

# RIBE 700-1050

From Emporium to Civitas  
in Southern Scandinavia

*Morten Søvsø*



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To the generations of Ribe's antiquaries

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*Morten Søvsø*

Museum of Southwest Jutland

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Jutland Archaeological Society

Ribe 700-1050: From Emporium to Civitas in Southern Scandinavia

RIBE STUDIER 2

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# Contents

Foreword .....	7
1. Introduction.....	9
2. Aspects of the theoretical discussion of towns and their origins in northern Europe ...	13
2.1 Starting point	13
2.2 What is a town?	15
2.3 Henri Pirenne and the trade model	18
2.4 Karl Polanyi and trade in the 'pre-modern' society	19
2.5 Dark Age Economics	19
2.6 The Viking Age in Denmark	20
2.7 The Medieval Town Project	21
2.8 From Tribe to State	21
2.9 The urban stage	22
2.10 A theory concerning the emporium of Ribe	22
3. History of research into Ribe .....	25
3.1 The Ribe Episcopal Chronicle	25
3.2 The renaissance historians: Hans Svaning, Anders Sørensen Vedel and Niels Krag	26
3.3 The ecclesiastical sphere: Peder Terpager and Matthias Galthen	27
3.4 The mapping of Ribe Town and Field	29
3.5 National romanticism and J. Kinch's Ribe Bys Historie og Beskrivelse	30
3.6 The main restoration of the cathedral and excavations in the churchyard in 1894 and 1930-1	36
3.7 Treasure finds, 1874 onwards	37
3.8 The National Museum's early excavations, 1911-41	37
3.9 Hugo Matthiessen's <i>Middelalderlige Byer</i>	38
3.10 Mogens Bencard and the Grønnegade excavation of 1953-6	38
3.11 The rescue excavation at St Peder's Church, 1960	41
3.12 The slip theory, 1962	42
3.13 New buildings in the town centre, 1959-78	43
3.14 The relocation hypothesis: Dankirke and Okholm, 1962-9	45
3.15 The original Ribe: excavations 1970-76	47
3.16 The Medieval Town Project and the dug-away hypothesis	49
3.17 Danmarks Kirker	51
3.18 Stig Jensen and Per Kristian Madsen	51
3.19 Excavations in the streets of the town from 1984 and the early damming hypothesis	52

3.20 The emporium of Ribe, 1984-	55
3.21 The urban archaeology meeting in Ribe, 1988-	59
3.22 The periodical By, marsk og geest, 1989-	59
3.23 Major excavations in the western suburbs of Ribe, 1987-2000	60
3.24 The use of metal-detectors and water-sieving in excavations in Ribe	63
3.25 Excavations at Ribe Cathedral, 2008-12	63
3.26 Summary: research history and the conceptual framework of town archaeology	65
4. Topography – the coastal zone of West Jutland in the Iron Age, the Viking Period and the Middle Ages . . . . .	69
4.1 Introduction	69
4.2 The landscape of West Jutland in the Iron Age, the Viking Period and the Middle Ages	73
4.3 Landscape and people	83
4.4 Summary, Topography	123
5. Ribe AD 700-1050. . . . .	129
5.1 The meaning of the place-name Ribe	129
5.2 The taphonomy of Ribe	129
5.3 The topography and hydrography of the area around the town	133
5.4 Earlier activity below the area of the town	143
5.5 Methods of excavation and recording	145
5.6 Chronological schemes	148
5.7 The principles for the presentation of archaeological evidence: inclusion and exclusion	149
5.8 Ribe in the 8th century	150
5.9 Ribe in the 9th century	173
5.10 Ribe in the 10th century	204
5.11 Ribe in the 11th century	215
5.12 Summary: Ribe AD 700-1050	224
6. The urbanization of southern Scandinavia, AD 700-1050. . . . .	225
6.1 The first emporia	225
6.2 Danish emporia in the 9th and 10th centuries	232
6.3 Towns as centres of the Christian kingship from around the year 1000: the <i>civitas</i> model	243
6.4 Conclusion: From emporium to civitas in Southern Scandinavia	253
7. Summary. . . . .	257
Ribe AD 700-1050 – from Emporium to Civitas in southern Scandinavia	257
Why and how did Ribe begin to exist?	258
How did Ribe evolve between AD 700 and 1050 – both in terms of topography and economy?	258
Is the model of Ribe's development applicable to other early towns in southern Scandinavia?	259
8. Bibliography. . . . .	261
Notes. . . . .	277
Appendix: Dendrochronology in Ribe until 2015. . . . .	279
Appendix: Plate 1. . . . .	285

