

An early set of clasps from Østabø in Sandeid, south-western Norway

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An overdue loan

During the Second World War, Charlotte Undset Thomas (later Blindheim) was writing her magister thesis at the University of Oslo on the dress and jewellery of the Viking Period, when she came across a description of an early set of clasps with remains of textiles from Østabø (also written Øvstabø, Østebø, Øvstebø) in Rogaland. The catalogue entry was rather brief, and in April 1944 Thomas wrote to the director of Stavanger Museum, Jan Petersen, for more information (Correspondence: Thomas and Petersen 1944). She was especially interested in whether the decoration on the clasps was made of gold foil (German *pressblech*) or gold filigree, the weaving technique used for the textiles, the exact date of the grave, and she asked for a photo. Petersen felt obliged to answer the young student properly, perhaps in part because he knew her family. Her aunt, the Nobel Prize winning author Sigrid Undset, had visited Petersen during excavations a few years earlier (cf. Myhre 2013:263). Thomas was also the granddaughter of the well-known archaeologist Ingvald Undset. Finally, her father, Sigge Thomas, was dr. philos in classical philology. His death, only weeks before her first letter, would likely have been known to Petersen.

In 1943, Stavanger Museum's collections were evacuated to a sturdy, stone-built parish hall (Norw. *bedehus*) on the island of Finnøy, 25

km north of Stavanger (Peterson 1945), and to answer Thomas' questions, Petersen made the long trek out there to examine the clasps. Although he could answer Thomas' query in some detail, he did not dare to comment on the weaving technique. After a couple of letters between the student and the director, he writes: "*As these finds are of such importance to you, I will take the risk and send them to you by registered mail and I hope that they will arrive in fair condition. After all, these are extremely fragile objects*" (author's translation). A few days later, Petersen got a confirmation from Thomas that the clasps had arrived safely in Oslo. The last letter from Petersen to Thomas is dated 16 May 1944 (author's translation):

Dear Miss Thomas. In your last letter, you asked about keeping the lent objects for some time, a question that I appear not to have answered. Yes, of course you can. I was happy to hear that you benefitted from being able to examine these objects personally. It was good that they arrived safely.

After the war, Thomas married the art historian Martin Blindheim (Hagen 2002:86-87). Charlotte Blindheim finished her magister thesis in 1946, and the same year she published an article ("En detalj i eldre jernalders drakt-

historie”) in *Stavanger Museums Årbok* about the clasps from Østabø. Here, Blindheim writes that “*Director Petersen was kind enough to send the piece [...] to me for further examination*” (Blindheim 1946:52, author’s translation). Until recently, this was the last information about the clasps from Østabø. While it was known in Stavanger that the clasps had been sent to Oslo in 1944, Charlotte Blindheim retired in 1987 and died in 2005, and it was assumed that the clasps were lost forever. Thus, it came as a big surprise when, in January 2016, the Museum of Archaeology, University of Stavanger (the inheritors of Stavanger Museum’s archaeological collections) received a phone call from the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo asking if a set of clasps was missing in our collections.

An early set of clasps

When thinking about the finds category known as “clasps” (Norw. *hektespinner*), the name John Hines immediately comes to mind. Hines’ (1993) study of the Early Iron Age clasps in England, on the Continent and in Scandinavia is a standard reference work. Hines divided the clasps into classes A, B and C, each with their subdivisions. Although the main period of use was the Migration Period, the oldest A and B clasps occur in the Late Roman Period. According to Hines, the oldest known are the A clasps, appearing for the first time in a grave from the 3rd century in Harpelev, Zealand, Denmark. In Norway, the B clasps with round buttons riveted to rectangular plates became very common during the Migration Period. The most common type is B1, separated into different subgroups by button design.

