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Archäologie in Schleswig



Det 61. Internationale
Sachsensymposium 2010,
Haderslev, Danmark

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Forord/Vorwort

Vi har hermed fornøjelsen af at fremlægge bidragene fra *Det 61. Internationale Sachsensymposion 2010* i et særbind af *Arkæologi i Slesvig/Archäologie in Schleswig*.

Arkæologi i Slesvig/Archäologie in Schleswig står for de symposier, som danske og tyske arkæologer fra museer, institutioner og universiteter har afholdt på tværs af landegrænsen siden 1991. Forumet fungerer som platform for en præsentation af aktuelle forsknings- og undersøgelsesresultater i koncentreret form. Desuden danner det udgangspunkt for at vedligeholde bestående faglige og kollegiale kontakter og er med til at skabe nye forbindelser.

Ved første øjekast kan det virke overraskende, at indlæggene fra *Det 61. Interna-*

tionale Sachsensymposion 2010 fremlægges i dette bind. Men begge symposier har mere til fælles end som så, idet såvel valget af emneområder, som mange af deltagerne er de samme.

Vi vil her benytte lejligheden til at takke alle dem, der har været medvirkende til, at det foreliggende bind kunne udkomme så kort tid efter symposiets afholdelse. Prof. Dr. Ulrich Müller, Institut für Ur- und Frühgeschichte i Kiel sørgede for, at al grafisk arbejde kunne udføres på instituttet i Kiel. Holger Dieterich fra instituttet har layoutet og designet det nærværende bind, mens Renate Braus fra Wachholtz Verlag på vanlig kompetent vis stod for trykningen.

Her skal lyde en hjertelig tak til dem alle!

Wir freuen uns sehr, zum 20-jährigen Jubiläum von *Arkæologi i Slesvig/Archäologie in Schleswig* die Beiträge des 2010 in Haderslev durchgeführten Sachsensymposiums präsentieren zu dürfen!

Arkæologi i Slesvig/Archäologie in Schleswig ist Synonym für grenzüberschreitende Symposien dänischer und deutscher Archäologen aus Museen, Landesämtern und Universitäten. Es fungiert seit 1991 als Medium, um aktuelle Forschungs- und Untersuchungsergebnisse in kompakter Form vorzustellen sowie bestehende Kontakte zu pflegen und neue herzustellen.

Das von *Arkæologi i Slesvig/Archäologie in Schleswig* zwischen Kongeå und Eider gelegene Untersuchungsgebiet stellt in vielen Epochen der Ur- und Frühgeschichte eine Kernregion für Innovationen dar. Es tritt dabei als Dreh- und Angelpunkt von Prozessen in Erscheinung, die in Form unterschiedlichen archäologischen Niederschlags zu erfassen sind.

Mag die Aufnahme der auf dem 61. *Internationalen Sachsensymposium 2010* in Haderslev gehaltenen Beiträge in diesen Band auf den ersten Blick überraschen, zeigen sich bei genauerem Hinsehen deutliche Übereinstimmungen zwischen den beiden Veranstaltungen. So überschneiden sich beispielsweise ihre Themengebiete und insbesondere auch der Kreis ihrer Teilnehmer.

Der engagierten Mithilfe aller Beteiligten ist es zu verdanken, dass dieser Band in so kurzer Zeit hat entstehen können: Prof. Dr. Ulrich Müller, Institut für Ur- und Frühgeschichte zu Kiel, ermöglichte es, dass alle druckvorbereitenden Arbeiten im Kieler Institut vorgenommen werden konnten. Auf Holger Dieterich, Graphiker am Kieler Institut für Ur- und Frühgeschichte, gehen der Entwurf des Layouts und die graphische Gestaltung der Beiträge zurück. Renate Braus, Wachholtz Verlag, betreute zuverlässig die Drucklegung.

Ihnen allen sei herzlich gedankt!

Sunhild Kleingärtner Signe Lützu Pedersen Lilian Matthes
Kiel/Haderslev, Juli 2011

Preface /Vorwort

The 61st International Sachsensymposium was held in the Museum Sønderjylland – Arkæologi Haderslev from 11–16 September 2010. Ninety-three archaeologists from nine countries attended the conference. It was the aim of this conference to reconsider the classic theme of leadership and elites by taking a contextual approach to the archaeological record. The choice of this year's theme would have pleased Hans Neumann, the former leader of the museum. Through his work, for example on the Olger Dyke, he managed to establish the museum in Haderslev as an international research institution. As early as the 1950s, Neumann was in contact with the group of archaeologists who had founded *The International Sachsensymposium* in 1949. In 1963, Neumann for the first time attended a symposium held in Groningen in the Netherlands. Fourteen years later, Neumann's continued attachment to the *The International Sachsensymposium* resulted in the 28th symposium being held in Haderslev. It was both a great honour and pleasure for the Museum Sønderjylland that *The International Sachsensymposium* returned to Haderslev to hold its 61st meeting here.

Thirty-five colleagues presented interesting papers most of which are published in this volume. They all contributed to our understanding of the multi-faceted realities of Iron Age and Early Medieval

societies and their structures. During an excursion through the countryside of southern Jutland we visited a number of sites related to the theme of the conference. Our first stop, however, was to visit the Bronze Age site of Brdr. Gram in Vojens, where we saw a grand example of an early three-aisled longhouse. The second stop was at Dankirke south of Ribe where a possible trading place flourished in the 3rd–5th centuries AD. Then we went on to Hjemsted Prehistoric Park. Here, parts of a larger settlement community, contemporary with the trading place at Dankirke, have been reconstructed. After lunch at the park, we continued towards Tinglev in order to visit the Olger Dyke which was probably constructed by the Angles in the 1st century AD. The next stop was at Søndergård III, one of the many settlement sites currently being excavated in advance of construction works for a new motor way. Here, we saw a fine example of the so-called Osterrönfeld-type house which can be dated to the 3rd century AD. It is thus probably contemporary with one of the offerings at the Nydam Bog, the last site on our excursion. Thanks go to all of those involved in carrying out the excursion.

