

Long knives from Haithabu

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Prepared by Tomáš Vlasatý on the basis of:

P. WESTPHALEN. *Die Eisenfunde von Haithabu. Die Ausgrabungen in Haithabu 10*, Neumünster 2002: 227-228.

Shapes

Four large knives and three blade fragments can be labeled as long knives (Nr. 5779–5785, Taf. 85: 1-5). With the exception of Nr. 5782, they do not differ in shape from the previously described knives (*Westphalen 2002*: Taf. 52–56). Long knives are distinguished from ordinary household or multifunction knives blades only with their total length or blade length.

Nr. 5779 (Taf. 85: 1) represents a completely preserved 423 mm long knife with a slightly bent back. The offset of the blade is located at a distance of 98 mm; the tang is tapered. The blade that is 325 mm long and 18 mm wide is heavily grinded and the state corresponds to the second degree of grinding (for degrees of grinding, see *Westphalen 2002*: Abb. 54). The back is 5 mm thick.

Preserved part of knife blade Nr. 5780 (Taf. 85: 2) is 299 mm long and has a bent back. There is offset as well. The tang is 114 mm long. The tip and edge are severely damaged. The current width of the blade is 31 mm and the maximum back thickness is 4 mm. The state of the blade corresponds to the second degree of grinding.

The knife fragment Nr. 5781 is 175 mm long and consists of a straight blade that is 108 mm long and 30 mm wide. The cutting edge and back are parallel. The back is 5 mm thick. The 67 mm long tang narrows towards the end.

The find Nr. 5783 (Taf. 85: 3) is 224 mm long and 40 mm wide. It has a slightly bent back and tang that is 47 mm long.

The knife Nr. 5782 (Taf. 85: 5) that is 406 mm long differs from all the knives from Haithabu. The back the blade is continues into the tang of rectangular cross section, which widens in the middle and flattens at the end. This flattened portion, which becomes thinner towards the end, has a rectangular hole in the middle and a rectangular notch at the end of the tang. The 232 mm long and 34 mm wide blade has a straight, 6 mm thick back, that slopes down at the distance of one third of the blade from the tip. The blade is not parallel with the back.

Two more knives are preserved only in fragments, specifically blade fragment Nr. 5784 (Taf. 85: 4) that is 137 mm long and 39 mm wide and a badly damaged Nr. 5785 that is 220 mm long.

The three blade fragments Nr. 5783-5785 (Taf. 85: 3-4), the assignment to long knives is questionable, because they have been preserved in a fragmentary way. Slightly bent tang of the find Nr. 5783 (Taf. 85: 3) is not typical for long knives. However, it cannot be labeled as curved sickle, as the tang is bent in a different way. Similarly, the knife Nr. 5782 (Taf. 85: 5) is questionable. It is a stray find and quite possible belongs to medieval or modern material culture.

Function

Long knives can not be compared to Merovingian single-edged swords, the so-called seaxes, which were used as main weapons (*Hübener 1988: 225*; for their development, see *Paulsen 1940: 127 ff.*; *Böhner 1958: 131*). Instead, they served rather as side weapons alongside the swords (*Ruttkay 1976: 295*; *Steuer 1966: 215*). The idea that the long knife (*Hiebmesser*) and seax (*Sax*) are synonymous (*Lehtosalo-Hilander 1982: 18f.*, Abb. 15) should be rejected (see *Seitz 1965: 81ff.*, 199ff.). According to A. Ruttkay (*1976: 295*), long knives have no special feature that would make them more suitable for combat, and should rather be seen as tools with different functions. For example, they could serve as stabbing weapons in duels or as hunting knives suitable for killing and cutting game. The similarities to the knives for meat cutting should be noted (see *Westphalen 2002: Abb. 69: 1-2*).

J. Petersen has already pointed out the problem that knives are difficult to assign to weapons or tools (*1951: 188*). In his view, knives with blades exceeding 300 mm and the width of 30 mm were used as weapons. G. Arwidsson (*1986: 35*) reports that the total length of the Birka long knives ranges between 460-550 mm. This length also applies to other similar finds from the area of Lake Mälaren. The blades of the Birka knives are so damaged that the width can be estimated to be 20-30 mm, with the back thickness of 5-8 mm. Even the exact function of standard knives (interpreted as domestic and multifunction knives) is no longer possible to determine. The same applies to long knives that could be used for daily activities if necessary (*Salmo 1938: 127*). At the same time, the long kitchen and hunting knives (see *Grieg 1928: 163*, Abb. 101) could analogously serve as weapons if necessary.

