

Power Made Visual in Viking-Age Denmark

Means and Messages

ABSTRACT

The development of territory and political structures in Viking-Age Denmark has long been a focus of research and debate. With recent discoveries, the geo-political landscape has become increasingly clear, particularly for the 10th century. The archaeological evidence and the testimonies of chronicles and other written sources from this period provide a detailed insight into the means of displaying power, influence, and wealth available to the royal family and to other members of the upper echelons of society. The visual manifestations range from impressive architecture, burials and monumental building works to the evidence of, for example, precious metal jewellery and hoards, which attest to communication between families and the establishment of relationships, often across considerable distances.

KEYWORDS

Danevirke / Trelleborg fortresses / Jelling / equestrian burial / wagon body burial / hoard

Political structures and the exercise of power have long been core themes in Viking-Age research, inspired in part by contemporary written sources that refer to individuals and groups of people holding positions of authority, and by the archaeological evidence, which suggests social differences in terms of wealth, status and access to power. In this context, the question of scale is a significant issue, both in relation to certain regions of special power-political interest, such as the border zone with the European Continent and the Ottonian Empire, and in a wider perspective. What kind of power-political framework was in play in the Viking Age? And what kinds of evidence are we to look for? Apart from richly furnished burials and precious metal hoards, the first of which came to light more than two centuries ago, discussions have often focussed on the

massive building works of the period, not least the extensive fortifications of the Danevirke across the Jutland Peninsula in what is now northern Germany (cf. Lemm, this volume, figs 1–2). Since the 1970s, numerous excavations of settlements and farmsteads in southern Scandinavia have provided further evidence that confirms the view of a structured, clearly hierarchical, yet also diverse society marked by both distinct local/regional differences and regional/supra-regional cohesion.

Rather than attempting a broad chronological overview of contemporary power-politics, the aim of this article is to present a variety of archaeological data and finds relating to the expression of power in Viking-Age Denmark. The focus is the 10th century and what may be described as visual manifestations or displays of power and authority. On the one hand,

these include monumental building works, such as the Danevirke ramparts and the Trelleborg-type circular fortresses, which attest to a high degree of organisation and technical knowledge as well as the presence of individuals or groups capable of mobilising human and material resources on a vast scale. On the other hand, they also include material culture and practices that demonstrate wealth, social values and ideals, which appear to have been shared, often over large distances, thus indicating close ties between powerful families. Some of these phenomena may well have emanated from the supra-regional trading hub of Hedeby or been transmitted via Hedeby.

A focus on the later Viking Age does not imply a lack of evidence for political structures or positions of power and authority in the previous centuries. On the contrary, archaeological excavations and written sources show that, for example, the Danevirke rampart system and settlement activity at Hadebyer Noor go back centuries in time, with the earliest parts of the Danevirke originating even before AD 500, as is also indicated by local settlement patterns (Harck 1998; Tummuscheit/Witte 2019, 122). The trading site and early urban community at the later town of Ribe in southwest Jutland emerged in the early 8th century, and there is a strong continuity of settlement and activity from the Late Iron Age into the Viking Age at several sites, such as Tissø and Lejre in Sjælland or Uppåkra in Scania. These settlements are characterised by an extraordinary wealth of artefacts, some of these unusual or of foreign origin, as well as impressive buildings (halls), which have been interpreted within a framework of religious and/or socio-political ceremonies (see for instance Jørgensen 2003).

The large halls of Tissø and Lejre with their roof-covered spaces of up to 550 m² have been viewed as a mainly eastern feature in southern

Scandinavia, forming a contrast to the farmsteads and villages uncovered, for instance, at Vorbasse in Jutland (cf. Kähler Holst 2014). However, the recently discovered site of Erritsø, immediately west of the Little Belt between Jutland and Funen, modifies this view. Here, investigations in 2019 revealed traces of a 50 m long building in several phases just outside the southeast corner of a previously excavated longhouse surrounded by a palisade and moat (Ravn et al. 2019). Moreover, a separate enclosure with a small building attached to the longhouse behind the palisade proved to resemble those identified at eastern magnate sites, such as Tissø or Järrestad in Scania (Jørgensen 2009, 333–344; Söderberg 2005, 78 fig. 10. 43). Preliminary dates for the palisade fall in the 8th to 9th centuries, while a rectangular brooch decorated in animal style B2 and a bird-shaped brooch suggest there was already activity in the 6th and 7th centuries (Ravn et al. 2019, 40). Thus, from Erritsø in the west to Järrestad in the east, strictly maintained architectural concepts have emerged, which presumably reflect common ideas and values, at least at the social level responsible for the hall buildings and enclosures. The purpose of the palisade and moat at Erritsø, and the buildings that preceded the fortified complex, is uncertain but could well be connected with the control of the land traffic routes between Jutland and Funen that crossed the Little Belt at this point and the sea route along the narrow strait of Snævringen, a route that may have been used in the 9th century by the merchant Ohthere when sailing from Norway to Hedeby (Englert 2007; 2015). Many of the phenomena that appear so prominently in the 10th century therefore build upon developments in the preceding centuries. Yet, the 10th century, particularly the second half of the century, was a period of innovative thinking and extraordinary building activity on a large scale (cf. Roesdahl 2011).

Landscapes of Power

The monumental Danevirke ramparts in the southernmost part of Jutland mark an ancient military line that has been closely tied to the definition of territory and state formation, although the river Eider further south was perceived as the true political border. Unlike other massive building works of the Viking Age (and earlier), the Danevirke was never completely forgotten but continued to be revitalised as a line of defence, and not least as a national symbol, up through the centuries until the present day. In 2018, Danevirke and Hedeby were inscribed in the

list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. The rampart system is the only monument from Viking-Age Denmark that is mentioned in contemporary sources. In the early 9th century, the *Annales regni Francorum* (s. a. 808) recorded the decision of the Danish King Godfred to fortify the border of his kingdom against Saxony and Charlemagne with a rampart north of the Eider. This was apparently an action and a manifestation of military organisation that was noteworthy. The Annals (s. a. 804, 809) also mention the *exercitus*, the *equitatus regni* and *duces copiarum* as



Fig. 1 Viking-Age Denmark and significant sites associated with King Harald Bluetooth and the 10th century. The dashed lines refer to general lines of communication across land and sea. – (Map M. Bolte, LEIZA, after Pedersen et al. 2024, 166).

well as the *primores Danorum*, i. e. the armed men and leaders of the Danes, the latter apparently holding positions of authority recognizable to Frankish observers (Rau 1966, 78–93).

