

# Trier and Frisian Trade in the Early Middle Ages

## ABSTRACT

This paper will conclude that the discovery of a sunken hut from the first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century within the fortified area of St Irminen on the bank of the Moselle river, as well as the finds associated with it, make it plausible that foreign long-distance traders lived in the monastery grounds. They indicate an origin in the North Sea or Baltic regions and must be viewed as foreign goods or merchandise. It is likely that the context was that of Frisian trade. According to the finds, it can be also assumed that, apart from the verifiable Frisian quarters situated near the centres of power, Frisians may have settled in a decentralised manner at various spots in the same city, which is likely for Trier and may also have been the case in other places. Moreover, the written sources and archaeological finds suggest that Frisians were present on the Moselle for longer periods, between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries.

## KEYWORDS

Coin fibula / Frisian Quarters / Frisian trade / Hedeby / Haithabu / Trier

During the early medieval period, Frisians were settled in the region between the Rhine delta and the coastal areas of northern Germany, reaching down to the mouth of the Ems river\*. Researchers have long identified them as a major agent in mercantile exchange between the northwestern regions of the Frankish empire and the Baltic region, including southern Scandinavia, but also with the southern and eastern regions of Anglo-Saxon settlement. Frisian groups could be found in the 8<sup>th</sup> century (and with growing density in the 9<sup>th</sup> century) in the Carolingian regna. Like the Jewish merchants of a slightly later era, the Frisians were among the chartered communities of the centres of administration, be they royal courts, cathedral cities or major abbeys.

The Norman raids during the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century certainly disrupted these trade relations to some extent, but settlements of Frisian merchants continued to exist even after these incidents. Their presence was concentrated along the Rhine river from its mouths, where the important trade emporia of Domburg and Dorestad were located, to the settlements further upstream, such as Birten (near Xanten), Duisburg, Cologne, Mainz and Worms. As traders of wine, they even went as far upriver as Strasbourg in Alsace (see the poem by Ermoldus Nigellus on Louis the Pious; Lebecq 1983b, 26–30; Volquartz 2017, 136–138). Apart from Frisian cloth (*pallia Fresonica*), research has also identified other commodities, such as furs, slaves, walrus ivory and amber from northern

\* Translated by C. Cluse.

Europe. Exports from the Continent included basalt millstones from Mayen, Rhenish pottery, and glass products, but also swords. These types of objects have been noted in a number of archaeological contexts in England and Scandinavia (Lebecq 1998). Furthermore, recycled objects from Roman antiquity often found their way through long-distance trade to Scandinavia. There are numerous glass mosaic stones used for making pearls or – as found in Ribe, Jutland – ancient cameos and Roman bronze objects apparently sought for smelting (Clemens 2014, 139–140). This also includes objects made from the red sandstone found between Trier and Kyllburg in the nearby Eifel region, a fact that was confirmed by petrography. This group of artifacts includes querns, mortars, weights, rotating grindstones and oil lamps found in Dorestad (Mader/Kars 1985).

Much of the knowledge concerning Frisian settlements is derived from a passing reference in a single written source. Therefore, it cannot be excluded that they had further settlements elsewhere. The evidence is as varied as the diverse hagiographic, historiographic, manorial and diplomatic sources can be.

Thus, the *Annales Fuldenses* for the year 880 mention the destruction of Birten, near the former Roman camp of Vetera, *ubi pars maxima Frisionum habitabat* (MGH SS rer. Germ. 7, 96). The existence of a former Frisian settlement in Cologne can be deduced from the position of the Frisian Gate during the High Middle Ages, as well as the *platea frisonum* that led up to it (Lebecq 1983a, 40–41; Ubl 2022, 207). As for Mainz, the *Annales Fuldenses* report that in 886 the *optima pars* of the city, »*ubi Friones habitabant*«, was destroyed by fire (MGH SS rer. Germ. 7, 104). M. Schulze-Dörlamm has recently dealt with the position of this »best part of the city of Mainz«, which was commonly thought to have been situated on the bank of the Rhine. Instead of localising it in Löhrstraße, on the site where a number of Roman ships and also some Frisian or Anglo-Saxon sceatta coins were found, she suggested that the 9<sup>th</sup> century Frisian quarter must be situated further south, near the place close to the river known as »Auf dem Brand«. This toponym has been known since the 13<sup>th</sup> century and according to this hypothesis has preserved the memory of the fire since Carolingian times. This area near the bank of the Rhine was situated outside the Roman walls of the city but was secured by a stockade and a fosse-and-rampart fortification (Schulze-Dörlamm 2021; Matheus 2022, 40–43).

It is only in the case of Worms that we have several charters as well as an annalistic source concerning the Frisians settling on a *platea* of their own. They had to participate in the maintaining of the city wall towards the Rhine, as apparently the section abutted

their settlement. In a similar way, the Jewish community would later have had the same obligation to the part of the wall bordering on their quarter. Moreover, the Frisian community owed the bishop in Worms certain specified customs duties (Lebecq 1983a, 27–28, 238–240; Volquartz 2017, 128–134).