The opening of *The 61st Sachsensymposium* was celebrated in the old town hall of Haderslev where the town council offered us a splendid reception including a Renaissance buffet organised by the group *Histo-*

ricum. This special environment proved to be a setting fostering friendly conversation and a warm and open atmosphere which was to pervade throughout the conference. Due to the dedicated commitment of all our colleagues at the museum who helped us in running the conference smoothly a very apt framework for an inspiring conference was created. *The 61st International Sachsensymposion* was characterized by stimulating exchange of ideas as well as intense and fruitful discussions. We would like to thank all members of the *Sachsensymposion* who contributed to the success of the conference.

Many thanks go to Tenna Kristensen

and Lennart Madsen who – despite heavy rain – managed to give us a memorable guided tour through Haderslev. Danske Bank Haderslev kindly supported the conference by way of stationery. We would also like to thank Kulturarvsstyrelsen and Museum Sønderjylland – Arkæologi Haderslev for their generous financial support towards the conference, and Dronning Margrethe II's Arkæologiske Fond and Museum Sønderjylland – Arkæologi Haderslev for their contributions towards the present publication. Finally, we are grateful to Holger Dieterich, Sunhild Kleingärtner, and Lilian Matthes for their expertise related to the publication of this volume.

**Linda Boye • Per Ethelberg • Lene Heidemann Lutz
Pernille Kruse • Anne Birgitte Sørensen**
Haderslev, July 2011

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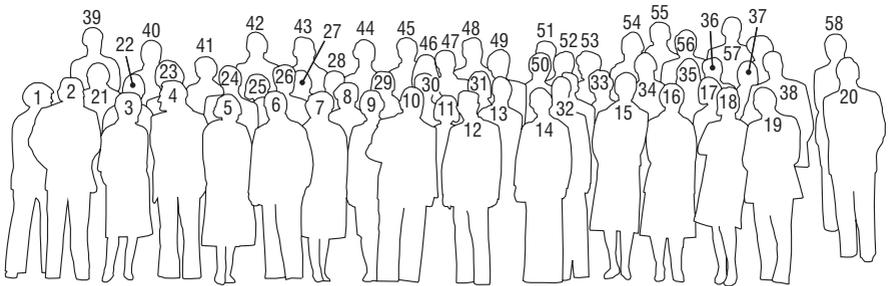
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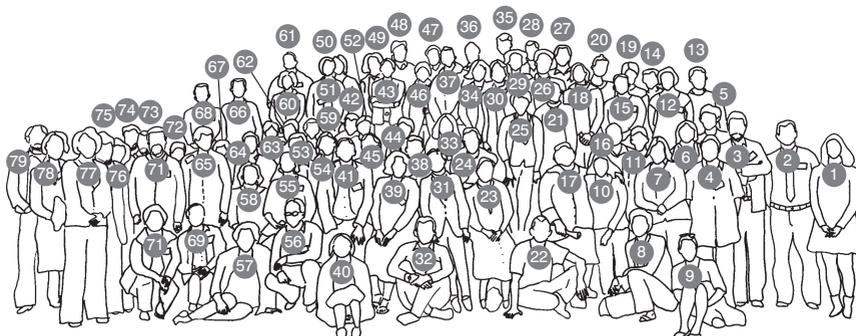
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Assembly Sites for Cult, Markets, Jurisdiction and Social Relations

Historic-ethnological analogy between North Scandinavian church towns, Old Norse assembly sites and pit house sites of the Late Iron Age and Viking Period

Anne Nørgård Jørgensen, Lars Jørgensen and Lone Gebauer Thomsen

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No society can exist that does not feel the need at regular intervals to sustain and reaffirm the collective feelings and ideas that constitute its unity and its personality. Now, this moral remaking can be achieved only by means of meetings, assemblies, or congregations in which individuals, brought into close contact, reaffirm in common their common feelings: hence those ceremonies whose goals, results, and methods do not differ in kind from properly religious ceremonies (DURKHEIM 1915, 322).

The pit house is a common house structure in the first millennium AD in Europe, and since its first discovery its function has been debated from different perspectives and with very different interpretations¹. Specific regional variations in the shape and interior structure of the houses, such as the presence or absence of ovens or hearths, can indeed be observed, but differing excavation methods, contexts and research traditions also have an influence on the excavators' interpretations. In Northwestern Europe and Denmark modern large-scale excavations have revealed a settlement pattern with farms and villages, in which the longhouse with a stable represents the primary living quarters of an Iron Age family, and where pit houses

and other small buildings are interpreted as secondary buildings, *i. e.* workshops or stores (BECKER *et al.* 1979; ZIMMERMANN 1982; BJÖRHEM / SÄFVESTAD 1993, 341 f.).

In our view, however, the pit house should be considered a multifunctional building type which in some cases served first and foremost as temporary accommodation. A historic-ethnological analogy with the North Scandinavian "church towns" of the Middle Ages, Renaissance and Modern Period, is presented here as a proposal for a new functional interpretation, and to provide a more nuanced understanding of the large groupings of pit houses which are known from the 6th century AD and until the Early Medieval Period.

1 DONAT 1980; SALKOVSKY 2001; SØRENSEN 1993; TIPPER 2004; ZIMMERMANN 2000.



Fig. 1. Luleå Gammelstad, Sweden. Church town with 408 cabins used for temporary accommodation in connection with church assemblies (photo: Sveriges Turistråd).

