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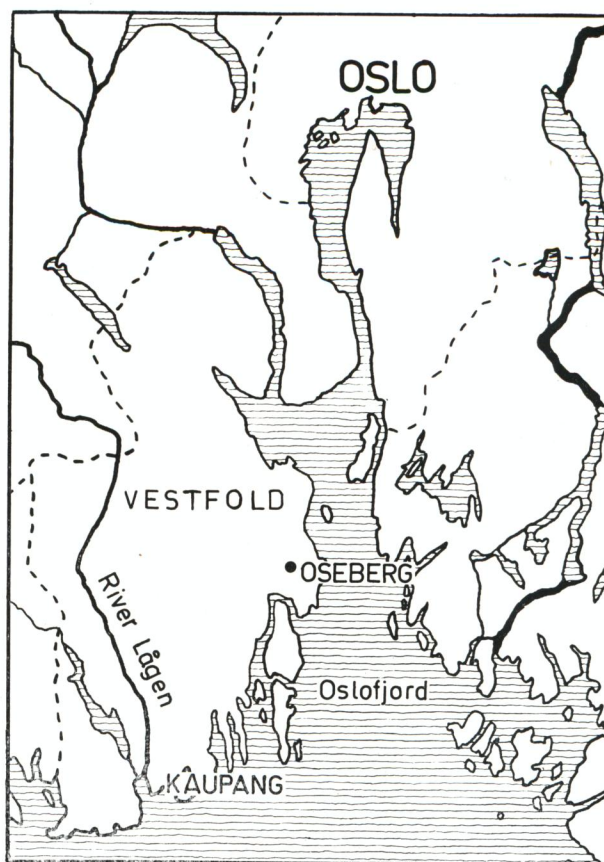
# NEW LIGHT ON VIKING TRADE IN NORWAY

By Charlotte Blindheim

DURING THE PAST TEN YEARS extensive excavation has been carried on at the Kaupang farms, near Larvik in the county of Vestfold, not very far from the place where the royal Viking burial of Oseberg was discovered (see *ARCHAEOLOGY* 11 [1958] 190-199). This was not the first excavation to be undertaken in this area near the mouth of the Oslo fjord: in 1867 a number of burial mounds was excavated. Part of the interest in excavating them at that time undoubtedly stemmed from the theory of the pioneer Norwegian historian, P. A. Munch, that there was some connection between the cemetery at Kaupang and Skiringssal, a port of the Viking period mentioned by the ninth-century Norwegian traveler, Ottar. The statement of Ottar, who had traveled north as far as the White Sea, and south to Hedeby (an important market town of the Viking Age in southern Schleswig), is incorporated in King Alfred's Anglo-Saxon version of the history of Orosius, which includes whatever contemporary material Alfred could obtain about the countries and peoples of North and Central Europe. The suggestion that a port or market town might be found on the Kaupang farms was supported partly by the place-name itself, which indicates a market place—compare "Kaupang" with the English "Chipping"—and partly by the large number of barrows concentrated on these farms. But when most of these barrows were excavated, in 1867, comparatively poor material was unearthed, reflecting a population which must have consisted of farmers rather than tradesmen. Further excavations on the spot were therefore given up, in spite of the evidence of the place-name and the historical records.

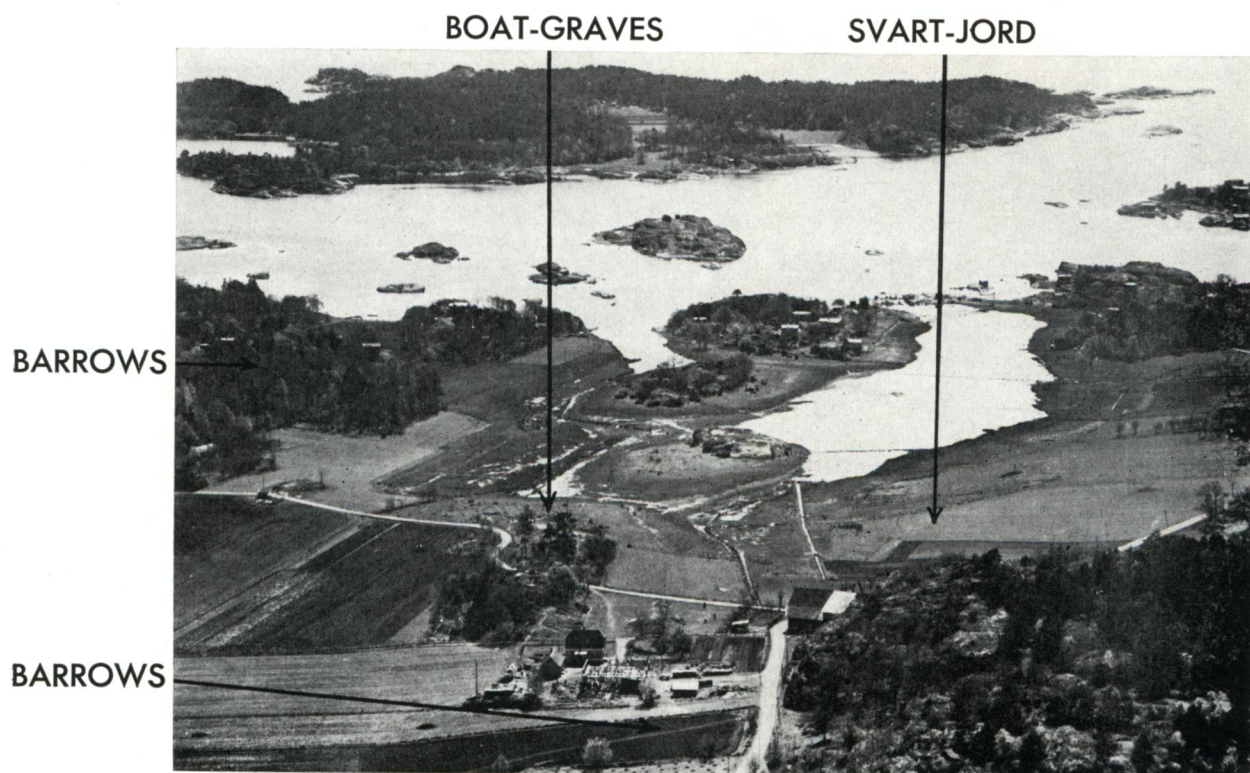
In 1947 new finds were accidentally discovered by the owner of the land in a different area. Rather rich material, obviously from boat-graves, pointed to burials somewhat different from the graves unearthed in 1867. Excavations at this new site were started in 1950 and have been going on since then.