The choice of location for the Danevirke was ideal. The natural landscape, dominated to the west by wetlands between the rivers Eider and Treene, and to the east by extensive forests reaching from the Trave to the Schlei, formed an often-impassable barrier with the Continent. Traffic between north and south was limited to a narrow passage only a few kilometres wide, through which access was further hindered by the man-made walls, earthworks, and moats of the Danevirke, which cover a total length

of about 30 km (**fig. 1**). The rampart system is the accumulated result of many building phases (for a summary see, for instance, Dobat 2008). In the mid-10th century, after an apparent break in activity from c. 800–950, the ramparts were strengthened and altered. Parts of the Main Wall were repaired and possibly extended, and the North Wall was replaced by a new eastern flank (the so-called Connecting Wall, *Forbindelsesvolden*), an almost 3.5 km long rampart that connected the semi-circular rampart of Hedeby with the Main Wall, thus integrating the town into the fortification system (Andersen 1998, 14; Erlenkeuser 1998, 194). Two dendrochronological dates give felling years of AD 965 and 968 for the



Fig. 2 Remains of the straight line of the Ravning Enge Bridge are today protected by a dam running equally straight across the Vejle River Valley in eastern Jutland, here viewed from the north. The reconstruction in the foreground gives an impression of the dimensions of the timber structure. – (Photo A. Pedersen).

Connecting Wall, while the semi-circular rampart of Hedeby appears to be slightly older (for a detailed discussion of the Danevirke, cf. Lemm, this volume).

By the second half of the 10th century, the Danevirke would have formed a formidable barrier, limiting access over land to the southern and western parts of the Danish kingdom (Jutland). The rampart system would also have functioned as an official point of entry, manifest in the first gate identified in the Danevirke, the 6 m wide Kalegat gate that allowed passage through the rampart for north-south bound travellers on the *Hærvejen* (the Army Road), the route northwards through Jutland along the main watershed. The gate was set in the 8th-century wall, and it continued in use until around 1200 (Tummuscheit 2012, 10; Tummuscheit/Witte 2019).

South of the Main Wall, a second rampart and moat, the 6.5 km long Kovirke, runs in a completely straight line; this is very different from the main ramparts of the Danevirke, which to a great extent follow the terrain, taking advantage of natural features in the landscape. The rampart was 7 m wide with an estimated height of 2 m, while the V-shaped moat was 4 m wide and 3 m deep. ¹⁴C-dates and close similarities in design and construction between the

Kovirke and the Trelleborg-type fortresses suggest that construction took place in the late 10th century, most likely around 980 (Andersen 1998, 153–167). Only a single construction phase has been identified and there are no signs of repair, indicating that the Kovirke may have lost its significance within a few decades, although it continued to exist as part of the Danevirke border complex (Andersen 1998, 17). Built at a time of conflict with the Ottonian Empire, the Kovirke created an alternative and visually very distinct line of defence across the shortest possible distance. Moreover, it offered protection to the cemeteries south of Hedeby, including the presumably royal Boat Chamber Burial from the mid-9th century, memory of which may still have been alive (Wamers 1994; cf. Lemm, this volume).

The straight line of the Kovirke is mirrored in the remains of a huge bridge built at Ravning Enge, across the widest part of the Vejle River Valley in eastern Jutland. The bridge was discovered in the 1930s, but it was not until several decades later that it was identified by ¹⁴C-dating as a Viking-Age monument. Excavations in the 1970s and the 1990s revealed that the bridge was about 760 m long and 5 m wide, with a roadway of more than 3,800 m² and an

Fig. 3 The fortress of Trelleborg in southwest Sjælland, viewed from the east with the Great Belt in the background. – (Photo The National Museum of Denmark).



estimated carrying capacity of 5 t (fig. 2). The basic structure consisted of 280 sections, each made up of four vertical posts, 30 cm × 30 cm in cross section, and supported by a slanting post at either side. The posts had been set out with the aid of hazel wood surveying sticks, some of which were still in place, and the deviation from a straight line was nowhere more than 5 cm (Schou Jørgensen/Møller 1999, 73–75). The date of the bridge (the felling year of the timbers) has been narrowed to around AD 980 or possibly slightly later by means of dendrochronology (Schou Jørgensen/Møller 1999, 73; K. Christensen 2003) and, judging by the lack of repairs, it fell out of use within very few decades. Analysis of the oak timbers indicates that the builders had access to many aged and mature trees. The timbers alone therefore represent a major investment beyond that of a single household or village (K. Christensen 2003, 210).

Like the Kovirke and the Ravning bridge, the Trelleborg-type circular fortresses were built to clear standards of measurement and with a stringent geometric layout, in this case defined by a circle instead of a straight line. Trelleborg, situated on a headland between two rivers on western Sjælland, was the first to be excavated in 1934–1942 (Nørlund 1948). The fortress is characterised by a circular rampart built of timber, turf, and earth, with an inner diameter of 136 m (fig. 3). Two main streets connected the four gates, placed at the four points of the compass, and they divided the interior space into four quadrants, each containing four, near identical buildings about 30 m long, arranged around a square courtyard. An outer ward protected by a low rampart enclosed another 15 buildings, likewise with curved walls and straight gables, as well as a cemetery, which included two mass graves and several weapon burials. The

fortress attracted great attention at the time, yet it was not unique; a decade later, the same stringent plan and characteristic features were identified at Aggersborg, north of the Limfjord in Jutland (1945–1952). With an inner diameter of 240 m, this fortress was far larger than Trelleborg and had room for 48 buildings (three times the number at Trelleborg) within its circular rampart (Roesdahl et al. 2014).

Fyrkat near Hobro in East Jutland was the third fortress to be identified. Excavations in the years 1950–1963 and 1973 clarified further details of the architecture and function of the fortresses (Olsen/Schmidt 1977). Significantly, the characteristic and today well-known silhouette of the buildings around the courtyards was determined by the observation that the outer row of posts in the walls had originally been placed in a slanting rather than vertical position. The finds demonstrated a wide range of activities, and the cemetery next to the fortress revealed that not only men but also women and children had lived here (Roesdahl 1977).

