Of Thieves, Counterfeiters and Homicides
Crime in Hedeby and Birka

By Sven Kalmring


Material evidence of prehistoric crime is rare. A compilation of finds from Hedeby harbour however offers three case studies, where three different offences – thievery, counterfeiting and homicide – are likely. Evidence for the smuggling of arms is discussed on the basis of a fourth example from Hedeby’s flat-ground cemetery. Against this background the author argues for a review of finds and features from comparable emporia such as Birka.

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The source material for the study of Medieval crime is difficult to define. Archæo-criminology faces some serious methodological problems: our cases should be related to empirically ascertainable phenomena, they must have been assessed as injustices worth punishing on the normative-social criteria of that time and – in spite of all differences – a connection to what we now consider to be criminal behaviour should remain (Schild 1991). Another challenge is usually posed by the poor state of the source material. However, in Hedeby harbour the archaeological record offers a remarkably wide variety of evidence.

Worth Punishing: Normative-social Criteria of Injustice

Medieval Scandinavian laws were not recorded until the Christian era between the 12th and 14th centuries. Increased royal power and the growing influence of the Church led to royal legislation and provincial laws mostly based upon Roman canonical law. Though in some respects they seem to have earlier roots, their significance for the legal framework of Late Iron Age Scandinavia is controversial (cf. Brink 2002, s. 87 ff; 2008, s. 24 ff, 27f). However, it is beyond doubt that Viking Period society was familiar with legal institutions such as assemblies, dedicated þing sites and judges, that is, socially high-ranking law speakers (Jesch 1998; Brink 2003).

Our knowledge of legal practice is sparse. Viking Period society was based on kinship. As royal power at that time was comparatively weak, the legal protection of the individual was a matter for the head of each family (Gade 1993). Crimes committed by women fell within the remit of their husbands while slaves’ actions were a liability of their owners. Assault committed against a member of a family was regarded as a crime against the family as a whole. It follows that vengeance could be directed both against the offender himself and against his relatives. The offended party obtained satisfaction through self-help either in terms of claiming fines or in blood feud (cf. Sawyer 1987). Public intervention only occurred in cases where the interests of a whole community
were violated. The motive behind a criminal action was not punishable, only its observable consequences.

Judging from the various later Medieval provincial laws, negotiation of a fine was the most common way to settle an issue between two families in that era. However, homicide at a legal assembly, the violation of domestic peace, arson, rape and high treason were regarded as such severe crimes that they could not be atoned for with fines (Gade 1993). Here, perpetrators were instead outlawed by legal verdict. Inability to pay an imposed fine as well as petty theft, robbery and illicit intercourse were punished by mutilation, whereas counterfeiting, bodily injury and insults were punished by flogging. Such corporal punishment was originally inflicted only on unfree members of society and were shameful punishments performed in public. The death penalty, when executed by public authorities, was however rather rare. As vengeance for a crime was generally a private matter, the killing of a member of the offender’s party eventually terminated the conflict. Nevertheless, Medieval Norwegian law prescribes that sorcery be punished by drowning, thievery by hanging and a slave caught stealing by beheading.

Hedebø Harbour
The 1953 discovery of a Viking Period shipwreck in the harbour of Hedebø (Hingst 1958) became the starting point of a large-scale research excavation in the years 1979–80 (Schietzel & Crumlin-Pedersen 1980; Kalmar 2010). By the end of the campaign, the wreck itself and 2236 m² of the Viking Period harbour as well as two adjacent shore areas had been investigated. This allows rare detailed insights into one of the most important Early Medieval ports of northern Europe.

Long before the emergence of the first harbour facilities a differentiated development is observable, pointing to use of the shoreline as a simple landing place. The construction of harbour facilities started in about the AD 830s. All structures were erected as multiple-row piling bridges. The following gradual expansion of the harbour – by a solid access to a landing place, the appearance of the first jetties, the assembly of connecting structures to form a single platform – eventually produced an impressive U-shaped platform of more than 1475 m² at the beginning of the 11th century.

The harbour’s continual adjustment to the changing demands of long-distance trade – that is, the changing demands of professional merchant shipping with the development of specialised cargo carriers against the background of urbanisation and formation of larger power structures – guaranteed Hedebø’s enduring participation in maritime trade and thus secured the settlement’s economic basis.

