

Chapter 1. Introduction

Viking Age Aristocratic Sites in Northern Europe – an Introduction to a Long Discussion

Were Danish kings itinerant and did they travel between the estates, the *Vicus Reges*, if you like, as known from contemporary Anglo-Saxon England with the court in Denmark already in the 7th, 8th and 9th centuries? Did the Carolingian Emperor Louis the Pious' troops approach the Erritsø royal hall in AD 815, possibly scorching it, while King Godfred's sons were hiding on what must have been Funen, 'an island 3 miles away', as the Frankish Annals report? It seems so and the function of the Erritsø, fortified manor thus seemed to change its emphasis from a royal *vicus*, based on tribute collection and religion in Erritsø, the name which from place name research is interpreted as the "supreme king's (i.e., Eirik's) hill", to a more militarized strategic defence-in-depth site of Jutland.¹ Is this a coincidence? And did the residents because of the 815 incidents, consequently, build a comprehensive moat and palisade before the impressive palisade in Jelling, 30 kilometres away in order to utilize the highly strategic landscape in a place where later military strategists of the 17th and 18th centuries found it imperative to place a garrison town like Fredericia before Fredericia?²

All hypotheses are substantiated by this array of papers in this volume that directly or indirectly elicit the use, multifunctionality, width and potential power related to such, for the lack of a better word, *aristocratic sites* in Northern Europe from AD c. 600-1000. The term, aristocratic, here defined in *Britannica* as: "Government by a relatively small, privileged class or by a minority consisting of those presumed to be best qualified to rule,"³ needs to be meshed with new data and landscape analyses from the papers in this volume. The papers additionally bear perspectives that are more critical

1 <https://arcnames.w.uib.no/2019/11/04/a-name-fit-for-a-king/>

2 Fredericia here referring to the nearby garrison town founded in 1650 only four km away, as a means to defend the country against an attack and invading armies in the flank when they invaded deeper into the Jutland hinterland.

3 <https://www.britannica.com/topic/aristocracy>

to an unilateral evolutionary, top-down and power-related perspective of central places (Chapter 2). In that I agree that the terms need to be better contextualised to regional but also interregional contexts and seen in a less ‘medieval-centric’ perspective as also outlined by Scull, distinguishing between ‘overlapping social geographies’ (Chapter 7).⁴ It also needs to be seen in a larger geographic perspective as outlined in Chapter 6.

The term manor, defined in Britannica as: “During the European Middle Ages, the dwelling of the lord of the manor or his residential bailiff and administrative centre of the feudal estate”, may be problematic as it is a high medieval, feudal term applied to a slightly earlier phenomenon in Denmark, unless we accept that the problematic terms feudalism and lord-vassal relations were already instated in Denmark in the 8th century. We need to discuss the usefulness and archaeological content of these terms, as many of the authors do in relation to geography, archaeological finds and localities and time, as done by for example Lemm in Chapter 13.

At first glance, it seems that the early Danish kingdoms were weaker, more volatile, than in the south but also peripatetic, maybe compatible to changing patterns of power of warlords in Afghanistan or Hawaii.⁵ Under these circumstances the function of the sites also changed over time.

Background

The project Royal Landscape and Power came about when Vejle Museum undertook a rescue excavation in 2006 and came across a very similar-looking hall to the ones then known in Lejre⁶ and Tissø⁷ in Zealand. As this was the first in Jutland of its type, we thought it appropriate to get a better understanding of the nature and dates around this phenomenon of second-generation central places. The project has from 2016 when the first research excavations started collected numerous C-14 dates and made stratigraphical observations combined with dendrodates that has not been possible to the same extent on other earlier excavations in Lejre and Tissø. Therefore, the general house chronology without many fixed dates have been a recurring problem. Due to extensive development in the area, we were also lucky to combine rescue excavations in the area and the surroundings, making it much more profitable in terms of data quantity and extent of research areas, than previously expected. The fact that the C-14 dates from Erritsø now exceed all other compatible sites in quantity makes it possible also to make Bayesian modulation on the high-resolution settlement history of the location, as three papers in this volume will reveal (Chapters 16, 17 and 18).⁸ It is now possible to trace

