ved Jørunde. *Arkæologi i Frederiksborg Amt* 1983 - 1993. Nivå 1993.
- Thomsen, Per Orla *et alii*, 1993: *Lundeborg - en handelsplads fra jernalderen*. Ringe 1993.
- Ørsnes, Mogens, 1988: *Ejsbøl I. Waffnopferfunde des 4.-5. Jahrh. nach Chr.* Nordiske Fortidsminder ser. B 11. København 1988.
- Aakjær, Svend, 1980: *Kong Valdemars Jordebog*. Udgivet af samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur 1926-1945, 2. Bind. København 1980.