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Scandinavia and the huns : a source-critical approach to an old question  
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# Debatt

## Scandinavia and the Huns

### A source-critical approach to an old question

That the Huns played a significant role in ‘the Transformation of the Roman World’ is not controversial. A number of monographs have been devoted to the fascinating history of this nomadic people (Thompson 1948; Maenchen-Helfen 1973; 1978; *Germanen, Hunnen und Awaren* 1987; Bóna 1991; Anke 1998; Šćukin et al. 2006; Anke & Externbrink 2007).

In syntheses of the Iron Age in Scandinavia, the Huns take their proper place at the end of the Roman Iron Age as those who triggered the Migration Period (Brøndsted 1960, p. 120 f, 179 f; Stenberger 1964, p. 446 ff; Magnus & Myhre 1986, p. 244 ff; Burenhult 1999, p. 287 f; Solbjerg 2000, pp. 69, 124; Jensen 2004, p. 12 ff.). In my own doctoral thesis I wrote a chapter on “The import of glass vessels to Scandinavia in the Hunnic period c. 375–454” (1984, p. 147 f). There I concluded that the Huns’ conquest of south-eastern Europe did not sever communications between Scandinavia and the Danubian basin. A new dimension to Hunnic influence in Scandinavia was presented by Charlotte Fabech (1991) in her interpretation of the Sösdala finds and others as evidence of Hunnic influence on funerary rituals in south Sweden. But it has to be remembered that those finds only cover one generation and that they are only found in a small area. The lasting effects of the Hunnic impact on Scandinavia were indirect; i.e. the consequences of the fall of the West Roman empire, the demographic changes in Eastern Europe, and the appearance of the so-called successor states (Heather 2005; Ward-Perkins 2005).

It was thus with great interest and expectation that I read a paper by Lotte Hedeager (2007a) in which she puts forward a new hypothesis about “Scandinavia and the Huns”. As always, it is a well written and interesting paper, filled with new ideas and interpretations. In the introduction she makes elegant use of the concepts of

the Annales School: *événements, la longue durée et conjonctures*. But it is an exaggeration to say that Scandinavian archaeologists have neglected Hunnic elements in the North (Hedeager 2007b). As I will demonstrate in the following, Hunnic elements are not easy to find.

#### *The Baltic Islands and the Huns*

Hedeager is convinced that “the Huns’ supremacy included parts of Scandinavia” (s. 44). This conclusion is based on a quote from a conversation between the West Roman ambassador Romulus and the East Roman envoy Priscus. Romulus said that “[Attila] ruled even the islands of the Ocean” (Priscus fr. 8, see Doblhofer 1955). Now, this is not supported by any other evidence. So one can simply reject it as too uncertain, or accept it as it is. Romulus probably believed what he said. So have later scholars and some include the Baltic islands in the realm of Attila. But it is sound scholarly procedure to be critical of narrative sources. I see no reason to believe with Hedeager that Romulus held “a competent geographical knowledge”. In my doctoral thesis I emphasised not the geographical but the social setting of the situation (1984, p. 99 f):

“The success of the Huns and Attila in particular made a deep impression on the Scandinavian peoples during the Migration period. We realise the role Huns and “Atle” play in the Nordic sagas, especially the *Hervarar Saga*. But this does not mean that we have any reason to believe that the king of the Huns ever controlled land in the north. “Hun” finds are very rare in Northern Europe (Werner 1956; Arrhenius 1982) and the Hun army has hardly been able to control the forested regions north of the Carpathians.