4 Ravn 2018

5 Bath, 2008; Ravn 2018; See also Graeber and Wengrow 2021, 4. See also Skre 2020

6 Christensen 2015

7 Jørgensen 2001

8 C-14 dates from a recent excavation in 2023 have not yet been fully processed, but dendrochronology suggest that too, as also the typology of houses do, (see also Ravn and Juel this volume and Lyngkjær Jensen this volume).

the Erritsø halls back to at least the early 8th century, and by proxy maybe even earlier back to the 7th century. What is perhaps more surprising is that the location also seems to continue when Jelling appears in the 10th century, suggesting that the two sites were contemporary, at least some of the time. Whether it can explain ‘the missing link’ in habitation history in the Jelling area proper from AD 550–900 is discussed elsewhere (Chapter 6) but could offer one element of an explanation. What this implicates in terms of the wider history and position among the emerging ringforts in the late 10th century, supposedly for the purposes of a national defence, remains to be deciphered. We shall here focus mainly on the so-called second-generation central places in Scandinavia and Northern Europe as a phenomenon, and leaving the 10th century for a later elaboration by the contributors, with the exception of Chapter 5.

The papers in this volume were first presented in 2021 in a workshop in *Kongernes Jelling*, at the Royal Viking seat of Jelling (Denmark) in-between two waves of COVID. The aim was to discuss the advent of aristocratic and possible royal sites in the late Iron Age and Viking Age. It so far concludes the research project ‘*Royal Power and Landscape*’, a diachronic research project by Vejle Museums together with the National Museum, initiated already back in 2016. The approach we have taken is an international and contextualised approach, where both place name evidence, archaeological evidence, metal detecting as well as landscape analyses in various regions of Northern Europe have been included, an approach that has developed out of a number of seminal projects in Scandinavia and abroad since the 1990s.⁹

Research question

The main research question of the project was: was there a royal seat nearby Jelling before, during or after the advent of Jelling in the middle of the 10th century; and if so, what characterised it? (See also Chapter 5). In other words, did Jelling rise in importance when Erritsø, only 30 km to the south-east, faded out, before Jelling was established in the middle of Jutland? Because according to written sources and several archaeological finds in Zealand, such as Lejre and Tissø, there certainly were aristocratic places and kings long before Jelling.¹⁰ Therefore, in order to solve the riddle as to why Jelling suddenly appeared, and as the specific investigations from the Jelling Project have come to a close, the results from it paving the way for this project, it became pertinent to look into the meaning and content of aristocracy in the greater region of South Jutland and Denmark.¹¹ One take-away from the workshop is that the term royal seat needs to be expanded, to include aspects of wealth, religion and assembly sites (especially in Norway, Sweden and England) production of some items, Grubenhäuser, war and kings (England and Denmark). But it is also obvious that geographical differences between Norway, Denmark, Sweden and England do matter, as does the exposed military posi-

9 E.g., Fabech & Ringtved eds. 1999

10 E.g., Christensen 2015

11 Pedersen, Dengsø Jessen & Holst eds. 2023

tion of Erritsø in Jutland in times of war, in comparison to the less defended sites of Tissø and Lejre in Zealand.

Methodological approach

We chose to take a broader perspective inviting scholars from Denmark, Britain, Sweden, Norway, and Germany into the discussion. This revealed regional similarities, but also where there were differences (Chapters 8, 9, 11). Comparisons with the British find patterns, one firstly discovers that the English ‘Great Hall Complexes’ appear earlier and fade out earlier, but that the organization and use of such royal places are compatible, despite a different history in the region (Chapter 7). It is striking and confirms my hypothesis that the Anglo-Saxon analogy for the development of Scandinavia remains a useful tool to work with, whilst it is also important to look for differences.

This anthology tries to do so, looking for similarities and explain the differences. One must admit that some of the same aspects regarding royal estates, conspicuous consumption, workshops and numerous sunken featured buildings (here called Grubenhäuser) seem to appear earlier in Britain (except for the Grubenhäuser) and end earlier there too (see also chapter 18).¹² Also, first generation central places or low-density urban sites, in for example Gudme and metal rich sites in Zealand, still remain a riddle to be explored further (chapter 2 and chapter 4), with parallels to be found. However thus far, Gudme seems to distinguish itself as having been connected to more extensive, supra-regional trade routes, more than the so-called second-generation central places that seem to contain more luxury production and exchange at a more local scale, related to the needs of the particular elite and its conspicuous consumption and tribute collection.¹³ In any respect none of them can be referred to as urban centres, which incidentally also involved international trade (see also Chapter 3 and 11), and the relationships between such phenomena and towns remain somewhat unclear (see however Chapters 3 and 11). Possibly the function of many of the second-generation sites may be summarized as follows by the Stanford historian Ian Morris:

