Gamla Uppsala

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Gamla Uppsala

The heyday of Gamla Uppsala spans from the first centuries of our era to the latter part of the thirteenth century. Witness to the magnificent and exciting past of the site is borne not least by the three Royal Mounds, which rise majestically above the fertile Uppsala Plain. The Mounds are powerful symbols of domination and faith, which leave nobody unaffected.

During the Iron Age some settlements developed into important centres for larger areas. These could be trading centres, religious centres and demesnes of the state. Archaeological finds indicate that there was a settlement at Gamla Uppsala as early as the third century AD. The true heyday of the place, however, occurred in the fifth and sixth centuries AD, i.e. in the Migration Period as the time is termed. In this period a Royal Demesne is founded and Gamla Uppsala became the power centre of “Sveariker” and one of the most important cult sites of Scandinavia.

It is easy to assume that the basin of lake Mälaren (Mälaren-dalen) was an isolated out-of-the-way region in the world at this time, but the truth is that parts of the society were well advanced – economically, culturally and technologically. Contacts with the rest of Europe were lively and handicraft was at the highest level, especially that of the art of the goldsmith. Economy was primarily based on animal husbandry, subsistence farming and trade with products of iron and fur.

A world in flux
Europe in the fifth and sixth centuries was characterised by great revolutions in society – both economical and political. The Roman Empire, which had united large parts of Europe, was weakened: the Huns (a nomadic people

Fragment of a gold object from the East Mound. The gold sheet, which is decorated with horizontal bands covering the whole surface, is an exquisite example of the art of the goldsmith in the Migration Period.
of Asiatic origin) attacked from the East
initiating the Great Migrations. It was
a time of regional power struggles. Dif-
ferent tribes waged war on one another,
local chieftains tied tracts of land to their
persons forming little kingdoms. Raids of
pillage were carried out, epidemics fol-
lowed suit and in their tracks the entire
population of Europe dwindled.

Present-day Sweden did not exist at
this time but the area was, as was all of
Europe at that time, divided into loosely
organised petty kingdoms of varying sizes
and influence. Society was hierarchically
organised with clear social borders and
the war-like ideal of the ruler prevailed.
The clan was the node of the social struc-
ture and on the strength of his place in
the clan the individual could gain a posi-
tion in society.

The realm of the “Svear”
Out of this tribal society a ruling class
emerged. One of the most influential and
legendary clans was the clan of the “Yng-
lingar”. According to legend the god Frey
was the ancestor of the clan of the “Yng-
lingar” in Svitjod (the realm of the Svear)
and he appointed Gamla Uppsala his
Royal Demesne. Thanks to Frey, or Frö as
he was increasingly called in the realm
of the Svear, crops grew richer, peace
abounded in the land and people
sacrificed to him for good harvests.

We encounter the fates of the
Svea Kings, particularly their
modes of dying, in the poem Yn-
glingasaga, which introduces the historical work Heimskringla by the Icelandic poet Snorri Sturluson from the 1230s. Snorri’s main source was Ynglingatal, a poem supposed to have been composed in the tenth century by the Norse poet Tjodolf. Many of the Uppsala kings in Snorri’s Ynglingasaga are more or less mythological characters, but it is important to bear in mind that the tales date from a time when people did not separate myth from reality. The “Ynglingar” were considered to descend directly from the fertility god Frey, and hence consequently equipped with divine properties. The king’s superhuman qualities revealed themselves mainly in his power over the year’s crop. In good years he received the people’s homage but also had to bear the blame if the crops failed. In the Ynglingasaga we are told that during the reign of king Domalde there was a severe famine caused by crop failure, and this displeased the “Svarr”:

“The Chieftains had a counsel and agreed that their king Domalde was the cause of the plight and that they should sacrifice him for good crops and kill him and stain the sacrificial spot red with his blood. They did so”.

In the latter part of the chronicle, however, kings are mentioned who may have had historical models, e.g. Aun, Egil, Ottar and Adils. According to Snorri, Aun and Adils were buried at Uppsala and Ottar at Vendel. It is chronologically quite reasonable to see the burials in the Uppsala Mounds as those of the “Ynglinga” kings, but it is an assumption that is totally impossible to prove and it does not quite tally with the finds, at least not with those of the East Mound. The few bone fragments found there are those of a young woman or possibly a woman and a boy.