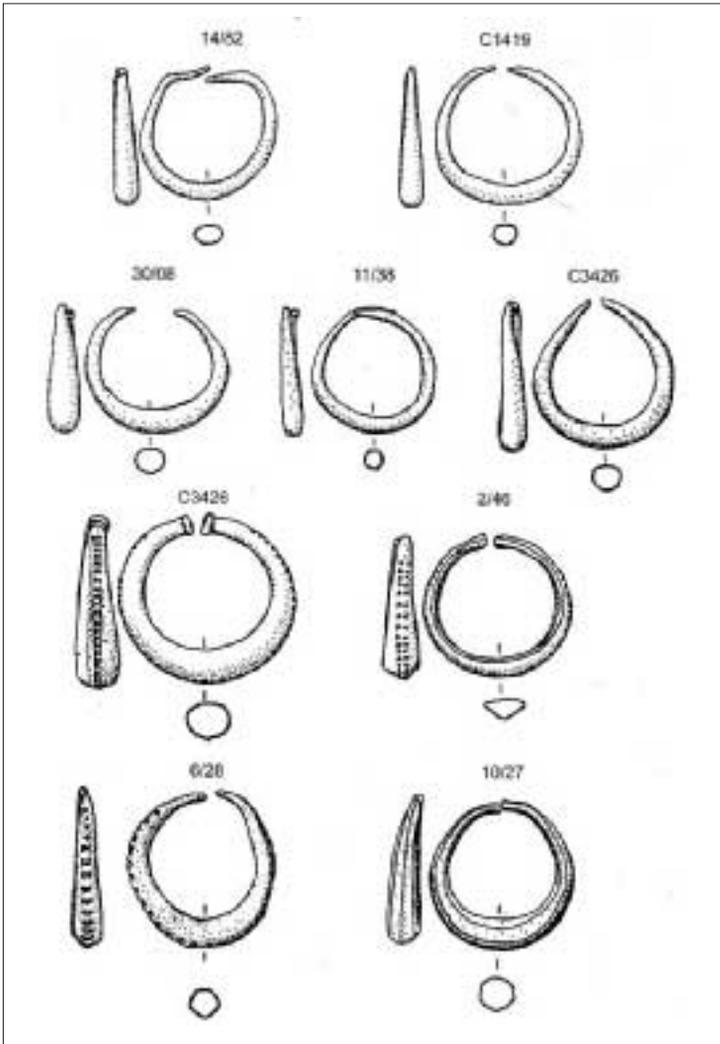


Fig. 1. Decontextualised gold rings from Denmark. Diameter 20–30 mm. After Hedeager 2007a.

Probably we have to interpret the information we get from Priscus in another way. Troops came from Scandinavia to win honour, fame, and wealth in the armies of Attila and his allied Germanic-speaking sub-kings. To be accepted, I guess that the leaders of the Scandinavians had to swear an oath of allegiance to the Hun ruler. This oath has been transferred to the area they came from, “the islands of the Ocean.” In this way Attila can have imagined that the Baltic islands were constituents of his realm.”

Attila may have *claimed* hegemony over the islands in the Ocean, but in reality it is unlikely that any Hun ever went there.

*The Archaeological Record of Scandinavia*

In her search for Huns in the archaeological record, Hedeager presents up-to-date theory but her factual reasoning is disappointing. It is not true that Roman goods stopped from the late fourth century (p. 46). It is true that burial customs changed and left archaeologists without a record of Roman imports in Denmark. But other parts of Scandinavia saw continued rich fune-



Fig. 2. A Migration Period silver ring of Nomadic 'pot-bellied' type from a multi-ethnic cemetery at Saint Martin de Fontenay in northern France. Diameter 12 mm. After Anke & Externbrink 2007, p. 321.

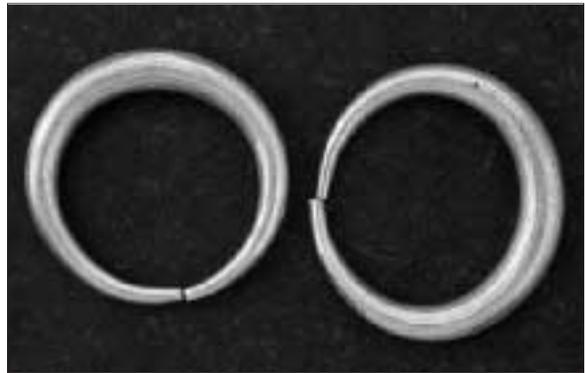


Fig. 3. Gold rings from an 11th century hoard found at Nore in Vamlingbo parish, Gotland (SHM 5279). Diameter 27 and 28 mm.

rary customs. In many rich graves of the 5th century we find imports from former Roman workshops, now under Barbaric control. In fact, some of the most eloquently Roman objects date to the fifth century. Most convincingly we can follow the process of *imitatio Imperii* and *interpretatio Scandinavica* in the gold bracteates. The earliest ones are imitations of Roman imperial medallions and gold coins, but the pictorial programme soon changes to adapt to Nordic myths and beliefs. Contrary to Hedeager, I see close contacts between Scandinavia and the late Roman world in the archaeological record of the 5th century.

