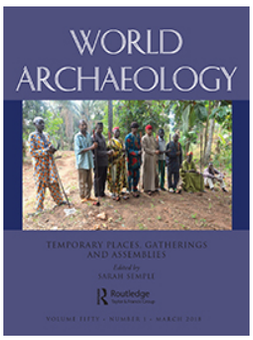

World Archaeology

ISSN: 0043-8243 (Print) 1470-1375 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rwar20

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To cite this article: Marie Ødegaard (2018) *Thing* sites, cult, churches, games and markets in Viking and medieval southeast Norway, AD *c*.800–1600, World Archaeology, 50:1, 150-164, DOI: 10.1080/00438243.2018.1488610

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.2018.1488610

WORLD ARCHAEOLOGY
2018, VOL. 50, NO. 1, 150–164
https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.2018.1488610

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ARTICLE

Thing sites, cult, churches, games and markets in Viking and medieval southeast Norway, AD *c*.800–1600

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ABSTRACT

The question of the co-location of different kinds of assembly, such as Old Norse *things*, churches, games and markets, is a familiar debate in archaeology and history. A close connection between *thing* and church sites is recognized in Scandinavia suggesting that law and religion were closely connected. While the location of different assemblies seems to have been determined by logistical practicalities and the choice of certain kinds of topographic feature, power relations may also have played a crucial part in dictating their setting. After the eleventh/twelfth centuries in Norway, royal regulation of *things* and markets increased. The locations of many types of gathering remained consistent, however, but the *thing* system in particular seems to have offered a mechanism for consolidating royal power.

KEYWORDS

Things; markets; games; central places; law; religion; Scandinavia

Some have argued that there was once a close link between legal assemblies, the so-called *things* (Old Norse *þing*), pre-Christian cult sites and medieval churches as well as different forms of games and markets (e.g. Munch [1852, 152–3]; Koht [1921, 29]; Schück [1926, 170–1]). It is also suggested that every parish had a site where games such as horse racing and fights took place (Skar 1909, 204). Within the same research tradition, it has also been argued that there was a high degree of continuity in the location of rural *thing* sites (Bugge 1920). The exact location of these different types of gatherings in the landscape is, however, rarely discussed or studied within a broader geographical context.

The institution for justice in Scandinavia in the Viking Age (AD 800–1050) and Middle Ages (AD 1050–1600) was the *thing*, a 'multi-functional venue for discussion and determination of any matter of communal concern' (Vogt and Esmark 2013, 152). This functioned at different hierarchical and geographical levels. The evidence for games/activities such as horse fights and horse races is particularly strong in Viking and medieval times in Norway, Sweden and Iceland and became widespread in northern England through Norse expansion in the Viking Age (Loftsgarden, Ramstad, and Stylegar 2017).

In this paper, using the coastal and central parts of southeast Norway, the co-location of these types of gathering is explored. In the Middle Ages, this area belonged to the *Borgarthing* law province and had four administrative levels, each with associated *thing* sites. The relationship of the *thing* meetings and games are important for understanding the power dynamics of the law provinces: for example, did a need for common meeting sites and trading venues prompt the

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emergence and co-location of different functions, or was local or royal power influential in guiding the situation of *things* and other types of gathering?

The development of the Norwegian kingdom during the eleventh and thirteenth century, alongside the advent of Christianization and the establishment of the Christian Church, are considered to be driving factors in the strengthening of local to supra-regional organization in Norway (Helle 1974, 216, 224–9). These factors may have changed the shape of administrative districts and the location of *things*. This question, relevant to processes of territorialization and kingdom formation across Scandinavia and northern Europe, explored here in the context of the Borgar*thing* law province and the agricultural areas of south and east Norway, with the administrative districts of Fyresdal in Telemark and Råde in Østfold serving as case studies (Figure 1).

Materials and methods

Activities at Norwegian *thing* or assembly sites were brief and seasonal and have left few archaeological traces. Thus written sources, especially diplomas and place names, are important in the identification of assemblies of all types. Diplomas are letters and documents with legal force, which survive from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries. These are published in the series *Diplomatarium Norvegicum* (Unger et al. 1874–2001). The diplomas relating to *things* have been classified by the author into three categories, *certain, probable* and *possible thing* sites based on the available evidence such as the number and type of cases or the list of attendees (Ødegaard 2015, 66–7). *Certain thing* sites are categorized by diplomas containing the term 'correct *thing* site', indicating the legally recognized assemblies. These were rural *things* and related to the so-called Old Norse *skipreiður* (sg. *skipreiða*) units, which were subdivided into quarters or *fjórðungar* (sg. *fjorðungr*) each served by a local *thing* and one of which was common to the entire *skipreiða* area. These rural *things* were also probably *althings*, where the local population would meet (e.g. Sanmark [2017, 40]).

