

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> University of the Highlands and Islands		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UoA 25: Area Studies		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Viking assembly-sites: Identifying early democratic institutions for the benefit of the public and local organisations		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2010-December 2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Dr Alexandra Sanmark	Reader in Medieval Archaeology	2009-ongoing
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 1 August 2013 - 31 December 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No</b>		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>Sanmark's research and excavation of Viking-Age assembly-sites, which are outdoor courts and parliaments, has revealed new sites as places of early democracy for the first time. This has benefitted the public and organisations in Scotland, Sweden, and Norway through integration of the research results into public information for visitors, tourist-guide training, and school programmes. In these ways, this research has helped to improve economic prosperity, cultural life, and education. In Sweden, the <i>Democracy Walk</i> website lists c. 20 assembly-sites identified by Sanmark. One of these, Anundshög – (Fig.1) the most extensive and archaeologically important site – has had increased local council funding for school visits, a café, and guided tours in Swedish and English attracting investment of more than £3m. It has also contributed to the cultural heritage value of the site. More than one million visitors have benefited directly from this research and many more indirectly through media coverage, exhibitions and education.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>This case study focuses on research carried out by Sanmark particularly from 2010 onwards, when <i>The Assembly Project</i> (TAP, <a href="https://bit.ly/2PZPbOQ">https://bit.ly/2PZPbOQ</a>) received funding from Humanities in European Research Area (HERA) for a collaboration between the University of the Highlands &amp; Islands (UHI) and the universities of Vienna, Oslo, and Durham. Sanmark's work entailed detailed study of Viking-age assembly-sites in Scandinavia and Norse settlements in the west, such as Scotland, Iceland and Greenland. A novel method of site identification and interpretation was created by Sanmark [3.1, 3.2] and a new method for field investigation was developed by Sanmark and Semple [3.4, 3.6].</p> <p><b>New methodologies:</b> Sites were identified and investigated through the novel approaches. First, all written sources were reviewed together with archaeological evidence and topographical information (aerial photography, LiDAR data, historic maps) and site-visits. All collected data was entered in a Geographic Information System, thus exposing unknown spatial patterns and relationships. Use of this method across all geographical areas provided an invaluable tool for comparative analysis [3.2, 3.6]. A large number of assembly-sites were identified, and their characteristics examined, showing that these sites consisted of certain key features that symbolised law and power, around which elite rituals were carried out. It is clear that the Scandinavians had a clear assembly-concept, which they brought with them to their new settlements [3.1, 3.2, 3.5, 3.6].</p> <p>Prior to the research of Sanmark and colleagues, very few sites had been investigated archaeologically, and the few field-investigations that had taken place focused on single features. The wider approach developed by Sanmark and Semple involved investigating large areas through topographical and geophysical surveys, followed by targeted excavation. This highly successful method revealed a range of different types of archaeological remains [3.2, 3.3, 3.5], and large assembly areas (as opposed to single assembly features) have been identified, where a range of communal activities – such as markets and horse racing – took place, in addition to courts and parliaments [3.2, 3.6]. This was pioneering work within Scandinavian archaeology and the method has now been applied to assembly-sites in England, Iceland, Shetland, and Norway where it has proven equally valuable [3.2, 3.4, 3.6].</p>		

Sanmark's research has also highlighted the value of assembly-sites to local communities, as many were used for up to 2,000 years [3.2, 3.5]. The old assembly-sites were the result of well-planned elite-strategies involving all aspects, from the selection of the site to the construction and maintenance of required features. Their symbolic significance in the landscape was so great that they are frequently predecessors of capitals and seats of provincial government and bishoprics that remain important in modern administrative organisation [3.1, 3.2, 3.6]. One such example is the Viking-age assembly Tinganes in Tórshavn in the Faroe Islands, which is still the location of the Faroese parliament. In this way, the old assemblies can explain the modern administrative landscape [3.2].