The church towns of Northern Scandinavia have roots in the Middle Ages and are still used today. An example is the UNESCO World Heritage site of Gammelstad at Luleå in North Sweden, where 408 family cabins are used for large church events (Fig. 1). In the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance each landowner in the parish owned a cabin which was used for accommodation in connection with church assemblies and markets. Families travelled long distances to take part in the year's religious festivals and stayed at the location for one or two weeks. Between the events the church towns were deserted. The cabins were maintained year after year. Today many church towns have disappeared, but there are still some well-preserved examples in the northern areas of both Sweden and Finland, including Lapland. In some cases the construction of the family

cabins even resembles that of pit houses. Not only religious events took place at the church assemblies, but also market and legislative assemblies. Thus there are parallels with the Icelandic parliaments, where legal, religious and market-related assemblies were held at the same time.

The authors propose that temporary assembly for undertaking a number of social and societal tasks was the primary function of some of our large pit house sites from the 6th–11th century AD, and that in many cases craft activity was a secondary function carried out during the stay. One function does not definitely exclude the other, and we also have pit house areas where the most important activities are crafts and production. However, a large proportion of the pit house sites may be places of assembly for religious events, trade and political control, which in this

case may have been introduced in the 6th century AD. The pit house areas are in this way a clear physical expression of a new control of the society through the utilisation of assembly site functions. This subject has special relevance to this volume, which is devoted to subjects relating to the organisation of society, such as lawmaking, religion and social relations.

What are church towns?

A church town is a gathering of small houses for accommodation. In some cases up to several hundred small houses were built around the parish church. These church towns are found in northern Sweden in Norrbotten, Västerbotten and Jämtland, and in Finland in Österbotten and Finnish Lapland². It is assumed that the church towns developed because compulsory church attendance was introduced at the end of the 1500s (BERLING 1964, 107 ff.). It was difficult to fulfil compulsory attendance when people in large parishes lived far away from the church. Therefore they gathered at less frequent church festivals and for several days in a row.

Some of the church towns had roots in the Middle Ages although there is no written evidence to support this (BERLING 1964, 32 ff.). The first church in Gammelstad is from the 14th century, but there could be predecessors (BESKOW 1957, 4 ff.). The church town tradition is described for the first time by an eye witness in 1600 and illustrated by two examples from 1695 at Luleå and Piteå (BERLING 1964, fig. I.I). The church towns were a tradition in both the “colonised” areas of North Sweden and

Sami areas, and previously existed in both Norway and Finland (BERLING 1964, 52 ff.). The Sami sites of assembly also have early roots, but subsequently developed into church towns when the Sami people became Christian (BERLING 1964, 145 ff.). In the church town of Lövånger there were separate areas for Swedish, Finnish and Sami inhabitants within a single church town.

The composition and structure of the church towns

Each of the landowning families built a small *stuga* (cabin), which could house *one* family for a short period; in other words, each house represented a farm or family estate in the parish (BERLING 1964, 67 ff.). The houses were often arranged in long rows around the church, with streets and squares in between. In the periods between the gatherings the cabins lay deserted and unused. In some cases the houses contained several rooms, with a family living in each room. In Luleå Gammelstad there are, for example, 408 houses with 553 rooms (www.gammelstad.lulea.se). When Luleå Gammelstad was established there were around 400 farms in the parish. Gammelstad is the best preserved of all the church towns and it was placed upon the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1996, as a unique Scandinavian cultural phenomenon (UNESCO 762; KASLEGARD 2010, 16). The houses make up a village with the buildings laid out in long rows, with streets and squares in between, radiating from the parish church. The temporary accommodations of Gammelstad lay also

