

BITS AND PIECES

TWO NEW FINDS FROM NORWAY AND AN UPDATE ON THE INTERPRETATION OF ALSENGEMS

More than 30 years ago M. Schulze-Dörrlamm published an article in this journal on Alsengems¹, oval gems incised with crudely drawn bearded figures holding hands. Her contribution not only contained an update of the known archaeological finds, but also provided an overview of Alsengems mounted on the bindings of church books, crosses, reliquaries and other religious artifacts. In fact, her work was a continuation of the studies of Alsengems initiated in the fifties by the German scholar O.-F. Gandert². Until recently Alsengems were found almost equally in liturgical and archaeological contexts, however in recent years many more have been found in archaeological contexts. The number of archaeological finds has more than doubled since Gandert published his article (**tab. 1**).

Finds of Alsengems have been reported from many different countries. The majority comes from the Netherlands (37 pieces)³ while 20 Alsengems have been found in Germany⁴. In Denmark and Sweden, there have been found 15⁵ and 9⁶ Alsengems respectively. Ukraine, Russia and Belarus each report one Alsengem⁷. Curiously, not a single Alsengem has been found in the United Kingdom. Until recently only one Alsengem was found in Norway, from the farm of Nummedal in Vik (Vestland fylke/NO; former county of Sogn and Fjordane) (**fig. 1, 1**)⁸. This changed in 2014 when a series of excavations took place in Oslo's medieval town prior to the construction of a new railway line. The excavations cut through the heart of the town uncovering religious and secular buildings, street systems, defensive constructions, part of the harbour and two of the town's churchyards. It was during these excavations that fragments from two Alsengems were found (**figs 1, 2–3; 2–3**). These two finds, together with the many new discoveries made in other countries since Schulze-Dörrlamm's publication, merit further investigation and a re-evaluation of the classification and meaning of these objects.

THE OSLO FINDS

The first gem was found in 2014 in a graveyard connected to the medieval church of St. Nicholas. It was broken in half and only the top fragment was recovered (**figs 1, 3; 2, A**)⁹. The second Alsengem fragment was found in 2018 and lay within the remains of a wooden building (**figs 1, 2; 2, B**) in the north of the town, at the junction of the town's main thoroughfares, Vestre strete and Bispeallmenningen¹⁰.

	Gandert 1955	Schulze-Dörr- lamm 1990	Gagetti 2010	van Vilsteren 2014	van Vilsteren 2023
liturgical	46	61	69	69	69
archaeological	39	49	51	63	87

Tab. 1 Number of Alsengems mounted in liturgical artifacts and recorded as archaeological finds as listed by various authors.

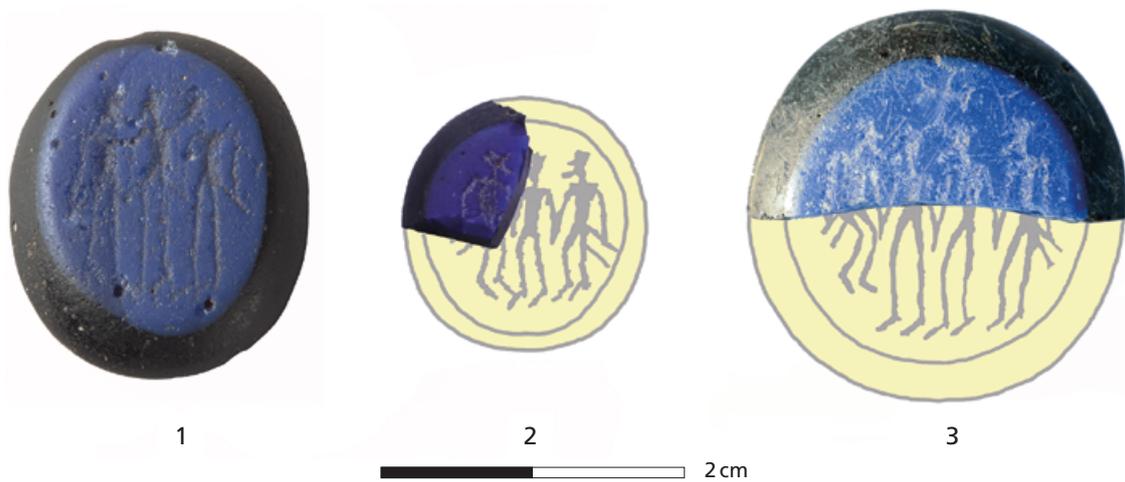


Fig. 1 Three Alsengems found in Norway. – **1** Nummedal near Vik (1893). – **2** Oslo (2018). – **3** Oslo (2014). – (Photos 1 Museum of Cultural History Oslo, K. Helgeland; 2–3 NIKU, Oslo). – Scale 2:1.

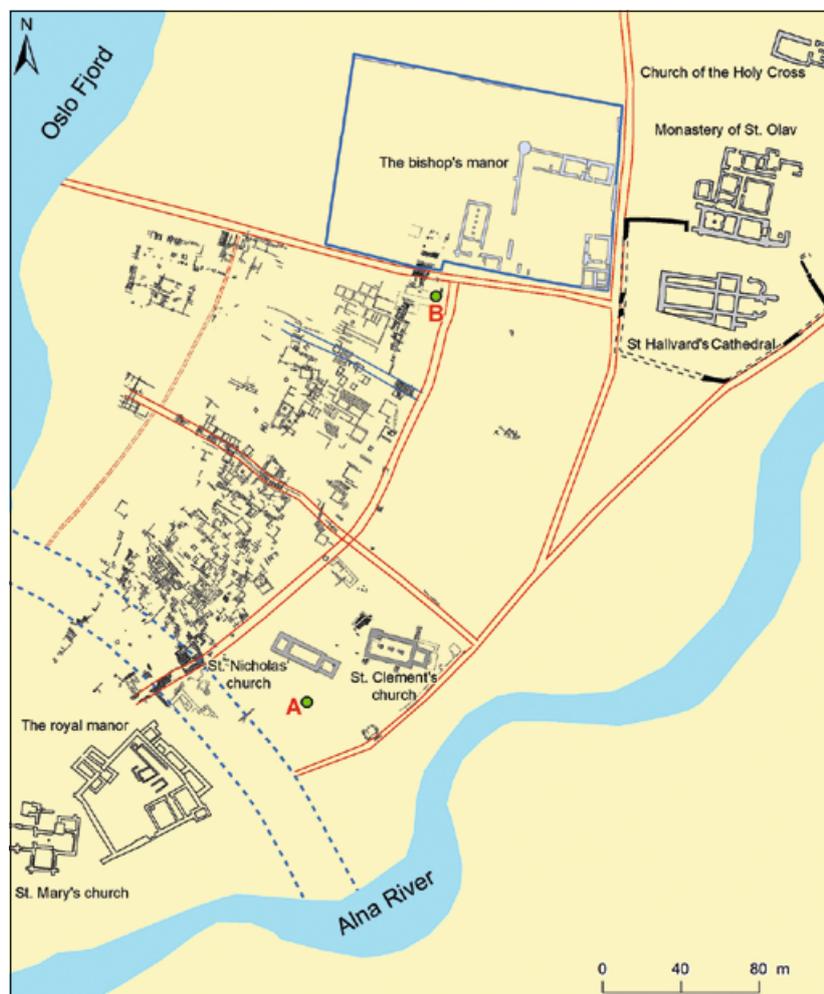


Fig. 2 Location of the findspots of the two Alsengems in the city of Oslo in 2014 (**A**) and 2018 (**B**). – (Map NIKU).