Village life
The “Ynglinga” dynasty was part of an aristocracy which held physical labour in contempt and did not concern itself with
man, amused themselves and slept in the same room although their conditions of life, rights and social standing were vastly different.

The free person's integrity was well protected. Nobody was allowed to harm or kill a free man and sexual abuse against a free woman was not tolerated. The thralls on the other hand, had few or no rights at all but could enjoy a good reputation despite their lack of freedom. They were owned by the yeoman like cattle and could be sold, rented or even killed at the owner's whim. A thrall woman's child belonged to her owner and the child itself became a thrall.

The yeoman and his wife ruled the farm jointly but their spheres of responsibility were strictly separated. The women had the daily care of the household, servants, supplies and resources. They wove, sewed, cooked and prepared hides and furs. The men's tasks included farming, forestry, hunting and fishing. The men represented the farm and the family to the outside world.

Although the prehistoric society appeared strikingly patriarchal on the judicial and political level, many women seem to have exercised great influence. When the man was away travelling or fighting the wife often took over the man's functions on the farm, and as a widow she could gain a very independent position indeed. In mythology and poetry such strong women assume at least as prominent a position as the men.

Every yeoman on his farm had to be his own blacksmith and could probably use the most common tools. We know from finds that there were smiths of great skill, too. The most common tools of the smith were hammers and tongs.

other activities than war, hunting and sports. But what was life like to the ordinary person in the sixth century?

People on the farm lived closely together and the yeoman worked side by side with his servants. Children and adults, women and men, servants and the yeo-
The royal mounds

People have been buried at Gamla Uppsala for over 2000 years and originally there were between 2000 and 3000 burial mounds in the area. Most of the grave field has been turned into arable land, house plots and gravel pits, so today only 250 mounds remain.

In the sixth century Gamla Uppsala became the site of royal funerals. The place was selected with care and to enhance the overpowering visual impact they were built high up on the ridge as symbols of divinity and power. Thousands of days’ work by hundreds of people were required in order to create one such monument. Only very powerful people could command resources of that magnitude.

By burning the deceased and his equipment he was transferred into another world through the devouring power of
fire. The funeral pyre could reach a temperature of close to 1500 degrees Centigrade. The charred remains of the dead were covered by a cairn, which was then covered by gravel and sand with a thin layer of turf on top.

"Odin decided that all dead should be burned on a pyre ... . He said that each one should come to Valhalla with the possessions he had with him on the pyre ... . It was their belief that the higher the smoke rose the higher the position he would reach and the more of his possessions that burned with him the more powerful he would become."

From the Ynglingasaga.

The excavations
In the 1830s scholarly theories were put forward suggesting that the Royal Mounds at Gamla Uppsala were not Royal Mounds at all but simply natural formations. Such an affront to the old national symbols could not be accepted, and to avoid any doubt the then Crown Prince, later King Karl XV, initiated an archaeological excavation.

The work was commissioned to the National Antiquary, Bror Emil Hildebrand who started excavating the 9 metre high East Mound in 1846 in the hope of finding the grave of a King of the Svear.

The excavation was a complicated and risky undertaking that aroused a lot of publicity at the time. With painstaking effort a 25 metre long tunnel was dug into the grave in the central cairn of the mound. A clay pot was found there, full of burnt bones with fragments of the fire-damaged grave gifts scattered about. The finds were difficult to interpret and not as magnificent as had been hoped; moreover there was great uncertainty as to the sex and age of those buried here.

Almost three decades later, in 1874, Hildebrand started excavating the West Mound, opening up an enormous shaft all the way to the cairn in the centre of the mound. Beneath the cairn there were traces of the funeral pyre, burnt bones and grave gifts. As Hildebrand could not see any significance in the finds he made this time either, his faith in the Royal Tombs began to falter.

Nowadays we know more about the grave finds, from the East as well as from the West Mound. Among the most important finds from the East Mound were little frag-
ments of pressed bronze sheet decorated with a dancing spear-carrier. These probably adorned a helmet of a kind known from several grave finds from Uppland. Fragments of gold objects (see p. 3) that may have come from the embellishments of a single-edged battle knife of the kind known as a scramasax were also found. The equipment of those buried also included one or more glass goblets, a board game, a comb, a whetstone and what may have been a palette.

