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IMITATION AND TRANSFORMATION - ROMAN MILITARIA IN SOUTH SCANDINAVIAN GRAVE FINDS

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The Early Roman weapon graves from southern Scandinavia have been woefully neglected in the past with only a small percentage available to scholars. As the famous weapon deposits from Nydam, Ejsbøl, Kragehul, Thorsberg and Vimose are in the process of being published,¹ an analysis of the weapon graves will hopefully challenge the interpretations from earlier investigations. Hopefully the combination of these results will create a better platform for future research in Iron Age weaponry, weapon-rites and means of power in Northern Europe.

This paper argues that Roman military equipment in South Scandinavia has far more potential than just being an indication of contact. It is not the fact that Roman militaria are present in southern Scandinavia that is the main issue - it is how it is used and sometimes redefined.

With a focus on Denmark in the two first centuries AD, this paper presents examples of how Roman military equipment is used and re-used - sometimes in a new form. In order to put the Roman material into a context, an overview of the development of the weapon burial rite in southern Scandinavia is presented first.

¹ Latest: RAU 2010; NØRGAARD JØRGENSEN forthcoming; BIRCH IVERSEN 2010; BLANKENFELDT 2009; PAULI JENSEN 2008; PAULI JENSEN forthcoming.

WEAPON BURIAL RITE AND WEAPON FINDS IN SOUTHERN SCANDINAVIA

The Iron Age version of the weapon burial rite appeared in the late Pre Roman Iron Age in connection with a general cultural change - the "Latenisation" - which affected most of northern Europe from around 250 BC and on. At this time richly furnished graves emerged and subsequently weapons became part of the burial customs for men. In Scandinavia the weapon burial rite developed in southern Scandinavia in the Late Pre Roman Iron Age, approximately 150 BC, from two directions in three waves:²

1. At first northern Jutland received impulses directly from present-day Poland.
2. Probably at the same time, the weapon burial rite spread from Poland through the Elbe-region and towards the peninsula of Jutland, and consequently reached southern Jutland a bit later. The island of Bornholm and the Swedish isle of Gotland are now part of the new tradition.
3. Just before the birth of Christ most of southern Scandinavia had embraced the new custom - except for Scania and Zealand, where the rite never really takes hold.

² MARTENS 2008 with further references.



Fig. 1. Distribution of the weapon graves from approx. 1-150/60 AD. Black dots mark the weapon burials; gray dots mark burials with horse equipment and no weapons. The island of Bornholm is not part of the investigation and is not on the map.

During the 1st and 2nd centuries AD the idea of giving weapons as a part of the grave goods flourished as proved by hundreds of weapon graves within the present-day Danish area. The weapon graves from the Early Roman Iron Age are mostly found in Jutland and on Funen, and almost none on Zealand, as can be seen on Fig. 1. With the beginning of the 3rd century AD the weapon burial rite gradually disappeared.

The earliest Roman or provincial-Roman produced military equipment reached southern Scandinavia just after the birth of Christ. As with the Roman material from the weapon sacrifices, the Roman military material from grave finds are almost exclusively linked with swords, that is sword blades, scabbard fittings and baldrics.

COPYING ROMAN SWORDS: CASE MØLLERUP

The earliest swords to reach southern Scandinavia are the Gladii of the Mainz type.³ In the present-day Danish area a handful of swords of Mainz type have been identified, but the majority of the finds belong to the slightly younger Pompeii type.⁴ As the distribution map in Fig. 2 shows, they are almost exclusively found in Jutland and on the Swedish isles of Öland and Gotland. No Gladii have yet been found in Norway.

Even though swords of the gladii type are not uncommon in southern Scandinavia, only a few of these can be identified as genuine Roman or provincial Roman

³ NYLÉN 1963.

⁴ WATT 1994.



Fig. 2. Distribution of the Gladii and Gladii imitations in southern Scandinavia in 1-150/60 AD. Black dots marks the Gladii, blue dots marks the Gladii chapes.

produced swords. Most of the late 1st and early 2nd century swords are imitations or copies. The copies can be identified by a number of details, for instance the degree of hardening of the edge. The relative uniformity of the copies and the imitations of the scabbard fittings indicate, that the Germanic craftsmen had a clear perception of how a Roman style sword should look.

An example of a copy of a Gladius was found at Møllerup, eastern Jutland, in an inhumation grave.⁵ The burial mound was excavated by the National Museum in 1896 and comprised a wooden coffin in a grave dug deeper into the soil than the majority of the contemporary graves of the area. Apart from the Gladius copy, the find included a belt buckle of copper-alloy, two rings (one gold), 5 pots, copper-alloy needle (from fibula?), textiles, and tools belonging to a black smith: hammer, thongs and thin iron bars (Fig. 3). The find dates to the first half of the 2nd century AD. The sword itself is approximately 57 cm long and 5 cm wide with a preserved leather-covered, wooden scabbard with copper-alloy fittings of Germanic origin (Fig. 4).

