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The ‘thing cottage’ at Anundshög

Alexandra Sanmark, Mathias Bäck, Kristina Jonsson & Marta Lindeberg

In 2017, excavations revealed the remains of a ‘thing cottage’ (Sw. *tingsstuga*) at the assembly (*thing*) site of Anundshög in Västmanland, Sweden (Bäck et al. 2018) (Fig. 1).

According to late medieval written sources, Anundshög was the *thing* site for Siende hundred (*härads*). The oldest surviving document dates from 1392 (Emmelin 1943, 110; SDHK) and the last time this *thing* site is mentioned is in 1467 (Emmelin 1943, 110; VRD). The seventeenth-century source *Rannsakningar efter antikviteter* mentions six documents that refer to Anundshög as a *thing* site, dating from 1355, 1358, 1391, 1393 and 1437 (Stähle 1960, 114). Archaeological evidence also suggests that Anundshög was a *thing* site and moreover that it was used for gatherings much further back in time. This site has many typical *thing* site features and characteristics (cf. Larsson 1998; Brink 2004b; Sanmark and Semple 2008, 2010; Sanmark 2009, 2017; Semple and Sanmark 2013) including:

- A location by a prehistoric cemetery
- A location close to wetlands
- Communication routes (land and water) converge at the site
- A rune stone is found at the site
- Standing stones are present at the site
- Hearth and cooking pits have been excavated

It is important to stress that not all these features were present at every *thing* site. Instead, a pool of features seems to have been available for the creation or redesign of an assembly site, from which a selection was made and presented in varying combinations. It is, however, clear that *thing* sites within the same region often had many features in common (Sanmark and Semple 2008, 2010; Sanmark 2009, 2010, 2017).

Anundshög was abandoned as a *thing* site at some point between the last documented meeting in 1467 and 1594 when meetings had been moved indoors and were held either in the ‘parish cottage’ or the ‘sexton’s cottage’ by Badelunda parish church, located c.1.5 km away. Further meetings are recorded here in the seventeenth century (Siende häradsrätt, Domböcker vid ordinarie ting; Emmelin 1943, 110; VRD). This development follows the pattern commonly observed across Sweden and indeed all of Scandinavia, where outdoor *thing* sites seem to have been the norm until the late sixteenth or the seventeenth century. Occasional indoor meetings are known in earlier times but it was not until the early modern period that specific buildings were designated, and at times erected specifically for these gatherings. These buildings were of-

ten known as ‘thing cottages’ (Tengesdal 1986; Sanmark 2009, 2017, Ch. 9; Hobaek 2013; Löfgren 2011).

In view of this, a reference in *Rannsakningarna* to the remains of a ‘thing cottage’ at the medieval *thing* site Anundshög is of great interest, and excavations were therefore carried out there in 2017 and 2018. According to *Rannsakningarna*, brick fragments from the fireplace of the ‘thing cottage’ were visible, c.18 m north of the largest stone in the ship setting situated north of the large burial mound (Stähle 1960, 114, 129). This spot was easily identified as a slight elevation with large stones and occasional brick fragments protruding from the top. The excavations confirmed that this elevation indeed contained the remains of a building with a fireplace. This is interesting not only from the point of view that the information in *Rannsakningarna* seems to be correct, but also more importantly this is the first time that a building with a function for *thing* meetings has been found at an outdoor medieval assembly site used for gatherings already in the Iron Age.

The building was clearly built of wood, as partial remains of a wooden floor and two possible sill stones have been found. The size of the cottage can be estimated to 6,7 × 6,7 m (Bäck et al. 2019). The fireplace was c.2,3 × 2,0 m and 0,75 m high and consisted of two large and relatively flat stones placed on top of a foundation of smaller stones. The finds of large bricks in the demolition layer showed that a brick superstructure had indeed been in place, as suggested by *Rannsakningarna*. The two large stones, c.0,8 m wide and 1,4 and 1.8 m long respectively, had most likely been removed from one of the ship settings, as they match the stones still part of these monuments, both in shape and size.

The building has been dated by various pieces of evidence. A charcoal sample from the floor in front of the fireplace has been radiocarbon-dated to the fourteenth century, with a slight possibility of an earlier date in the late thirteenth century (1280–1330 or 1340–1400, calibrated 2σ) (Bäck et al. 2018). This date range fits in well with the ring found inside the building (see below and Fig. 2), as this dates from the Late Middle Ages, possibly the fifteenth century (Bäck et al. 2018). As demonstrated above, Anundshög is documented as a *thing* site between 1355 and 1467, and by 1594 at the latest meetings had been moved away. It can therefore not be doubted that this is a medieval building, and it is moreover most likely the earliest building yet found at an outdoor *thing* site in Scandinavia.

