# Chapter 5
# Towns and trade

Although the early medieval period was a time of urban regeneration and rebirth throughout much of Northern Europe, the growth of towns in Viking Age Scandinavia has had a particular role in changing the popular image of Vikings, and emphasizing their identity as traders and manufacturers. Earlier research, inspired by the Belgian historian Henri Pirenne (1862–1935), saw towns as the result of economic development, particularly long-distance trade, but they have now come to be regarded as the product of local power structures. The foundation of urban markets and international trading ports has been seen as intrinsically linked to the growth of royal power and the establishment of the early Scandinavian states. With this has grown a competition to find the earliest town and recent excavations have seen the dates for sites with urban features being pushed further and further back into the Iron Age. Most of the early evidence comes from present-day Denmark and northern Germany, southern Sweden, and southern Norway. There are large areas of Scandinavia where there were no towns until the later Middle Ages.

We have already seen that from the 6th century a number of early trading and manufacturing centres were established around the southern Scandinavian coastline. These are not towns as such, but have been classed as proto-urban centres. Although the definition

of towns has been much debated by medieval historians and archaeologists, urbanism is above all a concept underpinned by some level of town planning and control.

One of the earliest Scandinavian towns was founded at Ribe in southern Jutland, *c.*704–10. Excavations have revealed a network of regular plots, surrounded by wattle fences and separated by small ditches. These plots were laid out from when the first merchants arrived, and have been taken as direct evidence for royal patronage and organization, although the thick layer of sand once thought to have been deliberately laid to level the site has now been reinterpreted as a windblown deposit. Eric Christiansen has argued against the tendency to ascribe Ribe to state action, and has suggested that it depended upon cooperation amongst merchants while the king merely tried to stay in control of the situation.



As no traces have been found of solid buildings, but only of semi-sunken huts and workshops, Ribe may have been a seasonal periodic market and manufacturing centre rather than a permanent residence. Specialized metal workers were casting a range of jewellery types, while others were making glass beads, using tessarae imported from northern Italy. There were also imported quern stones and pottery from the Rhineland and, from the 8th century, the minting of a silver *sceatta* coinage in the so-called Woden monster type. From the early 9th century Eidsborg slate whetstones and soapstone bowls were imported from Norway. Many of these goods were dispersed to the hinterland, and imported finds have been recorded from over 30 local sites. In return cattle were brought into Ribe for consumption and possibly export; thick layers of cattle manure have been found. By the mid-9th century Ribe was surrounded by a town ditch. However, as this was only 2 metres wide by 1 metre deep it cannot have had a defensive function and appears, instead, to have denoted a mercantile zone, possibly under royal protection and tax jurisdiction.

The Swedish kingdom began to develop in the 7th century around the great lakes of Central Sweden and the earliest town was at Birka, situated on the island of Björkö in Lake Mälaren, and 12 kilometres east of the proto-urban production centre at Helgö. On the island of Adelsö, on the other side of the strait, stand the remains of a royal manor. It is tempting to see this as the power base from which Birka was controlled and taxed, albeit from a distance. The first excavations on Björkö were carried out in the 1680s, and while Hjalmar Stolpe's excavations from 1871–90 yielded vast numbers of imported finds, the full sequence of Birka's development has had to await recent investigation.

Birka was fortified, on land and water, from its foundation in the mid-8th century. The first town was enclosed by a semi-circular rampart, divided into seven segments by six openings, which were probably gated, and presumably guarded by towers. At its northern end the rampart extended out into the harbour in Lake Mälaren as a series of piles. Adjacent to the rampart, excavation has revealed terraces upon which houses predating the town had been built. Finds from a longhouse of *c*.400–700 show far-reaching trade contacts before the town was established.



The town was also protected by a small fort – the 'Borg' – enclosed by an earth and stone bank with a wooden rampart. The presence of rivets suggests it was constructed using boat-building techniques, or using lots of ships' timbers. The Borg was first fortified *c*.750 when the town was founded, but it was burnt down in the 9th century, rebuilt and raised in height but fired again in the late 10th and 11th centuries. Beneath the hillfort is an area known as the garrison because of the number of weapon finds. Stone terraces had been built on sloping ground between two rock outcrops. The upper terrace was covered by a substantial 10th-century hall, which appears to have functioned as an assembly hall for the permanent garrison. Three pairs of stout roof-bearing posts created a large open space in the middle of the building. From within the hall the finds included armour and chain mail, shields, and spears which

stood against the walls; swords, arrowheads, axes, horse fittings, and locks and keys indicating the presence of chests. The finds' distribution suggests the presence of a high seat in the western part of hall. The garrison had direct access to the shore, and must have been situated to protect Birka from attack from the seaward side. Two jetties of oak piles are visible just below the area of the garrison, indicating a military harbour kept separate from the commercial one. Birka also had several cemeteries, and Stolpe excavated 1,100 burials, including 119 rich chamber graves. They represent a cosmopolitan mercantile community with wide-ranging trading contacts. Unlike Ribe, Birka appears to have been permanently occupied from the start. The number of times it was attacked, as well as the steps taken to defend it, is perhaps significant.