**Sweden:** Excavations at Anundshög have been carried out by Sanmark, most recently in 2017-19 [3.2, 3.3]. One of Sweden's most well-known archaeological sites – and one of two major assembly-places (Gamla Uppsala is the other) – this was investigated using the new field-method, revealing a 200-meter long wooden monument (4-6 m tall) that enclosed the sacred assembly-site [Fig. 1; 3.2, 3.5, 3.6]. Previous excavations had not detected this major feature and it is a direct result of the innovative approach. A 13<sup>th</sup>-century assembly-cottage used for producing written protocols was also excavated. This is a unique find as no other building has been found at an outdoor assembly-site [3.3]. Another wooden monument of late medieval date, was also excavated, marking a royal ceremonial route. This is the first time that a monument belonging to this route has been excavated. Arkels tingstad and Gamla Uppsala are two other assembly-sites for which Sanmark's research has been crucial. Arkels tingstad is a local assembly-site located outside Stockholm and Gamla Uppsala was a major assembly for early Sweden and the predecessor of the archiepiscopal seat of Uppsala. Mapping and interpretation of site-features shows that these were used for elaborate elite and communal rituals, for conflict resolution and collective acceptance of power [3.1, 3.2].

**Norway:** Sanmark has analysed twenty assembly-sites located across Norway and showed that similar traits as in Sweden were used for site-selection, thus demonstrating analogous assembly activities and rituals. Here, distances between assembly-sites and towns and bishoprics were longer, showing bigger spatial shifts in activities and modern administrative organisation, most likely related to particular demands of Norwegian topography [3.2].

**Scotland:** Very few Scandinavian assembly-sites were known in Scotland in 2010, and through Sanmark's method, more than thirty such sites are now known. Her research has shown that assembly-sites in Scotland relied on the same concept as in Scandinavia; many focused on reused monuments, reflecting the Scandinavian desire to portray themselves as the ruling elite, whose takeover was approved by the Gaelic/Pictish ancestors [3.2, 3.6]. Building on this work, in 2018-19, a British Academy funded project on Norse waterways took place, led by Sanmark in collaboration with the University of St Andrews, building on ideas from Sanmark's assembly research in Scotland (publication accepted to *Journal of Wetland Archaeology*). In addition, Sanmark leads a series of workshops on *Places of Royal Power and Ritual in Early Medieval Scotland and Europe*, funded by the Royal Society of Edinburgh, where the grounding methodology is a direct result of Sanmark's assembly research [3.1, 3.2].

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- 3.1. Sanmark, A. (2019). 'A New Methodology for assembly-site Identification and Analysis', *Retrospective Methods Networks Newsletter*, 7-15.
- 3.2. Sanmark, A. (2017). *Viking Law and Order. Places and Rituals of Assembly in the Medieval North*. Edinburgh University Press). 322 pages. Reviews: Barbara Crawford in *Northern Studies* 2018 ('an excellent book' ... which has been long needed'); Ben Raffield in *Medieval Archaeology* 2018, 62:1 ('highly recommended as a thought-provoking and valuable addition to any early medievalist's bookshelf.'), Howard B. Clarke in *Early Medieval Europe* 2019, 27:3 ('an impressive work of true scholarship').
- 3.3. Sanmark, A., K. Jonsson, M. Lindeberg and M. Bäck (2019) 'The *thing* cottage at Anundshög', *Tidens landskap. Vänbok till Anders Andrén*. Nordic Academic Press, 141-3.
- 3.4. Sanmark, A. and S. Semple (2010). 'The Topography of Outdoor Assembly in Europe with Reference to Recent Field Results from Sweden', *Perspectives in Landscape Archaeology*, Lewis, H. & Semple, S. J. Oxford: BAR International Series 2103, 107-119.

3.5. Semple, S. and A. Sanmark. (2013) 'Assembly in North West Europe: collective concerns for early societies?', *European Journal of Archaeology* 16(3), 518-542.

