



Kaupang Excavation Project
Publication Series, Volume 1
Norske Oldfunn XXII

KAUPANG IN SKIRINGSSAL



EDITED BY DAGFINN SKRE

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Preface

As the work on this first volume from The Kaupang Excavation Project reaches an end, two feelings dominate: gratitude and humility. Above all, I wish to express my sincere gratitude towards the late Principal Inspector Charlotte Blindheim for the great confidence she placed in me by asking me to take over the direction of the archaeological investigations at Kaupang. I also wish to express my gratitude to the institutions named on the previous page that have believed in and financially supported this project. A special thanks is given to The Anders Jahre Humanitarian Foundation which gave its strong early support to the project, as a result of which I gained confidence that our aims could indeed be reached.

The Municipality of Larvik has been a crucial partner in the practical work of the excavation phase. Vestfold County Council has proved a dynamic force in protecting and developing Kaupang after the excavation period. I thank both of them. A number of individuals in Larvik were both very helpful and hospitable during the excavations, amongst whom I wish particularly to thank Marit Kaupang Aspaas, the landowner of Kaupang, for her fair approach and excellent cooperation.

The Kaupang Excavation Project Council, which is composed of representatives of key sponsors and distinguished archaeologists from Scandinavia, Britain and Ireland, has had the responsibility of ensuring that the project proceeded according to its plan. The Council has also provided advice, and undertaken crucial discussions that have helped shape the development of the project. It also played a decisive role when the final funding of the project was put in place in 2003. I wish to thank all of the members of the Council – a list can be found on p. 501 – and especially its President, Kaare Reidar Norum, for his unflinching enthusiasm and supportiveness.

For the excavation period, the project had an Advisory Committee, which advised on excavation strategy and methods. I wish to thank the members of this Committee, who are listed on p. 502, for their solid and constructive contributions. In working on this book I, as its editor, have been in touch with many specialists in most of Northern Europe who have read and commented on drafts tirelessly and patiently. My profound thanks goes to them all. Within the University of Oslo there has been multifaceted cooperation from the Museum of Cultural History.

I have had the very good fortune to be surrounded by loyal and dedicated colleagues and staff in the project's preliminary stages, during the excavations, and in the project's analysis and publication stages. My thanks to them all. The two who have been there throughout, Unn Pedersen and Lars Pilø, merit special thanks. They have been indispensable.

Humility, as was mentioned above, may not strike the reader as a virtue obviously present in my contributions to this book, e.g. in the statement in Chapter 1 of my high ambitions for the project. But someone who has the opportunity to work with such rich and important archaeological sites as Kaupang and Skiringssal must have high ambitions – anything less would undervalue the site. Excavating such sites is therefore a great responsibility. This book is published with full awareness of that responsibility. I hope that readers of the book will feel that we have lived up to it.

Oslo, November 2006

Dagfinn Skre
Leader of the Kaupang Excavation Project
University of Oslo

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 The urban site of Kaupang, and the central-place complex of Skiringssal of which it was part, are key sites for the study of the Viking Period in Scandinavia. Research into these sites began more than 200 years ago, the last major project before the current one being Charlotte Blindheim's excavations between 1950 and 1974. Great advances in the understanding of urban sites and central places in Scandinavia, and much improved methods of field archaeology led to *The Kaupang Excavation Project* being planned in the late 1990s and carried out from 2000 onwards.

The principal ambitions of this project are: to produce new empirical evidence and develop a new understanding of Kaupang and Skiringssal; to develop new ways of approaching the culture and society of the Viking Age; and, to contribute new elements to the comprehensive image of the Scandinavian Viking Period. We are attempting to achieve these ambitions through high standards of fieldwork and analysis during the project, detailed dialogue with other relevant disciplines in the natural sciences and humanities, and a quite deliberate investment in extensive communication between the authors contributing to the project.

An overview of the most relevant archaeological sources for the Viking Period in Scandinavia forms the basis for an assessment of the importance of Kaupang and Skiringssal in research. To conclude, an outline is given of the understanding of the scholarly study of the past that is the basis for the design of both the project and this book.

Everyone familiar with the Viking Age in Scandinavia will have read or heard of *Kaupang*. At the farm of Kaupang in Vestfold, near the mouth of the Oslofjord, lie the remains of one of the earliest urban sites in Scandinavia, founded around AD 800 and abandoned in the mid-10th century (Fig. 1.3). The average Viking-age scholar will be less familiar with *Skiringssal*, the name by which Kaupang was referred to in the first extant source relating to the site, the travelogue of the Norwegian Ohthere (*Óttarr*) from the late 9th century (Skre, this vol. Ch. 2:29). Until the urban settlement at Kaupang was discovered by Principal Inspector (*førstekonservator*) Charlotte Blindheim in 1956, it was in fact Skiringssal that lay at the centre of archaeological and historical research attention. Documentary sources from the period c. AD 890–1300 refer to Skiringssal several times, and provide an image of the place not only as comprising an urban site but also as an important royal seat that was at the same time a cult centre and assembly place for a large

territory (Fig. 1.2) – possibly the whole of Viken, the lands surrounding the Oslofjord (Fig. 1.1).

Research into Skiringssal and Kaupang has a history of more than two centuries, within which Blindheim's excavations of 1950–1974 represented a real breakthrough. Earlier, Gerhard Schöning (1771), Jens Kraft (1822), Gerhard Munthe (comments in the 1838–1839 edition of Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*), Peter Andreas Munch (1850, 1852), Nicolay Nicolaysen (1868) and Gustav Storm (1901) had each made crucial contributions to the understanding of the site (Skre, this vol. Ch. 2).