In Scandinavian history and archaeology, there is a long tradition of using place names to construct a relative chronology and place names containing the Old Norse words *thing, leikr, skeið* and *kaupangr* can be used to identify types of assemblies and gatherings (Svensson 2007; Baker 2014). The word Old Norse *skeið* n., meaning 'course for races or race riding' (Rygh 1897, 75), is usually linked to horse racing and -fighting, with sacred/ritual connotations (Vikstrand 2010,361).[1] Names compiled with *leikr* m. may imply gatherings for games such as wrestling and horse fighting (Rygh 1897, 64–5). The *Frostathing* law (§ X, 48) and the National law (§ VII, 36) contain provisions for regulating horse fights and races (Hagland and Sandnes 1994, 46; Taranger 1915, VII, 36) and such activities may date far back in time (Vikstrand 2010, 351–5; Stylegar 2006, 212–15).

The words *-thing, -leikr* and *-skeið* were gathered from the nineteenth-century 'farm name register' *Norske Gaardsnavne* (dokpro.uio.no) and Norway's official register of place names in public use, *Sentralt stadnamnregister* (SSR) (kart.kystverket.no). The data contain not only references to land-registered farms (i.e. *matrikkelgård*) and smaller farms (*bruk*) but also some minor names of burial mounds, fields, large stones and so on. Sacral place names were also collated, but are only referred to here in reference to the *thing* system as these are very common and can have varied meanings. Assembly names are difficult to date, but it is generally considered they date to the Viking Age if not before (Sandnes 1976, 31).

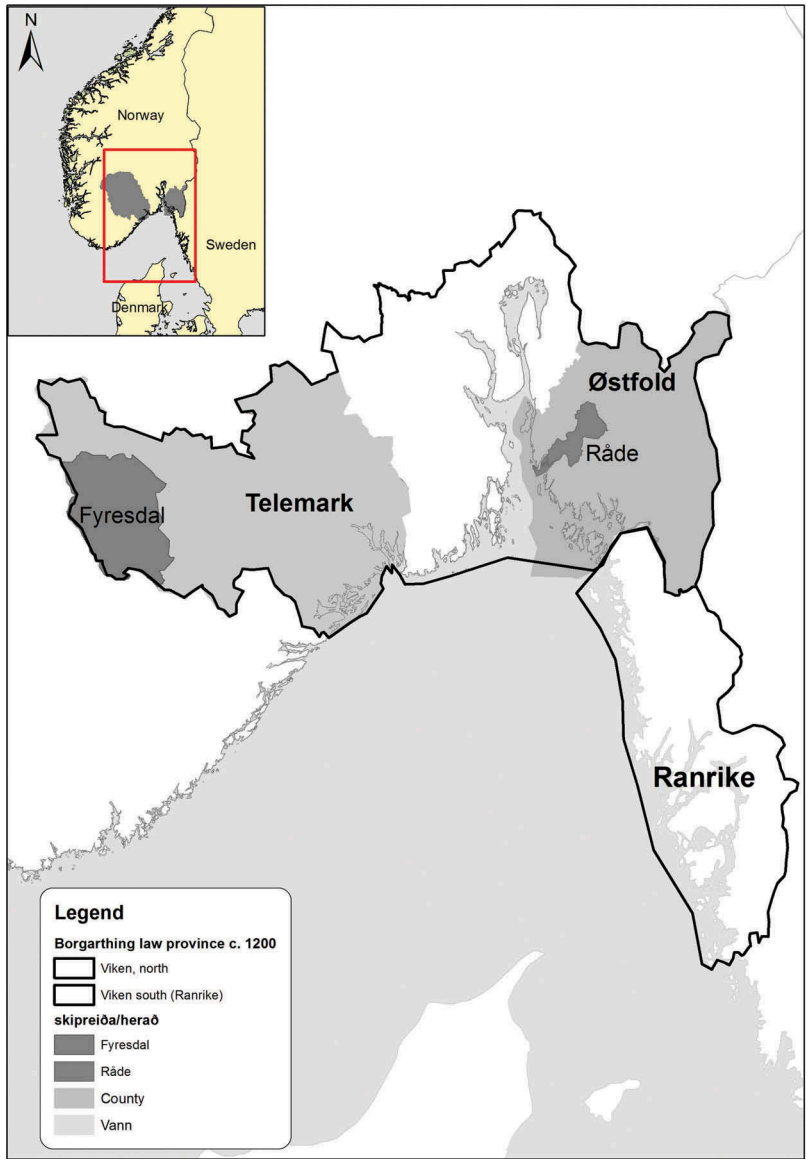

Figure 1. The Borgarthing law province *c.*1200 with Østfold and Telemark County marked in light grey, and the survey areas of Fyresdal and Råde marked in dark grey.

