Chapter 4
Changes in the countryside

Archaeologists studying the development of early states in Scandinavia during the Viking Age have argued that their origins lay in social and economic processes already under way in the late Iron Age. Major excavations in advance of development, as well as the archaeological recording of metal-detected finds, particularly in southern Scandinavia, have revealed a process of gradual settlement evolution, as well as a growing complexity of settlement types.

In Norway and the Swedish interior a pattern of isolated farmsteads, with small clusters of dwellings and outbuildings, was established during the Iron Age. In Denmark and southern Sweden there were relatively mobile villages as well as individual farms before the 9th century, but there is evidence for new patterns of landholding during the 10th and 11th centuries, and the establishment of the modern settlement pattern by the 12th century, reflected in place names ending in *-toft*, *-torp*, or *-by*.

Denmark and southern Sweden

In Denmark the period 500–800 was once seen as a period of decline, but more recent excavations show this was a prosperous age with growing social stratification; they demonstrate that the apparent desertion of settlements actually represents localized settlement movement. Archaeological work and metal detecting

has also revealed a much more complex system of settlement hierarchies.

Throughout southern Scandinavia a number of more specialized sites begin to emerge from the 6th century. Some appear to have functioned as production sites and landing places, established by aristocratic families who were looking for the opportunity to exchange production surplus for prestige goods. Many also incorporated religious functions. They include sites such as Helgö in Uppland; Paviken in Gotland; Gudme, Strandy Gammeltoft, and Fyn's Hoved in Fyn; Boeslunde, Vester Egesborg, and Næs in Sjælland; Sebbersund and Bejsebakken in northern Jutland.

At Gudme, in South-East Fyn, an Iron Age settlement complex of over 50 farms covered a square kilometre. Over 7,000 metal objects dated 200–1000 have been found within the settlement area, including six gold and five silver hoards, testament to the power base of the local aristocracy. Many of the farms belonged to craftsmen, on which goldsmiths and silversmiths worked, and where bronze casting was carried out. The main building was an imposing late Iron Age hall – an aristocratic residence whose inhabitants drank from Roman glasses and ate from Roman bowls. The adjacent coastal trading site at Lundeborg acted as the port of trade. Gudme also had some cult function; the place name means literally 'home of the gods'. Although it declined from the 6th century, its trading and manufacturing functions continued into the Viking Age.

A similar site existed at Uppåkra in Skåne. This also developed as a central place in the Iron Age, but maintained trading, manufacturing, and religious functions until *c*.1000, when it was superseded by the town of Lund, 5 kilometres to the north. Metal objects have been found over a 40-hectare area, including Arabic and Carolingian coins, tiny gold foil votive mounts or *guldgubber*, dies for their manufacture, and miniature amulets.

The site at Næs was occupied from the late 7th to 9th centuries. There were over 20 timber halls, but also some 70 workshops which must have been used as spinning and weaving sheds as each contained loom weights and spindle whorls. In a low-lying part of the site there were also 57 wicker-lined pits, used for retting flax. A 150-metre long channel had been dug to facilitate changing the water. Antlers were also found in several of the pits where they were being soaked prior to being worked. At Sebbersund there is evidence for a zoned trading and manufacturing centre comprising over 300 workshops, where weaving and ferrous and non-ferrous metal-working took place.

Vorbasse, in Jutland, was the first site where a sufficiently large area was examined to demonstrate a process of localized settlement movement, culminating in the establishment of a permanent village towards the end of the Viking Age. From 1974–92 over 260,000 square metres were excavated, revealing at least eight separate settlement shifts between the 1st century BC and the 11th century AD, as part of a process of local migration and rebuilding to make the most of the agricultural land. By the 8th century there were seven enclosed farms of roughly equal size, either side of a roadway. Each farm had a main hall, partitioned into rooms, and frequently with byres at one end. The halls were surrounded by workshops; some had wells, and one had a smithy.