From time to time, the written sources contain details regarding the legal and political conditions that were set out for Frisian trade. There are hints that their trading activities enjoyed royal protection similar to that of Jewish merchants. It is assumed that their quarter in Mainz was situated at the topographical meeting point of the royal and archiepiscopal spheres of influence. In Worms, they were under the protection of the bishops, who had obtained the right to their customs payments in charters granted by the Carolingian and Ottonian rulers. In Cologne, on the other hand, the geography of their settlement indicates that they settled within the grounds of the church of St Gereon outside the Roman walls of the city. As for Prüm in the Eifel, an important Carolingian abbey housing the mortal remains of Emperor Lothair I, we hear of close Frisian relations with the abbey's filiation at St. Goar on the Rhine, a place of growing attraction as a pilgrimage centre. They are attested in the miracles of Saint Goar, written in 839 by a monk named Wandalbert (Lebecq 2010). The famous register of Prüm's estates and income rights dating from the late 9<sup>th</sup> century also mentions Frisian holdings, including a church, and income from the abbey's holdings in Duisburg. These include annual payments of silver on St Martin's day and at Easter, to be paid by what were probably the abbey's own Frisian settlers in Duisburg. The expression »*Fresones qui manent in Dusburhg*« probably indicates a Frisian presence of some duration (Schwab 1983, 242 ch. 97). It is quite possible that other Frisians, too, resided at Duisburg for a spell of time – Frisians, who were attached to other manors. Duisburg, after all, also featured a major royal court (Milz 1985, 6).

This summary sketch of the Frisian presence, above all in the vicinity of royal courts and cathedral cities along the Rhine, reminds us that, on the one hand, the sources on the issue are scarce and rudimentary and, on the other hand, that the conditions for Frisian trade relations could be remarkably diverse. Thus, members of Frisian ship companies might convene locally in small gatherings of strangers; however, they might also gather in settlements under the protection of a powerful landholder.

Let us now turn to Trier (fig. 1). It is known that the Moselle region, including the former Roman imperial residence and medieval episcopal see of Trier, was included in Frisian trade. The documentation

