1 Introduction

The Viking Age – traditionally framed by the historic raid on the monastery at Lindisfarne in Northumbria in 793 and the battles of Stamford Bridge and Hastings in 1066, and nowadays archaeologically set to c.750–1050 – was an era of major societal changes in Scandinavia that has fascinated generations of scholars and laypeople. This sweepingly transformative period led to the integration of this formerly pagan periphery of the European North into occidental Europe, as these societies became unified Christian kingdoms. One of the most central fields to Viking-age archaeology – alongside research problems relating to the Christianisation of Scandinavia and the intertwined processes of state formation, or more specifically the development 'From Tribe to State' (Mortensen & Rasmussen 1991) – is the initial and unprecedented dawn of urbanisation in Scandinavia, which was distinctly different from the archetypes of ancient towns of the former Roman Empire. As novel centres of trade and crafts, these emerging Viking-age towns were inseparably linked to the spheres of economy, maritime connectivity, and patronage. However, despite some significant scholarly attention in Scandinavia itself, only four such sites have been recognised as proper Viking-age towns, namely Hedeby in northern Germany, Ribe in Denmark, Kaupang in Norway and Birka in Sweden (see Plates I–IV). Since the end of the nineteenth century, these four sites, however, have attracted continuous scholarly attention, due to their extraordinary archaeological records. It is noteworthy that two of them, Birka (in 1993) and Hedeby (in 2018), have become UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Nowadays, academic publications dealing with these urban sites – describing artefact groups and building features from various excavations – fill metres of shelf space, which makes the subject matter increasingly hard to grasp. Consequently, there are but a few

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009298070.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

comprehensive publications on the Viking-age urban phenomenon (e.g. Hodges 1982; Clarke & Ambrosiani 1991).

In the past, and indeed for decades, significant effort has gone into defining the nature of the Viking-age urban phenomenon as observed by archaeologists, since it did not quite fit any historical definition corresponding to the origins of medieval towns. Basically, the question was *what* constituted the Viking-age towns and how to describe them appropriately, as well as the need to differentiate them from the historically defined 'proper' European medieval towns. The growing understanding of Viking-age towns, as a chronologically and/or spatially discontinuous phenomenon, underlined the importance of this discussion even further. It is in the nature of things that this approach remained mostly descriptive. Defining what made these towns distinct from others depended on the ability to recognise these first Scandinavian expressions of urbanism as towns in their own right, typical of their era and setting (cf. Reynolds 1992). The resolution of this long debate – leading to the recognition of the phenomenon – can be linked to a growing self-esteem in archaeology as a discipline. Another important part of archaeological research has always been distribution maps for individual artefact groups, which can visualise how products and goods spread, thus establishing patterns of artefact provenance and ultimately providing clues for trade networks and communication. More recently, the digital revolution and models borrowed from network theory have made it easier to identify multiple artefact groups that have been found in more than one place, thus expressing previously hard to establish affiliations as scale-free networks in the shape of nodal points (or hubs) and ties (or links) within trading arenas such as the Baltic Sea. While this approach certainly allows for a deeper understanding of the interconnectivity of Viking-age towns as 'Network Cities' (Hohenberg & Lees 1996) – or rather network towns – that is, as the primary hubs in a web of hierarchically interrelated sites (serving as stepping stones for long-distance trade), it also clearly addresses the problem of *how* these Viking-age centres for trade and craft operated economically. Another recent and important trend in Viking-age urban

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009298070.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

studies – made possible by an ever-growing body of data – is to abandon the presumptions that these Viking-age towns were stable and almost 'monolithic' entities, whose 'town maps' needed to be explored and subsequently described meticulously. By recognising the chronological depth of their lifespans – up to two and a half centuries – the focus has instead shifted to urban dynamics and to the study of their presumably changing nature in specific, highly resolved time slices.

Only a holistic approach to an enormous, ever-increasing body of data – diligently gathered since the beginnings of archaeology as a scientific discipline – would allow for a deeper understanding of the research subject. Such an approach would involve not only Viking-age towns themselves but the entire Viking world – that is, the Scandinavian homelands and the so-called Viking diaspora (the results of Scandinavian expansion through *landnám* (ON; 'settlement of unoccupied land') and conquest), as well as contemporary conditions in early medieval Europe from Anglo-Saxon England through the Carolingian Empire and on to Byzantium. However, it would enable us to finally approach the inner core of the research problem, which almost resembles the concentric circles of some reversed golden circle model: instead of trying to define the *result* of Viking-age urbanisation (*the what*) as in previous efforts, or else by mapping the *process* of interconnectivity and economic networks of 'network towns' (*the how*) as elaborate follow-up studies, today we might – almost without recognising it – have reached the point to finally address the central question of *why* Viking-age towns emerged. In fact, instead of a mere 'trade and production' as some commonplace answer, we must truly start to ask about the very *purpose* of an unprecedented and suddenly emerging urbanisation in the Scandinavian periphery during the transformation period we call the Viking Age. Through *Towns and Commerce in Viking-Age Scandinavia*, the author attempts such an approach to this core question of *why* Viking-age towns and hence the very *purpose* of Viking-age urbanisation.

