

## Notes and News

### A CHIEFTAIN'S FARM AT BORG, LOFOTEN, N. NORWAY (Fig. 1; Pl. VIII)

Before Norway was unified into one kingdom during the late Viking age, the country was divided up into a number of minor chiefdoms. The names of some of their chieftains are known from the sagas. A well-known northern Norwegian chieftain was Ottar, who around A.D. 890, told his story to King Alfred the Great of England. From certain ancient monuments and finds it is possible to identify several central areas, probably indicating such chiefdoms. The farm of a chieftain himself, however, had never been identified, until an excavation started at a site some 180 km north of the Arctic Circle, on the island of Vestvågøy in the Lofoten islands. Nowhere else in northern Norway have so many Iron-Age ancient monuments been recorded as on Vestvågøy, and the island seems to have been densely populated in the Viking period.

In 1981 ploughing at the farm known as 'Borg' turned up objects of a character never previously found in northern Norway, objects rare even in the rest of Scandinavia. Trial excavations in 1983 and 1984 revealed a large number of objects — some of the same character as the previous ones — with remains of five or six buildings and traces of ploughing with mouldboard. Radiocarbon datings cover a span of at least 650 years, from the Roman to the Viking period, with a slight emphasis towards the late Iron Age. The latter is confirmed by the objects, the datable ones being of Viking and especially Merovingian date.

The bulk of the finds came to light in or close to the most distinct of the structures visible on the surface, a house-ground 30–40 m × 7–8 m (internal measurements). Most of the material consisted of objects normally found at a late Iron-Age settlement site: slag and iron fragments — mostly small ones, impossible to identify — some soap-stone objects and sherds of bowls, a few bronze fragments and a number of bones. Preliminary analyses of macrofossils (1983 and 1984 samples) and of burnt bones (1983 samples) demonstrate that agriculture was an important economic factor in the life of the settlement. Altogether 26 grains of barley have been excavated, a find that tallies with the traces of ploughing observed at the site. Among the relatively few burnt bones of which it was possible to identify the species, the bones of sheep or goats and of cattle predominated. So far, bones of fish, game or sea mammals have not been identified, although the use of such resources would seem natural considering the situation of Lofoten. However, fishing was obviously one source of food as confirmed by a few fishhooks and sinkers among the finds.

These activities would of course have been quite normal on a N. Norwegian Iron-Age farm. However, the reason why Borg is interpreted as a farm belonging to a chieftain, and not to an ordinary farmer, is the character of certain objects which differ strikingly from the rest of the material.

In addition to one little silver bead, there are three small objects of gold, one — possibly two — being a foil figure (so-called 'gull-gubbe'), presumably depicting Frøy, the god of fertility and peace, hugging Gerd, the daughter of a giant of Nordic mythology (Pl. VIII, A). Such figures are known from Denmark, Sweden and Norway, often in a cult context. About 55 fragments of glass were found at the site, representing six or seven vessels. The majority of these sherds are in various shades of green. Some are ornamented with melted-on threads in

