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Tracking down the aristocracy
– Distribution patterns and coin use at the Viking manor and market at Lake Tissø, Denmark

Just a few decades ago the picture of settlement in Scandinavia during the Iron Age and Viking Age appeared relatively unsubtle. The recorded settlements mainly comprised agrarian villages and only a few stood out from this pattern. The Danish excavations of the past 25 years, especially after the introduction of the metal detector have however given us a far more differentiated picture of the period. The picture now emerging is of a far more complex society with stratification in the settlements. At present it seems that the Danish settlements from the 6th-11th centuries can be divided into a number of main groups.

1. *Aristocratic sites* with an unusually high density of buildings and signs of extensive resource consumption in the form of many metal finds. These include Lejre (Christensen 1991; 1997), Gudme (Jørgensen 1994; Sørensen 1994a; 1994b), Tissø and Toftegård (Tornbjerg 1998).

2. *Early towns/emporia* from the 8th century and onwards such as Haithabu and Ribe (Jensen 1991; 1993).

3. *Landing/trading places* (places of call) with trading and craft activities. An example on a large site of this type is Sebbersund in North Jutland (Christensen & Johansen 1992; Birkedahl & Johansen 1993). As examples on minor sites one can mention several sites along Roskilde Fjord on Sealand and on the south coast of Sweden (cf. Ulriksen 1994; 1998).

4. *Specialized production sites* like Næs (Møller-Hansen & Høier 2000) and Selso on Seeland (Sørensen & Ulriksen 1996).

5. More *ordinary settlements* with a presumed agrarian basic economy, but with a clear element of craft activities (cf. Jensen & Watt 1993). Examples are Stentinget in North Jutland (Nilsson 1994) and Boeslunde on Seeland (Nielsen 1997).

6. *Ordinary farms and villages* exclusively with crop and animal farming as the main occupation (cf. Hvass 1993; Mikkelsen 1999).

7. *Fortified sites* with a defensive character (refuge forts) or with a definite garrison character (Trelleborg, Aggersborg, Fyrkat, etc.).
Among the seven settlement types we see great differences in their material culture, and the settlement types 1-5 can all be termed as ‘metal-rich sites’ or ‘productive sites’. The aristocratic sites with a very large number of high quality finds are in a class by themselves, while the basic primary producers in the form of the agrarian settlements are at the bottom of the scale with respect to the quantity and quality of finds. Of crucial importance to the identification of this settlement hierarchy is the individual sites’ content of material culture in combination with their settlement structure. The finds testify to the occupants’ status, resource consumption, activities, economy, etc.

**Manor and market at Lake Tissø**

This paper deals with one of the sites belonging to the group of aristocratic sites. So far the best elucidated of these complexes have been excavated on the west bank of Lake Tissø in West Sealand (Fig. 1; cf. Jørgensen 2003 for a more detailed description). The settlement is situated at a distance of some seven kilometres from the coast. Via the river Halleby Å it would have been possible to sail even fairly large ships from the sea into the lake. Several other waterways run into the lake, and in terms of traffic the settlement had a highly strategic position. The settlement extends along the whole west bank of the lake over a stretch of no less than 1.5 kilometres and a width of 200-300 metres. The total settlement area is about 50 hectares.

One of the most spectacular finds from the site was made in 1977 with the discovery of a gold neck ring from the tenth century weighing 1.8 kilos. Since the early 1990’s metal detector surveys and excavations of c. 9 hectares of the settlement complex have yielded more than 12,000 metal objects.

**The manors**

The excavations have revealed a complex consisting of one manor with adjacent market and production areas. The first manor was founded in the middle of the 6th century in the northern part of the complex. At the same time activity is documented in a large market and workshop area just south of the manor. The first manor burned down in the middle of the 7th century or just after. The site was abandoned and c. 600 meters to the south a new manor was built in the second half of the 7th century (Fig. 2). Early in the 11th century the complex seems to be abandoned.

For more than 400 years the manors are characterised by a sequence of impressive halls, which clearly distinguishes them from ordinary farms. The high building quality and not least the huge timber dimensions
underscores the special status of the complex. It was probably not a permanent residence because of its peculiar settlement structure, in particular for the late manor. It quite simply lacks many of the buildings one would normally associate with a permanent residence. This ‘lack of buildings’ might indicate that it was no ordinary magnate’s residence but perhaps an estate belonging to the king and being used for temporary stays (Jørgensen 2003, 204ff.).

Especially the late manor has a very high percentage of tin-plated and gilded objects of bronze and silver, compared to other metal-rich sites from the same period in Denmark. A highly characteristic element among the finds from the manor is weaponry, for example arrowheads. Several hilts, pommels and other fittings from swords have also been found, most of them with inlay of silver and brass. The distribution of the c. 100 weapons and weapon parts from the complex shows a clear concentration at the later manor. The aristocratic setting of the complex is also underscored by cavalry equipment in the form of bridles and spurs. Sherds of Frankish and Carolingian drinking glasses are likewise only found in the manor, more precisely in the hall area and the immediate surrounding area. The aristocratic aspect is also underscored by the presence of large, slender dogs in the bone material—probably hunting hounds. Large quantities of bone refuse in the fill of the sunken floor huts inside the manor and at the eastern end of the halls show that at some periods there must have been many people in the complex.

