

Kort meddelande

Medieval string instrument finds from Sigtuna, including the earliest known key for a possible *nyckelharpa*

Swedish archaeology is not spoiled for finds of Medieval music instruments. Sometimes we come across pieces of them, and can just make out faint strains of Medieval music from the scattered fragments. In the collections of Sigtuna museum are a few bone flutes and several buzzers made of bone, and since 2000 there is also a tuning key for a string instrument.

The elk-antler key was found during an excavation at the Professorn site in Sigtuna, connected to an urban domestic environment. It is one of the very few archaeological finds that come labelled out of the earth, as a runic inscription on the key says that **eri x sliþi x harbu x þisi x hailum x hantum** – “Erre carved this harp with fortunate hands” (c.f. Gustavson 2008, p. 43). The text made it easy to determine its function; obviously it belongs to a string instrument. Musician Styrbjörn Bergelt believes that Erre’s “harp” may have been a lyre or a Slavonic *lyre gusli* (Bergelt 2006, p. 31). The key can preliminarily be dated to the last decades of the 11th century (Mats Pettersson, pers. comm., unpublished project).

In 2015, during sorting of Sigtuna museum’s finds after they were moved to a new depository building, another tuning key showed up (fig. 1). It emerged from the large excavation at the Trädgårdsmästaren site in the late 1980s and had simply been registered as an “object” made of antler. It is slightly smaller than Erre’s key, 77 mm long, with decoration in the Urnes style of an astonishingly high quality (Uaininn O’Meadhra, pers. comm.). Like with Erre’s tuning key, there is a rectangular hole at the end, 8 x 10 mm in size, to be fitted onto the instrument’s tuning pegs. Unlike Erre’s key, which is straight, the decoration on the new find creates a short horizontal handle at the end, giving a bit more leverage. We cannot say for sure what instrument this object belonged to: all we know is that it was a string instrument. The key was attributed to building phase 4, AD 1050–1075, according to Björn Pettersson’s and Mats

Roslund’s chronology for the site (Wikström et al. 2011, p. 17 ff).

Yet another intriguing instrument find surfaced in January of 2016: a playing key for a *nyckelharpa* or similar instrument (fig. 2). The traditional Swedish string instrument *nyckelharpa* or “keyed fiddle” is equipped with keys with which the musician presses the strings and changes their pitch. This instrument is related to the hurdy gurdy, but is played with a bow like a violin, not with a resined wheel turned with a crank.

The key was found during excavations at the Handelsmannen site in Sigtuna, near the main street, in 1935, and was in fact identified as a key for a *nyckelharpa* already when the finds were registered. Unfortunately it was never dated or published, and was thus more or less forgotten.



Fig. 1. 11th century tuning key from the Trädgårdsmästaren site. Length 77 mm. Photo: Anders Söderberg/Sigtuna museum.



Fig. 2. 13th century playing key, possibly for an early *nyckelharpa*, from the Handelsmannen site. Length 125 mm. Photo: Anders Söderberg/Sigtuna museum.

The stratigraphical records of the excavation follow 1930s standards. Fieldwork was also hurried, as the archaeologist in charge Jan Erik Anderbjörk complains in his report (Anderbjörk 1935, p. 285). Nevertheless we seem to be lucky in this particular case as the key is one of few objects attributed to a distinct layer, unlike most of the finds, which were attributed to as wide ranges as “between 1.50 and 2.55 meters” depth below present street level”. The key belongs to layer C, at a depth of 1.05–1.40 meters, a highly organic layer that contained wood pieces and chippings. A layer of up to 0.35 meters’ thickness is a very well defined layer for this specific excavation, and even better: in Sigtuna 1.05 meters below the present level certainly means the Middle Ages, and so does the hint that the layer contained well preserved organic matter.

The layer above, layer B, was where glazed South Scandinavian Early Red Ware pottery appeared on the site according to the report. A

check on the finds shows that this was indeed the case, and this is important information. Such pottery came to Sigtuna in the 13th century, or possibly as a first few imports in the late 12th. Below layer C, in layers D and E we find a piece of proto-stoneware pottery of German origin and some sherds of Grey or Late Black Ware, that came into use in the late 12th century. Below this, in layers F and G at 2.5 meters’ depth, were two finds of Viking Period composite double combs. Finds of this comb type from Lund dated to the first half of the 11th century (Persson 1975, p. 320 ff) and a similar comb from the Trädgårdsmästaren site in Sigtuna has been dated to the early 12th.

This means that, despite poor stratigraphic records compared to modern standards, we do have a dating that seems fairly reliable. The key was found in a layer of the 13th century. Until recently, the earliest Scandinavian indication of the existence of the *nyckelharpa* has been a small

Fig 3. Portal, Källunge Church, Gotland. The left-hand musician seems to play a nyckelharpa. Scholars have been uncertain whether what looks like keys under the instrument's neck really represents keys, or the musician's fingers (c.f. Ling 1979, p. 44). Photo: Wolfgang Sauber/Wikimedia commons.



sculpture of a musician on the portal of Källunge Church on Gotland, dated to the mid-14th century (fig. 3). The Källunge sculpture is often referred to as our earliest evidence, but the interpretation was handled with some hesitation by the music historian Jan Ling in 1979 (p. 175), and treated as possible but weak evidence.

Can we say with certainty that the key belongs to a nyckelharpa? Could it belong to some predecessor like the organistrum (Schlesinger 1911) or a sibling like the hurdy gurdy? What is striking about the key is that it is so delicately slim and slender. This may rule out the huge organistrum. The shape and the size of the key seem exceptionally similar to modern nyckelharpa keys, strikingly enough to cause doubts about the dating among a few of the musicians that have seen it. In recent discussion among musicians acquainted with the instrument, the general judgement has been that it is difficult to completely rule the hurdy gurdy out, before we can study coeval instru-

ments, but the general feeling is that it most likely belongs to a nyckelharpa (Magnus Holmström, riksspelman, pers. comm.).

Ling assumed that the nyckelharpa could be dated back to between 1200 and 1460, depending on how one interpreted the Källunge sculpture (Ling 1979, p. 44, 174 ff). Just recently, a piece of a string instrument's body interpreted as that of a nyckelharpa was found in Wolin, Poland, and radiocarbon dated to the mid-13th century (Janowski et al. in press). If the interpretation is correct, it may give further support to the classification of the Sigtuna key as one from an astonishingly early nyckelharpa.

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