So, who was buried in the East Mound? After a number of investigations of the bones, most scholars agree that the Mound was raised over a woman or, possibly, a young man followed by a woman in the grave. The expensive gifts tell us that whoever was buried here was probably a member of a royal family, perhaps a queen. Rich women's graves are known from elsewhere in Scandinavia. One of the most renowned is that of the Oseberg ship, a Viking Period woman's boat grave discovered in 1904 on the Oseberg farm in Norway.

In the grave under the West Mound the bones
of an adult man were found together with those of animals, presumably the provisions given to the dead received for his final journey. Charred remnants typical of a male warrior's equipment were also found. High status weapons and exclusive objects, locally produced as well as imported, show that the cremated person had belonged to the warlike elite, possibly a chieftain or even a king. Amongst his equipment were found a Frankish sword embellished with gold and garnets and a game with Roman pieces of ivory. He was dressed in an expensive costume, made in part with Frankish goldstitched cloth and around his coat he wore a belt with a splendid buckle. Four cameos of eastern origin probably adorned a casket. The finds clearly indicate the faraway contacts which people of the Uppsala plain had in the sixth century.

The grave under the Central Mound has never been investigated, but all three Royal Mounds have been dated to AD 475–580. Northeast of the three Royal Mounds, close to the Odinsborg restaurant, there is a fourth mound, the so-called Ting Mound. There is much to suggest that the Ting Mound is a grave, but it has never been excavated.

The boat graves at Vendel and Valsgärde
A new grave ritual was introduced to the Uppsala region towards the end of the sixth century. Selected and noble-born persons were entombed in boats with all the equipment needed for the final voyage. The most splendid of these graves have been found at Vendel and Valsgärde. Chronologically the boat graves succeed the Royal Mounds but the oldest of the gifts at Valsgärde and Vendel correspond to those in the Royal Mounds at Uppsala.

Viking Period boat graves
at Gamla Uppsala
In 1973 archaeologists found four boat graves in the grounds of the vicarage of Gamla Uppsala church. One of them contained the remains of a woman who had been buried without cremation. She was provided with, among other things, a set of jewellery containing oval brooches, one larger brooch and some 60 beads. The most remarkable item is a bronze pendant in her string of beads in the image of a woman carrying a mead horn. It can be interpreted as Freya or some other female divine power: a Valkyrie or a Dis. The woman was buried in magnificent clothing including silk imported all the way from China.

Rite and cult

The German historian Adam of Bremen gave us his view of the cult at Gamla Uppsala in the eleventh century. In one of his writings he relates an eyewitness description of a religious ceremony some time in the 1070s. The time is the last phase of heathendom, which, according to Adam, had its main stronghold at Gamla Uppsala. In his chronicle he tells about “a famous temple, all adorned with gold” where people worship three idols. Thor, the most powerful, has his seat in the middle of the hall and on either side of him Odin and Frey are seated. The priests bring the sacrifices from the people to each one of the gods. If pestilence or famine threaten they sacrifice to Thor, if war to Odin and if a wedding is to be held to Frey. Every nine years a great common feast is held when people from all over the realm of the Swears come to take part in the sacrificial ceremonies.

“For nine of everything living of male gender is sacrificed. Their blood placates the gods. Their bodies, on the other hand, are hung up in the grove which is right by the sanctuary. This grove is so holy to the heathens that every tree is considered divine as a result of the death and decay of those sacrificed. Even dogs and horses can be seen to hang beside humans, and a Christian told me how he had seen seventy-two bodies hang there helter-skelter. Besides, there are many songs, which are sung at the performance of such a sacrifice, but they are indecent and hence best concealed.”

Adam of Bremen, c. 1075.

For nearly a thousand years, the provoking words of Adam of Bremen have served as the model for our view of the pre-Christian religion at Gamla Uppsala. But the question is, how trustworthy is Adam’s account of the sacrificial ceremonies? He had never himself been to Gamla Uppsala, but relied upon hearsay by the Danish King Sven Estridsson who in his youth was one of the housecarls of the Svea King. Adam’s mission was to spread Christianity and hence it was in his interest to portray the heathens in as barbaric a light as possible.

Many antiquarians have been fascinated by Adam’s heathen temple and have speculated about its possible where-
abouts. In 1926 Professor Sune Lindqvist found traces of some thirty posts under the spot where Gamla Uppsala church now stands. Some of these he interpreted as the remains of the old Uppsala temple. Later scholars have dismissed Lindqvist’s theories. They maintain that there never was a temple in the strict sense of the word at Gamla Uppsala. Still, while we may be critical when interpreting Adam’s texts, and he may have misunderstood some things, others maintain that there is no reason to doubt Adam’s information about Gamla Uppsala being an important cult site to the Svear until the second half of the eleventh century.