The fact that the number of farms at Vorbasse did not change for 300 years has been taken as evidence that the inhabitants were not free and independent landowners but must have been tenants of a magnate farmer or local lord who regulated the farms directly or through a steward. In the late 10th or early 11th centuries there was a major change in building style and the main buildings were replaced by large bow-sided halls, of the type seen at the Trelleborg forts. Separate cattle byres were constructed – the largest farm had five byres with room for at least 100 cattle, as well as a forge and a bronze foundry. In the 11th century the settlement moved for the last time, to the site of the present village.

Although the excavations have been smaller in scale, a similar situation – including the appearance of bow-sided halls – has been observed at other sites in Jutland, such as Sædding, Trabjerg, and Omgård, and in Skåne, at Filborna, where several generations of aisled longhouses were succeeded by 'trelleborg'-style houses in the 11th century. At Lindholm Høje, in northern Jutland, the bow-sided halls of the 11th-century village were built upon windblown sand which had covered the cemetery of the older settlement. In turn they were themselves covered by sand by the 12th century.

This process of mobile settlements being replaced by permanent villages was repeated throughout northern Europe at the onset of the Middle Ages. Various reasons have been proposed, including population pressure limiting settlement movement and leading to the demarcation of territorial boundaries. The development of villages goes hand-in-hand with the formation of parishes and the construction of permanent stone churches, but it is also related to the growth of cereal production and wealth being vested in land ownership rather than mobile resources such as cattle. Alongside this was the growth of royal control, with the attendant requirement on stable settlement to ensure a stable tax revenue. Although it is impossible on the basis of archaeological evidence alone to demonstrate the origins of a feudal system in Denmark during the Viking Age, it is at least reasonable to talk about the development of lordship and landholding on behalf of superior authority.

Several settlements reflect the growing concentration of power from the 7th century, and Viking Age aristocratic residences at Toftegård (Sjælland), and at Slöinge (West Halland) develop from earlier settlements. In both cases the high-status objects were concentrated in the hall areas.

At Tissø, western Sjælland, an exceptional **s**ettlement has been discovered on the shores of Lake Tissø, 7 kilometres from the coast, and accessible from the sea via river. The site has been investigated by metal-detector survey, and excavation since 1995. The first phase

of activity is represented by a large aisled hall with white plastered internal walls dated to the 6th–7th centuries. This hall was set in an enclosure with two other large houses and a few smaller buildings and workshops. It burnt down in the mid-7th century and was replaced by a substantial bow-sided hall on a new site to the south. This structure was unusual in that there was no stalling for cattle, and although a forge was built by the enclosure fence, there was no trace of any agricultural buildings. In the 8th century the hall was rebuilt, the enclosure extended, and a wide gate was built in the enclosure fence to enable wagon access. The main hall was rebuilt a second time in the 9th century, at the same time as the enclosure was further enlarged. The complex reached its maximum extent in the 10th century. A large hall of the new 'trelleborg' type was erected, in addition to several other dwellings, and open-ended buildings, possibly wagon sheds, although there was still no trace of agricultural production. In 1977 a 1.8 kg gold neck ring of the 10th century was found by metal detector. This would have been a tremendously precious object, equivalent in value to 500 cattle, and the type of gift that might have been given by a king to a loyal follower; it later turned out to have been hidden just outside the gate of the residence. The latest find from Tissø was a coin of King Harthacnut, *c.*1035.

Tissø was not an agricultural estate – there are few stalls for cattle and it must have been supplied with food by dependent farms in the area. Its economic base depended upon tribute, trade, and manufacture. Outside the manor enclosure, to both north and south, there was a 2–3 hectare workshop and market area with around 70 sunken workshops and also small houses or booths in which goods may have been traded under the lord's protection. Here goldsmiths and silversmiths worked, and bronze was cast into costume brooches, while other craftsmen made glass and amber beads and combs. Over 100 coins have been found, dating from a late 7th-century sceat, and including 8th-century Scandinavian and Frankish coins, although most are 9th- and 10th-century Arab issues; their distribution suggests trading was taking place on site.