The town of *Reric* is mentioned in the Royal Frankish Annals in connection with King Godfred's activities in the early 9th century. It is probably to be associated with the site at Groβ Strömkendorf, on the shores of the Baltic. In the 1990s 258 burials were excavated, displaying a variety of Saxon, Frisian, and Slavonic cultural influences, and including six Scandinavian boat graves. The settlement is dominated by semi-sunken workshops, and an impressive series of timber-lined wells which may have been used for dying textiles. It begins in the 720s as a production site but only takes on an urban character in the 760s when it is given a planned layout. In 808, as a result of conflict between Danish and Slavonic interests, Godfred destroyed *Reric* and moved the merchants to Hedeby.

Hedeby, in German *Haithabu*, literally means 'heath settlement'. Its location at the foot of the Jutland peninsula at one end of the fortified rampart, the Danevirke, put it in a commanding position to control east–west trade. The earliest activity in Hedeby dates from the 8th century, when the first jetties were built and a number of workshops were in use. During the 9th century streets were laid out at right angles and parallel to a stream, defining fenced building

**6. Aerial view, Hedeby. The curving rampart can clearly be seen; the dense patch of woodland at the north end is the site of the hillfort which overlooked the town.**



plots of regular size. Like Birka, the area was enclosed by a semi-circular rampart and protected by a small fort. The harbour was protected by a semi-circular arrangement of piles. There were between 2,000 and 5,000 graves within the rampart, and more outside. The majority of the burials were males, and although most are poor, there are some richly furnished 10th-century chamber graves. It has been suggested that by the 10th century there was a community of between 400 and 1,000 living in Hedeby, their livelihoods based directly or indirectly on trade. Imported materials supported a range of craft industries, including iron working with Swedish ore, the dressing of lava querns from the Mayen area, bronze jewellery production, antler, bone, leather and wood-working, and the manufacture of glass and amber beads. From the early 9th century Hedeby also minted its own coins.

The first Norwegian town has been examined at Kaupang, on the west side of the Oslo fjord. The name literally means 'marketplace', and Kaupang has been identified as Ohthere's *Sciringesheal*. Recent excavations by Dagfynn Skyre have revealed that the laying out of

individual plots was preceded by a very short-lived phase of itinerant craft production. Permanent buildings, in use all year round, were then constructed on each of the plots, probably in the early 9th century, but the town was abandoned by the 10th century, possibly reverting to a seasonal market. Kaupang had wide-ranging trading connections. The traded goods include German wine in Rhenish pottery, with glass drinking horns, Danish or Slavonic honey, and Norwegian whetstones. The inhabitants of Kaupang were also melting down silver and the finds include gold and silver which may have arrived as the result of raiding activity, including a Frankish book mount and an Irish brooch.

In the immediate hinterland of Kaupang there is a large farm at Huseby-Tjølling with a bow-sided hall, with imported cornelian beads and glass drinking vessels. Was this the hall of the prefect responsible for controlling the town? There are also a number of distinct cemeteries, including a large cremation cemetery, and a smaller group of high-status boat burials. It has been suggested that, while the cremation graves reflect the local burial rite, the boat burials may be of Danish merchants. Tree ring dating of the jetty at Kaupang proves it was erected sometime after 803 and it is argued that, like Hedeby, Kaupang may have been founded by the Danish King Godfred in the early 9th century in order to control the opposite end of his kingdom.



Finally, Scandinavian urbanism entered a new phase from the latter part of the 10th century, exhibiting more complex organization and the influence of the church. Århus was founded *c.*900 and was referred to as a bishopric at several points in the 10th century. It may have been established quite quickly, on a 4-hectare site enclosed by the sea and a semi-circular rampart, leading to the suggestion that it was also founded by royal intervention as a military stronghold which nurtured civilian activities.

In Sweden, Birka was replaced by Sigtuna at the end of the 10th century, but initially it had few eastern contacts and international

trade really only developed again in the 11th century. Settlement was organized in two rows of narrow building plots, on either side of a 700m stretch of road. The first Swedish coins were minted here in *c.*995, but during the later Middle Ages the trading focus shifted further around Lake Mälar, this time to Stockholm. Lund in Sweden, and Bergen and Oslo in Norway each seem to have been founded in the early 11th century.

The most northerly Scandinavian town was at Trondheim, or *Nidaros*. There is archaeological evidence for a royal farm estate and sporadic activity associated with local chieftains in what was to become the centre of the later town for most of the 10th century; but tradition associates town foundation with King Olaf Tryggvason in the late 990s. Certainly more permanent buildings were erected in the late 10th century, and land was regularly parcelled up. The first proper wooden quays were built on the riverside plots in the mid-11th century, and coins were minted from *c.*1050. Trondheim became an important ecclesiastical centre, particularly through pilgrimage to the cult of St Olav; it had seven churches by the end of the 11th century and the archbishopric was founded in 1152–3. A 60m length of one of the medieval thoroughfares was excavated in 1973–85. It was originally a gravel-surfaced track, running parallel to the shore, but was widened by the mid-11th century and surfaced with wooden planking. The areas fronting the street were occupied by large one-or two-roomed structures, maybe rented out to traders and craftsmen as combined workshops and storehouses. In the centre of the plots there were dwelling houses with wall-benches and fireplaces. Other buildings, identified as bathhouses, cookhouses, storerooms, or latrines, occupied the rear of the plots.

Although towns emerged at different times in different parts of Scandinavia, it is difficult to ignore the ubiquitous role of royal authority in providing the circumstances in which they grew. The towns are not particularly Viking, and the cosmopolitan bustle of merchants and craftsmen would have been familiar throughout

Northern Europe. Nonetheless, they facilitated overseas trade and expansionism, and provided the economic basis for the centralization of power and the growth of a mercantile class.