CHAPTER 2

THE DEATH OF SERPENT-HEAD RINGS

RITUAL DESTRUCTION OF ELITE INSIGNIA FROM THE ROMAN PERIOD

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Gold arm and finger rings with serpent-head terminals were among the most charismatic objects of the Roman Period in Scandinavia. Through their characteristic and symbol-laden design, they acted as the insignia of the uppermost elites, and as visual markers of elite alliances. The rings were objects intimately related to their powerful carriers and had to follow them in their shared graves. During burial rituals, the rings were treated in the same manner as the dead body; they were either burnt or remained unburnt. Typically, Danish and Swedish graves containing serpent-head rings were neatly arranged inhumation graves with unharmed rings. On the other hand, three western Norwegian graves with such rings instead reflect chaotic cremation rituals where the rings were cut and burnt. In order to understand better how and why these rings were damaged, the graves with fragmented serpent-head rings have been examined. In western Norway, the destruction of serpent-head rings seems to have been a ritual practice shared within a regional network of elites.

INTRODUCTION

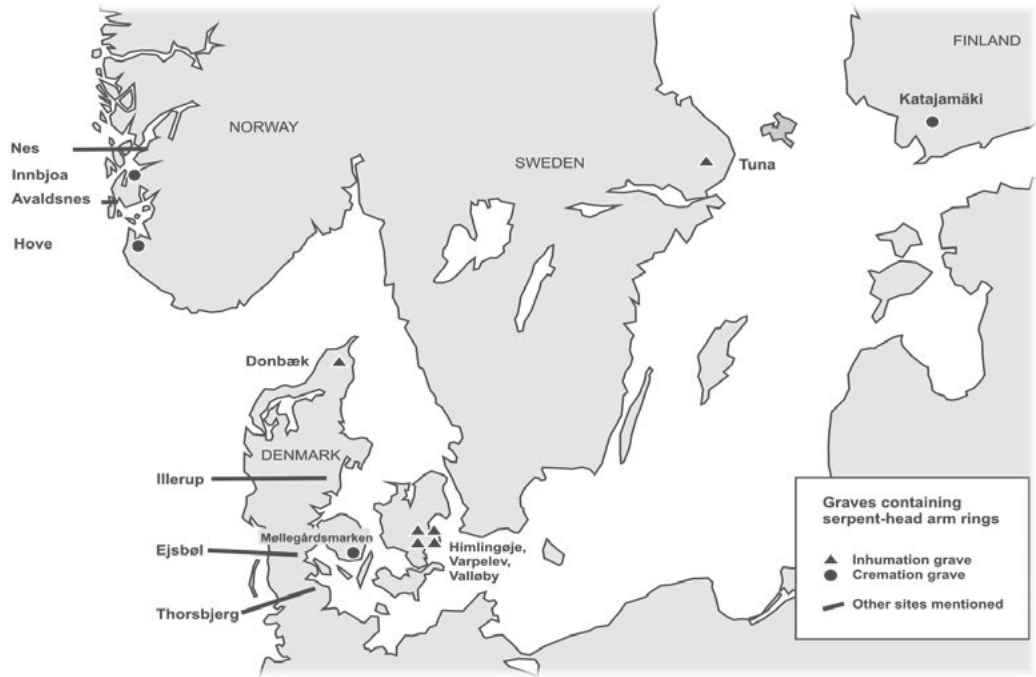
When dealing with objects produced and used in Scandinavia in the 3rd century AD, rings of gold with serpent-head terminals clearly stand out as some of the most spectacular and impressive. In these rings, the massive gold material has been skillfully forced into complex and highly expressive designs. The rings are very aesthetic and symbol-laden objects that must have provoked awe among contemporary viewers. Serpent-head arm rings occur in some of the most richly furnished graves in Scandinavia, Finland and Germany, confirming their intimate relation to the uppermost elites (Figure 8).

Most of the graves containing serpent-head rings are neatly arranged inhumation graves with unharmed rings, with several well-known graves from Himlingøje in Zealand, Denmark (Figure 9).

However, some of the graves contain serpent-head rings that had been brutally destroyed before their deposition. This was the case with the two serpent-head arm rings from Innbjoa and Hove in Rogaland county, southwestern Norway. Both rings had been damaged by cutting and burning and they were found in unordered cremation graves. As both graves were unearthed

Figure 9. The neatly arranged inhumation grave Himlingøje 1949-2, Zealand, Denmark, with two arm rings and two finger rings of serpent-head type around the deceased woman's wrists and fingers. Photo: Roberto Fortuna / Kira Ursem © The National Museum, Denmark. Licence: CC BY-SA 2.0.

Figure 8. Location of inhumation and cremation graves in Scandinavia containing serpent-head arm rings, as well as other sites mentioned. Two inhumation graves from Emmersleben and Flurstedt, central Germany are unmapped (cf. Schmidt and Bemmann 2008, pl. 12 no. 25, pl. 206 no. 148). Illustration: H. Reiersen.



by amateurs in the 19th century, the burials have previously been considered as uncertain finds and have been given little attention in discussions concerning this ring type (e.g. Hagberg 1967:17; Hansen 2004:150–151). In previous work, I have argued that the contexts of the Innbjoa and Hove graves are less problematic than previously assumed (Reiersen 2012, 2013). Rather than being uninteresting finds, these graves have a special research value through their association with ritually damaged serpent-head rings. At first, the destruction of these status-laden and charismatic objects seems highly irrational, and indeed troublesome for museum curators wanting to display whole objects. Through an examination of the find contexts of these graves and a few other parallels from graves and war booty sacrifices, this article seeks to understand why the serpent-head rings were destroyed.

SERPENT-HEAD RINGS AS ELITE INSIGNIA

Among the arm and finger rings characterized as rings with serpent-head terminals, there is great individual variation. The arm rings are normally categorized in Hildebrand (1874) types A–C, ranging from naturalistic to more stylized terminals. Finger rings with naturalistic terminals are categorized as Beckmann (1969) type 39 a–c. Most of the rings have plates with terminals in the form of animal heads, pear-shaped and sometimes with eyes, resembling the heads of serpents or ravens. Although both the serpent and raven interpretations could offer interesting symbolic meanings, the spiral shape of the rings and the plate decoration often with serpent-skin patterns support the traditional interpretation as serpents (Fernstål 2004:183–184). Similar heads also occur on high-status weapon gear, reflecting a special design associated with the uppermost elites (Petersen 2003:figures 5–8). It is possible that the serpent motif alluded to the role of the serpent as a liminal shape shifter (Fernstål 2004:197–200; cf. Hedeager 2011:85–86; Jensen 2013:213–214). These rather standardized zoomorphic designs might be viewed as early predecessors to the Scandinavian animal style.