Due to the lack of comparative archaeology, it is difficult to determine the function of the building on the basis

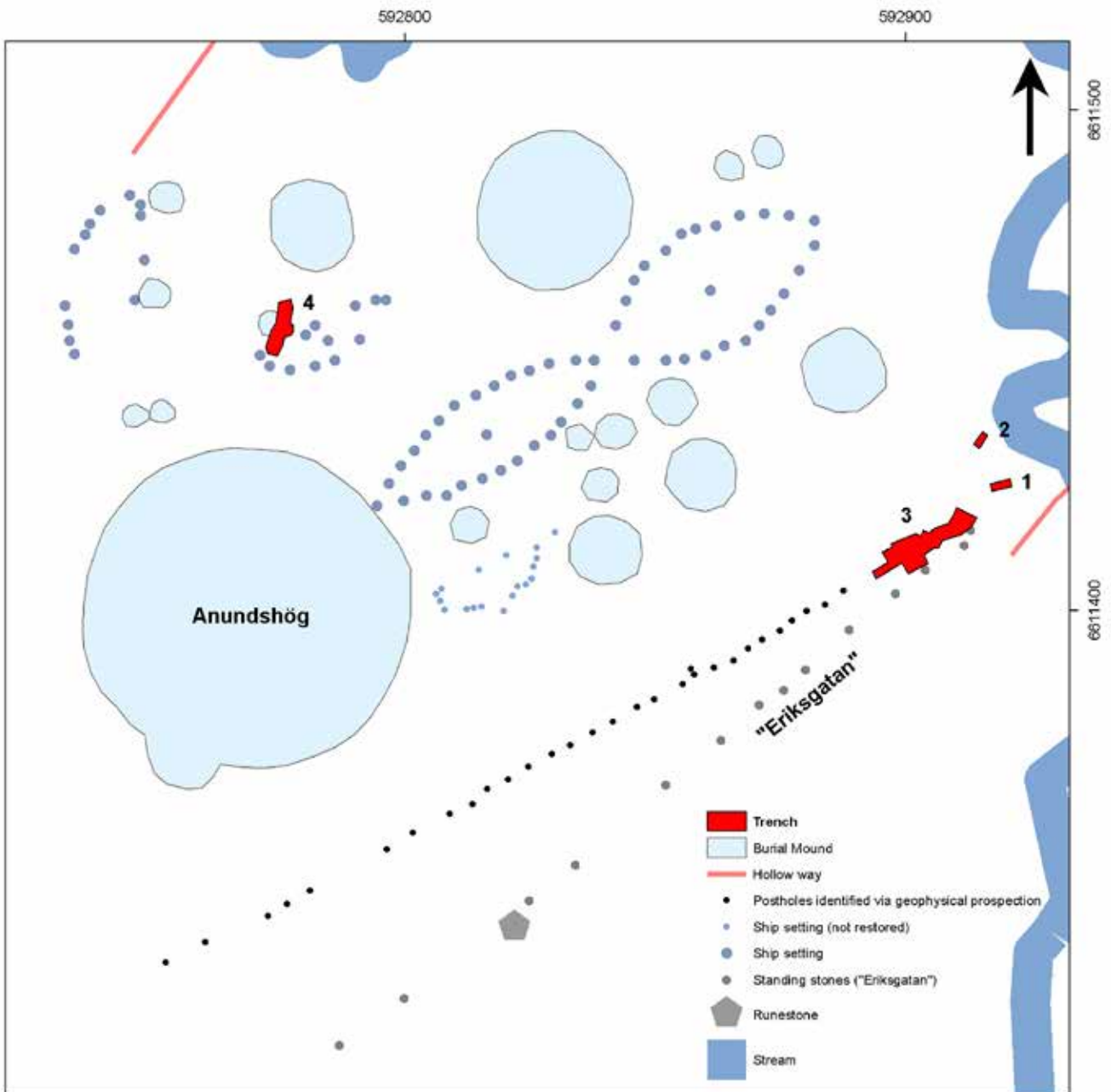


Fig. 1. The site of Anundshög, showing the location of the *thing* cottage (trench 4) in relation to the ship settings, the large burial mound and other features. Map by the authors.

