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# A Picture Stone from Grobin (Latvia)

By Valerij Petrovich Petrenko

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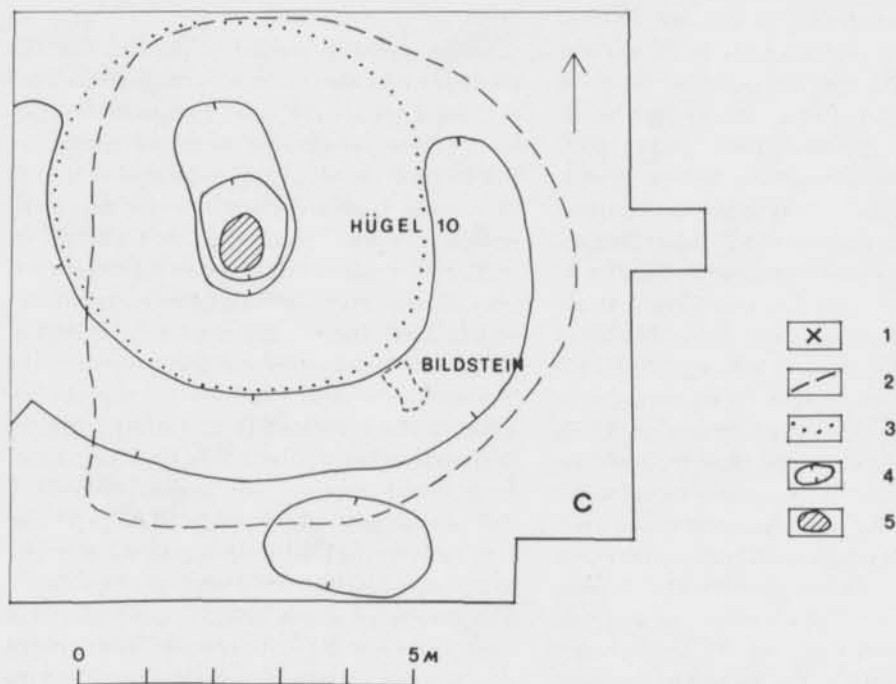
The paper deals with the picture stone discovered 1987 during excavation of burial mounds of the Priediens II (Pastorat) cemetery, at the east boundary of the town Grobin. It consists of a 70.5 cm high limestone slab one side of which is covered with engravings including a picture, by the author considered as representing a ship. The stone however shows a high degree of abrasion and its ornaments are difficult to interpret. The stone is related to a group of Gotlandic dwarf stones dating to the 6–7th centuries A.D. The finds from a series of excavations in 1984–1987 also have supplemented our knowledge about Grobin and its Scandinavian relationship.

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Isolated finds from archaeological sites along the Kurzeme coast (Fig. 1 A) in the vicinity of Grobin (South-West Latvia) attracted investigators' attention already in the last century when limited excavations took place (Kruze, 1842, pp. 22–23; Tab. 35; Sizov, 1896, p. 8; Markov, 1910, 14–15). However due to B. Nerman's works (Nerman, 1931, 1934, 1958) the above mentioned site has become widely known as a witness to Scandinavian colonies along the Alanda River in the 7–9th centuries. The cultural attribution of these antiquities by Swedish scholars that became firmly established in the literature is still applicable albeit supplemented (Šturms, 1949, pp. 205–217) and sometimes with slight corrections (Stenberger, 1977, pp. 414–415; Lundström, 1983, pp. 323–328). At the same time it should be borne in mind that B. Nerman's postulations are based upon the pre-War excavations while the monument groups continued to be investigated (Urtans, 1970, pp. 79–81; Stepins, 1970, pp. 36–37). Much new information came to light as a result of the field studies conducted in 1984 by the Joint Kurzemskaia expedition together with the LBIA AS USSR and the Institute of History of the Academy of

Sciences of Latvia (Petrenko & Ozere, 1985, pp. 86–89; 1988, pp. 415–416; 1989, pp. 163–164; Ozere, 1985, pp. 53–55; Petrenko, 1988, pp. 113–117).

