

NÉCROLOGIES / OBITUARIES

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BRITA MALMER (1925–2013)

Brita Malmer passed away suddenly on May 8, 2013, just a few days before her 88th birthday. She was born in Malmö in 1925. As a pupil in a history class in upper secondary school she realized that the account by Snorre Sturlassons about the Viking Age, although written down in the thirteenth century, was not a good source since it was not contemporary. At Lund University she studied among other things archaeology and history. Her history teacher was



Sture Bolin, who belonged to the Weibullian School where source criticism was a hallmark. In 1926 he had written a thesis about the finds of Roman coins in Germania and later published an important paper on the circulation of coins during the Viking Age. Source criticism and objectivity became a lifelong goal in Brita's own research.

In Lund she had met her future husband Mats P. Malmer during an excavation in 1947. When he excavated the church of Sankt Jörgens in Åhus 197 medieval coins were found. Here Brita had her first contact with coins and could sense their potential as research objects. The coins were identified by Nils Ludvig Rasmusson keeper at the Kungl. myntkabinettet (Royal Coin Cabinet) in Stockholm, where in 1951 Brita was offered a job, which she declined as she had enough work in Lund.

From 1952 Brita was employed at the coin cabinet of the Historical Museum in Lund with the task to renew the exhibitions. She became Master of Arts in archaeology in 1953 basing her research on an unpublished work on Byzantine coin types by Sven Estridsen.

In 1948 plans were made for international cooperation to publish the Swedish coin finds from the Viking Age, mainly housed in the Kungl. myntkabinettet in Stockholm. The finds chiefly consisted of Islamic, German and English coins with a total close to 200,000 specimens of which the majority survive. In 1954 the project began and Brita became an associate, although only for

a month during each of the first five years. Her task was to take charge of the Byzantine and Scandinavian coins and it was to last for her entire life. The young international team also consisted of Michael Dolley (English coins), Peter Berghaus, as well as Vera and Gert Hatz (German coins) and others who came to Stockholm every year to work on the hoards. It was an inspirational environment for everybody and many even learnt to speak Swedish and became friends for life. The fabulously rich finds provided new opportunities to study and analyze the coinage of the Viking Age.

The reference works on Scandinavian coins had been written in the nineteenth century and the material had only been partly analyzed. Brita realized that she had to write new works of reference for her material and she started with Norwegian coins dating from the second half of the eleventh century, a study for which her manuscript was finished in 1958. Her method was based on the decorative and technical elements of the coins. They consisted for instance on how the letters and motifs had been rendered and on weight, diameter and centering. Everything was described in words and the analysis carried out in an objective way. The basis for the method had been developed by her husband and was based on verbal definitions and independent typological elements. Brita developed the method and applied it in a very successful way to the Norwegian coins, which only exceptionally had legible inscriptions. The result was that the coinage could be divided into three classes based on motif and five chronological periods.

In 1959 Mats and Brita moved to Stockholm, where she became employed part-time within the Viking-Age project, and from 1962 on a full-time basis. In her doctoral thesis, published in 1966, the oldest Danish coinage during the ninth and tenth centuries became the next challenge. The coinage consisted of two main groups, earlier called Birka-Hedeby coins and later half bracteates. In order to avoid national connotations for the first group, *Nordic coins* became the name she used for both groups. A concentration of finds with coins from the earlier phase had been found at Birka, but she could show that the coins had been struck at Hedeby on the Jutland Peninsula. From a methodological point of view, the thesis was a follow-up on her work on the Norwegian coins. The entire material consisted of c. 2,700 coins, and Brita used her artistic skills to illustrate the verbal definitions of the types and varieties with her own drawings. Brita was also appointed senior lecturer after defending her thesis.

In 1968, history and numismatics joined hands in her popular book *Mynt och människor, Vikingatidens silverskatter berättar (Coins and people, the tale of the Viking-Age hoards)*. Based among others on her own drawings of coins from Ireland in the west to the Volga-Bulgars in the east, she was able to tell the stories of the coin issuers in a captivating way. The book helped to popularize numismatics and this she also did by giving talks on numerous occasions.

In 1945 the coin cabinet in Stockholm had opened an exhibition covering Swedish coins that became an inspiration to others. From 1962 Brita's main task was to help with the exhibition *The coinage of the world during 25 centuries*, which was opened in 1970. It was a herculean enterprise to exhibit thousands of coins and describe the development in text.

The keeper of the coin cabinet at that time, Nils Ludvig Rasmusson, led the Viking-Age project until he retired in 1970 and the vision had been to publish all finds in one large volume. This of course was an impossible task. When Brita became keeper of the coin cabinet and took charge of the project in 1971 a number of important decisions were taken. The project now got a name in Latin which was abbreviated *CNS* and every coin would be listed individually, which was not the norm, but became the standard for many later publications of finds. The individual features which the coins acquired when struck and after circulation would also be recorded. Hoards from Gotland account for two-thirds of the number of finds in Sweden and the first volume (1975) covered parishes in Gotland starting with the letter A. It was to be followed by seven more volumes before financing came to a halt in 1987. A parallel series, abbreviated *Commentationes*, was devoted to various aspects of Viking-Age coinage. Brita on her own or as co-writer published several volumes in this series, one of which was a catalogue (1989) of the 635 Byzantine coins found in Sweden.