At Nonnebakken in Odense on Fyn, much of the still standing remains of an undated circular rampart were demolished in 1909. Later investigation and dendrochronological dating of stray finds of wood from an associated moat suggested that this was another Trelleborg-type fortress (Jensen/Sørensen 1990). Renewed excavations in 2015 and 2017 support this interpretation, although no axial roads or buildings arranged around square courtyards were observed (Runge 2018). A silver hoard consisting of nine coins, among them five Hedeby coins (1 KG 8, 2 KG 9a, 2 KG 9b) and four Samanid dirhams, three pieces of hack silver and a silver Hiddensee-type filigree brooch was recovered from Nonnebakken in 1889 (Eilbracht 1999, no. 236; Moesgaard 2015, 156–157). A similar filigree brooch was recorded in 1773, and another that was of uncertain provenance, but which belonged to the owner of Nonnebakken (before 1901), may have come from the fortress as well (Skovmand 1942, 84; Roesdahl 1977, 167–168). A second hoard, discovered during the digging work in 1909, contains 24 silver coins, among which were several Hedeby coins (1 KG 8, 1 KG 9a, 3 KG 9b), one German (Otto I, imitation, post-936) and the rest mainly Samanid dirhams (Moesgaard 2015, 158–161). Like the first hoard, it is dated to the second half of the 10th century, and it may have been deposited during the construction of the fortress.

The four fortresses are no longer the only known examples of this type of fortification. A geophysical survey and excavations in 2014 revealed that a circular rampart at Lellinge in eastern Sjælland, today named Borgring, was most likely from the Viking Age and not, as previously assumed, the Roman Iron

Age. It too had gates placed in the main axes, and ¹⁴C-dating of burnt gate timbers provided a date in the 10th century (J. Christensen et al. 2018; Sindbæk 2020). No Trelleborg-type buildings have been identified yet and it is possible that the fortress was never completed. Similar fortresses may have been built further east, at Borgeby in western Scania and at Trelleborg on the southern coast of Scania. Only small trial excavations have been undertaken at Borgeby since 1998. The inner diameter is estimated at 150 m. The rampart was extended several times and the fortress appears to have been in use for a longer period than the Danish fortresses (Svanberg/Söderberg 1999; 2000, 339). A few finds, including fragments of a soldering plate, several crucibles and a fragment of a mould (possibly two) used to make a patris for Hiddensee-style brooches, indicate that exclusive filigree jewellery was produced at the site (like at Fyrkat) in the last decades of the 10th century (Brorsson 1998; Svanberg 1998). The Trelleborg site appears to lack the characteristic internal layout of Trelleborg, Aggersborg and Fyrkat and may represent a precursor to the Danish fortresses (Jacobsson 1999).

As a final, and at present unique structure, the newly discovered palisade complex at Jelling in East Jutland can be added to the building works associated with King Harald in the second half of the 10th century (Pedersen et al. 2023b). Jelling has long been known as a place of burial and commemoration, but despite two centuries of documented archaeological investigations there has been no evidence of a royal residence to match the huge mounds and rune stones. In 2006, excavations north of the churchyard and the North Mound revealed the first remains of a palisade built of heavy wooden planks and posts. The palisade proved to be about 1.4 km long, and its four sides enclosed a space of 12.5 ha, about half the size of the area behind the semi-circular rampart of Hedeby. The chamber burial covered by the North Mound marks the exact centre of the enclosure (fig. 4). Several buildings were spaced evenly along the north-eastern part of the palisade, and it is likely that another building, possibly the most significant and the first in a sequence of wooden buildings, stood south of the North Mound on the site of the present Romanesque stone church (Dengsø Jessen et al. 2023). Whether similar buildings were placed along the other sides of the palisade is uncertain. Although excavations in 2020 in the western part of the complex revealed traces of a building close to the palisade, it appears to differ in type and does not follow the same stringent layout as the buildings to the northeast. Its alignment deviates slightly from that of the palisade, suggesting that the two structures were not contemporary; however, it cannot be deter-



Fig. 4 Modern visualisation of the northeastern corner of the palisade in Jelling, eastern Jutland, created in 2013 by the sculptor I. Cronhammer in collaboration with Arkitekt K. Jensens Tegnastue. The North Mound, Jelling Church and the South Mound are seen in the background. The North Mound marks the centre of the enclosure. The enclosure is slightly larger than the original in order to protect the remaining parts of the palisade. – (Photo A. Pedersen).

mined which is the earlier (C. Lindblom, VejleMuseerne, pers. comm.).

Oak timbers preserved in the small pond, Smededammen, on the southern line of the palisade have provided a date range for the palisade between AD 958 and 985, with one sample coming from a tree probably felled in 968 (Dengsø Jessen et al. 2014). The palisade was built at the same time as or slightly later than the North Mound (958/959) and, moreover, while building works were taking place at the Danevirke. The Kovirke, the fortresses and the Raving Bridge, on the other hand, appear to belong to a second phase of building activity, which includes the South Mound at Jelling, on which construction commenced in the late 970s, and which experienced several breaks in the process before it was completed (cf. Krogh 1993; K. Christensen 2023).

Taken together, the fortifications, the Raving bridge and most recently the Jelling palisade complex provide a detailed insight into the engineering skills and the scale of construction achievable in the Viking Age. They attest to considerable architectural knowledge, including the ability to apply geometric figures and duplicate (transfer and adapt) building standards to fit the purpose of a given structure

(cf. Dengsø Jessen et al. 2014; Pedersen et al. 2023b). It is probably no coincidence that, for example, multiples of 60 occur in the inner diameters of Fyrkat (120 m) and Aggersborg (240 m), and in the length of the sides of the Jelling palisade (c. 360 m). A unit of 60 is also recorded in a rural settlement context, and the width of three farm crofts at Vorbasse (about 60 and 120 m) perhaps imply some form of official registering of land and property (Hvass 1980, 162–165). Precision and large scale are often interpreted as evidence of royalty and military power. In addition, fixed standards would have served practical purposes, making it possible to achieve greater speed and efficiency at a time of intense building activity on more than one site. Building requirements would be easier to communicate, and timbers cut to fixed measurements would be easier to order and to transport.

