

Settlement, Climate Crisis and Lordship in Early Medieval Scandinavia

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This article examines and describes the nature of lordship in Scandinavia during the Early Medieval period (c. 400–1000 CE). It counters the assertions of earlier research, which claim that lordship with estates had already developed at the beginning of the period. Earlier arguments have built on assumptions that the development of estates was propelled by the ‘Dust Veil’ and the subsequent climate crisis of the mid-sixth century. Scholars have argued that a more hierarchical society followed, reflected through the emergence of more lavish burial customs. Through a broad comparison with other north-western European regions and peoples, this article demonstrates that these burial customs can be understood differently, and further, that a more hierarchal society was not necessarily the outcome of the crises of the sixth century. The resulting analysis of Scandinavian lordship is then anchored in a detailed case study of the well-preserved settlements, houses, farms and field-systems on the Baltic Island of Öland. It concludes that incentives to create estates in Scandinavia were not present before the Christianization process.

Keywords: climate crisis, early medieval Scandinavian hierarchies, lordship, estates

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Introduction

In recent years, it has increasingly been argued that a more hierarchical society was introduced in Scandinavia after the Migration Period (400–550 CE). This has also been linked, wholly or partially, to the climate crisis caused by volcanic eruptions or extra-terrestrial bombardment of comets or meteorites in 536–537 CE. The climate crisis and the following population decline are also thought to have contributed to the emergence of a manorial estate system (Gräslund 2008; Gräslund & Price 2012; Löwenborg 2010). However, the idea of prehistoric estates in Scandinavia is not new. It has been suggested by Scandinavian researchers in archaeology and geography using other types of evidence (see for instance Berg 2003; Ericsson 2012; Herschend 2009; Iversen 2009; Myhre 2002; Skre 1998; Tollin 1999).

It is hard to deny that there would have been negative societal effects following the ‘dust veil’ of 536 CE and the subsequent plague epidemics and harsher climactic conditions. Certainly, various source materials, such as descriptions by ancient writers, pollen analyses, abandoned villages, volcanology and glaciology, show that this was the case (Axboe 2001, 2007; Gräslund 2008; Gräslund & Price 2012; see Gundersen 2022 for a more nuanced picture). What deserves further scrutiny, is the notion that these conditions caused a more hierarchical society, and that they brought about the phenomenon of estates. Indeed, the real question is whether there could have been any estates at all during the pre-Christian period in Scandinavia, that is before the twelfth or thirteenth century.

This article challenges the ideas and theories of earlier research in the following ways: firstly, by discussing whether the seemingly lavish burial customs were an expression of a more hierarchical society, or if these burials could be a sign of something quite different. Did the climate crisis in the sixth century, with its accompanying population decline, lead to good conditions for creating estates? This is accomplished through a comparison with other similar crises in Europe, drawing on richer source material from the Early and High Middle Ages. Secondly, I scrutinize the arguments and source material used by researchers who claim that manorial estate systems already existed in prehistoric times in Scandinavia. This requires a discussion of the manorial-estate system, and how different socio-economic relationships between peasants and their lords worked before great economic changes were introduced in various European regions. Finally, I analyse in detail what type of lordship may have been operating in Scandinavia during the Late Iron Age, i.e. Early Medieval period. At the same time, prevailing early medieval Scandinavian social hierarchies are explored through the evidence of very well-preserved settlements: houses, farms and villages from the period 200–700 CE.

Throughout this article, I compare Scandinavia to other areas in north-western Europe. That is, the regions and peoples which were never incorporated into the Roman Empire, and which therefore were not directly affected by Roman administration, legal systems, infrastructure, agricultural economics (with large farming units), estates run by slaves, tax systems or political systems (i.e. present-day Scandinavia, Northern Germany, Scotland, Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England). These societies had much in common in several important aspects, such as socio-economic conditions, social structure and hierarchies, settlements and cultivation systems, rules of inheritance as well as spatial and political organization (Blair 2018:306; Brink 2008a, 2008b; Callmer 1991; Charles-Edwards 1972; Fallgren 2019:90; Sawyer 1978, 1982; Wickham 1992; Woolf 2000; Wormald 1986).

Comparisons between these and the early medieval Scandinavian societies are therefore highly relevant. The early medieval written sources from these regions are especially valuable for providing a better understanding of how lordship may have functioned in Scandinavia during this time frame, before ‘feudal’¹ regimes and the Catholic Church, great landlords, landmarkets and taxation gained a firm grip on the peasantry and farmland in the Nordic region. In what follows, the similarities between social structure and hierarchies, socio-economic practice and rules, as well as inheritance rules, appear to be the most important phenomena behind understanding why the landscapes (settled and cultivated) had so much in common in this vast area of north-western Europe (Fallgren 2019:90, 2020:169–170).

Lavish burial customs

The emergence of a more lavish burial custom and the construction of imposing grave mounds in the seventh century AD, like the mounds in Uppsala in Sweden or Borre in Norway, can be interpreted as signs that some mem-

1 The quotation marks for the concept of *feudal* in this article are used because the concept has been questioned within modern historical research (see for example Bagge et al. 2011). In this article, the concept is used as Chris Wickham defines ‘feudal mode’ of production, that is as a system where landowners collect a surplus, a rent, from their tenants. That is, a system where landlords dominate peasants and live on the surpluses of dependent tenant cultivators, who did not own the land they were farming (Wickham 2005:304, 261). Wickham uses ‘peasant-mode’ societies as opposed to ‘feudal mode’, where peasants are independent producers, when analysing the social patterns and discussing economic structure and ‘ranked’ societies (Wickham 2005:304–305, 536–540). The social relationships of dependence and obligations that operated within so-called ‘ranked’ societies were the same as those operating in a so-called ‘extensive lordship’ society, where the opposite, ‘intensive lordship’, was the same as ‘feudal mode’ lordship, see below.

bers of a community were better off at the expense of others. Nevertheless, there is, as will be discussed below, nothing in the remains of settlements or field-systems from these time periods to support the theory of a more hierarchical society or the existence of any early estates involving lordship.

Regarding the phenomenon of extravagant burials, it has been demonstrated that in the early Merovingian regions (Austrasia, the middle Rhine region) this kind of burial may in fact mark an unstable social structure subject to competition. The absence of rich graves in these regions coincides instead with periods when the rich and powerful were less exposed to pressure, as when the dynastic strife ended with Clovis wiping out his rivals in 507 CE (Halsall 1995:251–254, 264–267). Björn Ringstad (1991) and Terje Gansum (1997) have offered similar interpretations of the large Norwegian mounds from the Roman Iron Age and the Migration Period. In addition, Dawn Hadley (2000:60–65) drew a similar conclusion regarding early Anglo-Saxon lavish burials. Similarly, Daniel Löwenborg (2010:13) connected the building of large mounds in central Sweden to the critical events that emerged after the ‘dust veil’ of 536 CE. Thus, the excessive burial custom which emerged in some regions of present-day Sweden could be interpreted as being related to societal stress, competition over resources, starvation and perhaps migration by desperate people, all caused by the climate crisis at the end of the sixth century CE, rather than as a sign of a more hierarchal society. In periods of a stable social environment, the need for this kind of demonstration of power disappears. This is very clear in the case of Old Uppsala, as John Ljungkvist (2013) has demonstrated. Even though no new monuments were erected here after c.700 CE, this important place did not lose its significance for the people in this region of central Sweden. This is confirmed by a number of new investigations, as well as the written sources from the Viking Age and the High Medieval period. The Viking Age rulers in the area no longer needed to project themselves with monumental mounds or elevated house platforms. Instead, they could quietly rest on the reputation and fame of the place, probably because their power was unchallenged (Ljungkvist 2013:57–62).

Climate crisis

When comparing the climate crisis and the consequences of the Justinian Plague with the better documented but equally fateful Black Death in the middle of the fourteenth century CE, it is well known that the latter resulted in a levelling of societies, rather than increased societal hierarchies. Due to the lack of people and workers resulting from the pandemic, the pressure on surviving tenants dropped drastically across Europe. Rents fell by at

least half of what was taken before by the great landlords. While this was a time of structural economic crisis for the great landowners the farms of the surviving tenants became more sustainable (Blair 2005:79; Lindkvist & Sjöberg 2015:162; Lunden 2004:149–151; Taylor 1983:171, 199). Even more relevant to the ‘dust veil’ event and the bubonic plague (Black Death) are references to climate degradation and pandemics in Irish and Anglo-Saxon written sources from the seventh to the eleventh centuries CE in the period shortly after the 500s. These repeatedly impacted farming societies within Britain and Ireland. The affected communities, as mentioned above, were also similar to early medieval Scandinavian societies in important ways.