A mid-9th-century Byzantine lead seal, bearing the name of Theodosius, is identical to examples from Hedeby and Ribe. Theodosius was head of the Byzantine armoury and recruiting office; Lars Jørgensen has suggested that he may have been buying iron or recruiting mercenaries in northern Germany and Denmark.

Tissø may be an example of an aristocratic or even royal residence. Weapons and riding gear, including spurs, bridles, and a large number of arrowheads and sword mounts are concentrated in the enclosure area. Frankish and Carolingian drinking vessels were also found in the area around the central halls. Miniature amulets, including Thor's hammers, fire steels, and tiny lances have also been recovered from this part of the site, possibly associated with an enclosed votive area. Tissø means 'Tyr's Island' and was named after the war god Tyr. Some 50 swords, axes, and lances were found on the lakebed in the 19th century. They go back to *c.*600, around the date of the founding of the settlement, although they continue into the 9th and 10th centuries, and probably represent offerings to Tyr. Tissø demonstrates that Viking Age lords had several functions: they were responsible for military protection of the local area, they controlled trade and crafts in the marketplace, and they were responsible for heathen cult ceremonies, including feasting in the great hall.

Finally, at Old Lejre, near Roskilde (Sjælland), excavations have examined the mythical seat of the Danish kings. From the 7th to the 10th centuries the settlement comprised two functional areas: a residential complex of 50 houses, including four halls, each *c.*48 metres long, and a craft area consisting of workshops and smaller buildings. Over 4,000 finds were recovered, including gilt jewellery, casket fittings, coins, weights, silver and bronze ingots, moulds, riding equipment, imported jewellery, mounts, and glass of Carolingian and Anglo-Saxon origin. The fact that the settlement remained in the same place for *c.*300 years is unusual and Lejre has also been seen as a royal residence.

Norway

In Denmark and continental Europe the extensive and continuous areas of cultivated land made it possible for the aristocracy to restructure their landed estates. In northern Scandinavia natural features such as marshes, forests, rivers, and valleys made the running of large estates difficult. It was more efficient to maintain small farms as individual units and so the basic settlement structure in Norway remained unchanged from the 6th century. In southern Norway and along the Atlantic coastline as far north as Tromsø there were chieftains who operated within a redistributive economy, passing prestige goods to their followers in return for food rent. In the Jaeren district of southern Norway the available land was cultivated intensively and Bjorn Myhre has argued that territories or chiefdoms, centred upon hillforts, emerged from around the 6th century, when they can be recognized from their rich graves. The building types continue with little change from the Iron Age into the Viking Age. Farms consisted of small clusters of aisled longhouses, combining living accommodation for an extended family and a cattle byre under one roof.

In northern Norway this mixed farming economy coexisted with a different cultural tradition, associated with the Saami, which depended upon hunting in the inner fjords, interior, and far north. This society is seen as mobile and egalitarian, although it was ignored in the Norwegian literature until the 1980s in favour of what was seen as a more Viking way of life. In the border area around the Lyngen fjord there are Norse burials to the south and Saami burials to north, although some intermarriage at elite level may be suggested by Saami jewellery in Norse high-status burials in this area. There is also a concentration of hoards containing Norse and Saami objects in the border area which may represent gift exchange used in the negotiation of the frontier zone. The collapse of the chieftain system and the end of pre-Christian religion may have led to much tenser relations with the Saami.

Excavations at Borg in Norway have revealed traces of a Viking chieftain's lifestyle maintained for at least 300 years. The Lofoten Islands lie above the Arctic Circle, in the most northerly region settled by Scandinavians; the distance from Borg to the southern border of Denmark is as great as from there to Rome!