Fig. 3 Alsengem A (find number: F13208) was found in 2014 close to the right arm of the skeleton in grave SA13205. – (Photo NIKU).



Fig. 4 Alsengems with 4 figures. – **1** from Lieveren/NL (1862). – **2** from Oslo/NO (2014). – (Photos 1 J. R. Beuker; 2 NIKU). – Scale 1:1.

The Alsengem from St. Nicholas' Churchyard

The first Alsengem fragment was found (fig. 1, 3) within a grave. **Figure 3** shows the Alsengem *in situ*. It appears to have been deliberately placed in the grave, close to the right arm of a woman who was aged between 22–30 years and had suffered from tuberculosis¹¹. Unfortunately, carbon-14 dating was not carried out on the skeleton. However, it was dated stratigraphically to the 13th century.

The grave was carefully excavated by hand and there does not appear to have been any secondary damage to the skeleton from later gravedigging. This would suggest that the Alsengem was already broken when it was put in the grave. If this was the case, then it could indicate that the object was deliberately interred with the individual as a holy relic, rather than an object of worth.

The inclusion of grave goods within Christian burials is rare, which could indicate that the Alsengem had been concealed within bandages or a shroud prior to burial. The skeleton itself does indeed show signs of binding, in particular the feet, which lay tightly pressed together suggesting that the body was originally wrapped in a shroud¹².

The Alsengem itself is broken in half and inscribed with four bearded figures and a forked cross. The three figures on the right are turned to face the person on the left. Alsengems with four figures are very rare, the Oslo find being only the second that we know of. The first was discovered in 1862 in peat in Lieveren (prov. Drenthe/NL) (fig. 4, 1)¹³. Although both finds are 1000km apart, the similarity of the imagery is striking. This, together with the fact that the forked cross in both cases is inclined to the right, suggests that both Alsengems could originate from the same workshop, if not from the same craftsman. The forked

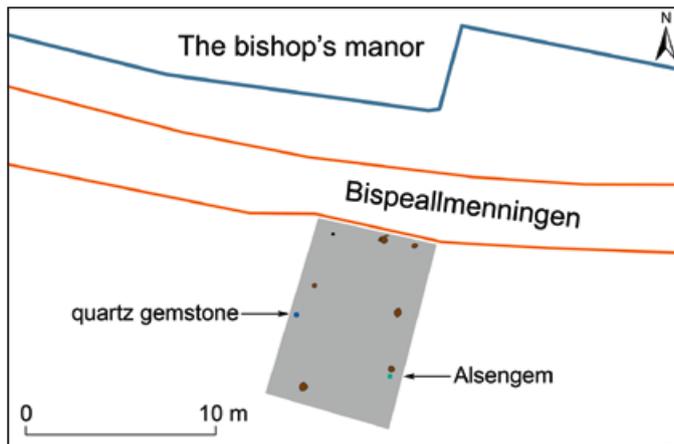


Fig. 5 Alsengem B was found in 2018 in a building just south of the bishop's manor. Dendrochronology of five of the seven wooden posts date the building to the second half of the 12th century. – (Map NIKU). – Scale 1:400.



Fig. 6 Oval cabochon gemstone, made of quartz. For the exact findspot cf. fig. 5. – (Photo NIKU). – Scale 2:1.

cross is a rare decoration on Alsengems and is only found on a gem from Spannum¹⁴, and from a very exceptional Alsengem from Oudemirdum¹⁵ (both prov. Friesland/NL). The latter is decorated only with a forked cross and lacks figures.

The Alsengem Found Close to the Bishop's Manor

The second Alsengem fragment, found in 2018 (fig. 1, 2), was uncovered in an archaeological excavation close to the medieval bishop's manor. The fragment was buried within an earthen floor contained within a wooden building. The building was separated from the bishop's manor by Bispeallmenningen, one of the town's main roads. Only the foundation posts for the building survived. Five of the posts were dated by dendrochronology to the second half of the 12th century, while one of the posts was dated to the winter of 1187/1188, which is the earliest possible time for the fragment to be left in the soil.

The Alsengem fragment was found close to the southeast corner of the building (fig. 5) only 6 m away from an oval cabochon gemstone, made of quartz (fig. 6), which was also buried within the earthen floor layer. The floor layer also contained remains of equipment for weaving and cooking, indicating that the building was probably a domestic dwelling. Radiocarbon dating of a fire layer suggests the building was abandoned after a fire, around 1195. This means that the building with the Alsengem fragment was in use for just seven years.

The dimensions of the fragment suggest that it was likely an Alsengem of the regular type with three figures. The estimated diameter of the fragment would not have exceeded 2 cm. The fragment could have ended up in the floor by accident. One hypothesis suggested by the main author (van Vilsteren) is that the Alsengem was deliberately divided into four parts, which were then concealed in all four corners of the building as a »good luck« or protection charm. Similar practices (involving coins and even a snake) are recorded from Finland¹⁶.