3.6. Semple, S., A. Sanmark, F. Iversen and N. Mehler, with Halldis Hobæk, Marie Ødegaard and Tudor Skinner (2020). *Negotiating the North: Meeting Places in The Middle Ages in The North Sea Zone*. The Society for Medieval Archaeology Monograph Series. Routledge. pp334.

These publications include two books from Edinburgh University Press and Routledge [3.2, 3.6] and articles/chapters in international journals and book series [3.1, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5]. All publications have been subject to rigorous peer-review. Publications 3.1, 3.2, 3.5 and 3.6 are results of TAP, which was ranked third out of over seventy applications. Total sum awarded by HERA: £850,000. In addition, Sanmark received £40,000 from the Natural Environment Research Council for LiDAR scanning. Publications 3.4 and 3.3 are outcomes deriving from grant income totalling £166,500, from a variety of funding bodies, e.g. the British Academy and the Swedish Royal Academy of Letters.

#### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Assembly places and practices are fundamental to our understanding of how medieval society in Northern Europe was transformed from a network of small-scale local power-structures to a competing system of large kingdoms with royally-driven administrative infrastructures.

Sanmark's research has identified and interpreted these sites in three specific areas across the Norse world, enabling a new public understanding of the history of democracy. Without the research of Sanmark and her TAP colleagues, the majority of these sites would not be known and certainly would not be developed as new cultural heritage tourism hotspots.

**Sweden:** At Anundshög, the excavations have produced new and important knowledge and the activities of the Council and the Badelunda Heritage Society have therefore increased dramatically [5.1, 5.2, 5.4b]. The Council has increased its investment on the site year on year, now totalling £323,805-£404,757 annually (an increase by £67,870 annually from 2017 and a total of £2,914,248 for 2013 to 2020). This covers site maintenance, a café, excavations, school events, road signs, and guided tours. The café, which started on a small scale, had an extension built in 2017 and now houses a small exhibition of the excavations. Site visitors have increased from 100,000 to 170,000 visitors a year from 2010 to 2019, with over 1 million visitors in the REF period [5.1, 5.4b,h, a]. Around 50,000-70,000 of these annual visitors are non-locals. There are many return visits, which the Council is keen to increase through future investments with the aim of making this into an even larger tourism attraction [5.1, 5.2]. The Council funding for the school events is £13,761 annually (£110,088 for the REF period). Between 2013 and 2020, 2,185 schoolchildren and 217 teachers have taken part in activities where the excavation results are presented [5.1, 5.3]. As a direct result of the excavations, the Society runs regular guided tours for local and international visitors, in both English and Swedish. There are 80-100 tours annually, i.e. 6,500 people across the REF period, and the guides have noted 'significantly increased... interest' after each excavation [5.2]. The Society receives funding from the Council, c. £9,740 each year (£77,920 in the REF period) and have brought in £10,180 for groups and coach tours, in total £88,100 [5.1, 5.2].

To ensure high-quality tours, the Society runs training courses for all guides each winter, of which the excavation results, such as the assembly cottage and the wooden monument, form a key part. Their aims are voiced in their magazine [iss. 39, 2018, 5.4c] stating that visitors have a right to expect that the guides are well-informed and that it is 'highly important' that their tours reflect 'the latest research' brought by the excavations [5.4c]. In the words of one of the most seasoned guides: "I am careful to tell everyone about the latest research ... each excavation can produce new finds that may overturn earlier theories" [22 July 2018, 5.4i]. The County Administration also stressed the importance of the excavations for the quality of the guided tours [5.6]. Through the excavation results, guides can present new results each year, continuously adding to their tours, creating return visits [5.1, 5.2]. Tours focus on the fact that the site represents a place where democracy flourished in the past and remained a significant central place for the region for thousands of years [5.1, 5.2]. Planned interviews for summer 2020 with participants in the guided tours had to be postponed due to COVID-19. The Society also organises the Västmanland Archaeology Day at Anundshög, an initiative from the Swedish Heritage Board, where the excavations are presented through talks and tours [5.4 l-