Within the B clasps, Hines singles out a special, early type of clasp which he calls the “tiny type”, and which includes the Østabø clasps (Hines 1993:13, fig. 17). The “tiny type” are small, single standing clasps. The *c.* 30 finds of “tiny type” clasps have a wide chronological distribution, but generally appear to be older than the B1 clasps. Hines writes that six specimens can

be dated to the Late Roman Period (4th century). Furthermore, there are eight to ten specimens that date from the transition to the Migration Period and the first half of the Migration Period. Among the latter, Hines includes the clasps from Østabø. Although Hines (1993:33) mentions the possibility that the Østabø clasps originated in the Late Roman Period, he still concluded that the grave should be placed in the Early Migration Period. Recently, Ingunn Røstad has refined Hines’ typological scheme, but similarly places the Østabø clasps in phase D1 (AD 400-450) (Røstad 2021:372). However, like Hines, she focussed mainly on the Migration Period clasps. Andreas Rau (2010), on the other hand, has examined Late Roman Period clasps, dating the Østabø grave to the 4th century. We will return to his analysis below.

Like everyone else, Hines assumed that the Østabø clasps had been lost. He therefore relied on conservator Tor Helliesen’s (1900, fig. 3) drawing and brief description in the catalogue (Figure 1a). What Hines seems not to have known was that Blindheim had examined the clasps in more detail in her 1946 article. In a letter to Petersen, Blindheim writes that she and conservator Bjørn Hougen examined the clasps with a microscope. On closer inspection, she found that Helliesen’s reconstruction of 4x2 buttons was incorrect, there were actually 6x2 buttons on the clasps (Figure 1b). Blindheim (1946:52, author’s translation) described the clasps thus:

As the drawing shows, six small clasps are preserved on a narrow piece of textile. Each one consists of a hook [Norw. *hekte*] and a loop [Norw. *malje*] with a filigree-coated small button that is riveted to the plate through an intermediate layer of textile in the same characteristic way as with [the later Norwegian] clasps with a single plate for several buttons.

Regarding the textiles, she notes that, in contrast to textiles related to clasps from the Migration Period, the textiles from Østabø were not tablet-woven (Blindheim 1946:48, note 2).

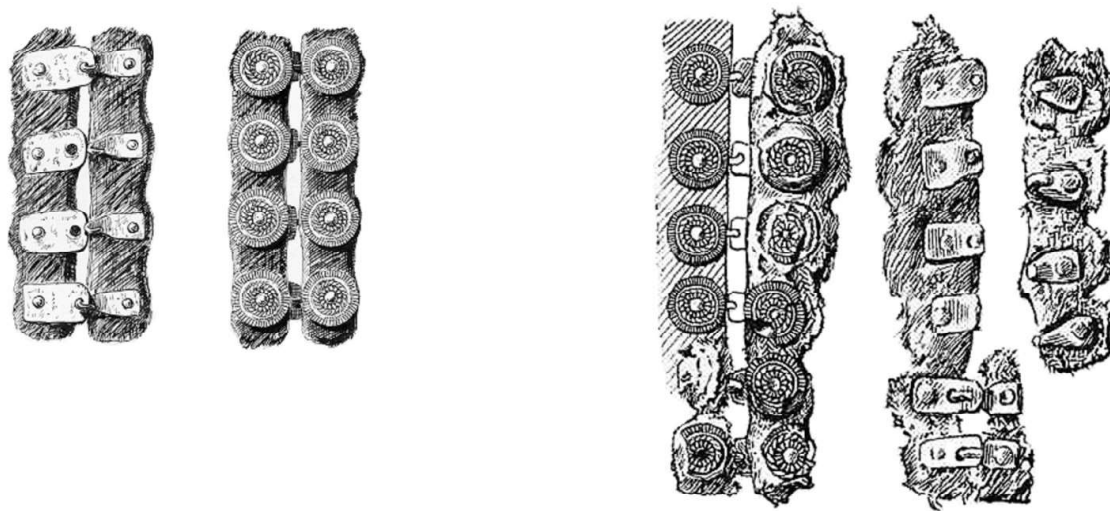


Figure 1. The set of clasps from Østabø. Top left: Drawing by Helliesen (1900, fig. 3). Top right: Drawing by Blindheim (1946, fig. 1). Bottom: Photo: Annette Øvreliid © Museum of Archaeology, UiS.