The right-angled cross defined by the streets running between the main gates in the fortresses occurs also in Jelling but is here defined by the diagonals between the corners of the complex, where so far only one gate has been identified. The circular form of the fortresses would be easier to defend than the long lines of the palisade, an argument in favour of an interpretation of Jelling as a monumental assembly

site rather than a purpose-built military structure (cf. Roesdahl 2011). The different use of circles and lines was probably intentional. While the circle would lead the eye around the monument, the range of vision thus decreasing as a traveller approached, the straight, 360 m long sides of the Jelling palisade would block the view, with the length of the line and distance to the corners appearing to increase on approach.

Movement through the surrounding landscape would have enhanced the visual (and bodily) experience of the enclosure at Jelling and the fortresses. In the case of Jelling, this is most apparent in the approach from the south, which involves a steep climb from the tunnel valley and lake south of the present town (Schülke 2023). In the later 10th century, a formal route from the south may have incorporated the steep sided Vejle River Valley and the passage across the bridge at Ravning Enge, 10 km south of Jelling. The expert builders employed by the king were probably very much aware of the landscape and its potential; they may also have considered the value of recognition and identification. The fortresses and the enclosure at Jelling are unique and unusual, as might be expected of an ambitious and powerful ruler, yet they were not so alien as to be incomprehensible. Spaced evenly across the country, only a few days' travel apart, they formed distinct points of reference, providing visual confirmation of King Harald's authority and his claim that he had won all of Denmark for himself. The English Burghal Hid-

age of Edward the Elder and the *Burgenordnung* of Henry the Fowler from the early 10th century may along with, for example, Slavic fortified residences have provided at least part of the background and inspiration for the initiatives of the Danish king (cf. Roesdahl/Sindbæk 2014, 407–409).

At the fortresses, military functions may have involved armed men from other regions or countries to ensure loyalty to the king, as has been suggested for the Trelleborg fortress on the basis of Strontium isotope analysis of the burial evidence (cf. Price et al. 2011). Apart from their role in military logistics and organisation, the fortresses were also a component of royal display, and S. M. Sindbæk (2020) has proposed that one of the significant messages embedded in these sites was the king's ability (and willingness) to protect his kingdom and his subjects at a time when the primary fighting forces may have been employed elsewhere. Relations with Norway were continuously challenged, and the decade following the death of Emperor Otto I in 973 saw changes in the political balance between Denmark and the Ottonian Empire and a need for increased military strength (Roesdahl/Sindbæk 2014, 399–403). This scenario ties in well with the geographical distribution of the fortresses and with their short period of use. Towards the end of the century, after the death of Otto II (983) and King Harald (c. 987) and a shift of interest on the part of the Danish kings towards England, the situation changed again.

The Powerful in Life and Death

The building materials and basic architectural principles of the Jelling complex and the circular fortresses were probably well known from traditional rural settlements. The layout of the Jelling enclosure with several buildings placed next to the palisade and a central area of focus (the North Mound and the area immediately south of it) resembles that of many elite residences and farmsteads, such as the farm that preceded the church and churchyard at Lisbjerg further north in eastern Jutland. Here, traces of a main building have been identified beneath the church, while subsidiary buildings, stores, and so on, were located parallel to the fence that surrounded the croft (Jeppesen/Madsen 1997). Buildings with a large, open central room (Trelleborg-type buildings) such as those at the fortresses and at Jelling can also be found in 10th century rural settlements.

Great halls offered the social elite an impressive setting for feasting, formal events and cere-

monies. The main room may have contained furniture or wooden panels, carved and painted like the fragments recovered from the burial chamber in the North Mound in Jelling (Krogh/Leth-Larsen 2007, 137–207), and wooden posts and walls were probably decorated with rich carvings and textile hangings. Like the interiors, the exteriors of the halls would have made an impression, especially if painted or whitewashed, as indicated by the discovery of lime kilns from the end of the 9th century at the residence west of Tissø (Henriksen/Holst 2015; cf. Holst/Henriksen 2023). At Lejre, height and thus greater visibility was achieved by building the halls on the top of a hill, some of them (a chronological sequence of three successive halls dated to the 7th to 8th/9th centuries) on an artificial, stone-framed platform 50–75 cm high (fig. 5; T. Christensen 2015, 71–74). In the 10th century, an adult man was buried in this platform in a coffin placed in alignment



Fig. 5 Reconstruction of one of the great halls from Lejre, south of Roskilde Fjord in Sjælland. – (Graphics EyeCadcher Media, Lejre, Roskilde Museum, 2004, and N. Garhøj Larsen).

with the main axis of the halls. A fragment of gold thread and a knife with a silver-wound handle suggest that the deceased was a person of some status; perhaps, considering the location of the burial, this was a descendant or a person who had a special connection with the hall (T. Christensen 2015, 154–159).

Conspicuous consumption was another means of displaying wealth, power, and social contacts. An unusually high number of metal objects have been recovered from the Tissø site, the most magnificent being a 10th-century gold neck ring. Even though a piece is missing, the ring weighs almost 2 kg, and was thus worth a fortune equivalent to nearly 500 cattle. Other finds include religious amulets, coins of different origin, high-quality jewellery of gilded silver and tin-plated copper-alloy, models for jewellery, tools and workshop waste (Jørgensen 2003). Weapons were probably manufactured and repaired by smiths on site. A concentration of weapons and weapon parts at the main residence suggests the presence of armed men here, possibly to protect the members of the household but also as a demonstration of authority and the ability (right) of the owner of the residence to use force if necessary (cf. Jørgensen 2003, 204–207).

A small object from Tissø worth noting in this context is a Byzantine lead seal from the early 9th century that is identical to two seals found at Hedeby and Ribe (Laurent 1978; Jørgensen 2003, 203; cf. Lemm, this volume). According to the inscription, »Mother of God, aid Thy servant Patrikios Theodosios, prospathar and chartular of the Imperial vestiary«, Theodosios was a high-ranking official of the Byzantine empire, responsible for provisions and weapons for the empire's land and marine troops. The three seals have no apparent material value to suggest why they have survived. It is possible that they (and the documents to which they were attached) were brought to Denmark by Theodosios or by his emissaries. If so, it is probably no coincidence that, apart from the two trading sites, the residence of a wealthy (perhaps royal) magnate would be approached by a foreign delegation seeking to acquire raw materials and equipment, and possibly also recruit men for the imperial army. Other finds, including Carolingian jewellery and a small group of early coins, among them an extremely rare imitation of Charlemagne's coinage with a Scandinavian motif on the reverse, attest to the extensive contacts of Tissø, either direct or indirect via intermediaries (Jørgensen 2003, 190–191).

