

'Central Place' aspects in Archaeology: a study of archaeological site in Uppåkra, Southern Sweden

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Abstract: *Uppåkra is an important archaeological site of Sweden. This site is known as Iron Age (c. 500 BC to 1000 AD) archaeological site in the Scandinavian perspective. On the other hand, central place is basically a geographical theory that seeks to explain the size and location of human settlement in the urban system and it defines archaeological sites with a combination of political, economical and religious functions. Methodologically the central place theory was followed to pursue the relevant factors of central place issues in archaeological context of Uppåkra. As a result, the cultural materials, special features and historical information indicate that Uppåkra witnessed more than 1000 years of human activities as central place with political, economical and religious functions.*

Key words: Central place, archaeology, Uppåkra, Sweden.

Introduction

Archaeology is a study about abandoned culture which has already been disappeared. Nevertheless the archaeological site reveals considerable data to interpret the past society through material culture and written sources. Undoubtedly it is a big challenge for archaeologists to interpret the context of the past society. On the other hand, central place theory is basically a geographical theory that defines the sites with combination of political, economical and religious functions as well as seeks to explain the number, size and location of human settlement in the urban system. In this paper the central place theory was applied on an archaeological site to pursue the relevant factors of central place issues which could help to create a possible understanding of central place in archaeological context.

Objective and Methodology

The aim of this paper is to push the exploration of the concept 'central place' and to refine the use in the field of archaeology on the basis of the chronological perspective of Uppåkra. Finally, the objective is to find out the interrelationship between the cultural materials of Uppåkra and the functions of central place. Mainly the research focuses on:

1. What is central place in the archaeological context?
2. What type of functions play role to identify a central place in archaeological context?
3. How the cultural materials, special features and historical sources indicate the function of a central place?

The term 'central place' was first pointed by American geographer Mark Jefferson in 1931. Meanwhile, two German economic geographers Walter Christaller and August Lösch provided some new discussions about central place (Jefferson, 1931).

Eventually the term 'central place' was exposed as a theory introduced by Walter Christaller in 1933. The theory of central place also pursue the relation between town and country, between urban and rural society as well as the economic activities within the city, town or in a village (King, 1985). Methodologically this theory has been applied to identify the criteria of central place concept in Uppåkra.

Result and Discussion

Uppåkra is located seven kilometres away from the coastal area of Southern Sweden. The site was first recognized in the 1930s. The accumulated layer might have begun from Pre-Roman Iron Age (c. 100 BC) which continued until the Migration Period (c. 500 AD). Introductory archaeological explorations and limited scale excavation were carried out during 1996-1999. The cultural materials and occupation layers of Uppåkra indicate that the site witnessed different building phases. The site is also noticed as elite settlement basis on social organization, special production, ruling group and exchange networks. The manufacture of copper alloy ornaments of high quality indicates that the place was a central place during the Late Iron Age. The external contacts of Uppåkra might have been connected from Roman Iron Age (100 AD-400 AD) (Larsson, 2002; Stjernquist, 2004).

Cultural Materials and Periodical Context of Uppåkra

As I mentioned in the beginning a number of cultural materials reported from Uppåkra from different layer and these materials indicate that Uppåkra witnessed six periodical phases. As we see in the below table that the timeline of Uppåkra started from the Pre-Roman Iron Age and continued until the Viking Age.

Table 1: Periodical context of Uppåkra

Phase	Period	Timeline
I	Pre-Roman Iron Age	c. 500 BC-200 BC
II	Early Roman Iron Age	c. 200 BC-200 AD
III	Late Roman Iron Age	c. 200 AD-400 AD
IV	Migration Period	c. 400 AD-550 AD
V	Merovingian Period	c. 550 AD-800 AD
VI	Viking Age	c. 800 AD-1050 AD

Näsman has shown that the trade context of the Early Iron Age as the first stage of his model consisted of gift exchange and luxury items. The model of Näsman and the cultural materials of Uppåkra strengthen the idea about the long distant trade and the distribution of local production. Presumably the tradition continued through the Migration and the Merovingian Period basis on cultural materials of Uppåkra (Näsman, 1990).

Uppåkra in the Roman Iron Age and the Migration Period

The weapon findings, precious metal and Roman imports in Uppåkra indicate nobility during the Early Roman Iron Age to the Late Roman Iron Age (Stjernquist, 1977; Lund Hansen, 1987; Hedeager, 1990). Several spectacular cultural materials found from

Uppåkra which is dated back to first century AD. Glass with cut and polished decoration, various types of gold pendants, brooches, denars were significant among them. These findings indicate aristocratic presence as well as a point to a contact network between Uppåkra and the surrounded world during the Roman Iron Age and the Migration Period (Hårdh and Larsson, 2002).



Figure 1: Patrices for gold foil figures

(Source: B. Almgren, LUHM. 2:1 in Hårdh, 2003.)

Gold, silver and gilded ornaments are also noticed from Uppåkra that express craftsmanship during the Migration Period in Uppåkra. Gold foil figures were also noticed from Uppåkra and that is exclusive and rare findings in south Scandinavian context (Watt 1999 in Hårdh 2003). Other typical sign of Migration Period was cruciform brooches. These brooches found from some places of western Sweden, Norway and England (Hårdh, 2002).