From early medieval Irish sources it is known that each time cattle plagues hit the island in the seventh to the eleventh centuries CE, Irish lords lost status and slipped downwards on the social ladder, because livestock was what lords gave to their clients as *fief*, and a man without a certain number of clients could no longer claim noble status (Charles-Edwards 2000:73–74; Kelly 1988:113, 117). Pestilences, which affected the population, could of course produce the same result – a loss of clients. According to the *Annals of the Four Masters* in the year of 1085, some of the nobles were reduced to ‘working occupiers of the soil’, due to the plague amongst men and cattle (Ó Corráin 2005:577). For low-tech communities, lack of people and abandoned farms and farmland were never good prerequisites for forming larger agrarian enterprises like estates. Major epidemics struck every generation of the Irish population in the second half of the seventh century, throughout the eighth, and into the first quarter of the ninth century CE (Ó Cróinín 2017:125–126). The annals also describe how plague and starvation, due to worsening climactic conditions, were the causes of social unrest, outbreaks of wars, looting of monasteries, displacement and migration of people within and outside the island, as well as cannibalism (Byrne 1971:141; Kelly 2000:194, 354; Ó Corráin 2005:577–580). After the Justinian plague of the 540s, the plague of AD 664 seems to have hit the people of Britain and Ireland particularly hard. The *Annals of Tigernach* (AT) states:

An eclipse of the sun at ninth hour on 1 May, and during that summer the sky was seen aflame. A great plague reached Ireland on 1 August, at *Mag nItha* in Leinster. There was an earthquake in Britain. The plague first erupted in Ireland in *Mag nItha* among the people in the kingdom of Fothairt. It was 203 years since St Patrick and 112 years since the first plague.

This and the first mentioned plague in 664 CE, and the other plagues during the seventh and eighth centuries CE, naturally generated chaos, starvation, unrest, plundering, migration and war among the Anglo-Saxons, Irish and Britons (Maddicot 1997; Ó Cróinín 2017). Harsh weather conditions causing starvation are recorded in the Irish and Anglo-Saxon sources fif-

teen times or more between 670–1048 CE (Culleton 1999; Maddicot 1997; Ò Corrain 2005:575–577). Cattle disease is also recorded several times, causing starvation and unrest (Kelly 2000:194). Of course, after the ‘dust veil’ event, several of these catastrophic plagues may have affected the communities in Scandinavia in similarly destructive ways.

Concerning estates

Several factors have contributed to the theory of prehistoric estates in Scandinavia, which this article challenges. Firstly, the theory of the existence of Iron Age to early medieval estates in this region was not based on observations of settlement or field-systems but instead on much later written sources from the seventeenth century CE. These sources state the relative size of the different settlements. This early modern data, combined with the existence of certain types of place-names, as well as the existence of visible prehistoric graves in modern times, forms the basis for the idea of prehistoric estates in Norway, which are assumed to have started already in the third and fourth centuries CE (Iversen 2008, 2009; Skre 1998, 1999). This theory is not based on any observation of prehistoric houses, farms or farmlands in the landscape. It has therefore been assumed that the large land holdings appearing in early modern sources also existed earlier in prehistoric periods (compare the criticism in Dørum 1999; Sandnes 2000). If true, these early estates would have been the oldest in Western Europe. Turning to Sweden, geographers were among the first to advocate the existence of large land holdings and the formation of estates before the High Middle Ages. Quite a few archaeologists have since adopted this idea, although the ‘manorialization’ in Sweden was thought to have started mainly in the Viking Age. Once again, this idea is not based on observations of prehistoric or Viking Age settlements, but on hypothetical constructions where conditions (such as property boundaries and ownership) from the High Medieval, Late Medieval and Early Modern periods were used and projected back to the Viking Age (Berg 2003; Ericsson 2012; Tollin 1999). These theories have recently been the subject of internal criticism (Widgren 2014:61–62).

Secondly, the arguments that are often presented in favour of this view, seem to be built on a misunderstanding of the contemporary early medieval conditions on the Continent or in Britain and Ireland, since they refer to social and economic conditions of the High or Late Medieval periods. This method of reasoning is anachronistic (compare Brink 2012:245–248, 2021a:439–442, 2021b:279–282). Furthermore, some of these scholars criticize what they thought to be a common view in today’s historical scholarship, that societies with a core of free farmers must also have been

fundamentally egalitarian (e.g. Iversen 2009; Skre 1998). However, peasant societies were not egalitarian (see Hadley 2000:50–60; Lunden 2001; Mann 1986:24; Sandnes 2000; Wickham 1992:237). Throughout early medieval Europe, there was a hierarchy among free peasants. In addition, free peasants could and regularly did have slaves, but this exploitation was kept within the household and generally integrated into the social networks of family units (Wickham 1992:244; Kelly 2000:438–440; Charles Edwards 2000:68–80; Iversen 2011; Poulsen 2012:456; for a thorough discussion of the importance of slaves and their number in Scandinavian Viking Age agrarian society, see Brink 2021b:299–310).

In Denmark, it is primarily Lars Jørgensen (2001, 2003, 2010) who has discussed the introduction of the estate system in the Danish islands. Unlike previously mentioned examples, he has used extensive excavated settlement remains from the Iron Age and Viking Age to discuss the emergence of estates (Jørgensen 2001, 2003, 2010; Nørgård Jørgensen et al. 2011). He formulated an interesting model of how large ‘farms’ or ‘magnates places’ (Gudme and Tissø) – might have held key positions for early medieval societies in the economic development from a tribute system to a new estate system. However, he is a little ambivalent on the question of what to call these places: residences, estates or manors. For the residence or manor of Gudme, which is located within a large-sized village and larger agricultural area, Jørgensen (2010:275) suggests that it was a residence for a magnate whose wealth was based on levying tribute. At the ‘manor’ at Tissø, on the contrary, there is no evidence for agricultural production or buildings associated with residences that would indicate permanent habitation. Rather than a permanent aristocratic residence, it could have been a complex belonging to the royal system of a peripatetic monarchy (Jørgensen 2003, 2010). Thus, Gudme could have been a village where a king had his residence. A related paper (Nørgård Jørgensen et al. 2011) discusses the large number of pit houses at the site, comparing Tissø and late medieval, early modern, north Scandinavian church towns and Thingvellir on Iceland. Based on the results, they suggest that Tissø functioned as an assembly site for a large number of people, perhaps more than 200 farms (Nørgård Jørgensen et al. 2011:102–104). Thus, it cannot have been an estate, residence or manor, but was more like an Irish ‘Royal Place’ and ‘Óenach’ (assembly place), or an Anglo-Saxon ‘great hall’ and royal ‘tuna’ – a place where food-rent collections, redistribution of tributes and large-scale feasting took place (Etchingham 2011; Faith 1997; Gleeson 2015, 2018). This, I would argue, is also valid for Lejre and other Scandinavian so-called ‘central places’, discussed below.

Frands Herschend (2009, 2022:218–228), who has analysed an enormous amount of material relating to Early Iron Age houses, farms and villages in Scandinavia, is another advocate for the existence of early estates and

large landowners. He does not provide a detailed examination of how these worked, but takes for granted their existence. Based on the presence of a few regularly laid-out villages, he argues that this pattern must have originated and been planned by a large landowner living outside the village. In other cases, where larger farms are located within the villages, he sees them as the dominant farms, and the people of other farms as subordinate tenants. Herschend's third example (2009:260–270, 291) is found in the Beowulf poem, in a passage where the hero Beowulf was given seven thousand hides (*bold*) of land by Hygelac, son of Hrethel. However, I am not convinced. Regularly planned settlements can occasionally be identified in some northern Swedish provinces where only free peasants were present during the Middle Ages and later (Sporrong 1994). Nevertheless, these were common where large landowners existed during the High Middle Ages and after (Fallgren 2006:171–177; Göransson 1985; Hastrup 1964; Poulsen 2012). In the cases of larger farms within villages, such as Herschend's examples from Öland, there is no reason to regard all the smaller farms in the same villages as subordinate tenants' farms. Instead, free peasants or clients probably inhabited the majority of these. This can be shown, among other things, by the presence of exclusive objects in excavated smaller farms on the island. In the case of Beowulf's gift of land, this poem goes on to mention that those people living on that land held customary rights to it while the realm exclusively belonged to the king. This shows that the anonymous author of the poem was conversant with the distinction between customary ownership of land and sovereignty of a territory (Hybel 2011:225). This means that the poem's author regarded the inhabitants of these farms as free landowners. That is important and in line with what we know about what is commonly referred to as 'extensive lordship' by British historians, which was based on tributes paid to kings, who just ruled over people, not the land they farmed, from territories inhabited by free farmers. Therefore, if there were any background reality in the gift Beowulf received from the king, it would have applied to hospitality from a large number of farms, not the ownership of them.²

Perhaps the most important thing to point out in this context is how neither pre-feudal nobility nor kings built their wealth or social position through major land ownership or estates. Instead, they gained their social positions and economic resources through food-rent and hospitality from free clients, landowners and these clients' obligations to participate in war and plundering (Bazelmans 1999:149–172; Blair 2005:252–254; Brink 2021a:92–93, 2021b:302–309; Charles-Edwards 2000:71–80;

2 Seven thousand hides is the size of a small early Anglo-Saxon kingdom, like for instance Essex or Sussex, and not an estate (see the 'Tribal Hidage'). I thank Alex Woolf for bringing this to my attention.