In the Stevns region, southeastern Zealand, Hansen *et al.* (1995) identified a network of centers in the late Roman Period. Based on material from richly furnished graves, certain gold rings have been interpreted as the

insignia of elites located at allied centers of various ranks in phases C1–C2 (mid-2nd–3rd centuries AD). The richest burials were characterized by Kolben type rings, and arm and finger rings of serpent-head types (Ethelberg *et al.* 2000:148; Hansen *et al.* 1995). Himlingøje was the dominant center and controlled and distributed at least some of these special elite insignia to its dependent allies in and outside the region (Figures 8–9). The large rings were carried on the body, visible to all who saw its carrier, thereby acting as well-known markers of elite alliances.

It has been argued that a similar hierarchy of centers inspired by the Himlingøje model existed in southwestern Norway (Reiersen 2011, 2017). This is the only region in Norway with Kolben type rings and serpent-head arm rings occurring together with large finger rings of Beckmann type 18. Despite the lack of serpent-head terminals, Bøe (1926:74) and Hansen *et al.* (1995) considered this type of finger ring to be closely related to the serpent-head type. This somewhat distinct ring type seems to have played a special role in a southwestern Norwegian alliance network.

RITUAL DESTRUCTION THROUGH CUTTING AND BURNING

To understand why some of the serpent-head rings were cut and burnt, we might first consider other relevant instances of ritual destruction related to cutting and melting. Deliberate object fragmentation, often through acts of ritual destruction, is a well-known phenomenon in prehistory (Chapman 2000, 2012, Chapman & Gaydarska 2007; Grinsell 1961, 1973). In Norwegian Iron Age graves, the ritual burning and bending of weapons was a common practice in male cremation graves from the Roman Period to the Viking Period (Shetelig 1912:107, 1925:135; Solberg 2000:76, cf. Aannestad this volume). Similarly, weapons were bent or cut in Roman Period war booty sacrifices in Denmark (Ilkjær 2002). Although perhaps somewhat simplistic, Grinsell (1961:477) gives a general explanation for the ritual destruction: 'Swords and other symbols of authority and valor may have been bent or broken because of their close association with the deceased, and from an idea that it would be improper to use them again.' Deliberate destruction of rings is also documented in the late Medieval Period in Scandinavia,

namely the cutting of signet rings after the death of their carrier (Troels-Lund 1914:306). A more prominent example of this practice is the ceremonial destruction of the signet ring of each pope (Ring of the Fisherman), documented from 1521 (Grinsell 1973:114).

Although gold objects occur relatively often in Norwegian graves from the Roman and Migration Periods (1–550 AD), melted gold is rare (Reiersen 2017:98). While personal belongings were usually burnt on the funeral pyre, this was seldom done with gold (Bøe 1926:80–81). According to Bøe, this indicates that gold was perceived as something more than personal belongings. Melted gold occurs in a few Roman Period graves, with no certain Migration Period instances (Table 1). The only graves with melted gold clearly from the 3rd century are three graves with fragmented serpent-head rings, including one finger ring from Nes. This illustrates the special meaning attributed to these rings. To gain new knowledge of why these rings were destroyed, I will discuss the find context of the serpent-head rings from Nes, Innbjoa and Hove. In addition, I will consider parallels from graves in Katajamäki, Møllegårdsmarken and in the Thorsbjerg war booty sacrifice.

Nes: Cut and burnt and pinned to the ground

We will begin our study of find contexts not with the arm rings but rather with a serpent-head finger ring from Løehaugen at Nes, Kvinnherad in Hordaland county (Reiersen 2017:238–239). This is the only fragmented serpent-head ring in Norway that has been archaeologically excavated. The finger ring is of Beckmann type 39b with three plates. Only one complete plate and part of a second plate are preserved (Figures 10–11).

The ring fragment of 4 grams seems first to have been cut and then melted. A gold drop found in the cairn suggests that the melting happened nearby (Bøe 1926:51, 81 note 1).

Based on the unpublished excavation report and the published account in *Vestnorske graver fra jernalderen*, some reinterpretations have been made of the find context (Figure 12). The excavator H. Shetelig (1912:44–45), noted that an inner cairn was separated from the outer mound by an undisturbed layer of clay. He first thought that this indicated a secondary addition to an original cairn. As all artefacts found were of a late Roman date, he instead concluded that this was solely one burial with objects scattered in the cairn. However, there are

Figure 11. The serpent-head finger ring from Nes (B 5931 a). Only one of three plates is preserved. Photo: Svein Skare © University Museum of Bergen.