Unlike Hines, Blindheim dated the grave find from Østabø to the 4th century. Together with another set of clasps from Jødestad in Sandnes, Rogaland (which she had not herself observed, and which is actually somewhat younger), she

believed that this represented a precursor to the common Norwegian clasp type of the Migration Period (type B1). In an article the following year in *Viking*, she summarizes her conclusion (Blindheim 1947:87, author’s translation):

Of great importance in this connection is that the clasps in a couple of Norwegian finds show a construction which it is tempting to believe denotes an older step in the development towards the particularly Norwegian (and younger Gotland) type with the buttons riveted to a common plate. One of these two finds goes further back in time than any other Norwegian find with clasps.

If Blindheim's dating of the Østabø clasps is correct, then it is not just any set of clasps that has been lost for nearly eighty years, but rather a set of importance in the early development of clasps. With the Østabø clasps recovered, one may once again study these first-hand and reassess the dating of the grave and the clasps. And, many years after the student asked for it, we can present the first photo of these clasps (Figure 1c).

Dating the grave find from Østabø

The grave assemblage in which the clasps occur includes the following objects (S2258):

- Handled vessel, type Rygh (1885) 361 of Stout's (1986) Group IIc
- Bow brooch of bronze, type Rygh 243
- Clasps with single standing buttons decorated with *pressblech* rosettes, type Hines (1993) B1 «tiny type» of Rau's (2010) Group 1, with textile fragments
- Belt buckle with rectangular frame
- Knife of iron
- Unburnt human teeth from an adult individual

The date of the grave find relies on the most diagnostic artefacts – the clasps, the handled vessel, and the brooch. Recognising the Late Roman Period style of the clasp buttons,



Figure 2. The handled vessel from Østabø. Photo: Terje Tveit © Museum of Archaeology, UiS.

Id	Year	Date	Grave finds
S2254	1900	320-400	Handled vessel Rygh 361, <i>tutekar</i> vessel, small clay vessel
S2255	1900	320-400	Bucket-shaped pot, Kristoffersen/Magnus shape AB1
S2256, S6078	1900, 1933	320-400	Handled vessel Rygh 361 Stout's Group IVb, 350 beads of glass, 17 beads of amber, dress pin of silver, chain of bronze, spindle whorl, tar from wooden bucket
S2257	1900	320-400	Bow brooch of bronze Rygh 243, birch bark
S2258	1900	320-400	Handled vessel Rygh 361 Stout's Group IIc, bow brooch of bronze Rygh 243, rectangular belt buckle, clasps of bronze with gilded <i>pressblech</i> rosettes Hines B1 "tiny type" of Rau Group 1, textile fragments, knife, unburnt human teeth
S2259	1900	320-400	Handled vessel Rygh 361 Stout's Group IIc, <i>Bügelknopf</i> brooch of bronze Rygh 242, trapezoid belt buckle, knife, sickles
S2260	1900	320-400	Handled vessel Rygh 361 Stout's Group IVb, bow brooch of bronze/iron Rygh 243, rectangular belt buckle, knife, 2 arrowheads
S2261	1900	320-400	Bucket-shaped pot Kristoffersen/Magnus shape AB1, <i>Bügelknopf</i> brooch of bronze Rygh 242, knife, spearhead Rygh 207
S2262	1900	320-400	Bucket-shaped pot Kristoffersen/Magnus shape AB1
S2263	1900	320-400	Bucket-shaped pot Kristoffersen/Magnus shape AB1, 2 handled vessels Rygh 361, bow brooch of bronze Rygh 243, ring of bronze, arrowhead, sickle, burnt bones
S2265	1900	320-400	Bucket-shaped pot atypical (Kristoffersen and Magnus 2010:26), fragment of knife, bronze thread
S2381	1901	400-550	Cruciform brooch, fitting of iron, spindle whorl
S2384	1901	320-500	Handled vessel Rygh 361, spindle whorl
S2385	1901	400-500	Bucket-shaped pot, 5 beads of glass
B5981	1905	400-550	Bucket-shaped pot, 2 cruciform brooches, simple bow brooch or iron, spindle whorl, tar from wooden bucket
S3128	1908	1-550	Bowl-shaped vessel Rygh 366, comb of antler Rygh 159
S3129	1908	200-550	Handled vessel Rygh 361, bronze fragment, burnt bones
S3132	1908	200-550	Belt stone of quartzite

Table 1. List of certain Roman and Migration Period grave finds from mounds in Østabø. Note that all finds catalogued in 1900 seem to date to Hansen's phase C3.