Faith 1997:1–14; Fraser 2009:349–355; Reynolds 1994:475–482; Verhulst 2002:31; Wickham 1992:232–236; Wolf 2007:120–121). Another important point, which deserves emphasis, is that all pre-‘feudal’ kings in north-western Europe regarded their position as legitimized through their link with the free peoples of their kingdoms. One result of this is that the early medieval law codes often pay a good deal of attention to the village-level peasant society, and the peasants who appear in these early laws are almost exclusively free landowning farmers (Goetz 1995:457–459; Wickham 1995:529–531, 2009:213). Furthermore, similar principles of inheritance were recorded in many early medieval laws, and the connection of these rules to the emergence and layout of contemporary villages is something that precludes ‘feudal’ conditions.

Another major contributing factor to why this anachronistic perception gained a foothold among Scandinavian scholars is the adoption of, and continued reference to, the normative ‘multiple estate model’. This was typically believed to consist of a main farm surrounded by a large number of smaller units that specialized in certain crops or other agricultural products, such as honey, pigs, hops and so forth (Jones 1979). First presented by the geographer Glanville Jones (1979), the model applied late medieval Welsh agrarian economic conditions to early medieval England. The model was criticized as faulty by historians when it was first presented, both due to its anachronistic nature and the author’s lack of knowledge about social and economic conditions during the early Anglo-Saxon period (Basset 1989:20; Blair 1989a–b, 2005:154; Faith 1997:8–14; Gregson 1985). However, it remained popular for decades, particularly within place-name research but also among archaeologists. The kinds of economic and social conditions described by Glanville Jones in his model existed in some part of Wales during the thirteenth century CE, but not during the Early Medieval period or earlier (Davies 1982:138; Faith 2008). There is no evidence that this kind of estate ever existed within the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms (Faith 2008). Today, the model is more or less rejected by scholars in the United Kingdom (Wickham 2005:320; Williamson 2013:25–30), but there are still those who believe that the model has some relevance for early medieval conditions (see Barnwell & Roberts 2012).

I therefore suggest that the basis for the theory of prehistoric estates in Scandinavia stands on unsound ground. Although it is a hypothesis which is widely embraced in medieval studies (within several sub-disciplines), I believe it is important to recognize the lack of evidence. In fact, to date there is nothing in the archaeological record in Scandinavia that supports the idea of prehistoric estates with farm-buildings or field-systems. Neither is there any evidence of large agricultural units run by slaves, ‘demesne-centered estates’, or any ‘bipartite estates’ (demesne farms with dependent serf vil-

lages around) (Brink 2012:260; Fallgren 2006:100–115, 2014, 2015; Hybel 1995, 2011; Jørgensen 2003:204; Poulsen 2011; Poulsen & Sindbaek 2011; see Verhulst 2002:33–60 for the definition of different types of estates and their content and function during Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages). Conversely, several studies have argued that during the Early Medieval period, across Europe, landed property was normally thought of as being held by free farmers who had acquired it by inheritance (Reynolds 1994:75–84, 122–128, 207–209, 398–403; Wickham 2005:552–556).

However, before leaving the question of Scandinavian prehistoric manors I should address a related idea, namely that the Scandinavian Iron Age ‘central places’, like Lejre, Tissø, Uppåkra and Old Uppsala, would have constituted very large royal estates (Andrén 2020:71–74; Callmer 2001). Even though several impressive buildings and various types of monuments have been found at these locations, they are not typical agricultural buildings, like large stables, barns, cowsheds or storehouses, as we saw earlier in the case of Tissø. Instead, they are symbolic and ritual monuments as well as buildings that project power – such as halls for ostentatious display, which often include the production of high-quality objects (Christensen 2008; 2015:263–270; Gelting 2011:163; Jørgensen 2010; Larsson & Lenntorp 2004; Ljungkvist 2013; Ljungkvist & Frölund 2015; Nørgård Jørgensen et al. 2011; Sundqvist 2013, 2018; Wikborg 2018). When it comes to food at these locations, excavations reveal traces of large-scale consumption rather than large-scale storage (Christensen 2015:161–179; Helgesson 2002; Larsson et al. 2018, 2020; Magnell et al. 2013; Zachrisson 2011). All this reveals that these ‘central places’ should probably be compared to the same type of phenomena as Anglo-Saxon ‘Great Hall Complexes’ or early medieval Irish ‘Royal Places’ (Bhreathnach et al. 2011; Blair 2018:103–138; Frodsham & O’Brien 2009; McBride 2018; Newman 2007, 2011; Schot 2011; Waddell 2014; Fallgren in press). These were neither residences nor estates. These were ‘kings-seats’ and served as places for the theatrical display of rituals of kingship, palaces where kings were inaugurated and practised kingship, where they fulfilled their role on behalf of their people and where negotiations with other kings took place. They were also the ceremonial location for a people and kingdom, the place where crowds of people gathered on special occasions such as religious rituals, assemblies, sport events and markets (Bhreathnach et al. 2011:146; Blair 2018:103–138; Brink 2005:74; Charles-Edwards 2000:473; Woolf 2007:27). Worth noting in this context is how even smaller Anglo-Saxon royal economic centres, such as the ‘vills’ and ‘tunas’ which the kings travelled around, remained places for commensal feasting at the ‘feorm’, rather than estates for agrarian enterprises (Faith 1997:38; Lambert & Leggert 2022). In the same way Welsh kings moved from ‘llys’ to ‘llys’ consuming, with his household, the food-rents supplied

by both nobles and free farmers, whereas a king of an Irish ‘túath’ received hospitality directly in the homes of his nobles (Charles-Edwards 1993).

There is therefore nothing to suggest that the agrarian economy in Scandinavia during the Early Medieval period could be characterized as a ‘feudal’ economy or that some kind of ‘manorialization’ started before the High Middle Ages. Instead, I would argue that the agrarian economy was of a similar type to that in north-western Europe during the Early Medieval period. That is, one of agriculture carried out mainly by free farmers, a farming based on animal husbandry together with small-scale cultivation of mainly barley, which was grown in only a few, and very small, fields (Fallgren 2019, 2020b:169, 173). This was characteristic of all north-western early medieval *kin-based*, *tribal* societies, and variously identified stateless *petty kingdoms*, *ranked* societies or *traditional societies*, before what has been labelled the ‘cerialization’ and ‘manorialization’ of Europe occurred, when the ‘feudal’ estate system was born in the late Early or High Medieval period. In most regions, it was associated with the increasing acquisition of land by the church, urbanization, the commercialization of agrarian production and the growth of a land-market (Banham & Faith 2014:298; Blair 2013, 2018:311–350; Faith 1997:245–265; Fouracre 2013:137–138; Pelteret 1995:24–37; Reynolds 1994:84–113, 425–447; Verhulst 2002:33–49, 87–113; Wickham 2009:469–471, 529–543; Woolf 2007).

These transformations began in the western parts of Europe, when Merovingian kings and aristocrats took over large Roman estates run by slaves during the seventh and the eighth centuries CE during the expansion into Roman Gaul, which over the next two centuries were transformed into ‘bipartite estates’. This type of estate then spread to all the parts that were forcibly incorporated into the Frankish kingdom, where conquered settlement districts and villages were donated to monasteries, bishops and nobles (Nitz 1988:249–260; Verhulst 2002:33–49, 87–113; Wickham 2000:280–302). In the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms it started on a smaller scale with the establishment of monasteries, ‘minsters’, in the late seventh century, but was not fully integrated until the tenth or eleventh century (Blair 2005; Blair et al. 2020; Faith 2020:53, 210–214; Wickham 2009:529–564). These transformations accelerated decisively when the reformed Catholic Church, from the tenth century onwards, got a firmer grip on the political and ideological situation in Europe and incorporated several larger kingdoms and regions into their economic and administrative system (Bartlett 1994:133–167). In terms of agricultural production, it was a change that went from a surplus production oriented towards consumption at festivals and feasts, to a production focused on the accumulation of goods to be sold at a market. However, these momentous changes did not arrive to Scandinavia until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries CE, when the ecclesiastical insti-

tutions were established here (Bartlett 1994:133–167; Fallgren 2006:171–177; Hybel 2011; Hermanson 2011; Lindkvist 1998; Lindkvist & Sjöberg 2015:101–110; Poulsen 2011; Poulsen & Sindbaek 2011; Rösener 1994:37–45, 196–200; Verhulst 2002:33–41, 132–135).

