

Identification

<u>Nomination</u>	Birka and Hovgården
<u>Location</u>	Adelsö Parish, Ekerö Commune, Stockholm County, Uppland Region
<u>State Party</u>	Sweden
<u>Date</u>	25 October 1989

Justification by State Party

As the most extensive and complex prehistoric site in Sweden, Birka is unique as a well defined proto-town, mentioned in Frankish documents as early as AD 870. The earliest known Christian congregation in Sweden was founded there in 831 by St Ansgar. Its location on a small island had preserved the entire site from modern development and exploitation. The conservation work that has been in progress continuously since 1931 and its historic relevance make it a well known tourist site. The historic connection with Birka and the historical events since the medieval period at Alsnö make the ensemble of Adelsö Hovgården and Birka unique in Swedish history and of great significance in European history.

History and DescriptionHistory

The date of the foundation of the settlement at Birka, on the island of Björkö in Lake Mälaren, is uncertain. Archaeological evidence suggests that it began in the closing years of the 8th century AD. It was certainly flourishing when the German monk Ansgar (later to be canonized) went there in 829 from Denmark, where he had been sent by the Emperor Louis the Pious to evangelize the Danes. His successful mission is recorded in the Vita Ansgari written shortly after his death in 865 by his successor, Rimbart. The chronicler Adam of Bremen, writing around 1070, records later missions in the 930s and the 1060s, and Birka is referred to in an interpolation in the Anglo-Saxon translation of the Geography of Orosius prepared at the request of Alfred the Great of England in the second half of the 9th century.

During the two centuries of its occupation, Birka was one of the dominant emporia of the northern world, which extended from Russia in the east to Ireland in the west, through important centres such as Hedeby/Haithabu (Schleswig), Ribe (Denmark), Kaupang (Norway), Dorestad (Netherlands), and Hamwic/Southampton (England). The size of the Birka settlement and the fact that it had the status of a quasi-town, with its own thing (council)

and law, suggests that it was pre-eminent in this part of Scandinavia. It appears to have succeeded and replaced the earlier trading settlement at Helgö, some 10 km to the southeast, which flourished between AD 400 and 800.

Judging from the archaeological finds, Birka began to lose its importance in the 970s or 980s, when its role was taken over by Sigtuna. Occupation lingered on for a few decades but Birka was probably abandoned by 920.

With the decline of Birka, a Royal estate was established on the neighbouring island of Adelsö. There are documentary references to associations between this area and the 11th century king Håkon. In the 13th century a royal palace was built in brick and became a favoured location for meetings of the Royal Council. It was here that the momentous Council meeting was held in 1279 at which the Swedish feudal system was given shape.

Description

The proto-town of Birka occupies much of the western part of the island of Björkö, which measures some 1.5 by 2 km. The surface evidence is confined to the ramparts of the hill-fort (borg), used as a refuge in times of danger, the long ramparts of the town wall (stadsvallen), with gaps where timber gate structures existed formerly, traces of stone jetties and harbours along the shore, and some 3000 burial mounds and stone settings surrounding the area of the main settlement. There are no standing remains of the settlement itself, with its timber buildings, but its location is vividly indicated by the so-called "Black Earth" (svarta jorden), composed of the layers of human occupation and the remains of wooden structures that are common on other sites of the period, such as Anglo-Scandinavian York (Jorvik), as revealed by excavation over the present century.

Birka is connected with the nearby Hovgården/Alsnöhus site on Adelsö island. This Viking Age and medieval royal estate is centred on Adelsö church, and the visible remains include the foundations of the 13th century brick palace, several large burial mounds, and an early medieval harbour with a runic inscription.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The nominated areas are in public ownership and are protected under the provisions of the Swedish Cultural Heritage Act 1988.

Management

The Swedish Central Board of National Antiquities (Riksantikvarieämbetet) is responsible for the management of the area.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

The Birka site was purchased by the State in 1912-14, additional acquisitions being made in the 1950s and 1960s. The Adelsö site was bought by the State (KVHAA) in the 1950s and taken into care by Riksantikvarieämbetet, to which ownership was later transferred.

Since 1931 Riksantikvarieämbetet has been operating a comprehensive conservation and restoration programme on Björkö, which now extends to Adelsö Hovgården.

The earliest known excavation at Birka was by J. Hadorph in the 1680s. In 1871-95 Hjalmar Stolpe excavated some 1100 burial mounds, and also in the Black Earth. His finds were analysed and reported by Holger Arbman nearly half a century later. There were excavations by Riksantikvarieämbetet in 1969-71 and by the University of Stockholm from 1973. A major five-year excavation project in the Black Earth began in 1990.

An excavation campaign began at Adelsö in 1992 and is producing a considerable body of information about the growth of this Royal estate, whose role was to oversee and control the Birka commercial settlement.