2 BERLING 1955; 1964; BESKOW 1957; ISAKSSON/ISAKSSON 1992; SÖDERSTRÖM 2003.

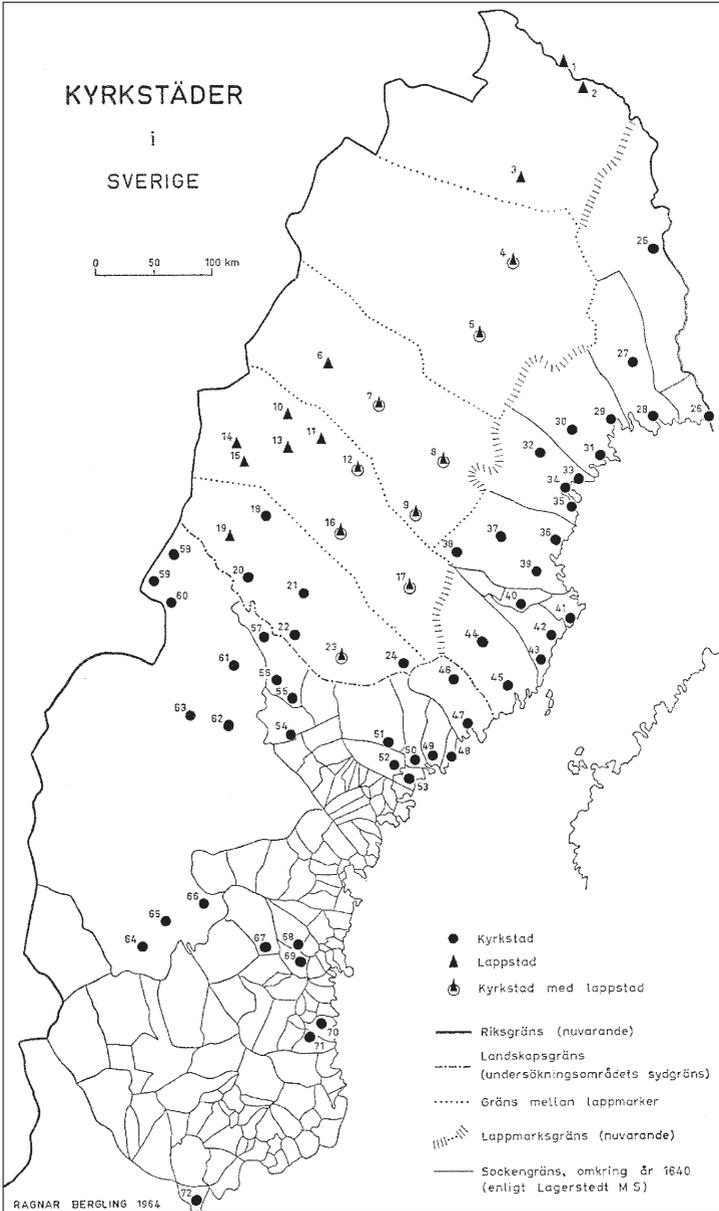


Fig. 2. Church towns in Sweden (distribution map) of the church towns (after BERLING 1964).

deserted between the assemblies. In some cases the landowner's area of origin is reflected in the physical composition of the church town. This applies at both Gammelstad and Lövånger, where the towns are divided up according to where in the parish the farmers come from.

What were the functions of the church towns?

At the assemblies in the church towns a number of religious, social and societal events occurred. However, the emergence and success of the church towns can be traced to the structure of society, as it was not just the common religious basis, but just as much the society-controlling elements, which led to their development (BERLING 1964, 107 ff.; 131 ff.). It was of course church events that were central during the festivals of Easter, Whitsun and Christmas. However, the following were also held at the assemblies:

- 1 Parliament
- 2 Tax collection
- 3 Jurisdiction
- 4 Market
- 5 Social events such as: wedding planning, weddings, baptisms, funerals, entertainment and recreation.

Even if obligatory church attendance was abolished in the middle of the 1800s, the church towns were used right up until the 20th century, which testifies to their significant social and societal function. In many places it became a tradition to meet in the summer, for a week in June and a week in August, to run through various relevant matters. Another area that shows that the gatherings were influenced by

things other than the church calendar are social events in which the young people found their partners for marriage.

Church towns are a very widespread phenomenon. At least 71–72 church towns have been recorded in Sweden (Fig. 2; BERLING 1964, 42 ff.). One can almost say that every parish had a church town and of these sixteen are still in existence. There is one in Jämtland County; eight in Norrbotten County and seven in Västerbotten County. A few still function as church towns today, that is to say that they are only used at religious festivals and otherwise they lie deserted. Others are used for different purposes. Church towns used today are: Fatmomakke (Fig. 2, no. 19), which is Sami and has 80 tent shaped shelters and 20 houses; Råneå (no. 29); Luleå Gammelstad (no. 31); Norrfjärden (no. 33); Piteå Gammelstad (Öjebyn) (no. 34); Hortlax (no. 35); Byske (no. 36); Skellefteå- Bonnstan (no. 39), which is described by Carl von Linné in 1732 as a town with 350–400 houses (ISAKSSON/ ISAKSSON 1992, 190 f.; SÖDERSTRÖM 2003) and Ankarede (no. 58). Church towns, which are used today as private buildings for other purposes are: Arvidsjaur (no. 8), which is Sami and is nominated for the UNESCO World Heritage List (Fig. 3); Ammarnäs (no. 10) and Burträsk (no. 40). Church towns that are in commercial use today are: Vilhelmina (no. 21); Överluleå (Boden) (no. 30) and Lövånger (no. 41).

The church towns are examples of well-preserved physical cultural heritage. At the same time they are well documented in written sources from around 1600 onwards (BERLING 1964 25 ff.; 43 ff.). Churches were needed in the area prior to this, as North Sweden was the subject of Swedish colonisation as early as the beginning of the 1300s (BERLING 1964, 145 ff.; 168 ff.;



Fig. 3. Arvidsjaur, Sweden. Sami church town stuga = cabin (photo: J. Sjöholm, © Norbotens museum 2009).

BESKOW 1957, 3). Generally church towns constitute a well-documented ethnological chapter in the history of Nordic assembly sites.

The church town as a centre for communication

The church towns were of great significance to the maintenance of social and societal stability in the north Swedish areas. The towns fulfilled many purposes, at both a general society and local level, and also for the individual family. The role of church towns as multifunctional communication centres for the promotion of law and order, and strengthening the cohesion in society, is obvious. At Arvidsjaur and Fatmom-

akke physical reminders of our own pit houses are apparent. However, also when one looks at the general structure, function and communication of the church towns, these sites invite comparison with pit house areas in the Late Iron Age and Viking Period. There is thus a clear basis for looking more closely at a historical and ethnological analogy.

The church towns are from a time, when history, as well as social and human conduct, is known. This has special significance for the analogy that is drawn with the Late Iron Age and Viking Period. The church towns were a remarkable tool for the control and manipulation of pre-industrial societies, and they reflect a tradition with deep roots in Old Norse culture. The earliest known physi-

cal remains belonging to this tradition in Scandinavia are of course “the world’s oldest parliament”: Þingvellir on Iceland. This site “fills” the gap between the Viking period and the emergence of the church towns.