Blindheim's point of departure was that this was a Late Roman Period grave. She found support in Johs. Bøe's (1931:57) study of Iron Age ceramics, placing the handled vessel from Østabø in the (late) 4th century (Blindheim 1946:52). Although Hines (1993:33) also recognised the decoration style of the clasps as of Late Roman Period origin, he argued that the Rygh 243 bow brooch resembled a brooch in a grave from Ås in Sande, Vestfold, which he dated to the Early Migration Period (although see below). According to Hines, the presence of a handled vessel of Rygh 361 type (the type generally dated to the Migration Period) does not contradict such a date.

With regards to the handled vessel, Stout (1986) places the Østabø vessel (Figure 2) in her Group IVb. However, this seems to be an incorrect grouping. As was noted by Bøe (1931:57), the decoration on this vessel with two cavetto (Norw. *hulkil*) lines altered the originally rounded body shape. Looking beyond this decorative feature, the shape instead resembles another vessel from the same farm (S2259 a, cf. Table 1), which is placed in Stout's somewhat earlier Group IIc. In general, Stout's study has its shortcomings, and several Roman Period finds are placed too late (e.g. the Group I handled vessel from early 3rd century Vårå, Karmøy, Rogaland [see Reiersen 2017:124] which she places c. AD 300). It seems reasonable to place the Østabø handled vessel

broadly within the 4th century, or Hansen's (1987) phase C3 (AD 320-400). In their study of bucket-shaped pots, Kristoffersen and Magnus (2010:62-64, Fig. 18) noticed the clear correspondence between early bucket-shaped pots shape AB1 and handled vessels Rygh 361 of Stout's Group II-IV, showing that these groups of handled vessels occurred already in the Late Roman Period.

With regards to the clasps of the "tiny type", Hines states that the type was "*clearly in regular use from the [Late Roman Period] up to the turn of VWZ II-III [Migration Period phases]*" (Hines 1993: 31). Clasps from the Sejlflod cemetery in northern Jutland are mentioned as the closest parallel to the decoration on the Østabø clasps. The Sejlflod finds were not fully published at the time of Hines' work, but have since been published (Nielsen 2000), and the site chronology refined (Carlsen *et al.* 2015). The closest parallels to the Østabø clasps are the clasps in Sejlflod graves K and T. These clasps are figure-8 shaped, and seem to belong to Hines' Class A. Just like the Østabø clasps, they are decorated with rosettes in *pressblech* foil with filigree imitations. They are placed in the late 3rd century and early 4th centuries; Grave K to the transition between Hansen's phases C2b and C3a (i.e., c. AD 310/320), grave T slightly later to phase C3a (Carlsen *et al.* 2015:49). The earliest of these, grave K, seems to best match the inventory of the Østabø grave. In addition to Sejlflod, buttons similar to those from Østabø also occur in the Nydam find (Rau 2010, Abb. 44 and catalogue). Rau (2010:139) therefore examined the Østabø grave find. He agrees with Blindheim and Bøe's dating of the handled vessel, concluding that the grave should be placed in Hansen's phase C3. However, Rau's description of the grave suggests that he has not gone into the details, as he assumes that there is no brooch amongst the finds and also writes that there were two vessels rather than one. Interestingly, Rau makes the point that there are western and eastern Scandinavian traditions of

the "tiny type", with the Danish and Norwegian finds forming one group. Alongside the Østabø "tiny type" clasps, only one further Norwegian grave is counted by Rau (2010) as from the Late Roman Period. This is the mentioned grave from Ås, with single standing, plain buttons of Hines type B1 i (C29263).