Authenticity

As an archaeological complex, Birka and Hovgården is entirely authentic, and no reconstruction has been carried out.

Additional comments

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the property in May 1993.

Evaluation

Qualities

The Birka-Hovgården complex is an important archaeological ensemble illustrative of the elaborate trading networks of Viking Age Europe and their influence on the subsequent history of Scandinavia. It is also important as the site of the first evangelization of this part of Sweden.

Comparative analysis

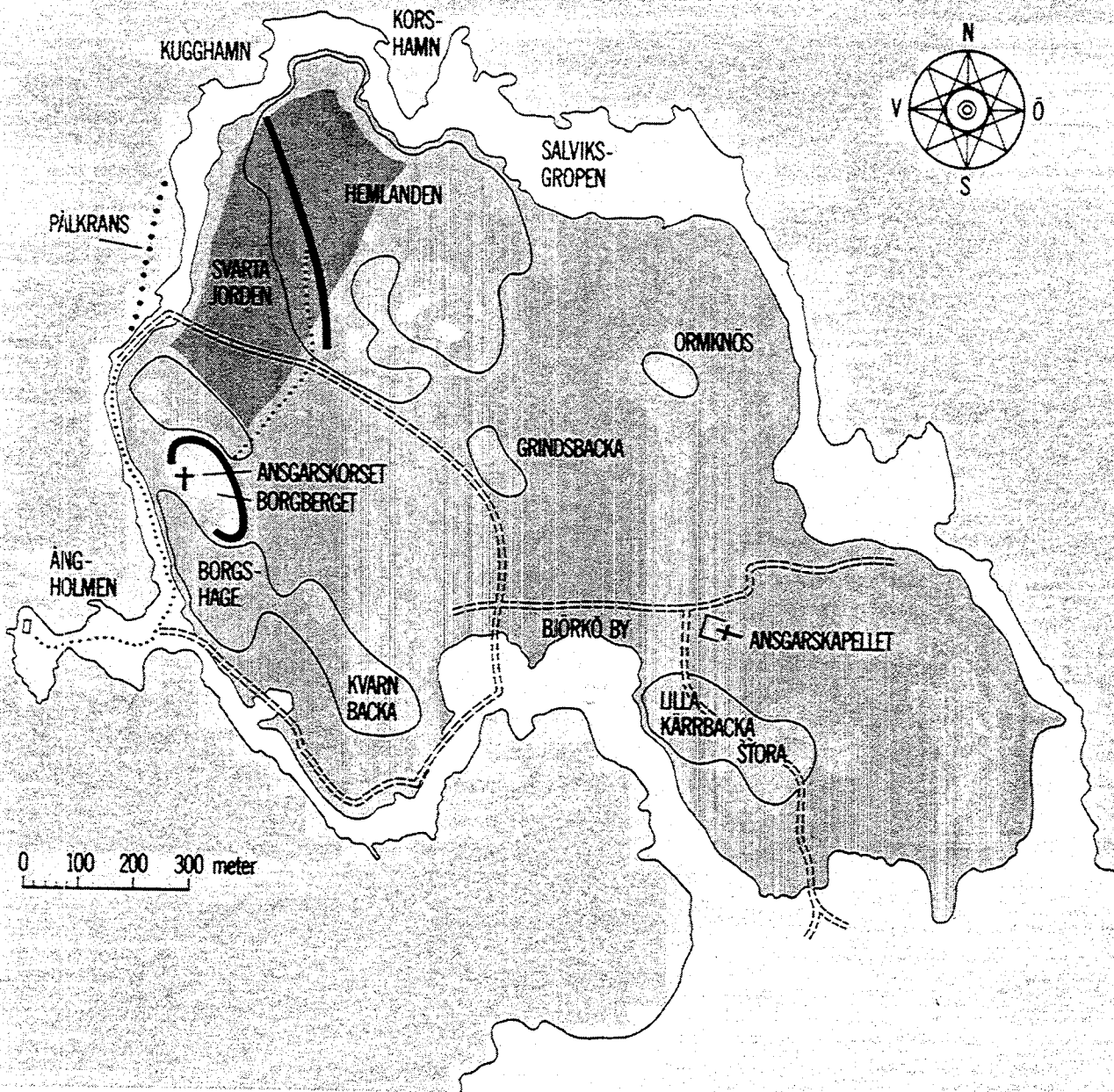
Birka has to be seen against the context of the other emporia of this period, from Staraya Ladoga to Dublin. The only sites that are comparable with Birka in terms of degree of conservation and accessibility are Hedeby/Haithabu (Germany) and to a lesser extent Dorestad (Netherlands). Most of the others, such as Ribe, Aarhus, Hamburg, York, and Dublin, are beneath the existing towns and cities. The wealth and diversity of the material excavated at Birka indicates that it was one of the most important sites of this group.

Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of criteria iii and iv:

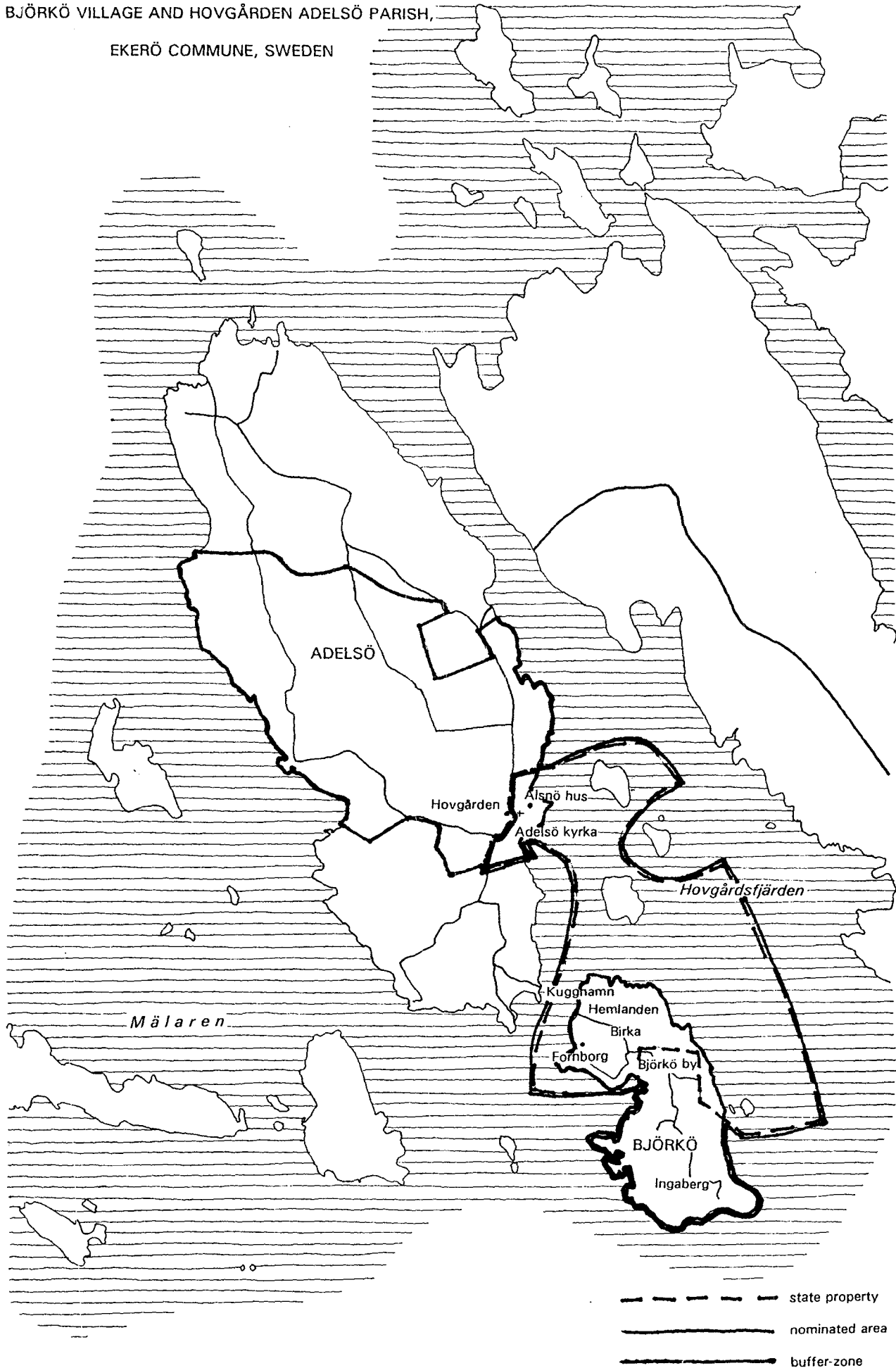
- Criterion iii The Birka-Hovgården complex bears exceptionally well preserved testimony to the wide-ranging trade network established by the Vikings during the two centuries of their phenomenal economic and political expansion.
- Criterion iv Birka is one of the most complete and undisturbed examples of a Viking trading settlement of the 8th-10th centuries AD.

ICOMOS, October 1993



Birka : plan du site / map of the site

BJÖRKÖ VILLAGE AND HOVGÅRDEN ADELSÖ PARISH,
EKERÖ COMMUNE, SWEDEN



Birka et Hovgården : plan indiquant la zone proposée pour inscription
et la zone tampon /

Birka and Hovgården : map showing the nominated area and the buffer zone