Thingvellir (*Þingvellir*), Iceland

Thingvellir where the people of Iceland gathered for the Althing (*Alþingi*) is, like Luleå Gammelstad, a UNESCO World Heritage site. The site represents the quite special function that parliaments had in Old Norse society³. Thingvellir is located in south-western Iceland, around 40 km north-east of Reykjavik. Here the Icelandic “Althing” met from c. 930 AD until 1798–99 (KARLSSON 2007, 117 ff.). During two weeks in June at midsummer it gathered every year to make laws and judge. On Iceland were both “all’s thing” (*Alþingi*), which was the general assembly, and the “local thing” or district meetings. The local (thing) is thought to be the oldest. Lawgiving and judging were two distinct functions of the Althing. The lawgiving was performed from “the Law Rock” (*Lögberg*) by “the Lawspeaker” and the power lay with the 36 chieftains (later 39) from the local things, who made up the Law Court (*Lögretta*). The chieftains selected farmers to the courts and there was one court for every “*fjerding*” of land. Thingvellir was not just of importance to law and justice. The thing also had a deeply rooted cultural and social function in Icelandic society. Markets were also held at the thing. More significantly, it was at Thingvellir that after dramatic events, and

with civil war looming, Christianity was introduced as the official religion in the year 1000 AD.

The thing took place on the plain and the *Althing* was described as an “open-air assembly”. It may be comparable to the meetings described, for example, in relation to the thing at Isøre (“Isøre Thing”) in Denmark (ZEEBERG 2000, chapter 3.3.1; NØRGÅRD JØRGENSEN 2002, 125 ff.). The sources for Thingvellir state that the participants stayed overnight in tents and temporary dwellings. Around 500 participants are estimated to have attended the assemblies, corresponding to one in nine of the overall total of farmers. Part of the world heritage monument at Thingvellir consists of 50 small booths of turf and stone (shelters), which were uncovered during the 1986–88 excavations undertaken by Guðmundur Ólafsson of the National Museum of Iceland (unpublished: www.Þingvellir.UNESCO). Thus temporary dwellings, *i. e.* tents and booths, were a part of the Thingvellir assembly site and were perhaps used in the same way as the stuga or cabin in the Medieval church towns. The Icelandic “parliament” has ancient roots and it is the generally accepted view that the people of Iceland adopted the tradition of public assemblies from the free men of Norway, when Iceland was colonised in the 9th century.

Interpretation of the pit house sites from the Late Iron Age and Viking Period

After this historic-ethnological discourse, we return to the discussion of the structure and function of some of the

3 KARLSSON 2007, 117 ff.; KLN M XVIII, 359 ff.; NIELSEN 1999, 256 f.; KASLEGARD 2010, 31.

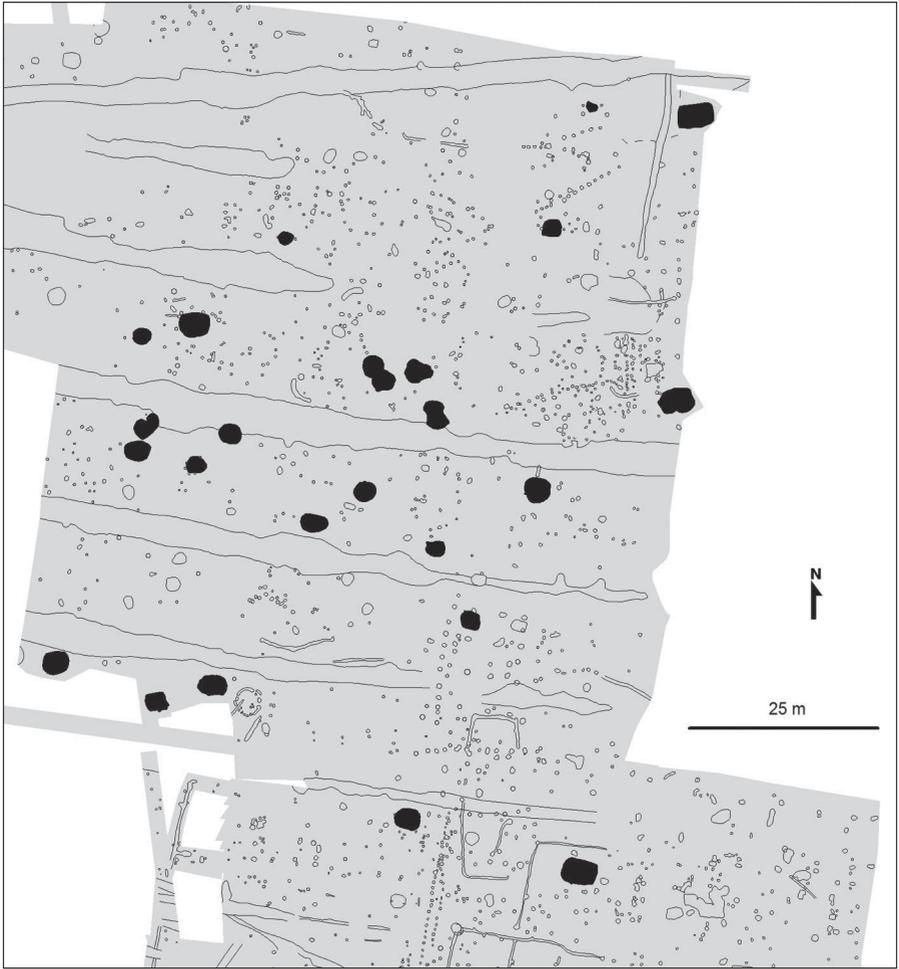


Fig. 4. Tissø, Denmark. Pit house area north of the residence (map: L. Jørgensen, Copenhagen).

Scandinavian pit house sites of the Late Iron Age and Viking Period. A few examples are presented in support of our argument that the primary function of the pit houses may have been as temporary accommodation.