The temple Adam described is more likely to have been a royal hall, i.e. a building where the king made important decisions, received guests and held religious ceremonies where food and fermented drink were consumed under ritual forms. It is safe to assume that the last element in the word Uppsala stems from Old Norse salr or salir meaning precisely hall. In 1990 a great Iron Age hall was excavated on a plateau north of the church and some of the postholes Lindqvist found in the 1920s may very well have been the remnants of another royal hall.

The sacrifice

The occurrence of public cultic feasts fits very well with what scholars know about the pre-Christian religion. Such feasts were celebrated in the autumn, in the winter, around Christmas-time and in April at the spring equinox, and were called blot. The verb to blota means to strengthen, and the object was to strengthen the gods.

Animals were sacrificed to honour the gods and people gathered to take a holy meal together. The blood was believed to have special power, and was therefore sprinkled on the idols, on the walls and on the participants of the cult activity. Some sources also mention human sacrifice. On a pictorial stone from Lärbro on Gotland a scene is depicted where people are sacrificed and hanged from a tree. How frequent this practice may have been is hard to say, but human sacrifice was probably not a common feature at the blot feasts.

It was the ruler’s task to lead the ritual sacrifice which was performed to help the crops and maintain peace. If the crops failed, the king was blamed. Towards the end of paganism it was not uncommon for kings to be influenced by Christianity, so as to avoid this duty.

The sources mention holy places where
rituals and cult activities were held, frequently out of doors. The place-name Torslunda in Uppland, for instance, demonstrates that Thor was worshipped in a holy grove (lund). The cult site could also be a stone setting or a mould where people sought contact with their ancestors.

**Gyðjar and vælvar**

In pre-Christian religious practice women occupied an obvious place. In public cult there were women leaders, priestesses called gyðjar (plural of gyðja). One of their tasks was to bless the holy mead during the ritual sacrifice. The office of the gyðja had a high status and presupposed a noble birth.

There were also women equipped with magical powers called vælvar (plural of vælva) (Sibyls). They did not belong to the religious sphere, rather they occupied a place outside society. The vælva could sejð (foretell the future), bewitch and enchant, properties which made her feared and respected at the same time. She travelled a lot in the communities and was called upon when a crop failed or some other misfortune had occurred. She often arrived like a queen with a great following. Her main attribute was the wand, vælur, which gave her the name. The rituals of the sejð were similar to those of the Lappish nojd, and like him, the vælva used a drum.
The myths and the gods

Written sources do not abound concerning the pre-Christian religion in Scandinavia, but some of the Icelandic sagas speak about the gods and the mythology. Adam of Bremen lists Odin, Thor and Frey in his description of the cult at Gamla Uppsala, but does not describe Nordic mythology more closely.

According to Snorri Sturluson's Edda the ancient Nordic world was divided into two parts: **Midgard**, the world where people lived, and **Utgard**, the mysterious...

The Earth-snake coils around the earth disc where Utgard, home of the Giants and Midgard of the humans were located. In the centre is the castle of the gods, Asgard with the verdant ash-tree Yggdrasil.
and dangerous world where giants and all kinds of fabulous beasts roamed. In the middle of Midgard there was the fortress Asgard, the home of the gods. The gods met daily in council under the eternally green ash-tree Yggdrasil, the world tree. Here the nornor also lived by Urd’s well. They were wise women who knew the fates of the world and stipulated the length of the life of every child born. Yggdrasil had great roots and at one of them the dragon Nidhögg was gnawing. One day he would have gnawed through the whole root and at that time the whole world would come to an end. In the sea around Midgard the Midgard serpent lay, an enormous snake encircling the world and keeping it together by biting its own tail.

**The creation myth**

Before the creation of the world there was Chaos, Ginnungagap. The first living creatures were the hermaphrodite giant Ymer and the cow Audhumbla who licked an anthropomorphic creature out of salty stones. It was Bure who later begot the son Bor. Bor and the giant woman Betsla had three sons. One of them was Odin, destined to be ancestor of the Aesir (asarna), the family of gods. Bor’s sons killed the giant Ymer and created the world from his body. Order was created out of chaos, natural laws and seasons were established and the sun and the moon found their orbits in the sky.