Thing sites in the Borgarthing law province

Using these sources, some 117 possible rural *thing sites* were identified in the *Borgarthing* law province (Figure 2), of which 49 sites are classified as *certain*, 19 as *probable* and 49 as *possible*. Diplomas survive relating to over a third of known churches in the Borgathing area, and while many of these indicate the *thing* was held in the church or churchyard, the majority can only be identified as *possible thing sites*. Of the 49 *certain* and 19 *probable thing sites*, 23 (34 %) were held at or in a medieval church. A relatively close connection is suggested therefore between churches

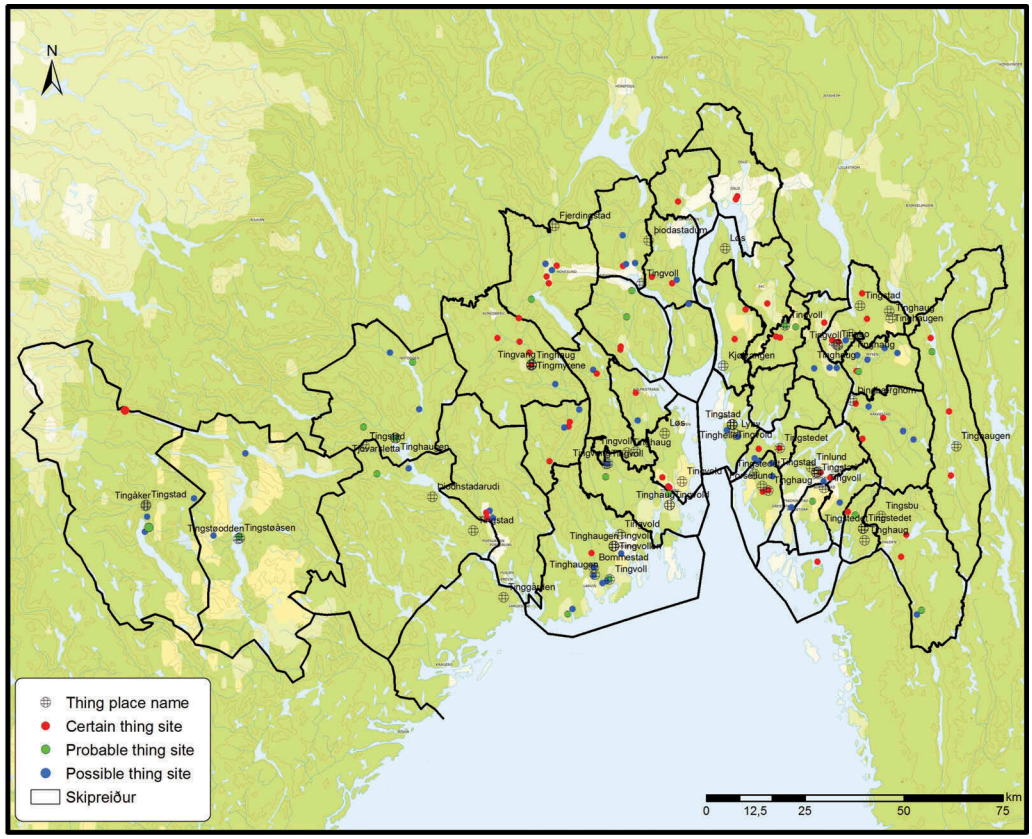

Figure 2. The distribution of *certain* and *probable thing* sites in the heruð/skipreiður areas as well as sites for *things* attributed by place names in the Borgarthing law province.

and *thing sites* in the Middle Ages and it is possible that these also reference older gathering places.

The place name data provided an additional 55 names containing *-thing* and four mentioning *-lýðr, ljóðr* meaning people/crowd and thus a regular place of gathering or a *thing* (Fritzner 1867, 419, NG I, 347). Figure 2 shows that most names are preserved in the central areas around the Oslo Fjord. If more than one of these name types is recorded at the same place then these are considered a safe guide to a place with legal functions (Svensson 2007, 197). This can be seen at Efteløt in Sandsvær, where four names occur in proximity to a *certain thing* site named in the diplomas (-Tingvoll, Tinghaug, Tingmyrene and Tingvang) (Ødegaard 2013). When these kinds of place names do not coincide with later *thing* sites, we might assume that a change in site location has taken place and that these refer to an older *thing*.

As Figure 2 indicates, the majority of the identified assembly places are located in coastal and central agricultural areas, in valleys and near rivers and lakes/sea. Some sites distinguish themselves by being located at or close to communication hubs, where land- and water-based communications met. The correlation of place-names and location cited as assemblies in the medieval diplomas also imply a high level of continuity in the location of local *things* across the Viking Age and Middle Ages (Ødegaard 2015, 370).

Markets and sites associated with wrestling, horse-fighting and racing

Five markets are known, of which four were located near possible *thing* sites, namely, Sem, Missingen, Komnes and Bø (Figure 3).[2] In Eiker, an organized metal-detecting survey and a geophysical survey have revealed a possible market at the farm of Sem (Ødegaard 2013; **[q]TQ5 [/q]** Kristiansen, Nau and Gustafsen 2016). Another possible market may have been co-located with the *probable thing* site at the Bø Old Church in Lindheim *skipreiða* in present-day Telemark County, where 800 coins, mainly dating to the Middle Ages, were found scattered under the church floor (Sawyer 2003, 172–3). Finds of scales and 'counting sticks' under the church floor from Ringebu church may also signal a market site (Knoph 1983, 42). However, such finds could also indicate votive rather than commercial activity (Gullbekk 2009, 272; Ramberg 2017). At the *possible thing* site of Komnes in Sandsvær, present-day Kongsberg, the place name might derive from *Kaupmannsnes*, containing Old Norse *kaupmaðr*, trader, and *nes*, promontory (Fritzner 1867, Rygh 1909, 371) perhaps implying marketing in the eleventh century or later (Sawyer 2003, 170).