The huge U-shaped wooden platform, however, cannot only be explained by the demands of merchant shipping or as a structure intended to aid loading and unloading of ships. It also seems to have served as a market place for the early town (Kalmar 2010). Its function as a central location for the exchange of goods is stressed by various finds from the harbour basin. This material allows comprehensive studies, not only reflecting Hedebø’s far-reaching trade connections, but also highlighting Viking Period harbour operations in all their rich diversity.

The Thief and the Sea Chest
The royal longship “Hedebø wreck 1” dates from c. AD 982 (−0/+7) and lay in the so-called Hebekasten section of the cofferdam. During excavations here in 1979, a sea chest was found near the transition from the ship’s bow to the midship, only 0.90 m from the keel (area B, grid square H12/13). The chest lay c. 0.5 m deeper than the wreck itself, which seems to rule out any connection with the ship. Meanwhile, the heads of the jetties were too far from the find spot – 4.60 to 5.70 m – to allow that the chest would accidentally have fallen between ship and jetty during loading.

The chest is composed of six oaken parts, with a slightly curved lid and inclined side panels (Crumlin-Pedersen 1997, p. 141 f; Roesdahl 2003, p. 225 f). It measures 52 cm in length and 23 cm in width and has a height of 27 cm. The longitudinal panels are inserted into notches in the sides. The floorboard is mortised into the side panels and was also nailed up onto the long sides’ lower edges. The vertical parts are decorated with a double line engraving. Originally the chest had an iron
lock with two overfall shackles (fig. 1). A close parallel is the somewhat smaller sea chest from the Oseberg burial (Grieg 1928, p. 121 ff). As the lid was made from a hollowed half-trunk, it was strong enough to bear the weight of an oarsman, and the inclined sides with a broader base would have prevented the chest from tilting over in rough sea. Therefore such chests are regarded as sea chests for the storage of personal belongings (cf. Ellmers 2009, p. 5).

When found, the chest was upside-down in the mud of the harbour basin with its lid sprung open (fig. 2). The lock had been gouged out and the chest was empty – except for a granite boulder weighing 16.4 kg. This speaks clearly of thievery on board of a ship: the chest was broken open by force, searched through and afterwards intentionally sunk into the harbour, weighted down with a boulder. Its find spot in the open water of the harbour indicates that the chest must have been dropped from a ship. As granite generally appears only as glacial detritus in northern Germany, the boulder may have been taken from the ship’s ballast.

The Counterfeiter: Pewter Coins
Before the start of systematic metal detector surveys at Hedeby in 2003 (von Carnap-Bornheim & Hilberg 2007, p. 210 ff), 151 coins were known from the town area (Wiechmann 2007). 68 derived from the harbour excavations, which touched upon a relatively small area compared to the settlement. Here most of the coins are early Nordic ones, nearly exclusively struck at Hedeby itself. Moreover Islamic coins, coinage from the Carolingian realm, the German Empire and Northumbria has been found in the harbour basin.

In spoil earth from the north-eastern corner of the excavated harbour section (area 80 II, grid square 15) nine darāḥim were during water sieving. Initially they were classified as official ‘Abbāsidic coins of caliph Hārūn-al-Rašīd, struck in Madinat-al-Salām – today’s Bagdad – in AD 807/808 (Hovén 1990). Peculiarly however, all of them show not only identical stamps, but also the relative position of the obverse and reverse is the same on each coin. Furthermore, they even have the same diameter and weight, weighing a little less than ideal darāḥim.

A metallurgical analysis has proved the coins not to be made of silver, but of a lead-tin alloy (Steuer et al. 2002, p. 155 ff). The material is 70–90% tin and 10–30% lead. Some of the darāḥim show traces of wasters, which attests that they were not struck on a minting stamp, but cast (ibid. fig. 14). To make these replicas, an original dirham was used and pressed several times into a clam-shell mould. Another cast dirham with a waster turned up already in 1905 as a surface find in the early town’s settlement area (Nöbbel 1936, p. 134, fig. 15).