By 650, though, markets were putting new options on the table. Instead of just turning up and eating everything, a king or lord could install an agent on his farm, confiscate the lion’s share of its output and then take his cut to Norwich or some similar market to swap for more durable goods. Continental merchants wanted food and drink (and slaves) to sell in the cities back home; Anglo-Saxon elites wanted Continental ornaments, clothes, and weapons to distinguish themselves from their poorer peers. Everybody gained, except the slaves.¹⁴

12 As arose during the workshop the term ‘pit-house’ often used by Danish archaeologists does not make sense in English.

13 Jørgensen 2001.

14 Morris 2022, 164

If one accepts this highly likely analogy and exchanges Norwich with Ribe, or more likely Hedeby, and Anglo-Saxons with Danes, and the 7th century with the 8th and 9th centuries in Denmark, it is most likely that the same happened here.

Terminologies

It is now 10 years since the seminal volume *Wealth and Complexity* was published.¹⁵ Relevant to this volume is that it summed up a number of models for understanding centrality and central places in Scandinavia in the late Iron Age, a period that is as relevant to understand as the Viking Age proper.¹⁶ Here, it was pointed out that the geographical models presented by Walter Christaller did not apply well to the Scandinavian and Northern European past reality (see also Chapter 7). Neither of the continental models were relevant, as they are intertwined with the early towns that were not present in large numbers in the late Iron Age and Early Viking Age in Scandinavia. This claim has only been substantiated during the last 10 years of extensive excavations and research in Scandinavia, where numerous sites and metal detector finds have changed the picture of what constitutes an important site in general and an elite site in particular.¹⁷ And as it is revealed in this volume, rich metal finds do not necessarily comprise the only good indication for a central place, let alone an elite site *per se*, as the find record currently is so extensive that we need to redefine the importance of such sites (For more on this see Chapter 2 and 7). In contrast we need to explore the usefulness of different terminologies, among others defined in the *Wealth and Complexity* volume, and get a better understanding of what the term aristocratic sites holds, archaeologically and historically, in general in Northern Europe and specifically at the Erritsø site, which is the focus of this volume in particular.

Karen Høilund Nielsen has, drawing from Harrison, distinguished between **centripetal** and **centrifugal** sites, and the question is whether these two terminologies are applicable to current data.¹⁸ Before we explore that, the definitions presented are as follows. Centripetal sites “... outline[s] functions of controlling a superregional area. Such sites constitute: “... rituals, solution of judicial disputes, marriage, exchange of livestock and ‘economic specialities’ ... and defence of the region.”¹⁹ They should also: “have a catchment area and service the local population” and ... “be evenly spread relative to the general pattern of settlement;”²⁰ This is not the case for centrifugal sites which within a network: “are supra-regional and related to inter-regional contacts and

15 Stidsing, Høilund Nielsen & Fiedel 2014

16 For a historical review of the concepts see Høilund Nielsen 2014, 11.

17 See also Fabech and Ringtved eds., 2000.

18 Harrison 1997, 25

19 Wolf 1966, 40

20 Høilund Nielsen 2014, 23

are therefore not centres in a regional perspective, but nodes in a supra-regional network (centrifugal centres).”²¹

By challenging the recent results of the papers present in this volume with these two definitions, there seem to be some empirical facts that are defying a rigid archaeological definition of aristocratic sites. There also seems to be new elements we need to add to the equation to understand this phenomenon. But as a working hypothesis the Erritsø site seems more like a centripetal site than a centrifugal site, in that we suggest that it served an interregional function where the king could visit on occasions in order to keep an unstable kingdom with centrifugal tendencies together, by ruling and performing conspicuous rituals and collecting tribute, elements the finds seem to support. In that perspective it almost equals the term defined here by Runge as “space” (Chapter 3). An important factor as also identified by Runge is that the convergence of several transport routes is essential for all the sites, as also seen at Lisbjerg further north²². It does not seem that a king was present all the time, judging from the few metal finds and the lack of an extensive array of craft production, contrary to for example at Gudme-Lundeborg, a first generation central place, where supra-regional trade seemed to play a more significant role (Chapter 4).