In the post-War period, in parallel with the current excavations of the necropolis at Rudzukulns I (Smukumi) and Priediens II (Pastorat), new cemeteries were excavated: at Priediens I, Atkalni I, II, Rudzukulns II, and in several trial trenches cultural layers of settlements were uncovered and studied as well. This resulted in the following interpretation of the sites: considerable extension of source base (practically doubled), specification of the topography and the qualitative and quantitative structure of some necropolis. For instance the Priediens II (Pastorat) cemetery definitely contained not less than two thousand burial mounds, the majority of which had already lost all or nearly all of their surface signs by the time the noteworthy plan was drawn up in 1929–1930 (Nerman, 1958, p. 7). The variety of grave assemblages and burial rites seemed to be more diverse. Thus among the various types of funerary monuments were several types of cremations, flat inhumations and inhumations in mounds. The pro-



portion of archaeological sites left by different population groups of the region was thought to be different in former times etc.

In the antiquity collection, formed with the Grobin finds and recently acquired artefacts, several are worthy of detailed examination due to their importance. This paper discusses a stone stele, uncovered in the Priediens II cemetery in 1987 (Fig. 1 B).

The mound N 1987/10 (7.3–7.6 m in diameter) in which the stele was found was not of right shape on the plan because of damage during construction of adjacent graves and later deformation. Yet the earth elevation according to measurement before excavation was 0.4–0.5 m; digging proved it to be not less than 0.8 m. The North-West side was fairly steep, and the top noticeably flat. At the foot under the construction, two ditches were dug: the larger of which to the North was horse-shoe-shaped, 2 m wide by 0.3–0.7 m deep, and the smaller 1.2 m wide by 0.3 m deep. Ditches surrounded the burial. In the center was discovered an oval hole, 0.4–0.5 m deep, 1.5 m wide and 3 m long, oriented with slight deviations to S.E. and N.W. Its northern sides were steep and the southern more gentle. The layer of residue from the outside cremation reached 1.1 m deep of calcic bones, ash, charcoal and finds and occupied an area of 1.3–1.6 m in the south part of the pit. The ditches retain traces of rites following funerals: sand of darker colour saturated with charcoal and separate fragments of handmade pottery. A schistous elevation on top of the

burial place contained humus sand. Calcic bones, coal and even pieces of partly burnt wood and finds were discovered near the surface of the mound practically beneath the turf (Fig. 1, C).

The mound inventory includes both implements which escaped the pyre and those which were burned. Many of the latter could not be identified. Among the finds with no traces of burning was e.g. a large hemispherical amber gaming piece 33 mm in diameter with a hole through it, a biconical bead 11–12 mm long of twisted thin bronze wire, round in cross-section, and a half of a bone bead 12 mm in diameter, decorated with an incised pattern. In contrast a large decorated compound comb with an expressive profile back, judging by the fragments of its laps, the base plates and its teeth, was definitely in fire. The laps at the edges are decorated with three incised lines, as were both sides of the projecting base plates. Oxide residue around the holes shows that the laps and the base plates were connected with iron rivets. A few of them, 13–14 mm long with a round or rectangular cross-section of a stem, are among the other finds.

Some metal fragments can be obviously identified as parts of a shield: large rivets with a hemi-spherical head, bindings, parts of a body of an umbo and possibly that of a hilt. Some objects retain traces of wood and textile imprints. The excavated artefacts may represent fragments of a single-bladed sword (parts of plated ring bindings of a hilt, sheath etc.), a metal belt set (fragments of a buckle with an intact rectangular flat plate or fragmented rectangular plates) have also come to light. Moreover, one might mention small pieces of a deliberately broken vessel or vessels and of bronze cored covering (Fig. 2).

The composition of finds, the planigraphy and stratigraphy of the mound, corresponding to the neighbouring dated graves, allow its dating to the 7th century, most likely the second part. Despite some objects, the presence of such as a few beads which are characteristic of women's burials, the male inventory predominates here.

The stone stele was discovered in the S.E.

Fig. 1. Localisation of the picture stone now housed in the Liepaja Historical and Arts museum. — Orienteringskarta och gravplan. (A) South-West coast of Courland (Kurzeme). — SV delen av Kurlands kust. (B) Map of the location of cemeteries at Grobin (according to B. Nerman). — Gravfälten vid Grobin. (C) The mound N 1987/10. Plan of the lower layers. — Hög N 1987/10 — lägre skikt. (1) The picture stone, place of discovery. — Bildstenens fyndplats. (2) Boundary of the mound before excavation. — Högens yttre begränsning före undersökningen. (3) Boundary of the burial. — Den egentliga gravens begränsning. (4) Ditches and holes. — Rännor och gropar. (5) Interment residues of the cremation. — Bålmörja.

