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1 Introduction

The Viking Age – traditionally framed by the historic raid on the monastery at Lindisfarne in Northumbria in 793 and the battles of Stamford Bridge and Hastings in 1066, and nowadays archaeologically set to c.750–1050 – was an era of major societal changes in Scandinavia that has fascinated generations of scholars and laypeople. This sweepingly transformative period led to the integration of this formerly pagan periphery of the European North into occidental Europe, as these societies became unified Christian kingdoms. One of the most central fields to Viking-age archaeology – alongside research problems relating to the Christianisation of Scandinavia and the intertwined processes of state formation, or more specifically the development 'From Tribe to State' (Mortensen & Rasmussen 1991) – is the initial and unprecedented dawn of urbanisation in Scandinavia, which was distinctly different from the archetypes of ancient towns of the former Roman Empire. As novel centres of trade and crafts, these emerging Viking-age towns were inseparably linked to the spheres of economy, maritime connectivity, and patronage. However, despite some significant scholarly attention in Scandinavia itself, only four such sites have been recognised as proper Viking-age towns, namely Hedeby in northern Germany, Ribe in Denmark, Kaupang in Norway and Birka in Sweden (see Plates I–IV). Since the end of the nineteenth century, these four sites, however, have attracted continuous scholarly attention, due to their extraordinary archaeological records. It is noteworthy that two of them, Birka (in 1993) and Hedeby (in 2018), have become UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Nowadays, academic publications dealing with these urban sites – describing artefact groups and building features from various excavations – fill metres of shelf space, which makes the subject matter increasingly hard to grasp. Consequently, there are but a few

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comprehensive publications on the Viking-age urban phenomenon (e.g. Hodges 1982; Clarke & Ambrosiani 1991).

In the past, and indeed for decades, significant effort has gone into defining the nature of the Viking-age urban phenomenon as observed by archaeologists, since it did not quite fit any historical definition corresponding to the origins of medieval towns. Basically, the question was *what* constituted the Viking-age towns and how to describe them appropriately, as well as the need to differentiate them from the historically defined 'proper' European medieval towns. The growing understanding of Viking-age towns, as a chronologically and/or spatially discontinuous phenomenon, underlined the importance of this discussion even further. It is in the nature of things that this approach remained mostly descriptive. Defining what made these towns distinct from others depended on the ability to recognise these first Scandinavian expressions of urbanism as towns in their own right, typical of their era and setting (cf. Reynolds 1992). The resolution of this long debate – leading to the recognition of the phenomenon – can be linked to a growing self-esteem in archaeology as a discipline. Another important part of archaeological research has always been distribution maps for individual artefact groups, which can visualise how products and goods spread, thus establishing patterns of artefact provenance and ultimately providing clues for trade networks and communication. More recently, the digital revolution and models borrowed from network theory have made it easier to identify multiple artefact groups that have been found in more than one place, thus expressing previously hard to establish affiliations as scale-free networks in the shape of nodal points (or hubs) and ties (or links) within trading arenas such as the Baltic Sea. While this approach certainly allows for a deeper understanding of the interconnectivity of Viking-age towns as 'Network Cities' (Hohenberg & Lees 1996) – or rather network towns – that is, as the primary hubs in a web of hierarchically interrelated sites (serving as stepping stones for long-distance trade), it also clearly addresses the problem of *how* these Viking-age centres for trade and craft operated economically. Another recent and important trend in Viking-age urban

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studies – made possible by an ever-growing body of data – is to abandon the presumptions that these Viking-age towns were stable and almost 'monolithic' entities, whose 'town maps' needed to be explored and subsequently described meticulously. By recognising the chronological depth of their lifespans – up to two and a half centuries – the focus has instead shifted to urban dynamics and to the study of their presumably changing nature in specific, highly resolved time slices.

