The Emerge of Early Towns in Viking Age Scandinavia

While in continental Europe ‘proto urban settlements’ already existed for hundreds of years as a legacy of the Roman Empire, in the remote are of Scandinavia proto-urbanism only started in the period that is known as the Viking Age. The reasons for Scandinavian towns to suddenly arise in a relatively short period of time has been the subject of scholarly debate for many years and is part of a bigger discussion concerning the so called ‘emporia’, as which the sites connected to craft and long-distance trade in early medieval northern Europe are known since Richard Hodges’ book “Dark Age Economics”. In this article I will firstly discuss the debate concerning the origin of ‘urban’ settlements in Scandinavia, and secondly a couple of examples of Viking Age towns.

Keyword: Viking Age, Scandinavia, urbanisation

Sjoerd van Riel
Lund University
sjoerd-14@live.nl

Introducing the concepts of town and urbanisation

When discussing towns, one first needs to determine what a town defines. Generally, in archaeology we are speaking about a town when its inhabitants are not producing their own food but undertake non-agrarian activities and depend on the surrounding rural population for their food. They focus on crafting and trading, and the towns itself is the focus point for the surrounding area where people come together to acquire objects and goods that are produced or traded in the town. Furthermore, towns are permanently inhabited by a separate community, in the contrary to the many seasonal trading markets that existed throughout the Viking Age.\(^1\) Scholars have proposed a range of additional characteristics that are typical for towns, such as defences, a mint, planned street system, diversified economic base, social differentiation, complex religious organization and a judicial centre. However, towns in different parts of Europe have been created under very different circumstances and therefore we cannot use these characteristics as fixed criteria, but only as guidelines of what to look for when trying to identify early medieval towns.\(^2\) The very terms ‘town’ and ‘urbanisation’ themselves are debatable, since they are loaded with preconceptions and may be too much associated with phenomena which occurred only later in

---

\(^1\) Skre, 2012, p. 84,87

\(^2\) Schofield & Steuer, 2007, p. 111
the medieval period and were of a significant different nature from the events in the early Viking Age. However, in this paper I will continue using the terms ‘town’ and ‘urbanisation’ because they are still so widely used in academic literature and debates.

**Pre-town trading settlements and the origin of towns**

Let us first shortly examine what kind of settlements existed before towns came up in Scandinavia. Trade and exchange of goods are phenomena that originated long before the Viking Age, but the circumstances in which they occurred differed for periods and regions. In Scandinavia, early medieval towns did not naturally evolve from the Roman settlements as in continental Europe, since Scandinavia was never incorporated in the Roman Empire. Instead, trade before the Viking Age took place in seasonal markets. These markets sometimes had buildings like sunken huts, but they were designed mostly as workshops and not as permanent living areas. The markets were used in certain periods of the year. Some scholars suggest that winter was the favourable time since in that period sledding over the frozen lakes using bone skates allowed for quicker transportation than in summer, while others think that summer would be better because of easier sailing conditions.

In addition to the non-permanent character, another characteristic that puts these markets in a different category than the later towns is the absence of plot-division. However, the spatial organisation within the markets was not completely random. In some of the markets, craft-production took place in a specific area, while another area was probably reserved for the trading of finished products. A third difference between the seasonal markets and the towns is the absence of extensive import of goods such as raw materials, wine or pottery, and the absence of the use of silver as currency at the markets. Even though imported goods can be found at the markets, these are often interpreted as ‘prestige goods’, and not as commercial trading goods; mostly coming from the Roman Empire in the first centuries AD and used in the gift-exchange of local rulers.

---

3 Sindbæk, 2007, p. 129
4 Skre, 2007, pp. 447,453; Skre, 2012, p. 87
5 Clarke & Ambrosiani, 1991, p. 133
6 Skre, 2007, p. 447
7 Skre, 2007, p. 454
8 Skre, 2007, p. 455; 2012, p. 87
The earliest towns in Scandinavia emerged in the eighth century AD. First Birka in modern day Sweden (second half of the eighth century), then Ribe and Hedeby in Denmark (late eighth and early ninth century) and Kaupang in Norway (ca. 800). After about two centuries without any new towns emerging, a second wave of towns arose around AD 1000, with Sigtuna and Lund in modern day Sweden, Åhus and Roskilde in Denmark and Oslo and Trondheim in Norway. Striking is the discontinuity between these two waves of town emerging. The former four towns all disappear in the ninth and tenth century. The reasons for this have been extensively debated. Proposed explanations include decreasing harbour and sailing conditions, but these are not fully satisfying.

The towns in the two different phases of the Viking Age arose in different circumstances. Whereas the early Viking Age towns were supervised or controlled by more or less local rulers who depended on personal ties and charisma to stabilize their dominion, the towns created in the late Viking Age were deliberate institutions set up by the first kings of the three Scandinavian kingdoms; Sweden, Denmark and Norway. This change of reign went hand in hand with a change in religion and institutionalised power. The Christian church worked closely together with the new kings and it is therefore no coincidence that many of the newly created towns can be seen not only as successors, but even as (religious) replacements of their neighbouring ‘central places’ of the early Viking Age, as is the case with for example Lejre – Roskilde and Uppåkra – Lund.

In the remaining part of this paper, I will not go in depth on the debate about the later Viking Age towns, but instead discuss the debate and problems regarding the nature and complications of the earliest Viking towns.