Figure 2: Gold objects of Uppåkra.

(Source: Bengt Almgren in Larsson & Lenntorp, 2004.)

The other indication of central place is some Roman copper coins found from Uppåkra belonging to 4th to 5th century AD. These coins could have been used for payment during the Migration Period. The tradition was probably continued between the Migration and the Merovingian periods (Hårdh, 2003).

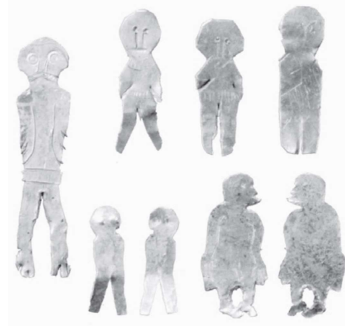


Figure 3: Thick gold foil figures from Uppåkra.

(Source: B. Almgren, LUHM (4:1) in Watt, 2004.)

The gold foil figures are also known as guldgubbar refer to small figure of men or women or sometimes animal embossed and scratched on gold foil. These embossed figures were made with a high technical delicacy. The colour of the gold foil figure suggests that most of them were made of pure gold and few of them were made of an alloy with high gold content (Watt, 2004).

Enigmatic House of Uppåkra

A house was found in Uppåkra during 2001 along with four big postholes. On the other hand several remains of house were found in 2000 as well. Those remains dated back to the Roman Iron Age. The location of the house is in the centre of the settlement on the south direction (Larsson, 2003; Hårdh, 2006). Archaeological excavation revealed a complex sequence of layers from that house. A high timber-building with a stave-wall structure could have been built and re-built in several stages. The four big postholes of that house indicate that the posts would have been placed for the roof supports of the building. The imaginary posts of the house also indicate that the house was used for a long time from the Roman Iron Age to the Viking Age (Larsson, 2006; Stjernquist, 2004).

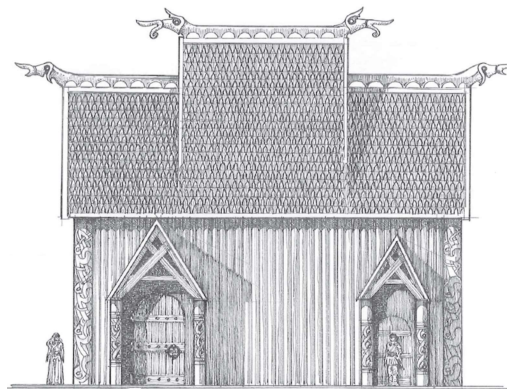


Figure 4: Hypothetically reconstructed house 2 at Uppåkra.

(Source: Loic Lecareux in Larsson & Lenntorp, 2004.)

It is very difficult to interpret the house of Uppåkra that whether it is cult house or a hall (See fig. 4). Several different layers and findings are excavated from Uppåkra. At the same time the radiocarbon dating indicate an early time period with the value of 2080 ± 45 BP (Ua-22073). The calibrated date indicates the period of 210 BC-30 AD. So, it may be assumed that the earlier house level is probably connected to the Late Roman Iron Age and the Migration Period.

Spectacular Beaker and Glass Bowl

One of the spectacular finding from Uppåkra was a beaker excavated in 2001 from the so-called cult house that is made of copper alloy with rim and silver. The bands of the beaker are coated with gold (Grandin, 2004; Hårdh, 2004).

The beaker is suggested as very unique object that expresses aristocracy and represents as Migration Period object. The iconographic style of that beaker indicates mythological aspects as well. This type of item was probably made for the elite class. The beaker also indicates skilful craftsmanship as well as expresses a central place context with aristocracy, ceremonies, myths and legends. Probably the item was made locally (Hårdh, 2006 and Hårdh, 2004).



Figure 5: Uppåkra beaker.

(Source: Bengt Almgren, LUHM, Lund in Hårdh, 2004.)

Another magnificent object is a glass bowl excavated from Uppåkra in 2001 along with the metal beaker. The bowl was also found from the so-called cult house. The suggested date of the glass bowl is about 500 AD and the context of the glass bowl in the house is from the Late Migration Period (Stjernquist, 2004).



Figure 6: Uppåkra glass bowl.

(Source: Bengt Almgren, LUHM in Stjernquist, 2004.)

The so-called cult house, the beaker and the bowl indicate Uppåkra as a central place as well as give an idea about the skilful artisans and craftsmanship. The beaker and bowl might have been used by the elite peoples in the society. The beaker was probably used as drinking vessels for ceremonial purpose (Hårdh, 2010; Stjernquist, 2004).

Conclusion

The cultural materials and occupation layers of Uppåkra indicate that the site witnessed different building phases. The site is also noticed as elite settlement basis on social organization, special production, ruling group and exchange networks. The manufacture of copper alloy ornaments of high quality indicates that the place was a central place during the Late Iron Age (Carnap-Bornheim, 2010). On the other hand, the external contacts of Uppåkra might have been connected from Roman Iron Age (100 AD-400 AD). The evidence of aristocratic society, skilled craftsmanship, ceremonies, contact networks, myth and legends indicate the central place character of Uppåkra (Larsson, 2002 and Stjernquist, 2004).

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