Seminarium
Onsdag, 19.2.2025 klockan 15.00 – 17.00, Rum 334 i Wallenberglaboratoriet,
Lilla Frescativägen 7
Zoom, https://stockholmuniversity.zoom.us/j/66059743348

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A numismatic chronology for Birka: dirhams and dirham assemblages in the light of coin production in the Islamic world, 8th to mid-10th centuries

During archaeological excavations at the island of Björkö in the years 1871–2003, a large number of coins were found as both grave goods and stray finds in Birka's Black Earth. The vast majority of coin finds are oriental silver dirhams produced in the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries at various mints across the Islamic world. Among distinct formal and functional categories of Birka's numismatic material are (1) whole dirhams and their assemblages, (2) coin pendants and their assemblages, and (3) fragments of dirhams. The main advantage of Islamic dirhams over both other coins from non-Islamic areas and non-monetary objects is that each fully and properly attributed dirham is normally always datable to a certain year, being the most precise point of departure for research into the chronologies of the Viking world.

Until recently, several attempts have been made to build a chronological framework for Birka based on well-dated Islamic coins. There is a general agreement that the earliest traces of monetary transactions in dirhams are datable back as early as soon after c.AD 800, with a small dirham deposit tpq AD 810/1 from Birka's Black Earth excavations in 1991 being among the earliest coin hoards in Viking Scandinavia. The latest dirham import to Birka is from the mid-960s and marks, as almost elsewhere in Scandinavia, an essential decline in the inflow of oriental coins to the North due to their essential debasement in the Islamic world.

Yet no attempts have been made to give a better and more detailed picture of dirham imports to Central Sweden based on a larger number of up-to-date typological observations and full-scale data on the history of coin production in Islamic regions. Since there was presumably no other direction for Viking age trade with the East than through the territories of Eastern Europe, a previously developed chronology of dirham imports from the mid-eighth to the early eleventh century (Kuleshov 2021) is used as a comparative framework for the Birka coin finds.

The paper will present the results of large-scale seriation analyses of dirhams and dirham assemblages from Birka. The main conclusion is that among Birka's oriental coins, it is possible to distinguish between five typologically and chronologically distinct groups of dirham assemblages, datable to c.AD 795–833, c.AD 833–67, c.AD 867–95, c.AD 895–925, and c.AD 925–65 respectively.