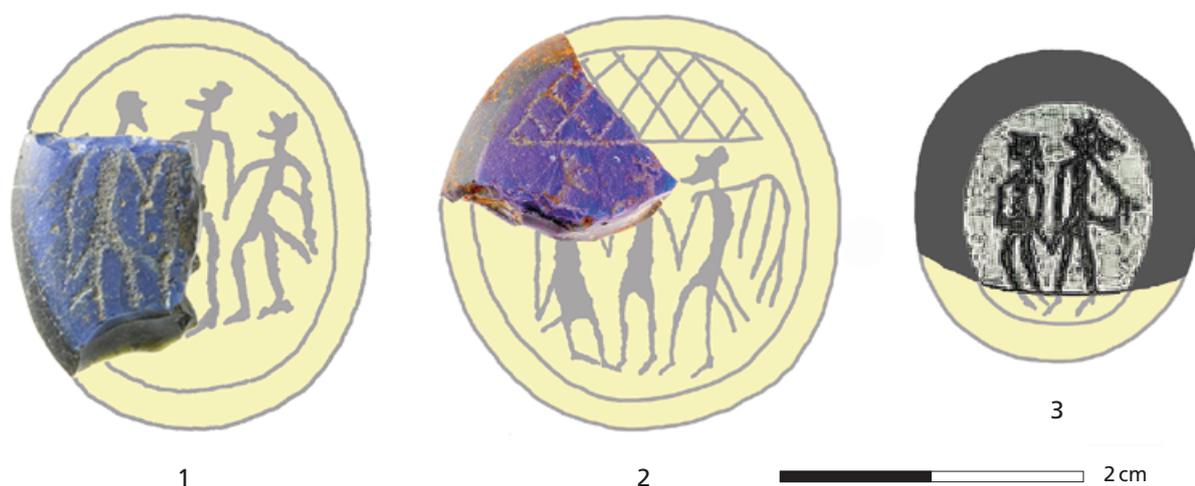


Fig. 7 Three fragments of Alsengems. – **1** from Blija/NL (2016). – **2** from Odense/DK (2015/2016). – **3** from Bielgorodka/UA (1909/1910). – (Photos 1 PAN; 2 Odense Bys Museer; 3 after Arne 1916). – Scale 2:1.

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The Alsengems from Oslo are not the only ones to have been found in a fragmentary state. In 1909/1910 three quarters of a gem was found during excavations in the town of Bielgorodka (Kyiv obl./UA) (**fig. 7, 3**). As no better picture is available at the moment, we have to make do with a very poor drawing in the publication of 1916¹⁷. The figure on the right seems to avert his face, but this is very unlikely as all the other Alsengems with two figures appear to face each other¹⁸. The town of Bielgorodka was most likely destroyed in 1240. In 2016 a second Alsengem fragment was discovered by detectorist E. Algra on arable land near Blija (prov. Friesland/NL) (**fig. 7, 1**)¹⁹. There is no further find context available. It looks as if the original gem depicted three figures. The third fragment was uncovered in the old town of Odense/DK in 2015/2016 (**fig. 7, 2**). This find must also originally have included three figures. The grid decoration above the figures is peculiar. This pattern is encountered on only two other Alsengems, one from Aurich (Lkr. Aurich/DE) (now missing)²⁰ and one from Højmark (Ringkøbing-Skjern Komm./DK)²¹. According to the archaeologists, the Odense fragment can be dated to the late 12th–mid 13th century period.

The fact that several gems were discovered as fragments is remarkable considering the very compact and sturdy appearance of Alsengems. To damage such a solid item seems to require quite a bit of force.

Almost all gems have a double-chamfered side. This suggests that from the start the Alsengems were intended to be mounted within an object, perhaps a metal ring. A striking phenomenon that we often encounter on archaeological gems is that small chips have broken off on the edge (**fig. 8**). Even such small chips do not jump off themselves. Again, force is required. It is assumed that the chipping is a result of attempts to free the Alsengem from their metal mounts.

There have been several finds of Alsengems mounted in gold (**fig. 9, 2, 4**), silver (**fig. 9, 1**), copper (**fig. 9, 3**) and iron (**fig. 9, 5**). An Alsengem found at Ribe (Esbjerg Komm./DK) (**fig. 10**) shows signs that it was once mounted. The central part of the front of the Alsengem is full of scratches. There are hardly any scratches visible on the edges and sides which suggests that the sides have been covered during the »lifetime« of the gem²².



Fig. 8 Danish, Swedish, German and Dutch Alsengems with missing chips on the edge. – **DK-1** Ågerup. – **DK-6** Roskilde. – **DK-9** Vester Nebel. – **DK-11** Torsholm. – **DK-13** Ribe. – **S-1** Kalmar. – **S-3** Alby. – **D-3** Bremen. – **D-7** Edewecht. – **D-12** Loitmark. – **D-13** Pennigsehl. – **D-16** Kaarst. – **FR-12** Hallum. – **FR-16** Buitenpost. – **DR-6** Anloo. – (Photos National Museum of Denmark [NMD]: DK-1 M. L. Hansen; DK-6, DK-9, DK-11 Lennart; DK-13 Museum of Southwest Jutland; S-1 Statens Historiska Museet; S-3 Kalmar läns Museum, P. Rosberg; D-3 Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg, J. Hiltmann; D-7 Landesmuseum für Natur und Mensch Oldenburg; D-12 Stiftung Schleswig-Holsteinische Landesmuseen Schloss Gottorf, Schleswig, C. Dannenberg; D-13 after Gutmann 1958; photos D-16 D. Lück; FR-12 Fries Museum; FR-16 M. J. Buwalda; DR-6 J. R. Beuker). – Scale 1:1.



Fig. 9 Mounted Alsengems. – **1** Bokel/DE. – **2** Lübeck/DE. – **3** Højby/DK. – **4** Blija/NL. – **5** Westerblokker/NL. – (Photos 1 Museum August Kestner, Hannover; 2 Bereich Archäologie und Denkmalpflege der Hansestadt Lübeck, D. Braga; 3 C. Krause; 4 K. Leenheer; 5 Archeologische Dienst, Hoorn). – Scale 1:1.

DISTRIBUTION

As mentioned earlier Alsengems are found in different archaeological contexts in various countries in Northwestern Europe. They derive their name from a gem found in 1871 in Sønderborg (Syddanmark/DK) on the Danish island of Als (in German: Alsen), just off the east coast of southern Jutland. It was the first Alsengem to be published in archaeological literature²³. The distribution pattern of the Alsengem finds suggests that the nomenclature was not at all a bad choice: the island is located almost in the middle of the area where the gems are found. However, things could have turned out differently, if more attention had been paid to the very first discovery of such a gem during the quarrying of the terp mound of Birdaard (prov. Friesland/NL) in 1846. If this find had been flagged up then we might now have been talking about Birdaardgems rather than Alsengems.

There is an interesting pattern in the distribution of the Alsengems (fig. 11). The archaeological finds are concentrated in the northern part of the Netherlands, northern Germany and Denmark, with a few in Sweden and now, as it turns out, three in Norway.

The distribution of Alsengems mounted on liturgical artifacts is very different. They are concentrated in mid-Germany, but are also found in Belgium, Switzerland, France, Spain and Italy, countries from which no gems have been found within the archaeological record.