*The workshops and the market place*

Outside the manor there are extensive workshop and market areas. The structure of these activity areas is relatively uniform. There are thousands of post-holes, in which it is extremely difficult to find any system. However, a common building type in the market areas is the sunken floor hut, of the type we know from many other sites of the same character in the southern Scandinavian and northern German area. So far c. 85 sunken floor huts have been excavated, but from the whole area there are probably several hundreds.

In the southern workshop area iron forging and bronze casting seem to have dominated the activities. In the forging areas there are many characteristic forge slags from the refining of iron. Semi-finished material for strike-a-lights, shears, knives and arrowheads are often seen among the finds from this area. Bronze casters worked in the same areas, and among other things casting-moulds for tortoise brooches have been found, as well as miscast keys, brooches and Thor’s hammers. The distribution of molten bronze and lead shows, however, that jewellery was produced over most of the site. The jewellery makers worked also at the manor itself, where several models for making moulds have been
Fig. 1. Map showing the archaeological status of settlement complex on the west bank of the lake Tissø in the Late Iron Age and Viking Period. Terrain curves (0.5 m), excavation areas (yellow), silver hoards — with or without coins — (blue dots) and gold neck-ring (red dot) are shown. In the southernmost area massive traces of market and craft activities have been demonstrated. This area extends up to the large manor from the late 7th to the early 11th century. North of the manor a market area continues some 600 metres to the north along the coast. Here too there are clear traces of workshop activities. In the northernmost part of the area is found the first manor from the 6th and 7th centuries. On the highest point in the area depositions of animal bones and a ploughed up silver hoard point to a special area with a possible cultic function.
Fig. 2. Plan of the excavated area with the later manor area and adjacent market areas. The horizontal strips are the traces of the medieval ridge-and-furrow field system, which was laid out after the abandonment of the settlement. The small roundish features that are scattered all over the area are sunken floor huts. In the middle can be seen the fenced croft areas in several phases, the large manor and its central area with the large halls and smaller, enclosed separate areas. The find spot for the oldest coin (secatta) in the first hall of the manor is shown (dot).
Fig. 3. Map showing the distribution of weights.
found. Tools in the form of burins and small chisels for metalwork often appear in the southern workshop area.

The distribution of the trading activities is evident from the many weights and fragments of Islamic silver coins that have been found all over the area. The distribution of the weights shows the large extent of the activity area, which is close to 40 hectares (Fig. 3). If we compare with the find frequency at town-like emporia such as Ribe, Haithabu, Kaupang and Birka, the quantity of finds is much smaller at Tissø, and this does not suggest long-lasting settlement in the market and production areas. There seem to have been short, but intense periods of activity. Since such large areas had to be used in connection with these activities, this might suggest that many people gathered at the site in these periods.

The coins – distribution and use

The frequent metal detector surveys in combination with the excavation of nearly 20% of the complex offers a unique insight into patterns of distribution and use of specific find groups in relation to areas and structures. Based on the excavations we have a good impression of the structure of the complex, the size of the manors as well as the size of the market areas. The detector surveys have yielded c. 12,000 metal objects, each of them with a precisely recorded find spot, and by analysing the distribution patterns of the find groups we gain information on different activity areas and their use. This also goes for the c. 130 coins from the late 7th to early 11th centuries from the settlement complex. The coin material have not yet been analysed in detail so this paper only gives a preliminary presentation. The identification of the Islamic coins is ongoing, so it is not yet possible to detect the chronological evolution within this group. The precise find spot of each item has been recorded 'in the field’, but the transcription of the ‘field record’ into the database is not yet finished. This is why the maps presented here are only covering approximately 3/5 of the coins.

The coin inventory from Tissø so far comprises:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Coin</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Antonianus, 3rd cent.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sceatta, 7th cent.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolingian coins, 9th cent.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Haithabu” coins, 9th cent.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamic dirhams, 8th – 10th cent.</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German &amp; Scandinavian 10th-11th cent.</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medieval (post 11th cent.)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Apart from the stray Roman antonius the oldest coin is a sceatta of the continental-runic type from the late seventh century – incidentally the first sceatta find from eastern Denmark (Fig. 4:1). From the settlement area we have at present five Carolingian coins; one minted under Charlemagne (768-814) and four under Louis the Pious (814-840). To this we can add three early Nordic coins of the picture types from the first half of the 9th century (Fig. 4:2-3). The great majority is, however, made up of Islamic dirhams from the 8th – 10th centuries. At present 108 dirhams and fragments have been found (Fig. 5). The dirhams have not yet been identified; however, at a quick glance many seem to be early, i.e. from the 8th and 9th centuries. The last coin group is made up of 12 German and Danish coins from the 10th and 11th centuries. Among the latest is a Scandinavian imitation of an English “Agnus Dei” coin minted after 1009. The majority of these late coins are of German origin.