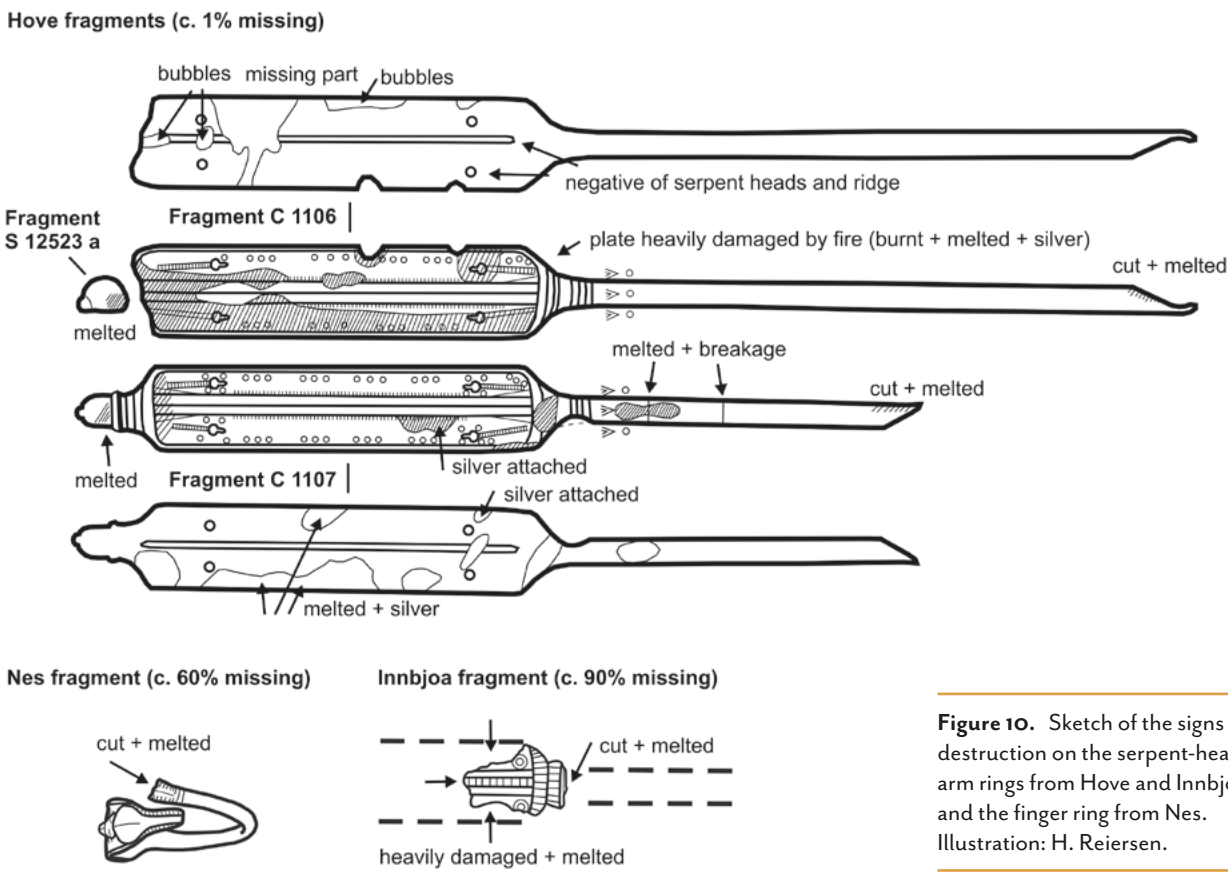


Figure 10. Sketch of the signs of destruction on the serpent-head arm rings from Hove and Innbjoa and the finger ring from Nes. Illustration: H. Reiersen.

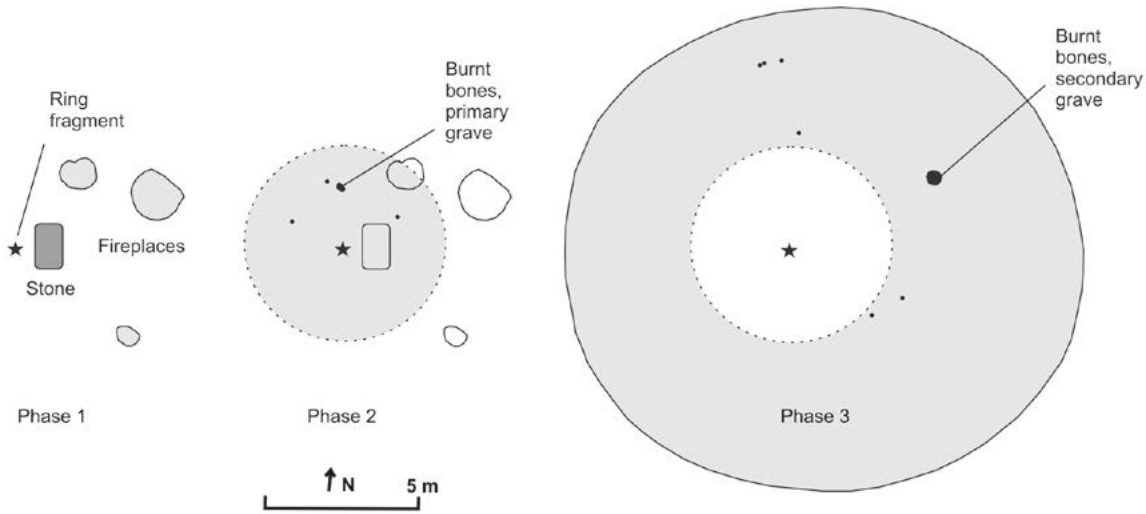


Figure 12. A reinterpretation of three phases in Løehaugen, Nes. Phase 1. Fireplaces and stone associated the burial ritual (C1b). Phase 2. Primary burial (C1b) in a small cairn of stones, sealed off by a clay layer. Phase 3. Secondary burial (C3) in an outer mound of soil and stones. After Reiersen 2017, fig. 7.10 modified after Shetelig 1912, fig. 100.

chronological issues that indicate that Shetelig's first assumption was correct. The presence of both a finger ring dated to phase C1b (Andersson 1993) and sherds (now lost) of a younger bucket-shaped pot (listed in Engevik 2008; Kristoffersen & Magnus 2010) might suggest a primary grave in C1b and a secondary grave from C3. The treatment of the burnt bones varied in the two graves. In the inner cairn, lumps of charcoal with burnt bones were found, whereas the burnt bones from the top of the outer mound were cleansed.

The building of the cairn might be separated into three phases, with phases 1–2 related to the primary grave and phase 3 to the secondary grave (Figure 12).

The unpublished report mentions that a large stone (1.4 x 1 m) was situated near the center of the cairn. Around this stone, there were three fireplaces. Shetelig assumed that the fireplaces were used in rituals on the site prior to the cairn construction. The gold ring fragment was found on the spot which later became the cairn centre. Shetelig (1912:figure 100, h) noted the peculiar *in situ* context of the ring. It was deliberately pinned vertically into the 'sterile' ground. This context makes it plausible that both the fragmentation and the special deposition of the ring at the cairn center were done intentionally. Shetelig did not record the dimensions of the inner cairn. However, from the plan drawing (Shetelig 1912:figure 100), the following objects might also be associated with the primary grave: a simple spindle whorl, a rod of iron, and a curved knife of iron (Shetelig 1912:figure 103), all consistent with a female

grave from the transition between the early and late Roman Period, phase C1b (cf. Andersson 1993).

Hove: Fragments from rituals in an elite settlement

The Hove arm ring was found at Hove in Sandnes in 1843. Although B. Myhre in his Magister thesis from 1964 problematized the find context of the ring (summarized in Myhre 1972), most uncertainties were rejected through an analysis of the original archive material available from 1843 (Reiersen 2013). The arm ring from Hove is of type C. Regarding its design, it might be noted that the 'eyes' of the plate terminal ends are pear-shaped with long bodies behind, resembling four small serpents slithering towards the center of each plate (Figure 10). From a visual analysis of the arm ring fragments, it has been possible to reconstruct the sequence of destruction (Reiersen 2017:97). As the cut marks in the smooth end of the two large ring fragments have a similar angle and size, it is assumed that the arm ring was first cut in two (Figure 10). Both cut marks were melted, indicating that the ring fragments were afterwards burnt. Due to the presence of melted silver on the ring, it seems likely that the ring fragments were on the funeral pyre together with other objects. The silver might stem from a fibula, indicating that the ring fragments were situated on the corpse. There were cracks on burnt areas of the ring, stemming from stress in the metal after bending. This secondary bending done after the burning might have happened during the burial rituals. However, it is just as likely that it was done after the ring was found in 1843 to make the fragments more sellable as two separate rings. During a metal detector survey in 2009, a melted gold fragment was uncovered in the area where the grave was found (Figure 14). By comparison with the arm ring fragments, it is likely that this is the melted-off terminal end of the largest ring half. The three fragments weigh 153.65 grams.