The itinerant king's road to Ribe and/or Hedeby?

Therefore, I suggest the contention that as an explanation for those phenomena, we consider the perspective of a peripatetic kingdom; that this was an institution in operation already in the 7th and 8th century, perhaps earlier, as indeed Ian Wood suggests among the Franks in the 5th and 6th centuries²³ and Rosamund McKitterick does for the Carolingians, in the 9th century.²⁴ Also Anne Pedersen suggests this for the 10th century in Jelling in this volume (Chapter 5). This sort of institution with a leader who was present, as any modern leader knows, was necessary in both Danish and European kingdoms up until the 17th century²⁵, when an administration could take over: A phenomenon seen in compatible societies around the world such as Hawaii and among the Incas.²⁶

Taking this perspective, the recently found site at Munkebo (Chapter 10) and possibly Fæsted/Harreby make better sense.²⁷ They may be stops on the way. Now we only need to find the “in-between-sites” that may have been reached by the peripatetic king within one day, considering a day's ride to be approximately 20-30 km, as Andersen does in

21 Hoiland Nielsen 2014, 23

22 Jeppesen 2005

23 Wood 1994, 65

24 McKitterick 2008, 178 discusses this and suggests that it is problematic but likely present from the reign of Louis the Pious.

25 Porsmose 2023

26 For Hawaiians see Ravn 2018; for Incas see Schjellerup 2021.

27 Although they need more publication and datings of the hall, see Grundvad & Albris 2020.

this book (Chapter 12).²⁸ In this respect, if the king was not going to Jelling, 30 km to the northwest, the king could travel to Almind, some 20 km to the west, which is seen as a Thing place by some place name scholars, and there next further on to Dollerup, some 20 km further to the southwest, the latter incidentally known all the way back into the Roman Iron Age for its rich chiefly grave.²⁹ They could both be stops on the way to Fæsted/ Harreby, further 30 km to the west along the hypothesized great Faris forest and ultimately making way to Ribe or Hedeby.³⁰ Future research and detailed landscape analyses assessing the routes may substantiate this hypothesis.

This hypothesis of a peripatetic kingdom would reconcile two opposing traditions in Danish Viking Age scholarship, the one suggesting that Denmark was not united before the 10th century³¹ an analogy which looks very much towards the Anglo-Saxon, diversified internally competing kingdoms, and others that suggest that Denmark was a united realm already back in the 6th-7th century, an analogy that looks very much towards the Frankish societal development and possibly also is influenced by a teleological, national romantic perspective.³² With a peripatetic kingdom it was both and neither, depending on time and place.

In order to explore this hypothesis, we will in future studies need to focus on whether there was habitation all year in the Erritsø locality, or whether the site functioned as a seasonal site, when the court of up to 300 persons potentially arrived on occasions.³³ The hypothesis that there were peripatetic kings that early would furthermore explain that despite almost identical halls on Zealand and in Erritsø, grubenhäuser and workshop areas and despite great effort, we find fewer metal finds in Erritsø and also only selected evidence of production³⁴. A compatible case is presented from a mid-Swedish area (Chapter 11). We have in Erritsø indications of iron- and textile production only, but no clear evidence of other sorts of specialised craft production. It simply does not seem that the itinerant kings would stay very long here, only as long as goods could be collected to sell on in either contemporary Ribe or Hedeby, and until other ritual and juridical functions were taken care of, as the overrepresentation of barley for ritual ale seem to suggest was important.³⁵ It would thus explain difference in intensity of metal finds in contemporary Lejre and Tissø with the Erritsø site.

28 Grundvad & Albris 2020

29 Hartvig & Sørensen 2021. For Iron Age Dollerup, see Mikkelsen and Davidson 1989, 183.

30 Grundvad & Albris 2020, 20

31 Sawyer & Olsen 1988; Holst 2014

32 Näsman 2006. See also Skre 2020

33 Here, I refer to a Carlsberg funded project we participate in, with exactly that focus by Dr. Sarah Croix, Aarhus University.

34 By the look at the metals in Erritsø it also seems the metal finds are less well-preserved.

35 Henriksen and Stevnsvig 2020, 4. Indeed one charred barley seed with a sprout suggesting production of ale was located at the site.