# Foreword

In 2006, Claus Fèveile published *Det ældste Ribe* [The earliest Ribe], launching the publication series *Ribe Studier* [Ribe Studies]. The goal of that series was to make the core archaeological evidence from excavations in the town of Ribe between 1984 and 2000 accessible to the scholarly world and to give an account of Ribe's special status in the archaeological landscape of Denmark and northern Europe.

The present book, *Ribe 700-1050: From Emporium to Civitas in Southern Scandinavia*, is volume 2 in Ribe Studies. The main text here provides a comprehensive presentation and analysis of the archaeology of the town through to the end of the Viking Period. Alongside that, the book has a major topographical section which discusses West Jutland in this period and the connexions between Ribe and the hinterland of the town. In addition, a concluding chapter discusses the origin of towns in southern Scandinavia.

As will become clear in what follows, the earliest Ribe is a unique archaeological site within the borders of present-day Denmark — our only true *emporium* — and that this special status is both a blessing and a challenge when one has the privilege of working on the archaeology of the town.

Archaeologists working here are used to dealing with thousands of finds of glass beads, sherds of glass vessels, moulds and Carolingian pottery; finds of a kind that are exceptionally rare elsewhere in Denmark. How is this massive difference to be understood?

The whole situation is rendered no less complicated by the fact that the closest parallels to Ribe are found in our two neighbouring countries: namely at *Reric*, close to the village of Gross Strömkendorf north of Wismar in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, and Åhus at the mouth of the Helge River in eastern Skåne. Ribe, Reric and Åhus have inevitably been studied within the frameworks of the legal situation and the research traditions of three different nations, with all of the barriers and differences that those will give rise to.

My hope is that this book about Ribe in the period AD 700-1050 will be able to explain exactly why Ribe is a unique site, and also why the study of the early towns is able not only to provide information about trading patterns but can be part of more general discussions concerning power and economy in those areas of land which were subsequently to become known as Denmark.

A supplementary aspiration, however, is that this book will succeed in crossing contemporary national borders, which impose constraints when one is engaged in research upon the Viking Age and the wide-ranging seaborne mobility that was characteristic of and defines that period.

The text was written in the period 2013-17 and has been updated down to the year 2020. The principal emphasis has been laid upon the archaeological features, rather than upon the artefactual finds. That selection was necessary in consideration of the size of the volume, but it is possible to access the massive collection of finds from Ribe in its entirety in digital form via the museum's on-line collection, accessible at <http://sol.sydvestjyskemuseer.dk>

Research into Ribe continues, and in 2017-18 the research excavation Northern Emporium funded by the Carlsberg Fund and under the leadership of Professor Søren M. Sindbæk from the Centre for Urban Network Evolutions at Aarhus University took place. This exciting project has, amongst other things, produced crucial new evidence about the settlement on the plots of the earliest Ribe. These results will be published separately and have, except for note 20 on page 156 and two sentences on page 169, not led to changes in the present text.

My heartfelt thanks to my colleagues in Sydvestjyske Museer, whose support and constructive criticism has had nothing but a positive effect on the quality of this book. Despite the fact that the museum in Ribe has grown in recent years it has been possible to maintain the excellent working culture which was



characteristic of *Den antikvariske Samling* in its day. This sense of responsibility for curating research into Ribe and the history of the town is a constant factor in why the museum has been able to sustain quality in fulfilling its role and to carry out the comprehensive digitisation that has dominated work in recent years.

