

Roman horticulture beyond the frontier: garden cultivation at Iron Age Uppåkra (Sweden)

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Traditionally, the study of Roman cultural imports to Roman Iron Age societies in Scandinavia has been based on analysis of the artefactual record. The starting point has been artefacts held to be high-status objects deriving chiefly from funerary contexts and, to a lesser degree, from settlement sites.¹ Although the existing evidence at Uppåkra, a high-status settlement site in Scania province, Sweden, comes only from residential contexts, we will address the ongoing debate concerning Roman cultural imports with ecofactual evidence, to consider which aspects of Roman culture were introduced, which parts of Roman society were mediators, and the underlying social reasons for the introduction of the archaeobotanical remains into indigenous Iron Age society.

Uppåkra, a high-status proto-urban site

Recent archaeobotanical finds of Roman Iron Age date (A.D. 1-400) from Uppåkra and its environs demonstrate that a range of Roman garden plants was cultivated locally, betraying an acquaintance with Roman horticulture. The evidence shows that a number of garden plants previously thought to have been introduced in the 12th c.² through the monastic system and the developing urban centres were first introduced almost a millennium earlier. Macrofossils found at Uppåkra and on some surrounding settlements reveal a range of plants commonly grown in gardens in the core of the empire (cf. Colum., *RR* 11.3.14-15): dill, garden parsley, garden cress, elecampane, parsnip, carrot, turnip, rape, cabbage, black mustard, white mustard, and opium poppy. In Roman contexts these vegetables and condiments were used not only for culinary purposes, but a number of them were also considered to carry medicinal properties. The finds demonstrate an understanding of Roman horticultural techniques, probably some acquaintance with Roman culinary customs, and possibly even some awareness of Roman medical practices. We will suggest that the purpose in introducing these plants, along with knowledge of how to cultivate them, was not simply a practical one. They may comprise another example of how customs of Roman origin, and in some cases knowledge and skills derived from Romans, were imported by Iron Age élites living beyond Rome's northern frontier. We will suggest that the purpose of these imports could have been politically motivated, following Mary Helms' idea that knowledge both from and of foreign cultures was a way for élites in stratified societies to manifest their status and procure political power.³

The Iron Age settlement of Uppåkra is one of the oldest proto-urban sites in Scandinavia; its earliest traces date back to the 1st c. B.C., and it remained an important site for over a millennium. It sits on a prominent rise in a fertile plain, 7 km from the coast. It had access to the Öresund Strait from small waterways to the north and south, and to a prehistoric N-S land

1 U. Lund Hansen, *Römischer Import im Norden: Warenaustausch zwischen dem Römischen Reich und dem freien Germanien* (Copenhagen 1987).

2 J. Heimdahl, "Barbariska trädgårdsmästare. Nya perspektiv på hortikulturen i Sverige fram till 1200-talets slut," *Fornvännen* 105 (2010) 265-80.

3 M. W. Helms, *Ulysses' sail. An ethnographic odyssey of power, knowledge, and geographical distance* (Princeton, NJ 1988).