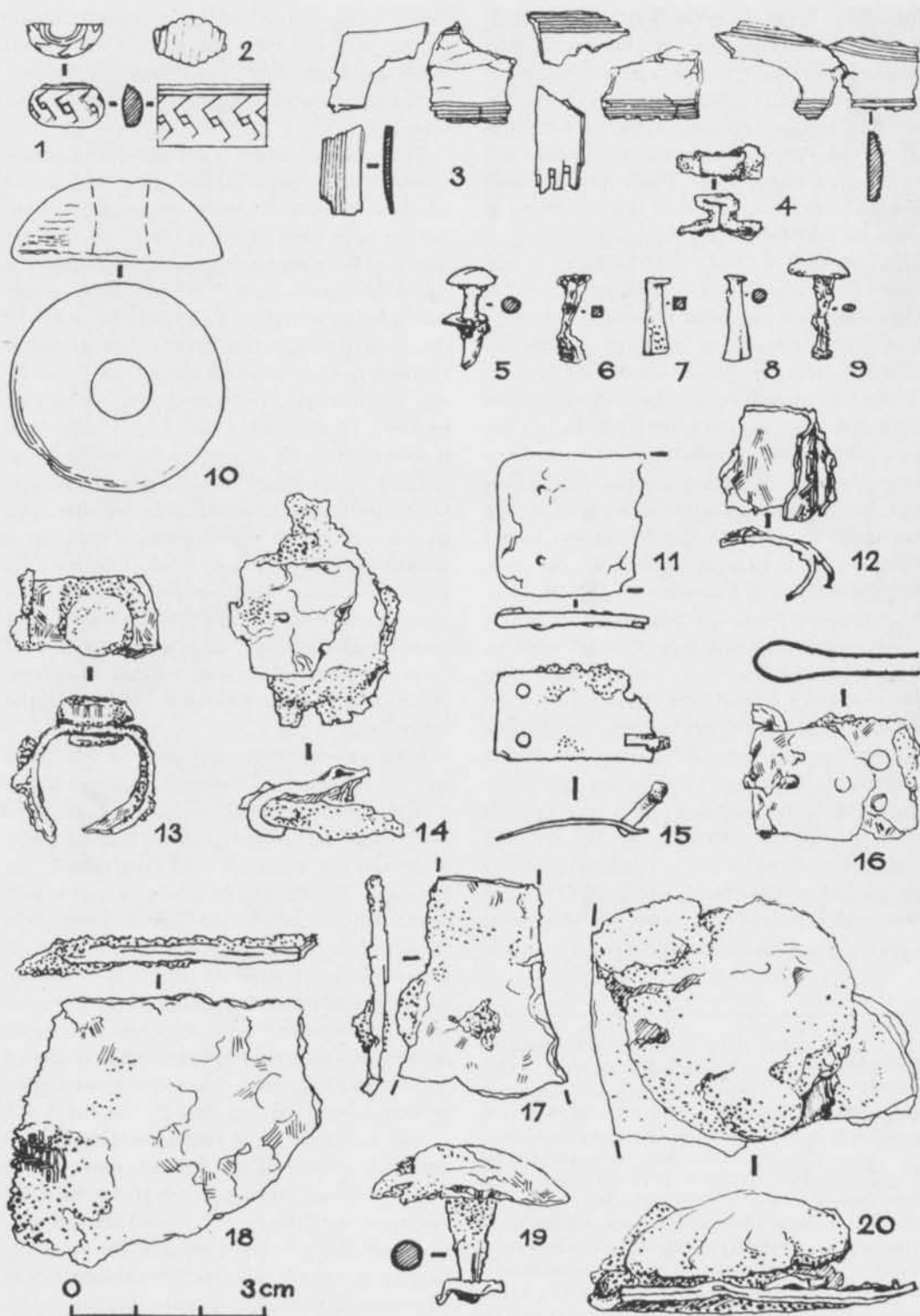


Fig. 2. Some finds from the mound. — Fynd ur gravhögen.