of the excavated evidence. The Database of Built Heritage (Sw. *Bebyggelseregistret*) contains a list of Swedish ‘*thing* buildings’ (Sw. *tingshus*) and town halls (Sw. *rådhus*) (see *Bebyggelseregistret* in the list of references; Esricht and Sohlenius 2009). This register contains standing building remains, but no buildings that have been archaeologically investigated. It appears that no medieval ‘*thing* building’ has previously been excavated in Sweden, or indeed Scandinavia (cf. Sanmark 2017, Ch. 9). There is therefore no information on what type of building design or artefacts could be expected, although some knowledge could be derived from early modern inventories of *thing* buildings. These records suggest that from this time finds such as building materials, perhaps metal fittings, household goods, personal equipment could be anticipated, perhaps also artefacts directly connected to the *thing* proceedings,

such as writing materials and book clasps. Interestingly, *Rannsakningarna* states that the table that used to stand in the ‘*thing* cottage’ had survived and was kept in the nearby village of Tibble in the seventeenth century. The table is said to have had ‘nails in one end’ (Sw. *medh Järn Naglar på den Eena ändan*) (Jensen 2009, 14). An important consideration in this respect is that finds of household goods would make the archaeological interpretation of the building more difficult, as it could indicate a dwelling house rather than an official building. This means that for medieval *thing* cottages, perhaps only a few different artefact categories should be expected (for full discussion, see Bäck et al. 2018).

This is indeed in line with the excavations of the building at Anundshög, as only six artefacts were found. Three were of an ordinary character: an iron hook and four



Fig. 2: Gilded finger ring of silver from the *thing* cottage. To the right is a reconstruction of what the ring may originally have looked like with its minuscule 'm' surrounded by blue glass. Photo: Mathias Bäck.

iron nails, one of which was possibly from a piece of furniture. The fourth find, a cast gilded silver plate from a finger ring (Fig. 2), was however rather more spectacular. This circular plate, which was once soldered to the ring, has two rows of décor in relief around the edge. In the middle, there is a minuscule 'm' symbolising the Virgin Mary, around which there were traces of dark blue glass. When intact, the 'm' would thus have been visible as gold surrounded by blue glass. A similar ring has been found in the abbot's house at Varnhem Monastery in Västergötland, Sweden (SHM inv. nr 18393). It is of course not known who wore the ring found at Anundshög, but it is possible, or perhaps even likely, that this was a person with a role in the *thing* proceedings, such as a lawman or a high-ranking churchman.

As demonstrated above, there is no artefactual evidence to suggest that the excavated building was a dwelling, and no farm is recorded here in later written records. The unusual placement of the building, alongside the ship setting (Fig. 1), also goes against this interpretation. It must therefore be concluded that this most likely is the '*thing* cottage' referred to in the seventeenth century and therefore of great interest to assembly research. The late medieval name and function of this building is however not known. As pointed out above, the term '*thing* cottage' was often used in the seventeenth century for parish or sexton's cottages used for *thing* meetings (Emmelin 1943, 105). It seems most likely that the move to indoor meetings was driven by the need for a dry space where documents relating to the assembly proceedings could be

produced. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries seem to represent a transition period when buildings began to be used for some assembly activities, but the actual meetings were still held at the traditional outdoor *thing* sites. This began to change during the fifteenth century, when *thing* meetings were instead held by (not *in*) the parish churches, with the use of associated cottages (Sanmark 2017, Ch. 9).

It is possible that further medieval buildings similar to the one found at Anundshög existed at other outdoor assembly sites, although no such traces have yet been found (Sanmark 2017, Ch. 9). We should not necessarily expect such buildings to be mentioned in the written sources, as at Anundshög. Despite the fact that the cottage was in place at least by the fourteenth century, it does not appear in any medieval source. Instead there are references to the mound (*Anunda hög*) (1392, Emmelin 1943, 110; SDHK). In view of the strong links between late medieval *thing* sites and prehistoric remains, above all mounds, (cf. Sanmark 2017, Ch. 4) it is hardly surprising that the Anundshög mound was perceived as more important than the cottage. The link to prehistory is also seen in the building's location by the ship setting. This is further supported by the reuse of the two stones from the ship setting for the fireplace. These stones were presumably chosen partly for practical reasons, but tradition and symbolism probably also played a part. The exact function and purpose of the stones in the ship settings in the Iron Age is not clear, but they were probably used in the *thing* and cultic rituals. By the Late Middle Ages, the stones had most likely lost their function for the *thing*, since they could be removed from the ship settings. They did, however still carry some symbolic value, and were therefore incorporated into the *thing* building.

In conclusion, Anundshög is an intriguing place and one of the very few assembly sites where written references to medieval *thing* meetings have been confirmed by archaeological excavations. Altogether, the different strands of evidence show that this site has been in use for gatherings and assemblies from the Early Iron Age to the Late Middle Ages, even if not continuously so. In order to further explore the late medieval practices and use of Anundshög, new excavations are planned for 2019.