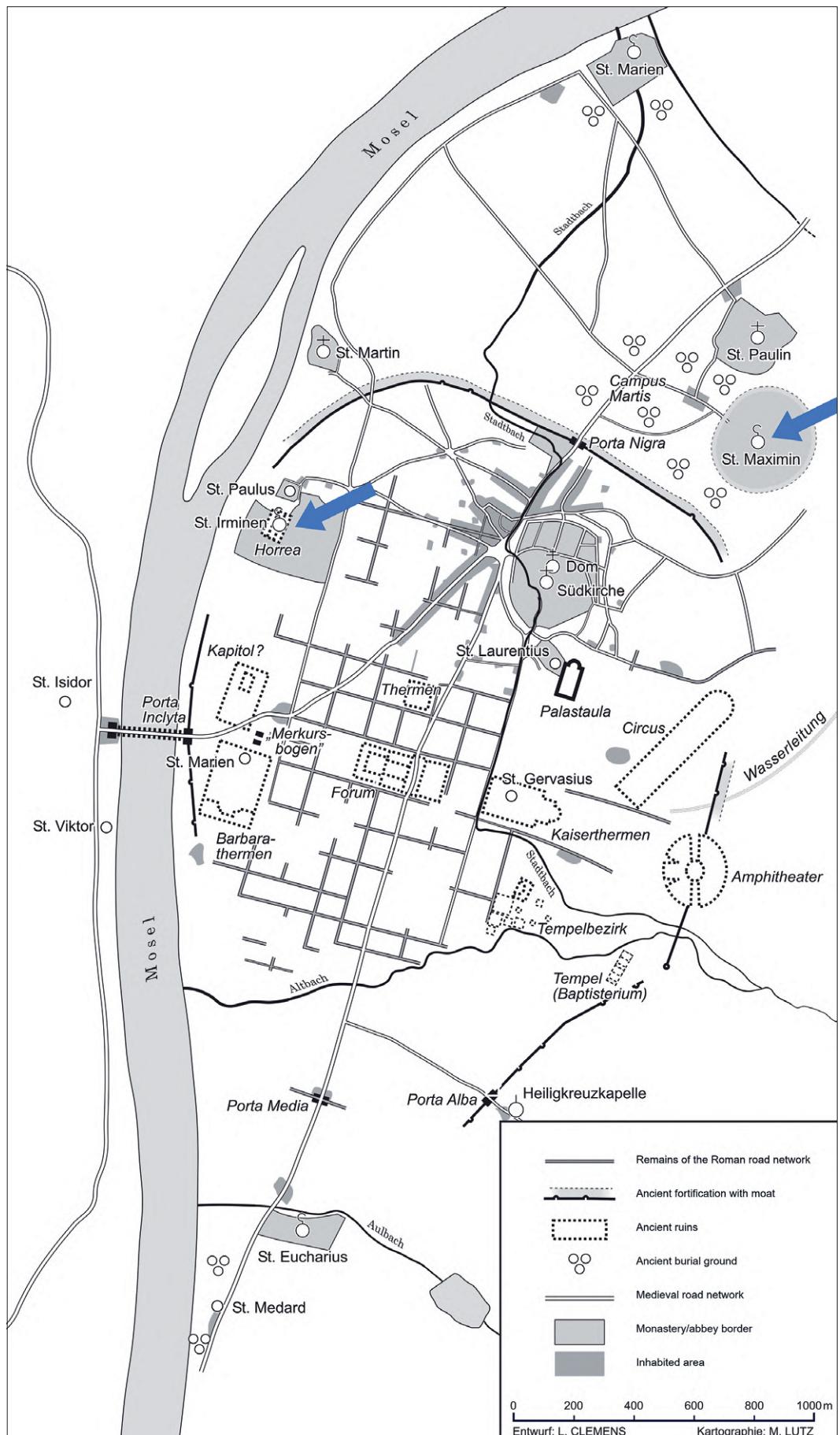
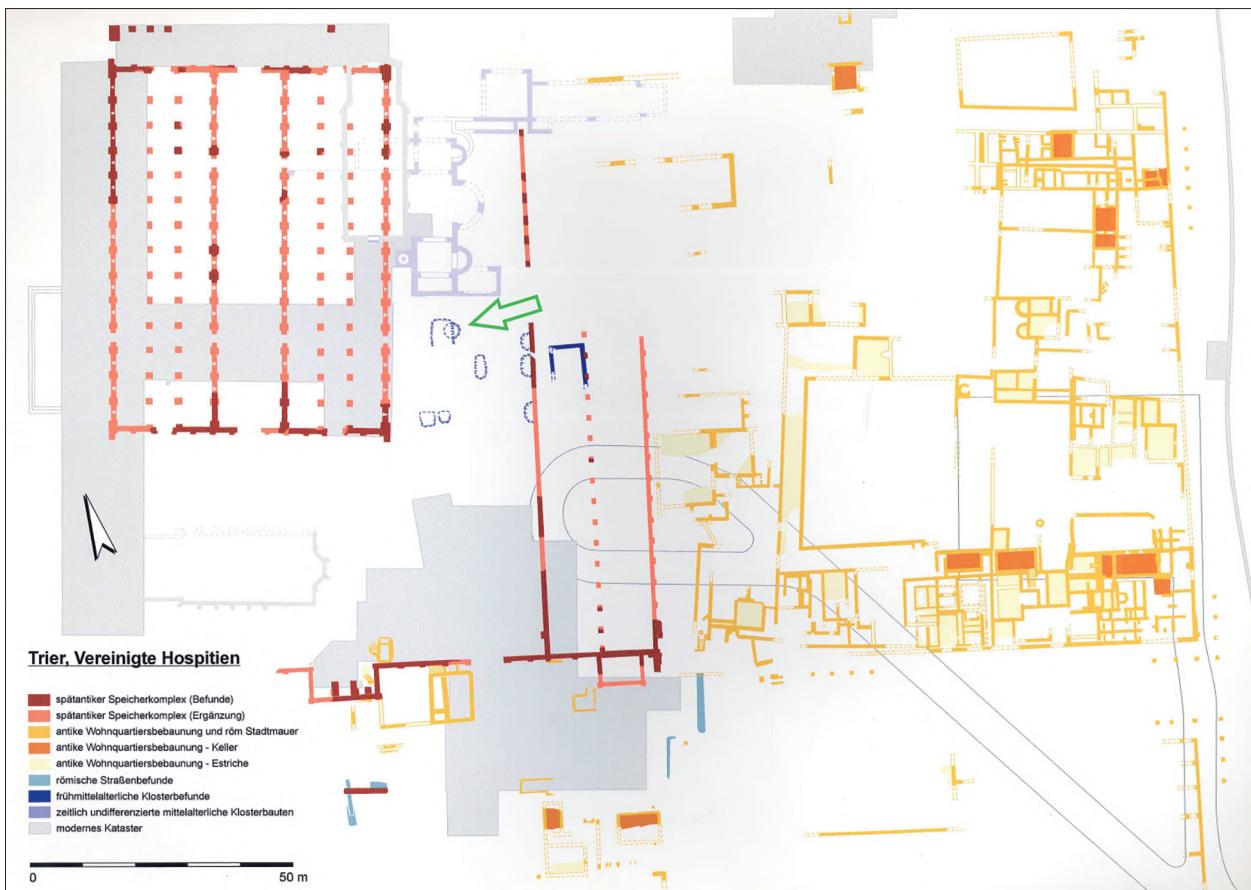
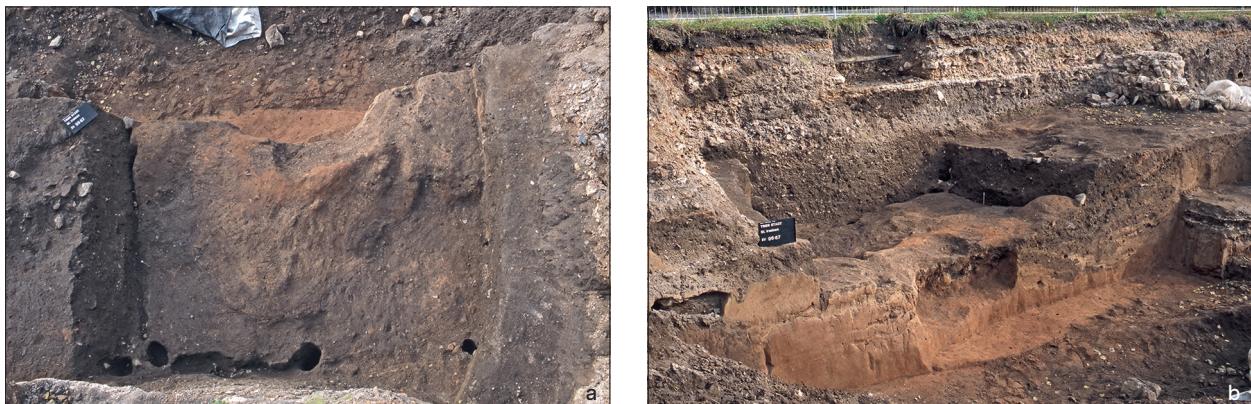


