

Tonicha Upham (Anglo-Saxon, Norse & Celtic) - Oslo, Bergen and Stockholm, 2016

A supervision essay on female burials first sparked my interest in Viking Age burial practices, and from there a dissertation topic on evidence of trade in female burials developed. I planned my trip to Oslo, Bergen and Stockholm into gain a more comprehensive understanding of these burials - it is one thing to read about specific graves and artefacts, but another thing entirely to be stood atop a burial mound! I'm hugely grateful to Pembroke College and the Scandinavian Studies Fund from the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic for facilitating this immensely fascinating and useful trip.

I spent a fortnight in Scandinavia, starting in Oslo. The main place of interest here was the Viking Ship Museum, home to three ships in which people had been buried. Of particular importance was the Oseberg burial, a well-preserved pleasure boat that had held the bodies of two women, and a wealth of grave goods. It is only up close that the size of this and the other ships in the museum can be truly appreciated, and this allowed me to truly understand the grandeur of this incredibly ostentatious form of burial. Another useful visit during my stay in Oslo was to the Museum of Cultural History, which houses a great display of Viking Age objects, many of which were found in graves.

From Oslo, I took a very early train to Stockholm, where I stayed in a floating hostel in the middle of the city. I primarily used Stockholm as a base from which I could travel further afield, beginning first with Uppsala and the royal burial mounds at Gamla Uppsala (Old Uppsala). This involved a 5km walk, so I was fortunate to have good weather, and on arrival I was greeted by a huge collection of large burial mounds, accompanied by another incredibly useful museum. I followed up my trip to the burial mounds with a visit to some rune stones still standing by Uppsala Cathedral, and a trip into the University to see a series of precious books and manuscripts, including some Norse sagas. Over the following two days I visited Sigtuna, a surviving Viking Age town founded in around 890 where I was able to follow a trail of rune stones and church ruins, and Västerås, the site of a number of known burials, including Anundshög, which is the largest surviving burial mound in Sweden. It is surrounded by a series of rune stones, smaller mounds, and ship setting burials, which consist of a series of standing stones arranged in the shape of a ship around a burial. From this main site, I headed off into the woodland for other, smaller burial mounds and a prehistoric labyrinth, until the train timetable forced my return to Stockholm.

The absolute highlight of my time in Stockholm, however, was my trip to Birka. Birka was a Viking Age trading town, situated on the tiny island of Björkö on Lake Mälaren. The trip by boat took about two and a half hours each day, and I only wish I could have spent more time on the island! There are over 3000 known burials on the island, which have fielded many fascinating grave goods (these I saw at the historical museum in Stockholm, as the island's remote location means the most precious finds cannot be securely stored and displayed in the location they were found). In addition to the burials, there was a tour of part of the island, culminating in the area where a fortress once stood, replica Viking Age dwellings and ships, and a museum containing a small selection of the archaeological material found on Birka.

My final stop during my time in Scandinavia was Bergen, back in Norway. This city also boasted a museum with a great array of Viking Age objects, as well as other relevant historical museums and a church. I also ventured up a couple of the mountains in the local area, by funicular and cable car, even getting caught in torrential downpour at the top of Mount Fløyen!

I returned to Oslo for my flight home on another very early train, along a mountainous rail-route considered one of the most scenic in the world. I came home with bags full of academic publications which I'd picked up at the various museums and sites of interest I visited, as well as a wealth of useful information and exciting ideas for my dissertation.