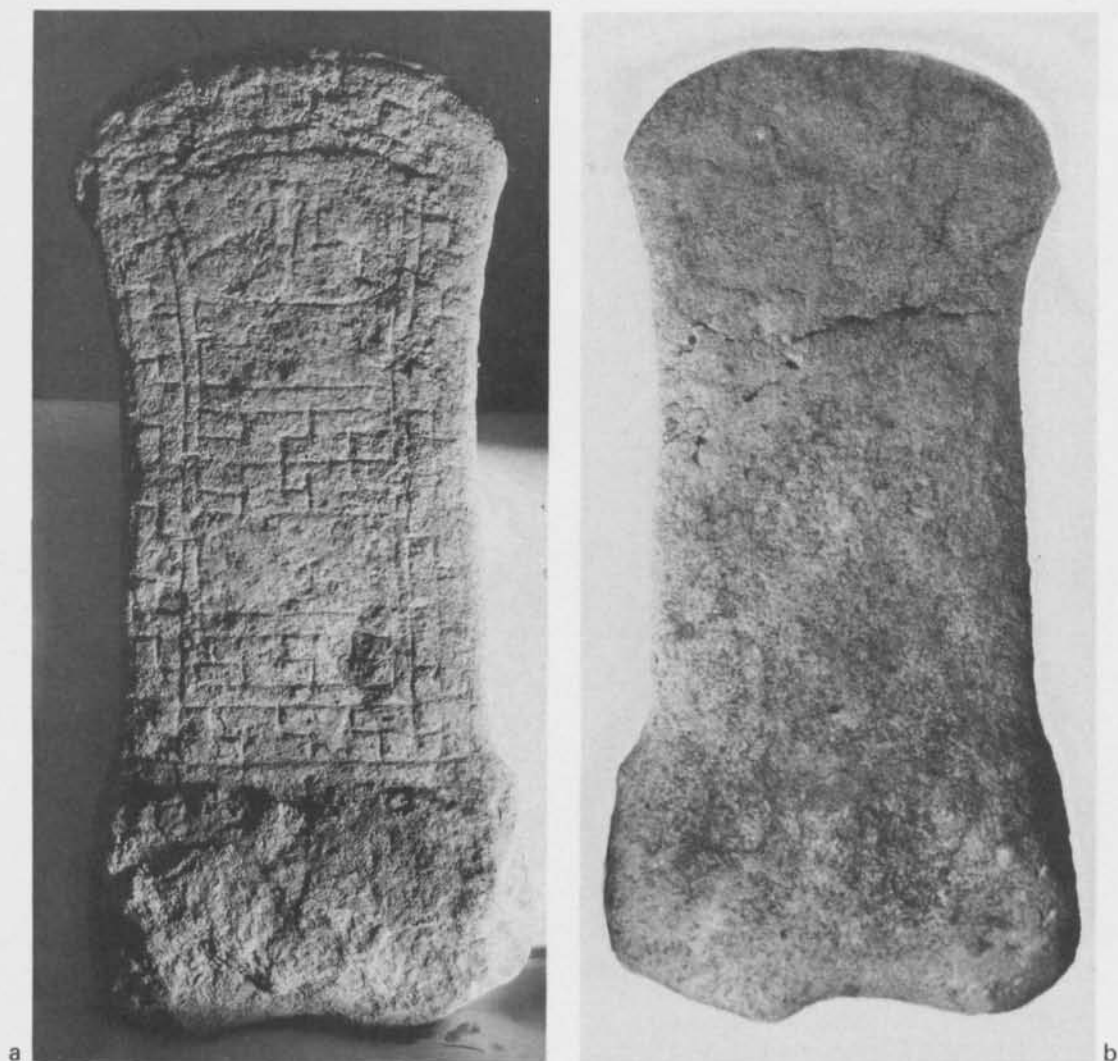


Fig. 3. Face and reverse side of the picture stone. — Bildstenens åt- och frånsida.

section at a depth of 0.5–0.7 m from the barrow surface in the layer of the brown humus sand, i.e. in the elevation lying along the slope (fall up to 0.2 m) with its base turned to the mound center, to the N.W.–S.E. It may well be that the excavated remains of burnt wood under the turf derive from the construction used to fasten the stele vertically at the mound top.