Major advances in the study of the early urban sites and central places in Scandinavia, and not least in the methods of field archaeology, meant that by the late 1990s the time was ripe to take a new step forward in research into Kaupang and Skiringssal (Skre, this vol. Ch. 3). A research project was organized at the Institute of Archaeology, Conservation and Historical Studies of the University of Oslo, and the field-



Figure 1.1 Vestfold means “West of the Fold”, and Fold is the ancient name of the Oslofjord. Vestfold is the richest region of Norway in Viking-period archaeology. Some of the most important sites are shown here. Areas under cultivation in modern times are shaded green, largely reflecting the situation in the Viking Age.

There were three principal routeways in Vestfold. The first was the sailing route along the coast, which all maritime traffic followed. The second was Raet (The Ridge), the great morainic belt that runs SSW to NNE a little way in from the coast. The well-drained soil of the moraine was favourable to agriculture; for land travel in coastal areas of Vestfold, Raet was the natural route. The third routeway was that from the south into the interior along Lågendalen (the Låg Valley). This valley, which is also well-suited to agriculture and could in parts support substantial settlement, leads up to Numedal, which in turn adjoins the mountain plateau of Hardangervidda, which one can cross to reach the western coastal regions. It is also easy to descend from Numedal into the Drammen River system or north to Ringerike, Hadeland and the remaining “Opplands” (Skre, this vol. Ch. 18:Fig. 18.2). The western boundary of modern Vestfold is the fjord now known as Skjensfjord which leads into the mouth of the Telemark River valley. This valley branches into several smaller valleys that lead into the various parts of Grenland and Telemark, and further up to the southern part of Hardangervidda. Map, Julie K. Øhre Askjem.

Figure 1.2 The most important elements in the Skiringssal central-place complex as they are identified in various chapters in this volume. Kaupang is the urban settlement (green outline; Pilø, this vol. Chs. 6–10) surrounded by cemeteries (red outline; Stylegar, this vol. Ch. 5) (cf. Fig. 1.3). The large northernmost cemetery was located by the main road which led to and from Kaupang. This cemetery was probably where the petty kings of Skiringssal and their followers were buried (Skre, this vol. Ch. 16). One kilometre along this road from Kaupang, at the farm of Huseby, the remains of a Viking-period hall have been excavated, probably the hall that gave Skiringssal its name (Skre, this vol. Chs. 11 and 19). The road is likely to have continued further north to the thing site of Þjóðalyng (black outline; Skre, this vol. Ch. 17). Just north of the assembly site was the lake Vítrir/Vettrir whose name indicates that it was considered sacred. On the south-eastern shore of the lake lies the small but distinct hill called Helgefjell. This name also denotes a sacred location (Brink, this vol. Ch. 4). The level shown for the lake is its assumed original level. The sea-level shown has been raised 3.5 m from today’s level to show its level in the early Viking Age (Sørensen et al., this vol. Ch. 12:271). Illustration, Anne Engesveen.

work of this project was undertaken in the years 1998–2003. The most important element within this fieldwork was a major excavation in the settlement area of Kaupang in the years 2000–2002 (Pilø, this vol. Ch. 7).

This volume is the first in a series where the results from this research project are published. It is appropriate, consequently, to first explain the background of the project and the objectives that have shaped both the project and the present book (1.1). Especially readers who are not specialists in archaeology, and readers with little previous knowledge of archaeology in Scandinavia, might benefit from the general sketch offered in this chapter of the significance of Kaupang and Skiringssal in the archaeology of the Scandinavian Viking Period (1.2; Figs. 1.1–1.3).



Finally, the design of the project and of the current volume has been guided by specific ambitions for the scholarly study of the past, of which an account is also given (1.3).

1.1 The ambitions of the Kaupang Excavation Project

The urban centres of the Viking Period in Scandinavia are once more the targets of major research efforts. The results of the extensive excavations at Birka in the 1990s are being published (Ambrosiani 2001a, 2004; Ambrosiani and Clarke 1992, 1995b; Miller and Clarke 1997; Wigh 2001); the results from numerous excavations at Ribe and the related studies of recent decades are being brought together and published (Feveile and Jensen 2000; Feveile 2006a, 2006b); and a new campaign with fresh reviews of the vast body of evidence from earlier excavations at Hedeby has begun (e.g. Schultze 2005), and sophisticated geophysical surveys have been carried out over the whole of the settlement area (von Carnap-Bornheim and Hilberg, in press).

At the same time, there has been a great flourishing in general scholarship concerning the Viking Period and the centuries immediately preceding it, with important excavations and research work on rural central places (e.g. Larsson and Hårdh 1998, 2002, 2003; Jørgensen 2003; Larsson 2004; Lundqvist 2003; Munch et al. 2003; Söderberg 2005) and research work on the social structures of the Viking Age (e.g. Brink 1996b; Iversen 1997; Mortensen and Rasmussen 1991; Skre 1998b; Sundqvist 2002).

The new empirical evidence that has emerged has challenged many long-accepted truths, and therefore new research questions have been put on the scholarly agenda. To produce further new, concrete evidence was also one of the principal objectives of the Kaupang project when, at the end of the 1990s, new excavations were planned. We had produced for our own use overviews of the state of scholarship on Kaupang and Skiringssal and of the archaeological evidence then available. During this work, it soon became evident that it would be essential to carry out further excavations because the research questions with

which we were concerned could simply not be answered with the existing evidence (Skre, this vol. Ch. 3:43–4; Pilø, this vol. Ch. 6).