The large cairn excavated at Hove in 1843 included a primary burial from the late Roman Period and a secondary burial from the Viking Period. An initial newspaper report states that on 1 November 1843, a small burial chamber was found, containing an imported Roman vessel of brass (Hemmoor bucket, Eggers (1951) type 58) (Reiersen 2013). In the vessel were burnt bones and two gold rings. The first was a large, undamaged

Figure 13. The two large fragments of the serpent-head arm ring from Hove (C 1106–07), together with a small burnt spiral ring (C 1102) and a large unburnt finger ring Beckmann type 18 (C 1101). Compare also Reiersen 2017, fig. 7.27. Photo: Terje Tveit © Museum of Archaeology, University of Stavanger.

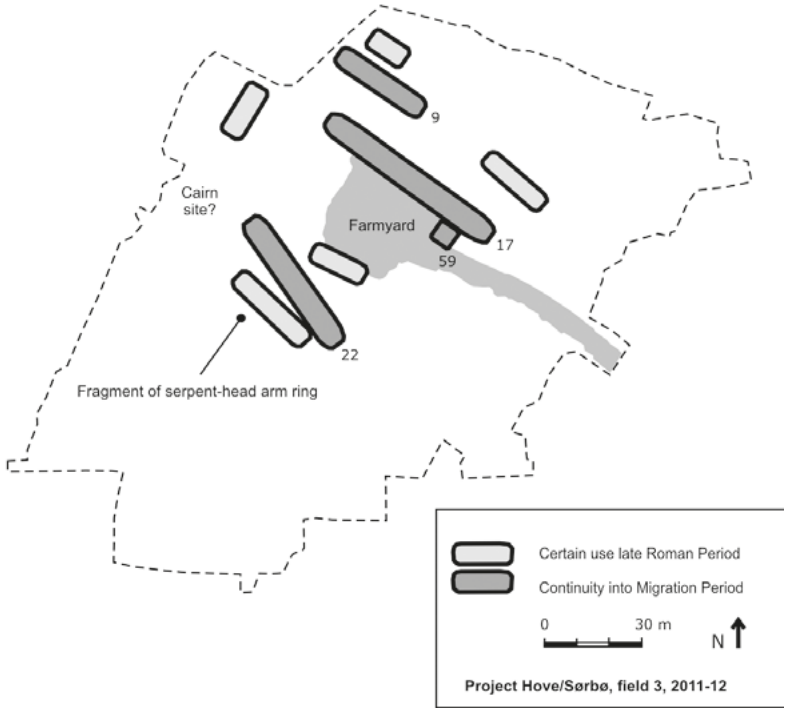


Figure 14. The approximate position of the small ring fragment (S 12523 a) in relation to the late Roman period settlement excavated at Hove/Sørbø, field 3. House 17 was over 60 metres long. Modified after Reiersen 2017, fig. 7.25 based on Bjørdal 2014, figs. 6–7.

finger ring, Beckmann type 18 (Figure 13). The second was a small ring ending in a spiral, burnt and cut on one end. A clay pot (Bøe 1931:figure 247) was standing about 0.5m from the brass vessel and presumably outside the chamber. The letter accompanying one of the arm ring fragments was dated 5 November 1843. At this time, the remaining objects from the cairn had probably been unearthed, including the two arm ring fragments, two spindle whorls, as well as two additional objects from the Viking Period grave. With the Nes burial as a parallel, it seems likely that the arm ring fragments and the spindle whorls were located at another spot in the cairn than the human remains in the brass vessel. The ring fragments might well have been found at the bottom of the cairn. The arm ring, finger ring and brass vessel indicate that the burial happened in phases C1b–C2, and the spindle whorls point towards a female grave.

In 2011–12, excavations were carried out on the farmsteads Hove and Sørbø, revealing traces of an extensive settlement (Figure 14).

This is the area from which the cairn was removed, and its location might be indicated by the negative print of a large cairn, just west of the settlement (Bjørdal 2014:17). Cooking pits encircled the cairn, alongside many flat graves. The small arm ring fragment from 2009 was found south of the assumed cairn location, close to the settlement. The female grave thus seems intimately linked to the settlement. Inside house 17, which was over 60 meters long, a rare, berlock-shaped amber bead was found, contemporary with the grave

Figure 15. The natural mound Hagahaugen at Innbjoa, on which the grave with the serpent-head arm ring was situated. Photo: H. Reiersen.

and belonging to a woman from the same social milieu (Reiersen 2017:figure 7.26). Finally, one important oddity from the female grave should be noted. In contrast to the small, fragmented spiral ring and the arm ring, the large finger ring was undamaged. The finger ring had a broad diameter, presumably fitting a male hand. As we shall see, a similar undamaged ring was found in the Innbjoa grave. Rather than explaining these as double-burials, the pattern could indicate the deposition of funerary gifts.

Innbjoa: Confirming the pattern from Hove

The Innbjoa arm ring is preserved only as a tiny fragment, 2.025g (Reiersen 2017:258–259). Its fragmented state makes certain typology difficult. The preserved part probably stems from one of the ends of the plate, either towards the smooth ring part or an actual terminal (Figure 10). Shetelig (1912:60) considered it to stem from an arm ring of type A or B, and Bøe (1926:52 no. 243) considered it as most likely type B. While the burial cairns covering the Nes and Hove grave have been removed, the natural mound Hagahaugen, where the chamber and cairn enclosing the Innbjoa ring were found, can still be seen in the landscape (Figure 15).

Traces of fireplaces have been reported near the mound, and the ritual destruction might have happened there. A local farmer conducted the initial digging in 1882, and a subsequent excavation was carried out by antiquarian I. Ross in 1883 (Reiersen 2012).

Apart from the arm ring fragment, the grave included a large gold finger ring Beckmann type 18, a Rygh (1885) type 166 bronze whorl, a unique Rygh type 171 silver whorl with decorated gold string, an Almgren (1897) type VII 205 silver fibula, melted bronze fragments, and sherds of two handled pots (Reiersen 2017:figure 7.22). The handled pots reflect an early clay pot type, which might have been imported. Similar pots are known from the north Rogaland district, present also in graves at Gard in Haugesund together with a Rygh type 171 bronze spindle whorl, and at Våråå in Karmøy in combination with a rosette fibula of Zealandish type (Bøe 1931:52–53, figures 54–55, Reiersen 2017:123–124). It has been claimed that sherds of a younger bucket-shaped pot were found in the chamber (see Reiersen 2012). Although the sherds in question are now lost, Shetelig,

in his unpublished notes, described these as stemming from a bucket-shaped pot made of ordinary ceramic. The description indicates that this was not a proper bucket-shaped pot, as these, unlike other ceramic pots, have either asbestos or steatite tempering. The silver fibula, finger ring and spindle whorls point towards a female grave from phase C1b. Like the Hove grave, the finger ring might have been a male ring.