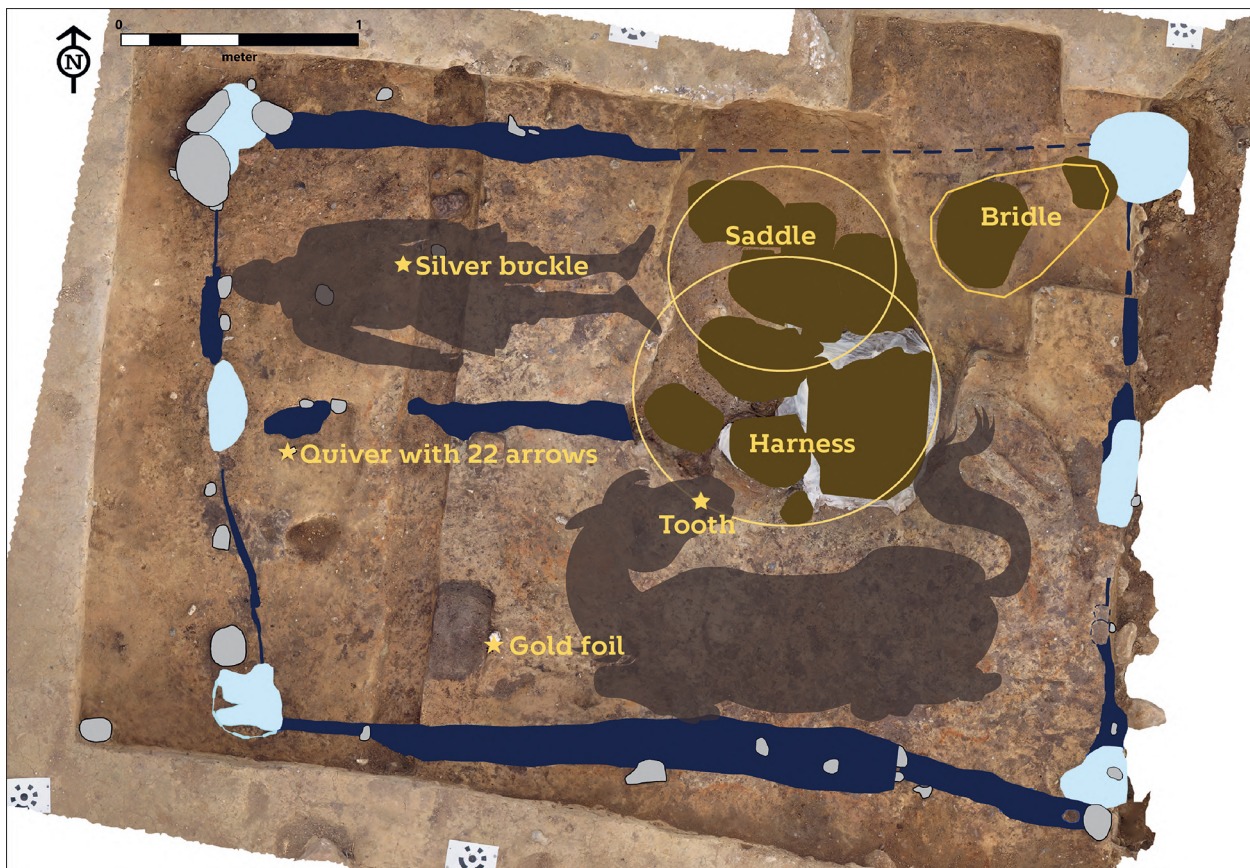


Fig. 6 Digitalised plan of the equestrian burial in Fregerslev, Jutland. The background shows the bottom level of the grave. – **Light blue** Corner posts and roof bearing posts. – **Dark blue** Traces of planks. – **Yellow star** Finds. – **Dark beige** Soil blocks with material from the harness, saddle, and bridle. – (Graphics K. Hedensten, Museum Skanderborg).

Formal receptions and banquets were for the living. Funerals offered another occasion to display wealth and status, and thereby secure the social position of a family and their claims to inheritance and succession. In comparison to most of the known graves from the preceding century, those of the 10th century show a greater diversity in terms of, for example, their contents and the effort and resources invested in the funeral (and the grave). Burials containing weapons and horse furnishings – artefacts associated with authority and the right to command – form a particularly prominent group (Pedersen 2014). The exact status, title or rank of the deceased is uncertain, but there is no reason to doubt that they belonged to prominent and wealthy families. They would have been distinguished by their appearance, i.e. dress and personal items such as a pair of spurs and the quality of the horse equipment etc., but probably also by their values, behaviour, and practices. Military skills and horsemanship were essential to a lord or a man of high status, and training probably began at an early age. The emphasis on feasting and recreation indicated by the tableware and gaming boards in some burials is mirrored in the contemporary wagon body bur-

ials, which are often associated with women. They too contain wooden buckets and metal basins and occasionally also parts of drinking horns as well as personal ornaments, knives and whetstones and, in a few cases, spindle whorls, shears and other items originally kept in a casket (Pedersen 2014, 212–213; Eisenschmidt 2021b).