In addition to the desire to produce new evidence, we recognized the need to develop new ways of approaching the Scandinavian Viking Period and to produce new elements to the overall picture of that era. New evidence will produce little additional insight if it is simply “more of the same”. To justify major excavation projects, the new evidence has to be produced from deliberate and strategically designed research interventions that are directed by pertinent and central scholarly questions of wider relevance than merely to the site under excavation and the immediate fields of academic specialization to which it relates.

A research project at a site like Kaupang should therefore be concerned with topics beyond those directly concerned with the archaeology of towns. Like all fields of specialization within the multifaceted realm of archaeology, the archaeology of urban settlement must endeavour to link up with other fields within the discipline and to connect with universal research questions concerning the period under study. The study of the towns has to make itself relevant to other aspects of the subject-area by speaking clearly and audibly within the wide academic common room to which all archaeologists and historians who work on the Scandinavian Viking Age relate.

The multidisciplinary character of Viking Period studies complicates matters when it comes to realizing these general ambitions. Amongst the many disciplines interested in the Viking Period, archaeology has a distinct identity in that its primary domain is the material remains, and because new material is constantly being discovered. However another characteristic of archaeology is that in attempting to interpret this evidence, archaeologists must try to maintain adequate links with two really quite different, yet at the same time equally vital, fields of scholarship, the natural sciences and the humanities.

Close collaboration with natural scientists is indispensable because the scientists’ contributions go well beyond the analysis of remains. Through detailed discussions between archaeologists and scientists we develop strategies and methods for sampling and analysis that fundamentally affect the research questions, strategy and methodology, not only during excavation but also during post-excavation work.

Furthermore, these wider links also connect archaeology with the many other disciplines concerned with the culture and society of the Viking Age: philology, toponymy, runology, textual and literary criticism, history, religious studies, art history, social anthropology, and more. As soon as the archaeologist of the Viking Period extends his or her interest beyond purely archaeological research issues such as the

chronology of arrowheads or the level of production at an iron-smelting site, it is necessary to establish and develop a dialogue with those academic disciplines. One’s work would rapidly degenerate into dilettantism if, for instance, one were content to use Old Norse literature as a source without fully engaging with what historians and Norse philologists have to say about the use of such sources. Still, in our enthusiasm for interdisciplinarity, archaeologists must not ignore the discipline-specific problems which lie at the very heart of the discipline. That is where much of its creative potential resides (Skre 1999).

The rather high-flown ambition of this project has been to sort out all of this, i.e. to make a contribution to Viking-period scholarship on all three levels identified here: to produce new empirical data; to develop new methods and approaches; and to provide new details within the overall understanding of the Viking Period in Scandinavia. It has been our aim to achieve this by entering into a close collaboration with the relevant scientific fields (Sørensen et al., this vol. Ch. 12; Bonde, this vol. Ch. 13; Barrett et al., this vol. Ch. 14; Milek and French, this vol. Ch. 15; Baug, in prep.; Gaut, in prep. a; Pedersen, in prep. a and b; Pilø, in prep.; Resi, in prep. a and b). We have also consciously sought to apply the highest standards in both the fieldwork and the analytical work of this project, and to use advanced techniques of digital recording and geophysical survey (Pilø, this vol. Ch. 7:149–51, 158–60). We have simultaneously taken up major issues and basic data that have required detailed discussions with colleagues in other fields of the humanities concerned with the Viking Age (Brink, this vol. Ch. 4; Skre, this vol. Chs. 17–20; Blackburn, in prep.; Gaut, in prep. a and b; Kilger, in prep. a and b; Rispiling et al., in prep.; Skre, in prep.).

These ambitions formed the basis for the planning of the project’s analytical and publication stages. To create a dynamic and stimulating atmosphere within the project, a group of contributors has been put together including both distinguished and experienced scholars and talented younger researchers. Great importance has also been attached to maintaining a high level of communication between the contributors by arranging project seminars, meetings, text-based symposia, and excursions. These occasions have also helped to create a scholarly network amongst the contributors, which has proved exceptionally valuable for the younger recruits. It has also been a quite deliberate policy to create an open project circle so that the contributors can use relevant skills both within and outside the team, and use pertinent information as other scholars within the group discover it.

In a following chapter, a detailed account will be found of the principal research questions tackled by this project (Skre, this vol. Ch. 3). Immediately below is an overview of how the research tasks taken up by



Figure 1.3 This landscape model shows the settlement area of Kaupang as far as it can be plotted from the fieldwork of 1998–2003 (Pilø, this vol. Ch. 8.3:164–72). It is possible to distinguish an area with plot-divisions and permanent buildings, shown here (yellow), from an outer zone lacking such features and with fewer artefactual finds or stratified layers (cf. Pilø, this vol. Ch. 8:Fig.8.18). This surrounding zone may have been used by visiting craftsmen and the like for temporary occupation, perhaps in tents, during periods of major influxes of people to the town.

The town was surrounded by several cemeteries (red), some large, some small. Some of these had burials in barrows (black), others in flat graves, while yet others had a combination of these burial forms. There is also evidence of both cremation and inhumation (Stylegar, this vol. Ch. 5). The large cemetery along the road (orange) out of the town was probably not meant for the inhabitants of Kaupang but for the local petty king and his followers (Skre, this vol. Chs. 16 and 19).