Lordship before manorialism

In early medieval stateless kingdoms and societies, before the establishment of estates, there were several different kinds of socio-economic systems. These were built on hierarchical and reciprocal dependencies of client relationships, mainly between kings, lords and free farmers. Kingdoms were without taxes and had no institutional administration. Royal government worked by giving direction to civil society, rather than through state servants (see further Charles-Edwards 2000:80–83; Hadley 2000:63; Hermanson 2011; Wickham 2009:150–170). Status and power were maintained via generosity, reciprocity, gift giving, hospitality and provision of benefits, rather than via coercion or land ownership (Bazelmans 1999; Blair 2018; Brink 2021a; Faith 1997, 2020; Hayden 2014; Hermanson 2011; Lambert & Leggett 2022; Mainland & Batey 2018; Verhulst 2002; Wickham 1992, 2005:303–379; Woolf 2007; Zori et al. 2013).

Peasants in this environment did not pay tax to a state or rent to a landlord. Usually, they owed tribute or hospitality to some superior, but this was a lesser burden because they could expect to share it with their lord or king at feasts or get some of it redistributed as gifts (Lambert & Leggett 2022:25–32; Wickham 1992:245). These economic and social dependencies are usually called ‘extensive lordship’ by historians, as a contrast to ‘intensive lordship’, or ‘feudal-mode lordship’, which over time, and due to changing land-ownership and socio-economic conditions, replaced the former and older systems in most regions of Europe. The essence of ‘extensive lordship’ was that it was based on obligations from people living in well-defined territories. Not because the elite owned the land or their farms, but because they ruled over people (Barrow 1973:25; Blair 2005:254–255; Charles-Edwards 2000:71; Faith 1997:2–10, 2008, 2012, 2020; Thacker 2005:477; Wickham 1992:232–236; Woolf 2007:120–125).

As mentioned above, an Irish petty king received hospitality directly in the homes of his nobles, whereas kings in Wales moved from court to court consuming the food-rents supplied by both free farmer and nobles. It has long been recognized that Anglo-Saxon kings travelled around different economic centres consuming, with their household, the annual renders of food (‘feorm’) from the free peasantry. However, new research of the phenomena and concept of ‘feorm’, and recent detailed analyses of food listed

in *Ine 70.1*, in *The Law of King Ine* (c.690 CE) and other early Anglo-Saxon charters, has instead shown how ‘feorm’ was a large feast, where suppliers participated and consumed the food in company with the king, rather than the storage of goods or food-rent that were collected by royal officials or consumed solely by the king and his men (Lambert & Leggett 2022). Free peasants do not appear to have been obliged to provide early kings with food. Instead, they were expected to host kings at lavish communal banquets with several hundreds of people eating enormous amounts of food. The food available at these feasts was primarily meat, in contrast to what both kings and peasants ate during the rest of the year. These lavish feasts were infrequent occurrences and there is no reason to believe kings spent the year moving from one feast to another, eating vast quantities of mutton and beef. Rather, they probably spent most of their days eating a cereal-based diet, like the peasantry, sourced primarily from their own landholdings. Furthermore, it is unlikely that kings attended these feasts because they had a pressing economic need for large quantities of food. Rather, these feasts were important for political and symbolic reasons, affording opportunities for the king’s legitimacy and authority to be celebrated publicly (Lambert & Leggett 2022:5–12, 27). Thus, the hospitality that the peasants gave to kings, and the fact that they shared these meals with the kings, was a sign of their freedom and honourable status. From this it also follows that a king who accepted a feast from a peasant community was not only recognizing their status, but implicitly accepting that he had a duty to be loyal to them and to defend their interests (Charles-Edwards 1989:30–33; Faith 2020:50–53, Lambert & Leggett 2022:27, 31). Eleventh- and twelfth-century kings in Norway feasted with provincial farmers in roughly the same way (Hermanson 2011:65; Orning 2008; Pálsson 2016).

There is no doubt that meat was the most valued feasting food in the Viking world (Mainland & Batey 2018:786–798; Zori et al. 2013:153–154). The large tribal municipal religious and sacrificial festivals at Old Uppsala, Lejre and Lade are well known from various late Viking Age and Old Norse sources (see Christensen 2008; Schjødt 2020; Sundqvist 20021). From these sources it is clear that all the people in these regional kingdoms (peasantry, lords and lesser kings) were obliged to participate and bring gifts, food and tributes to these major festivals. Divinations and extensive animal sacrifices were made by the rulers in order to obtain divine guidance. Large communal sacrificial meals involving much drinking were part of this. Thus, as with the ‘feorm’ mentioned above but on a larger scale, there was a reciprocal relationship between the kings and the farmers. The ruler used the cult feast as repayment for tribute, while the farmers relied on the cult of the king as a means of protection and entertainment (Sundqvist 2002:186–188; Schjødt 2020:802–822).

The Icelandic chieftains' power and status rested on their ability to recruit followers or clients among farmers. This was achieved through conspicuous consumption and gift giving, where the feasting at the chiefs' halls was a key element (Hermanson 2011:64–65; Sigurdsson 1999; Wickham 1992:238–340; Zori et al. 2013). Thanks to Ireland's extensive legal material surviving from around 700 CE there is unusually detailed information about lord and client relations from Ireland. These touch on everything from reciprocal relations and obligations between free peasants of different status and their lords, the relations between lords and kings and between kings of different status (see further Charles-Edwards 2000:68–80; Kelly 1988:29–33, 2000:445–448). As we saw in Iceland, an Irish lord's status was dependent on the number of clients he had, but the Irish clients provided their lords with food-rent, hospitality in their homes and some service. In return, clients gained a number of benefits. They received livestock or cattle as 'fief' from their lords and they attended when the lord was entertaining his lord or king. With good husbandry, the clients could also increase their wealth in different ways through the client relationship. It is clear from legal texts that lord and client could be kinsmen with one law stating how it is preferable to enter into a contract with a kinsman (Kelly 1988:28–34). In Ireland meat consumption was relatively heavy in the winter, especially in the 'guesting season', between 1 January until the beginning of Lent. During this period, the lord was entitled to bring a large company to be entertained in the house of his client. During other periods, the peasant's meat consumption was reduced to smaller amounts, while the lord, having enjoyed the meat of his client's houses during the guesting season, could now enjoy his own as well as the meat element in the client's winter and summer renders (Charles-Edwards 2000:73). In addition to these food and feasting obligations, military services to lords and kings were perhaps the most important obligations of the peasantry in Europe during this period. At the same time, this was the most important sign of their free status (Reynolds 1994:48–74).

As indicated earlier, kings and lords also had obligations and gave something to their clients. This could be a gift, or something that was lent for a longer period. This is usually called 'fief' in the literature, a word related to the Frankish term **fehu ôd*, in which **fehu* means cattle and *ôd* means goods, implying a 'moveable object of value' (Ausenda 2003; Banham & Faith 2014:86–87; Bloch 1966:106, 165–66; Zori et al. 2013). The aristocracy usually gave 'fief' in the form of livestock or implements to their clients. From the high kings to the lesser kings and down through the upper layer of the aristocracy, prestigious objects, such as gold rings, precious weapons, drinking horns, horses, hunting dogs, board games, falcons, hawks and even ships, could be distributed as 'fief' (Byrne 1971:43–46, 153; Kelly

1988:29–35; Charles-Edwards 2013:118–125; Van Dam 2005:212; Yorke 2013:80). Later, in the High Middle Ages, the concept of ‘fief’ came to mean ‘land granted by a lord or king’ (for example Reynolds 1994:48–74).

Lords or aristocrats in ‘intensive lordship’ societies never gave gifts to their dependent peasants or received hospitality from them. For them, the gift-exchange in land or movables was restricted to the military entourage and to his aristocratic equals (Charles-Edwards 2000:68–80; Wickham 1992:241). This is an important difference from earlier, which also explains why high and late medieval settlements are usually so poor compared with earlier settlements, and why we hardly ever find any valuable objects in commoners’ houses from these time periods. The lavish burial custom mentioned previously, for example the many large mounds in the surrounding countryside of Old Uppsala containing weapons, board games and other exclusive objects (see Hennius et al. 2018; Ljungkvist 2006:162; Ljungkvist & Hennius 2016), as well as the discovery of valuable objects on farms in the surrounding area of Uppåkra (Aspeborg 2019; Helgesson & Aspeborg 2017), should be seen as evidence of client-ship relations between kings in different positions and between kings and different layers of the contemporary nobility, where valuable objects, deposited in the graves or used in the houses, constituted the symbolic and concrete evidence of these social relations, the ‘fief’.

