

Korta meddelanden

The Långön pouch is not made from lizard skin

In *Fornvännen* 21 is an article by Ture J. Arne reporting on his 1906 excavation of a Viking Period mound cemetery on Långön Island in Tåsjö parish, Ångermanland (Arne 1926; SHM 13316; Raå Tåsjö 155). The level of organic preservation at the site was remarkable. Among the finds from mound 6 is a small scaly leather pouch that contained a piece of flint and iron fragments probably representing a strike-a-light. To observers at the time, the pouch seemed to have been lined with cloth, judging from the fact that under a microscope one could see fine brown hairs “like those in a brush.” The article’s description of this piece of skin is quite extensive. The species identification was made with help from zoologists at the Swedish Museum of Natural History (SMNH).

It was difficult to identify the skin, but in the end, those involved decided that it must come from a large exotic reptile. By a process of elimination, apparently, the decision landed on the monitor lizards, *Varanus* sp., or more specifically *V. salvator* or *V. bengalensis*, which are native to different parts of Asia. The article offers a long scenario for how far this item must have travelled to end up in that grave, on an island in Lake Hottingsjön. It is a great story and as most great stories it has been repeated many times. In the Swe-

dish History Museum’s (SHM) Viking exhibition the item is described as a pouch made of skin from an Indian monitor lizard. I have met more than one reenactor carrying a skin of these reptiles, although they are protected by the 1975 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora.

However, I will try to stop the telling of this story here. It is a great one but I believe it to be based on a premise that is simply not true, viz the idea that this piece of skin must be from a reptile since it is scaly.

I first saw the pouch at the SHM in 2016 (fig. 1). The scales are just as T.J. Arne describes them, of different sizes and shapes, with quite a lot of variation in both size and in shape. The first trait is not strange, but the second one made me doubt that this would be the skin of a reptile. In 1926 it was claimed that this would be skin from a part of the lizard’s neck where bigger and smaller scales meet.

I went to the SMNH and looked at some of the same individual animals that were available for the identification in 1926, and a lot of new ones. Fig. 2 shows the neck and shoulder area of a *V. salvator*. It is quite possible that this area of this specific individual was the model in 1926. It



Fig. 1. Långön in Tåsjö, mound 6, detail of the pouch. Photo: SHM 13316.

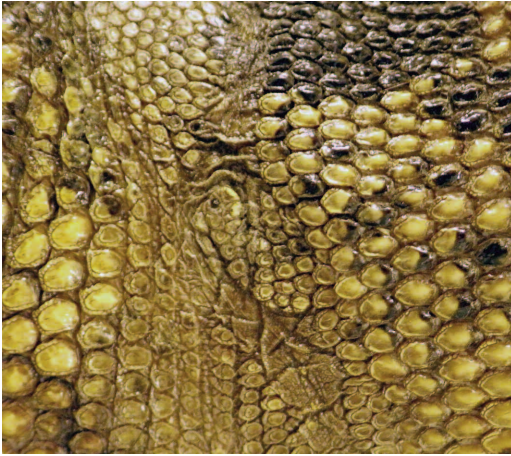


Fig. 2. Skin from an Asian water monitor lizard, *Varanus salvator*, in SMNH. Photo: author.



Fig. 3. Skin from an Bengal monitor lizard, *Varanus bengalensis*, in SMNH. Photo: author.

does look similar, but note that the lizard's scales are rounded, not flattened or pointy. This seems to be true for most species of *Varanus*. Fig. 3 shows a detail of scales on one of the few *V. bengalensis* skins in the SMNH collection (an individual that died at Skansen in the thirties). This does not show the area in question since it has not been mounted and so is harder to relate to the lizard's underlying anatomy. In the reptile world these two were the best candidates available. Still they are in my opinion not the best alternative in the animal world.

I would like to present a candidate much closer to home, perhaps not as interesting but more

likely and more fitting. Fig. 4 shows a detail of a piece of beaver-tail leather that I tanned some years ago (*Castor fiber*). Beaver tails are not a common source of leather as the tissue is usually quite hard and inflexible. It is however suitable for the Långön pouch, where it was probably folded along its length and just sewn down along the natural edges of the tail. The "scales" of the beaver's tail are much less symmetrical than on any reptile. It has large, irregular scales with flat edges in the middle that grow smaller and more square towards the edges. Burnt beaver bones have been found at a Stone Age settlement site on Långön itself (SHM 24946; Raä Täsjö 150).



Fig. 4. Tanned skin from a beaver tail, *Castor fiber*. Photo: author.

Beaver-tail skin is difficult to identify. I would not have made the connection myself had I not, when planning to make a small pouch, found a piece of beaver tail in a drawer. It sparked a memory of my tanning teacher Aja Petterson at Bäckedals folkhögskola in Sveg telling us how she would ask people if they could guess what kind of animal such leather came from. She rarely got a correct answer and would happily state that it was Swedish crocodile.

I would like to thank Aja for all she taught me

and also Erik Åhlander and Sven Kullander at the SMNH for showing me the collections and discussing this issue with me.

References

Arne, T.J., 1926. Ett gravfält från vikingatidens slut i Ångermanland. *Fornvännen* 21.

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