An equestrian burial excavated in 2017 at Fregerslev near Skanderborg in eastern Jutland may serve as an example of an equestrian burial and one that points to contacts between Hedeby and elite milieus further north in Denmark (Schifter Bagge 2020; Schifter Bagge/Pedersen 2021). The oak-built burial chamber, measuring c. 3.8 m × 2.5 m, was about twice the size of an average chamber grave. Nonetheless, its layout follows established conventions. The chamber was oriented east-west, and the deceased had been placed within a defined space, although not necessarily a closed coffin, in the northwest corner. A harness for a horse (including the remains of a food bag) was found east of the deceased (at the foot end), whereas the animal had likely been placed in the southern part of the chamber (fig. 6). The grave appears to have been robbed in more recent times, and apart from a quiver of

Fig. 7 Harness fittings from Fregerslev, Jutland. The cross-shaped mount (1) and the figure-of-eight mount (3) of gilt copper alloy resemble finds from equestrian burials in Schleswig. – (Photo FOTO & CO).



arrows (arrowheads) it contained none of the principal weapons (sword, axe, spearhead) that might be expected in a burial of this type and size. However, the bridle and numerous fittings of gilt copper alloy and tin/lead for the harness were preserved along with fragments of a wooden saddle. Some of the mounts, particularly a series of cross-shaped and figure-of-eight strap-mounts (fig. 7, 1, 3) show close similarities with finds from well-furnished graves in the hinterland of Hedeby, i. e. a cremation grave in the cemetery of Langballigau and two chamber graves in Thumby-Bienebek and Quern-Scheersberg (Schifter Bagge 2020, 509–510; Eisenschmidt 2021a, 150–152 fig. 7; cf. Lemm, this volume). The Fregerslev bridle is the first example with such mounts from a burial context in present-day Denmark, but single mounts, presumably accidental losses, are now known from most of the country. Many Danish equestrian burials were uncovered more than a century ago, which might in part explain the scarcity of small decorative harness fittings. Cross-shaped mounts have been recovered from Hedeby and Ellingstedt in Schleswig, and from England and Norway (Lemm 2016, 106–107; Schifter Bagge 2020, 509).

Equestrian burial was mainly practiced in western Denmark, west of the Great Belt. There is next to no evidence of such burials to the east (in eastern Sjælland and Scania) and in general only a few weapon burials in this area. The families associated with the great halls here may have had no need of such burial practices. However, it is necessary to distinguish between the events that took place at a funeral (evidence of which is limited) and the final resting place of the deceased, the event possibly being far more impressive than the grave. It is also conceivable that the established social hierarchy and the strong continuity over generations attested at sites like Tissø and Lejre limited the scope for expensive and labour-intensive funeral display. Like the equestrian burials, richly furnished female wagon body burials are most common in 10th-century western Denmark, and only the burials at Hedeby, Thumby-Bienebek and Kosel Ost contain gold and silver intricate filigree jewellery (Pedersen 2014, 216–221, with references). Thus, to judge from the geographical distribution patterns, ostentatious burial was a means of display used only in certain regions, possibly those experiencing change or a heightened social mobility, perhaps accentuated by external stress.



Fig. 8 Cross-coin attributed to King Harald Bluetooth. The motif on the right refers to the Crucifixion of Christ (the Calvary). – (Photo The National Museum of Denmark).

The Power of Gold

The two chamber graves in Jelling, one in the North Mound and the other beneath Jelling Church, are among the best-known burials from 10th-century Denmark. Both contained artefacts in the Jellinge style. Their quality and rare features such as a small arrow-like motif that occurs on items from both burials could be indicative of experienced craftsmen working on behalf of the king. Against all expectations, however, the excavations of the palisade complex in Jelling have revealed no traces of extensive trade or production, let alone a goldsmith's workshop (Pedersen et al. 2023b, 155–156). The lack of evidence of precious metalworking stands in marked contrast to the artefact material from, for example, the residence at Tissø and the circular fortresses associated with King Harald. The remains of work areas, tools and raw materials, including gold, have been recorded at Fyrkat, and a damaged gold filigree pendant with a suspension loop shaped like a bird's head appears to have been lost here by its owner (Roesdahl 1977, 35–37, 41–45). A bronze matrix for a pendant with a similar bird's head was found at Trelleborg (Roesdahl 1977, 163–164) and, as mentioned above, a few artefacts from Borgeby in Scania are interpreted as evidence of a late Viking-Age gold- and silver-smith's workshop (Svanberg 1998).

Production areas and waste material need not imply permanent royal workshops at these sites. Instead, the ornaments may have been produced by itinerant craftsmen with access to a wider network

of specialist metal workers with whom they could exchange ideas, models, and technical knowledge. As a meeting place for such craftsmen, Hedeby, on the border between Denmark (and in a wider sense Scandinavia) and the Continent would be well suited. Travelling craftsmen might explain the discovery of a purse of 42 models for 10th-century-type filigree jewellery that was lost in the harbour. With these models, a goldsmith was able to fashion pendants such as the one from Fyrkat, Hiddensee-type cross pendants named after the gold hoard uncovered on the island of Hiddensee, west of Rügen in northern Germany, and a variety of circular brooches (Armbruster 2010).

As shown by the finds from Nonnebakken, filigree ornaments were also made of silver, and there are numerous versions of cast copper-alloy. Silver was a measure of wealth and a means of display as indicated by, for example, the observation of Ibn Fadlan, a member of a delegation to the Volga Bulgars in the 920s, that when a man had 10,000 dirhams he had one necklace made for his woman, and two when he had 20,000 dirhams (Simonsen 2000, 7; Montgomery 2000, 7). Around 975, a new Danish silver coinage was introduced, the so-called cross coins attributed to King Harald Bluetooth (fig. 8). With their distinct cross motifs, they may have been part of a political/religious strategy to enforce the king's new status as a Christian ruler and perhaps an ambitious attempt to introduce a new, clearly royal, coinage. J. C. Moes-



Fig. 9 Preliminary survey of complete items of gold jewellery in present-day Denmark. ▲ Hoards containing gold jewellery. ● Single finds of gold arm rings. ◆ Single finds of other types of gold jewellery. – (Graphics M. L. Bendtsen).

gaard (2015) has suggested that the cross coins may also have been intended as payment for loyal retainers employed by the king. Most of the known examples are from hoards. Single finds are few and the location of the mint is unknown, but Hedeby is a possibility. Several single cross coins have been recovered here, including two coins found together with a Carolus imitation (KG 9) and an Otto-Adelheid-

Pfennig from the bottom layer of a sunken-featured building (Hillberg/Moesgaard 2010).