The place-name Kaupang is first recorded in a document of 1401 (DN V:290), where it is given as the name of a farm by the Viksfjord in Tjølling. However, the word itself is much older. From the period immediately after the Viking Age, kaupangr is known as the term meaning ‘market site’ and ‘town’. How long this word had been current in Old Norse cannot be securely established, but there seems no doubt that it was in use in the Viking Age (Schmidt 2000b; Brink, this vol. Ch. 4:63). Its etymology is a matter of debate, but the most plausible interpretation is “trade-bay”. This term was probably used for the town by the Viksfjord in its own time, but it is not clear that it would have served as a

place-name. It is possible that the site was first referred to as Kaupang after the town had been abandoned but was still remembered.

We do not know, therefore, what the town at Skiringssal was called in the Viking Period. The view put forward by P. A. Munch in 1850 (105–6; cf. Schmidt 2000b:84–92) seems most plausible. He noted that in Ohthere’s travelogue of c. 890, Skiringssal was called *æn port*, “a certain port”. Munch drew a comparison with the way the town of Trondheim, Norway was referred to a few centuries later. *Prándheimr* was originally the name of the region, and the population of the region referred to the town simply as *kaupangr*. To people outside the region it was known as *kaupangrinn í Prándheimi*, subsequently shortened to *Prándheimr*, i.e. Trondheim. In the same way, the Viking-age population of southern Vestfold may have referred to the local town merely as *kaupangr*. It was obvious which “*kaupang*” they meant. In this case, this form of reference was preserved in the name of the farmstead that was later established on the site of the town. People outside that region may have referred to the site as *kaupangr í Skíringssal*, or just *Skíringssal*. It seems likely that Ohthere used one of those forms of reference, and that his term was re-interpreted by the Anglo-Saxon scribe who translated and wrote down his account as *æn port ... þone man hætt Sciringes heal*: “a certain port ... which is called Skiringssal”.

On this model of the landscape, the sea-level shown has been raised 3.5 m from today’s level to show its level in the early Viking Age (Sørensen et al., this vol. Ch. 12:271). Illustration, Anne Engesveen.

the various contributors have been assigned to this and the future publications of this project.

About the current volume

At the centre of the Kaupang Excavation Project is the urban settlement that was situated on the Viksfjord at the southern end of Vestfold in the period c. AD 800–960/980, at the site where today the farm of Kaupang stands (Figs. 1.1–1.3). Since Blindheim's excavations the urban site has been called *Kaupang* after the farm, but its Viking-age name is actually uncertain (cf. Fig. 1.3). In this and the future publication from the project the name Kaupang will be used.

It is principally that site which the project has been focussed upon, and it is from there that we have obtained by far the greatest quantity of archaeological evidence from Skiringssal. In this volume the *urban site* Kaupang and its *local context* in Skiringssal are the centre of attention, and the chapters will, to varying degrees and from various angles, concern themselves with those two primary topics. The comparative ambitions are limited at this stage, but will be met to a greater degree in later volumes of this series. The objectives of this volume, each of which is fulfilled in a specific section of the book, are as follows:

- *Section I: Background.* To present the principal research questions and strategy of the project. To publish summaries and assessments of earlier research at Kaupang and in Skiringssal, and to undertake new analyses of specific categories of material previously gathered.
- *Section II: Excavations and Surveys 1998–2003.* To publish the key results of the excavations and recording undertaken during the project in 1998–2003. Only an overview is given of the artefactual finds (Pilø and Pedersen, this vol. Ch. 9), while particular objects that are of importance in respect of, say, dating or the interpretations of buildings will be highlighted in other chapters. We have decided not to go into great detail in respect of individual layers, pits, ditches and other features. The relatively few scholars who are interested in exploring the excavation records to this level of detail are referred to the reports that are archived at KHM.
- *Section III: Scientific Analysis.* To publish the most important natural scientific analyses that have been carried out on material from Kaupang. (Scientific analysis of artefacts will be published in later volumes.)
- *Section IV: Skiringssal.* To publish investigations of the other elements within the central-place complex of Skiringssal, to examine the connexions and chronological relationships between these elements, and to attempt to reach an understanding of the emergence of the complex, its development, and its demise.

Future publications

A number of specialist studies are in preparation, which will in some cases relate directly to the principal research questions of the project and in others prepare the ground for further work on those questions. Most of these studies are concerned with one or more categories of the artefactual finds from the excavations. The classes of finds that are being worked on now include scales and weights (Pedersen, in prep. a), hacksilver and ingots (Hårdh, in prep. a), coins (Blackburn, in prep.; Rispling, et al., in prep.), Scandinavian metalwork (Hårdh, in prep. b), Continental and Insular metalwork (Wamers, in prep.), ring-pins and penannular brooches (Graham-Campbell, in prep.), soapstone (Baug, in prep.), textile tools (Øye, in prep.), whetstones (Resi, in prep. a), objects of jet, amber and precious stones (Resi, in prep. b), glass vessels (Gaut, in prep. a) and, finally, pottery (Pilø, in prep.). Some studies have a more theoretical orientation and deal with several classes of material and with different sources of evidence. This is the case with studies by Kilger (in prep. a and b), Gaut (in prep. b), Pedersen (in prep. b) and Skre (in prep.).