Only a holistic approach to an enormous, ever-increasing body of data – diligently gathered since the beginnings of archaeology as a scientific discipline – would allow for a deeper understanding of the research subject. Such an approach would involve not only Viking-age towns themselves but the entire Viking world – that is, the Scandinavian homelands and the so-called Viking diaspora (the results of Scandinavian expansion through *landnám* (ON; 'settlement of unoccupied land') and conquest), as well as contemporary conditions in early medieval Europe from Anglo-Saxon England through the Carolingian Empire and on to Byzantium. However, it would enable us to finally approach the inner core of the research problem, which almost resembles the concentric circles of some reversed golden circle model: instead of trying to define the *result* of Viking-age urbanisation (*the what*) as in previous efforts, or else by mapping the *process* of interconnectivity and economic networks of 'network towns' (*the how*) as elaborate follow-up studies, today we might – almost without recognising it – have reached the point to finally address the central question of *why* Viking-age towns emerged. In fact, instead of a mere 'trade and production' as some commonplace answer, we must truly start to ask about the very *purpose* of an unprecedented and suddenly emerging urbanisation in the Scandinavian periphery during the transformation period we call the Viking Age. Through *Towns and Commerce in Viking-Age Scandinavia*, the author attempts such an approach to this core question of *why* Viking-age towns and hence the very *purpose* of Viking-age urbanisation.

Naturally, the focus of any study on Viking-age towns in the Scandinavian heartlands must revolve around Hedeby, Ribe, Kaupang

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and Birka. Out of these four, Hedeby, on the border between Scandinavia and Continental Europe, by far developed into the largest urban entity. Protected by semi-circular ramparts, Hedeby's settlement area covered 27 ha, while the second largest, Birka, only covered 13 ha. Both sites are briefly mentioned in written sources, mainly in Rimbert's *Life of Ansgar* and Adam of Bremen's *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*. While Hedeby, Kaupang and Birka do not display any noteworthy signs of settlement after the Viking Age, Ribe is still an existing picturesque town. Later activity, or the lack thereof, is visible in how well artefacts have survived and in how accessible the sites are for archaeological investigations. At Ribe, for a long time only the pre- and early Viking-age 'marketplace' from c.700–850 was archaeologically known, yet not 'Ansgar's Ribe' from the middle Viking Age as suggested by the written sources. Meanwhile, recent excavations have managed to fill this knowledge gap. However, by that time Ribe's influence seems to have been surpassed by Hedeby. Kaupang, which is rarely mentioned in the written sources at all, has been exposed to severe bioturbation, heavily affecting the site's preservation conditions. In Birka, the preservation of organic materials has suffered due to dramatic post-Viking-age regression and isostatic rebound of about 5 metres. However, here it is particularly about 1,100 burials, excavated in the late nineteenth century – out of around 3,000 interments altogether on the whole island of Björkö – that contribute to its fame in the scientific community. Modern excavations in the fortified settlement area only started in the 1990s. In Hedeby, in contrast to Birka, a gentle marine transgression of the water level of some 0.8 metres ensured superb preservation conditions for waterlogged wood, allowing for archaeological excavations where some 30 centimetres of wooden walls were still preserved. Finally, while both Birka and Kaupang ceased to exist in the third quarter of the tenth century, Hedeby seems to have persisted until 1066. Even though the processes of transformation are still under debate, in the late Viking Age Birka seems to have been replaced by Sigtuna and Hedeby eventually by medieval Slesvig. Lastly, modern

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history has also played its part in the understanding of these sites: as a result of the Second Schleswig War in 1864, the duchy of Slesvig – previously a Danish fiefdom – was initially completely integrated into Prussia and eventually split so that its southern part, including Hedeby, became German. Prior to the Second World War, Hedeby researchers had willingly been an important part of the SS *Ahnenerbe* ('ancestral heritage') research. For decades after the war, this meant that research that had dealt with Hedeby, as well as the scholars who were involved with it, was ignored, in both Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon contexts. It was not until 2005 that Hedeby gained official recognition and representation at the Viking Congress, initially as part of the Danish delegation and later as representatives of the federal state of Schleswig-Holstein. This study will take into account these very different points of departure, and although all four Viking-age towns will be examined, the emphasis will be placed on Hedeby and Birka. To understand the otherness of Viking-age towns, and eventually explain their purpose, as well as the reasons for their sudden emergence in the North, it would be too short-sighted to focus solely on the early urban centres themselves in order to capture the very core of this discontinuous phenomenon that preceded later expressions of high medieval towns. Instead, it needs nothing less than a truly holistic approach. Ideally, this would involve a thorough examination of the societal framework of the circumjacent traditional rural world, mirrored in a supra-regional comparison with Anglo-Saxon England, Continental Europe and Byzantium. It would also require an inclusion of the sparse but no less important information from chronicles and legal texts describing either the conditions in Scandinavia itself or procedures from elsewhere, manifesting similar frameworks that, due to intensified contacts, might have served as models for the Scandinavian conditions. Although this may sound like a vast research undertaking, it is indeed achievable. Actually, most of the pieces required for solving this scientific jigsaw puzzle have been at least partly known and debated for quite some time. With this revision, it is anticipated that their renewed composition will