But the world was ageing and headed for its destruction in Ragnarök, the ultimate natural disaster and social dissolution. A ferocious fire-storm swept over the earth and the people fought one another in bitter wars. The Aesir went into action against the evil powers but nobody was victorious in the final struggle. A new world arose ...

**The powers that ruled the world**

The myths tell about the Aesir who were constantly engaged in maintaining the cosmic order. The people prayed to them for life, health, peace, fortune in war, and fertility. The Vanir belonged to the group
of gods in Asgard, but it is told that the Aesir and the Vanir once were at war with each other. The Vanir were gods of fertility, Frey and Freyja being the great personages in the myths.

The worst opponents of the Aesir were the giants, powers of chaos threatening the divine order to shape the world to their own minds. However, there is no sharp distinction between Aesir and giants. Odin, the foremost of the Aesir was of giant ancestry himself and several of the Aesir married giantesses. Dwarves occupied the Netherworld. They were skilled craftsmen and ruled over the metals. Like the giants they belonged to the powers that Aesir and people must outwit and fight. Dwarves are easily confused with elves, another kind of subterranean being, but without evil minds. They assisted the Aesir in their struggle against the giants.

Female powers occupied a central position in old Norse religion. The disir were collective goddesses of fertility invoked in public and private cult. A so-called Disablótt (sacrifice to the disir) was held once yearly at the spring equinox. As a remnant of the cult of the disir a fair is held at Uppsala called the Distingsmarknad.

The norms were powers of destiny living by Urd's well under the world tree Yggdrasil where they carved the fates of people in wood. Urd is an old word for destiny, which also may mean death.

The valkyrias were another category of female powers of destiny, having to do with the battle-field. The word valkyria means "war-selectress", those who select who is to die in battle. After the battle the valkyrias brought the fallen warriors to Odin's realm in Valhalla.

A gloomy female being was Hel, who governed the realm of death, Hel, or with a different name, Nifelheim. It was a cold, damp and grey place where people who didn't die in battle were thought to go.

The tale of the death of Balder and Loki's punishment

When the beautiful son of Odin and Frigg, Balder started to dream ill-pot-tending dreams about his life, Frigg was worried and made all things in the world take an oath not to harm Balder. Only the mistletoe was overlooked, because it was so small and insignificant. Since Balder now was invulnerable, the gods amused themselves with target shooting at him with all kinds of weapons without harming him. But Loki tricked the blind Höder into shooting at Balder with a branch of mistletoe which changed itself into an arrow and killed the young god.

The gods were stupefied, but Frigg sent a message to Hel to persuade her to let Balder return from the realm of the dead. Hel promised to agree to this only if everything in the world would cry for him.
Gods and humans, plants, animals and stones then cried bitterly, all but a giant woman who refused to shed a single tear over the death of Balder. The giant woman was of course none other than Loki in disguise.

Odin was frantic with grief after Balder’s death and wanted to punish Loki, who turned into a salmon and hid in the rapids. But the Aesir saw through his disguise and caught him in a net. They brought him to a cave, tied him and fixed a poisonous snake over his head so the poison dripped over his face. His wife Sigyn, however, stands by him and catches the drops of venom in a bowl. When the bowl is full she has to empty it and the poison then drips into Loki’s face who turns in agony so the whole world trembles. Thus he shall lie until Ragnarök.
Some Gods

BALDER
Son of Odin and Frigg. Balder was the mild affectionate god, loved by everyone. The white flower balders-brà (scent-less may-weed) is named after him.

FREY
From the family of the Vanir. God of fecundity, pleasure and peace. His statue was provided with a gigantic penis. His wife was the giantess Gerd, but it was said that Frey was married to his sister Freyja before they moved to Asgard. With Gerd he sired the dynasty of the “Ynglingar”. Frey was the owner of the fantastic ship Skidbladner, which always had a fair wind and was so large that it held everybody in Asgard. In spite of that the ship could be folded like a handkerchief.

FREYJA
Frey’s sister. Freyja was often called Vanadis and was widely worshipped throughout Scandinavia. She was a goddess of fertility and foremost of the diser. Her home was Folkvang, where she received half of those that fell in battle, the other half went to Odin. Freyja was married to Od (presumably an alias for Odin) who later deserted her. Freyja knew how to scjöd, to foresee the future, an art she taught to Odin.

HEIMDAL
Guardian of the gods. Lived in Himlabergen (the Sky Mountains) and could see and hear everything that happened in the world. Heimdal was the son of nine sisters. He had three sons: Earl, Karl and Thrall – equivalents of the three earthly social classes.

