

Søren M. Sindbæk (ed.)

Northern Emporium
Vol. 1 The Making of Viking-Age Ribe

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Vol. 2 The Networks of Viking-Age Ribe

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Review by Charlotta Hillerdal 

As the earliest Scandinavian ‘emporium’ (to use Sinbæk’s term of preference, more commonly these sites are referred to as ‘towns’), Ribe can hardly be overvalued. Equally, as the most recently excavated Viking Age town, one that makes use of the full range of novel analytical and recording methods offered by contemporary archaeology, the impact of the Ribe excavation can hardly be overstated. As very accurately pointed out by Sindbæk himself in

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the introductory chapter (Vol. 1, p. 13), Ribe (established around 700 CE) is the reference site for much of Viking Age chronology and development. It is therefore highly welcome that the excavations have been published in such meticulous detail. These volumes promise to become the new ‘bible’ for Viking Age researchers, not often read cover to cover, but frequently cited for decades to come.

Sinbæk’s network theory (2007) has been profound in the last decades’ reconceptualization of the Viking era. Ribe is foundational to this, both theoretically as a ‘type example’ of a network nodal point, and quite literally as the first of the ‘Viking’ emporia. These volumes contribute to advancing this idea, and not least, to anchor it within material culture and empirical data.

It has long been recognized that these sites are characterized by long-distanced sea trade and crafts. But the origin and intent of their establishment are debated. The network model has provided the most effective critique against the, often assumed, link between urbanity, regal power and state formation (e.g. Ambrosiani 1990; Ambrosiani & Clarke 1991; Skre (ed.) 2007; Skre 2008).

Sinbæk sees Ribe’s foundation as the northernmost extension of a Frisian tradition, rather than a Scandinavian initiative, something that is supported, at least partially, by the artefact material (e.g. Vol. 2, Chapters 2, 3, 6–14). Underlining that these places are there to serve a purpose, in a very practical sense, rather than advancing an agenda or ideology.

This too changes the ‘dynamic’ of the Viking Age, moving away from notions of isolated northern communities suddenly appearing on the (British) world stage at the end of the eighth century CE, towards that of continuous interaction and gradual intensification and integration into a growing trade network.

Despite the (somewhat surprising) loyalty shown to traditional chronology (e.g. Vol. 1, pp. 50, 158–159), this book contributes to the feeling of it becoming increasingly outdated. Ribe’s continuous occupants from 700 CE, or a little earlier, seem to take little note of the rise of the Viking Age in 793. Rather, they go about their business according to their now century-long tradition of craftsmanship and trade, contacts across the seas, south, north, and east, well established. Trade in products from the North, the western Scandinavian peninsula, can be seen already in the 730s (Vol. 2, Chapters 7, 14), abundance of amber suggest the Baltic Sea area is extensively involved in trade in the 740s (Vol. 2, Chapter 15), and it is even probable that a traveller from England visited the emporium in the early eighth century (Vol. 2, Chapter 9). If anything, Ribe shows us the need to break the hegemonic narrative of The Vikings (see also Vol. 1, p. 18).

Volume 1 The Making of Viking-Age Ribe offers a detailed focus on the Posthustorvet excavation 2017–2018. The excavation made use of new field-work and documentation techniques to achieve a high-definition approach to the chronology and context of the finely sequenced stratigraphy of up to 2.5 meters depth.

High-definition excavation is presented in a high-definition publication. This certainly does not make it the most intriguing read for the casual reader but will be immensely beneficial for anyone with a special interest.

The backbone of this volume consists of a summary of the excavation results, followed by ten specialists' reports detailing different analytical aspects of the excavation. These are generously illustrated by multiple site plans, images, and detailed data tables. The volume also includes 5 plates detailing the matrix of principal phases and constructions (Plate 1), section drawings, and photogrammetric reconstruction of sections (Plates 2–5).

The introductory chapter by Sindbæk sets the scene outlining the research history of Ribe and the motivation for undertaking a new excavation in Ribe, including research questions and aims.

The second chapter explains the excavation methodology, recording protocols, sample strategy, etc. in clear detail. It also critically evaluates the success of this approach, with important advice for future excavations on similar sites.

Chapter 3, the most substantial chapter in the volume, an 'Excavation atlas' of 170 pages, navigates through the stratigraphy phase by phase, relating the chronological history of a site from the scantily used grasslands that preceded the establishment of the emporia, until the much-disturbed modern urban deposits at phase 18.

Each phase is interpreted in relation to: artefact finds, ecofacts, micromorphology, and entomology – each category represented by its own symbol. This is an efficient way of presenting the distinct phases and comprehensively organizing the significant data, where the reader could easily have gotten lost in the amount of available information.

The chapter also include five 'Focus' sections that offers a more in-depth look at certain structures or phenomena that stood out in the excavation.

The Excavation Atlas is followed by ten specialists' reports, ranging from 3D spatial recording to radiocarbon chronology.