The stone stele is a slab of limestone 70.5 cm high by 26 cm wide at its narrow part, oval in cross-section (with pointed ends), 4.7–5.8

cm deep with a massive base, concave lateral verges, a wide hat-like upper edge with projecting angles and arched top. The base, 7–8 cm deep and 30–35 cm wide, roughly shaped with sloping shoulders, has two short lateral projections at the foot. They could have served as a device to hold the stele upright, although there is another possible explanation: they could be regarded in the light of the origin of these shaped stones (Fig. 3 a–b).

The slab (both sides are more carefully carved than the base) bears bas-relief images

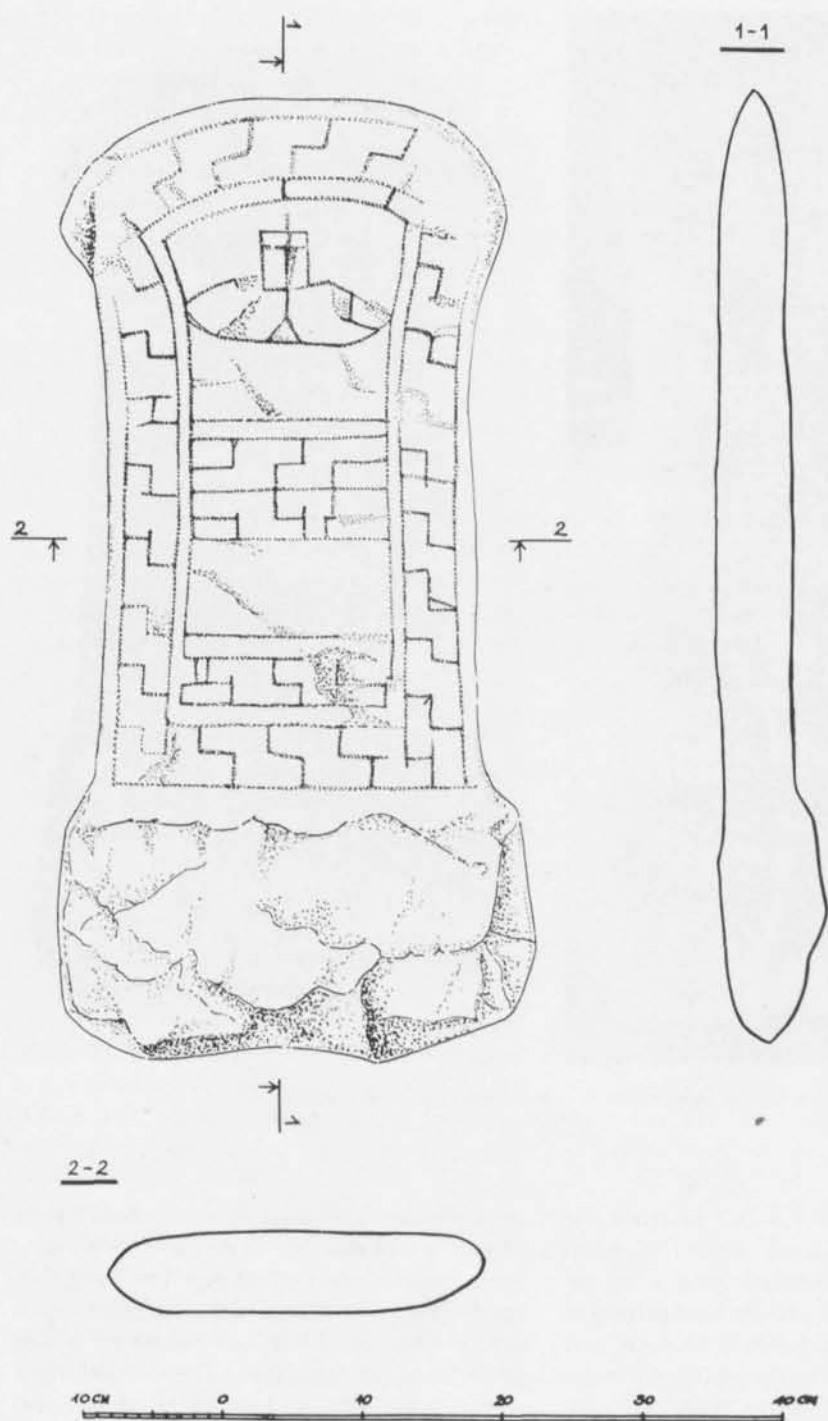


Fig. 4. Tentative interpretation of the pattern of decoration. — Förslag till bildtolkning.