The overlap between the archaeological and the liturgical Alsengems is relatively small and the discrepancy strongly suggests that the distribution of the archaeological finds reflects the original spread. The Alsengems mounted on liturgical artifacts are likely to be regarded as secondary in nature. As Schulze-Dörrlamm points out²⁴, the reason that Alsengems from the southern part of Germany, Italy and Spain are only found mounted on religious artifacts, is simply due to the fact that they did not originate there. If we take a closer look at the distribution of the archaeological finds, we notice a strong concentration in the northern part of the Netherlands which contains 43 % of the total Alsengems. The Dutch province of Friesland particularly stands out in this respect (fig. 12) with 23 specimens from that area alone. This constitutes 26,4 % of the total amount of 87 archaeologically discovered Alsengems²⁵. Taking into account their similarity in style, it is likely that the Alsengems were produced in Friesland and then found their way to Germany and Scandinavia.

DATING OF ALSENGEMS

The dating of the Alsengems has long been based on typochronological criteria. In fact, it was a sort of floating typochronology. Gandert was of the opinion that the gems dated from the beginning of the 8th century until the end of the 10th century²⁶. His typochronological sequence was not based on the archaeological material, as in his day hardly any well-dated finds were available. Gandert developed a sequence of six groups of Alsengems based upon a hypothetical iconographical development. His dating was derived from what he regarded as early or late in his sequence. Gandert considered the Alsengem from Lieveren (fig. 4, 1) with four figures to be the oldest (»Urgemme«). His sequence was highly questionable and could just as well be reversed. This is in fact what happened in 1990 when Schulze-Dörrlamm revised



Fig. 10 The central part of the Alsengem found during the excavations in Ribe is full of scratches (within the yellow circle), whereas the sides are almost unscratched. – (Poto Museum of Southwest Jutland). – Scale 2:1.

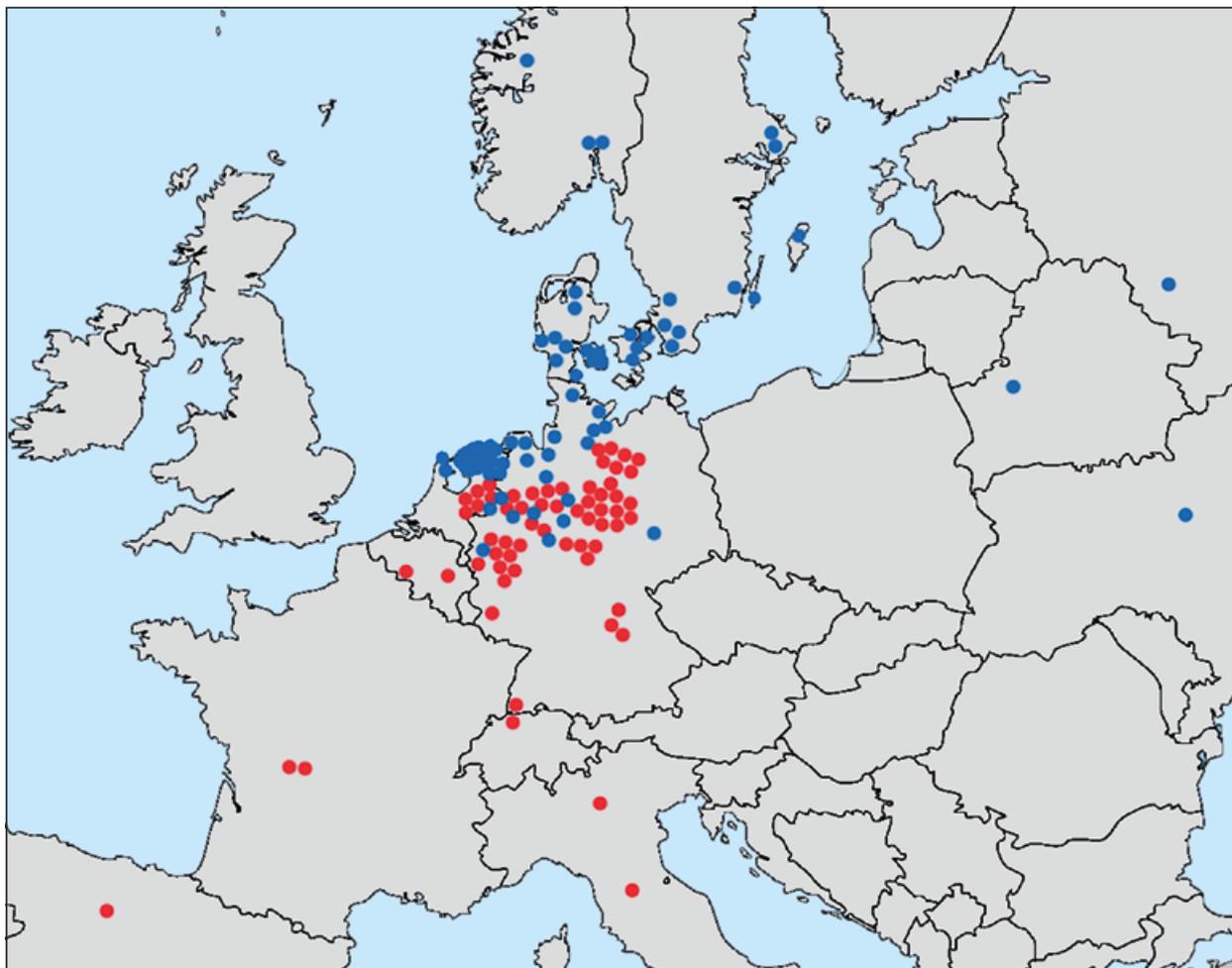


Fig. 11 Distribution of the Alsengems in Europe. – ● archaeological finds. – ● Alsengems mounted on liturgical artifacts. – (Map V. T. van Vilsteren).