Finally, warm thanks to the grant-awarding bodies and authorities without whose assistance this book would not have been written. The VELUX FUND has provided support within the project '*1000 års mennesker*' [People over a Thousand Years], while the Castle and Culture Agency granted funds for the production

of the manuscript. Translation, completion of illustrations, and the printing of the book are entirely funded by grants from Queen Margrethe II's Archaeological Fund and Aage and Johanne Louis-Hansen's Fund. Thanks to Professor John Hines, Cardiff University, for a particularly competent translation and valuable comments. The illustrations within the book have been completed and reworked by graphic draughtsman Lars Foged Thomsen, while the process of transforming the manuscript into a book has been in the safe hands of editor Jesper Laursen and illustrator Ea Rasmussen of the Jutlandic Archaeological Society.

Ribe, August 2020  
Morten Søvsø

# 1. Introduction

What can Ribe tell us about the early history of the towns of Denmark? Were the earliest towns a product of top-down planning and of decisions taken by those in power at the time, or was the true driving force of this development the essentially uncontrollable hand of the market? What were the first towns like? Who lived there? How many people, and what were they doing? How did the towns change over time? To what extent were such changes the result of royal decrees – for instance in respect of minting, or the establishment of a castle; or consequences of much higher level political factors such as the division of the Frankish Empire after the Treaty of Verdun of AD 843; or reflexes of wide-ranging changes in the flow of goods between the trading networks such as the opening up of trade routes to the Caliphate via the Russian rivers? Could global climatic conditions also have played a part? This series of major questions is central to research into urban history, and they will be discussed in this book using the town of Ribe as the primary case study.

The earliest Scandinavian towns did not appear in a void but were rather buds which grew on an expanding northern European trading network, the nodes of which, the *emporia*, quite literally rose up on the ruins of the Roman urban civilization in the course of the 7th century. In areas where some elements of Roman urban culture had survived, such as the Upper Rhineland, marked continuity between the Roman towns and the *emporia* is evident (Ellmers 1984), while in other areas only weak connexions, if any, between the older and the newer towns can be seen. The latter situation characterizes the Rhine mouth and the southern coastal regions of the North Sea (Hodges 1989). In Scandinavia, which had not previously had any towns, the appearance of the *emporia* also represents the introduction of urbanization *per se*.

The boundaries of the study are therefore those of the primary phase of the history of towns in Scandinavia, a period in relation to which scholarly research has struggled to achieve any consensus on the character of its town-like trading sites which, like the later towns, were decisively moulded by trade and

craft-production but which appear to a very large extent – in the 8th century at least – to lack the religious and administrative institutions that are typical of the classic medieval towns. The early towns have been labelled *ports of trade*, *proto-towns*, *emporia* or *wīcs*, while here and there one encounters the very general German term *Seehandelsplatz* ‘marine trading site’ or just *trading site*. In this book, which is a product of tradition, the word *town* is preferred – and as the term for both the earlier and the later variants (Skre 2007b). Following the publication of Richard Hodges’s book *Dark Age Economics* (1982; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1989: abbreviated as *DAE*), the early towns experienced a blossoming of research and theoretical study, which the immensely informative evidence from Ribe regrettably played only a relatively peripheral role in. Ribe has rather been discussed first and foremost within the boundaries of the kingdom of Denmark, and was not only a feature of *Projekt Middelalderbyen* ‘The Medieval Town Project’, which did not have any dedicated theoretical strand, but also of the nationally focussed project *Fra Stamme til Stat* ‘From Tribe to State’. The Medieval Town Project was attached to the sub-discipline of Medieval Archaeology and was focussed upon the slightly later, classic medieval town, while From Tribe to State was attached to Prehistoric Archaeology, and town-formation played a minor part in it. For structural reasons, the field of research into early urbanization thus fell between two stools: a problem of approach that has also affected research in the other Nordic countries (Skre 2007a, 47). The Kaupang Project of 2000-2 and the publications it produced, the publication of *Ribe Studier I: Det ældste Ribe* (Feveile ed. 2006), and a new generation of internationally oriented scholars has, however, revitalized this field of research in the last two recent decades (Sindbæk 2007; Kalmring 2010; Arents & Eisenschmidt 2010).