The grave testifies to several ritual practices characteristic of elites in the region. The stone chamber at Innbjoa (3.7 x 1.6 m) has a contemporary parallel in the rich Flaghaug grave at Avaldsnes in Karmøy with very similar dimensions (3.6 x 1.2 m). At Innbjoa, the chamber bottom was covered by a burnt layer, perhaps indicating that the burial was a secondary cremation in an existing chamber. Similarly, the chamber in the Flaghaug mound was also used for secondary burials (Stylegar & Reiersen 2017:564, figure 22.3, burials 2–3). The graves at Avaldsnes and Innbjoa both have finger rings of Beckmann type 18, although the large, unburnt ring at Innbjoa might be interpreted as a male object deposited in a female grave. The arm ring from Innbjoa is preserved only as a tiny fragment; it is the remains of a ring treated in the same manner as the serpent-head rings from Nes and Hove. The combination at Innbjoa and Hove of destroyed serpent-head arm rings and similar large, unburnt finger rings hardly seems coincidental. The man buried at Avaldsnes with a Kolben type neck ring and a Beckmann type 18 finger ring probably had strong ties to the elites at Innbjoa and Hove (Figure 18).

Parallels from Katajamäki and Møllegårdsmarken

Although the three graves from southwestern Norway with ritually destroyed serpent-head rings make up a distinct regional group, the practice was not restricted to this region. The known parallels from graves include a fragmented serpent-head arm ring from a grave in Katajamäki in Salo, Finland and arm ring fragments from the large cremation cemetery at Møllegårdsmarken in Funen, Denmark.

The Katajamäki arm ring (NM 6459:4,13,15,18) had been deliberately broken, with the broadest end of fragment 13 showing traces of melting (Figure 16).

While the fragments number 4, 13 and 15 fit together, fragment 18 does not (pers. comm. L. Söyrinki-Harmo 08.05.12, cf. Europaeus 1914:27–28). The fragments weigh 67 grams and the ring is of type C. The site Katajamäki is situated in the Isokylä region near Salo (Schauman-Lönnqvist 1989, site 19). After initial digging by a farmer, the grave was excavated by A. Europaeus (1914) and the find context is well documented. There were several graves situated close to each other, and the grave in question was the primary grave in burial area 1 (note that NM 6459, listed in Schauman-Lönnqvist 1989: 33–36 includes objects from several graves). The grave site was a low, oval collection of stones (Figure 17). The main concentration of objects and 80 per cent of the burnt bones were found in the southern part of this area, with a fireplace situated just north of this. Partly on and partly around the fireplace, the excavator uncovered fragments of a silver neck ring of eastern Baltic type and fragments of a serpent-head arm ring. Both ring types reflect non-local forms and were probably destroyed at the site. Fragments of the silver ring were situated on the fireplace itself, and while the fireplace was still warm, one large stone was put on top of the fragments, flanked by one similar stone on each side. Among the main concentration of grave furnishings were fibulas, a bronze chain, objects of bronze and iron, a knife, clay pot fragments, and two unharmed bronze arm rings of local type (see Europaeus 1914). Although there were no unequivocal material indicators of gender, the absence of weapons might indicate a female grave. Like the graves from Nes and Hove, the ring fragments were deposited at a spot separate from that of the human remains, indicating the need for a separate 'grave' for the ritually destroyed rings.

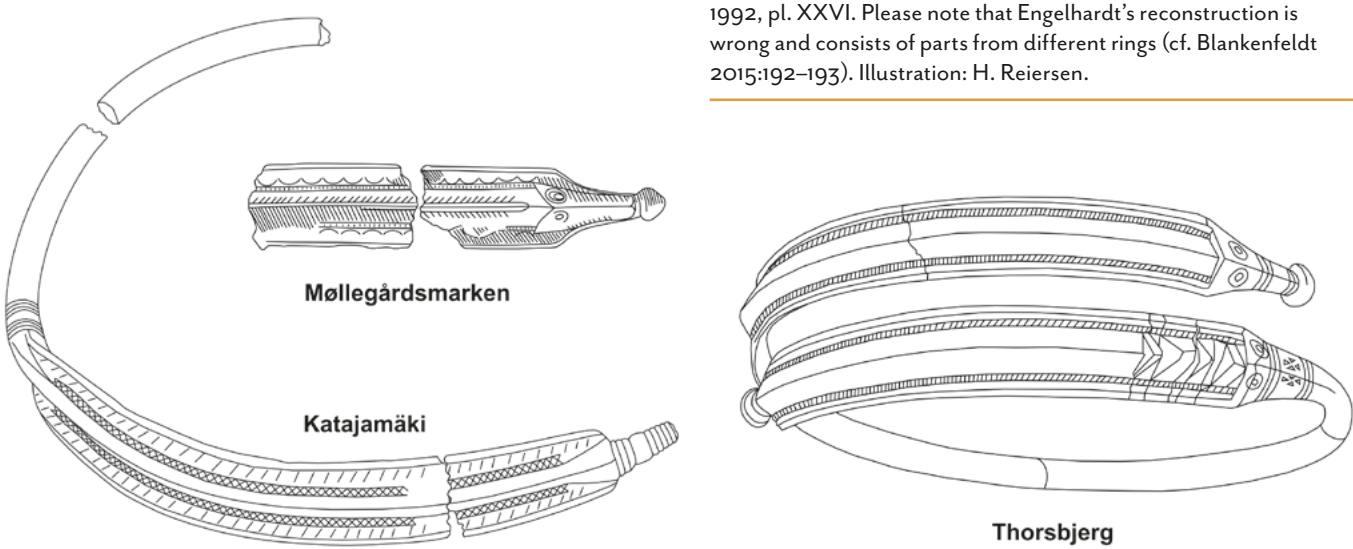


Figure 16. Fragments of serpent-head arm rings from Katajamäki, Finland, Møllegårsmarken, Denmark and Thorsbjerg, Germany. Redrawn after Engelhardt 1869:37, Europeaus 1914, fig. 4, Thrane 1992, pl. XXVI. Please note that Engelhardt's reconstruction is wrong and consists of parts from different rings (cf. Blankenfeldt 2015:192–193). Illustration: H. Reiersen.