These cast non-silver coins are clear evidence...
for counterfeiting. The cases where wasters have not been removed suggest manufacture in Hedeby itself, and indicate that the forgeries did not circulate for a long time. The wasters would soon have revealed them. As coins from one series rarely stay together for long, the forgeries do not seem to have found their way into the circulation of money, but rather were lost close to their place of production (Steuer et al. 2002, p. 158 f), that is, a counterfeiter’s workshop in Hedeby.

The date of the counterfeiting is slightly problematic, as the closedness of the complex – it may have incorporated a few real Samanidic coins as well – is not secure. Obviously, though, the forgeries cannot pre-date AD 807. And they belong in a period when coins were still used as real coin-age with a nominal value (Münzgeldwirtschaft) in Hedeby and its hinterland (Wiechmann 2007). After about AD 900, the hack silver economy where coins were divided for payment with weighed silver (Gewichtsgeldwirtschaft) would easily have revealed the forgeries. The best dating evidence is structural: the find spot in the harbour was underneath an extension of the northern jetty that made the area accessible only after 886 and before c. 990–1010.

The Homicide Victim: Skeleton Hedeby 1953a

Already during underwater survey in 1953 a human skull was salvaged from the harbour basin. Its exact find spot is somewhat uncertain: most publications report that the helmet diver found it inside the Hedeby 1 shipwreck (Kersten 1954, p. 52; Hingst & Kersten 1995, p. 270). The ship sunk, after a certain time of use, due to a fire in the interval AD 990–1010 (Crumlin-Pedersen 1997, p. 94). Apart from the removal of the skull, the ship’s contents were left unexamined at the time in order to prevent destruction of preserved hull elements. In the anthropological reports a more precise find spot is given (Schaefer 1956, p. 95; 1963, p. 93 ff). Here it is said that human remains of two individuals were found in the mud on top of the eastern part of the wreck. Apparently the bones were inside the limits of the wreck but in a superficial stratigraphical position, suggesting a considerable interval between the sinking of the ship and the deaths of the two people.

Of skeleton b, only the lower jaw remains, belonging to a mature male. Skeleton a’s skull belongs to a late-juvenile person of an “eastern European phenotype”. The rest of the human remains – thirteen partly damaged ribs, a left-side humerus and the left-hand part of the pelvis – also belong to that individual. Because of the individual’s youth, their sexual characteristics are not strongly developed. Hence U. Schaefer (1963, p. 98) judged their sex only as “male rather than female”. However, by means of a discrimination function analysis of the skull in 1969, H. Helmuth concluded that skeleton a was a female.

The well-preserved skull – cerebral and visceral cranium without a jaw – shows evidence of injuries (Schaefer 1956, p. 96; 1963, p. 204, pl. 24). On the right side of the frontal bone the compact bone has been damaged at three different spots. The damage most likely does not derive from the recovery of the skull but rather from stabbing with a sharp object. On the right upper jaw is a hole, 11 mm in length and 2–3.5 mm in width (id. 1963, pl. 32). Along the edges of this hole are fine cracks, typical for stabbing injuries. It must have been caused by a knife-like object. As the wound only opened into the maxillary sinus, it was not lethal. Any concomitant infection is unlikely as there is no damaged bone tissue. The individual more likely died shortly after that injury, as there are no signs of callus formation around the edges of the wound.

Due to the unclear context of the skull in relation to the shipwreck, we should treat simple explanations such as “a member of the ship’s crew that – if not already killed before – died when the ship was afire and sinking” (Schaefer 1956, p. 96) with care. Understanding the killing of that individual is difficult: there are no indications of the person’s social status – was it a free person or a slave? – nor for the circumstances that led to their violent death. Was it a battle, premeditated murder or spur-of-the moment manslaughter? All that seems certain is that this individual died a violent death. Referring to it neutrally as “homicide” admittedly can only be based on what we would consider a crime from a modern perspective.

What Is Lacking?

Something that would complete this vivid insight into crime in an Early Medieval harbour
district would be evidence of smuggling. Especially in an early town such as Hedeby – one of the largest maritime trading places of the Viking world with a considerable stock turnover, situated directly on the border between the Continent and Northern Europe – the smuggling of goods was presumably on the daily agenda. In order to identify archaeological evidence, however, we need to know what goods were actually contraband.