Fig. 1 Map of Trier during the 10<sup>th</sup> century with St Maximin and St Irminen (Saint Mary *ad horrea*; present-day Vereinigte Hospitien). – (Map M. Grün).



**Fig. 2** Trier, Vereinigte Hospitien. The green arrow indicates the location of the early medieval sunken hut. – (Map O. Haffner, after Clemens/Löhr 2001, I22–I23).



**Fig. 3** Trier, Vereinigte Hospitien. Sunken hut viewed from above (a) and from the southwest (b). – (Photos B. Kremer).

focuses on the imperial abbey of Saint Maximin situated north of the city (fig. 1). The abbey was developed from a late Roman cemeterial basilica of the early Christian community on the ancient cemetery where, among others, the remains of Agricetus and Maximinus, two 4<sup>th</sup> century bishops, were venerated. The monastic house harboured close relations with the Carolingian and later Ottonian rulers.

The Vita of Saint Maximin, possibly composed in the last third of the 8<sup>th</sup> century (on the date see Embach 2007, 267), relates a number of miracles ascribed to the saint. Within a single year he was said to have healed ten individuals, including one from Aquitaine, three from Germania, as well as three of Frisian descent (*Frisii genere*). The Frisians were obsessed by demons and therefore they were



**Fig. 4** Trier, Vereinigte Hospitien. Coin found in the sunken hut: **a** Obverse. – **b** Reverse. – (Photos T. Zühmer). – Scale 2:1.

brought before the saint's tomb by their parents. Moreover, this older Vita as well as a later version, edited in 839 by Lupus of Ferrières, mentions a certain Frisian named Ibbo, who had dedicated himself and all his possessions to the blessed Maximinus (»Qui cum ad B(eatum) Maximinum se cum omnibus quae habebat condonans«: AA SS Mai 7, 24; »se suamque substantiam beato Maximino donavit«, as Lupus puts it: MGH SS rer. Merov. 3, 80–81). Later, he conducted mercantile expeditions for the abbey *ultra mare*, that is, to England or Scandinavia. On one of these tours, the convoy of Frisian ships was overtaken by a storm, in which six ships were lost. According to the miracle story in the earlier Vita (with much direct speech), Ibbo exhorted his *nautae* to pray to the abbey's saint and was eventually saved with all his crew.

Ibbo had placed himself under the protection of Saint Maximinus and became a *homo ecclesiae* and privileged member of the abbey's *familia*, which implied that he also took advantage of their privileges, such as freedom from customs duties along the Moselle and Rhine rivers (Sprandel 1985, 24; Johanek 1987, 62). We may assume that the Frisians of Prüm Abbey enjoyed a similar status in Duisburg, which protected them from the claims of other authorities. When Ibbo stayed in Trier, he probably lived in the settlement around the Benedictine house. Similar conditions may have been obtained for those Frisians who lived near St Gereon's in Cologne.

Further evidence of a Frisian presence in Trier can be obtained from archaeology. In 1996, the construction of a new kitchen tract on the grounds of the Vereinigte Hospitien nursing home necessitated a survey (fig. 1). In this connection, archaeologists investigated parts of the early medieval abbey precincts of the noble nunnery of Saint Mary *ad horrea* (also *in horreo*), later called St Irminen after its second abbess. In its early years, this monastic house had harboured close relations with the early Carolingians (Knichel 1999, 938–939). The original name *ad horrea* relates to the fact that the abbey was built on the site of the late Roman fortified granaries of

Trier near the bank of the Moselle. It also shows that locals were still aware of this former function at the time of its foundation in the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century (Clemens 2003, 71).