On the function of towns
One of the main questions is how these early Viking towns arose. Did they naturally develop from an existing place where people gathered, or were they supervised or even completely set up by someone? The archaeological and historical evidence suggests the latter. Out of the four early Viking Age towns, only Ribe seems to have evolved from a seasonal market,

9 Skre, 2012, pp. 84-85
10 Skre, 2012, p. 85
11 Skre, 2012, p. 86
12 Skre, 2012, p. 86
the other three have been founded on virgin ground.13 This argument of the towns as newly founded institutions is at odds with the early standpoint of Richard Hodges (1982), who divided his emporia in several subtypes, in which ‘type A’ emporia such as Helgö were seasonal predecessors for ‘type B’ emporia such as Birka.14 This point of view has then been severely criticized,15 one of the arguments being that the continuity between emporias of type A and B as Hodges saw it was not correct since, as discussed before, only Ribe seems to have evolved from a seasonal market. What most scholars agree on, however, is that all of the new towns or emporia have some kind of connection with royal power, e.g. in the form of minting (Ribe) or the presence of a royal estate as in Birka or Kaupang.16 The regular plots and street plans also point towards an organized construction of the towns.17 According to Hodges 14, a possible explanation for the sudden emerge of institutionalised towns all over northern Europe is the engagement of kings, who founded the new trade centres or emporia in order to stay in control over the traded goods. By creating a defined and controllable trading area, the kings could supervise the traded (‘prestige’) goods, without losing them to foreign merchants.18 The clearest example of the Scandinavian kings as active agents in founding towns is Hedeby in Denmark. According to the Royal Frankish Annals, King Godfred of Denmark came with his fleet in 808 and sacked the Slavonic trading centre of Reric. He escorted all the merchants to a place called Sliesthorp, which is associated with the newly founded town of Hedeby.19 This town was founded at the southern border of the Danish kingdom. One of the reasons for this might be that these border areas were the places which had the best potential to become popular trading places because of their position on the political, economic and cultural border, which could attract foreign merchants as well as Danish ones.20

There are several examples of flourishing trading towns in border areas, such as Ribe which was located at the border between the Danish and the Frisian areas. The positioning

13 Skre, 2012, p. 87
14 Hodges, 1982, pp. 50-52
15 e.g. Clarke & Ambrosiani, 1991, p. 71; Skre, 2008, p. 335
16 Skre, 2012, p. 87-88
17 Skre, 2012, p. 89
18 Hodges, 1982, p. 54
19 Skre, 2007, p. 458
20 Skre, 2007, p. 459
of the new emporias in border areas seems to have been a general trend, not only in Scandinavia but also in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and the Frankish empire. In this way, rulers could supervise the safety in these trading ports from a royal residence, and at the same time have a personal eye on events happening and people entering their kingdoms. This period could mark a change in the Scandinavian concept of lordship from a rather socially defined lordship to a territorial one. Instead of an influential sphere centred around an aristocratic residence and influence through alliances and military presence, lordship was now territorially defined with physical borders, the emporia being one of the physical markers of these borders.

However, not all scholars agree on the degree of influence from the kings. Søren Sindbæk stresses the importance of the interdependence of the traders rather than a coercive power concerning the protection of peace in trading centres. Furthermore, he argues that the location of the emporias, or ‘nodal points’ as he calls them, at border areas are more a consequence of favourable natural and geographical locations, e.g. places where a topographical barrier forces the break of traffic, a trans-shipment and maybe a temporary storage of the goods. Therefore, the choice of the sites could be as much a consequence of the interests of travelling merchants and the conditions of the natural geography as it was the consequence of the ambition and interference of a ruler. I think the truth lies somewhere in the middle of these standpoints. There is enough evidence from coins, written and archaeological sources that rulers influenced and probably even supervised the foundation of new towns, but I believe that these rulers did not possess enough power to position a town in a certain location solely based on their own interests. I think the power of commerce and the influence of traders and craftsmen was already too big for that, after all it was the presence of these merchants and artisans on which the success of a town as a centre of trade depended in the end.

Next to a commercial character, the early Viking Age towns also seem to have had a cult function. One reason for this might be that a sacred character, together with military

---

21 Skre, 2007, p. 460
22 Skre, 2007, p. 461
23 Sindbæk, 2007, p. 128
24 Sindbæk, 2007, pp. 128-129
presence, helped secure the peaceful environment that is needed to attract merchants.\textsuperscript{25} This could also be one of the reasons for early churches being constructed in these trading towns, such as the ones in Ribe and Hedeby in the mid 850’s. The presence of a Christian community, however small, resulted in the attraction of more Christian Frankish merchants coming from Dorestad and other major Frankish emporias, who brought with them commodities that were much wanted in the northern world, such as wine from the Rhineland area.\textsuperscript{26}

**Conclusion and some problems explained**

The origin of towns in Scandinavia is a much debated subject. First of all, we have question if we can use the terms ‘town’ and ‘urban’ to describe Viking Age settlements, and prevent that the terminology we use pushes us towards preconceptions which are connected to these terms. Secondly, there are many questions regarding Viking Age towns that remain open for debate. Most of the discussion focusses on the degree of influence practiced by the rulers of the time. Where they the active agents that some scholars suggest, or were they just trying to influence an ongoing development as much as they could? As I already explained earlier in this essay, I think the answer to this question lies somewhere in the middle.

Another problem we are facing has to do with one of the main sources used for this debate: archaeological excavations. Evidence coming from this source is per definition very fragmentary. Only a very small percentage of past society can be excavated and only a very small percentage of the excavated area is actually preserved. Many materials that could be of importance for the debate such as textiles, wood and other organic material usually leave very little traces in the archaeological record. This tends to lead scholars to draw conclusions which might be incomplete, since they are based on very fragmented evidence. However, if the level of fragmentation of the evidence is taken into account in the questions that we ask, and if we combine evidence coming from multiple disciplines such as archaeology, geology, history and numismatics, we can come to a greater understanding of how these early Viking towns came into existence and what influenced their geographic positioning.

\textsuperscript{25} Skre, 2007, p. 451-452
\textsuperscript{26} Skre, 2007, p. 462
**References**