The theoretical discussion in this book forms Chapter 2, *Theory*, which by way of introduction seeks to develop my own epistemological standpoint, after which the focus turns to the *emporia* and the theoretical discussion that they have been part of. Many other topics – the

social structure of the Later Iron Age; the emergence of centralized power; numismatics, and more – are elements of the book, but an exhaustive theoretical discussion of those fields too would burst the banks.

To shed light upon the themes of the book, the focus in the following study lies first and foremost upon the incredibly rich archaeological material from excavations in and around Ribe. The background to the selection is the fact that the archaeological evidence from the town is of wider chronological range than at any other Scandinavian urban site, and also, for the most of the period in question, is of a breadth and density that makes it possible to produce a quite detailed account of the varying topography and economy of the town through time – as shown by the archaeological evidence.

The antiquarian tradition in Ribe is long and extensive, and has, over time, generated a substantial volume of scholarly literature, formally moulded by successive dominant questions or theories – some of which are still current while others have now been set aside. Despite the great quantity of past studies, not until now has a comprehensive history of scholarship been produced. In order to establish a clear view of the shifting paradigms of different ages that have governed the archaeology of the town, this book also presents a relatively comprehensive history of research in Chapter 3.

This book will attempt to answer three key questions:

## 1. Why and how did Ribe emerge?

A primary requirement for this question to be answered must be knowledge of the society in which Ribe emerged around the year 700. Precisely that period of the Later Germanic Iron Age has traditionally stood as an archaeological gap between a rich body of earlier evidence ranging over graves, settlements, weapon hoards and more which runs into the 6th century AD, and after it the Viking Period's equally rich archaeological evidence supplemented by overseas sources, runestones, etc. (Näsman 1991; 2006).

The explosion in the use of metal-detectors in recent years has, however, radically increased quantities of finds, including material from the Later Germanic Iron Age. Particularly in combination with the cartographic evidence that is now available in the form of cadastral ('matriculation') maps and more, a path has been opened for retrogressive settlement studies, which together with palaeoclimatic research and the so-called Church List in the Ribe Oldemoder (= 'Great-Grandmother') manuscript creates the basis for a topographical analysis of society and settlement in West Jutland throughout the first millennium AD. This constitutes Chapter 4 of the book, *Topography*.

## 2. How did Ribe develop in the period AD 700-1050 – in both topographical and economic terms?

The earliest Ribe is known only through excavations, and all of those have been constrained by the fact that there is still a living town above the layers from earlier periods. South of the river, the cathedral itself is the oldest surviving building, founded around 855, while the street plan around it was laid out in the 11th century and has survived pretty much unchanged to the present day, even though the town has, in the intervening centuries, risen up to 5 metres higher because of the deposition of thick culture layers within it. The sequence of culture layers is generally well preserved, and has outstanding potential for tracing the history of the urban zone through stratigraphical excavation. On the other hand, all of the traces of the Viking-period land-surface are hidden below the thick layers, and knowledge of what that landscape looked like has to be gained through excavation.

On the northern side of the river, where the original Ribe was sited, there are no surviving structures, and the area has generally had the character of a suburb ever since the Middle Ages, and been used in a wide variety of ways (Fig. 1). Some parts have been farmed intensively, leading to the complete destruction of the underlying stratigraphy, while others were sealed below culture layers as early as the Middle Ages and so have been extremely well protected from damage. Proximity to the town is thus, for better or worse, the factor which means that the state of preservation of the earliest elements of Ribe varies hugely, in stark contrast to the conditions that are typical of the other Viking-period towns of Scandinavia. An understanding of the taphonomic factors is of fundamental importance for any assessment of what the archaeological evidence tells us.