The excavations took place immediately north of the area where, in 1926, sizeable finds of ceramics were recovered from pits and cellars in the earth, later to be known to researchers as »Hospitalkeramik«, on account of their place of discovery (Hussong 1936; 1944, 181–185; Hussong/Cüppers 1972, 99–100; Bis-Worch 1995, 12–13). The 1996 excavations not only proved the existence of yet another late Roman granary building – its southern limits had already been observed in 1993, so its length could be established at 64 m – but also the remains of the monastery's settlement, which was datable by coin finds (fig. 2). The copious finds allow for important insights into the techniques of early medieval production relating to glass and non-ferrous metals. The traces include two waste shafts from the late 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries as well as the settlement remains from the late 9<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Clemens/Löhr 1998, 419–423; 2001, 121–123; Clemens 2001, 48–53).

Let us look at one of the last finds in more detail. It concerns a partly excavated sunken hut. The cave was dug into an earlier waste shaft (fig. 3a–b). Its northern side is preserved. It features three post bases and extends over 3.80 m. One of the posts was apparently renewed at some point in time, which indicates a longer period of use of this building. The central post, which at 40 cm is much thicker than the outer ones (18 cm and 24 cm in diameter), was apparently the main support of this construction. The remains of the western and eastern sides could be investigated to a length of 3.10 m, the rest was removed in 1926. The three sides still in evidence all featured small crevices of c. 10 cm in width and 10 cm in depth, which apparently served to insert planks and boards. The rich finds (figs 4–5) included, among other objects, a fibula of pressed tinplate (fig. 5, 1) and a penny coin struck in Trier under Charles III, between 911 and 923 (Weiller 1988, 279–