The project has never presumed to exploit the full scope of research possibilities that resides in the large collection of evidence from the fieldwork at Kaupang. Nor, indeed, within the relatively broad topics that are addressed in the project (Skre, this vol. Ch. 3) will the many research questions be dealt with exhaustively. We have picked out those major problems that we consider it most urgent to examine given the current state of scholarship. These have undergone adaptation in the course of the project work according to the resources available, and as opportunities provided by the evidence are recognized. Other than this, the full material is available to anyone who might wish to explore amongst the wide range of possible research questions that emerge from the analysis of the vast archaeological material from Kaupang and Skiringssal.

1.2 Kaupang and Skiringssal in the archaeology of the Viking Period

What is the place of Kaupang and Skiringssal in our understanding of the Viking Period in Scandinavia? That depends, of course, upon what sort of research issues one is interested in, and thus there is no simple answer to this question. To assess the significance and interpretative potential of the finds that are published in this and the successive volumes, it is necessary to locate them within the general context of the sources for this period in Scandinavia. The following outline emphasizes the archaeological evidence in particular.

In Norway and Sweden the great majority of archaeological finds in the museum collections have come from graves. The number of grave finds is very high, and the number of artefacts per grave is also

generally high. Similarly in Denmark, burial archaeology has produced a large corpus of material, although graves are fewer there and the number of artefacts per grave is lower. However the settlement evidence there is richer than in Norway and Sweden. In most regions of Scandinavia we find both cremations and inhumations, although the ratio between the two is extremely variable. In broad terms, inhumations are most common in Denmark whereas cremations are dominant in Norway and Sweden. The graves were usually placed in barrows, but burials in stone features, stone settings, and under the level ground, are found too, especially in Denmark. Graves may be isolated, but it is more common for them to be in groups, which in Norway usually comprise up to fifteen graves. Large cemeteries are also found in most regions, but these are rare. In most cases the cemeteries can be associated with a farmstead, but in Sweden and Denmark also with a village. In the farmstead cemeteries it seems likely that just one barrow was raised for each generation, probably when the farm was inherited by the next generation.

There is no comprehensive survey of the number of unexcavated graves of the Viking Period, but there must be tens of thousands in Sweden and Norway together. The obstacle to estimating a figure is the fact that without excavation it is difficult to distinguish Viking-period funerary monuments from those of earlier periods. In Denmark the number of graves is much lower. Here it is the practice of burying under the level ground that is the biggest obstacle to estimating the number of graves.

Nor, indeed, do we have accurate figures for the number of grave finds in museum collections: in the case of Norway, estimates vary between 6,000 (Solberg 2000:222) and 12,000 (Stylegar, pers. comm.). Best known are the incredible ship graves from Oseberg and Gokstad, but these are utterly exceptional. To begin with, the state of preservation was very special in these two cases, as the barrows had been constructed of clay and turf, which meant that a great deal of the wood survived. The burials were also uncremated. However, as ship graves they are by no means unique (e.g. Opedal 1998); indeed, graves containing ships and boats are found in considerable numbers all over Scandinavia (Müller-Wille 1970).

The majority of the grave finds that are now in the museums were unearthed before c. 1900, some as a result of campaigns of excavation but most during the intensive cultivation of land that started in the early and mid 19th century (Pedersen 1989). Before 1905 Norway had no laws protecting ancient monuments, and barrows were destroyed in dreadful numbers. But the museums pursued an active policy of collection, and consequently obtained a large number of finds for their collections. The way in which the finds were made, though, meant that the information available about them varies greatly, and is

usually poor. Often the only information is that the objects were found in the course of farm work. Whether they are from a single grave has frequently to be determined by the type and dating of the objects, and it often looks as if only the largest and best preserved artefacts were collected and sent to the museums.

The documentation of finds from early archaeological excavations is also of rather inconsistent quality, ranging from Hjalmar Stolpe's outstanding drawings and written records of the excavation of 1,100 graves at Birka in 1873–1895 (Gräslund 1980) to Nicolay Nicolaysen's rather meagre written reports of his excavation of some 1,400 graves in south-eastern Norway from 1867 to 1900. While Stolpe was interested in both the construction of the grave and the position of the objects within it, Nicolaysen was most concerned with collecting objects for the museum. His excavations at Kaupang are amongst the very few cases in which he produced a plan of a cemetery (Skre, this vol. Chs. 2:34–6 and 16:Fig. 16.1, 365); there are no drawings of a burial itself from his work at any site.

Hoard finds constitute another category of finds typical of the Viking Period in Scandinavia. From the two centuries preceding this period they are rare, while at the end of the Viking Period in particular they are very numerous. Silver is the most common metal in these hoards. Jewellery is predominant in the earlier finds, but coins appear increasingly towards the end of the period (Hårdh 1996).

Settlement finds of the Viking Period are, by contrast, much less numerous than one might expect given the large number of burial finds. The number of excavated settlements from the 1st to 6th centuries AD is far higher all over Scandinavia. This must primarily be due to the fact that the building-types and hearths of the Viking Period have not left such clear traces as those of earlier periods, making the Viking-period settlements themselves harder to recognize. The number of excavated settlements of the Viking Period has, however, grown in recent years, especially in Denmark and Sweden. These excavations provide information on buildings, settlement patterns and the like, but the quantity of artefactual finds from them is generally quite low. However systematic metal-detecting has, in recent years, produced numerous metal finds from some settlements.