#### *Earrings and Huns*

Ten gold rings from Denmark and Norway figure prominently in Hedeager's argument (fig. 1). They belong to a crescent-shaped type, open with pointed ends and a thickened middle. According to Hedeager they are Hunnic earrings and were not recognised as such by Joachim Werner (1956). However, the similarity between earrings from Hunnic finds and the Danish rings is illusory and based upon the lack of scale. Anyone familiar with earrings and finger rings from c. 1000–1200 would be suspicious. When I took part in the excavations of the settlement fort at Eketorp on Öland, we found rings in silver and

gilded bronze that look like the Danish rings 14/82, C1419 and 11/38 referred to by Hedeager. But they were not found in the context of the Migration Period fort. They belong to the Medieval phase of the fort, possibly dating from 1170–1240 (Borg 1998, p. 277). In fact, similar rings are common in Late Viking Period and Medieval Scandinavia.

Unfortunately, all of the Danish rings Hedeager discusses are decontextualised. None is known to have been found in wetlands like so many of the Migration Period gold finds. This observation makes Hedeager resort to a post-processual argument that the rings "held a different position to other gold artefacts" (p. 48). This is true, but not in the way Hedeager suggests.

The Danish rings are simple and do not offer the archaeologist many typological traits to study. But some observations can be made. Measuring 20–30 mm, the rings are all larger than any nomadic earrings I have encountered (c. 11–18 mm). They all lack a typical "pot-belly", as seen on one from a multi-ethnic Migration Period cemetery at Saint Martin de Fontenay in northern France that has been ascribed to a nomadic presence (fig. 2; Pilet 1994). This shape is rare, and most of the rings look like French *croissants* or German *Hörnchen*. Hedeager would have been wise to look for other possible origins

than the Huns, for instance, in the stores of the National Museum in Copenhagen. There you will find a number of similar rings from good contexts, some in well dated hoards (Lindahl 1992, p. 136 f)<sup>1</sup>. Doing a quick search on-line ([mis.historiska.se/mis/sok](http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok)), I found a number of gold and silver earrings and finger rings, many from well dated contexts, in Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm (fig. 3)<sup>2</sup>. The Danish and Swedish finds confirm the dating of the Eketorp rings to the 11th and 12th centuries AD. If they reflect any foreign influence, it is Slavic.

A gold ring from Vesterbø, Rogaland, Norway is mentioned by Hedeager as Hunnic. It was found in 1882 in a barrow, “lying separately on the bottom” of a SE–NW burial chamber. From the same mound come an iron spearhead and a sword. Remains of “crumbled bones” were found. Kent Andersson included the ring in his catalogue of Roman Iron Age finger rings, but not in his typology (1993 find 852). He did not date the ring, but today he considers it to date from the Viking Period (e-mail 8 October 2007). It is very similar to a gold ring from Lundby Krat dated to c. 1100 (Lindahl 1992, p. 136 f). The Vesterbø grave find is not unequivocally closed. The opposite is more probable. In Norway it is not uncommon to find secondary graves placed in Roman Iron Age and Migration Period stone chambers (Bjørn Myhre quoted by Siv Kristoffersen, e-mail 2 January 2008). To conclude, the Vesterbø ring cannot carry the evidential burden for a Hunnic presence in Scandinavia.

Since I have no detailed knowledge about nomadic earrings, I showed Hedeager's drawing of the Danish rings to Michel Kazanski in Paris and Bodo Anke in Berlin, both of whom have great knowledge of nomadic material culture (Anke 1998; Ščukin & Kazanski 2006; Anke & Externbrink 2007). Kazanski could not agree that the Danish rings are nomadic (Kazanski, *viva voce* 9 November 2007). Anke offers three arguments against an eastern or nomadic provenance. 1) The rings are all stray finds. 2) There are no further references to an eastern context. 3) There is an obvious typological difference between the Danish rings and nomadic rings like the one from Saint Martin de Fontenay (Anke, e-mail 4 February 2008).