The magnate's complex at Tissø and the pit house area

The best example so far is the large settlement at Tissø in western Zealand, dating to the 6th to 11th centuries (JØRGENSEN 2003; 2009, figs. 12–13). From

early on a large part of the entire 50 hectare settlement showed traces of activity and occupation. Approximately 85,000 m² of the settlement area has been excavated. The excavations uncovered two aristocratic residences, dating from the 6th to 7th centuries and the 8th to 11th centuries respectively, as well as several structures and finds relating to cult, trade and market activities. In the areas outside the two manors seventy-seven pit houses have been located. The original number of pit houses is estimated to have been between 200 and 300. Sixty-two of the Tissø pit houses have been excavated (THOMSEN 2009, 501ff.). Their construction is simple, most commonly featuring an oval pit with a ridge-post at either end of the gables. Only one pit house had traces of a fireplace. The relatively homogeneous fill layers indicate that the abandoned houses were most likely quickly filled in again. Only a small number had preserved floor layers. The finds from the fill layers consist of pottery, tools and jewellery, numerous animal bones and waste material from craft production, mainly slag.

Two aspects characterise the Tissø settlement: the layout of the central area of the settlement with its monumental halls and adjacent buildings that were maintained for several hundred years, and on the other hand, finds and structures that indicate that the site was not permanently settled. This latter interpretation is, amongst other things, based upon a general lack of typical agricultural buildings and the dispersed nature of the workshop and trading activities (JØRGENSEN 2010, 280 f.).

Tissø – the pit houses north of the manor

Finds in the pit house area north of the manor are relatively few, and the struc-

tures clearly do *not* reflect a permanent settlement (Fig. 4). Longhouses are not present in this area. On the other hand, a small group of furnaces from metal crafts are documented in one area, whilst in another traces of glass bead production are found. The only finds that occur with some frequency are textile tools, *i. e.* spindle whorls, fragments of loom weights and needles in the layers of pit houses. This has so far led to the general interpretation that the Tissø pit houses mainly functioned in connection with textile production (THOMSEN 2009, 506).

Interpretation of the Tissø pit house area

Using the analogy between the Scandinavian church towns and Old Norse assembly sites, we interpret the major part of the pit houses at Tissø as temporary accommodation for families who attended events at the site for short periods. These families performed a number of craft activities during their stay and most likely brought their tools with them. Textile tools are found in 63% of the pit houses and represent a higher frequency than tools and workshop debris related to other crafts (THOMSEN 2009, 505f.). The natural conclusion would be to interpret these houses as textile workshops, although loom weights are relatively few, indicating that weaving was not an important activity at Tissø. Yet we do not know whether this frequency is high or low, as there is very little material from other sites to compare with. However, a fruitful way of evaluating the character and scale of textile production is to analyse the tools themselves, as well as their immediate and overall context (ANDERSSON 2007). This will be done as part of an ongoing research initiative (THOMSEN 2010 a, 27 ff.).

We suggest that the Tissø residence functioned as an assembly site for a large number of farms in the area – perhaps as many as 200–300. The extensive distribution of contemporary objects shows that a large area was occupied during these periods, indicating that many families were present at one and the same time.

Other pit house sites in southern Scandinavia

Other sites with many pit houses and little or no evidence of ordinary agrarian structures and functions are known from Southern Scandinavia, however, it is not a homogenous group of sites, and only some of them had an assembly function. Some of these sites are characterized as central places or magnate's farms like Tissø, others are characterized as landing places or specialised production sites. In this context most researchers infer an economic function to the pit houses, *i.e.* weaving hut or workshop building.

The settlement at Järrestad in Sweden is interpreted as a magnate's farm and a regional central place (SÖDERBERG 2002, 37). The layout of the monumental halls and their close relation to a fenced special area is strikingly similar to that of Tissø. Twenty-five pit houses have been excavated, but crop marks observed in the field south of the hall area indicate a large pit house area (SÖDERBERG 2002, 45). The excavator suggests that the pit houses were both used for various craft activities as well as for accommodation by people from "the lower ranks" (SÖDERBERG 2002, 77). However, Järrestad was probably also a place where people gathered for feasting is evidenced by a number of cooking pits and numerous animal bones in the fill layers of wells and pit houses. Thus an interpretation of the

pit houses as temporary accommodation in connection with assemblies is also an option.

The gathering of people on a seasonal basis is also a characteristic feature of the many Danish landing places from the 6th to the 11th century (ULRIKSEN 1998). One site will serve as an example: Sebbersund situated on a narrow headland south of the Limfjord in North Jutland (CHRISTENSEN/JOHANSEN 1991; NIELSEN 2008). Excavations have revealed a market area, dating to the period 700–1100 AD, with seventy pit houses and numerous postholes, but no farms or longhouses (NIELSEN 2004, 104 f., fig. 2). On the basis of the distribution of metal finds and crop marks from *c.* 200 pit houses, the excavators interpret the area south of the market place as a workshop area. A wooden church, built in the early 11th century and surrounded by a churchyard, is also an important element at the site. Sebbersund is interpreted as a market and workshop place where locals and foreigners met on a seasonal basis. Nielsen argues that the pit houses functioned as "separate units", however, whether this means that they were used as dwellings as well as workshops is unclear (NIELSEN 2004, 105). The close relationship between settlement, church and churchyard probably means that Sebbersund also functioned as a religious centre, at least in the Late Viking Period.