Closer investigations of this kind of metal-rich settlement have shown a number of them also to have had other special features, such as halls that reveal the settlements to have been aristocratic residences. Some of these, such as Slöinge in Halland (Lundqvist 1996, 2003) are essentially a magnate farmstead and probably little else. But other settlements had a variety of functions for the surrounding community, and it has become the practice to call these "central places" (Fig. 1.4; Skre, this vol. Ch. 3.2). Most of these

Figure 1.4 *Scandinavian towns, market places, central places and magnate farmsteads of the first millennium AD referred to in this volume. Map, Julie K. Øhre Askjem.*

sites have origins several centuries before the Viking Age. Some of them lost significance in the course of the Scandinavian Iron Age, and all of those that survived were abandoned towards the end of the Viking Period. At those sites which have been most thoroughly examined, it looks as if an aristocratic household was at the core of the complex. Skiringssal is one of the relatively few obvious central places of the Viking Period in Norway (Skre, this vol. Chs. 19 and 20).

Central places had functions that other settlements did not have. At Skiringssal the most important elements of the central place were the assembly place, the sacred lake, the hall, the enormous cemetery, and the town. As later chapters will show (Skre, this vol. Chs. 11, 16, 17, 19 and 20), the scope for comparative studies of this range of phenomena is quite limited due to the paucity of such sites; indeed, in Norway, other such central-place sites are virtually non-existent. Only in southern and central Scandinavia are there comparable central-place sites, but even they are few in number.

Two categories of activity that we expect to find traces of at a central place are trade and craft production. These activities are of course in evidence at a number of sites that specialized in them; these are normally referred to as trading sites, market sites or the like. Such sites are known in Scandinavia from as early as c. AD 200 (Lundeborg on Fyn), and they increase sharply in number from the 8th century onwards (Callmer 1984; Clarke and Ambrosiani 1995:46–89; Sindbæk 2005; Skre, this vol. Chs. 3.1 and 20). Kaupang is one of these sites.

The rise in the number of such specialized sites represents an intensification of trade and craft production. But the rise is also due to the fact that before the 8th century those activities were normally performed on a limited scale in settlements, probably mainly addressing the needs of the settlement's own

inhabitants. But from the 8th century onwards those activities were less often located at farmsteads or in villages and more frequently in the specialized sites. There was thus a change in the contexts of these activities. A parallel and probably related development can be seen: at the start of the Viking Period there were changes in production and trade, with shifts from the production of individually crafted items to the serial production of identical items and from the primarily local or regional distribution of goods to trade over long distances (Callmer 1995).

The number of specialized trading and production sites in Sweden and Denmark is quite high (Callmer 1994). Very few have been found in Norway. From the period before c. AD 1000, Kaupang is the only proven example in Norway. Stray finds and place-names indicate that such sites existed at a number of other locations, but their dating is uncertain; most are probably of the 11th century or later.

The majority of the specialized trade and production sites of Scandinavia appear to have been of only local importance; most were fairly small. Just a few were large; they produce huge quantities of finds, a major proportion of which represent long-distance trade (Sindbæk 2005:80–7). Kaupang is one of these; the others are Ribe (c. AD 710–850), Birka (c. 750/780–970) and Hedeby (c. 808–1070). The character of these four sites is discussed in detail in a later chapter (Skre, this vol. Ch. 20.2).

The archaeological material from Kaupang is therefore at once unique and yet also typical of the archaeological picture drawn by Viking-age finds from elsewhere. What is typical is that much of the material was deposited as grave goods. This group of archaeological finds from Kaupang is consequently that which can most easily be correlated with other collections of Viking-age archaeological material (Stylegar, this vol. Ch. 5).

The finds from the settlement area at Kaupang

are, conversely, harder to contextualize in such a way. Some of the classes of artefacts, for instance glass beads and weights, are also found in graves, which helps to form a picture of the distribution and social context of these items. Other types of objects, such as hacksilver and coins, are very rare in graves, but do appear in large quantities in hoards. The latter category of deposits has a range of intrinsic interpretative problems, as have the graves, and the settlement finds constitute an important comparative control for both of them. Other categories of artefacts, such as loomweights and crucibles, are practically only found in settlement contexts, and in these cases the Norwegian comparative material outside of Kaupang itself is very sparse. This is also the case with the buildings and a large number of other types of finds, for which we have to turn to other market sites and towns to find any large comparable assemblages.

Characteristic of settlements is that, with few exceptions, only small items will be found complete. Large objects would usually have been picked up had they been lying on the ground, and would only have been discarded had they been broken. Many objects were also crushed by being trodden on or by other activities. Therefore, complete large artefacts have usually to be sought in the graves or the hoards. There were other processes and factors too, both during and following the period of settlement, which mean that the artefactual assemblage from settlement sites is not representative in the composition of the material culture of the once living society. Examples of such processes and factors are the value assigned to different types of artefacts by their owners, the pattern of garbage disposal in the settlement, the conditions for the preservations of organic material in the settlement deposits, the types and degree of post-depositional disturbance to the deposits etc.

The finds from the graves also have a range of inherent interpretative problems which make it difficult to make direct comparisons with the settlement assemblages. Pottery, for instance, is a common category of find in the settlement area at Kaupang, and also occurs in graves at this site. But pottery is practically completely absent from burials everywhere else in Norway. It appears, indeed, as if ceramic cooking pots and containers were rare in Viking-period Norway; soapstone cauldrons and wooden vessels were preferred. But was pottery really so rarely used in Norway outside of Kaupang as the burial record would seem to imply? Or is the absence of pottery from the graves due rather to the fact that it was simply not the practice to deposit such material in them? In contrast to the settlement assemblages, the choice of artefacts for graves was indeed based on a conscious choice of material culture, and it is quite apparent that there were conventions governing what was deposited and what was not. If we had more finds from rural settlements, it would be possible to form a

clearer idea of the use of pottery in the Viking Age in Norway. But given the present find-situation, it is not clear *how* unusual the extensive use of pottery at Kaupang was.