Early medieval Scandinavian hierarchies

I will now use the visible remains of houses and farms from the Baltic Island of Öland to exemplify how early medieval hierarchies in Scandinavia were expressed and manifested in everyday life (Figure 1). The main reason for choosing settlements from this particular region of Scandinavia is that Öland has an unusually large number of visible early medieval houses, perhaps the most in Europe. This Baltic Island therefore provides exceptionally good conditions for detecting and determining different types of house and farm sizes within larger settlements, hamlets and villages. Consequently, the early medieval hierarchy asserts itself in a very natural and exceptionally distinct way through these observable and often well-preserved farms. These houses were primarily erected and used during the Late Roman Iron Age and the Migration Period, but at least some of them were still in use during the early and middle parts of the Vendel Period. There are 1325 known early medieval houses on Öland. On the neighbouring island of Gotland there are 1408 visible houses, but Gotland is more than twice the size of Öland (Gotland is 3183.7 km², whereas Öland is only 1347 km²). Thus, Öland appears to have been the more densely populated

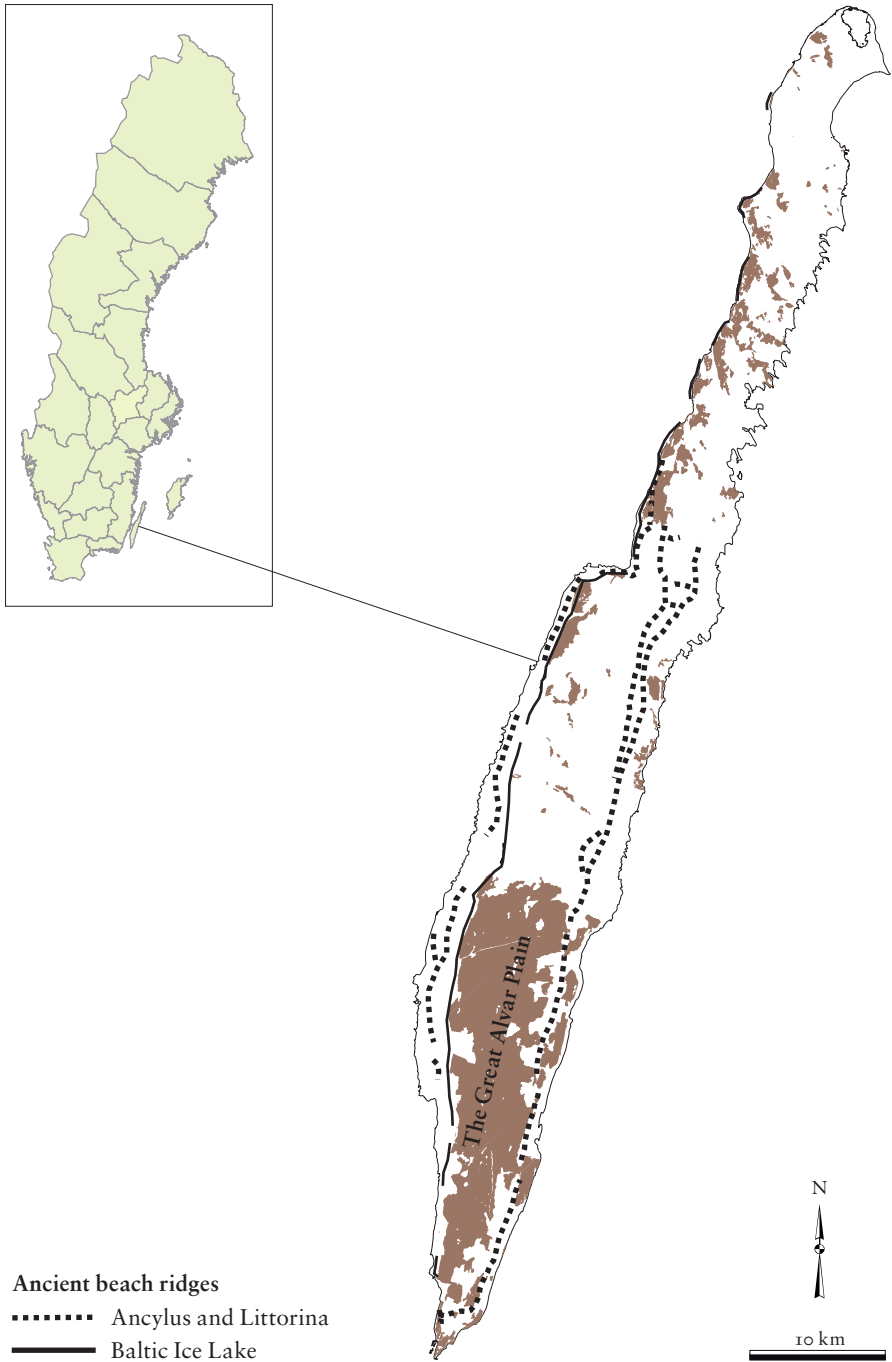


Figure 1. Map of Öland, and its location in Sweden. Drawing: Ylva Bäckström.

of the two islands during these periods. This can also be confirmed by the oldest data on the number of farms from the sixteenth century, when there were 1500 farms on Öland and 1508 on Gotland. The number of farms during the Migration Period, when population was at its peak and before the 'dust veil' decline, is estimated at between 1000–2000 for Öland (Fallgren 2006:146, 2008b:124) and 2000 for Gotland (Svedjemo 2014:108).

There are at least three important reasons for the very large number of well-preserved early medieval house remains on Öland. In contrast to the Swedish mainland, the three-aisled houses constructed during these time-periods were built with stone walls, about 1.5–1.6 m high and about 1.5 m broad. This, of course, has made them more discoverable than other contemporary houses on the mainland, and more likely to survive destruction. This is also true of the large number on Gotland. Secondly, the island was at an early stage densely populated and fully colonized. Everywhere on the island where it was possible to carry on farming and set up a farm, there are traces (or you can find traces on older cadastral maps) of early medieval houses and fences. Even on the large Great Alvar plain, which is unfertile but suitable for grazing, there are many houses, albeit smaller in size than those lying in the hamlets or villages. These should probably be seen as the visible remains of contemporary shielings belonging to the different villages on each side of the large barren limestone plain. Thirdly, between 1569 CE and 1801 CE, the whole island was used as a royal hunting ground. This placed many restrictions on how the farmers could use the land, especially the commons, but also other kinds of farmland, all of which served to preserve the early medieval buildings and its farmland (Fallgren 2020a).

Because of this, one can discover many variations within the houses on the island, regarding the placing and numbers of doorways, visible interior stone walls and variants of different house types built together (Figure 2). With knowledge of the function of different house-types and how these are grouped within the villages, it is actually possible to identify four different farm sizes on the island (Fallgren 1998). The smallest farms consisted of just one building, divided into a living area and a byre. The next farm size, and one step up in the hierarchy, were farms with two buildings. They usually contained one living-house and one house where the sheep were kept. These farms appear to have been the most numerous on the island (Figure 3).