While silver was the metal commonly used in trade in the Viking Age, gold was the exclusive metal used to display status and wealth. Several new finds have come to light in Denmark, mainly due to the increasingly popular use of metal detectors. **Figure 9** shows a preliminary survey of hoards and single



Fig. 10 The gold hoard from Fæsted, South Jutland. The chain with animal-head terminals to the left of the centre was found in 1911. Below the chain is a Hiddensee-type broken pendant. On-going investigations at the site have revealed another arm-ring, a reused solidus, a pendant without an inset and a large piece of hack-gold. – (Photo R. Fortuna, The National Museum of Denmark).

finds of gold jewellery and, although not included in this survey, Hedeby and the surrounding region have yielded quite a few gold artefacts, among them a simple 10th-century-type gold arm ring weighing 20.65 g from Füsing, a site identified in 2003 immediately north of the Inner Schlei (Dobat 2010, 168–169). Another heavy gold arm ring was found in 1886 at Sörup, a little more than 25 km northeast of Hedeby (Wiechmann 1996, 434–435). Its weight of 396 g is very close to the total weight (390.1 g) of a small hoard of eight (one a broken half) gold arm rings recovered in 1905/1908 on the northern point of the island of Peenemünde off the southern Baltic coast. Gold jewellery has likewise been found in several hoards from Scania in the eastern part of Viking-Age Denmark (cf. Hårdh 1976).

One of the most spectacular hoards of gold jewellery from Denmark was discovered in 2016 at Fæsted in southern Jutland, in a field where a gold chain with Jellinge-style animal-head terminals had been found more than a hundred years earlier (Grundvad/Ejstrud 2020). The hoard is made up of 1,460 g of gold

and more than 100 g of silver. Apart from the gold chain, it contains a gold filigree brooch, eight gold arm-rings, twelve gold pendants, gold beads and clipped gold as well as several silver objects, including an arm-ring (fig. 10). Like the chain, the brooch and the heaviest of the gold arm-rings are decorated in the Jellinge style. The hoard was probably deposited shortly after the middle of the 10th century.

The pendants from Fæsted include a Hiddensee-type one. In contrast to the Fæsted and Hiddensee finds, most of the known pendants of this type are of silver, not gold. A set of seven identical silver pendants was found as far abroad as Kyiv, as part of a large hoard containing various items of Kievan jewellery from the 12th and 13th centuries. The set may have been kept for generations by a wealthy Kievan family, as an heirloom and a memory of distant ties to Scandinavia (cf. Duczko 2004, 227). Apart from the filigree pendants, the Fæsted hoard also contains five semi-precious stones set in gold and two empty pendants (one of them found in 2019). Close parallels are known from Hedeby chamber grave 5 and from

grave 318 in the Flat Grave Cemetery (Arents/Eisen-schmidt 2010, vol. 1, 123; Kalmring 2018). A square pendant from Fæsted may even have come from the same workshop as one from grave 318, which is dated to the second half of the 10th century (Kalmring 2018, 73). If so, the workshop may have been in Hedeby, where another square gold pendant set with an amethyst has been recorded (Arrhenius 1978, 12).

Other high-quality gold filigree ornaments have been found in southern Jutland, including a gold hoard from Vester Vedsted, two elaborate brooches from Hornelund and a gold filigree snake pendent from Gørding, north of Ribe. Worth noting are two filigree pendants and a brooch decorated with animal figures from the Vester Vedsted hoard, which were probably produced by craftsmen well-acquainted with Continental jewellery traditions. One of the pendants is decorated with filigree cones and a *Wellenband* ornament (Eilbracht 1999, 101–103), whilst the other shows a Terslev-style knot motif. Gold pendants are rare. However, three gold Terslev-pendants are known from Hedeby; two from chamber grave 5 are almost identical to the one from Vester Vedsted so, although they are slightly different in size, they must have been made in the same workshop (Eilbracht 1999, 139–140).

These finds suggest high-status patronage and probably close social ties. Surveys and excavations

near Fæsted have revealed the remains of earlier ritual activity in addition to traces of a large hall at the site of the gold hoard, and the area appears to have maintained a high status in the following centuries (Grundvad/Ejstrud 2020). It has been suggested that the Hiddensee hoard may have been a gift from the Danish king, Harald (or his son Svein Forkbeard), to an ally south of the Baltic. Gift exchange was an essential part of the forging of political and social relationships (Pedersen et al. 2023b, 155–161). Gold arm rings as well as costly weapons, clothing, and other valuable items were presented as gifts and rewards for talent, courage, and loyalty. Thus, a gold arm ring could serve both as a reminder of the occasion when it was received and as a demonstration of obligations and alliances between individuals and families. Refusing a gift would be considered a rejection of friendship and allegiance. The importance of the gift as a social and political medium is given in, for example, the description of the Easter assembly held at the court of Emperor Otto I in 973 in Quedlinburg. According to the *Chronicon* of Thietmar of Merseburg, written between 1012 and 1018, the assembly was successful in that all matters were resolved peacefully, gifts were distributed, and all the delegates (presumably also including the Danes present at the event) returned home satisfied (Thietmar 2.31).

Women and Power

Women are less often mentioned in contemporary sources. Nonetheless, they were very much part of the display and negotiation of power. Marriage was one of the strategic means to establish and strengthen alliances and relationships between families in the Viking Age; it was also a mark of status within the social/political hierarchy of the time, revealing the rising fortunes of a family, its contacts and the range of its influence. Next to nothing is known of the Danish queens in the early Viking Age apart from the wife of King Harald Klak who, according to the poet Ermoldus Nigellus, accompanied her husband to Ingelheim and was baptised along with her husband at the court of Emperor Louis the Pious in AD 826 (Ermoldus, book 4).

The picture becomes somewhat clearer in the 10th century. King Gorm praised his wife Thyra on the smaller of the two rune stones in Jelling, while King Harald named his mother along with his father on the larger stone (fig. 11), an indication that the queen played a significant, even instrumental role in the lives of both father and son. She may have brought

land, economic means, and perhaps also the influence and status of her own family into the marriage, her status later contributing to ensure the rights and inheritance of her son (Sawyer 1988, 220–221; cf. Imer et al. 2023). An event recorded by the Danish chronicler Saxo Grammaticus around AD 1200 may be a distant memory of the importance attached to the queen. According to Saxo, King Harald ordered his forces to haul a huge stone up to the place where his mother was buried so that it might be set up as a memorial to her. The king's men protested, and the attempt was abandoned. However, it was too late. Indignant at the insult that had been shown them by such a demeaning task, the men refused to take up arms on the king's behalf in the conflict with his son, the event thus leading to his downfall (Saxo Grammaticus, book 10, 8). Following the medieval tradition, Thyra was believed to have been buried in Jelling but neither of the two known chamber burials can be positively associated with the queen.