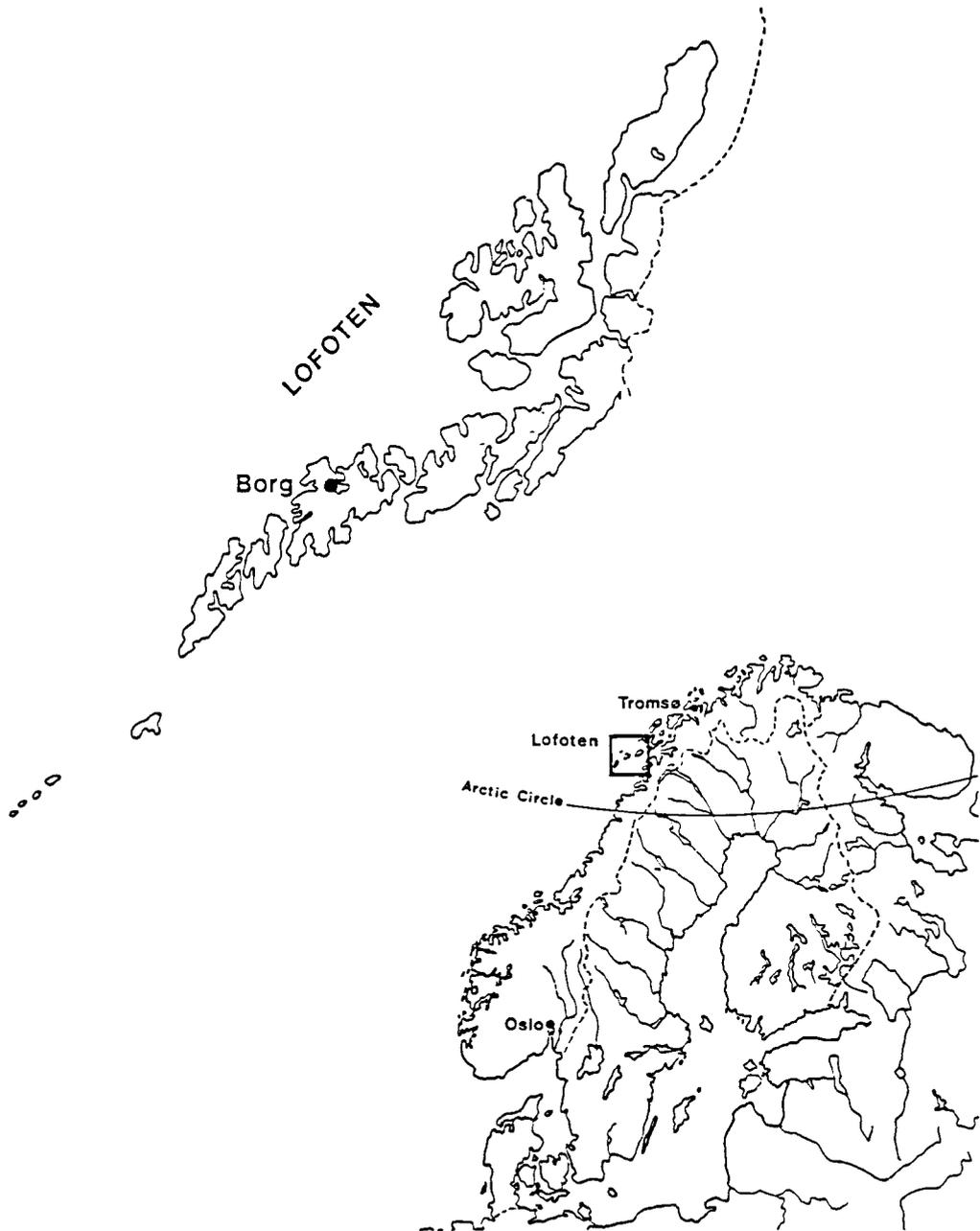


FIG. 1  
BORG, LOFOTEN, N. NORWAY  
Location map

the same colour, others are sherds of reticella glass of a delicate blue colour, the twisted thread being blue and yellow (Pl. VIII, c). The most remarkable sherds, however, are those decorated with gold foil (Pl. VIII, d). These are quite outstanding, and, to our knowledge, have been found in only one or two sites in Sweden and in one in Germany. On the whole, late Iron-Age glass is rare; in northern Norway only one other find is known. The Borg vessels probably came from the Continent — from France and the Rhine area. Reticella glass is also known from Great Britain. Equally remarkable is the ceramic material from Borg. Except for some scattered pieces of early Iron-Age pottery, most of the fragments — nearly 30 altogether — seem to be sherds of tin-coated jugs of the late Iron Age, also probably brought to Borg from the Continent (Pl. VIII, b). Most of these objects were found inside the most distinct house-ground.

As already stated, these objects are very rare, and not only in a N. Norwegian context. Though of course on quite another scale, such combinations of finds are primarily associated in southern Scandinavia with early towns and market-places, like Ribe and Århus in Denmark, Helgö and Birka in Sweden, Hedeby in Schleswig, and Kaupang in Norway. Only a person of very high rank socially and economically would have been able to obtain such items of 'luxury' and to maintain the status that these objects represented. In our opinion, the logical interpretation of the Borg site is consequently that it is the farm of one of the chieftains mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Ottar, who lived somewhere north of Lofoten, sailed from northern Norway, passing Kaupang and Hedeby, bringing with him furs, walrus tusks and eider-down. The Borg finds show that 'luxury' articles — and a new invention such as the mouldboard plough — were brought up from the south, most likely by a chieftain or his men.

As the results of the trial excavations (80 m<sup>2</sup> altogether) are very promising, it is intended that the project should be continued for four or five years in collaboration with other Scandinavian scientists. We hope to throw some light on Borg as one of the social, economic and political centres in northern Norway, and also to focus on Borg as an example of our wide common Nordic and even North Atlantic Viking and pre-Viking culture.

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