

Before the Church

Archaeological excavations north-east of the church have unearthed interesting finds dating all the way back to the Early Roman Iron Age, i.e. around the birth of Jesus. The modern-day fields of Agerbygaard Farm were once the site of one of the richest settlements on Bornholm during the Iron Age and Viking Era – and it is hardly coincidental that Østerlars Church was built at this precise location.

Excavation history

The site was initially excavated in 1983–1984 by amateur archaeologists led by Gert Larsen. They found potsherds from the Late Roman Iron Age and sherds characteristic of the Baltic pottery which was traded with throughout the Baltic Sea Region during the Viking Era. A quern-stone and a single glass bead were also unearthed. Amateur archaeologist Klaus Thorsen began to search the site using a metal detector in 1990 and soon discovered the first coins, brooches and counterweights. Since then, the finds have grown, supplemented by finds of exotic glass, jewellery, *guldgubber* and a fragment of a hanging vessel from the British Isles. The finds give evidence of trade, everyday life and production, as well as ritual traditions.



Amateur archaeologist Klaus Thorsen, armed with his metal detector, has found many of the magnificent artefacts which now indicate that the area around Østerlars Church is a very significant site!



Guldgubber (gold toreutics)

Some of the most significant finds from Agerbygaard Farm are two *guldgubber*, i.e. gold sheet-metal “toreutics” characteristic of Bornholm, like the ones found at the rich settlement Sorte Muld near Svaneke, which are dated to the Roman Iron Age. The actual function of the *guldgubber* is unknown, but they are believed to have served a ritual purpose. The toreutics are imprinted on thin pieces of gold metal, and the value of the metal is not overwhelming. On the other hand, *guldgubber* have been found at many sites in a ritual context, including at Uppåkra, Sweden. In addition to the *guldgubbe* above, yet another *guldgubbe* was found at Agerbygaard Farm, as well as a sheet of gold metal that was presumably to have been processed into a *guldgubbe*, but was never made. Around 1,800 *guldgubbe* toreutics are on display at Bornholms Museum.

Early Christian hanging vessel

One of the more spectacular finds from the Agerbygaard settlement is the fragment of a bottom section of a hanging vessel from the British Isles dating from the 8th century. Hanging vessels of this sort were hung in the oldest English churches and held holy water, into which the congregation would dip their hands before the church service. How did this hanging vessel end up here so close to Østerlars Church? It may have been stolen, as English churches and monasteries were frequently plundered by Scandinavian raiders during this period. But it is also speculated that the religious artefact could have been brought here for other reasons, perhaps in conjunction with a previous wooden church here at the site?



Fragment of the English hanging vessel
(Photo: National Museum of Denmark)

This fragment of a medieval coin is one of the most recent finds from the site. Gold has also been found in the form of solid rings, such as this one with a diameter of 2 cm. These rings were used as means of payment: it was possible to cut off the amount of gold which a product was worth.



Clothing and fashion

Finds of glass beads and brooches inform us how people were dressed and adorned themselves. Brooches are also one of the best aids archaeologists have in the relative dating of finds, as – in prehistoric societies, too – fashion changes all the time.

Two so-called beak brooches. They were used on clothing in the time around AD 530–700, known as the Late Germanic Iron Age.

Fragment of a blue glass bead.

Fragment of a brooch from the Early Germanic Iron Age.

Fragment of an equal-arm brooch, Viking Era.

(Photos: Bornholms Museum)