It will be clear, that Ribe as an entire Ancient Monument is both massively complicated and extremely rich in information which has allowed the town's archaeologists to develop a very intimate grasp of the development of the town and its inhabitants. The most recent overview of the archaeological evidence was published in 2006, but a great deal of new information has come in since then. In connexion with this study, the evidence from Ribe has been reviewed and analysed, and so forms the basis of the most substantial chapter of the book, Chapter 5, *Ribe 700-1050*, in which the development of the town from the *single-street along the river bank plan* of the 8th century to the 10th-century *D-shaped enclosure* to the 11th-century *civitas* is examined against the background of the archaeological excavations.

Through the archaeological discoveries in Ribe it is possible to document unbroken urban development

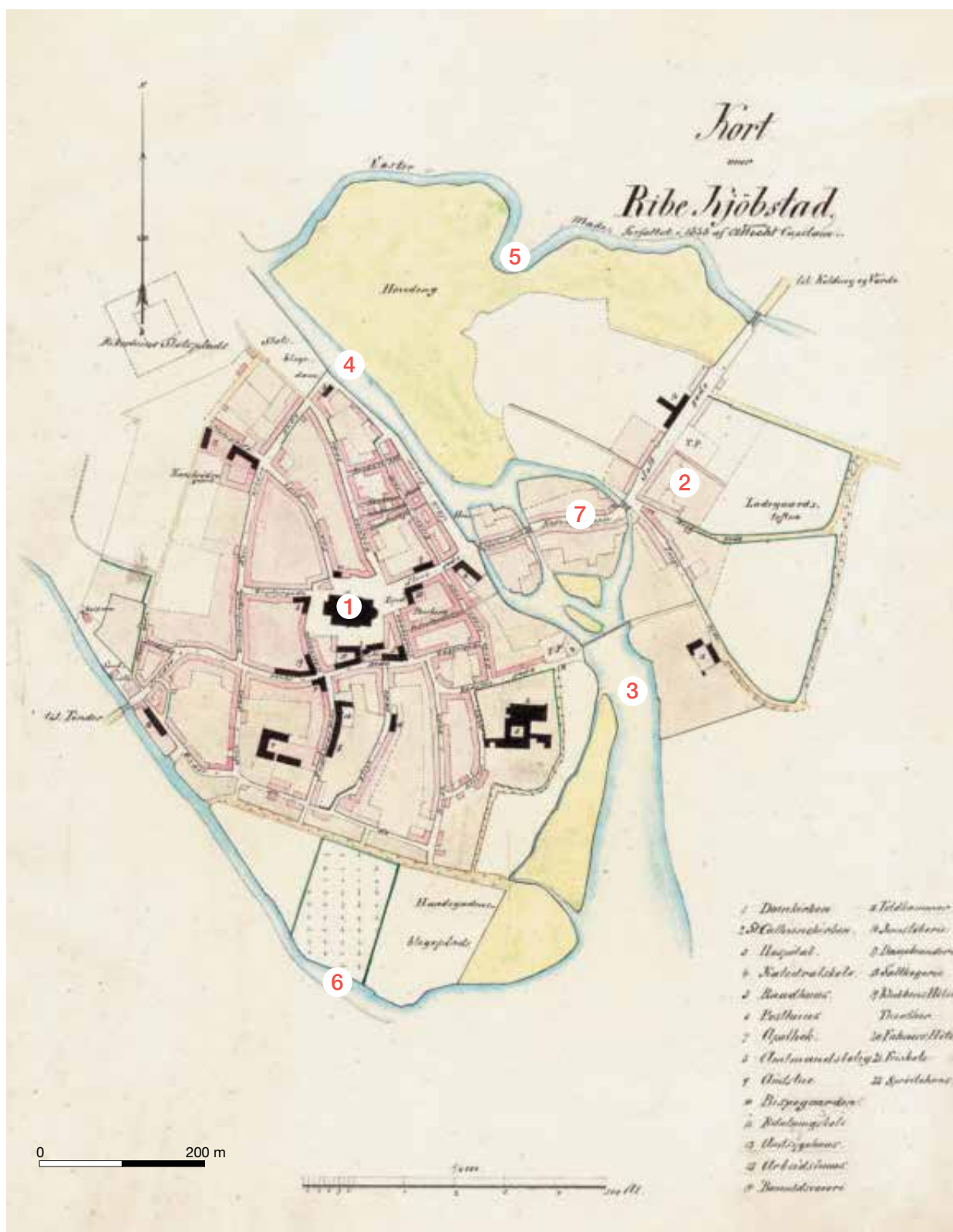


Fig. 1. Techt's map of Ribe from 1858 was the source for the town plan in the first edition of Trap's *Statisk-topographisk Beskrivelse af Danmark*. In addition to the information provided on the map itself, numbers in red mark a series of key components of the town's essential topography. 1: the cathedral, south of the river; 2: the north side of the river; 3: Ribe Østerå (East River); 4: Ribe Vesterå (West River); 5: River Tved; 6: the Stamping Mill Leat; 7: the Dam. After the original held by the national Geodata Agency with additions by the author.

from around the year 700 onwards. The town changed radically several times over. A church was founded as early as the 9th century, and this provides us with an as yet unique opportunity to observe how the town responded to its presence. As will appear, the town continued to stand, unaffected, where it had been all the time, until some time in the 11th century, and was, amongst other things, at a certain provided with defences where the church had already been located on the other side of the river for a considerable time. Only around the year 1050 did the town relocate towards the church, and so conformed to the *civitas*-model that is typical of the classic medieval town. That concurrently defines the later chronological limit of this book.

### 3. Can a model for the development of Ribe be applied to other early towns in southern Scandinavia?

In Chapter 6 of the book, *Urbanization in southern Scandinavia AD 700-1050*, the angle of view is widened to include the other early towns of southern Scandinavia. This section focuses on Denmark, which means that the Swedish emporium of Birka is omitted in what follows, along with other trading places on the southern Baltic shores which can scarcely have been under the control of the Danish kingship: Ralswiek, Wolin, Truso, and more (Kleingärtner 2014).