on the face. The picture is framed by double, incised lines following the shape of the stone. Then comes an angular border and outside this another frame of incised lines. The inside surface is divided into two vertical fields by a similar zigzag ornament. The identical ornamental zone provides the basis of the composition. The upper field seems to have an engraved ship image which is rigged with a mast, sails and probably a superstructure. The picture in the lower field is no longer discernible.

The ship hull with distinctive arched base extends along the whole width of the field, both with its bow and stern touching the inner frame. The mast is less than the ship's length. The other details must be examined with great care because of damage to the corresponding slab sections. So to the right of the hull a rectangular superstructure may be surmised and the noticeable bifurcated mast at the bottom supposed to be a model of fastening (Fig. 4). The condition of the picture stone leaves much to be desired. The limestone is exfoliated, the surface, including sections covered with engravings, are peeled and crumbled, there are shallow and deep splits. That is why the proposed interpretation of some details of the ship (e.g. the shape of the stem) is to be considered unique. Now the stone is under restoration at the Liepaja Historical and Arts Museum and remains there in perpetual tenure. Preliminary information on the picture stone is contained in a number of publications (Petrenko, 1988, pp. 113–117; 1989, pp. 165–166; 1990). The general appearance of the slab (shape & proportions), the techniques of manufacture, some peculiarities of the composition calls to mind a wide range of analogies among picture stones in Gotland: Ardre Petsarve II, Garda Smiss I, Gothem Västerbjärs, Roma Kloster etc. (Lindqvist, 1942, figs. 314, 354, 359, 473) as does the environment where the slab was found (the Priediens cemetery was formed with the active assistance of immigrants from overseas). It is beyond doubt that the find is connected with the Ancient Scandinavian cultural tradition. The Grobin stele is referable to the dwarf stones, group "B" dating to the 6–7th centuries according to competent classification

(Sune Lindqvist, 1941, pp. 115–117) or to the chronological group "M", according to the more modern taxonomy (Nylén & Lamm, 1988, pp. 171–200) although the picture has its peculiarities. Thus the superstructure, if the marked protuberance on the upper right hull is rightly so interpreted, an unusual detail for a ship image on stones belonging to the said groups. Although the mast and the sail are very similar to those stones at När Rikvide. Norrlanda Bjärs, Hablingbo Stenstugu, Halla Broa X and particularly at Halla Broa I-site B (Lindqvist, 1941, figs. 54–56, 61, 62; 1942, figs. 466, 469) slight peculiarities are apparent. The author considers the above said features of the Grobin picture stones to be unusual but in conformity with the above mentioned attribution. The distinguishing traits were probably connected with temporal frames or reflected regional characteristics of fine arts traditions linked with religious representations of people of the inhabited zone whence they migrated to the Alanda banks.

The presence of a picture stone, similar to dwarf stones of Gotland in one of the mounds of the Priediens II cemetery which was constructed according to B. Nerman by a "garrison" mainly consisting of "Krieger und Steuerheber"—who came from central Sweden (Nerman, 1958, pp. 182, 199)—confirms this new fact. A noticeable proportion of ancient finds in Grobin mounds originating from Gotland were also pointed out in former times, when they were associated with marriage contracts and trade exchange between two colonies (Nerman, 1958, p. 179). A number of similar objects in different kinds of mounds, distinct features of some discovered both in level graves and in mounds, the peculiarities in some cases of using women's ornaments in burial dresses in comparison with the Gotland traditions (Thunmark-Nylén, 1983, pp. 306–322; Näsman, 1989, pp. 21–22) as well as different mound constructions and polymorphous burial traditions of the Priediens II cemetery and others, all of this not only impel us to renounce those too simplified estimates while examining the interaction processes of various population strata, settled along the Alanda banks but also necessitates



revision of the overall structure and the main characteristics of this complicated assemblage of monuments.