m]. In 2019, the Archaeology Day drew 2,000 people, the most ever for this event across Sweden [5.2]. This, too, is funded by the Council, (£21,209 between 2013 and 2020) [5.1, 5.2]. In addition, the Västmanland museum, County Administration, and Heritage Society organise events where the excavation results are presented. Most of these events have been sold out, bringing in 70-110 people each time [5.2, 5.4d-e].

The site's history as a place where democracy flourished in the past and was significant for thousands of years is also highlighted in media coverage. Swedish Radio stated in 2018 that this was an 'ancient place of assembly' used for important proceedings where people met 'free of violence' [5.4f]. Jan Melander, Västerås Director of Heritage, stated that the excavations had served to further highlight the 'tremendous importance' of the site to 'Västerås and the county of Västmanland' and that visitors gain 'a new understanding ... of the existence and practice of democracy in Viking Age Sweden' [5.1], views echoed by the County Administration [5.6]. The significance of the site is further evidenced by the remains and the guided tours being listed in major international tourism guides [5.5a-b, e-z] and the excavations gaining significant media coverage in the REF period [5.4d-g]. In 2020, Expressen, a major Swedish newspaper with c. 2,994,000 daily readers (5.72 million site-visits and 20.04 million page-visits/day), listed Anundshög as no. 2 of the 10 most exciting archaeological sites in Sweden [5.5b-c; 5.6]. The assembly at Anundshög is listed as Västmanland's top spot for tourists in an article by the main Swedish News agency (TT) published in a range of newspapers [5.4h].

Sanmark's research formed the basis of guided tours in Swedish and English to Arkels tingstad and Gamla Uppsala by Sweden History Tours. Co-owner Jonathan Olsson stated that Sanmark's research was crucial. Regarding Arkels tingstad, he said that they have had around 550 tours and almost 2,000 people "at Arkels tingstad with your information as basis. All the vital information I provide for the visitors builds on your research", adding that tourists come away with a different view of the Viking Age, surprised with the presence of laws and parliaments, rather than just violent pillagers [5.7]. The company is expanding and will be starting a longer historical tour from Stockholm, where Anundshög is the highlight, based on Sanmark's research.

Moreover, assembly-sites in Sweden are part of a *Democracy Walk* (developed from concepts in Boston and Reykjavik), with its own website ([www.democracywalk.se](http://www.democracywalk.se)) listing around 20 assembly-sites, 'directly based' on Sanmark's research. In the words of the project leaders: Sanmark's 'expertise has been essential to our understanding of these sites and will be crucial to our further research and development of this part of the project' [5.8]. The selected sites will be signposted as sites important for Swedish Democracy, with a logo developed for this purpose [5.8]. The project has been delayed due to the COVID-19 outbreak and the official launch not yet known.

**Norway:** As well as bringing the sites to public attention for the first time, between 17 May 2014 and 4 January 2015, the research for TAP has improved public understanding through the exhibition *Ja, vi elsker frihet* ('Yes, we love freedom'). This was held at the Cultural Museum of Oslo celebrating the 200-year anniversary of the Norwegian Constitution. TAP's research was the main feature in the part of the exhibition called 'The Arena of Freedom', for which the project participants jointly wrote the text. TAP's key message is found on the museum website: "Maybe it was not the king who united the kingdom, but the assembly and the local community" [5.9]. Through this free exhibition, early concepts of democracy were dispersed to a wide audience (70,000 visitors to museum in this period) [5.9]. Frode Iversen, who was part of the exhibition organising committee, declared that 'The Arena of Freedom' was 'successful', 'derived from TAP's original research', and showed the practice of democracy in early Norway, and also 'served to change popular views of the past as disorganised and violent' [5.9]. Sanmark's research results were also included in a TV documentary with Frode Iversen (*Arkeologerna*) in 2014. In episode 6 focusing on the development of democracy in Norway, school children examined early democracy, through a debate on whether to have ice cream or chocolate, with Frode at the Dysjane assembly-site [3.6, 5.9]. This episode was watched by 400,000 people, making it one of Norway's most

popular programmes, with repeats at least once a year until 2020 – 150,000 viewers each time – and the series has also been shown in Sweden and Finland [5.9].