I conclude that all Hedeager's rings in fig. 1 can be dated to the late Viking Age or the High Middle Ages. Thus, the distribution map where Hedeager has plotted the Danish rings onto Joachim Werner's 1956 map of nomadic 4th–5th century rings gives a false impression and must be rejected.

#### *Other Nomadic Finds in Scandinavia*

Concerning Anke's second point, Hedeager presents other finds to support the idea of Huns in Scandinavia. A nomadic mirror can possibly be identified among the bronze fragments found in one of the cremation barrows from old Uppsala (Arrhenius 1982, fig. 8; on this point Hedeager refers to the wrong paper by Arrhenius). The identification is not accepted by Wladyslaw Duczko (1996, p. 78). The uncertainty makes the find a possibility, but not a strong indication of Hunnic presence in Scandinavia. The relevance of the find is furthermore weakened by a recent dating of the burial to the Early Vendel Period, i.e. 550–600, a hundred years or more after Attila's death (Ljungkvist 2005).

Hedeager considers a tuft of hair found in the same barrow as a further argument in favour of a Hunnic influence on burial practice. Sune Lindqvist (1936, p. 201 f) rejected the find due to uncertain find circumstances, but referred to another hair find with a better context. It is from the Viking Period barrow Skopintull on Adelsö in Lake Mälaren (Rydh 1936, fig. 291). The grave goods contain several objects of eastern provenance, but the late date makes other influences than Hunnic ones more plausible.

#### *Animal Art and Huns*

The origin of Nordic animal art according to Hedeager is to be found in cultural transformations and a new Germanic identity caused by foreign influences, and “the Huns are for several reasons the obvious candidates” (s. 44). An eastern nomadic origin for animal art has been suggested before, but those who have rejected the idea have strong arguments. “According to our present knowledge, it seems out of the question that Eastern-Asiatic art with its own characteristic animal art can have influenced the art of the North” (Haseloff 1984, p. 110 f, my transla-

tion from German; his views are available in English, see Haseloff 1974). Haseloff emphasises that it was only after 400 years of contact that the Roman influences resulted in an art-form among Germanic-speaking peoples. He explains this with the closer interaction between Romans and Germanic tribes in the wake of political changes after the Hunnic conquests (Haseloff 1981, p. 4; cf. Kristoffersen 2000, p. 45 ff). It is surprising that Hedeager, who includes Haseloff's work of 1981 among her references, does not bother at all to counter his arguments for a Roman root of the animal art. This root appears clearly in the so-called Nydam style, coeval with the Hunnic invasion. In this style animals were not "the main organizing principle on the new artistic expression", but geometric chip-carving was, as demonstrated by Olfert Voss (1955; cf. Roth 1979, p. 58 ff). That these patterns have a Roman origin can hardly be called into question. Hedeager's statement that "animals are the media for social, religious, and political strategies" among the Huns (p. 48) may be true, but I cannot find any support for the assumption that this had any effect among sedentary Scandinavians. Also, animal art appeared among Barbarians already in the 3rd and 4th centuries, influenced by Roman decorated objects (Werner 1966; Roth 1979, p. 44 ff).

### *Shamans*

In a number of influential papers Hedeager has argued that the Scandinavian belief system was shamanistic. The Huns are used to support this view. She argues that the Huns took over from the Romans as the ideal of the Germanic-speaking peoples in Northern Europe. She suggests a development of "a new symbol system with animals as the organizing principle, ideologically without anchoring in the Christianized Roman world." This is an interesting idea, but is it more probable than the obvious alternative, a continued Roman influence? First, we do not know when the Nordic pantheon developed, but many scholars mean that its structure pre-dates the Late Roman period (Schjødt 1999, p. 15 ff). Tacitus certainly saw similarities between the Roman and Germanic gods in the 1st century and gave the Germanic gods Roman names (Rives

1991, p. 156 ff). Secondly, the surmised shamanism of the Nordic belief system is controversial (Schjødt 2003). In my view, we do not need any Huns to understand the Norse religious tradition.