Nineteen names contain *-leikr* and 17 mention *skeið*. The presence of some 36 names for gatherings associated with games across 21 known *skipreiður* units (Figure 3), with 10 *skipreiður* hosting more than one game site, may imply such gatherings were located within smaller districts, such as the quarters. Instances of *skeið* and *leikr* names are also spatially distant from each other,

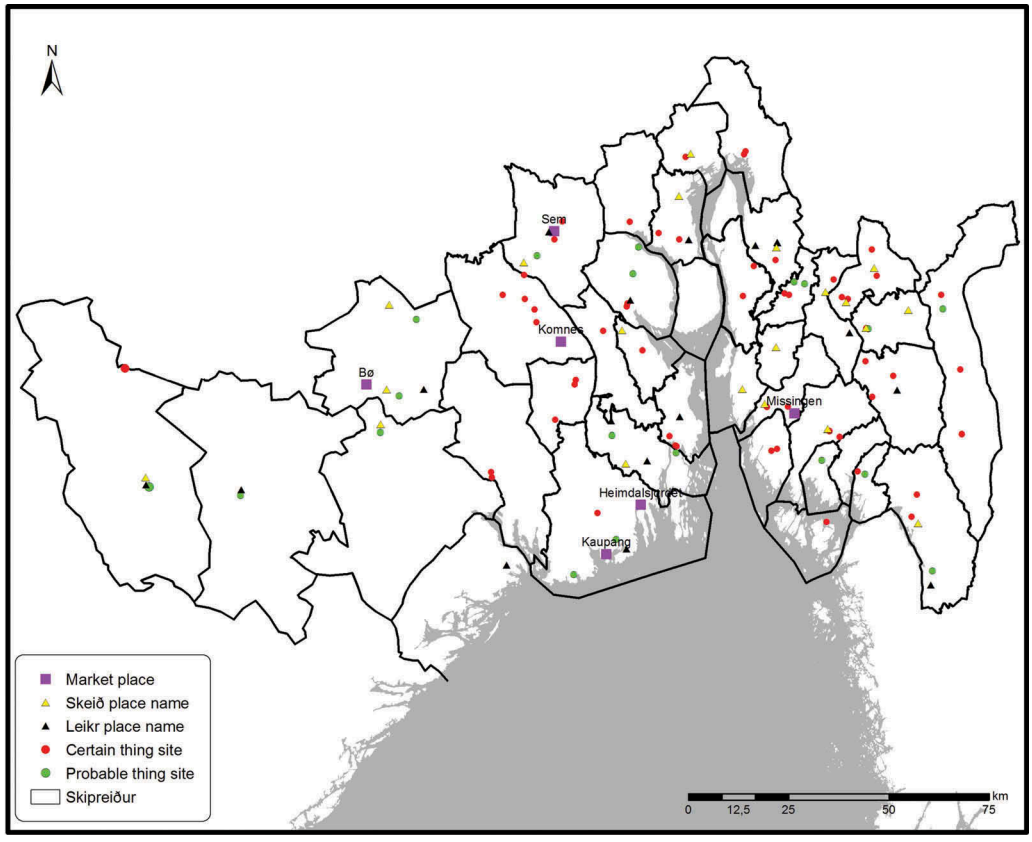

Figure 3. Distribution of markets, and games indicated by place names containing ON leikr and skeið in the Borgarthing area.

with just one instance of two names situated a few kilometres apart in Follo *skipreiða* (Figure 3). This supports the notion that such sites may have related to different rural areas. It has been argued that *skeið* is a younger medieval name for horse racing, post-dating the Old Norse names of *hestaþing, leikmót* and *leikstefna* (Stenvik 2001). The *leikr* names could thus be older or simply indicate that the names for activities changed over time. Only one example is evident of a *thing* and game site located in the same place,[3] but four survive at neighbouring farms just a few kilometres from *thing* sites,[4] and two more lie only a kilometre from a known *thing*.[5] This connection between gatherings for games and *thing* sites is now explored further in two case studies.

