

Violent aftermath for the warriors at Alken Enge

July 29 2014



Four pelvic bones on a stick are shown. Credit: Peter Jensen, Aarhus University

Denmark attracted international attention in 2012 when archaeological excavations revealed the bones of an entire army, whose warriors had been thrown into the bogs near the Alken Enge wetlands in East Jutland after losing a major engagement in the era around the birth of Christ. Work has continued in the area since then and archaeologists and experts from Aarhus University, Skanderborg Museum and Moesgaard Museum have now made sensational new findings.

"We have found a wooden stick bearing the [pelvic bones](#) of four

different men. In addition, we have unearthed bundles of bones, bones bearing marks of cutting and scraping, and crushed skulls. Our studies reveal that a violent sequel took place after the fallen warriors had lain on the battlefield for around six months," relates Project Manager Mads Kähler Holst from Aarhus University.

Religious act

The remains of the fallen were gathered together and all the flesh was cleaned from the bones, which were then sorted and brutally desecrated before being cast into the lake. The warriors' bones are mixed with the remains of slaughtered animals and clay pots that probably contained food sacrifices.

"We are fairly sure that this was a religious act. It seems that this was a holy site for a pagan religion – a sacred grove – where the victorious conclusion of major battles was marked by the ritual presentation and destruction of the bones of the vanquished warriors," adds Mads Kähler Holst.



This image shows archaeology students from Aarhus University Ulla Ragna Berg Rasmussen og Anders Bonde Mørk in the excavation at the Alken Enge. Credit: Anders Trærup, AU Foto

Remains of corpses thrown in the lake

Geological studies have revealed that back in the Iron Age, the finds were thrown into the water from the end of a tongue of land that stretched out into Mossø lake, which was much larger back then than it is today.

"Most of the bones we find here are spread out over the lake bed

seemingly at random, but the new finds have suddenly given us a clear impression of what actually happened. This applies in particular to the four pelvic bones. They must have been threaded onto the stick after the flesh was cleaned from the skeletons," explains Field Director Ejvind Hertz from Skanderborg Museum.

Internal Germanic conflict

The battles near Alken Enge were waged during that part of the Iron Age when major changes were taking place in Northern Europe because the Roman Empire was expanding northwards, putting pressure on the Germanic tribes. This resulted in wars between the Romans and the Germanic tribes, and between the Germanic peoples themselves.

Archaeologists assume that the recent finds at the Alken dig stem from an internal conflict of this kind. Records kept by the Romans describe the macabre rituals practised by the Germanic peoples on the bodies of their vanquished enemies, but this is the first time that traces of an ancient holy site have been unearthed.

Visit the excavation and see the finds

The archaeological excavation at the Alken Enge site is set to continue until 8 August 2014. Guided tours of the dig for the general public will be held on Thursday, 31 July at 15.00 and 17.00. The tours start at Alkenvej 171, 8660 Skanderborg. The excavation will be open to the press on Wednesday 30 July 2014 from 10.00 to 15.30.

A number of finds from the excavation are currently on display at Skanderborg Museum.

Provided by Aarhus University

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