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create a comprehensive picture of the earliest stage of urbanisation in Northern Europe. The suggested implementation of the concept of 'special economic zones' to this debate (Kalmring 2016a) may contribute to a more profound understanding of the societal value of these very distinct sites and ultimately answer the pivotal question why and for what purpose did Viking-age towns emerge at this specific point in time.

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2 The Viking-Age Town

Context and Academic Debate

One of the primary proto-urban centres of the early medieval world in Northern Europe was without a doubt Hedeby. Hedeby was situated on the border between Scandinavia and Continental Europe, connecting the North Sea with the Baltic Sea by a portage. Its success as a trading hub is inseparably connected to the destruction of the *emporium* Reric – situated in an area controlled by the West Slavic Obotrites – by the Danish king Godfred in 808 (Tummuscheit 2003). In order to control and tax the ongoing trade, Reric's merchants were relocated to Hedeby. However, while in the contemporary historical sources Reric was addressed as an *emporium*, Hedeby was rather referred to as a *portus* (Kalmring 2010a: 42–7). Hedeby's continental denomination *Sliaswīk*, though, includes the element -wic, derived from the Latin *vicus* (Laur 1992: 575). It is not until the report of its destruction in 1066 (Adam of Bremen book 3, chap. 50, scholium 81) and in later sources (cf. Helmold of Bosau, c.1167) that Hedeby is referred to as a *civitas*. Hedeby's counterpart Birka was situated on Björkö in Lake Mälaren, a small island situated not only in the border area between Uppland and Södermanland but also at the southern point of the borders between the provinces (OSwd. *Hundari*; cf. OEng. *Hundred*) Attundaland, Tiundaland and Fjärdhundraland of Uppland. In terms of transport geography, it was favourably situated along the waterway *Fyrisleden* (Ambrosiani 1957), leading from the Baltic Sea via Södertälje and Birka to Gamla Uppsala and Vendel. Birka is referred to as both a *portus* and a *vicus* in contemporary written sources but also as a *civitas*, an *urbs* and even an *oppidum* (Mohr 2005: 98–101; for discussion, see Kalmring 2014/15: 283). The descriptions of both of the sites characterised by these terms are indeed quite similar: Hedeby is described as a Danish port where 'merchants from all parts [of the world] congregated' and the

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attendance of Frisians and Saxons from Dorestad, Hamburg and Bremen guaranteed that 'an abundance of goods converged there' (Rimbert chap. 24).[1] According to Rimbert (chap. 20), Birka was also frequented by Frisians, complementing Adam of Bremen's (book 1, chap. 60) description of visits by Danes, Norwegians, Slavs, Sambians and 'Scythians' (see Chapter 8, Note 2). Rimbert (chap. 19) also stated that it 'contained many rich merchants and a large amount of goods and money'. What constituted these two almost similarly ascribed Viking-age towns, and what were their roles in the vast communication and trade network sometimes described as the 'Northern Arc' (McCormick 2001: 562–4, 606–12, map 20.4), which stretched from Western Europe to Central Asia? What made it possible for these towns to be able to rise above their regional settings and attract foreign merchants from afar, resulting in abundance and significant wealth? What was the spark that led to the first urban entities emerging so far beyond the borders of the Roman world? Why does the late Iron Age in Scandinavia witness the emergence of Viking-age towns at this specific point in time?