All the coins were found one by one. Only a few specimens were in stratigraphy; all the others are detector finds from the plough soil. The distribution patterns of hack silver from ploughed up hoards and the coins indicate, that some of the coins may derive from at least two of the silver hoards. This is, however, uncertain. Moreover, the possible hoard specimens are so few (approximately 10-20 specimens) that they will not disturb the overall impression. Therefore, all the coins have been included in the distribution maps presented here.

The distribution map in Fig. 5 shows that the dirhams are spread all over the site. The only exception is the area with the early manor in the north. The dirhams are often cut to varying sizes and no less than 72 are fragments smaller than 1/3 of a dirham (Fig. 6). The distribution clearly
Fig. 5. The distribution of 63 dirhams from the 7th-10th centuries. Even though an additional 45 dirhams only are associated to one of the three main excavation areas so far (their exact find spots have been recorded 'in the field', but not yet mapped precisely), the distribution pattern seems to be representative.
Fig. 6. The distribution of dirham fragments smaller than 1/3 of a coin. Out of a total of 72 fragments 43 are mapped. The mapping of the remaining is ongoing.
Fig. 7. The distribution of the "rare" coins: Sceatta, Haithabu types, Carolingian and a Scandinavian imitation of English "Agnus Dei". Six of the coins are from the late manor, three coins from the possible cult area on the hilltop and only one have been found in the southern workshop area (the Charlemagne coin). The picture indicates that the use and function of these coin types was not associated with trade or production. The limited distribution shows that these types clearly had a different function or use than the Islamic dirhams.
indicates that they were primarily used in connection with trade and probably also workshop activities all over the site.

This is not the case when we are dealing with the group of what we can call the "rare" coins, i.e. the sceatta, the Haithabu and Carolingian types – a total of 9 coins. To this we can add the pierced Scandinavian imitation of an English "Agnus Dei" coin from the early 11th century. These special coins demonstrate a completely different distribution picture (Fig. 7). The majority are clearly concentrated within the area of the later manor. The sceatta was even found in the eastern end of the oldest hall building (cf. Fig. 2). This is the area where finds of glass fragments, a tuning peg from a lyre and bone refuse shows that the dining and receptions took place. Even though it was found in a medieval plough layer it cannot have been moved far from its original position.

Six out of the 10 coins have been found within the manor itself, while three was found in connection with a presumed cult area on the hilltop. So far only one Carolingian coin (Charlemagne) has been found in the southern market and workshop area. Most of the coins were found in the modern plough layer; however, they cannot have been moved far from their original position. The distribution of these coins therefore reflects a true pattern with regard to their distribution. The distribution indicates that their use and/or function differed from the Islamic dirhams. Their absence from the market areas and their clear association to areas of a special status is noteworthy. Judged on the Tisso complex the "rare" coins were apparently not used in a coin or silver currency based trade, as it was the case with the Islamic coins. It is also noteworthy that all except one coin are supplied with holes or a loop for suspension. The one exception is the small sceatta from the hall. Apart from the Roman antonanus the sceatta is the oldest coin on the site and the find spot inside the first hall is hardly a coincidence.

The Carolingian and early Nordic coins were struck during the first half of the 9th century. As mentionned above, the Islamic coins found at Tisso have not been closely dated yet, but from other Danish sites, we know that Islamic coins do not appear in substantial numbers in Denmark before the middle of the century. The bulk of the coins are from the plough layer, and it is impossible to suggest a precise date for their time of loss/deposit. It is, however, likely that the "rare" coins and the Islamic coins represent two distinct phases of coin use at the site. The Carolingian and early Nordic coins was probably originally primarily minted for use in connection with the trade activities large emporia such as Dorestad, Haithabu and Birka. However, at a Scandinavian rural site such as Tisso their function seems to have changed. The limited distribution of the Carolingian and early Nordic coins as well as the suspension holes seems to reflect a symbolic use by the aristocracy in the
Fig. 8. The distribution of 20 whole dirhams with or without suspension hole/loop. The picture does not at all correspond to the distribution of the “rare” coin types in Fig. 7.
9th century. These coin types represents another use and function than the Islamic coins as reflected in the very different distribution patterns. The Carolingian and Nordic types were limited to the elite of the 9th century. Only with the emergence of the large quantities of Islamic coins we observe silver coins penetrate into other segments of the rural societies outside the large emporia, i.e. rural trade and workshop production. This change is perhaps reflected by the distribution of the 20 intact dirhams of which several are with suspension holes. (Fig. 8). In the southern workshop area have been found eight Islamic dirhams with holes and two others in connection with the late manor. Even though five pierced dirhams have not yet been included in the digitised distribution map there are indication on that some of these derives from a disturbed silver hoard (cf. above; marked with ? in Fig. 1). Silver is now accumulated within the rural production areas.

The distribution patterns with regard to the different coin types from the Tisso complex shows, that the special coin types such as Carolingian and early Nordic perhaps can be used to identify aristocratic residences and elite areas in larger settlement complexes. The find situation for these types at Tisso points to primarily a symbolic function rather than a use in connection with trade and crafts, as it a generation or two later became so clear in the case of the Islamic coins.

Acknowledgement

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References