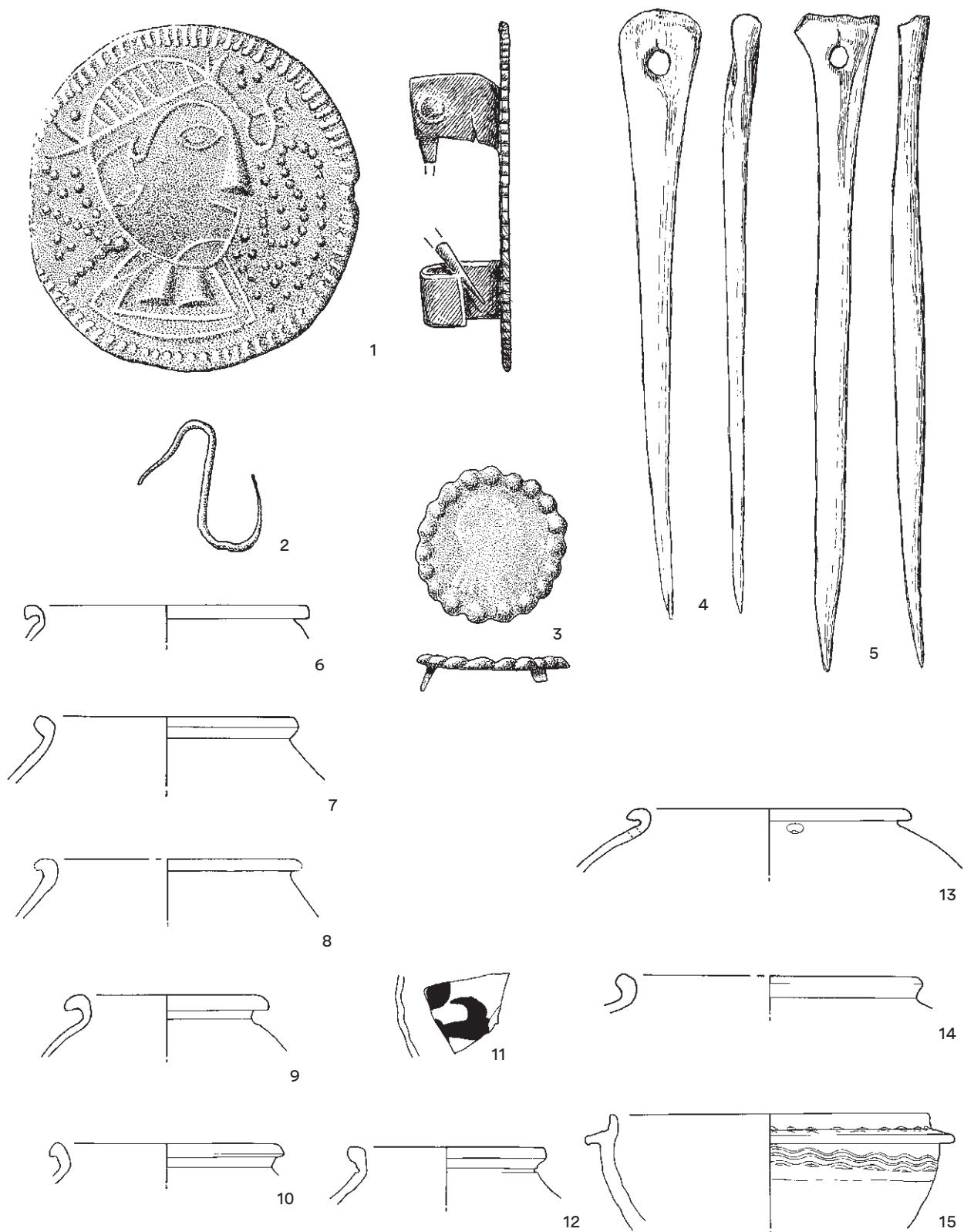
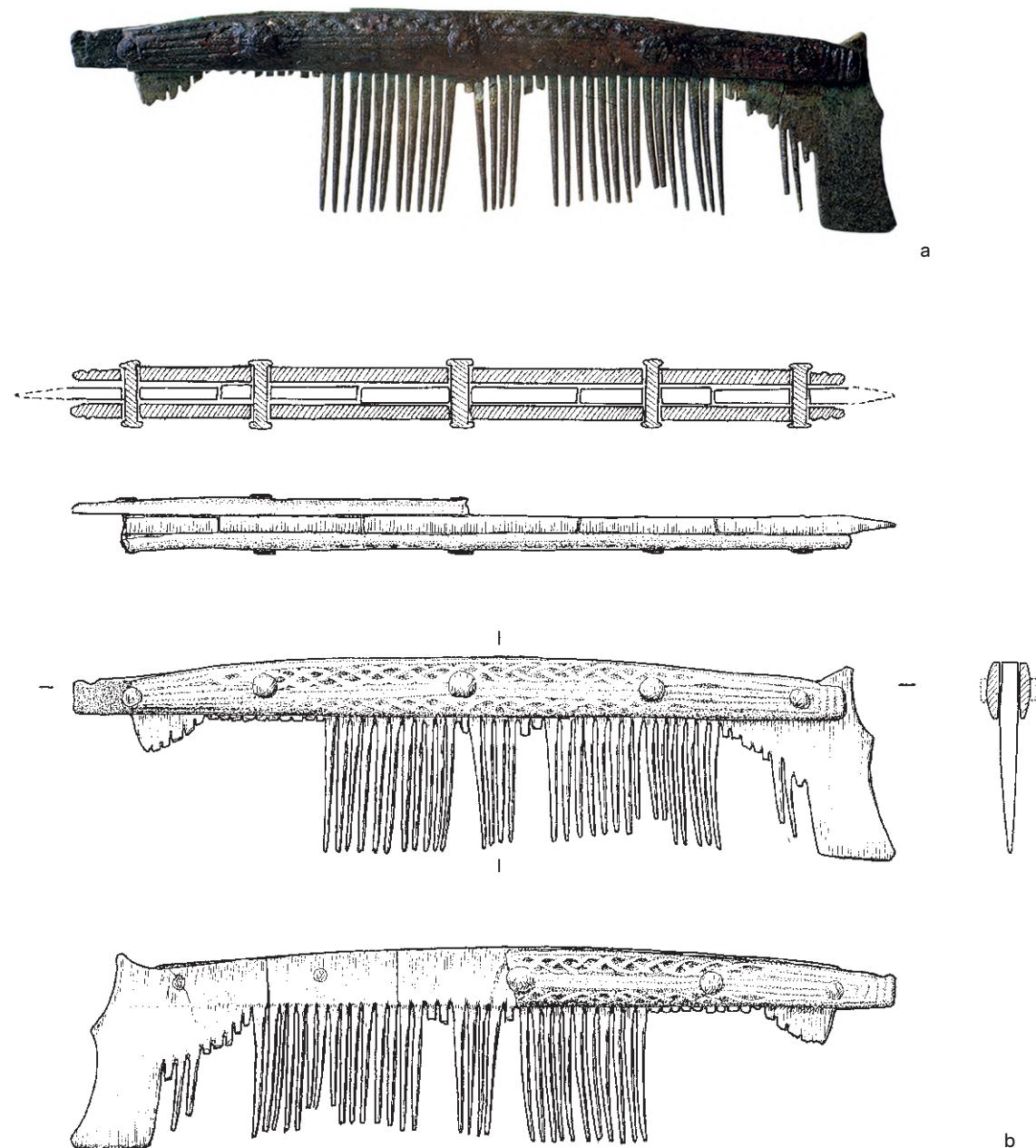


Fig. 5 Trier, Vereinigte Hospitien. Finds from the sunken hut and its surroundings. – (Drawings H. Backes). – 1–5 scale 1:1; 6–15 scale 1:3.