A little more is known about King Harald's wife. On a rune stone from Sønder Vissing (c. 40 km



Fig. 11 King Harald's rune stone, face A. The inscription reads »King Harald ordered these kumbl made in memory of Gorm, his father, and in memory of Thyra, his mother; that Harald who won for himself Denmark« and on faces B and C »all and Norway and made the Danes Christian«. – (Photo R. Fortuna, The National Museum of Denmark).

north of Jelling), Tove describes herself as the wife of Harald the Good, Gorm's son, and daughter of Mistivoi, prince of the Obodrites, a people on the northeastern border of the Ottonian empire. The fact that Tove named her father, and moreover commemorated her mother, suggests that her ancestry was important to her and perhaps to her husband. Harald's son and grandson also sought their wives among the women of neighbouring ruling families. According to Thietmar of Merseburg, the first wife of Harald's son, Svein Forkbeard, was a daughter of Prince Mieszko I of Poland and sister of his son and successor Bolesław I Chrobry (Thietmar, 7.39). Once successful in England, Cnut the Great married the widow of his deceased rival Æthelred II in 1017, and in 1027 when the king was in Rome to attend the coronation of Emperor Konrad II, his daughter was betrothed to the emperor's son Henry, later Emperor Henry III – a testimony to the increased influence of the royal family on the European stage (Sawyer 1988, 267–271).

The ambitions of the Danish kings are mirrored in those of the Ottonian dynasty. Eadgyth (Edith) of England, daughter of Edward the Elder and granddaughter of Alfred the Great, was the first wife of

Otto I (936–973). Her sarcophagus was discovered in Magdeburg in Germany in 2008 (Kuhn 2012). The second marriage of Otto I to Adelaide (Adelheid) of Italy, widow of King Lothar of Italy, secured him access to important allies in southern Europe and brought him a step closer to the title of emperor (Schieffer 2001a, 26). His son Otto II (974–983) married Theophanu, a Byzantine princess and niece of Emperor John I Tzimiskes (969–976). The wedding in 972 in Rome was the last major achievement of the emperor and evidence of the success of his Italian and Byzantine politics (Schieffer 2001b, 457). He died the following year, not long after the Easter assembly in Quedlinburg. The next generation advanced even further; Princess Zoe, second daughter of Emperor Constantine VIII (1025–1028), was on her way to marry the grandson of Otto I when he died in 1002.

Adelaide and Theophanu both became important figures in the maintenance of imperial power in the Ottonian Empire in the later 10th century. After the death of Otto II in December 983, it was essential to secure the rights of his son as successor. The so-called Otto-Adelheid-Pfennige issued under Otto III demonstrate the role of his grandmother Adelaide acting as regent on behalf of her grandson (991–994).

In a different medium, an ivory plaque assumed to represent Emperor Otto II together with Theophanu and their son Otto III may have been commissioned by Theophanu after the death of her husband to commemorate the coronation of their son (Otto III) in May 983 and to enforce the claims of the boy, who was then only three years old. Like his father, Otto III wears a crown, and both hold up their hands

towards Christ, who is flanked by Mary and Mauritius (the patron saint of the imperial family). In this view, the underlying intention of the plaque and the rune stone of King Harald seem very similar – to secure and legitimise power by calling upon ancestry and continuity between generations, the importance of which was stressed by Thietmar of Merseburg (Thietmar I.19).

Concluding Remarks

The archaeological evidence and the testimonies of chronicles and other sources from the 10th century offer a remarkable insight into the various forms of display and communication available to the royal family and to others of wealth, status, and influence (or those wishing to attain status and influence). The visual manifestations range from the impressive architecture and monumental building works commanded by the king and the social elite to the practices and values implied by the evidence of rituals and ceremonies, marriage arrangements and the establishment of alliances, often across considerable distances.

The Danevirke formed a military defence line on the northern edge of the border zone defined by the river Eider and probably also, as in later times, a psychological barrier, but it was at the same time a permeable fortification and a focal area of activity. Hedeby, at the eastern end of the Danevirke, was a meeting place for merchants and craftsmen, for people of different faith and origin, and for warriors and influential families, even the king (cf. Lemm, this volume). It was a place where knowledge, for example, of metal working techniques or advances in weaponry and battle strategies might be exchanged, and where the social values and practices of different groups of people could be observed and depending on the situation be adopted, emulated or rejected.

Further to the north in Jutland, the Jelling enclosure provided a controlled space for political, social, and possibly religious acts or ceremonies, the most significant perhaps being the celebration of the succession of King Harald shortly after the middle of the 10th century (cf. Pedersen/Madsen 2017; Pedersen et al. 2023b, 167–172). The large rune stone raised by the king in honour of his parents was a modern monument that combined tradition (the art style and the

use of runes) with an inscription in horizontal lines and images that would have been recognizable to foreign observers (cf. Roesdahl 2013). The wording of the inscription is also worth noting. Rather than »having the stone made«, King Harald »commanded the monuments to be made«, a choice of verb appropriate for an ambitious king (Jesch 2013, 11).

The monuments, together with the fortresses, the Ravnning Bridge, and the building works at the Danevirke are initiatives with not only a practical function but with the clear aim of impressing the viewer. Tradition and innovative features both served a purpose. It was essential that the implied message of power, authority, and legitimacy could be understood by the intended recipients, whether they be the king's subjects and followers, or foreign travelers and delegates from the courts of neighbouring powers. Thus, the monuments can be seen as part of a deliberate strategy to ensure the acceptance and maintenance of the king's authority – an attempt to visualise and enforce new concepts of royal power and kingship, to a great extent triggered and inspired by developments in neighbouring countries, not least the Ottonian and the far distant Byzantine Empires.

Parallels to the king's means of display and communication can be found in the architecture, material culture and practices of the uppermost echelons of society and their lesser counterparts, in their dress, the wealth they displayed, or the feasting and ceremonial acts that took place within the great halls. The events had a transient nature, but the exchanged gifts served as a reminder, and memories of the events could be recalled and retold in a new setting. Scandinavian ideology was combined with European models and values that were transmitted in the meeting and movement of people.

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