Concerning the arms trade, embargos are actually known from written sources. Regulations in 9th century Carolingian capitularies try to assure strict control on the export of arms from the Frankish realm and ban smuggling (cf. Jankuhn 1951, p. 228, note 93; Horn Fuglesang 2000). The Capitulary of Thionville/Diedenhofen, for example, mentions for AD 805: “Concerning merchants who come from parts of the Slavs and Avars, how far they ought to proceed with their business (…). And let them not bring arms or breastplates to sell. And if they are found carrying them, let all their goods be taken from them (…)” (Capitularia regum Francorum, c. 7). Such regulation of the arms trade is particularly interesting with regard to the distribution of the so-called Ulfberht swords (Steuer 1987, p. 151 ff; 1999, p. 408 f; Solberg 1991).

Ulfberht swords appear throughout the Viking Period and are characterised by a welded blade signature, +VLFBERH+T, in various versions (Müller-Wille 1970; 2006; Menghin 1980; Geibig 1991, p. 116 ff). The inlaid Roman capitals generally consist of damascened iron wire, while the blades themselves are high-quality iron. On the reverse side of most Ulfberht blades are various geometrical patterns. The inscription has long been interpreted as a manufacturer’s label, which would make Ulfberht a Frankish sword smith. His workshop was assumed to have been located somewhere on the Lower Rhine. In a reappraisal of the Ulfberht swords, Anne Stalsberg (2008) recently came to the conclusion that the signature does not denote a smith, but rather a bishop or abbot who oversaw an arms workshop. Variations within the inscriptions have been regarded as imitations and counterfeits, where the copied manufacturer’s brand label was seen as a universal synonym for quality (Geibig 1991, p. 118).

The exact number of Ulfberht swords that were made is of course unknown. Up to now 166 blades carrying such signatures have been identified (Stalsberg 2008, p. 90 ff). Strikingly, only 16 certain examples are known from within the former Frankish realm, whereas at least 144 have been identified outside its borders with a distinct focus in Norway (Stalsberg 2008, p. 99 ff, map 1). Hence, apart from locally made imitations and counterfeits, a considerable number of Ulfberht swords must have left the Frankish realm as booty, ransom or – last but not least – contraband goods via the borderland trading places.

The Arms Smuggler (?) and the Ulfberht Sword

Only one Ulfberht sword is known from Hedeby. It was found by F. Knorr in 1906 in “Harbeck’s paddock” among the grave goods of a burial in the early town’s flat-ground cemetery (Arents 1992, p. 40 ff, 64 ff, fig. 40). Like most of the burials in the flat-ground cemetery, grave 52/1906 (= Arents’s grave 62) was an inhumation oriented west-southwest and containing few artefacts. Nails surrounding the body indicate a decayed wooden coffin. The body was on its back. The grave goods consisted of the sword with remains of a scabbard, placed on the right-hand side, and a knife on the pelvis (Arents & Eisenschmidt 2010, p. 41, pl. 12.62). The sword hilt (Geibig combination type 11 = Petersen type V) dates the burial to c. AD 900–950 (Geibig 1989, p. 247).

Concerning the lettering on the blade, Alfred Geibig (1989, p. 242, catalogue “Schwert 28”; 1991, p. 116, note 69, No. 280) reports that because of the remains of the scabbard the inscription could only be studied on an X-ray photograph. But even on the photograph, taken in 1984, merely vague hints of a signature in capital letters were visible. Only two letters – R and H – were identified with confidence. Towards the hilt and after a gap for another letter, two arches below each other were observed. They might be read as the letter B, which would give the series of letters “(B) . RH”. This might be interpreted as the remains of the name Ulfberht. In addition Geibig noted other vague irregularities on the X-ray photograph which might point to the existence of further letters. Unfortunately, the X-ray photograph from 1984 can no longer be found,
and a new X-ray photograph taken in November 2009 reveals nothing but vague irregularities.