Both sites, Hedeby and Birka, possessed comparable geographically accessible and advantageous locations near borders – that is, where it was easy for people and goods to converge – making them attractive sites for visiting merchants and resulting in considerable economic prosperity. As described in the previous paragraph, there were even similarities in the way they were denoted in contemporary written sources. But can the latter provide further insights into the closer nature of these sites? The labels used in the continental sources for describing such trade sites have been the subject of considerable academic discussion, closely linked to the vast research field that deals with 'early stages of the European town' and urbanisation in Central and Northern Europe in general. Apart from perhaps the Scandinavian Christianisation process, there is hardly any other field of early medieval archaeology and Viking-age studies that has been debated as intensely and with so much controversy. Hence, it is

[1] ... *et hac occasione facultas totius boni inibi exuberaret*. The English translation by Robinson is misleading here.

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no coincidence that there is still no generally accepted and straightforward interpretation. This chapter offers a general orientation of the bewildering discussion about the terminology and associated concepts that have been put forward in order to capture – in distinction to the definitions formulated by historians – the specific nature of this Viking-age urbanisation on the eve of the classical medieval town: on the one hand, through the initial attempt to find a suitable definition along with a corresponding conceptual denomination (*the what*; the focus on the result) and, on the other hand, through the application of central place and network theories that focus on the interconnectivity of Viking-age towns as ports for maritime trade and urban production (*the how?*; the focus on the process). By describing and defining these theoretical processes and concepts, as well as their association to a number of specific features of Viking urbanisation, urbanism and urbanity,[2] as a point of departure this compilation at the same time makes it possible for readers to identify the most prominent features of the Viking-age town.

2.1 'SEEHANDELSPLÄTZE', PROTO-TOWNS, EMPORIA AND VIKING-AGE TOWNS

The concept of *Seehandelsplätze* ('maritime trading places') was developed by Jankuhn (1958) as a way of recognising maritime trading sites along the coasts of the North and Baltic Seas as a separate group and different from the early medieval *vici*, which occurred inland. He characterised the *Seehandelsplätze* through their connection to maritime trade and their roles in long-distance trade networks, as well as by their appearance in contemporary written sources and their abandonment during the tenth century, when most of them were replaced by new towns (cf. Steuer 2005). Following the ideas of Polanyi (1963), these types of sites are also subsumed under what is today the somewhat outdated term 'ports of trade', which once more stresses their

[2] For a discussion of the interrelated concepts of urbanisation (process), urbanism (urban lifestyle) and urbanity (urban practices), see Kjellberg (2021: 36–8, 60–1, 252–3 figs. 2.11, 12.1).

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maritime component. His concept describes trading sites that already had some sort of administrative organisation of trade by an authority in societies that had not yet developed markets. Moreover, these sites were usually located on borders between different political and economic entities, where they could exist without belonging directly to a specific territory. Thus they were able to work as gateways in between various political or economic forms of organisation as well as hubs for the exchange of goods between their respective hinterlands and those of foreign traders (cf. Steuer 1999: 567–74 fig. 78; Steuer 2003).

In her influential historical study on *Die europäische Stadt des Mittelalters* (*The European Town of the Middle Ages*), Ennen (1972) suggested an application of a flexible *Kriterienbündel* ('bundle of criteria') instead of defining one single, and thus quite inflexible, criterion for a town. Without defining exactly which criteria would be indispensable, or how many verifiable criteria were needed for defining a town, she instead addressed the appearance, inner structure and function of medieval towns (Ennen 1972: 11–12 and references therein). In archaeology, this pragmatic approach has later been applied by Biddle (1976: 100) for discussing the various stages of urban development in Anglo-Saxon towns, emphasising aspects of defence, street planning, markets, mints, legislative autonomy, their role as central places, the presence of relatively large and dense populations, diversified economies, 'urban' plots and houses, social differentiation, complex religious organisation and, finally, their role as judicial centres. These concepts were also discussed at the international conference 'Vor- und Frühformen der europäischen Stadt im Mittelalter' ('Proto- and Early Stages of the Medieval European Town') in 1972 at Göttingen, where some of the aims were to clarify conceptual problems, finding a common definition for medieval towns that were subject to research and developing a terminology for earlier sites where such definitions were not yet appropriate (Jankuhn et al. 1973: 8–9). In this context, G. Dilcher (1973) elaborated on the historical aspects of judicial matters in high medieval towns, particularly

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