IDUN
Goddess who owned the apples of eternal youth that the Aesir ate every day to stay young. She kept them in a box and as soon as one was eaten, there was a new one.

LOKI
From the family of giants. Married to Sigyn and had three children with the giant woman Angerboda, the three most ghastly monsters in Norse mythology, the Midgårdsorm (World) snake, the Fenris wolf and Hel.

One-eyed Odin, and Freyja depicted on a pendant from Östergötland. Different scales.
On one of the helmets from the boat-grave cemetery at Vendel fly the ravens of Odin, Hugin and Muninn.

**ODIN**

Father of the Aesir and the most powerful of the gods. He was god of death, war and wisdom, but appeared in many guises. He once pawned one of his eyes to the giant Mimer for a gulp from the well of wisdom. Odin lived in Valhalla, abode of dead warriors, where he gathered his forces of fallen warriors and princes. Odin’s eight-footed horse was called Sleipner and two ravens sat on Odin’s shoulders, Hugin (Mind) and Munin (Thought) who flew out in the world every morning to gather news for their master. Odin was married to the wise Frigg, who protected motherhood and marriage.

**THOR**

Muscular, red-headed fighter who had an equivalent in Hercules of the Romans. His trusty companion was the hammer Mjölnir which he threw at the giants, his most formidable opponents. Thor was god of thunder and rain travelling over the skies in a carriage drawn by he-goats. He was married to fair Sif, whose hair was of pure gold.

**TY**

Son of Odin and the strongest of the gods next to Thor. In the texts he appears as a god of wisdom and a warrior god. He gives the warriors courage and warrants them victory. Ty had only one hand because he had lost the right one in the jaws of the Fenris wolf when the gods tricked the wolf to let itself be fettered.

On this Migration Period gold pendant the Fenris wolf bites the right hand off Ty. Top right: Thor’s hammer Mjölnir, found in Skåne (Scania). Different scales.
The new faith

By the ninth century the position of Gamla Uppsala had changed. The role as a centre of power was transferred to the merchant town Birka on the island of Björkön in Lake Mälaren and towards the end of the Viking Period to Sigtuna. Nevertheless, Gamla Uppsala still maintained an important function as a religious centre and the reputation of the place spread far beyond Scandinavia.

The Vikings were warriors who terrified the population of Europe on their raids of pillage, mainly along the British and French coasts. But they were also peaceful merchants and skilled seafarers who made important discoveries. Among other things, the Vikings were the first Europeans to land in America, or Vinland, which was the Viking name for the new country.
Trade, increasingly important, and international contacts increased with Viking activity. Enhanced mobility brought with it cultural and religious influences, both from the Far East and Christian Europe.

The Northerners had met Christianity during trading voyages and raids of plunder, but it was through missionaries that the new faith was systematically spread. The missionaries generally came to Sweden from the South, from what was later to become known as the archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen. Initially the new faith spread very slowly and in places was met with violent opposition. This was especially strong at Gamla Uppsala, which probably strengthened its position as a cult centre during the missionary period. As late as in the 1070s Adam of Bremen described the heathen sacrificial rites at Gamla Uppsala. But many kings supported the Christian mission and saw opportunities to consolidate their power by collaborating with the Church. Nevertheless, the final victory of Christianity was not completed until some time in the twelfth century.

The silver treasure
One of the most spectacular finds from Gamla Uppsala is the silver treasure found one summer's day in 1891 when a farmer was clearing a ditch by a field immediately north of the church. The treasure comprises, amongst other things, goblets, chains, a reliquary crucifix and some mysterious objects hanging from one of the silver chains—perhaps a toothpick or an ear-scoop. The treasure has both heathen and Christian features.

The objects are of superior quality and date from the end of the eleventh century, at the end of the period between Christianity and paganism. Iconography and beautifully chased patterns tell of ancient cult usage. In one of the bowls there is a Viking period runic inscription: “uikula owns the bowl. Björnulf the bearded ...”.

Gamla Uppsala becomes an Archiepiscopal See
In the year 1164 the Church of Sweden received the Pope's permission to form an ecclesiastic province in its own right and the Archiepiscopal See was placed at Gamla Uppsala. That the choice fell on Gamla Uppsala was certainly no coincidence. The ancient cult site was a powerful symbol of religion and royal power.
The cathedral at Gamla Uppsala as it may have looked in the twelfth century. The reconstruction is based on excavated foundation walls and traces in the parts still standing. The western end of the cathedral is the least certain part.