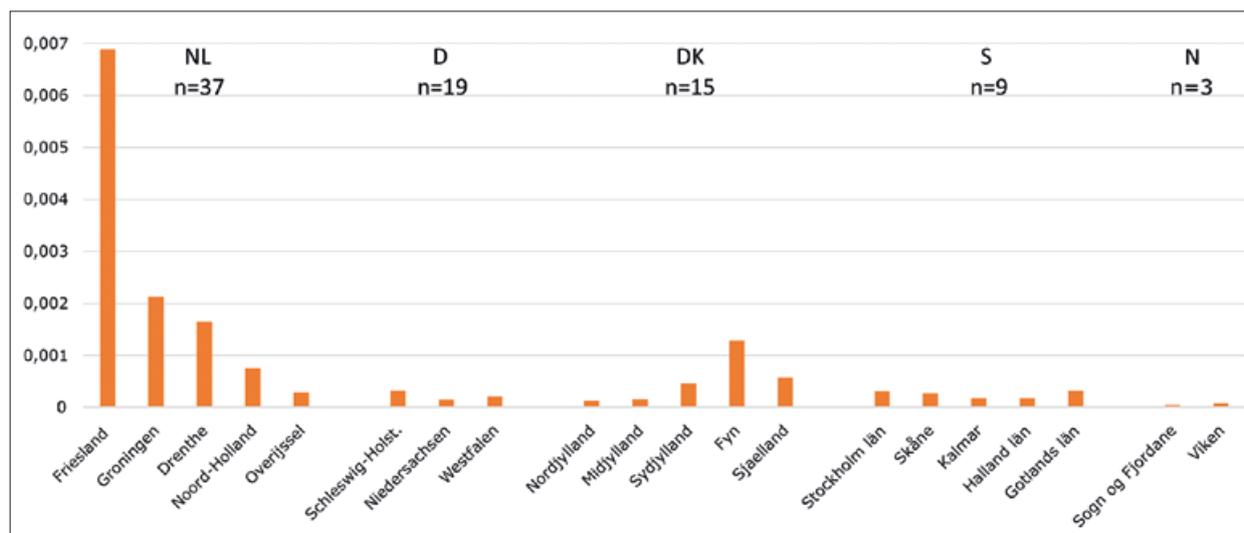


Fig. 12 Density per km² of archaeological finds of Alsengems in the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Sweden and Norway. – (Graphic V. T. van Vilsteren).

the system of Gandert. She came up with three types based on one (type I), two (type II) and three or four figures (type III)²⁷. As the number of well-dated archaeological gems was still limited at the time, Schulze-Dörrlamm decided to base her typology on the date of the religious objects the Alsengems were mounted on. Her type I was dated to the period 11th–early 13th century and type II from the middle of the 11th–end of the 13th century. Type III Alsengems were dated to the period 13th–middle of the 14th century. The Lieve-
ren Alsengem with four figures was suddenly considered to be the youngest by Schulze-Dörrlamm, which effectively reversed Gandert's typology.

Since Schulze-Dörrlamm's publication, a number of Alsengems has been discovered during archaeological excavations, providing better context and dating. However, this is not the case in the Netherlands where all of the 37 Alsengems are stray finds without context, and therefore difficult to date. In Germany, the Alsengem in the treasure of Bokel (Lkr. Rotenburg [Wümme]/DE) discovered in 1928 must have been deposited around 1220–1230²⁸. In 1977 an Alsengem was found in redeposited soil in the first stone church of Lübeck, built most probably before 1138²⁹. The third well-dated gem in Germany comes from the city centre of Münster³⁰. It was found in a burned layer from the second half of the 13th century. In Denmark, the Alsengem from Ribe (**fig. 10**) was found during the excavation of the canon's monastery, close to the Cathedral between 2008 and 2012. It has a clear context, as it was discovered in layers that can be dated to the years around 1200³¹. Quite recently two new finds (of which one was only a fragment [**fig. 7, 2**]) were uncovered during an excavation in the city centre of Odense. They were found in layers of street debris (or levelling layers in the street area) dated to the late 12th–mid 13th century³². All the other German and Danish Alsengems were stray finds. Sweden offers more when it comes to dating. No less than six of the nine Alsengems found there have a datable context. The Alsengem from Kalmar (Kalmar län/SE) was found in the western forecourt of the local castle in 1936 and dates from the 12th or the 13th century³³. A gem found during the excavation of the town hall of Lund (Skåne län/SE) between 1964 and 1965 was assigned to the 12th century³⁴. Another gem was found on a farm dating from the 12th or 13th century during excavations in Bunkeflo near Malmö (Skåne län/SE) between 2000 and 2002³⁵. The Alsengem from Skogaby (Hallands län/SE) was found in a context dating to the period 1175–1300, during the excavation of a rural settlement in 2007³⁶. Finally, two gems from Sigtuna (Stockholms län/SE) are attributed to the years around 1100³⁷. The two Norwegian Alsengems from Oslo fit very well in this pattern. The Alsengem found in the building close to the bishop's manor dates to the last quarter of the 12th century, while the gem from St. Nicholas' churchyard can be attributed to the 13th century. In conclusion, the archaeological finds without exception indicate a 12th and 13th century date. No hard evidence was found for an origin in the 11th, nor in the 14th century apart from those dated in accordance with the religious objects they are attached to. However, as mentioned earlier these liturgical gems must have been attached later and are of a secondary nature which makes their value for the chronology quite limited.

PILGRIM BADGE?

Over the past thirty years, Alsengems have usually been interpreted as pilgrim insignia of the Three Kings in Cologne. This hypothesis was put forward by Schulze-Dörrlamm in 1990 who claimed that Alsengems with three or four figures are younger than those with only one or two figures³⁸. The cult of the veneration of the Three Kings was given new impetus when their relics were transferred from Milan to Cologne in 1164. From then on, as Schulze-Dörrlamm presumes, pilgrims could have taken a memento in the form of an Alsengem. In the 12th and 13th centuries, pilgrimage hadn't really taken off. It is conceivable then that the time-consuming production of Alsengems would still have been able to keep up with the influx of pilgrims