As well as the assembly sites we have the specialised production sites. One example is Næs, on the coast of south-western Zealand (MØLLER HANSEN / HØIER 2000). Næs is a significantly smaller site than Tissø, with four long houses representing four phases of a single farm, sixteen smaller buildings, sixty-nine pit houses and a very large number of retting wells. The site dates to the 8th–10th centuries and is in-

terpreted as an agrarian landing place specialised in the processing of flax, hemp and nettle (CHRISTIANSEN 2006, 257f.). Until now the pit houses have been interpreted as weaving huts. We suggest that their primary function was as housing for the families or staff involved in the time-consuming processes of turning plant fibres into cloth. The pit houses were probably only settled for as long as it took to harvest, ret, dry and process the plant fibres. So far we are unable to describe which, and how many, people were involved in this work, but most likely additional staff from other settlements was required for this kind of large-scale production. The pit houses here may have served as temporary housing and workshops at the same time. Another example of a landing place with specialized production, which may be related to a natural harbour and naval force, is Selsø Vestby, Hornsherred on Zealand (ULRIKSEN 1998, 42 ff.).

Pit houses as temporary accommodation?

As it appears, in Denmark pit houses are usually interpreted as workshops and more rarely as dwellings. The main reason for this is the general lack of ovens and fireplaces in the archaeological material. According to normal archaeological methods and reasoning, determining the function of a pit house is only possible when the floor layer is intact and contains “positive” evidence, such as ovens, fireplaces or loom weights lying in a row that have fallen from the upright loom. In principle these finds only testify to the presence of an activity and do not necessarily imply the overall function of the house. Spinning, weaving and other processes involved in textile production certainly took place in all Iron Age main houses,

but this fact has not resulted in applying a functional term such as “weaving house”, as we assume that the main function of longhouses was as accommodation. We need to distinguish between the *primary function* and the *activities*.

The need for a fixed heating device like a fireplace or oven is usually the main criterion for identifying a pit house as accommodation (SØRENSEN 1993). In our view, we also should consider other methods of heating, such as the use of hot stones or charcoal, perhaps in raised benches or boxes (THOMSEN 2010b, fig. 3). These methods are quite sufficient for heating a pit house, but the problem is that they leave little or no trace in an archaeological context, even if the floor layer is intact. The only evidence would be fire-cracked stones and patches of charcoal. In the summer period heating was probably not needed at all. Most likely a number of activities – ordinary household chores like the preparation of food as well as craft production – took place outside the pit house.

Conclusion – pit houses at assembly sites in Denmark

In Denmark pit houses were clearly used for many purposes: accommodation, storage and numerous workshop activities. Still, determining whether the workshop activities were the primary function or just accompanying or secondary activities is difficult. We propose the idea that pit houses at assembly sites and landing places with specialised production were primarily used as accommodation for the families or working groups performing the activities that are reflected in the find material from these sites. As stated above, a distinction

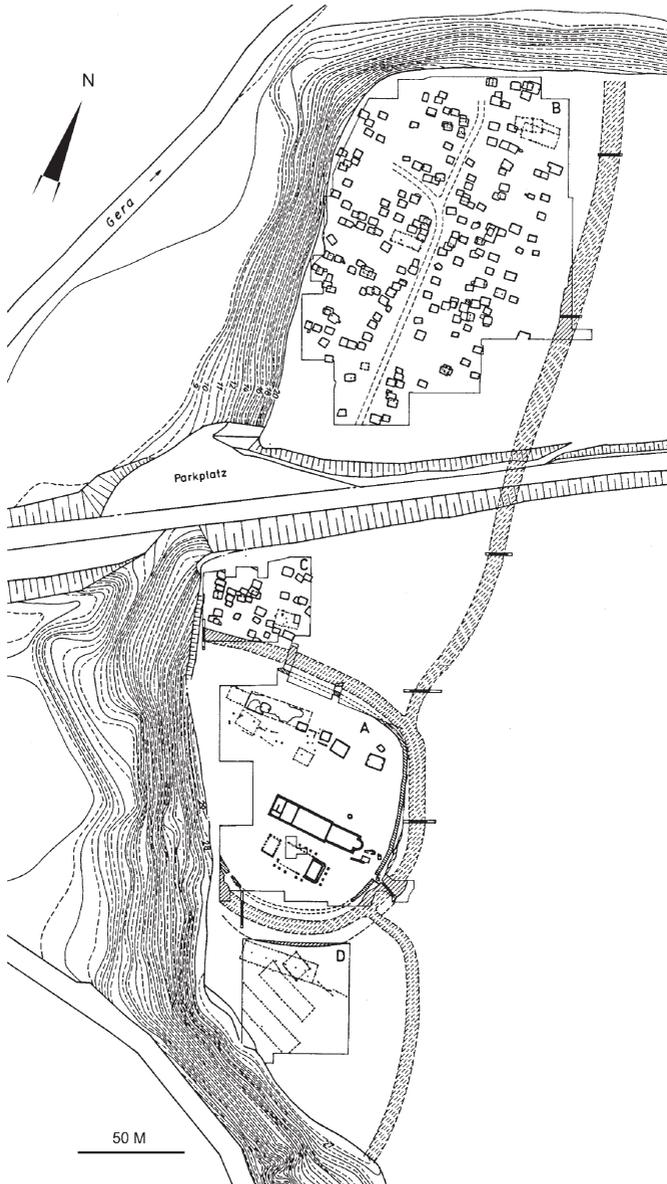


Fig. 5. Gebesee, Germany. Royal travel station and residence from the 10th-12th century AD. North of the residential area is situated a large area containing pit houses (after DONAT 1999).

should be made between the primary function of the houses and the activities documented in their floor and fill layers. We also need to analyse more of these sites with numerous pit houses and compare the evidence. This will enable us to progress from merely documenting the presence of an activity like, for example, textile production to evaluating the character, scale and intensity of this activity.