Appraising the possible Ulfberht sword from Hedeby is difficult. Having been found in a grave, it should primarily be regarded as a personal belonging of the interred individual. The circumstance that it was found at the borderland trading place of Hedeby does not make things easier: was the person from the German Empire, having arrived with his own sword which he had acquired legally on the Continent? Or was it instead an individual from outside of the Empire who got the weapon as booty, as ransom or as a smuggled piece of weaponry? Last but not least, we must consider that after the defeat of king Gnupa, between AD 934 and 983 Hedeby was not even located outside the empire, but lay under the nominal hegemony of the German kings (cf. Hoffmann 1984, p. 128 f). Hence the possible Ulfberht sword from Hedeby cannot be regarded unproblematically as contraband.

Prospects for Further Study – the Birka Evidence

Against the background of the evidence from Hedeby, it would interesting to review finds and features from comparable emporia such as Birka from an archaeo-criminological perspective.

Among the coins found in Birka’s Black Earth in 1990–95, Islamic issues form the largest category with 90 specimens. There are also eleven quite common silver Volga-Bulgar imitations of Islamic coins from c. 900–950 and six counterfeit coins (Rispling 2004, p. 38 ff). Five of these forgeries are made of silver-plated copper alloy. They date from c. 835–845 (nos 55, 98) and c. 893–933 (nos 7, 52, 94), respectively. Ingrid Gustin (2004a, p. 16 ff; see also 2004b, p. 97 ff) states that in Birka a weight economy was practised, and four of these five counterfeit coins were indeed cut into pieces (nos 7, 52, 55, 94). It is unclear how the counterfeiters could have any chance of success. Gert Rispling (2004, p. 39) argues that the number of Islamic imitations from Birka in no way suggests that they were struck there, but that their skillful make bears witness to the work of expert craftsmen with a knowledge of Arabic. Quite outstanding among the six counterfeit coins is a pseudo-Islamic gold coin (no. 90; Rispling 2004, p. 39 ff, fig. 4:3a–b) deriving from the plough soil. This counterfeit dinar is a gold-plated copper coin from no earlier than c. 785–790. As it seems to be related to the coins of the Offa Rex group (cf. Grierson & Blackburn 1986, p. 280 ff, 332) it may be of West European or indeed Anglo-Saxon origin.

Grave Bj 959 in the great Hemlanden mound cemetery is so far unique among the Birka graves. It was in burial area IA close to the town rampart’s segment 6, towards the Black Earth. Excavated in 1881 by Hjalmar Stolpe, the grave was a flat-ground inhumation burial oriented southwest (Arman 1940/43, p. 384; cf. Gräslund 1980, p. 12 ff, 87). Even though the burial itself was undisturbed, the skull of the well-preserved skeleton was found at the right forearm (fig. 3). In the neck area, instead, was the lower jaw of a pig. Judging from the oval brooches – type P55:1 A (Jansson 1984, p. 47; 1985, p. 83 ff, 134 f, 149, fig. 76c) – the grave belongs to the younger Birka stage, c. 850–975.

If grave Bj 959 represents an executed individual, this burial would provide indirect evidence of a crime. We cannot say what transgression the woman may have been punished for by the townspeople, but they must have regarded it as severe if they sentenced her to death. However, the ample grave goods seem to contradict such an interpretation: apart from the two bronze tortoise brooches, the woman was equipped with a string of pearls, a knife, scissors, tweezers, a needle case and, at her feet, an antler spoon probably once accompanied by decayed organic vessels. Thus it also has to be taken into consideration that the woman may – with regard to the pig jaw replacing her head, with possible magic connotations (cf. Price 2002, p. 206) – have been decapitated post mortem as protection against the unquiet dead.

Another individual was found in an unnaturally bent position with the head separate from the torso in a double inhumation (grave A129) during excavations in 1988–89 underneath a longhouse terrace near rampart segment 4. It dates from the end of the 8th century (Holmquist Olausson 1992; 1993, sp. 113 ff). The main occupant of the burial, known as “Elk Man”, was a mature individual equipped with a spear, shield and arrows as well as an unprocessed elk antler.
The decapitated individual has been interpreted as a sacrificed slave of the interred warrior. As a slave, and thus a personal possession of the warrior according to the Viking Period way of thinking, this human sacrifice should be seen separately both from individuals sentenced to capital punishment by society and from murder victims. The same applies to a body found in 1996 in the fill of an early 8th century burial mound incorporated into the first rampart of Birka’s hillfort (Holmquist Olausson 2002, sp. 161 fig. 7:4). Also, the custom of joining the dead (sutte/ Totenfolge) as suggested e.g. for the boat chamber grave from Hedeby dated to c. 830–850 cannot be regarded as a criminal act in the eyes of contemporary observers. For this exceptional burial, it has been suggested that the exiled Danish king Harald Klak was interred in the company of his cup bearer and stable manager, following ideals of Frankish court ceremony (Wamers 1994; 1995; 2005).