Fyresdal, Telemark County

Fyresdal is situated in West Telemark County in hilly mountain terrain. In the fourteenth century, Fyresdal consisted of an administrative division called Old Norse *heruð* (sg. *herað*) (Hansen 1980, 25), equivalent to *skipreiður* (Ødegaard 2015). An older name for Fyresdal was Moland, indicating Moland's central position when the *herað* was named. There were four parish churches here in the Middle Ages (Qvisling 1912). One *certain thing* site is identified at the farm of Åsland (e.g. Lange and Unger 1860 [1395], 230; Unger and Huitfeldt-Kaas 1878 [1450-1460], 337) and one *probable* site at the farm of Væting (e.g. Lange and Unger 1860 [1395], 368; Unger and Huitfelt-Kaas 1878 [1450], 203); both date to medieval times (Figure 4). The name Åsland, *Ásaland*, may contain Old Norse *æsir*, gen. *ása* in the first paragraph (Olsen 1915, 17), i.e. a member of the principal pantheon in Norse religion, suggesting a possible cult site of some considerable age (Bugge 1920, 127).

The *probable thing* on Væting was located next to the farm of Moland and its medieval church (Figure 4). Two *thing* names lie approximately 5.5 km to the north, perhaps old sites, obsolete by the medieval era. Located between these two sites is the farm of Skeimo and the so-called 'Skeid stones' (N 160). This *skeið* is well-known from the seventeenth- to early nineteenth-century sources as a site where horse-fighting and racing took place annually (Glostrup 1618, 39). Written sources describe four stones here (of which two are still extant) that marked the field for games (cf. Stylegar 2014). One stone contains a tenth/eleventh-century runic inscription that reads:

þorolr rit
saskal raþa ru(na)[r]
(e)**r lr stirebes**

translated in Old Norse to *as þórolfr reit. Sá skal ráða rú(nar), er lér stigreips*, i.e.: 'Thorolf wrote. He shall command (these) runes who lends (another person) a stirrup' (Olsen 1951, 234). The translation is disputed, especially the interpretation of *stigreips* as stirrup, and some interpret the last part **þorolr storols** as a man's name, *Þórolfr Stórolfsson* (Källström 2007, 416), however, this offers an interesting additional perspective which might connect the games known from the early-modern era with much earlier and similar activities at the site.

Only two *thing* sites are known in Fyresdal: one was located next to a church. In the *Borgarthing* law province, the quarters and parishes often coincide thus a *skipreiða*/*herað*-district likely hosted four churches and four *thing* sites. This pattern may be evident in Fyresdal *herað* but is not fully evidenced. Only one *skeið* is known, and this was centrally located in the *herað*. Early-modern

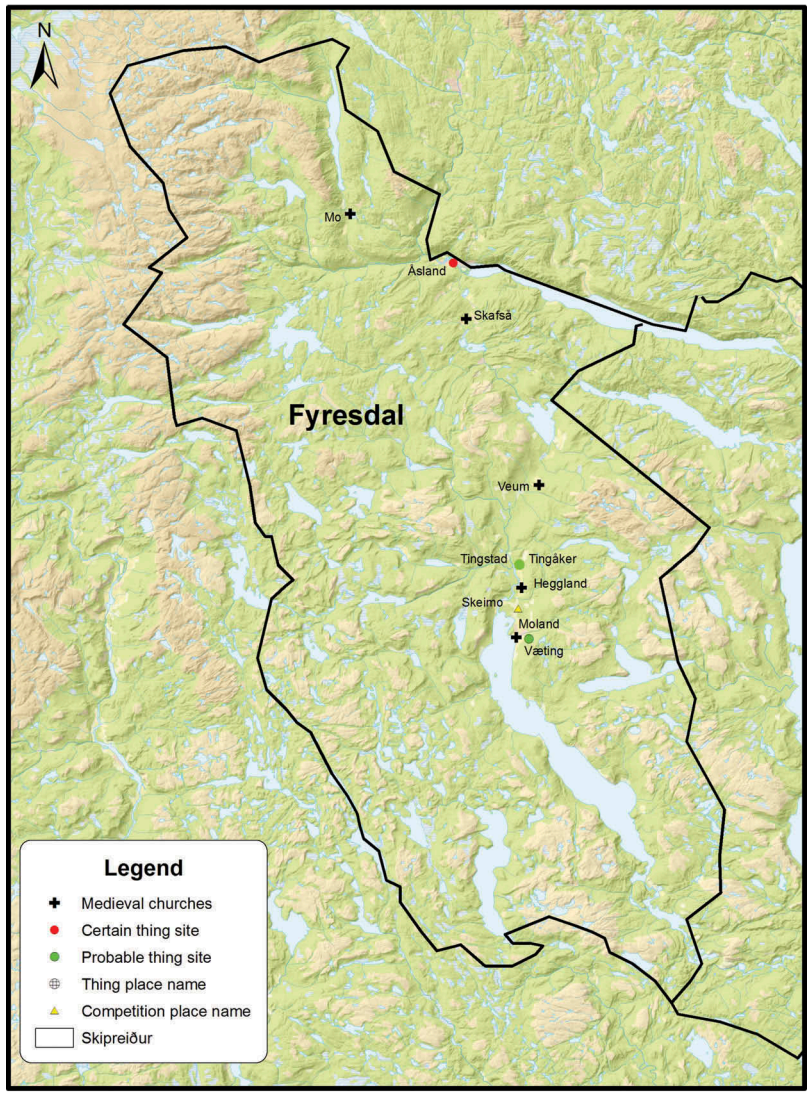

Figure 4. The distribution of *thing* sites, skeið and churches in Moland herað, present Fyresdal in Telemark County. Heggland church was a private church, thus there were four medieval parish churches in Fyresdal.

written sources describe people coming together from the surrounding parishes to the games (Glostrup 1618, 39), implying this was a regional meeting site.