**Scotland:** As a result of Sanmark's research, there are more than thirty new sites known to the public, but these are all open sites, often in wild locations where there is no mechanism for tracking visitor numbers and as a result the only way to trace this is through the growth of tours to the sites. In Scotland, Sanmark's research has been included in the INS Tourist Guide Green Badge course (92 students since 2013), CertHE in North Highlands Tourist Guiding (2013-19: 147 students), and the Norse Kirkwall CPD events (31 people attending in total) [5.11]. As a result, trained guides are aware of democratic institutions and means of conflict resolution in Scotland's past [e.g. 5.11]. They can also add information to their tours and make them stand out from other. One student stated: "your lecture has provided me with a new dimension that I can add to any tour routes, particularly in Dingwall, Thurso and Skye" [5.10].

Sanmark developed an exhibition based on her research at the Orkney Museum in December 2017-February 2018 (total visitors 1,622). This Museum struggles to maintain visitor numbers at this time of year and are therefore 'sourcing high quality, engaging exhibitions and these figures demonstrate that this exhibition met our target' [5.12]. For the museum, this was an opportunity to provide new knowledge on Orkney's Viking past and the role of Orkney's Viking-Age assembly-sites, preserved in place-names, such as Tingwall. According to the Curator, the exhibition was significant as it 'highlighted the democratic heritage of the Scandinavian settlement in Orkney' [5.12].

TAP was assessed along with 439 other EU-funded projects and was identified as one of the top 20 projects and a 'success story' for social impact, as a result of promotion of tourism [5.13].

#### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- 5.1. Testimonial from Jan Melander 2020, Director of Culture at Västerås Council.
- 5.2. Testimonial from Bengt Wallén 2020, Head of the Badelunda Heritage Society.
- 5.3. Birgitta Larsson (2020), Kulturmiljövård Mälardalen (commercial archaeological unit active in the county of Västmanland), in charge of the teaching activities at Anundshög.
- 5.4. Relevant media coverage in one report.
- 5.5. List of tourism sites/media that refer to Anundshög.
- 5.6. Testimonial from County Administration Västmanland, 2020.
- 5.7. Statement from Jonathan Olsson, Sweden History Tours  
<https://www.timetraveltours.se/tours/>
- 5.8. Democracy Walk statement by Åsa Danielsson.
- 5.9. Testimonial from Frode Iversen 2020, Museum of Cultural History, Oslo.
- 5.10. Feedback from students on the North Highlands CertHE
- 5.11 Testimonial from Lynn Campbell 2020, STGA Green Badge Guide Trainer.
- 5.12. Testimonial from Gail Drinkall, 2020, Curator of the Orkney Museum.
- 5.13. Ramon Flecha, Marta Soler, Esther Oliver et al. 2015. IMPACT-EV. Report 3. Impact evaluation of FP6 (last call) and FP7 SSH research projects (Version 1.0.0). Zenodo. *Evaluating the impact and outcomes of European SSH research*, coordinated by the University of Barcelona, <https://zenodo.org/record/1041950#.XiXGziPgrcs>. See: pp. 25-36; tables with collected and analysed data on pp. 28-9 and 35-6).



*Fig. 1. 3D-reconstruction of the Anundshög-site. In the foreground are a runestone and a line of standing stones, with the wooden monument excavated by Sanmark and Semple just behind. In the background are several burial mounds and five ship-settings.*