Within the framework of an international project, in 1993 and 1998 fifteen Viking Period swords in the Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm were studied as to the upper third of their blades in order to identify possible trademarks (Kirkpichnikov et al. 2001). Among six others, the sword SHM 7097 was found to bear an Ulfberht inscription. According to the inventory notes, this sword was found at Björkö/Birka and was acquired in 1882 from one C.J. Johansson. It is the first known Ulfberht sword from Birka, a stray find probably deriving from a disturbed
burial. The sword hilt belongs to Petersen’s type H, Geibig’s combination type 5, variant I, which dates from c. AD 800 on and past AD 900 (Geibig 1991, p. 38; 141, fig. 39). Hilts and pommel are decorated with wires and intertwined strips of silver and brass. The blade, of which only the upper half is preserved, bears an inscription inlaid with damascened iron wire. Even though some letters are not preserved, the remaining grooves for the wire and the wire’s outlines made it possible to reconstruct the signature as +VLFBERHT+. On the reverse, the blade carries four St. Andrew’s crosses divided by columns framed by a half cross on each end (Kirpichnikov et al. 2001, p. 225, fig. 3; cf. Stalsberg 2008, Tab. 1, S4).

+VLFBERHT+ is the most common signature. The Birka signature, where the second cross is placed after the final T is the second most common variant (cf. Stalsberg 2008, p. 95 f.). It is generally accepted that both represent original pieces from the Frankish workshop (Müller-Wille 1970, p. 76; Geibig 1991, p. 118 ff). Stalsberg (2008, p. 102) suggests that they may even belong to two different people working in the same position, the individual of variant 2 being a little older than the one of variant 1. But even as a genuine Ulfberht sword, the Birka find’s classification as contraband remains difficult. With no associated finds from the burial it was taken from, it is not possible to speak of the background of the deceased. Being presumably a piece of grave goods, the sword SHM 7097 has not in the end been treated as a commodity, but as a personal belonging. In the case of a deceased trader from the Frankish realm, for instance, it might be assumed that he acquired the sword legally in this homeland. But since the sword was found in the Lake Mälaren area of Sweden, far from the Frankish border, an interpretation as smuggled contraband lies within the realm of the possible.

Bibliography


Summary

The source material for the study of Medieval crime is difficult to define. A compilation of artefacts related to crime from the Hedeby harbour excavation, however, shows a remarkably wide variety of likely examples.

The features documented there demonstrate a gradual extension of the harbour with facilities that finally formed an impressive U-shaped platform. On one hand it supported merchant shipping and facilitated stock turnover, on the other hand it also served as the early town’s market place. The artefacts found reflect trade connections as well as harbour operations in an extraordinary rich diversity. This includes evidence for crime.

A sea chest with its lock gouged out was sunk in the harbour basin by means of a granite boulder. This indicates a thief who wanted to dispose of the evidence. Nine darāhīm initially classified as official ‘Abbāsidic coins proved to be cast of a lead-tin alloy. Because of the pretended originality and the material used, they must represent conscious forgery. And since they probably formed a closed association, they must have been lost near their place of production. A skull found in 1953 during an underwater survey close to Hedeby wreck 1 carries injuries from a sharp object such as a knife or dagger. The person must have died shortly after that injury. Although a definite appraisal of the killing of that individual is difficult from a modern perspective, it has to be looked upon as homicide.

We can only document smuggling when we have preserved export regulations. Such embargoes are known in the arms trade. But even though one Frankish Ulfberht sword is known from a burial at Hedeby, it cannot unproblematically be regarded as smuggled goods.

As a prospect for further research, against the background of the evidence of crime from Hedeby, a comparison with Birka is offered. Here, six counterfeit coins from the excavations in the Black Earth 1992–95, the grave of a decapitated woman and a recently identified Ulfberht sword are discussed.