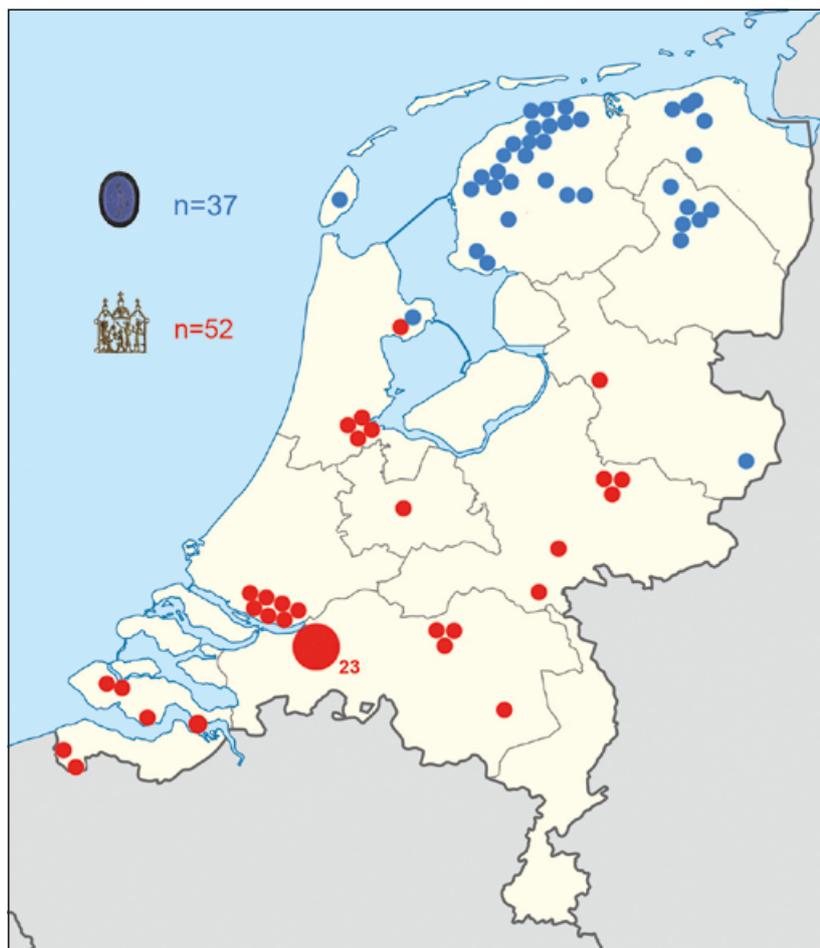


Fig. 13 Find spots in the Netherlands of Alsengems (●) and of lead-pewter pilgrim badges of the Three Kings in Cologne (●) seem to exclude each other. – (Source www.kunera.nl; map V. T. van Vilsteren).

at that time. It is also possible that, when the numbers of pilgrims coming to Cologne increased later in the 14th and 15th centuries, it became necessary to find other types of souvenirs, which could be produced faster and at a cheaper cost. This need could then be met with the manufacture of lead-pewter pilgrim's badges. There is, however, an important argument against the interpretation of Alsengems as a pilgrim's badge. Finds of lead-pewter pilgrim badges tend to have a distribution in a circle around the pilgrimage church where the saint in question was worshipped. So, if Alsengems were pilgrim badges of the Three Kings, one would expect that their spread would have taken place in a circle around Cologne. However, the southernmost find of an Alsengem in Germany is reported from Kaarst (Rhein-Kreis Neuss/DE) (fig. 8, D-16), some 50 km north of Cologne. The greatest density in the distribution of the archaeological Alsengems suggests that the manufacture did not take place in Cologne, but possibly in Friesland. After all, most Alsengems are found in that province. Production of these artifacts does not necessarily need to have taken place within a city. It is quite conceivable that it occurred in a settlement, on a terp mound or in a monastery in the rural landscape of the province of Friesland. Curiously, the distribution patterns of the Alsengems on the one hand and the lead-pewter insignia of the Three Kings from Cologne on the other seem to be mutually exclusive. Alsengems are only found in the northern part of the Netherlands (provinces of Friesland, Groningen, Drenthe, Overijssel and North Holland) while the distribution pattern of the lead-pewter pilgrim badges is very different. These badges, which pilgrims would have brought from their pilgrimage to the cathedral in Cologne, have been found in many places in the Netherlands, but emphatically not in the northern provinces (fig. 13). The northernmost of the 52 lead-tin insignia was found in Hoorn (prov. North

Holland/NL). It is hard to imagine that pilgrims from the northern provinces Friesland, Groningen and Drenthe only took Alsengems with them as a souvenir from their pilgrimage to Cologne, while pilgrims from the rest of the Netherlands had a strict preference for lead-pewter badges. In addition, there is a difference in dating. The lead-tin insignia only appear on the stage when the Alsengems disappear. It is inconceivable that Cologne was first popular as a place of pilgrimage with the northerners (who would often have taken Alsengems back to Friesland) and that pilgrims from the rest of the Netherlands suddenly flocked to Cologne en masse when these gems fell out of fashion at the end of the 13th century. At the same time, we would also have to believe that the northern Netherlands population turned their back on the Three Kings in Cologne. This is very improbable.

There is only one conclusion possible: Alsengems were not pilgrim badges. Which throws up the question: what do the figures mean and what was the function of the Alsengems?

INTERPRETATION OF ALSENGEMS

In the 1880s and 90s, a lot of debate was going on in the »Zeitschrift für Ethnologie«. O. Olshausen claimed that the Alsengems were produced specifically for bindings of church books, crosses, reliquaries and other religious artifacts. The many finds of Alsengems in Scandinavia were in his vision the result of the plundering of churches and monasteries by the Vikings³⁹. This was rejected by M. Bartels who put forward an interesting hypothesis. He suggested the possibility that Alsengems could be identified as the victory stones of king Nidung, which are mentioned in the 13th-century German »Wielandsaga« and the Norse »Thidrekssaga«. Northsea tribes would have kept these stones in a chest in their homes and taken them out before a battle⁴⁰. Already in 1951 P. C. J. A. Boeles came up with the idea of Alsengems as pilgrim badges⁴¹. This was rejected by Gandert because the veneration of the Three Kings did not start until after the transfer of the relics from Milan to Cologne in 1164. Gandert held the view that Alsengems were meant as amulets and victory stones⁴². After Gandert the interpretation as pilgrim badge of the Three Kings in Cologne again was brought up by Schulze-Dörrlamm. Her publication in this journal has had a profound influence. Although she only claimed the provenance from Cologne for the gems with three and four figures⁴³, every publication subsequently interpreted all the Alsengems as pilgrim badges from Cologne. Almost no one questioned her hypothesis. A tentative critical analysis was given by M. Roslund. In 2009 he further developed the idea put forward by Schulze-Dörrlamm⁴⁴ that the joining of hands depicted on the Alsengems might represent some kind of togetherness. In Roslund's vision, Alsengems can be regarded as group markers that were worn mounted in a cloak pin or in rings⁴⁵. The iconography of the gems has both social (holding hands) and religious (angels, crosses) symbolism. Roslund's conclusion is that the Alsengems represent the reification of a previously established community of merchants from Saxony and Friesland, a cultural identity anchored in a religious form, but created on the basis of profane needs⁴⁶. The way in which Roslund arrives at his reasoning is still strongly based on Schulze-Dörrlamm's hypothesis about Alsengems as a pilgrim badge of the Three Kings in Cologne. As we have shown, that hypothesis is no longer tenable⁴⁷. Disregarding both this hypothesis and the chronological framework proposed by Schulze-Dörrlamm only strengthens Roslund's reasoning. In view of the presumption that the production of Alsengems took place in Friesland, we would rather think of communities of Frisian rather than Saxon merchants operating in northern Germany and Scandinavia. A catching elaboration of Roslund's ideas, especially in economic terms, was raised by A. Håkansson⁴⁸. But again, he too is significantly impeded by the views of Schulze-Dörrlamm. This unjustly leads him to relate Alsengems to pilgrimage in Cologne.