Until 1956 the digging was concentrated in the boat-grave cemetery, which has yielded abundant material, partly native in origin, partly consisting of imported articles such as Anglo-Irish bronze ornaments, a hanging bowl with a runic inscription, tiny fragments of glass beakers of Frankish origin and bits of imported pottery. The shield boss shown is of a type unknown in Scandinavia. My hope is that readers of *ARCHAEOLOGY* may help us with parallels.



MAP OF THE OSLO FJORD AREA, SHOWING THE COUNTY OF VESTFOLD AND THE SITE OF KAUPANG





The Kaupang site, with the various excavation areas indicated.

## VIKING TRADE continued

Of the boats themselves nothing was left except the rivets. Whenever these were found in position, careful excavation enabled us to uncover an impression of the boat in the ground. In a few cases faint traces of the timber and details such as the ribs and keel could be discerned. All the boats uncovered in this way belong to a small type with a total length of about twenty-five feet. At least two of the boats contained more than one burial. Investigation showed that these could not have taken place at the same time. All the graves were covered with several layers of large and small stones, some of which were visible in the turf here and there.

The grave goods indicate that this burial ground belongs to the same period as the material unearthed in 1867, that is, not before A.D. 800 and not after 950.

In assessing our material from the point of view of its relation to an actual market town, we think it is justifiable to say that it has strengthened the belief that considerable commercial activity was carried on here. Imported articles such as pottery and glass sug-

gest trade rather than plunder. Moreover, in both excavations vessels of soapstone are rather common. This material cannot have been obtained on the spot, as soapstone is not native to the district. A reasonable explanation has been provided by Dr. Jan Petersen, who believes that these vessels were produced almost on a "factory basis" in districts where there were good soapstone quarries, and then sent from there to Kaupang for export. In the Viking town of Hedeby large quantities of soapstone cauldrons have been found, and these probably came from Kaupang. According to Ottar, as recounted by King Alfred, the route from Kaupang to Hedeby was well established in the ninth century.

More convincing evidence that we were on the right track was gathered when excavations were started in a field where common sense told us the actual market place ought to be situated, that is, the only place where there were no traces of burials. In this field the blackish earth had a greasy consistency, just like the Svart-jord (black earth) which has been noted at several early market sites such as Birka in Mälaren (Sweden) and others.

Some three hundred square meters of this field have





Excavating a boat-grave at Kaupang. Note how close the site is to the fjord.



*Left:* A shield boss of unknown type from one of the Kaupang graves. *Above:* Granite and oak anchor found at Kaupang, shown *in situ*.





*Left:* Bronze ornaments of local origin from the Kaupang boat-graves. *Right:* Anglo-Irish bronze ornaments found in the boat graves.



## VIKING TRADE continued

been excavated up to now. A well constructed jetty built of small stones has come to light, as well as foundations for houses of various kinds. Among the abundant material from this part of our excavations should be noted a heavy anchor made of granite and oak, weighing some eighty kilograms, masses of animal and fish bones, giving evidence of a farming economy and of local fishing, slag and refuse from the local iron production and last, but not least, a considerable number of fragments of imported glass and pottery, which were scattered all through our trial trenches. Types belonging to the ninth century are markedly in the majority. An examination by the radiocarbon method of some wooden poles found outside the jetty gave the date A.D. 840  $\pm$  90.

We think that sufficient evidence has now come to light for us to say that the name Kaupang is clearly derived from actual conditions prevailing during the Viking era in the district around the site. In view of the fact that our investigations are not completed, it is too early to attempt a definite assessment of the scope of the trade which passed through here. But it is quite clear that North Sea contacts must have been important for our market place. It is significant that of the two coins which have thus far been found one

is Frankish (Louis the Pious), the other Anglo-Saxon (Coenwulf of Mercia).

One of the many problems with which we are faced is whether the actual idea of organized markets such as this one came from Western Europe or whether they should be seen as local phenomena—in other words, whether the decline of this market place and others of the same type (which we know must have existed at least along the coast) was due to impulses connected with the whole Viking raid movement. If we can succeed in solving this problem satisfactorily, the solution may also throw light on the history of the earliest towns of our country.

Thus far the fate of our kaupang lies in darkness. The finds in the Svart-jord suggest that the fall came suddenly—it seems as though the houses were abandoned at some time in the first part of the tenth century, for a reason unknown to us. Thus far no strong evidence of a fire has been found. Curiously enough, no tradition about this market place has been handed down in the district apart from the place-name itself. Yet it must have been the center of commercial, religious and political contacts for over a century.

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DR. BLINDHEIM is Curator of the Viking Department of Oslo University's Museum of Antiquities. She has been directing excavations at Kaupang since 1950, and this year conducted still another season's work at the site.