Råde, Østfold County

In Råde *skipreiða*, two *certain thing site*s are known, first described in the early 1400s, at the farm of Huseby (DN Unger and Huitfelt-Kaas 1893 [1404], 25; Magerøy 1970 [1434], 344, 349) and the farm of Lundeby (e.g. Unger, C.C.A. and Huitfeldt-Kaas 1871 [1493], 435; Ødegaard 2015, 196). In addition, there may have been a *possible thing* on the farm of Åker (Huitfelt-Kaas 1903 [1553], 367). Nevertheless, only one quarter – Missingen *fjorðungr* – is attested as a unit in existence in the

Middle Ages. The quarter name indicates that Missingen may have had legal functions when the quarter was formed (cf. Vikstrand 2010, 151, 375). The *things* are all, with the exception of Huseby and Åker, located in separate (if later) quarters (*fjorðungar*) (Figure 5).

Huseby had a church in the Middle Ages, and Lundeby was a neighbouring farm to Råde church. Three stone settings called 'Tingstedet' i.e. the *thing* site, suggest the location of the *thing* at Lundeby. Two other place names are interesting: the farm Åker in the south-west and Åkeberg *Akraberg* in the east, containing a*kr* m., which is a name for dry areas well suited for gatherings and often linked to legal assemblies in Scandinavia (Brink 1996, 264; Sanmark 2017, 13). All *thing* sites had central positions in the *skipreiða* compared to the historic settlements, perhaps with the exception of Åker (Figure 5). They were all located near important communication routes, especially Missingen, located where land- and water-based communications meet (Figure 5).

Archaeological finds from Missingen/Åkeberg indicate that the area was a central place in the Iron Age. In 2003/2004, the Museum of Cultural History excavated several long-houses here, one of which was a 61 m-long hall building, dated to AD 30–410 (Bårdseth and Sandvik 2007, 141). This is one of the largest known buildings of the Scandinavian Early Iron Age. Such large halls have been suggested as a requirement for political and religious activities (Løken 2001). In 2014, the Museum of Cultural History initiated an organized metal-detector investigation here. Finds demonstrating

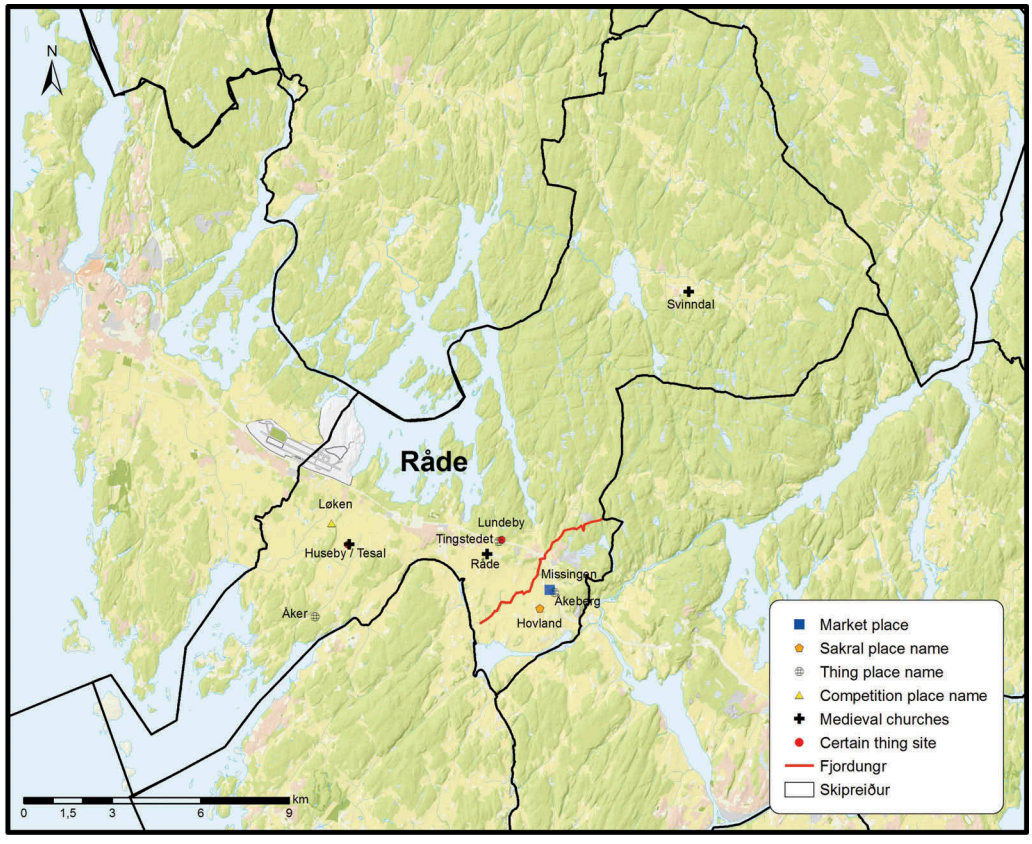

Figure 5. Map showing the distribution of *thing* sites, churches, place names indicating assemblies and the market place at Missingen in Råde, which also gave its name to a quarter. Svinndal parish was probably a later addition to the skipreiða area.