Sometimes the living houses in those farms had a stable within, but this applied only to the largest of the farms in this category. They were very few and existed only in the smallest villages, established at the end of Migration Period (Fallgren 2006:140). The number of small farms, with one or two buildings, is just over 1000 of those that remain today. On the next step in the hierarchical ladder are the farms containing three buildings. These farms usually contained a larger house for habitation that included a byre

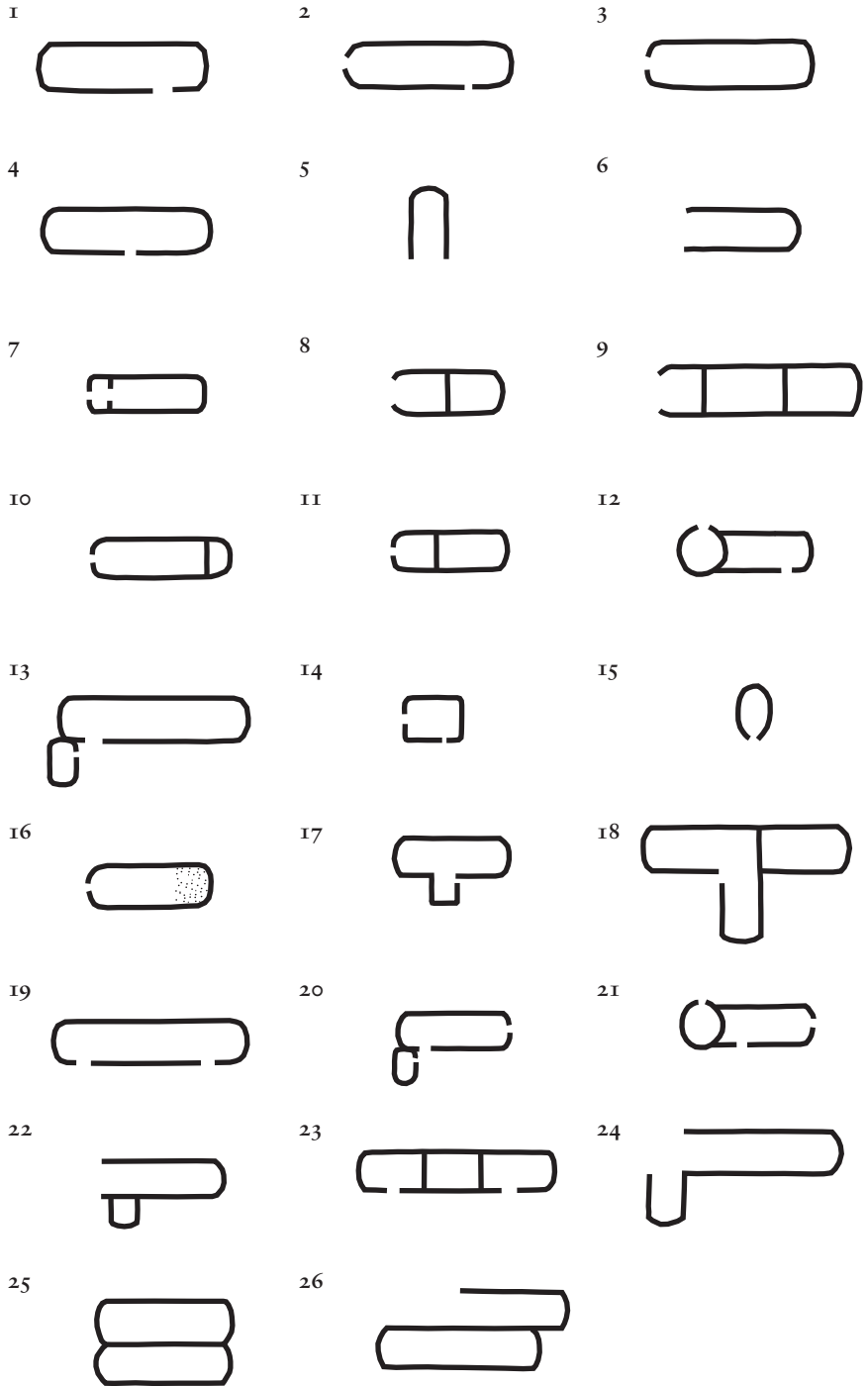
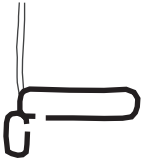
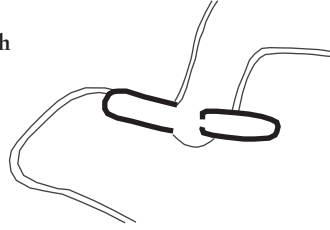


Figure 2. Identified types of early medieval houses on Öland. Drawing: Ylva Bäckström.

Hagby, Norra Möckleby parish



Rosendal, Böda parish



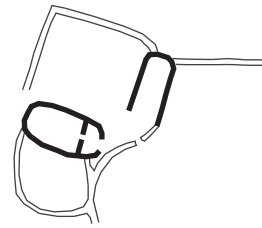
Gillberga, Persnäs parish



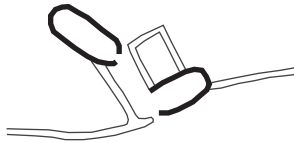
Lenstad, Torslunda parish



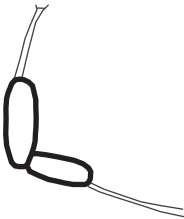
Södra Greda, Föra parish



Valsnäs, Löt parish



Holmetorp, Algutsrum parish



Brostorp, Glömminge parish



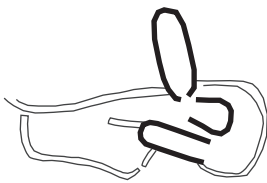
N



20 m

Figure 3. Different types of the most common early medieval farms on Öland. Drawing: Ylva Bäckström.

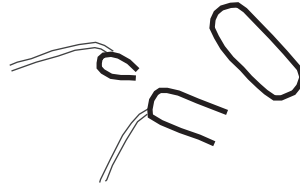
Valsnäs, Löt parish



Karum, Högsrum parish



Skäftekärr, Böda parish



N



20 m

Figure 4. Examples of the slightly larger three-house farms on Öland. Drawing: Ylva Bäckström.

together with a larger sheep-house and a smaller outbuilding (Figure 4). About 100 of these remain visible on the island. At the top of the hierarchy were those who lived on the largest farms. These farms were very large and consisted of four or five buildings. More than one of the houses in these farms could be larger than 30 m and the largest could be 55 m in length (Figure 5). They also contained houses of different types – habitable houses, with or without byres, sheep-houses, smaller outbuildings, and the most important: a special high-status house in the form of a separate hall. Only four of these very large farms have been archaeologically investigated, namely Övertorp, Rönnerum, Skäftekärr and Skogsby. These different houses on the largest farms, as presented in Figure 5, were very large buildings, with lengths ranging from 99 m (Övertorp) to 152 m (Skogsby). Of these gigantic farms, 20 are still visible in the landscape and are fairly well distributed over the island (Fallgren 1998, 2006:143–146, 2019:100). The smallest farms ranged between 110–168 m² in floor space. The two-house farms ranged from 150–250 m². The three-house farms ranged between 240–300 m², and the twenty largest farms ranged from 558–834 m².

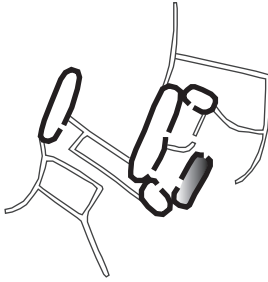
Out of the farms shown in Figure 5, Rönnerum, Skogsby and Fagerum represent the three largest prehistoric farms found in Scandinavia so far. Even the biggest Scandinavian Viking Age farms are smaller than these farms. For instance, the very large house (85m) in Borg on Lofoten had a total floor area of 660 m² (Öye 2002:278). Therefore, there is nothing in the archaeological material from Scandinavia that shows or indicates that the communities here would have become more hierarchical after about 550 CE. I have previously suggested that the only Scandinavian prehistoric farm larger than the large Migration- and Vendel Period farms described above is the very large farm investigated at Tissø in Zealand (Fallgren 2008a), but as we have seen, the Tissø complex was not a residence or farm, or any other type of agrarian enterprise.

Thus, these different farm sizes reveal, in an unusually clear way, the contemporary social hierarchy on Öland, from small and common farms with one or two houses, to the rarer but somewhat larger farms with three houses and, at the top of the societal pyramid, the few but exceptionally large farms with four or five houses. One can also see that the sizes of the enclosed fields and meadow land correlate with the sizes of the farm-buildings (Fallgren 1998, 2006:143–46). A very similar farm hierarchy can be detected on the neighbouring island of Gotland (Svedjemo 2014:9), and in Norway (Løken 2006:312), of approximately the same sizes seen in southern present-day Sweden (Carlie & Artursson 2005; Helgesson & Aspeborg 2017), as well as in Denmark (Ethelberg 2003; Herschend 2009; Hvass 1988; Jørgensen 2010; Kaldal Mikkelsen 1999). In this context, it is also very interesting to note that several of the early medieval Germanic and Celtic laws, from the

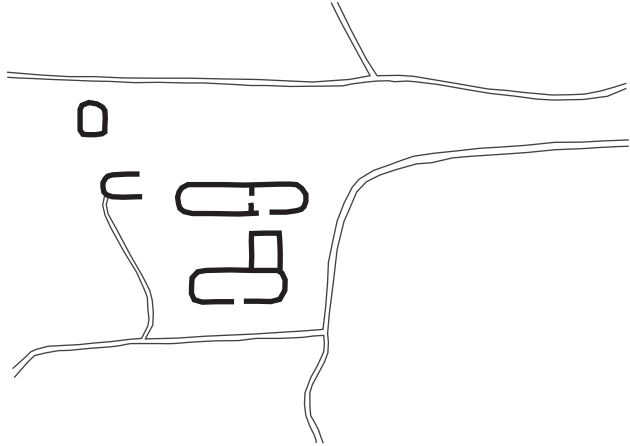
sixth century to the ninth century CE, describe a largely similar hierarchical grading of the free land-owning population, into three or four groups. This was true for the continental Saxons, the Alemanni and the Bavarians (Reuter 1991:66; Rivers 1977). Likewise, the early Irish laws from the seventh and eighth centuries CE (Kelly 1988, 2000:445) describe an identical hierarchy to the one in Öland. Archaeologically, this stands out very clearly in the Irish early medieval settlements (O’Sullivan et al. 2014). Several of the early Anglo-Saxon laws describe a very similar division of the free population, expressed in different proportions of ‘wergild’ (Blair 2018:302–305; Hadley 2000:66–67; Hough 2014; Thacker 2005:489–492).