⁵ National Museum inventory no. C8285-99. KJÆR 1900, 117ff.; KLINDT-JENSEN 1950, 31f.

Not only Roman swords are known from South Scandinavian graves, also Roman scabbard fittings - chapes and scabbard runners - are found in this context.

GERMANIC AND ROMAN COMBINED: CASE BRANDSBY

One of the characteristic Roman or Provincial-Roman produced chape types are the small, cast copper-alloy chapes with pelta-shaped perforations, known as the Novaesium type (Fig. 5). The Novaesium chapes come in different sizes and it has often been suggested, that the small ones could belong to scabbards from daggers. In the weapon deposit of Illerup Ådal in Eastern Jutland, however, very small Novaesium chapes (approx. 20 x 22 mm) were found mounted on perfectly normal sized scabbards belonging to perfectly normal sized spathas.⁶ Consequently, small chapes do not necessarily belong to daggers.

A sword with a Novaesium type chape was found in a burial in Brandsby,⁷ north of Odense on Funen, near the weapon deposit of Vimose with its 89 chapes of the Novaesium type.⁸ The find reached the National

⁶ BIBORSKI - ILKJÆR 2006, Bd. 12, 241 SACC/VEG1 and SACC/ZFH.

⁷ KJÆR 1900, 122ff.

⁸ PAULI JENSEN 2008, 141.



Fig. 3. Tools from the Møllerup inhumation grave (After Kjær 1900, Fig. 1-2).

Museum in 1895 and is probably not complete. The Brandsby sword and wooden scabbard is 85.5 cm long and beautifully preserved (Fig. 6). The sword itself is a spatha of Biborski's type Vimose-Ilkerup, which places the find in the period 150-250 AD, period C1. Apart from the remarkable fittings around the Novaesium type chape, it is interesting that the chape itself is no longer in one piece. Probably it had been worn out in the bottom, a phenomenon also observed on numerous examples from Vimose. The chape was then split in two parts and mounted on the scabbard with an extra band-shaped copper-alloy fitting and a couple of rivets to keep it in place - mountings with two rivets are commonly used to fix Germanic chapes to the scabbard. Furthermore, the Roman produced chape had been placed on a scabbard with Germanic fittings: a scabbard runner of Carnap-Bornheim's type IA with the bird head shaped middle part.

On the one hand, one could argue, that it must have been vital that the Roman chape was on this sword even though it had served its time. But on the other hand it is combined with a Germanic style scabbard runner, indicating that Roman produced objects were not sacred but were to be used alongside the local products. The Roman chape has, in other words, been transformed or redefined into a Germanic style fitting with its characteristic rivets holding the chape in place.



Fig. 4. The sword from the Møllerup grave (Watt 2003, Fig. 10).

TRANSFORMATION: CASE BOGNÆS

A very special example of how Roman military equipment experienced an interesting after-military life is a round Balteus fitting found in 1984 as a stay find at Bognæs near Copenhagen on the island of Zealand, where military equipment - as mentioned earlier - is very rare compared to other parts of southern Scandinavia.

The piece is a broken but quite ordinary balteus fitting made of copper-alloy with a diameter of approx. 6.3 cm (Fig. 7). It has received some trashing at a time and has been broken by wringing or bending it backwards and forwards. The back of the fitting, however, reveals that it has been re-designed into a fibula. No similar finds are known from southern Scandinavia.