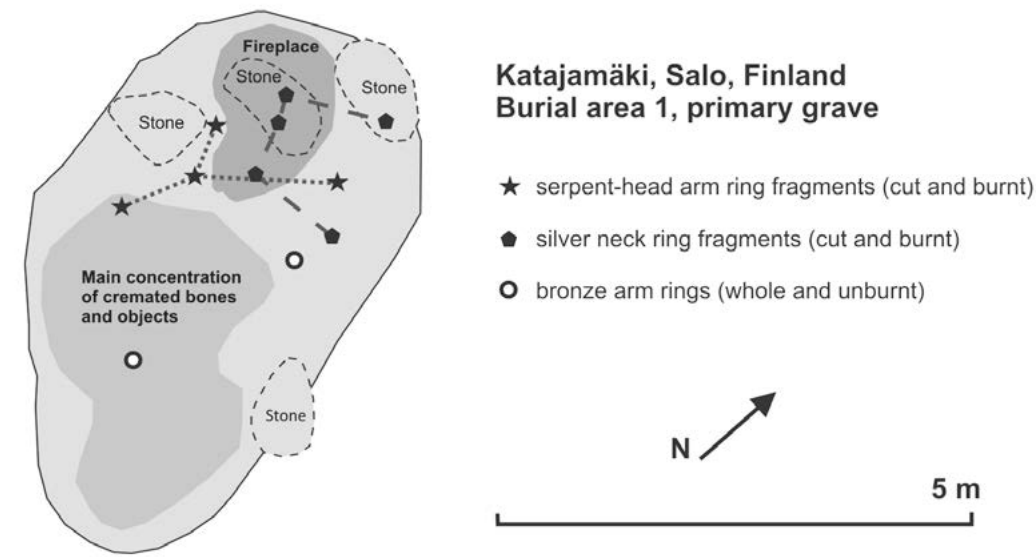


Figure 17. The grave from Katajamäki in Salo, Finland among other things included one fragmented serpent-head arm ring, one fragmented silver neck ring and two undamaged bronze arm rings. Illustration: H. Reiersen simplified after Europaeus 1914:25–26, fig. 1.

The cemetery at Møllegårdsmarken is situated between Gudme and Lundeborg in southeastern Funen. It is the largest early Iron Age cemetery in Scandinavia with some 2500 graves. About 1500 cremation graves stem from the late Roman Period, including 70 graves with Roman imports (Albrechtsen 1971; Jensen 2003:425). The Gudme-Lundeborg area has been interpreted as the most important center in Scandinavia in the Migration Period, taking over the position of the wealth center in Himlingøje from the last part of the Roman Period. The two arm ring fragments from Møllegårdsmarken were found in a metal detector survey of the cemetery area and probably stem from a cremation grave (Figure 16, cf. Thrane 1992, pl. XXVI). Thrane (1992:315) notes that the fragments were violently broken and then exposed to fire, reflecting an extraordinary treatment compared to other metal objects in the cemetery. Together, the Katajamäki and Møllegårdsmarken graves confirm that the destruction of serpent-head rings in graves was linked to destructive cremation rituals and that this special practice was known outside southwestern Norway.

Destruction in the War Booty Sacrifices

In late Roman Period war booty sacrifices, weapon gear was the main target for ritual destruction through cutting or bending. In the war booty sacrifices, the weapons were cut and sunk in water, presumably in a similar manner as their defeated human owners. However, in addition to weapons, status rings were also destroyed. From the Thorsbjerg war booty sacrifice, there are fragments of at least three serpent-head arm rings (Figure 16; Blankenfeldt 2015:192–200, 412–416, pl. 43–45). Blankenfeldt suggests that the Thorsbjerg rings were first straightened out, then placed over a chisel and struck from above (Blankenfeldt 2013:59, 2015: 200, note 366). An interesting parallel to the ring fragments from Thorsbjerg is the two Kolben type arm rings from the Illerup A sacrifice. These had been damaged by deep cut-marks but remained whole (Carnap-Bornheim & Ilkjær 1996:182–184). In the Ejsbøl bog, the special deposition event Ejsbølgård C included several fragments of gold neck rings, occurring together with the weapon gear of a military leader (Anderssen 2003:250–251).

Blankenfeldt (2013:59, 2015:200) writes that traces of destruction occur more frequently and intensely on high-status objects, hereby confirming special mentalities towards these objects. From the Illerup A material, the material on shield bosses has been interpreted as reflecting an army hierarchy, with a few silver shield bosses from army leaders, bronze bosses from officers and many iron bosses from warriors (e.g. Ilkjær 2000). Analyses of the destroyed shield bosses show that the level of destruction is low on the iron bosses, more intensive on the bronze bosses and most intensive on the silver bosses (Nielsen 2013:65–66). Several of the bosses had traces of being hit by the necks of axes.

Finally, it might be noted that human remains from the slain warriors are mostly lacking in war booty sacrifices like Illerup A (cf. Ilkjær 2002:203). The recent excavation of the early Roman Period ritual deposition of human remains in Alken Enge near Illerup (Mollerup *et al.* 2016, Søe *et al.* 2016) could indicate that humans and their equipment were deposited at separate sites. Just like the Thorsbjerg rings, the human bones from the Alken Enge bog were cut up, smashed and thrown into the lake.

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF SERPENT-HEAD RINGS

Throughout this article, fragmented serpent-head rings, their find contexts and some relevant parallels have been considered. Summing up the evidence in search of the cause of their destruction, we might then try to reconstruct the life and death of the examined serpent-head rings. To understand why some of the serpent-head rings were ritually destroyed, we must examine several interconnected variables. Above all, the authority and alliance network the rings were connected to might provide the most important backdrop for the mentalities towards the rings. Since the ring carriers buried in the graves from Nes, Innbjoa, Hove and perhaps also Katajamäki were female elites, the gender of the deceased might have been an important element in the shared life of the carrier and the ring. The acts of ritual destruction of the rings have their parallels in the ritual destruction of weapons and status rings in contemporary war booty sacrifices and graves. In the burial ritual, the association with the cremation ritual seems important, although the cremation ritual did not *per se* make a destruction of gold rings necessary.

Finally, the unburnt male finger rings at Innbjoa and Hove and the inhumation graves from Avaldsnes and in Zealand provide an interesting contrast to graves with fragmented rings. Traces of the practice of destroying serpent-head rings in the funerary rite cluster in south-western Norway binding together the elites in this area in a shared ritual tradition.

ELITE ALLIANCES THROUGH INTERMARRIAGES

The serpent-head rings were not ordinary objects, they were meant to make a clear statement and distinguish their owner. Through a technology of enchantment (Gell 1992), the serpent-head rings were given a symbol-laden design by skilled artisans using Roman gold as the raw material. The Hove arm ring fragments have a total weight of 153.65 grams. The sheer weight of gold invested in such objects provided them with an elevated position in the object hierarchy. At a time when few figurative motifs are known from metal objects in Scandinavia, their special and easily recognizable serpent-head design filled them with charisma. The serpent-head ring was worn on the body, clearly visible to all who saw its carrier. Worn around the arm, they were probably looked upon with special respect and awe, as a powerful object possessing the narratives of interaction between Scandinavian elites. The charisma of the ring and that of the elite person wearing the ring were closely connected. It has even been suggested that the serpent design of the rings signified their transformative power and ability to help the carrier reach an altered state of consciousness (Fernstål 2004:203). The rings might have been perceived as magic and dangerous. It seems hardly coincidental that these rings received a similar treatment as weapons in graves and bog sacrifices.

