Beyond Wayland – thoughts on early medieval metal workshops in Scandinavia

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ABSTRACT: This paper reflects on and summarises the current state of research on early medieval (750-1100 AD) metal workshops in Scandinavia by way of examples from workshops and metalworking sites recovered via archaeological excavations and surveys over the last 30 years. A critique is presented of a number of features which occur perennially in Scandinavian archaeometallurgical presentations, such as the tendency to overemphasise the importance of written accounts and the common habit of over-interpreting archaeometallurgical finds.

Introduction

The use of metals in past ages is a subject of seemingly endless possibilities in terms of research and publications – Scandinavia is no exception. It is explicitly or implicitly included in most academic works within the fields of Iron Age and early medieval studies, but as with so many other important and fundamental cultural features, it is more or less taken for granted – as if the extraction and working of metals took place almost on its own. The situation was of course much more complex than that, and this paper aims to highlight some aspects of one of the fundamental prerequisites for metalworking – the workshop. The workshops and production sites listed below have mainly been found within the boundaries of modern day Sweden, but some important sites in Denmark, Norway, Finland and Estonia have been included (Fig 1). The timeframe is that of 750-1100 AD, often referred to as the Viking Period.

The ever-productive forge of myth and legend

In many studies of early medieval Scandinavia, the working of metals is mainly presented as taking place under the ever-watchful eyes of masterful smiths. These are often depicted as somewhat outside the norms and regulations of their contemporary societies, and their domain, the smithy, is just as often described as a symbolic border zone where the unknown lurks in the shadows (cf Burström 1990; Lindeblad 1996, 71-2; Hed


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