The finished cathedral was more than 60 metres long provided with transepts and a three-aisle nave. During the first part of the thirteenth century a conflagration devastated the cathedral and large parts of the building were destroyed. In 1273, following a decision by the pope, the Archiepiscopal See was transferred to East Aros, henceforth to be called Uppsala. The old cathedral was downgraded to a parish church.

**Saint Erik**

Erik the Holy plays a central role in Swedish church history. Erik was probably elected King around the year 1150. In reality his name was Erik Jedvardsson, belonging to a family from Götaland. His paternal name of Jedvard suggests an English ancestry. The dynasty of the “Erikar” descends from Erik, the family that challenged the Sverker dynasty over the power of Swear and Götar.

In the legend of Saint Erik from about 1260 we are told of his good deeds, among which are mentioned his great contributions to the building of the cathedral at Gamla Uppsala. His greatest deed is considered to be his crusade to Finland, where he made the pagan Finns accept Christian mis-

Left: After the conflagration in the thirteenth century large parts of the walls were torn down and the remainder converted to a parish church. The large cathedral choir since then functions as a nave (the part of the church where the congregation sits) and the semicircular apse as a choir.

Right: Saint Erik, wooden sculpture in the triptych from the fifteenth century in Gamla Uppsala Church.
Like the great reliquaries on the continent, the Erik reliquary was probably made of gilt metal and adorned with figures of the saint and scenes from the life of the saint. Several cases have succeeded one another over time. In Uppsala Cathedral the Saint's skull is still kept, along with a cut-through vertebra, some miscellaneous bones and his funerary crown of gilt copper.

missionaries. Erik the Holy was murdered in 1159 or 1160 by the Dane Magnus Hindriksson, who, according to the King List of the Västgöta Law, succeeded Erik.

The cult as a saint arose shortly after his death. The relics (the bones) of the king were exhumed from the tomb at Uppsala Cathedral and re-entombed in a reliquary. Every May 18, on the anniversary of his death, the Erik day was celebrated when the relics of the saint were carried in procession from Gamla Uppsala to East Aros. The purpose was to show the relics to the people and to bless the fields in prayer for a good crop. It is hard to miss the parallel with the cult of Frey. Erik is normally depicted with an orb and a sceptre, royal symbols, but sometimes with a palm leaf too, a symbol of his martyrdom. The reliquary was transferred in 1273 to the new cathedral at East Aros (present-day Uppsala).

Through Erik, a worldly prince who became a saint, royal and divine power had been united in one person. Saint worship was in the Middle Ages of great importance for the spread of Christianity and in a way replaced the ancient gods. The saints could be turned to for assistance in the greater and lesser problems of everyday life.

Miraculous stories deal with persons who have looked to Saint Erik for help and been answered. They told for example of King Birger Magnusson who in 1292 was cured of a severe illness where his flesh was “consumed” and of the blind woman who regained her eyesight when she wetted her eyes with the blood of the King.
National symbols through the ages

The Royal Mounds soon became symbols of the glorious past of the Swedish State. Especially in times of political unrest Gamla Uppsala with the Royal Mounds in focus played a prominent part. In the sixteenth century Gustav Vasa held regular gatherings at the Mounds when Sweden needed to mobilise ideological strength against the Danish might. The prehistoric people called the “Göter” were celebrated and considered to be ancestors of the Goths. This people were thought to have emigrated from Sweden, spread over Europe and ultimately conquered Rome. These trains of thought finally gave rise to a new view on history – Gothicism.

Gothicism
Sweden became a major power in the seventeenth century and the State’s interest in the antiquities of the country increased. This was the true heyday of Gothicism and Gamla Uppsala became the subject of animated debate. The most astonishing theories were supplied by the historian and scientist Olof Rudbeck (1630–1702). His historical work Atlantica, which appeared in several volumes towards the end of the seventeenth century, is a gigantic propaganda piece for Sweden as a major power. He identified Gamla Uppsala as the centre of mythical Atlantis, the cradle of civilisation from which astronomy, time reckoning and

Olof Rudbeck tried to prove that the sunken Atlantis was identical with Gamla Uppsala.
the Latin and Greek alphabets (with the runes as a model) originated.