Continental pit house sites: Haithabu, Gebesee and Tilleda

In the Carolingian and Ottonian Periods large pit house sites related to fortresses, monasteries, palaces and royal courts on the Continent have been seen as centres of craftsmanship, primarily for textile production but also for metal working and other crafts (STEUER 2003, 168 ff.). The proposal for a new interpretation of pit houses on a number of sites as temporary dwellings has also far-reaching implications for our understanding of some of the German as well as other Continental sites.

Hedeby, Viking Age trading centre

The geomagnetic surveys at Hedeby have indicated the presence of an area with numerous pit houses in the north-western part of Hedeby (HILBERG 2008, 109). This could be temporary housing for families coming to Hedeby from a wider area. The town not only served as a trade and production centre, but probably also had administrative, political and religious functions like other classic assembly sites. Hopefully, future research and excavations will reveal information that can confirm or refute this thesis.

Gebesee, Ottonian royal complex

Similarly, well-organised pit house areas have also been identified at the royal or aristocratic residences of the 10th–11th century at Gebesee and Tilleda in Germany (DONAT 1999; GRIMM 1968; 1990). Outside the fortified residential areas of these Ottonian complexes, there are large areas *suburbia* with significant numbers of pit houses and only a few other structures (Fig. 5). At Gebesee fireplaces and ovens in pit houses are relatively rare, and tools for textile production occur in around 21 % of the pit houses (DONAT 1999, 108 ff.). On this basis Peter Donat concluded that the pit houses were probably weaving houses. However, subsequently he expressed doubts over this and allowed for the possibility of other interpretations, including that pit houses could have functioned as dwellings.

Tilleda, Ottonian residence

From written sources we know that important religious and political events took place at the Carolingian and Ottonian residences, events that attracted many people from the surrounding area. The presence of large numbers of people on these occasions also resulted in the organisation of markets. Archaeological excavations at the Ottonian residence Tilleda in Saxony have revealed a vast pit house area in the suburb, in which several craft activities were documented (GRIMM 1968; 1990). Two unusually long pit houses with evidence of up to six looms under the same roof were interpreted as weaving houses (*Tuchmachereien*; GRIMM 1968, 129). The intensive use of the pit house areas at palaces and royal courts in the 10th century has been seen as a sign

of production beyond household needs; a production made by local craftsmen and weavers, who did not use the pit houses for accommodation (STEUER 2003, 175). In our view, the large pit house areas at both Gebesee and Tilleda might also represent temporary housing for the families attending the events. The textile tools and finds relating to other crafts found in the pit houses reflect the activities of the families during their stay.

Conclusion

The tradition of assembly sites and parliament meetings is an Old Norse phenomenon, which is described in both the Icelandic and Nordic written sources of the Middle Ages. No one doubts the evidence of the general parliament assemblies on Iceland at Þingvellir. The Nordic church towns are strongly connected to the Christian church and until now no one has suggested that the church towns could be a remnant of, and development from, the Old Norse tradition of assemblies. The church towns are assumed to have roots in the Middle Ages. In our view, there is a very close connection between the functions of the church towns, the Old Norse assembly sites, and the archaeological material from the pit house sites.

The authors propose:

"that the primary function of the Late Iron Age and Viking Period pit house sites is as accommodation at sites of assembly. The pit houses were temporary housing for families and workers staying for a limited period at sites. The purpose of the accommodation varied, according to the social and overall functional context of the pit house."

It is now up to future research to analyse the pit house areas and set criteria for differentiating pit house areas at local and general assembly sites, and on the other hand sites with other functions like, for example, production and naval assembly. There are rich possibilities for comparative studies between the church towns and the pit house sites. Each of the small houses in the church towns was built by a landowning farmer and represented a farm in the parish, and we suggest that a pit house at an assembly site may also represent a family. Like the church towns, the pit house areas were probably also deserted in the periods between the assemblies. There is ample opportunity to analyse ethnographic material in the well documented church towns, and thus to look more closely at patterns of behaviour and functions. What did people undertake in the church towns, how many tasks did they use the opportunity to complete? As mentioned before, at the assemblies in the church towns the following were held: parliament, tax collection, jurisdiction, markets, and social events such as wedding planning, weddings, baptisms, funerals, entertainment and recreation. This may inspire a nuanced understanding of the social and societal functions of the pit house areas.

The success of the church towns can be traced to the structure of society, as it was not only the common religious basis, but just as much the society-controlling elements, that resulted in the development of the church towns. This may also apply to the Danish pit house sites, which emerged from the 6th century and developed rapidly from the 8th century onwards, a period in which it is assumed that a significant organisational change occurred in Iron Age society (JØRGENSEN 2010, 282 ff.).

Like the church towns the pit house sites may have acted as multifunctional communication centres for the promotion of law and order and strengthening of cohesion in society.

The structural composition and layout of the church towns with “areas” representing the various geographical parts of the parish can also inspire analysis of the structure and composition of the very large pit house sites, like Hedeby. Can internal differences also be identified within the pit house areas? The same applies to the interesting trait that there are Sami, Finnish and Swedish ethnic groups in the same church town. Could the pit house areas of Hedeby represent different groups of people and regions?

In recent years aerial photography has revealed several new Danish sites with many pit houses. Some of these sites are located close to medieval churches (ERIKSEN/OLESEN 2002). Does this pattern imply that churches were perhaps located at, or near, earlier assembly sites? Subsequently it is necessary to look more closely at the location of the pit house sites in the landscape, especially in relation to the cultural landscape in the Viking Age and Medieval Period.

There are more questions than answers, but hopefully as more data becomes available, we will be able to reveal further information about the complex structures underlying pit house areas and assembly sites in the Late Iron Age and Viking Period.

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