At a basic level, this study distinguishes between two concepts of the town: the *emporium model* and the *civitas model*. The emporia served as the primary nodal points in the maritime trading network and were from the outset – or very rapidly fell – under royal control. On the merchants' sailing routes there were a number of minor stopping places, landing sites, of varying size and character, the larger of which might also be trading sites, probably controlled by local powers. These provided a basic root for what would later grow into the classic medieval town, and are represented by the towns of:

- Ribe
- Reric/Hedeby/Schleswig
- Åhus
- Kaupang
- Aarhus

The so-called 'central places' of the Iron Age provide another basic stock root for a later group of towns, whose role was to serve as religious and administrative centres for the Christian monarchy. These towns emerged after the Conversion in the decades either side of the year 1000 and are referred to collectively in this book as the *civitas model*, a Christian notion of the

urban phenomenon, inspired by an idealized model of the heavenly Jerusalem, *Civitas Jerusalem*, which in the 11th century came also to transform the earlier emporia. The central places appear in some cases to have their origins right back in the Earlier Iron Age, and they share the characteristics of being centrally located in relation to land-traffic; of apparently having been the home sites of a chieftainly dynasty; and of being the sites of religious or political central functions organized around sacrifices and feasts – in other words, a way of life rooted in the pre-Christian religious sphere (L. Jørgensen 2014). They vary greatly in size and presumably also in importance. Gudme, Tissø, Lejre, Uppåkra and Sorte Muld are the largest known sites in historical Denmark. In this book, towns such as:

- Viborg
- Odense
- Roskilde
- Lund

are suggested to be representatives of this model. A number of further towns could have been included in the analysis. Aalborg clearly goes back to the 11th century, but the most recent, important excavations have yet to be published. Næstved too has archaeological features from the Viking Period, but these finds are not adequately published either. Other towns with early finds or mints such as Randers, Horsens, Slagelse and Copenhagen could have been included as well, but it is considered that the towns selected sufficiently illustrate the structural development of urbanization.