In the beginning of the nineteenth century Gothicism regained momentum. In 1809, Sweden had lost Finland and Åland in the war against Russia, and the loss led to a new search for contact with a glorious past. In that spirit the Götiska Förbundet (Gothic Society) was formed by a group of academics, civil servants and officers. At the meetings the members took names after Old Norse fighters and drank mead out of horns. Great reunions were held at the Royal Mounds, one of the best known in 1834 at which the Uppsala students paid homage to King Karl XIV Johan. In the Association’s periodical “Iðunna” writers like Esaias Tegnér and Erik Gustaf Geijer contributed poems promoting the Gothic idea.

Gamla Uppsala was still in the early twentieth century seen as the most important symbol of the Swedish State. From several quarters desire was expressed to erect a national monument and to this end the artist Carl Larsson was engaged. His suggestion was a majestic Pantheon, a cemetery for worthy Swedes, which was
to be erected in the vicinity of the East Mound. The suggestion attracted vigorous opposition from those who regarded Gamla Uppsala as a holy place and the plans were never realised.

Carl Larsson’s view of Prehistoric Sweden was instead expressed in “Midwinterblot” (Mid Winter Sacrifice) painted in 1896 and commissioned by the National Museum. The motif is taken from Snorri Sturluson’s tale of how the “Svear” sacrificed their King for a better crop after years of crop failure. But Carl Larsson’s magnificent and colourful scene from ancient times did not appeal to the National Museum, which at first rejected the work. After several tours on the international art market, the “Midwinterblot” was nevertheless placed in the museum in 1993.

Although the Royal Mounds have lost a lot of their former importance as national symbols, Gamla Uppsala continues to stimulate people’s imagination, which makes the site one of our great National tourist attractions. In the summer of 2000, the new museum at Gamla Uppsala was inaugurated, right by the Royal Mounds. The visitor is here invited to an exciting journey in time, from the chiefdom of the sixth century through the Viking Period and the introduction of Christendom, to the Archiepiscopal See of the thirteenth century. We are told in the exhibitions what the scholars know about Gamla Uppsala, but also of the riddles that remain to be solved.
Suggested reading


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Riksantikvarieämbetet (RAÄ)
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Important dates in the history of Gamla Uppsala

Modern Time

2000 The museum at Gamla Uppsala inaugurated.
1899 Odinsborg opened.
1874 Excavation of the West Mound.
1846/47 Excavation of the East Mound.
1689 King Karl XI participates in Olof Rudbeck’s excavations.
1523–1535 King Gustav Vasa delivers some ten speeches from the Ting Mound.

Middle Ages

1273 The Archiepiscopal See is transferred from Gamla Uppsala to present-day Uppsala.
c. 1230 Snorri Sturluson writes Heimskringla, where he tells of Gamla Uppsala.
1219 Snorri Sturluson visits Sweden.
1164 The Avastra monk Stefan is inaugurated as the first Archbishop with his See at (Gamla) Uppsala.
1159/60 King Erik Jedvardsson (Saint Erik) is murdered.
1150 The cathedral of Saint Lars is inaugurated at (Gamla) Uppsala.
1130 The Episcopal See is located to (Gamla) Uppsala.

Late Iron Age

1075 Adam of Bremen writes Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum where he writes about (Gamla) Uppsala.
980 Sigtuna is founded.
829 Arager arrives at Birka.

Viking Period

Eighth century Birka is founded.
Seventh century The boat-graves at Vendel and Valsgärde

Norse Period

Sixth century The Royal Mounds are made.
Fifth century The first hall building erected at (Gamla) Uppsala.
Third century Some farms are built.
The museum at Gamla Uppsala displays the finds from the Royal Mounds and surroundings and the legendary history of the site over 2000 years. The museum arranges guided shows and tours over the monumental area along with programmed activities in the summer season. For more information on opening hours, group bookings and programmes call 018-23 93 00 or visit our website www.raa.se/gamlauppsala.

Gamla Uppsala is no. 59 in the series Svenska kulturminnen (Cultural Monuments in Sweden), which is a series of guides to some of our country's most interesting cultural monuments.

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Gamla Uppsala

The site is one of the most remarkable cultural sites in Scandinavia. This was the royal manor and the most important cult site of the Svear in the Iron Age. Here is one of our largest burial sites. And this is the site of the first archiepiscopal cathedral in Sweden.

But who are buried in the mounds? Who were the people living here? The questions around Gamla Uppsala are countless...