Regarding the textiles, there was not enough time to do a proper new analysis for this article. There is, however, reason to believe that Blindheim and her colleague Hougen were correct in their observations. Both were knowledgeable regarding archaeological textiles, not least Hougen (1935) with his study of the Snartemo textiles. A quick look by my colleague Ellen Tjørnhom Bøe supports their statement that this isn't tablet-woven. Bøe further states that the quality is very fine and suggest that there might be several techniques involved. Further analysis is necessary.

The bow brooch is rather simple and a variety of Rygh 243 type (i.e., Almgren's (1897) Group VI). As mentioned, Hines draws a parallel to the brooch from Ås, a grave which he considered to be from the Early Migration Period, but which Rau (2010) counts as the second Late Roman Period grave with clasps from Norway. While simple bow brooches occurred in both the Late Roman and Migration Periods, the Østabø brooch might well stem from Hansen's phase C3. This might also be true for another simple bow brooch from a separate grave in the same burial mound (S2257 a, cf. Table 1). Finally, the eight unburnt teeth indicates that this was an inhumation grave. An osteological analysis of the teeth carried out by Berit Sellevold (1993), indicates that the deceased was an adult, 30-40 years old. Although gender identification is rather problematic, Rau (2010) suggests it might have been a male grave, partly due to the lack of beads. Indeed, among the contemporary graves from Østabø (Table 1), only one grave had the typical "female" textile equipment (spindle whorl) and also included 367 beads of glass and amber (Sode 2010). Among the four other graves

with brooches Rygh 242-243 types and more than one other artefact, three included typical “male” weapons (arrowheads or spearhead).

The local context of the Østabø grave

The Østabø farm is situated in the settlement district Sandeid in north-eastern Rogaland. Between Sandeid and Eide, in Ølen, there is an old portage (Norw. *eid*). Alongside the Haraldseid portage further to the west (Reiersen and Kvæstad *in press*), it represented an alternative route to the main seaway past Avaldsnes. The old portage path at Sandeid is still partly preserved as a hollow road. Close to the portage at Østabø, there was a cemetery with perhaps as many as 100 mounds (Fyllingen 2020). Early excavations revealed grave finds from the Late Roman to the Viking Period. In the years 1900-01, some 29 grave finds from 26 mounds were excavated. All eleven grave finds from the early Iron Age catalogued in 1900 seem to stem from Hansen’s phase C3 (AD 320-400, cf. Table 1). Most of the graves contained ceramic vessels of different types (see Magnus 2012). This rather unusual uniform collection of graves indicates the excavation of a specific part of the cemetery with largely contemporary graves, of which the grave with clasps was part. In comparison, the largest Early Iron Age cemetery in Rogaland, at Kvasheim, with c. 130 mounds, had some 30 certain graves from the late Roman Period (Lillehammer 1996, fig. 54). In addition to favourable agricultural soil and the strategic placement controlling the portage, outfield resources were also plentiful in the Sandeid district. Excavations in 2018 at the farms Østabø, Bjørkhaug and Skeie revealed extensive iron production in the Late Roman Period, AD 200-400 (Fyllingen 2020). The production site at Østabø was radiocarbon dated to AD 313-406 (Beta-513634, Fyllingen *et al.* 2020), i.e. contemporary with the concentration of grave finds.

The establishment of Sandeid as a centre of at least local importance is indicated by a richly

furnished female grave from within Hansen’s phases C1b-C2 (AD 150-320). This grave, from Søre Håland, included two silver finger rings of serpent-head type, Beckmann (1969) type 40 (S6254, S6277; Reiersen 2017:256). Rings of this type were well-known markers of status and alliances, and similar rings of gold are found at the major centres in Rogaland and across Scandinavia. Among several interesting finds from the area in the subsequent Migration Period, the fragmented relief brooch from Østabø (not Østabø!) and the tablet-woven band from Helgaland might be mentioned (Kristoffersen 2000:332, F62, Bøe 2020). In the Viking Period, there are several prominent finds from Sandeid, including insular finds and a Carolingian sword from Østabø (Kristoffersen 2021). During the most recent excavations, two well-preserved houses from the Viking Period was unearthed (Fyllingen 2020). The medieval church site in Sandeid has furthermore been used as an example of cult continuity, with the presence of a pre-Christian phallus stone alongside medieval stone crosses (Myhre 2006).