### *Gold and Huns*

"The immense number of gold hoards in the Nordic area can be ascribed to the policy of the Huns and the political situation in general." (s. 47). No scholar disagrees with the last part of the sentence, but arguments can be raised against the first part. Frands Herschend (1980, p. 121 f; cf. Kyhlberg 1986) dates the importation of solidus coins to Öland to the 460s, i.e. after the Hunnic realm broke up. On Bornholm and Gotland, the solidi hoards are later still. Unminted gold is more difficult to date. However, heavy gold objects were made in Scandinavia long before the Huns appeared on the European stage. And many were made of gold that was imported after they had disappeared again. Thus many if not most gold hoards are the result of Roman policy, not that of Attila.

### *Nomadic Faces*

According to Hedeager, early Style I brooches from Scandinavia have human masks "with distinct Asiatic attributes" (p. 51). In a recent paper Claus von Carnap-Bornheim (2007) argues to the contrary. Nomadic masks found in Eastern Europe are in his opinion influenced by south Scandinavian masks. Many masks pre-date the Huns and the earliest are from the 3rd century. A significant difference between the nomadic and the Nordic is that the Nordic masks have a moustache whereas the nomadic ones have a chin beard. All nomadic masks depicted by von Carnap-Bornheim have round or straight eyes. Thus the presence of moustaches and the lack of chin-beards on the masks depicted by Hedeager indicate a Scandinavian origin. That some masks are slant-eyed seems to be the only "Asiatic" trait. But considering that the masks she depicts were made in a different way, being cast, and that they decorate women's brooches, it seems unnecessary to assume a Hunnic origin (cf. Arwidsson 1963).

*Men's Attire, Saddles and Bracteates*

Disregarding chronology, Hedeager also refers to men's attire as depicted on small gold-foil figures of the period 550–700 (her fig. 9). She assumes a direct Asiatic influence, a Hunnic impact on European dress. She refers to a paper by Hayo Vierck, but disregards what he actually wrote. Vierck presents two alternatives: one directly Asiatic via the Avars, and one indirectly Asiatic via the Goths (Vierck 1978a; cf. Arrhenius 1982, p. 77 fig. 11). There is no need for Huns.

The same is the case with the saddles. The earliest saddle with a wooden frame in northern Europe dates to the early 3rd century and has been found at Illerup in Jutland (Ilkær 2000, p. 110). I disagree with Hedeager when she writes that “the iconography of the gold bracteates has no obvious background in the material culture of the Roman Period and their central symbols belong in the Hunnic realm” (2007a, p. 54). I refer the reader to a paper by Anders Andréén (1991) where he argues that the runic text on some bracteates corresponds to three central terms in Latin: *dominus*, *felicitas* and *pius*. My own view of the bracteates has been published elsewhere (Näsman 1998; cf. Vierck 1978b). Morten Axboe (1991) has also emphasised the Roman background. That the bracteates start as an *imitatio imperii* and end as an emulation of Roman ideas seems more likely than any Hunnic explanation.

*Concluding Words*

Certainly, the brief three-generation period between the Huns' attack on the Gothic tribes in 375 and their defeat at Nedao in 454 saw fundamental changes in most parts of Europe. The Hunnic impact released strong tensions in the societal fabric of Europe. But the effect of the Huns was only indirect. The disintegration of the West Roman Empire and the establishment of a number of so-called successor states were factors of greater significance in the perspective of *événements* and *conjunctures* as well as *la longue durée*. In a recent study of three-leaf arrowheads from present-day Lithuania, Anna Bitner-Wróblewska concludes that they date to the ‘Hunnic period’, but “there is no reason to treat the dis-

cussed artefacts from Lithuania as a proof of direct contacts with the Huns” (2006, p. 118 f).

The conclusion about the “Hunnic period” in Bodo Ankes's doctoral thesis is well worth quoting: “... a new ethnogenesis of Germanic tribes took place; the social structure, settlement pattern and economic basis changed. A significant part of the shaping and development of Germanic kingdoms began. A totally new development and change in the Central European settlement areas took place, on which the later Medieval and Christian societal order was built. It is tempting to state that without the Hunnic impact, this development would not have happened until much later” (Anke 1998, p. 150; my translation from German). But it would have happened anyway, and not very much later. Had the Huns not succeeded, the Avars would have plausibly have done so 193 years later.