workshop activities, handicrafts and precious-metal manufacturing indicate that the site was a central place and possibly a marketplace lasting from the first century AD to the eleventh/twelfth centuries (Maixner 2015, 37–8). The settlement at Missingen may have had a supra-regional role (Maixner 2015, 39) and implies a close connection between central places and later *thing* sites. By the Middle Ages, however, the site had ceased to be active and is not mentioned in medieval sources.

The place names testify to several gathering places. The Huseby church was also called Tesal. Huseby farms were royal administrative farms in the late Viking Age, *c*.AD 900–1000, and the names often replaced the original farm names (Stylegar and Norseng 2003, 372; Christensen, Lemm, and Pedersen 2016), which in this particular case may be Tesal. The suffix Old Norse *salr* refers to a hall building and is the old word thereof (Brink 1996, 255–8). The first section might come from the Norse god Tyr or Ty, meaning 'Tyrs sal' or 'place of worship' (Johansen 2002, 334). Huseby must have replaced *salr*, an old word for hall, in *c*.AD 900–1000. Tyr was the warrior god and a god for glory, justice and the *thing* (Steinsland 2005). The farm and its inhabitants may therefore have had early connections to both a cult and the *thing*. Less than 1 km north-west is the farm Løken, *Leikvin*, containing *leikr* and – *vin*, meaning 'a place for games' (Rygh 1897, 325).

Lundeby, which has a *certain thing* site and a name containing Old Norse *lunð*, which might be derived from a 'holy grove' (Sandnes and Stemshaug 1976, 209), dates to the Viking Age. At Lundeby, three of the stone settings, called a '*thing* site', may bear witness to the *thing*'s location. The farm of Hovland, located *c*. 1 km southeast of Missingen, has a name probably deriving from '*hof*', heathen cult site, composite with – *land* (Sandnes and Stemshaug 1976, 30).

In Råde, therefore, diplomas, place names and archaeological evidence together indicate that there may have been close connections between different assemblies in the Iron Age and the Early Middle Ages. There are hints that *thing* sites were more common than sites for games and that the game site served the whole *skipreiða*, but the *thing* and cult sites had a local remit. The cessation of activity at Missingen *c*.1100 suggests a major change to the organizational structure, but before this market and central place may have operated at a super-regional level.

Discussion

The distribution of different types of assembly place names shows that they share common features; primarily, they are situated along good communication networks (Ødegaard 2015, 263; Loftsgarden 2017, 273). When people from several areas came together, it is likely that they chose the best available and most easily accessible places. This has also been pointed out at assemblies elsewhere in other regions of Northern Europe (Pantos and Semple 2004; Sanmark and Semple 2013; Sanmark 2017, 57, 146). This might be one reason why local *thing* sites in the *Borgarthing* law province are characterized by their continuity in location. The distribution of names for sites where games took place might be linked to skipreiða units containing quarters and parishes, and sometimes hosting two or three sites for games. Sites for games and *things* were rarely co-located but some were just few kilometres apart. The *Borgarthing* law province thus differs from medieval Ireland, Scotland and Anglo-Saxon England, where an association between horse racing and local assembly sites is suggested (Baker 2014).

Markets too were only connected to the local *thing* occasionally in the *Borgarthing* law province suggesting the former had regional and super-regional functions and the latter was aligned instead to local administrative areas. Elsewhere in the *Borgarthing* area, higher-level *things* were

linked to important centres and towns, at least after AD 1100–1200 (Ødegaard 2015, 325–6), which compares well to what we know of Scandinavia broadly and to England at this time (Sanmark 2017, 52, 138–9, 149).

In the *Borgarthing* area, there appears to be a connection between different types of sacral place names and *things* as well as churches, as the case study from Råde showed. As mentioned above, a third of the *certain* and *probable thing* sites in the *Borgarthing* law province had a close connection to a medieval church. A large proportion of these indicate cult-continuity – this is based on an assessment of proximity between early medieval churches (AD 900–1200), cultic and/or theophoric names, and pre-Christian grave fields (see Brendalsmo [2006, 135]; Ødegaard [2015, 293–4]). The source material, however, does not testify to any general co-localization of cult and *thing* and unlike Sweden, it is not possible to certify that local *thing* sites were moved to churches as a result of Christianization (Sanmark 2017, 143). In contrast, here in Norway, the evidence emphasizes continuity, consistence of location over time and longevity in economic and socio-political locales at least until the High Middle Ages (Ødegaard 2015; cf. Sundqvist [2006]).