References within the volume are given in brackets in the text, and every effort has been made to keep footnotes to a minimum. The bibliography follows the style guide used in Danish Journal of Archaeology. Unless otherwise indicated, the figures and tables have been produced by the author, and the maps are oriented with north to the top. All levels are in meters above sea level following the Danish DNN standard.

The Danish chronology used in the text is as follows:

Neolithic (c. 3900-1700 BC)  
 Bronze Age (c. 1700-500 BC)  
 Pre-Roman Iron Age (c. 500-1 BC)  
 Early Roman Iron Age (c. AD 1-200)  
 Late Roman Iron Age (c. AD 200-400)  
 Early Germanic Iron Age (c. AD 400-550)  
 Late Germanic Iron Age (c. AD 550-800)  
 Viking Age (c. AD 800-1050)  
 Early Medieval (c. AD 1050-1250)  
 High Medieval (c. AD 1250-1400)  
 Late Medieval (c. AD 1400-1550)  
 Early Modern (c. AD 1550-1800)  
 Modern (c. AD 1800-)

## 2. Aspects of the theoretical discussion of towns and their origins in northern Europe

What has happened will happen again,  
and what has been done will be done again,  
and there is nothing new under the sun.  
(*Ecclesiastes 1, 9*: New English Bible)

### 2.1 Starting point

My own position in respect of archaeological theory is that I do not find it difficult to see inadequacies in all sorts of theoretical approaches, whether or not one can attach the labels of ‘culture history’, ‘processual archaeology’ or ‘post-processual archaeology’ to them. The two latter waves, which particularly emphasize the importance of archaeological theory, are very nearly the worst, having emerged as they did as reform movements, whose primary *modus operandi* would always be to create a platform that is based on attacks on the current state of affairs. Archaeological research that leans very firmly upon a theoretical attitude will all too frequently prove to be the range of literature which most rapidly appears dated. Paraphrasing the Danish author Tom Kristensen, I would say: ‘Fear theory and nurture it not, for it is a load upon your back.’ And it is also a theory dependent upon my own highly empirical starting point whose utility I hope the following text will demonstrate.

While such a critically negative view of theorizing comes rather naturally to me, it is certainly harder to try to formulate a better or more precise theoretical alternative. This reveals my own existential doubt about how realistic that project is at all, and at the same time my (theoretical) association with the post-modern/post-processual tradition. I cannot refute the proposition that knowledge and theory are social constructs which a critical perspective can reduce to being subjective products of the producer’s consciousness – formed by that subject’s experiences, desires and cultural background. As a reluctant constructivist, I likewise have no wish to deny that the language spoken and written does to a certain extent shape what we call

‘reality’, even in respect of Prehistory. But the world is not purely a linguistic or social construct. It exists in reality, where the human body and senses are also found. There is therefore more than language there, but the obscure relationship between language and reality constitutes a real set of problems which lead to relativism and solipsism (Foucault 1966).

As a philosophical movement, this position can be followed down through the ages from the Sophists of Classical Greece onwards. In the second half of the 20th century it has had major influence on sociology and anthropology, with the French philosopher Michel Foucault as a core figure. From there, archaeological theory has been influenced too.

Social constructivism claims that human cognition is a social construct that is tied to the language. In its current incarnation social constructivism was supposed to be a politically left-leaning liberation project that aimed to break down and completely transform the inherited, supposedly bourgeois, conceptual systems concerning sex, power, sexuality, normality, and more. The debate has changed many western societies and sharpened the perception of how language does to an extent form reality, but the deconstruction of scientific conceptual systems has in recent years proved apt to exploitation from different corners of the political playground in order to sow doubt about well-established ‘truths’ of the natural or social sciences, on the subjects of climate change, social economy, migration, etc. The so-called post-factual society – *perception is reality* – can thus be said to be a product of social constructivism. And here, the revolution has ended up eating its own children.