As mentioned, different researchers have established the interpretation that serpent-head rings were elite insignia and markers of alliance networks. In a seminal work, J. Werner (1980) interpreted Kolben type arm rings and the largest serpent-head arm rings as male military insignia. In later research focussing especially on the ring distribution in Zealand, Holten (1989), Hansen *et al.* (1995), Andersson (1995), Ethelberg *et al.* (2000) and others have pointed out that all serpent-head arm and finger rings acted as symbols of elite alliances in Scandinavia

(Ethelberg *et al.* 2000:194). Due to their vital importance for an upper stratum of Scandinavian elites, socio-politically, the rings were potentially dangerous objects that had to be controlled so that their authority did not fall into the wrong hands. Therefore, the rings were probably person-dependant and non-transferrable objects.

The Innbjoa, Hove and Nes graves all included spindle whorls and were presumably female graves. In Roman Period Scandinavia, the distribution of certain types of female elite insignia probably reflects women engaged in long-distance intermarriages (Przybyła 2011). If the serpent-head arm rings are the result of long-distance alliances, it is possible that both the rings and their female carrier mirror intermarriages with allied elite families in regions outside southwestern Norway. The Innbjoa and Hove graves both contain several objects related to high social status. Without doubt, the unique silver spindle whorl with gold string from Innbjoa belonged to a woman of special importance. Several of the serpent-head ring types have distributional cores indicating their region of origin. According to Ethelberg *et al.* (2000:195), arm rings of type B were especially associated with Zealand. Type C rings have instead been associated mainly with eastern Sweden, where this arm ring type occurs in many hoards and in the Tuna inhumation grave (cf. Fernstål 2004; Hagberg 1967). It is thus possible that the Innbjoa arm ring, probably of type B, originated in Zealand. The type C ring from Hove might perhaps be associated with eastern Sweden. However, the presence of type C rings in Zealand indicates that the Zealand and eastern Sweden regions belonged to the same network.

When the alliance pact was agreed upon, the personification of the alliance was a woman wearing a serpent-head ring. As physical signs of the alliance network, a 'lineage charisma' followed the ring (Vedeler this volume). Although some objects with 'lineage charisma' related to a family or an institution could be handed down and used for generations, this seems not to have been the case with the serpent-head rings related to person-dependant alliances. Both unburnt and burnt rings were placed in the graves presumably of their carriers. The authority of the rings could not be inherited, the alliance they represented only lasted the lifetime of its carrier and had to be renegotiated. When the personification of the alliance pact died, the alliance was broken, and the ring had to die.

THE DEATH AND BURIAL OF THE RINGS

Thus the burial rituals not only reflected the burial of the deceased; it was also necessary to incorporate the ritual death and subsequent burial of the serpent-head ring. It is possible that the cutting of the rings reflected a ritual 'killing' of the rings, whereas the burning was related more to its funeral. In this manner, the ring first had to die before it could join its dead carrier on the pyre. Consequently, the destiny, life and death of the carrier and the ring were parallel and closely intertwined.

The destruction ritual seems to have happened close to the burial site. At Katajamäki, the fireplace was sealed with large stones. The central stone was fire-cracked, as it was put down when the fire was hot and the ring fragments had just been deposited. In Nes, a small melted fragment, three fireplaces and a large stone might be traces of the destruction process at the site where the cairn was built. From the Hove ring fragments, it might be inferred that the ring was first cut before being melted. The silver melted onto the ring could indicate that the cut ring fragments were situated on the body on the funerary pyre, hereby melting together presumably with a silver fibula. As was mentioned, the ring fragments were thereafter probably placed on a separate spot in the cairn. The small ring fragment found in 2009 could either have been overlooked in the 1843 dig or it could originate from the site of the funeral pyre, which must not have been far away from the cairn.

From the association between unharmed arm rings and inhumations, and fragmented arm rings and cremations, the burning of the rings has a direct association with the cremation ritual. This seems to have been the dominant burial type in the late Roman Period in southwestern Norway, in the Salo area around Katajamäki, as well as in the Møllegårdsmarken cemetery. However, in general there seems not to have been a direct link between the cremation ritual and the melting of gold items in contemporary graves, at least not in Norway. Here, the cremation rite only seldom included damage to gold. In the case of the cremation graves with serpent-head arm rings, this was instead the rule. This is seen in the Innbjoa and Hove burials, in the Katajamäki cremation and in the fragments from the Møllegårdsmarken cremation cemetery. The tradition of destroying status rings in this manner is documented also in the serpent-head finger ring from Nes, and in the

Katajamäki grave, the same practice is documented on a destroyed silver neck ring of eastern Baltic type.

The rings were put to rest together with the carrier but at some distance from the skeletal remains. In Nes, the ring fragment was pinned to the ground and formed the core of the cairn, with the burnt bones found some distance to the north. In Hove, the arm ring fragments were not found in the chamber with the cremation vessel but were found elsewhere in the cairn and had thus probably been deposited separately at another place. In Katajamäki, the damaged ring fragments were found around a fireplace just north of the main concentration of cremated bones and the rest of the burial furnishings. Similarly, the Alken Enge deposit of human remains and the lack of human remains in the nearby Illerup A weapons deposition, indicate that objects and carriers were separated in death.