Thanks to Susan Canali who kindly revised my English.

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*End Notes*

- 1 Simple rings are found in hoards from Hågerup, tpq 1048; St. Frigård, tpq 1106; and Græse, c. 1130. A hoard from Lundby Krat, c. 1100, contains a decorated gold ring very similar to Hedeager's rings 2/46 and 6/28. Thanks to Peter Vang Petersen who helped me with information about the diameter of the Danish rings. His opinion, well known to Hedeager, is that the rings are Late Viking Period or High Medieval (e-mail 13 November 2007).
- 2 Two gold rings from a 11th century hoard at Nore in Vamlingbo on Gotland (SHM 5279) and a gold ring from the Medieval town Lund (SHM 622) are faceted like the Danish 10/27. A golden finger ring from Köpinge in Scania (SHM 3524) is a stray find similar to the Danish 2/46. Plain gold

rings are found at Dörby on Öland (SHM 1672), t.p.q. 1014, and the Medieval town Sigtuna (SHM 21135). Silver rings are found in the Hjortsberga hoard from Blekinge (SHM 3491; Hårdh 1976 Fund 2, Taf. 3), the Medieval town Lund (LKM 53436:692; Blomqvist & Mårtensson 1961, fig. 214; Hårdh 1976 Fund 92, Taf. 37:ii), and a bog find from Saxtorp in Scania, tpq 978 (LUHM 3625 a.o.; Hårdh 1976 Fund 117, Taf. 37:iii).

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## För en liberalisering av de svenska metallsökarreglerna

Sverige har stränga restriktioner mot allmänhetens användning av metallsökare. Nedan kommer jag att argumentera för att dessa regler tillkom utifrån en överdriven hotbild, att de i flera avseenden är skadliga och att det därför finns starka skäl för att mjuka upp dem. Bakgrunden till mitt inlägg är fem års givande samarbete med metallsökarsektionen inom Fornminnesföreningen i Göteborg.

Flera olika grupper i samhället har starka åsikter om metallsökare. Jag är arkeologisk forskare och vill komma åt det källmaterial och den gratisarbetskraft som en mera utbredd användning av metallsökare skulle alstra. En annan grupp är metallsökaramatörerna själva som vill ha större frihet att utöva sin hobby. Firmor som importerar och saluför metallsökare representerar det ekonomiska intresset. De kulturminnesvårdande myndigheterna vill väl i regel ha hårda restriktioner. Fornminnesplundrare, slutligen, struntar i reglerna hur de än ser ut.

### *En överdriven hotbild*

De kulturminnesvårdande myndigheternas restriktiva hållning grundar sig på en uppfattad hotbild. Att plundring med metallsökare före-

kommer är obestridligt: några plundrare har dömts för sådana brott i landets domstolar (Hennius 2004; 2008). Men plundringens omfattning har överdrivits kraftigt. Oron för »kriminella ligor» som plundrar fornlämningar är särskilt på Öland och Gotland mycket stor. Antikvariska tjänstemän föreställer sig att utländska skurkar springer omkring på småtimmarna med närmast magiska apparater och dammsuger åkarna på guld och silver med stor effektivitet (Gustafson 2000). Denna oro har lett till politikerpåtryckningar och medieframträdanden och därmed indirekt till att dagens restriktioner infördes i Kulturminneslagen 1991.

Året innan, 1990, prövade de annars mycket sansade forskarna Majvor Östergren och Jonas Ström instrumentet Electro-scope för Riksantikvarieämbetets räkning. De konstaterade att instrumentet var »uppbyggt efter slagrutepincipen» men bedömde ändå att det »kan praktiskt lokalisera ädelmetall på större avstånd, dvs flera hundra m» (Östergren 1991). Östergren sammanfattade att Electro-scope i dess dåvarande utförande var svårarbetat och vindkänsligt, men att det med tiden skulle kunna utvecklas och bli »utomordentligt farligt för vårt fornlämningsbestånd».