280, type 35; **fig. 4**) as well as numerous pottery fragments, a bronze fishing hook, and two bone needles (**fig. 5, 2, 4–15**). Outside the edifice, a coin fibula was found in an occupation layer related to it (**fig. 5, 3**; Clemens/Löhr 1998, 422–423).

The remains of a bone comb with bronze handle rails featuring braided ornaments (**fig. 6a–b**) measuring 12 cm in length and up to 3 cm in height, represent an exceptional find. The comb and handle rails are joined by five bronze rivets (Clemens



**Fig. 6** Trier, Vereinigte Hospitien. Comb with bronze handlebars. – (a photo T. Zühmer; b drawings M. Diederich). – Scale 1:1.

2020). As the studies by M. Müller-Wille, D. Meier and, most recently, V. Hilberg show, known parallels of this type of comb originate from the Baltic region, especially from places like Kosel and Hedeby/Haithabu in Schleswig-Holstein, Lejre in Zealand, Birka, Gotland, Wiskiauten in the Kaliningrad region, Staraja Ladoga, Bolsoe-Timerevo and Gnezdovo in Russia. There are also some specimens from other regions, for instance from London and Frisia, namely from Almenum near Harlingen and Aalsum in the Groningen province (Müller-Wille 1988; Mei-

er 1994, 154–156, and especially the recent survey of many hitherto unpublished objects in Hilberg 2009, 81, to whom I am indebted for further references) (fig. 7). We may assume that it was produced at the trading post of Hedeby/Haithabu on the Schlei river, where numerous fragmented moulds for making the bronze handle rails, but also finished specimens, (41 examples so far) have been uncovered (figs 8–9; Schietzel 2014, 421). In places where they appear in association with other finds, they can be safely dated to the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

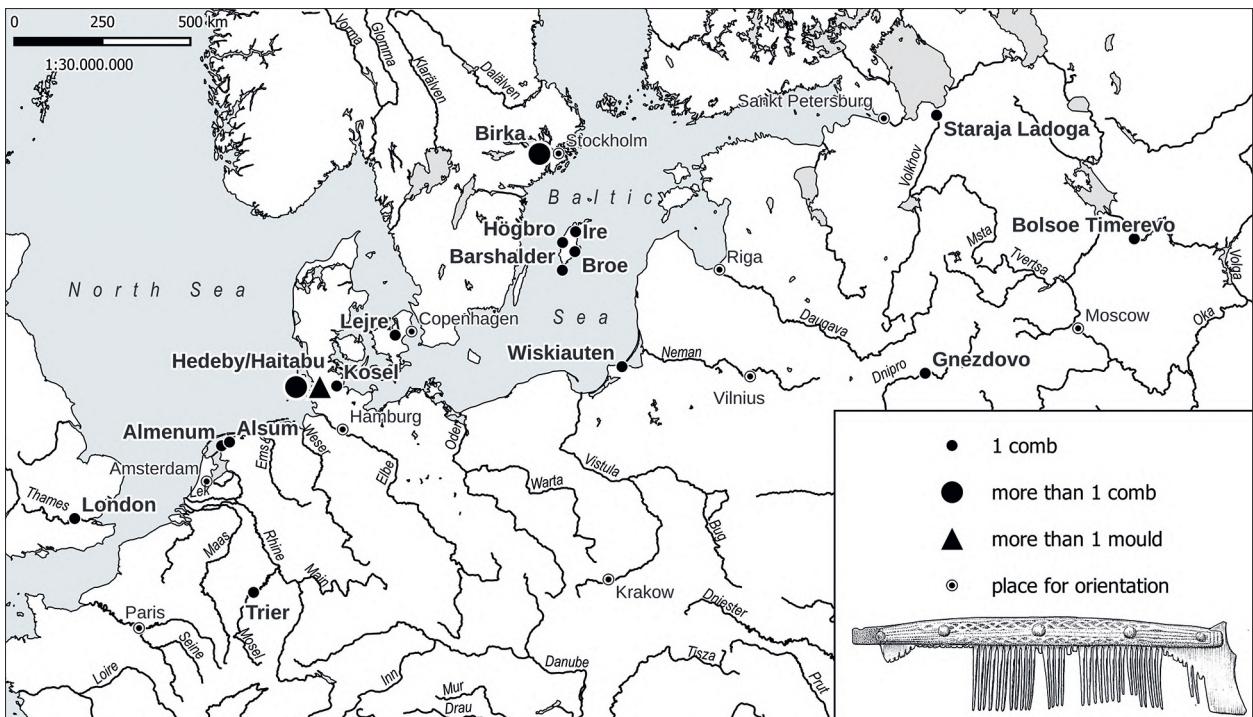


Fig. 7 Map showing the distribution of combs with bronze handlebars according to Hilberg 2009, 81. – (Map M. Grün).