Fig. 14 Alsengems. – **1** Britsum/NL (1905). – **2** Suddens/DE (ca. 1857). – **3** Alby/SE (1946). – (Photos 1 J. R. Beuker; 3 Kalmar läns Museum, P. Rosberg; 2 drawing after von Alten 1882). – Scale 2:1.

A curious aspect of this discussion is the total absence of Alsengems in England. The three Alsengems in English collections all lack a British provenance⁴⁹. The activities of detectorists and the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) should have resulted in finds if there were any, as is the case in the Netherlands⁵⁰. Numerous Roman intaglios, many without metal mount, have been reported to PAS, but not a single Alsengem. We know that Frisian traders were active in England, but thus far we do not have an explanation for this absence.

MERCHANDISE

If the presence of Alsengems is related to the activity of Frisian traders, then the next question is: what merchandise did the Frisian traders carry? As already put forward by the main author⁵¹, the iconography of the Alsengems may provide an answer to this. The Alsengems contain an array of imagery including stars and angels but it is the main imagery that we would like to draw attention to: the image of men holding hands, which we encounter on all Alsengems with two or more figures, is in our opinion an expression of the togetherness of Frisian traders and their customers. On three of the known gems however, the men not only hold each other's hand, but they are holding a tree or plant in their hand together (**fig. 14**). On the gem found in Britsum in the Netherlands in 1905, this suggestion is aroused because the upper part runs straight and shows two times two branches (**fig. 14, 1**)⁵². The lower part, on the other hand, is somewhat winding and seems to represent a root system. The same motif is known from two other Alsengems. The gem found circa 1857 in Suddens (Lkr. Jever/DE) in North Germany shows three men (**fig. 14, 2**), the middle figure and the right figure hold a small tree or plant that has three branches on either side⁵³. The third Alsengem was found in 1946 in Sweden in Alby (on Öland, Kalmar än/SE)⁵⁴. There are three men depicted on this gem (**fig. 14, 3**), but in this case, they are holding two trees or plants. The gem found at Suddens includes another symbol above the left figure, that we encounter on many other Alsengems (**fig. 15**). It seems to be intended as an indication of a plant or vegetable. We encounter this symbol on five of the thirty-six Dutch Alsengems (Idaard, Sneek, Hitzum, Warffum and Lutjesaaksum), on five of the twenty German specimens (Bokel, Edewecht, Klein Gladebrügge, Loitmark and Pennigsehl), on four of the fifteen



Fig. 15 Alsengems. – **1** Idaard/NL. – **2** Hitzum/NL. – **3** Klein Gladebrügge/DE. – **4** Vester Nebel/DK. – (Photos 1 Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden; 2 Fries Museum, Leeuwarden; 4 National Museum of Denmark, Lennart; 3 drawing after Kersten 1951). – M. 2:1.

Danish gems (Aagerup, Sonderborg, Vester Nebel and Viborg), on two of the nine Swedish gems (Kalmar and Vikarve) and at the Alsengem from Belarus (Novogrudok). In some cases, the plant is drawn in triplicate on a horizontal stripe (fig. 15, 3). The stripe seems to represent the soil in which the plants grow. This symbol is therefore depicted on almost a quarter of the gems found in archaeological contexts. Together with the three Alsengems shown in figure 14, this suggests that the reason why the men hold hands has something to do with plants or young trees.

The most obvious interpretation of the depiction of plants or trees is grain. The plant drawn on the Alsengem of Alby (fig. 14, 3) shows no resemblance to wheat, barley or rye. However, it could very well be interpreted as an image of oats. The transport of oats from Scandinavia to the Netherlands in the 12th and 13th centuries should not be surprising. During this period the Netherlands experienced an influx of people from the countryside into the cities, meaning large numbers of people became consumers instead of producers of food. The suggestion that oats played an important role in this could be predominately due to the production of beer. Brewing boomed during the period of city expansion. This is reflected, amongst other things, in the emergence of gruit as a commodity, which was used to flavour beer, prior to the introduction of hops around 1325. In the 13th century, a striking number of sources mention the right to collect the gruit in cities in the northern Netherlands⁵⁵. From historical sources we know that in the Netherlands, oats and not – as is often thought – barley were the most important ingredient for the brewers well into the 16th cen-

ture⁵⁶. The new peat reclamations in the Netherlands may not have been able to produce enough oats to meet the enormous demand. In light of this, it would not be surprising if the guild of Frisian merchants, who were active in northern Germany and Scandinavia, were trading in grain, especially oats. Unfortunately, the other symbols which appear on the Alsengems such as the stars and angels are not as easy to interpret. The suggestion that grain (or possibly oats) was transported by Frisians from Scandinavia to the Netherlands does not necessarily imply that this grain was produced in Scandinavia. In settlements like Sigtuna or Lund Swedish traders might have sold the grain that they themselves had imported from regions in the eastern Baltic area.

CONCLUSION

The two gems found during excavations in Oslo fit well with the chronology of the Alsengems (12th and 13th centuries). Both gems seem to have been broken and deposited on purpose within two very different contexts. The Alsengem found within the grave may have had a spiritual purpose, perhaps an amulet used to cure an illness. The fragment found within the house is more difficult to interpret, however it could also have been deposited as a »good luck« or protection charm.

Until recently, Alsengems have usually been interpreted as pilgrim insignia of the Three Kings in Cologne. This hypothesis of Schulze-Dörrlamm is no longer tenable. Distribution patterns in the Netherlands of Alsengems and lead/tin pilgrim badges of the Three Kings in Cologne make this hypothesis highly improbable. The suggestion by Roslund and Håkansson that Alsengems can be regarded as group markers, worn by (Frisian or Saxon) traders is justified by the depiction of men holding hands. The archaeological finds show a strong concentration in the Dutch province of Friesland. This, together with the similarity in style, gives reason to think that the Alsengems have been produced in Friesland. The traders may have been Frisians, rather than Saxons.

A tentative interpretation of the plantlike symbols on the Alsengems is put forward that the merchandise the Frisian traders were trading was grain, especially oats, meant for the emergent brewing industry. This may have been triggered by the rapid population growth and the swift urbanization in the 12th and 13th centuries.

Maybe the contact between Frisian traders and those from Norway and around the Baltic Sea can be regarded as signs of the progressive emergence of the Hanse, which took place in the 12th and 13th centuries⁵⁷.