Naturally, the focus of any study on Viking-age towns in the Scandinavian heartlands must revolve around Hedeby, Ribe, Kaupang

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009298070.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and Birka. Out of these four, Hedeby, on the border between Scandinavia and Continental Europe, by far developed into the largest urban entity. Protected by semi-circular ramparts, Hedeby's settlement area covered 27 ha, while the second largest, Birka, only covered 13 ha. Both sites are briefly mentioned in written sources, mainly in Rimbert's *Life of Ansgar* and Adam of Bremen's *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*. While Hedeby, Kaupang and Birka do not display any noteworthy signs of settlement after the Viking Age, Ribe is still an existing picturesque town. Later activity, or the lack thereof, is visible in how well artefacts have survived and in how accessible the sites are for archaeological investigations. At Ribe, for a long time only the pre- and early Viking-age 'marketplace' from c.700–850 was archaeologically known, yet not 'Ansgar's Ribe' from the middle Viking Age as suggested by the written sources. Meanwhile, recent excavations have managed to fill this knowledge gap. However, by that time Ribe's influence seems to have been surpassed by Hedeby. Kaupang, which is rarely mentioned in the written sources at all, has been exposed to severe bioturbation, heavily affecting the site's preservation conditions. In Birka, the preservation of organic materials has suffered due to dramatic post-Viking-age regression and isostatic rebound of about 5 metres. However, here it is particularly about 1,100 burials, excavated in the late nineteenth century – out of around 3,000 interments altogether on the whole island of Björkö – that contribute to its fame in the scientific community. Modern excavations in the fortified settlement area only started in the 1990s. In Hedeby, in contrast to Birka, a gentle marine transgression of the water level of some 0.8 metres ensured superb preservation conditions for waterlogged wood, allowing for archaeological excavations where some 30 centimetres of wooden walls were still preserved. Finally, while both Birka and Kaupang ceased to exist in the third quarter of the tenth century, Hedeby seems to have persisted until 1066. Even though the processes of transformation are still under debate, in the late Viking Age Birka seems to have been replaced by Sigtuna and Hedeby eventually by medieval Slesvig. Lastly, modern

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009298070.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

history has also played its part in the understanding of these sites: as a result of the Second Schleswig War in 1864, the duchy of Slesvig – previously a Danish fiefdom – was initially completely integrated into Prussia and eventually split so that its southern part, including Hedeby, became German. Prior to the Second World War, Hedeby researchers had willingly been an important part of the SS *Ahnenerbe* ('ancestral heritage') research. For decades after the war, this meant that research that had dealt with Hedeby, as well as the scholars who were involved with it, was ignored, in both Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon contexts. It was not until 2005 that Hedeby gained official recognition and representation at the Viking Congress, initially as part of the Danish delegation and later as representatives of the federal state of Schleswig-Holstein. This study will take into account these very different points of departure, and although all four Viking-age towns will be examined, the emphasis will be placed on Hedeby and Birka. To understand the otherness of Viking-age towns, and eventually explain their purpose, as well as the reasons for their sudden emergence in the North, it would be too short-sighted to focus solely on the early urban centres themselves in order to capture the very core of this discontinuous phenomenon that preceded later expressions of high medieval towns. Instead, it needs nothing less than a truly holistic approach. Ideally, this would involve a thorough examination of the societal framework of the circumjacent traditional rural world, mirrored in a supra-regional comparison with Anglo-Saxon England, Continental Europe and Byzantium. It would also require an inclusion of the sparse but no less important information from chronicles and legal texts describing either the conditions in Scandinavia itself or procedures from elsewhere, manifesting similar frameworks that, due to intensified contacts, might have served as models for the Scandinavian conditions. Although this may sound like a vast research undertaking, it is indeed achievable. Actually, most of the pieces required for solving this scientific jigsaw puzzle have been at least partly known and debated for quite some time. With this revision, it is anticipated that their renewed composition will

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009298070.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

create a comprehensive picture of the earliest stage of urbanisation in Northern Europe. The suggested implementation of the concept of 'special economic zones' to this debate (Kalmring 2016a) may contribute to a more profound understanding of the societal value of these very distinct sites and ultimately answer the pivotal question why and for what purpose did Viking-age towns emerge at this specific point in time.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009298070.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press