Altogether, one can say that in several ways Kaupang and Skiringssal are very important sites in the archaeology of the Viking Period in Scandinavia. To begin with, the urban settlement has a large number of objects in a range of types that are otherwise unusual or simply unknown in Viking-period assemblages from elsewhere in Norway. As such artefactual finds from settlements are unusual everywhere in Norway except Kaupang, the site is therefore also important to anyone working on the material from the hoards and graves. All three types of find-context pose particular difficulties of interpretation; these difficulties can more easily be delimited and checked when artefact-types occur in more than one of them.

If we look beyond the physical artefact-types themselves to types of activity, it is clear that Kaupang provides rich evidence of certain forms of activity that are otherwise very rarely seen. In particular the scope for finding evidence of trade and craft production is high in urban settlements. The crafts produced and the goods traded can be found both in graves and in hoards, but the remains of the craftsman's work and the conduct of trade are found primarily at the urban sites. The quantity of goods from long-distance trade is quite enormous at urban sites compared to what one sees at other types of sites. The assemblages from Kaupang and the other urban settlements are therefore key sources for Viking-period trade and craft. Looking beyond the urban site, the other elements of the central place Skiringssal, which are the vast cemeteries, the royal hall and the *thing* site, are also only rarely found at other sites.

If we raise the horizons yet further and look at combinations of activities, Kaupang and Skiringssal appear even more special. Only a few central places of the Viking Period with a similar activity range are known, and the number of urban settlements is even lower (Skre, this vol. Chs. 19 and 20). Research into such sites is therefore significant, not only because of their rich artefactual material and diverse and unusual activities, but also because these were the most important centres of power during the Viking Age. The study of their emergence, their elements, their development, and their demise is consequently quite fundamental to any understanding of Viking-age culture and society, and particularly for an understanding of the profound transformation from the tribes and petty kingships of the Iron Age to the kingdoms which emerged in the Viking Age and which grew, in due course, into modern nation-states.

1.3 Exploring the distant past

A few words are needed on the views of historical and archaeological scholarship that underlie the editor's

design of this volume. The individual authors answer only for their own chapters, of course; they are not to be held to account for these views. However the unity of the volume, and particularly the editor's own chapters, are informed by certain views which will be explained briefly here.

It is a basic condition of all historical disciplines that they are practised in a different period from that with which they are concerned. History has to be meaningful and relevant to readers of the historian's own time. Meaning and relevance are phenomena that are historically dependent, and what constitutes meaningful history today is different from that of fifty, five hundred or a thousand years ago.

This becomes particularly evident when reading Viking-age literary sources. For a modern reader, the sense of these is difficult to grasp not simply because of the usually dense formulae of the poetry or the runic inscriptions, but because it would have to be read in its past cultural context to convey its proper meaning. This is illustrated by the fact that the longest and most compendious of Viking-period runic inscriptions, the Rök inscription, is probably that on which opinions concerning the reading and interpretation of the text are most divided. This is not due to damaged runes or ambiguously written words, but rather arises because comprehension of the references, the context, and the meaning of the formulations, presupposes a knowledge that has largely been lost. Similar insights can be obtained by studying archaeological sources which have meaning in the form of pictures and decorations, such as the Gotlandic picture-stones (e.g. Andrén 1989) and Scandinavian animal art (e.g. Hedeager 2004).

Equally alien in form are the ancient concepts that underlay the very acts of recounting history or writing it down. In the poems, which are the only surviving literary works that can be dated with any certainty to the Viking Period itself, the principal objective was not to recount factual events. These poems operated within a symbolic and mythical reality in which events, places and individuals were linked first and foremost to what Meulengracht Sørensen (2003:267) calls "the Viking Age's perception of life and the world, its myths and concepts". This does not make it impossible to use the poetry as historical source-material, but the symbolic and literary functions of its passages have to be carefully assessed before they are pressed into service as sources for the events, places and persons mentioned (cf. Skre, this vol. Chs. 18, 19 and 20.3).

Such contextualized readings of archaeological and written sources are now effectively taken for granted in scholarly circles. But it is just as significant that we who are writing history nowadays are also subjects of our own age, and that our texts too are only meaningful within a particular set of cultural and intellectual conditions. The texts that we write

are thus subject to the same preconditions as the texts and objects we treat as sources. Our texts have no objective or neutral status that enables us to reveal the "true reality" of the distant past. They are created within the universe of meaning that we belong to ourselves.

What is the consequence of this realization? For some scholars, such a realization has resulted in what I would call a sort of academic resignation, whereby they accept that all understanding is governed by its immediate historical circumstances, and therefore that no contact with past reality can ever be validated – and that such contact therefore is not worth striving for. This produces a style of historical writing that relates only to the present, with an agenda that is solely and thoroughly contemporary – involved in the political and cultural issues of here and now, and deriving its premises and objectives from that only.