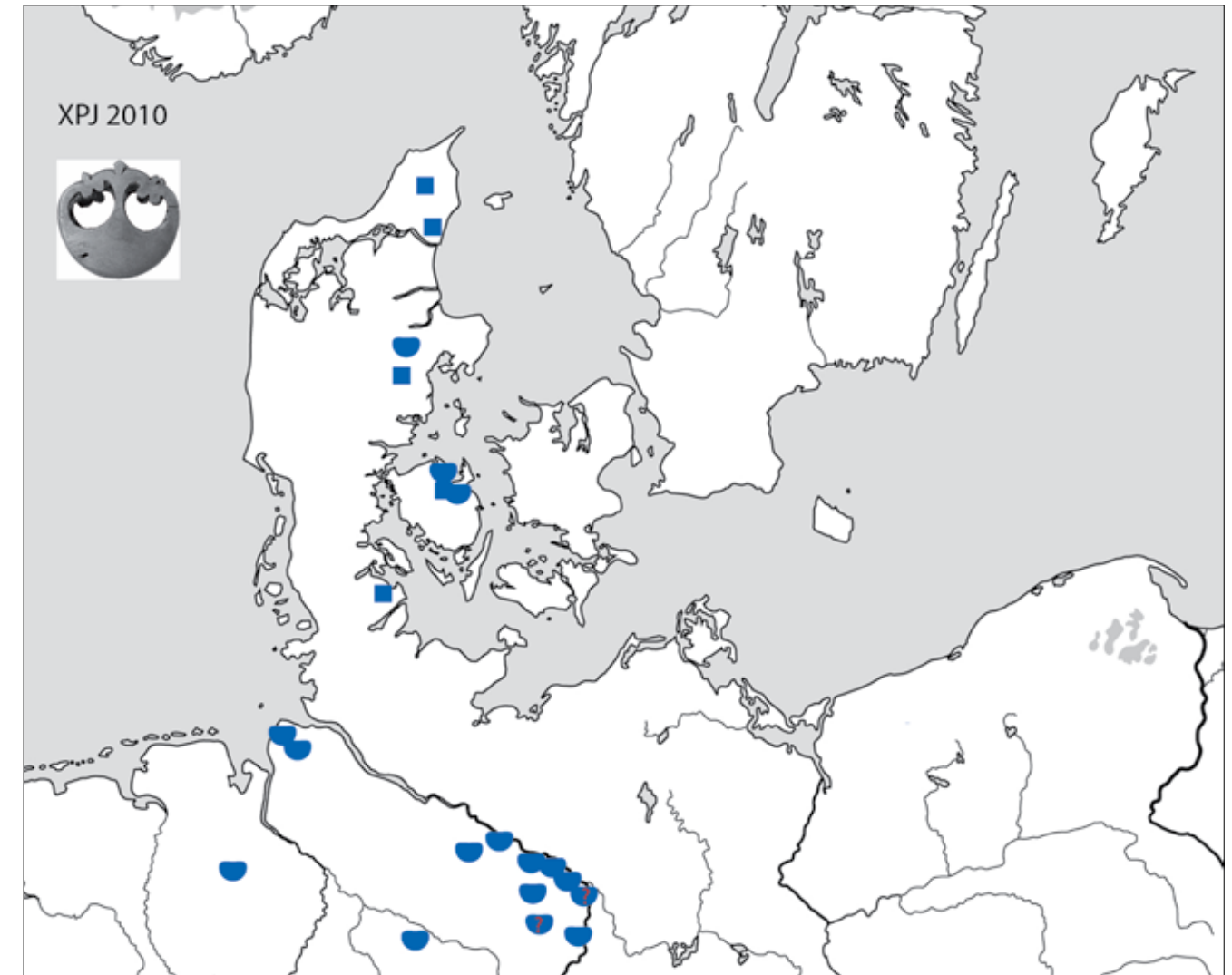


Fig. 5. Distribution of the chapes of Novesium type. Semi-circle marks grave find, square mark weapon deposits.

MEETINGS AND INTERACTION

But what can these few examples tell us about Roman and South Scandinavian connections?

Often we see the relations between Romans and the North Germanic tribes described as an asymmetrical relation of power, in other words a centre-periphery system. This means that the centre - the Romans in this case - dominates the periphery through technological, economical, organisational or military superiority. The centre receives raw-materials (amber, fur?), foodstuff (sheep, cattle?) and cheap labour (slaves?) in return of mass-produced goods such as drinking vessels and military equipment.

Sometimes researchers argue for a similarity in ideology or that the North Germanic elites adopt Roman customs, like the drinking feast - with imported Roman drinking vessels - or the Triumph after successful battle with sacrifices of the conquered equipment.⁹ The mutual ideologies or at least the partly shared conceptions of rituals or practices of the Germanic elites and their Roman contacts encourage their communication and furthermore justify or consolidate the Germanic elites' rule of power. On the other hand, it is only too obvious that the Germanic tribes had long ago discovered the joy of feasting and drinking alcohol. Furthermore, the custom of sacrificing weaponry in the wetlands began long before the Romans entered the scene. This is not

⁹ For instance STORGAARD 2003; JØRGENSEN 2001.