In 1975 the Kungl. myntkabinettet became a separate museum with the added name *Statens museum för mynt-, medalj- och penninghistoria* (*State museum for coin-, medal-, and monetary history*). This was entirely thanks to Brita's efforts and the staff also increased. During her leadership it became a museum as well as a research institution. Research became her main task in 1979 when she became the first holder of the Gunnar Ekström chair in numismatics and monetary history. At the start it was located at Statens humanistisk-samhällsvetenskapliga forskningsråd and under the name Numismatiska forskningsgruppen (Stockholm Numismatic Institute) and it was later transferred to Stockholm University, where it became part of the department of Archaeology.

The book *Den senmedeltida penningen* (The late medieval penning) (1980) covered the smallest denomination of the Swedish coinage. These bracteates were struck c. 1360-1520, almost exclusively in Stockholm (crowned head), Västerås (crowned A) and Söderköping (crowned S). There were many varieties of the crowned head and the crowned letters had various symbols, but nobody had been able to date them more precisely, among other things because they were hardly ever found in hoards. However, when the silver content of 110 coins was tested the results showed that they belonged to three chronologically different groups with decreasing silver content, which coincided with written monetary decrees from 1449. Then Brita realized that she had a basis for dating the types etc. Her final results showed in

detail how the coinage developed over time with regard to type, style, silver content, weight and find distribution. A major part of the material came from so-called cumulative finds from churches, monasteries, and towns. Brita was the first in Sweden to see the potential of using cumulative finds to study, for instance, monetization.

In 1981 Brita became a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities and her inaugural lecture covered numismatics as a historical science. Using four examples she pointed to areas where numismatic material could increase our knowledge of the Viking Age and of the Middle Ages.

Besides the Viking Age, there are a large number of finds in Sweden from the Middle Ages and Modern times. In 1982 in order to survey the coin finds in Sweden from all periods Brita started a new series of publications - *Landskapsinventeringen* (Provincial survey). The majority of the finds are preserved and can be studied, above all at the Kungl. myntkabinettet.

In her research Brita often confronted areas with difficult problems that earlier researchers had not been able to solve. Dies were made to strike the coins and obverse and reverse dies were combined with each other depending on how fast a die was worn out. The dies have not survived, but the coins from which the dies were struck have often been preserved. As a research tool the method was first used in ancient numismatics. Brita introduced it in the Nordic countries in connection with her studies on the coinage of Olof Skötkonung at Sigtuna, which started c. 995. They were imitations of Anglo-Saxon coins and Brita's greatest contribution to research was to bring order to the so-called Scandinavian imitations of Anglo-Saxon coins c. 995–1035. The material is very large, highly complicated, and problematic and meant several decades of study. The results have totally changed our view of the oldest coinage in Sweden and Denmark – our oldest industry as she used to call it. The coinages have proved to be very large and continued for a long period of time. The first volume was published in 1989 and following her retirement in 1992 a second volume was published in 1997. When she passed away she was working on the third and final catalogue covering these coins, which will then amount to c. 1,350 pages. A complete coverage of the Swedish part of the earliest Scandinavian coinage was published in 2010 in *Den svenska mynthistorien, vikingatiden ca 995-1030* (*The Swedish monetary history, Viking Age c. 995-1030*). It was the synthesis of half a century of research.

Brita has no doubt been the most productive Swedish numismatist in modern times and to her coins had unique properties since they were contemporary and often had legends. She analyzed major and complicated subjects and has necessarily dealt with basic research, but she has also covered subjects such as coin circulation and monetization. A long series of publications

testifies to her working capacity, patience, ability to concentrate as well as her sense of method, logic, and structure.

Brita was known and respected in Sweden and abroad and received many honours as proof of this. Among these are those of the Swedish Numismatic Society (honorary member, Gustav VI Adolf medal), the Swedish Antiquarian Society (Hildebrand award, Montelius medal), and the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities (medal of merit in gold). Mention can also be made of the International Numismatic Council (honorary member), the Royal Numismatic Society (honorary member, medal), Institute de France, Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres (Prix Duchalais), and The American Numismatic Society (Huntington-medal).

Brita's life was marked by a strong sense of duty. At the age of 87 she was the first to come to work and the last to leave. The task that she had been given in 1954 to be in charge of the Scandinavian coins became a life long one, which she nearly saw fulfilled. When new coin finds are published in the future the descriptions of the coins will include references to her work and thus her name will live on. Her research has provided numismatists, historians, and archaeologists with new pieces of evidence when trying to interpret the societies of the past.