THE REBIRTH OF A REGIONAL ALLIANCE

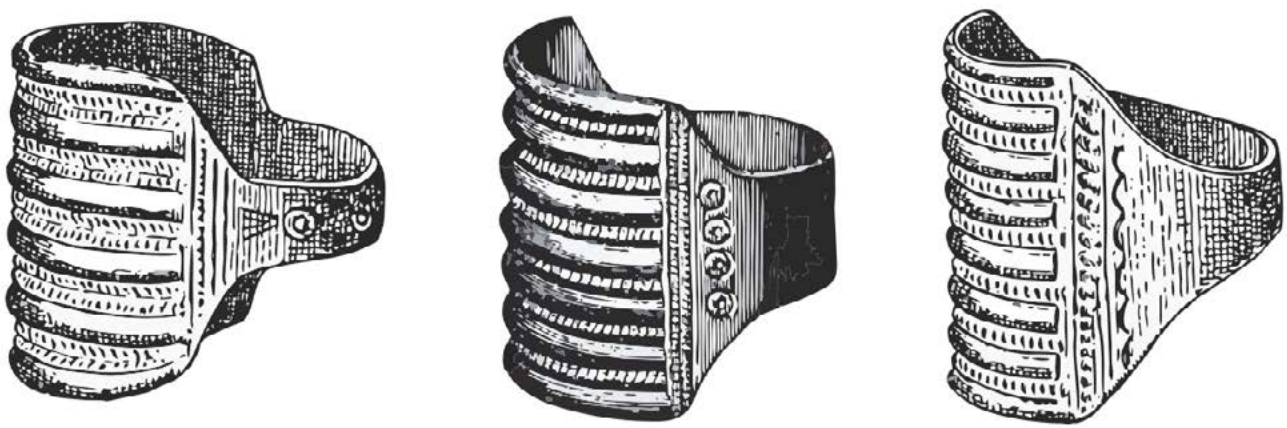
Although the destruction of serpent-head arm rings also occurred at Møllegårdsmarken and Katajamäki, as well as in Thorsbjerg, the concentration of two fragmented arm rings and one fragmented finger ring in southwestern Norway suggests that this ritual tradition was especially important in this region. Unusual details of the burial rituals at Avaldsnes, Hove, Innbjoa and Nes indicate that the people in this network met and had some shared practices. The Avaldsnes and Innbjoa grave chambers had similar, large dimensions. The female graves with serpent-head rings at Hove, Innbjoa and Nes are the only certain phase C1b–C2 graves in Norway where gold items have been melted. At Hove and Innbjoa, the only graves in Norway with serpent-head arm rings, the burnt and cut arm rings were supplemented with unburnt Beckmann type 18 rings. Together, these odd similarities seem hardly coincidental, but are rather a product of close relationships among those controlling these rings. The shared traditions of elite milieus with similar ring types indicate that the alliance networks we sketch from the distribution of ring types reflect actual relationships.

If the destruction of the rings during the funerary rituals reflected a liminal situation where alliances had to be renegotiated, there might have been an instant need for stabilization. This could be the reason why the

undamaged, male finger rings Beckmann type 18 were deposited in the female graves at Innbjoa and Hove. It is possible that these rings indicate that a renegotiation of regional alliances took place among those gathered at the funerary ritual. Similarities with the ring from the rich male grave in Flaghaug at Avaldsnes indicate that these rings were regional alliance rings (Reiersen 2011). The similarity among the Beckmann type 18 rings in the three graves seems to reflect a related origin of production (Figure 18), and they might well have been alliance gifts from the Avaldsnes milieu to their closest subordinates (Reiersen 2017).

As a symbolic funeral gift, they probably showed the witnesses present at the funerary ritual that regional alliances with the Avaldsnes center continued despite the death of a woman related to the overseas alliance.

In contrast to the arm rings from Innbjoa and Hove, the large Kolben type neck ring from Flaghaug at Avaldsnes was not destroyed. This was probably an inhumation grave, as the weapon set present was undamaged (Stylegar & Reiersen 2017). However, the reason why this large status ring was not destroyed might also reflect a greater stability at this time in the powerful center at Avaldsnes. From several subsequent richly furnished graves in this mound, perhaps reflecting a 'dynastic' cemetery (Reiersen 2010), it might be inferred that power dwelled at Avaldsnes also after this grave indicating a permanent power base. The undamaged/damaged rings might thus have signalled a continuation or discontinuation of power and alliances. In this manner, undamaged rings occurring in inhumation graves in Himlingøje, might have mirrored a greater stability of power among elites in the most important centers. Although the rings were deposited in graves and put out of circulation, in contrast to the graves with broken rings, they could reflect a more straightforward continuity of power.



Avaldsnes Hove Innbjoa

Figure 18. The three finger rings of Beckmann type 18 from Avaldsnes, Hove and Innbjoa. After Rygh 1885, fig. 306, Shetelig 1912, figs. 126, 137.

EPILOGUE

The serpent-head arm rings were among the most powerful and charismatic objects of Roman Period Scandinavia. The charisma embedded in these rings was so powerful and dangerous that, upon the death of their carriers, the rings had to be taken out of circulation, and in some cases, the rings were destroyed. For museum curators today, it would seem highly regrettable that these rings were intentionally destroyed and are preserved as mere shadows of their past glory. From the written correspondence regarding the Hove arm ring in 1843, it seems that the fragmentation of this arm ring was also a problem for professor R. Keyser at the University of Oslo (Reiersen 2013:62–64). Due to the damage to the ring, Keyser did not want to pay the price he originally had settled on with the vendor, warning him that he could not promise that the university could buy these fragments at all. Luckily, in the end, the rings and the rest of the grave find were salvaged together with at least some information about the find context. Through a consideration of the find contexts for intentionally destroyed serpent-head rings in southwestern Norway and abroad, I attempt to emphasize the significance of these special elite insignia and their carriers. Looking beyond the sad remains of these once so spectacular rings, new insights have been made regarding the significance of these rings and the mentalities surrounding them throughout Scandinavia. This article suggests that the death of these powerful and charismatic serpent-head rings, which were dangerous and non-transferrable objects, was a direct consequence of person-dependant alliances.

Table 1. List of melted gold in Roman and Migration period graves in Norway. Based on Bøe (1926), with a few later supplements. Dates mainly after Andersson (1993). The frame indicates the discussed serpent-head rings, which are the only melted gold objects dated to phases C1b or C2. After Reiersen 2017, table 5.2.

MUSEUM NO.	FIND SPOT	OBJECT TYPE MELTED	PHASE
C 18011	Lund, Larvik, Vestfold	Gold berlock	B2
C 9260	Bruland, Sandnes, Rogaland	Gold berlock	B2
B 5931	Nes, Kvinnherad, Hordaland	Serpent-head finger ring; Drop of gold	C1b
B 4045	Innbjoa, Vindafjord, Rogaland	Serpent-head arm ring	C1b
C 1106–07, S 12523, C 1102	Hove, Sandnes, Rogaland	Serpent-head arm ring, including small fragment; Small spiral gold ring	C1b–C2
B 11546	Godøy, Giske, Møre og Romsdal	Medallion	C3
B 7634	Grindheim, Etne, Hordaland	Finger ring Beckmann type 11	C3
C 6300	Stadheim, Vik, Sogn og Fjordane	Finger ring Beckmann type 13	C3
C 11562	Reme, Lindesnes, Vest-Agder	Finger ring Beckmann type 12	C
C 3816	Seim, Vik, Sogn og Fjordane	Finger ring Beckmann type 12	C
B 10790	Jangarden, Giske, Møre og Romsdal	Drops of gold	C3
B 6103	Haugland, Kvinnherad, Hordaland	Drop of gold	C
C 52083	Ås, Sande, Vestfold	Drops of gold	C
S 10455	Nordbø, Rennesøy, Rogaland	Gold fragment	C3–D