The *thing* was important for claims to power by elite groups, and helped transmit ideas that power was legitimate and approved by the ancestors. At the same time, it created collective memories and strengthened social cohesion (Sanmark 2017, 82–116). This might be one of the reasons why central places, such as Missingen, served various common functions for larger surrounding areas and persisted into the medieval era (Brink 1996, 237). The correspondence of *thing* and church sites may also signal patterns of elite behaviour. Many parish churches in Norway were probably built as private initiatives by local aristocracy (Skre 1988; Emanuelsson 2005, 244–5; Andrén 2013, 40; Tollin 2011) in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. People on these farms must have had an important role in the practice of cult and justice in the Iron Age and early Middle Ages (e.g. Brink [1996, 240]; Sundqvist [2006]). Law and religion, which included ancestors, cult and rites, and law, were closely interwoven and in the spatial proximity of things and medieval churches we may be seeing the processes by which such power was transmitted within a Christian context (Andren 2013, 41; Sanmark 2017, 148–9).

In the *Borgarthing* law province secular and ecclesiastical divisions mirrored each other at all hierarchical levels from the eleventh to mid-thirteenth centuries, from the smallest local units, such as quarters (*fjorðungar*) and parishes, up to the diocese and the law area (Ødegaard 2015, 137). The sources also testify to an interconnected jurisdiction in secular and ecclesiastical matters, especially until the mid-thirteenth century (e.g. Seip [1942]; Gunnes [1970, 124–6]; Bagge [1981, 2008]).Is it possible that royal, and partly ecclesiastical, regulations of the *thing* affected the local *thing* system earlier and more extensively than previously stated (cf. Imsen [1990, 25–34, 193–202])?

There are several examples from the *Borgarthing* law province of the king moving *thing* sites closer to his domain in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, first among higher-level *thing*s, and later in the thirteenth century, it occurred at local levels (Ødegaard 2013, 2015). This might also be the case in Råde, where the family at the central place of Missingen seem to have lost their power in the High Middle Ages, as no evidence of a *thing* is apparent. However, the main *skipreiða thing* was centrally located at the farm of Lundeby. Lundeby is confirmed to have been a royal farm in 1322 (Tank 1916, 153, 160, 605-606; Oskarsson 2001, 120; Norseng 2005, 115 n. 9). That the king moved higher-level *things* is well-attested in Scandinavia (Iversen 2017; Sanmark 2017, 146), but it is also confirmed at the local level in Sweden (Vikstrand 2015, 61–3). There was a struggle for power between local elites and the king in Norway in the eleventh to fourteenth centuries, which over time included different royal officials (Helle 1974, 31, 1993). This process probably affected local power relations, in which some local elites lost their power while others who were loyal to the king gained power. By delegating

power to the elites in the districts, the king created a more robust platform to regulate communities and exert more super-regional power (Brink 1996, 240; Iversen 2008, 20; Orning 2012; Reynolds 2013, 7–8). The written sources and archaeological data together indicate that from the eleventh century onwards the king tried to take control over the *things*, churches and markets, and used these organizations actively in the process of consolidating the kingdom. By contrast, the gathering places for games seem to have escaped such regulation and remained more communal.

Conclusions

The material from the *Borgarthing* law province shows how different assemblies were related to different levels and regions. The *thing* and cult sites were related to smaller areas, whereas competition sites and markets seemed have had regional and super-regional roles. Settlement patterns and communications were significant for the location of all assemblies. Gatherings and assemblies of all kinds brought people from different districts together and strengthened their collective identity and cohesion. Despite the fact that decisions were made by the majority, the elite had a significant role at *thing*- and cult meetings in the Iron Age, but increasingly, from the eleventh century onwards, the king and the church tried regulate and control cult and religion, *things* and markets in the *Borgarthing* law province.

In Norway in the Middle Ages assemblies were connected to different scales of social organization – serving local, regional and supra-regional communities and served to create and secure notions of collective identity and social cohesion. Royal power and Christianity served to alter and change the power of these collective gatherings, yet the locations themselves seem to have endured, demonstrating interesting and long-lived connections between people and place from prehistory to the Middle Ages.

Notes

1. This word can, however, just refer to a boundary (Hoel 2008, 219).
2. There was also a market at Heimdalsjordet in Vestfold county (Bill og Rødsrud 2013), but a *thing* site has not been identified. In addition, the Viking town of Kaupang had a market and a *thing*, probably a regional and higher level *thing* (see Skre [2007]; Ødegaard [2015, forthcoming]).
3. At the farm of Lekum in Heggen.
4. Skeimo and Tveit with two *thing* place-names (Tingstøodden and Tingstøåsen) in Kviteseid, Vøien and Løken in Bærum, Berg and Skjøl in Eiker, and Andebu og Skjeau. However, the latter are in two different *skipreiður* (Arendal and Råbygge).
5. Ryen and Løkja in Hitterdal, present Notodden, and Sande church and Skjøll in Sande *skipreiða*.

Notes on contributor

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