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## Sammanfattning. En bildsten från Grobin i Lettland

Redan på 1800-talet började forskarna uppmärksamma en grupp fornlämningslokaler i staden Grobins omgivning. Grobin ligger vid den kurländska kusten i sydvästra Lettland. Internationell uppmärksamhet fick dessa forn lämningar tack vare Birger Nerman. Genom hans arbeten har de allmänt kommit att erkännas som bevis för att det under 600–800-talen e. Kr. funnits skandinaviska kolonier längs floden Alandas stränder. Sedan Nermans tid har nya arkeologiska undersökningar ägt rum i Grobin. Härvid har man under efterkrigstiden också kommit att undersöka nyupptäckta forn lämningar vid si-

dan av grävningar på de redan kända gravfälten. Särskilt goda resultat har den "kurländska expedition" kunnat redovisa, som gjorts gemensamt av Leningradavdelningen av Institutet för arkeologi vid Sovjets vetenskapsakademi och Institutet för lettiska SSR:s historia.

Till de många, ytterst intressanta fynd som kommit fram under de senaste årens undersökningar hör en ristad stela av kalksten med klar anknytning till de på Gotland så vanliga bildstenarna från yngre järnålder. Denna bildsten (N 1987/10) hittades 1987 vid undersökningen av en gravhög på höggravfäl-

tet Priediens II (f. d. Pastorat) (Fig. 1 A–C). Fyndkombination (Fig. 2) och horisontell stratigrafi tillåter en datering av densamma till 600-talets senare del. Stenen är huggen i kalksten. Den har en kraftig rot, konkava sidor med kraftig utsvängning uppåt och konvex överdel. Stenen, som är 70 cm hög, är 4,5–5,8 cm tjock och 26 cm bred vid midjan (Fig. 3 a–b). Bildstenens framsida har dekor i låg relief. Inom en kantföljande bård med trappstegsmönster finns en av två parallella linjer inramad yta med samma ytterkontur som stenen själv ovan roten. Mittpå delas denna yta av en dubbel tvärbård med trappstegsmönster och en liknande bård finns

längst ned. I det övre fältet finns en bildframställning, av mig tolkad som en skeppsbild med bågformigt kölparti. Den synes ha rätvinkligt segel, mast och troligen en överbyggnad. I det nedre fältet har funnits en nu nästan helt utplånad komposition.

Såväl då det gäller framställningsteknik som form och proportioner liksom kompositionselementens detaljer är anknytningen till Gotland uppenbar. Utan tvivel kan fyndet förknippas med skandinavisk kulturtradition och de av Sune Lindkvist till 500–600-talet daterade s. k. dvärgstenarna (grupp B enl. den av honom skapade klassificeringen).

### *Ship or ducks? Comment on the picture-stone found at Grobin, Latvia*

In the preceding paper V. P. Petrenko reported on the remarkable find of a Gotland type picture-stone in a burial mound at the Priediens II cemetery east of the town Grobin in 1987. It is interesting but not wholly surprising that a probably Gotlandic picture-stone surfaced in Latvia. There are other examples of such stones once exported from Gotland (Fig. 1). Two of them were found on neighbouring Öland and a third is known from literary sources to have stood in Norrala churchyard in Uppland (Nylén & Lamm 1988, pp. 144–145). This stone sheds light on the question of whether stones really were exported from Gotland. Its damaged runic inscription says "they brought this stone from Gotland and ... after ... his brother. He owned this ...". We may hope that more Gotlandic picture-stones will come to light around the Baltic in the future. They could be seen as forerunners to the medieval export of dressed limestone and baptismal fonts from Gotland.

Dr Petrenko is to be congratulated on his important find and the Editors of *Forvännen* are happy that he so quickly answered our invitation to publish the stone in our Journal.

To give an entirely reliable analysis of the features on a picture-stone as worn as that

from Grobin is a very delicate matter, and still more difficult for a person with little experience of this type of monument. Therefore it is no great wonder that I, who have done much work on them may have some objections to Petrenko's interpretation. These pertain to what he has identified as a sailing ship in the upper pictorial field. Already when I first saw



Fig. 1. Distribution of Gotlandic picture-stones. (After Nylén & Lamm 1988.)