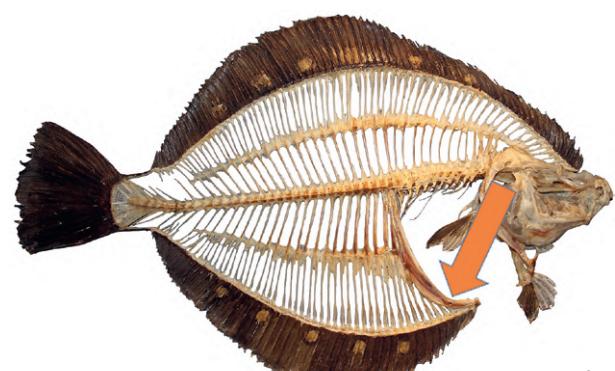
Fig. 8 A comb from Haithabu. – (After Schietzel 2014, fig. 421).



Fig. 9 Moulds for comb handlebars from Haithabu. – (After Schietzel 2014, fig. 421).



a



b

Fig. 10 Trier, Vereinigte Hospitien: a Os analis of a maritime flatfish recovered from the fillings of the sunken hut. – b Flounder, skeleton. – (Photo a T. Zühmer; b © Sebena Jane Blackbird/Alamy Stock Foto).



**Fig. 11** Coin fibulae from Trier: **a-b** Coin fibulae from the Palastplatz. – **c** Coin fibula from the Windstraße. – (Photos a after Böhner 1958, pl. 19, 1; b-c after Clemens 1988, 520 fig. 4, 10-11). – Scale 2:1.

Other material, which was excavated next to the aforementioned find within the grounds of St Irminen at Trier, merits attention. This material comprises more than 17,000 animal bones, which were analysed and identified by R. Schoon and D. Heinrich in a project funded by the German Research Association (DFG) (Schoon 2018; Heinrich 2018). Heinrich has analysed the 1,039 fishbone remains. These were mostly found in the early medieval waste shafts, though 52 of them come from the sunken hut discussed above. All but one come from non-domesticated river fish not held in ponds. However, one fishbone from the sunken hut turns out to be the boomerang-shaped *Os anale* of a flatfish or, more precisely, a plaice (fig. 10). As it must come from an adult individual that once measured more than 30 cm in length, it cannot be from one of those young flatfish that probably swam up the Rhine and Moselle rivers, but from an individual caught in the North Sea or the Baltic. D. Heinrich considers this find as »the remains of a trading object or of the provisions of a ship crew« (Heinrich 2018, 309).

This finally leads to the find of a bronze coin fibula with a coarse pearl ring found next to the sunken hut (fig. 5, 3). This type of brooch is rare in the Trier region and its surroundings. From the area of the city, where far more than one hundred 8<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> centuries brooches were uncovered, only four, including the one from St Irminen, are of this type. There are no such brooches from the adjacent region, for example, from the little fortification of Harpelstein near Horath in the Bernkastel-Wittlich district, where 28 fibulae were found (Clemens/Gilles 1991; Clemens 2006). The coin's image may well signify something and indicate that its bearer was a long-distance trader working in the luxury segment of the trade. The maps of comparable finds presented

by P. Berghaus and S. Spiong indicate a core area of distribution, especially of pieces with a coarse pearl ring, in Frisia (Berghaus 1994, 114; Spiong 2000, 304). Berghaus highlights a semi-finished piece from Utrum (Berghaus 1994, 115) and points out a nearby production site. Other finds time and again come from along the major river systems of northern Europe. Of the three other pieces found in Trier, two were found near the archbishop's palace (the former late-Roman palace hall; fig. 11a-b), including one bearing a pseudo-inscription, and one is from Windstraße in close proximity of the cathedral (Clemens 1988, 520–521, 537; fig. 11c). These sites suggest that we should discuss the possible links between coin fibulae and individuals active in long-distance trade as their bearers.

Another type of find commonly associated with Frisian trade is rare in the Trier region. Here, only a few of the Frisian/Anglo-Saxon sceatta coins have been uncovered so far: Two specimens of the »porcupine« type come from the Moselle near the Roman bridge and from Liebfrauenstraße in the cathedral close (Gilles 1981, 30 fig. 1, 9; 1985, 44 fig. 2, 7; Petry 1992, 332–333). More recently, another sceatta of this type was found in the grounds of a former Roman villa in Holsthum »Auf den Mauern« (Bitburg-Prüm district) (Rheinisches Landesmuseum Trier EV 1991, 78, find no. 18, photo nos RLM Trier RE 1992, 82/13 and 14). There have been further finds in the Middle Rhine area (Saal 2016; Fischer zu Cramburg 2020; see Gierszewska-Noszczyńska/Kaiser, this volume). However, there is also some evidence for the trading of goods from the southern regions to the North; for instance, numerous coins struck in mints in Upper Lotharingia during the Merovingian and Carolingian periods were found in the Frisian settlement areas, especially in the Rhine delta area (Petry 1992, 275–352).

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