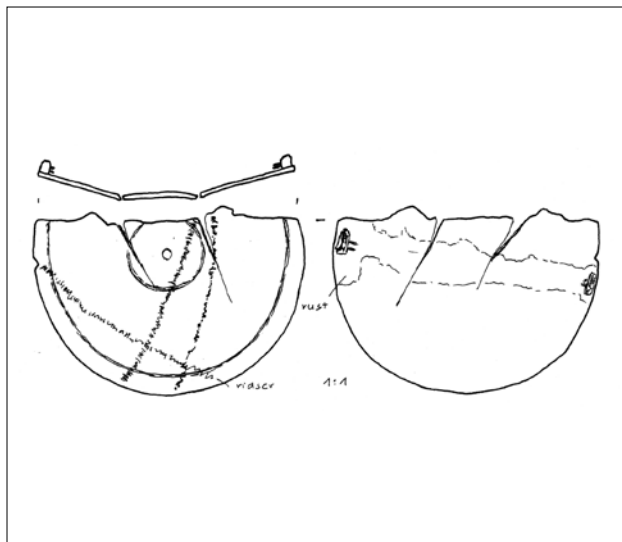


Fig. 7. A balteus fitting re-made into a fibula from Bognæs, Zealand (drawing: Find protocol of the National Museum).

to say, that the Germanic drinking traditions didn't develop after the meeting with Romans nor that the weapon sacrifices were static and unchanging. But the mono-chrome view of Roman-Germanic relations has too long dominated the discussions.

The examples above show a variety of different way of using Roman *militaria*: some items were taken over and used in their original form, sometimes the specific type was copied into almost identical type. At times, Roman *militaria* was transformed into a near Germanic form with the same function and in some occasions imported pieces was to be re-designed and completely changed role. For a long time scholars have discussed how much Roman military equipment reached South Scandinavia and how it got there. The variety of the way the material is used opens a whole new set of questions never asked. It becomes clear that the meetings between Roman and Germanic led to much more than a mindless adaption of foreign goods and ideas.

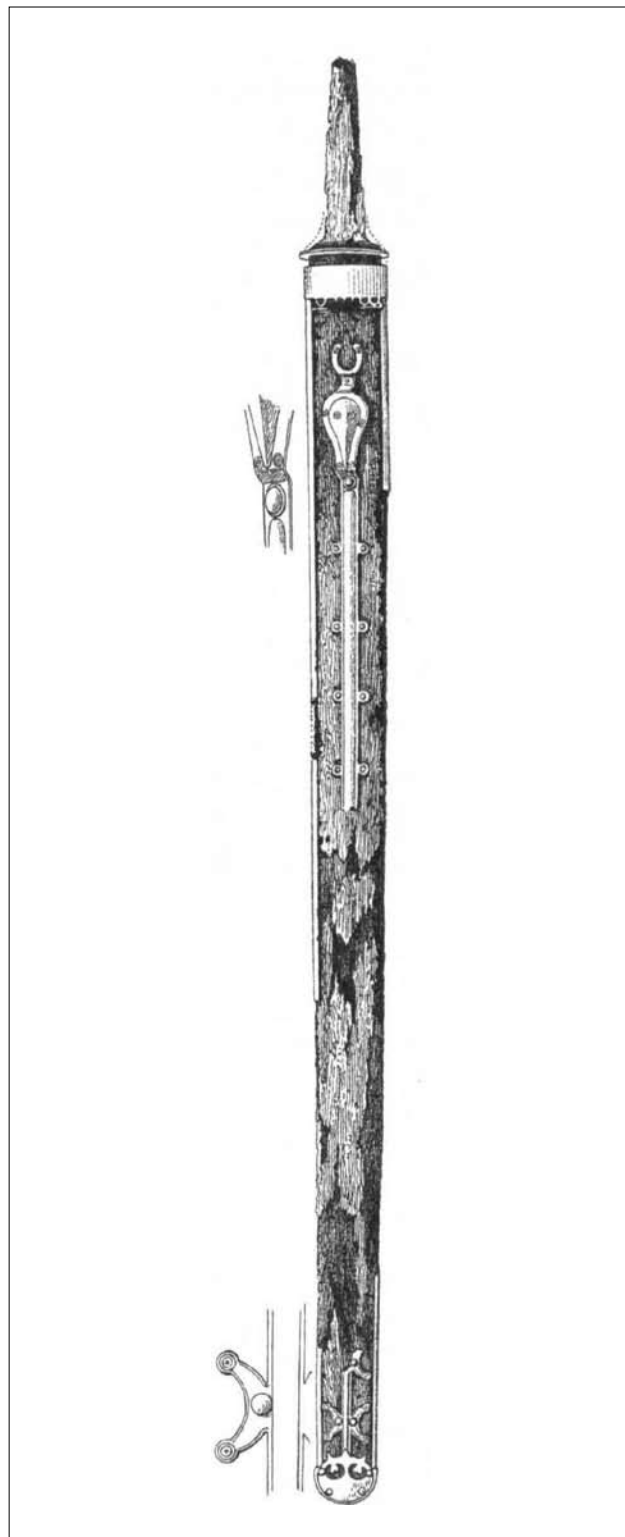


Fig. 6. The sword from the Brandsby grave, Funen (after Kjær 1900, Fig. 6)

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