Comparison

In Finland, the Merovingian combat knives are widely used weapons. They differ from the Continental seaxes by smaller size (*Salmo 1938: 127ff.*). Lehtosalo-Hilander P.-L (*1982: 18ff.*) mentions that six late Merovingian combat knives and three Viking age long knives were found at the burial site of Luistari. In Sweden, long knives appear in richly equipped 10th century

graves (Steuer 1976: 443; Arne 1934: 71, Taf. 19: 5; Arwidsson 1986: 36). The finds from Haithabu can be compared to long knives from the Birka graves (Arbman 1940: Taf. 6; Arwidsson 1986), which are usually chamber graves with rich inventories. H. Arbman (1943: 222 Abb. 182: 12.47) assigned the combat knife from the double grave Bj 644 to the female part of the inventory. Sometimes, the knives are absent and the only preserved fragments come from bronze edge sheath fitting, which is considered a characteristic feature of Swedish and Baltic long knives. The sheaths always cover both blades and handles. Based on quality sheaths, G. Arwidsson (1986: 35) believes that combat knives were manufactured by specialists. There is no long knife known from the graves of Haithabu. Actually the only long knife found in a grave in Haithabu is located under the Connecting Wall (*Verbindungswall*), which dates to the 2nd or 3rd quarter of the 7th century; the long knife is a Merovingian seax with the overall length 620 mm and a blade width of 54 mm (Arents 1992: 71ff; Jankuhn 1976: 102, Abb. 21, 22a-b).

The main area of distribution of these long knives lies in eastern Scandinavia and Baltic countries (Arwidsson 1986: 37; Lehtosalo-Hilander 1982: 19; Salmo 1938: 160). There are no West-Scandinavian graves with long knives (Arwidsson 1986: 37). In England, there are similar knives, dated to the 10th to the beginning of the 11th century, with richly made sheaths (Paulsen 1940: 130ff.; Hall 1986: 83, Abb. 88). In some West Slavic graves, the long knives are present and are called *langseaxes*; they are dated to the period from 7th / 8th century to 8th / 9th centuries (Rempel 1966: 31, Taf. 42A, 44A5, 45C, 45D4, 94: 2; Stroh 1954: 24, Taf. 12H3). Long knives do appear in larger numbers in Great Moravian and Old Hungarian warriors and equestrian graves (Hrubý 1955: 174ff.; Ruttkay 1976: 295f., Abb. 34).