The original timber and sod-walled longhouse was built in the 5th–6th centuries, but during the 7th century this was extended and replaced by a second aisled hall, *c.*80 metres long by 7.5–9 metres wide. The hall was divided into three aisles by two rows of timber posts which supported the roof; it had five rooms and five entrances. The hall continued in use for some 300 years; by the time it was demolished it must have been a very old-fashioned building, although its long life and traditional architecture may have signalled the long continuity of the ruling family.

Despite its northerly location the climate was ameliorated by the Gulf Stream, and everyday life revolved around cattle, reflected by a substantial byre, although barley was also grown. Sinkers and fishhooks demonstrate that fishing was also a significant component of activity, and the stockfish trade was no doubt important. Large quantities of iron slag were found and forging may have been undertaken in a smithy, although iron was imported from southern Norway. Soapstone was also imported and various artefacts were manufactured here: spindle whorls, drilling weights, net sinkers, and loom weights. Multicoloured pendant whetstones, of a type known from Hedeby, were also produced. Other finds included sherds of two Tating-ware jugs and 12–13 glass vessels of the 8th–10th centuries, some decorated with applied gold foil, which link the owner to the ceremonial drinking tradition of the north European elite. The imported goods represent symbols of power and prestige; similar imported objects have been found only at Kaupang in Norway. Parallels have been drawn between Borg and Ohthere's account of *c.*890. No doubt he visited the feasting hall, although it has been concluded that this farm belonged to another chieftain, named Tore Hjort. Ruins of large boathouses

show the chieftain certainly possessed boats capable of sailing the same distances as Ohthere. The economic basis may have been similar, although no walrus bones found, and there were no artefactual links with the Saami.

Ohthere

Ohthere, or Ottar, was a Norwegian merchant who visited King Ælfred in the late 9th century. Although we do not know what language they spoke, or whether they used an interpreter, Ælfred asked Ohthere about his lifestyle and travels, and had them recorded in English.

Ohthere's homeland was in the far north of Norway, above the Arctic Circle, and his farm may have resembled that excavated at Borg. His land was poor and much of Ohthere's income came from exploiting the reindeer. He also went whaling and walrus-hunting, and took tribute from the neighbouring Lapps. This was in kind (presumably walrus ivory and furs) and so Ohthere had his own ship and travelled south to the markets of Northern Europe.

Ohthere told Ælfred that no one lived north of him but that there was a market town to the south called *Sciringesheal* (Kaupang). He said that it took at least a month to get there under sail if you laid up at night and had a favourable wind every day. All the time you must sail along the coast. From Kaupang he said he sailed five days to the trading town at Hedeby.

In the 10th–11th centuries the chieftain's residence was succeeded by three much smaller buildings which seem to reflect a more

typical farmstead. This may indicate a dramatic change in local power politics, associated with the rise of royal Norwegian power. The pattern is similar to the end of the aristocratic central places and settlement disruption seen in southern Scandinavia.

Borg was a religious centre both in pagan and Christian times. The central room in the hall appears to have been used for feasting, cult ceremonies, and festivities. The majority of the imported objects, including fragments of a hanging bowl, five *guldgubber*, and the head of a gold manuscript pointer were found in the northern corner of this room, which may represent the position of the high-seat. The hall may therefore have been used as a pagan temple or *hof* on special occasions, the local chieftain combining sacred and secular roles. Although continuity of ritual practice cannot be demonstrated it may be significant that the parish church is still situated at Borg.

Throughout Scandinavia, therefore, there were major changes in rural settlement patterns during the Viking Age, reflecting growing social complexity and increasing hierarchies and specialization of site function. There is nothing intrinsically Viking about these developments, and similar changes were taking place elsewhere in Europe. Nonetheless, they did underpin the establishment of the Scandinavian nation states and provided the basis for overseas expansion. At the upper end of the settlement hierarchy a new type of site emerged: the town. This is the subject of the next chapter.