Notes

- 1) Schulze-Dörrlamm 1990.
- 2) Gandert 1955.
- 3) van Vilsteren 2023.
- 4) Gagetti 2010. – Kaiser 2000. – Thier 2016, fig. 3.
- 5) Baastrup 2004. – Højmark Søvsø/Knudsen 2016, 155 fig. 15f (Ribe). – Haase 2017, 113 fig. 8 (Odense). – Imer et al. 2017, 137 fig. 1 (Odense).
- 6) Gagetti 2010. – Roslund 2009.
- 7) Arne 1916. – Gurevich 1986.
- 8) Rygh 1893. The Nummedal Alsengem is in the collection of the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo and has inventory number C17144.
- 9) Derrick 2018, 135.
- 10) Langvik Berge et al. in prep.
- 11) Østergaard Jensen 2016, 88.
- 12) Østergaard Jensen 2016, 88.
- 13) Gandert 1954. – van Vilsteren 2018, 116 no. 4.
- 14) van Vilsteren 2021, 23 no. 7.
- 15) van Vilsteren 2023, no. R 15.
- 16) Hukantaival 2016, 149.
- 17) Arne 1916, 93. See also: Gurevich 1986, 25.
- 18) Arne 1916, 93 complains in his publication about the poor quality of the drawing.

- 19) van Vilsteren 2021, 19 no. 6.
- 20) Gandert 1955, pl. 25 no. 16.
- 21) Baastrup 2004, 164 fig. 9.
- 22) After inspection of the Alsengem itself, this observation is confirmed by Mette Højmark Søvsø, curator of the Museum of Southwest Jutland (email 19.1.2022).
- 23) Bartels 1882, 187.
- 24) Schulze-Dörrlamm 1990, 218.
- 25) Some of the Alsengems found in the Dutch province of Drenthe are suspected to originate from Friesland as well. They may have been transported from there in the late 19th and early 20th century during the largescale quarrying of the fertile soil of the Frisian terp mounds.
- 26) Gandert 1954, 251; more elaborate in Gandert 1955.
- 27) Schulze-Dörrlamm 1990, 220.
- 28) Krabath 2004.
- 29) Zazoff 1980.
- 30) Thier 2016.
- 31) Højmark Søvsø/Knudsen 2016, 155 fig. 15f.
- 32) Information by email (31.8.2022) from Jakob Tue Christensen, Odense. See also Haase 2017, 113 fig. 8; and Imer et al. 2017, 137 fig. 1.
- 33) Selling 1948, 167.
- 34) Martensson 1967. – Roslund 2009, 230.
- 35) Ingwald/Lövgren 2005, 44.
- 36) Håkansson 2011, 56.
- 37) Håkansson 2019, 212.
- 38) Schulze-Dörrlamm 1990, 219–220.
- 39) Olshausen 1887, 700.
- 40) Bartels 1887, 709. The same view is put forward by Henig/MacGregor 1996, 91.
- 41) Boeles 1951, 460.
- 42) Gandert 1954, 254.
- 43) Schulze-Dörrlamm 1990, 221.
- 44) Schulze-Dörrlamm 1990, 220.
- 45) Roslund 2009, 237.
- 46) Roslund 2009, 238.
- 47) Already put forward by van Vilsteren 2014, 126.
- 48) Håkansson 2019, 212.
- 49) Henig/MacGregor 1996.
- 50) van Vilsteren 2021.
- 51) van Vilsteren 2023.
- 52) van Vilsteren 2023, 179.
- 53) von Alten 1882, 546.
- 54) Selling 1948.
- 55) Roermond (1224), Doesburg (1231), Zutphen (1235), Groenlo (1236), Utrecht (1248), Delft (1274), Haarlem (1274), Rhenen (1277), (Zalt)Bommel (1277), Dordrecht (1278), Venlo (1286), Harderwijk (1295), etc. Cf. van Vilsteren 1992, 142.
- 56) van Vilsteren 1994, 63. See also Doorman 1955, appendix VII.
- 57) Boestad 2022.

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Zusammenfassung / Summary / Résumé

Krimskrams. Zwei neue Funde aus Norwegen und eine Aktualisierung der Deutung von Alsengemmen

Es werden zwei neue fragmentarische Alsengemmen aus der Altstadt von Oslo vorgestellt, von denen das erste in einem Grab aus dem 13. Jahrhundert und das andere im Boden eines Gebäudes aus dem späten 12. Jahrhundert gefunden wurde. Alsengemmen wurden lange Zeit als Pilgerzeichen der Heiligen Drei Könige in Köln interpretiert. Diese Hypothese von M. Schulze-Dörrlamm ist nicht mehr haltbar.

In Anlehnung an M. Roslund und A. Håkansson gelten Alsengemmen als soziale Marker, die von friesischen Händlern getragen wurden. Alsengemmen wurden höchstwahrscheinlich in Friesland hergestellt. Es wird vermutet, dass es sich bei den Waren der friesischen Händler möglicherweise um Getreide, insbesondere Hafer, handelte, das für die aufstrebende Brauindustrie bestimmt war.

Bits and Pieces. Two New Finds from Norway and an Update on the Interpretation of Alsengems

Two new fragmentary Alsengems are presented from the old town of Oslo, the first one found in a grave from the 13th century, the other in the floor of a late 12th century building. Alsengems have long been interpreted as pilgrim badges of the Three Kings in Cologne. This hypothesis of M. Schulze-Dörrlamm is no longer tenable.

Following up on M. Roslund and A. Håkansson, Alsengems are to be regarded as group markers worn by Frisian traders. Alsengems were most probably produced in Friesland. It is put forward that the merchandise of the Frisian traders may have been grain, especially oats, meant for the emergent brewing industry.

De morceaux et des morceaux. Deux nouvelles découvertes en Norvège et une mise à jour de l'interprétation des *Alsengemmen*

Sont présentés ici deux nouveaux fragments d'*Alsengemmen* provenant de la vieille ville d'Oslo, le premier trouvé dans une tombe du XIII^e siècle, l'autre dans le sol d'un édifice de la fin du XII^e siècle. Les *Alsengemmen* ont longtemps été interprétées comme des insignes de pèlerin des Trois Rois à Cologne. Cette hypothèse de M. Schulze-Dörrlamm n'est plus tenable.

Depuis M. Roslund et A. Håkansson, les *Alsengemmen* doivent être considérées comme un marqueur social porté par les commerçants frisons. Les *Alsengemmen* ont très probablement été produites en Frise. On pense que les marchandises des commerçants frisons étaient probablement des céréales, en particulier de l'avoine, destinées à l'industrie brassicole en plein essor.

Schlüsselwörter / Keywords / Mots-clés

Alsengemmen / Pilgerzeichen / sozialer Marker / friesische Händler / Hafer

Alsengems / pilgrim badges / group markers / Frisian traders / oats

Alsengemmen / insignes de pèlerin / marqueur social / commerçants frisons / avoine

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