Concluding remarks

In my view, Charlotte Blindheim seems to have been right with regards to the early date of the grave find and clasps from Østabø. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to address in detail the role of the Østabø clasps in the development of the B1 clasps, it is without doubt that the Østabø clasps were in use at a time with a great variation in A class and “tiny type” clasps, and before the standardisation of the Migration Period type B1. While the decoration on the Østabø clasp buttons refers to the long-lived decorative traditions of the Late Roman Period, the combination of six pairs of “tiny type” buttons indeed resemble the later B1 clasps. The individual carrying this early set of clasps on the dress was part of a local 4th century social milieu with access to local iron production and exotic products like polygonal glass beads and amber beads (Sode 2010). The resemblance with “tiny type” clasps in Jutish sites like Sejlflod and

Nydam, suggests contact and mobility across the North Sea. Back in south-western Norway, the person eventually was buried in a mound at a large cemetery in a settlement district that remained central from the Late Roman Period to the Medieval Period. Excavated and transported from Sandeid to Stavanger in 1900, evacuated from Stavanger to Finnøy in 1943, brought back to Stavanger and sent by mail to Oslo in 1944, and returned to Stavanger in 2016, we are happy to have this fragile and special set of clasps back safely in our collections.

Epilogue

In January 2016, I had been working temporarily at the Museum of Archaeology for one year. To me as a young Iron Age researcher, it was a great experience to come to Stavanger and be integrated in a small group of exceptionally skilled Early Iron Age researchers. The way I was included in Stavanger mirrors how the student Thomas was met by Museum Director Petersen. Working together with the two ‘object nerds’ Siv and Åsa, who from the start treated me as an equal, has been a formative experience for me. I am very proud to have been a part of their Early Iron Age exhibition that opened in 2021. Shortly after the clasps arrived from Oslo, Siv asked me to write an article about the Østabø clasps. Although it has weighed on my conscience, I am glad that this article waited in the drawer for seven years. Its theme seems to have been meant to be in a festschrift for Siv, as it resonates so much with her own career.

The narrative of the Østabø clasps includes an amusing research history (cf. Kristoffersen 2018), which is also an example of good collaboration between Stavanger and Oslo – so typical for much of Siv’s research. It builds on the original research of a pioneer female archaeologist, where important parts of Siv’s own research on objects and chronology is also standing on the shoulders on the work of the important female pioneers Eva Nissen Fett (Kristoffersen 2000) and Bente Magnus (Kristoffersen and Magnus

2010). The topic “clasps” is also something that I associate with Siv and her work on the Migration Period dress, where the local, regional, and not least inter-regional perspectives are always interwoven (cf. Kristoffersen 2006).

Finally, we might add that while Charlotte Blindheim’s long-term office loan perhaps is not a practice to encourage from a curator’s point of view, in the last decades Stavanger has enjoyed many better-planned long-term loans from Oslo – not least in Siv’s early Iron Age and Viking Period exhibitions (cf. Kristoffersen 2021, Kristoffersen and Pedersen 2021).

Abstract

In January 2016, a set of clasps from the Early Iron Age was found in an office at the Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo. It turned out that these clasps originated from Østabø in Rogaland and that they were in fact part of the collections of the Museum of Archaeology, University of Stavanger. The clasps had been sent to Charlotte Blindheim during the Second World War for research in connection with her magister thesis. Blindheim considered these clasps to be the oldest in the country. A reassessment of the date of the grave supports this. The grave is one of eleven 4th century graves from a large cemetery along the portage and settlement district of Sandeid.

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