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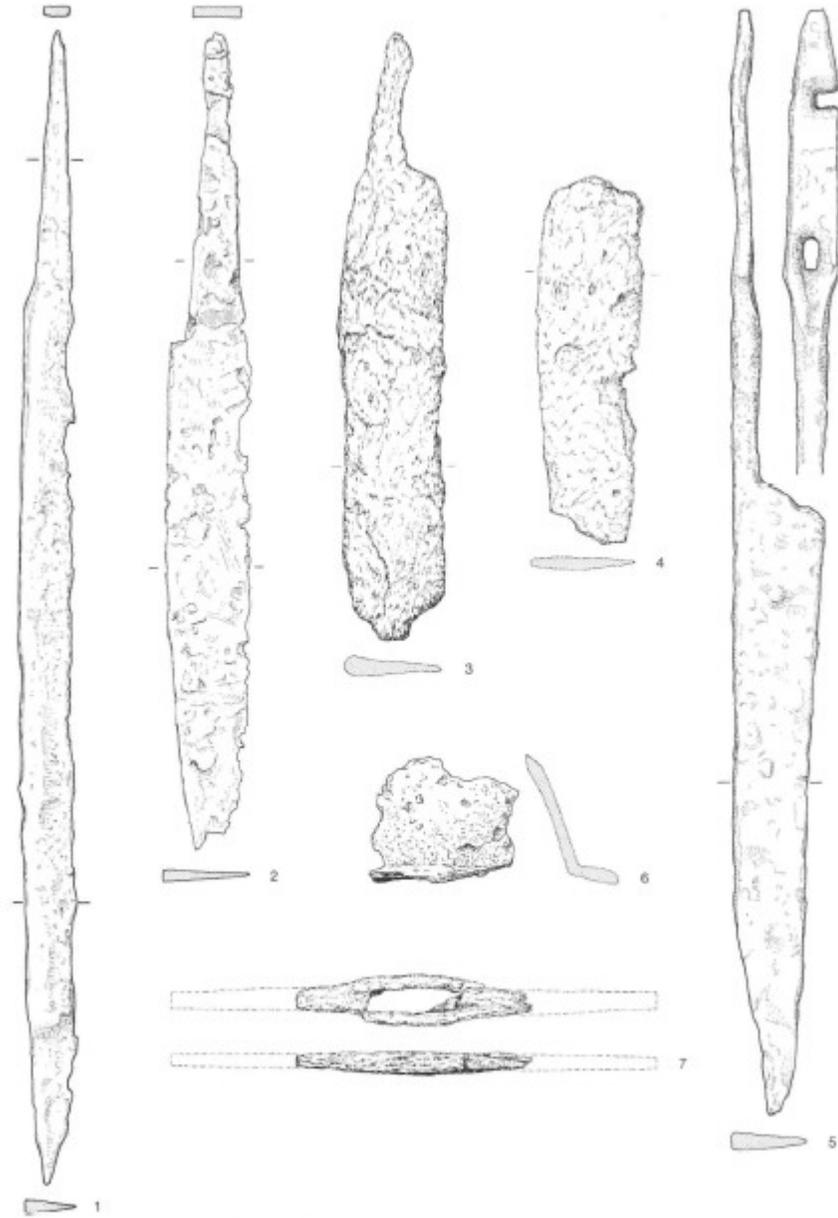
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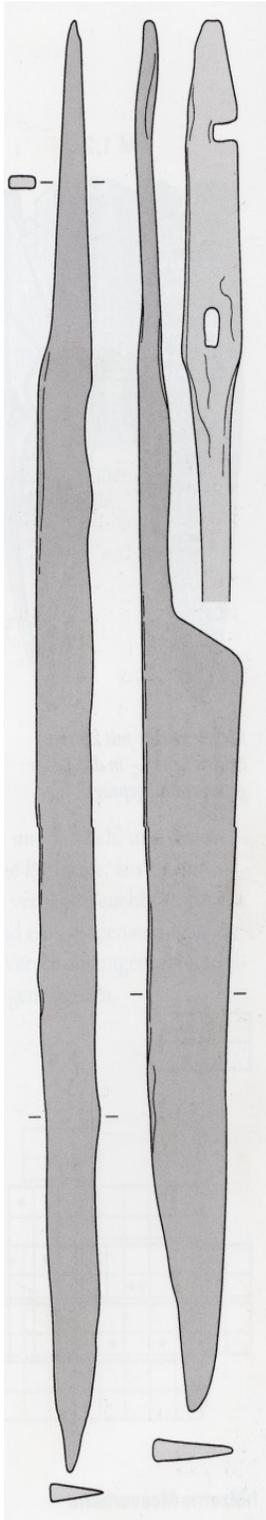
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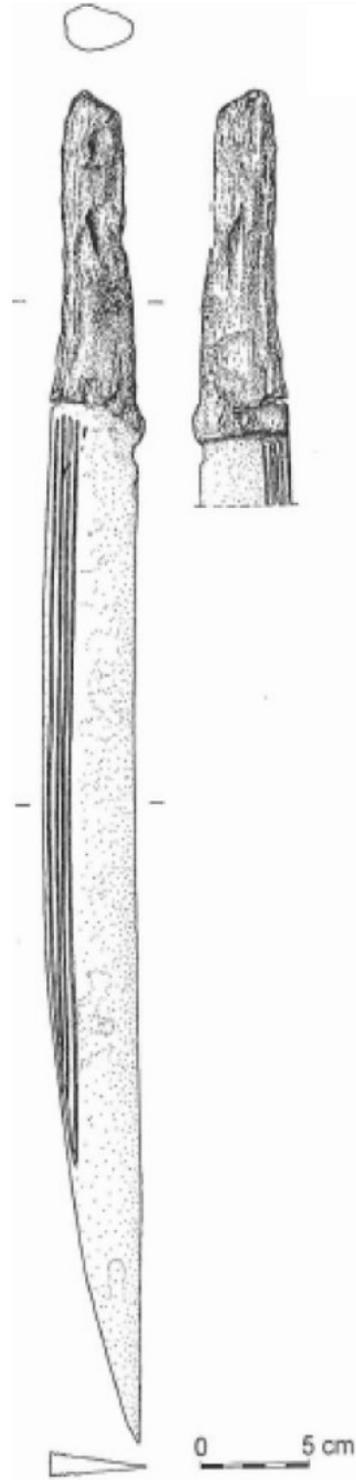
Tafel 85: 1-5. Long knives from Haithabu.

1 Nr. 5779; 2 Nr. 5780; 3 Nr. 5783; 4 Nr. 5784; 5 Nr. 5782.

Taken from *Westphalen 2002*: Taf. 85.



Knives Nr. 5779 and Nr. 5782.
Taken from *Schietzel 2014: 229*.



Merovingian seax found in the grave
under the Connecting Wall in Haithabu.
Taken from *Arents – Eisenschmidt 2010: 74, Abb. 41*.