In all likelihood, the inhabitants of the smaller and common farms on Öland were free self-sufficient farmers, like, for instance, contemporary Anglo-Saxon ‘ceorls’ or ‘ócaire’ and ‘bóaire’ in Ireland. All had their own animal herds and separately fenced fields and meadowlands, which shows they were self-sufficient units. There could therefore not be any question of subordinate units being forced to produce only one type of agricultural product to satisfy a lord’s needs. Most importantly, in terms of the free status of these inhabitants, archaeologists have found not just ordinary artefacts on these smaller farms, but also smaller numbers of more valuable objects, like a few Roman gold or silver coins, weapons and small numbers of imported jewellery, glass beakers and beads, for example from Brostorp (see Stenberger 1933:122–124), Sörby Tall (see Beskow-Sjöberg 1977:22–24) and Rosendal (Fallgren 1993a). These artefacts belong to the type of exclusive objects that were earlier mentioned in connection with gifts that lords and kings distributed to bind free clients, i.e. ‘fife’. All this excludes the possibility that they would correspond to something like high medieval dependent tenant-farms (compare Fallgren 2019:10). Likewise, the occurrences of several grave-fields around the villages, containing only ordinary smaller farms, means that these farms were inhabited by free inhabitants who, through inheritance, were able to pass on the properties to their children (Fallgren 2006:118, 136–141). The inhabitants of the slightly larger farms of three houses may have belonged to a lower stratum of aristocracy, like Anglo-Saxon ‘hlafordas’, ‘eorls’ or ‘thegns’, and ‘flaiths’ on Ireland. The twenty largest farms on Öland undoubtedly belonged to the people of the top tier of aristocracy. We do not know what the owners of these farms were called or what they called themselves, but kings (‘konungar’), petty-kings and possibly high kings, seem to be the most likely designation. As mentioned above, the largest category of farms is really vast compared with other Scandinavian contemporary farms, and the three presented at the bottom in Figure 5 are the largest of all early medieval farms found in the whole region. When compared with known Anglo-Saxon royal residences or farms which were in one way or another associated with royalty

Övertorp, Glömminge parish



Karum, Högsrum parish



Rönnerum, Högsrum parish

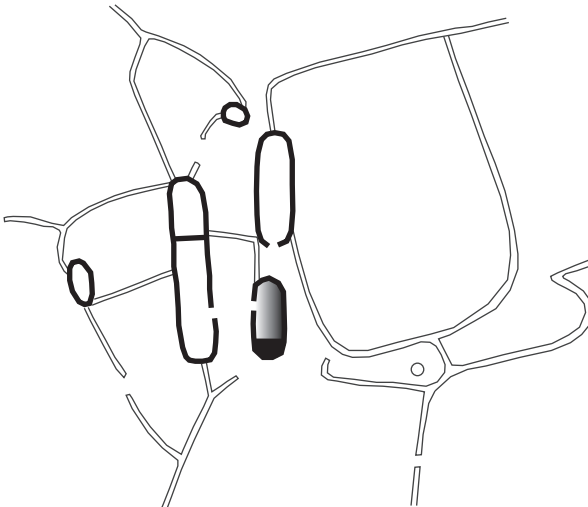
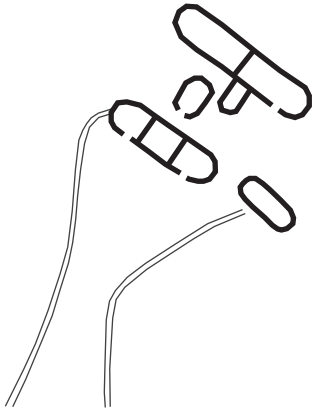
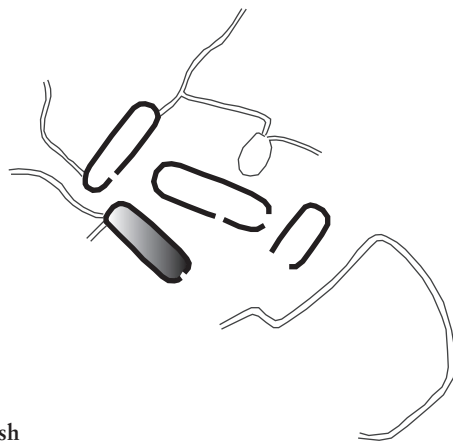


Figure 5. Seven of the largest aristocratic farms (farms with four or five houses). The four halls identified at Övertorp, Skäftekärr, Rönnerum and Skogsby are shaded. Drawing: Ylva Bäckström.

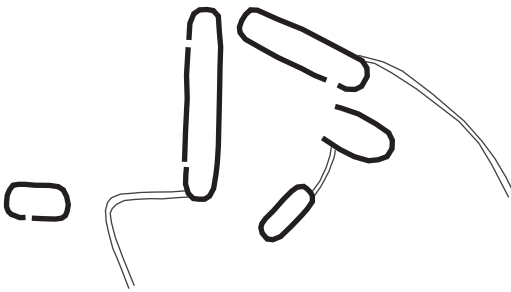
Abbantorp, Högsum parish



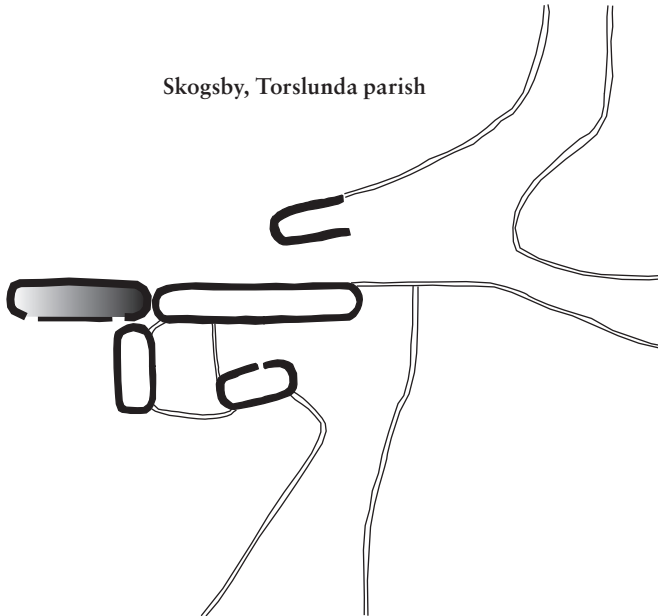
Skäftekärr, Böda parish



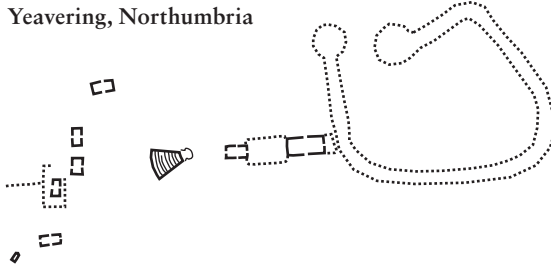
Fagerum, Böda parish



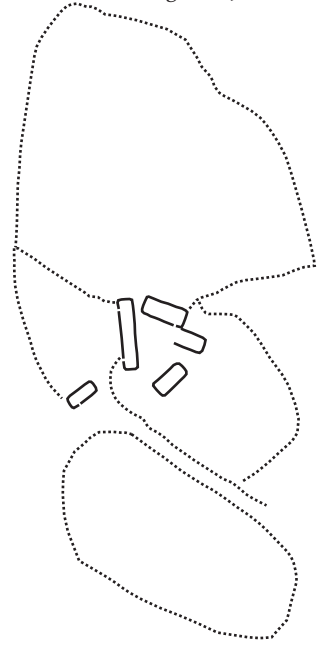
Skogsby, Torslunda parish



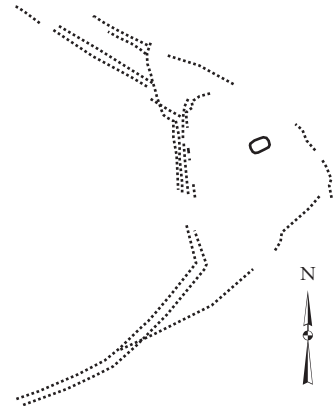
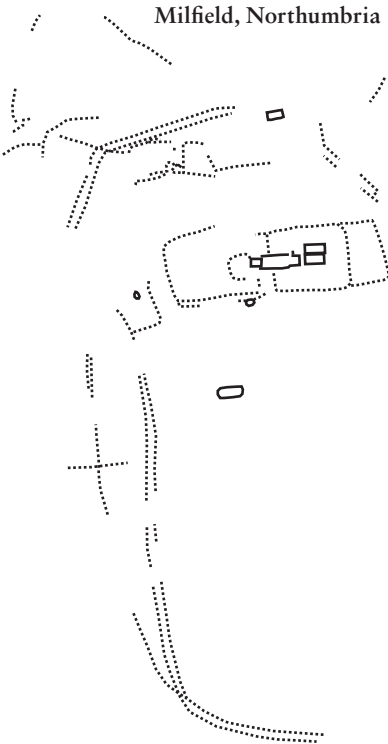
Yeavinger, Northumbria