Motivation-hunters might allege that this position of resignation is born of a contemporary recognition of the fact that the relationship between the research and the object of study is at best suspect (Foucault 1966; Latour 1991), and the current perspective is rather that a range of geopolitical constructs and systems appear ever more uncontrollable, whether that be global financial markets or political structures

such as the United States, the European Union, or the Russian Federation. The world, both then and now, does not appear to contain some hidden order, purpose or regularity, but rather a so-far generally growing human population whose past presence in the world is the archaeologist's field of study. This population has always been resourceful, and through the work of hands and spirit turned itself in new directions and away from others.

The frequently criticised 'culture-historical' archaeology formerly developed a series of methods for working with the evidence of the populations of previous ages in the form of typological classification, analogies and distributions. The understanding that lay behind those was that human behaviour is not purely random but rather is meaningfully structured in various ways. Through the interpretation of archaeological remains it was possible to generate knowledge of life in Prehistory. These methodological approaches are still the building blocks of archaeology: inductively, they can be put together and interpreted to produce narratives of the past, and they will continue to serve in that way even while new scientific methods produce new archaeological data.

This book is concerned with the Late Germanic Iron Age (550-800 AD) and the Viking Period (800-1050 AD) in northern Europe: a period of time which scholars connected to different university disciplines and different theoretical traditions have worked on. Prehistoric archaeology swiftly absorbed inspiration from processual archaeology and so from anthropology, and with that orientation came a long series of interesting works concerned with the structure and development of prehistoric societies. As a new concept, a deductive approach was applied as well. Because society was assumed to conform to various laws, these over-riding theories could be applied to the empirical evidence and advance the interpretations beyond what traditionally that evidence had seemed able to provide information on. That the deductive method would be successful, however, is not a given; rather it stands or falls with the quality of the theory applied and the representativity of the archaeological evidence in relation to the specific issue.

The inspiration provided by anthropology meanwhile also introduced the use of various social models that differed greatly from, for instance, historically known conditions in Europe. Access to these marked a clear new break in relation to previous scholarship, and silently and willingly constructed a beguiling prehistoric Otherness, in which social codes reduced prehistoric people to pale shadows, devoid of free will and governed by an alien set of norms. *The past is a foreign country. They do things dif-*

*ferently there* (Hartley 1953). This social-constructivist narrative is still a powerful one in archaeological theory, and cannot be denied some degree of validity – for instance if the object of study is some form of 'tribe' or a culture group that cannibalistically had its own kind on the menu, or put all of its efforts in to hewing colossal sculptures, as on Easter Island; but if the premiss of Otherness is accepted, it is also necessary to ask, how did it come about, then, that *they* became *us*? Here, we move into disputed ground concerning the relationship between the 'I' and the world, one end-point of which is solipsism: the destructive view that one can only really be certain of one's own existence.

Is the supposition of Otherness valid in the case of northern Europe in the Viking Period too? And if *they* were something different, what are *we* then? This problematization of the relationship between the researcher and the object of study (Latour 1991) or, in terms of phenomenology, the relationship between the Self and the Other,<sup>1</sup> has only been pursued in Danish archaeological theoretical discussions to a limited extent, although it occupies a key place in sociology. In recent years, Bruno Latour in particular has problematized the relationship between the researcher and the object of study, and of the other pairs of opposites which form the building stones of structuralist-influenced research traditions, and pointed out that the analytic division into binary opposites rests upon a non-existent basic premiss of separation. The position is emblematically summed up in the title *We have never been modern*, which thus directs attention to the view that the assumption of contrasts of nature/culture, ideal/reality, language/reality and objectivity/subjectivity, which have been key pillars of the Western philosophical tradition since the Enlightenment, is, according to Latour's reading, an illusion.

The university disciplines of Medieval Archaeology and History have been concerned with rather less distant periods of time, and have been furnished with a corrective in the form of written sources, which are quite profuse for the more recent periods but reduce the further back one goes. From the very nature of the evidence, one is often working retrospectively, and much available information about both society and its individuals has made anthropologically derived models less convincing. The view of people in the distant past has emphasized the similarities between then and now more than the differences. In a more or less pure form, this fundamental and epistemologically based difference in views of the past runs throughout most studies of the Viking Period, and for that reason I shall attempt to clarify the position that I am seeking to work from.