What is needed in this respect is the ability to have two ideas in one's head simultaneously. Why should one system of meaning not be capable of being *recognized* and *understood* within another? It is important to appreciate that the meaningful world of the past cannot be *experienced* in exactly the same way as it was originally. If that were possible, we should feel the same real physical fear and the urge to hide indoors when we read about giants and other evil spirits (*meinvættir*) threatening human life. And when we read about Viking-age justice and honour, we should feel their inflexible and determined aggression towards anyone subject to vengeance for some offence or misdeed. These emotions are barely sensible to us, and any engagement with the past in those terms would lie outside the bounds of scholarship. But we can *recognize* both evil powers and feuds, and we can *describe* and *understand* their respective cultural significance and social role. Sometimes we may even think that we understand them empathetically. But what we write has to be meaningful for ourselves too, and for others who live in our contemporary reality, and that fear and aggression have, therefore, to be described and explained using our era's frames of reference, which in those cases would normally be psychological or anthropological. One must not, as a result, suppose that there is any coincidence between *us* and *past peoples*, or between *our* history of them and *their own* history of themselves. Yet equally, our history of them is no more right or wrong than their own; it is just more meaningful to us through our modern frames of reference.

In a scene from the film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, "Professor of Archaeology" Indiana Jones tells a student: "Archaeology is about Facts. If you want the Truth, go next door to the Philosophy Department" (Bintliff 1993:100). It is easy to agree that archaeology is stuffed with facts; that is reflected by most of the chapters in this volume. In them one can also see how important those facts are to scholarly

argument. But Jones is mistaken if he thinks that facts have any value *in themselves*. Facts have no interest or meaning until they are interpreted – a state of affairs that should become equally clear as one reads this book. Facts begin to take on scholarly meaning when they are linked up with other facts, involved in some line of argument, and used to form a basis for conclusions. For instance, the pure fact observed by Milek and French (this vol. Ch. 15.5:330), visible only in their microscopes, that the earliest deposits in one of the plots at Kaupang comprised seven layers of charcoal-rich material separated by thin layers of sand, is merely a detail in itself. But the observation became extremely interesting when they noted the contrast between those deposits and the later deposits at the same location and used their scholarly competence to interpret the facts. Together with comparison of equivalent deposits at Ribe, Jutland, and Gásir, Iceland, their judgment of the Kaupang deposits leads them to interpret the seven layers as possibly representing seasonal activity, perhaps in seven successive years, on this plot – in turn a crucial factor in the view of the initial development of the settlement at Kaupang that is proposed here (Pilø, this vol. Ch. 10:193).

It is not possible to draw a really sharp distinction between facts and interpretation, because all observations of “facts” are made within particular circumstances and on the basis of certain premises that influence the observations themselves. If we take this into consideration, only the source itself remains as entirely objective – not anything we may say about it, not even what we might regard as “factual” about it. All the same, the difference between fact and interpretation is a fruitful distinction, because it makes clear that anything interesting we might have to say about the past is always a matter of interpretation and never purely or simply a matter of “fact”.

The purpose of these interpretations is to render the past comprehensible and meaningful to us; to turn it into *history*. It is not meaningful as long as it remains simply a collection of facts. Contemporary interpretations create context and meaning of a kind that is accessible to contemporary people. Those who are committed to the source-critical school that has emerged within archaeology, Old Norse philology and history alike, are therefore mistaken when they believe that they can strip a source bare of all ambiguities and expose a reliable core. There is no such core, because its unveiling, and these scholars’ subsequent use of the source, will always depend upon certain premises that involve elements of interpretation and which are consequently ambiguous in themselves.

Of course, this does not mean that source-criticism can be neglected. It is absolutely essential; however, one simply must not believe that it can remove all doubt. Source-criticism can only produce *degrees of reliability* for a source being used in particular ways or to support particular conclusions. This applies to

interpretation too. No interpretation is ever conclusive; it is only more or less probable. In this book, particular attention is given to the degree of probability that the respective contributor considers the interpretations to have.

The view of the relationship between facts and interpretation set out here does not, thus, lead to a downgrading of source-criticism. On the contrary, it leads to a greater concern with interpretation, and with how it is presented and supported by facts and arguments. It also draws attention to the general perception of the Viking Age, the *history*, which these interpretations are intended to merge into. Finally, it emphasizes the fact that the individual interpretations and the overall *history* have qualities and elements that are *not* rooted, one and all, in the available facts.

The *history* rendered here has, therefore, to be examined minutely, because it is not only formed from the available facts but also is involved in and governs the selection and interpretation of those facts. It thus has an important and prominent position in the research process. This situation is justified, however, because the *history* is the whole justification for the scholarly study of the past, because the *history* renders the past meaningful and turns it into more than a collection of uninterpreted sources and fragmented understandings.

Published in the present book are a large number of facts concerning Kaupang and Skiringssal that have not been available before. These facts have stimulated the contributors to produce new interpretations, and to re-interpret facts known before. Out of these building blocks it has proved possible to suggest new and more comprehensive views on many issues, alongside something that is ambitiously regarded as a history of Kaupang and Skiringssal. But one has to admit that Indiana Jones was right in that neither the history nor the interpretations of archaeology can be granted the status of “Truth”. What we present here are conclusions of varying degrees of probability, which are supported by the observations and arguments that are published along with them.

As noted, the interpretations that are offered here are not directionless. They find their places in one way or another within a *history* that to some extent has itself been developed in the course of the work on these chapters. And our efforts to develop this history also have a direction – an ambition that could never be fully realized, but which all the same is utterly fundamental to all research into the past – namely, to get in touch with the reality of the past as best and as fully as we can, and to present an understanding of that reality in a way that makes it meaningful for ourselves and our contemporaries.

Part I:

Background