Fagerum, Öland



Milfield, Northumbria



100 m

Figure 6. The second largest of the Oelandic farms, Fagerum, with its enclosures together with the two largest of the Anglo-Saxon Great Hall complexes, Yeavinger and Milfield, both in Northumbria, pictured at the same scale for comparison. Drawing: Ylva Bäckström.

(see examples in Blair 2018:117–122; McBride 2018:4–36) or known Irish royal residences (O’Sullivan et al. 2014:47–138) they are huge. Based on this comparison, it seems reasonable to characterize these farms on Öland as royal residences. Even in comparison to the so-called ‘great hall complexes’ they are large (Fallgren 2019:102 fig. 2), which also includes the true Scandinavian ‘central places’. Nevertheless, as we have seen above, these cannot be interpreted either as residences or as some kind of large agricultural units/enterprises (Figure 6).

Kinship and villages

When it comes to the settlement structure, it should be mentioned that all of the farms in Öland were included in larger units, villages or hamlets. A village, or hamlet is best described as a group of farms with a common name, whose properties and fences border each other. The fields and meadows of the farms have either been mixed together within one or several common enclosures or have been individually and separately fenced. One or more shared resource, such as a pasture, existed outside the enclosed lands (Erixon 1960:195; Fallgren 1993b, 2006:87–115; c.f. Blair 2018:139–156, 294–308; Wickham 2005:516–518). The neighbourhood itself, the common name and the common resources outside the fenced lands, form the hallmark of what characterizes a village. However, before the ‘manorialization’ of Western Europe and the introduction of intensive lordship, there was another essential and typical component to every village, namely kinship.

Before ‘feudalization’, partible heritage dominated as the inheritance principle among the people in north-western Europe. This is reflected in all the early medieval Germanic and Celtic laws, as well as in high medieval Nordic laws (Charles-Edwards 1972:29–33, 1993; Enequist 1935; Holst 2004:193–198, 2014:187; Murray 1983; Reynolds 1994:57–74; Sawyer & Sawyer 1993:180–187; Scull 1993:72; Williamson 2013:24). The wording regarding the ‘origin of neighbours’ in the introduction to the eighth century CE Irish law *Bretha Comaithchesa* (Judgements of neighbourhood) is very enlightening. It starts with a question: ‘From where does neighbourhood emerge?’ and the answer is immediately given: ‘From plurality of heirs’ (Charles-Edwards 2000:100). The earliest Anglo-Saxon laws, as well as laws from twelfth-century Wales, also show the connection between the emergence and growth of villages through partible inheritance, where the eldest son takes over the paternal farm, while the younger brothers built new farms close by (Charles-Edwards 1972:29–33, 1993, 2000:87). This is also apparent in the Lombardic law, *Edictum Rothari*, from 643 CE (Reynolds 1994:183).

Rosendal, Öland



Clontreem Valley, Ireland

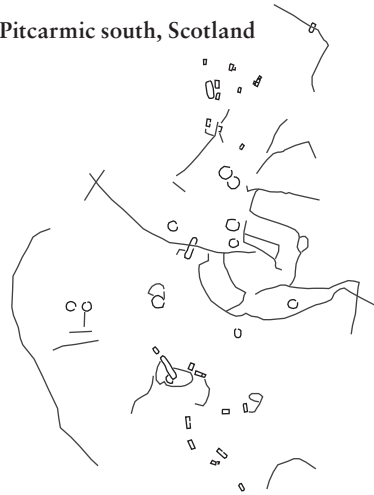


Figure 7. Examples of ‘pre-feudal’/peasant mode villages with scattered farms: Rosendal, Öland; Drumturn Burn, Scotland; Butterwick, England; Clontreem Valley, Ireland; Pitcar-mic south, Scotland. Drawing: Ylva Bäckström.

Drumturn Burn, Scotland



Pitcarmic south, Scotland



Butterwick, England



Thus, as long as there was space in the landscape, these early medieval peasant-mode, kin-based villages and hamlets could grow into larger units. It was kinship and partible inheritance that created them, and kinship was the glue that held them together. This was a major contrast to the more uniform villages shaped according to ‘feudal’ economic and ownership principles, and inhabited by tenants (Fallgren 2019:94–97, 2020b:173). In addition, these pre-manor hamlets and villages usually had a quite different layout to that of high- and late medieval villages (Figure 7). Mostly they had a more dispersed layout, where the farms in the same village were set apart from one another, but connected to one another and the commons outside the fenced lands through cattle paths (Blair 2018:139–163, 288–305; Dodgshon 2015:177–180; Fallgren 1993b, 2006:83–84, 95–99, 2008:73; Parker Pearson 2012:38–40; Wickham 2005:470). Further, common fields did not exist within these villages during those time periods. This is also evident from early medieval Germanic and Celtic laws. Instead, each farm had its own separately fenced field and meadowland, directly connected to the farmyard of each farm, which is why a distance of between 50–200 m was often created between farms in the same village. It is well known that in parts of Scandinavia where intensive lordship was never introduced, from the post-Medieval period up to early modern times, and where free farmers still dominated that they were groups of related people (Enequist 1935; Sporrang & Wennersten 1995). These villages had more in common with early medieval or pre-feudal villages in terms of the overall layout than the high- and late medieval villages with geometrically-shaped layout and common and subdivided fields (Fallgren 2006:87–96, 2008:72–73, 2019:95). This has also been observed in those parts of medieval England where seigniorial control was weak or absent (Dyer 1991).

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that, contrary to the claims of earlier research, there is little evidence to suggest that the climate crisis of the sixth century, with subsequent population decline and famine, contributed to a more hierarchical society in Scandinavia. Instead, there is strong evidence for the opposite, as seen in climate crises and plague epidemics of the later Medieval period. Thus, the climate crisis was not a likely incentive behind the creation of large agricultural units or estates, which in turn gave rise to lavish burials. By contrast, the construction of wealthy burials during the same period should instead be seen as an expression of crises and conflicts between groups of people, where certain families, by such sumptuous manifestations and rituals, tried to maintain or establish power over oth-

ers. Added to this, there is nothing in the archaeological record to indicate that the elite during the Vendel Period and the Viking Age resided in larger farms or houses, compared to their Migration Period precursors.

Furthermore, there is no source material to support the idea that estates and ‘feudal mode’ production were established in Scandinavia before the introduction of ecclesiastical institutions in the twelfth century. The estate system in most European regions was introduced via monasteries and the Catholic Church, through which they integrated these new regions into an international economic system. There can therefore hardly have been any incentives to create similar estates in Scandinavia before Christianization. The Catholic Church also campaigned for a new approach to land ownership and a land market. Before that, all landowners in the form of kings, lords and peasants lived on farms, which they inherited and passed on by inheritance to their children. Significantly, these societies were by no means egalitarian. There was a clear hierarchy among and between peasants, aristocrats and kings. One of the largest differences between these earlier societies and those transformed based on ‘intensive lordship’ with manorial estate-systems was that neither kings nor the nobility or chiefs built their wealth or prestige through major land ownership.

Taken together, the results from this study offer new openings and possibilities for research on lordship in Scandinavia during the Early Medieval period (c.400–1000 CE). While the current study offers an overview of Scandinavian lordship, it illuminates the situation on Öland specifically. Further studies of other Scandinavian regions, beginning with the arguments presented here, may provide deeper and more nuanced insights into how lordship developed and evolved in Scandinavia during the centuries following the ‘dust veil’ and other crises.

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