To highlight a few, Chapter 5 on soils and sediment micromorphology by Barboura Wouters is extremely informative, especially considering the important contribution micromorphology made towards understanding the site. Micromorphology solved some of the longstanding 'Ribe conundrums', such as identifying stratigraphy in the seemingly homogenous 'dark earth' layers.

This chapter also demonstrates the highly varying preservation conditions across the site, and a very uneven accumulation rate throughout the decades, something that is further discussed by Søren M Kristiansen and Anna K. E. Tjellden in Chapter 8 and by Pieterjan Deckers in Chapter 6. Decker's chapter is also a well needed reminder that the chronological assumption behind stratigraphic relationships expressed in single context recording is not always as straight forward as one would like to assume.

Chapter 11 by Jacob Kveiborg is another immensely useful addition to the book, since zooarchaeology is not very prominent in the 'Excavation Atlas' (Chapter 3). Unsurprisingly, the assemblage is dominated by local domestic animals, predominantly cattle but also pig and sheep. However, Kveiborg shows a great variety of animal resources were utilized by Ribe's inhabitants, including locally available gamebirds and fish, even though fish is probably severely underrepresented in the faunal assemblage. The use of local wild resources is also evidenced in Chapter 13 discussing plant material.

Insect remains (Chapter 12) were incremental in establishing the permanent character of occupation in the earliest phase of Ribe's existence, but a detail that really brought the site to life for me was the detection of honey-bees and evidence of bee keeping in the mid-8th century (p. 441).

The high-definition approach must be considered very successful. Not least resulting in a refined chronological framework where settlement phases have been identified down to 10–20, occasionally 30, year-spans between 690/70 and 900/920 CE. The uncertain end-date of the Viking Age sequence (Phase F14) is due to highly disturbed settlement layers (p. 200). As no decline in craft activities can be discerned in this phase, the interpretation opens for the possibility of continued activity beyond the early 900s.

Geoarchaeology in combination with archaeoentomology has resolved some of the outstanding questions, for example that of Ribe's probable origin as a seasonal market, as suggested by previous excavations (Feveile 2006). Instead, it is concluded that Ribe had a permanent occupation from the very start, albeit with shorter-lived, less sturdy, wattle walled houses.

Microporphology is also able to put an end to speculation of seemingly homogenous 'dark earths', previously interpreted as quickly accumulated organic deposits, probably linked to cattle markets (Bencard & Jørgensen 1990). Analysis showed that these are highly compressed stratified layers of houses build from organic materials such as wattle, reeds and turf. The high level of preservation is explained by local conditions created by the large amount of compressed organic matter (Vol. 1, pp. 116–117; Chapter 5).

These finds attest to interesting shifts in building traditions throughout Ribe's existence. Initially, the site is marked by light wooden buildings of wattle and wood, permanent but rather short-lived. For about two decades

positions of buildings, fences and boundaries seem to shift around, contradicting ideas of a planned settlement and original plot-division. However, following this a very stable building pattern and plot-division is established, with a continuous sequence of buildings for almost 200 years. Craft production, evident already in the earliest occupation phase, also seem to follow a similar pattern with large short-term variability in the earliest phases shifting towards a series of specialized craft activities continuously practiced on the same plot for decades.

Volume 2 The Networks of Viking-Age Ribe comprises 20 chapters focusing on different finds- and materials categories, framed by an introduction and conclusion by Søren Sindbæk. This is the book where Sindbæk's network theory is mapped onto the artefact material and actualized, to some effect.

Naturally, given the amount of finds and the limitation set by a comprehensive volume, presentations of artefacts have to be summarized, but find categories and approach has been designed with usefulness for research in mind (Chapter 1), and it shows. These categories include but are not limited to: pottery, stone products, numismatic evidence, non-ferrous metal working, beads, bone and antler working, textile production, and wood. There are also a couple of chapters focusing on more unique finds, such as the only sherd of Samian ware (with probable origin in Roman period Rhine area) ever found in Ribe (Chapter 5), and remains of musical instruments (Chapter 21). The chapters are largely descriptive and includes detailed tables, drawings, and multiple artefact photographs – for example, 128 pictures of 124 individual Ribe type beads (Chapter 13, Figs 13.24, 13.25, 13.26). This is a hugely helpful reference book for anyone working with Viking Age material.

The underlying focus is on movement of things and people, and the emerging image is of a settlement with both domestic and international character, depending on which material you focus on. Imported pottery suggest early ties with Frisia and the Rhineland, but the dominating pottery tradition is domestic (Chapters 2, 3). Early comb production overwhelmingly points to Frisian artisans (Chapter 14), but brooches and pins follow local tradition (Chapter 9). Consistently, throughout the settlement's history, there is a conversation between foreign and local, and large and small movements. Sindbæk concludes that Ribe should be understood, not as a 'community of people of widely different origins' (p. 419) but as embedded in the region and with an explicit function to fulfil.

What is striking is the everyday character of this, for its time, extraordinary settlement. Barrel wood reused as floorboards (Chapter 20), imported raw material for craft production (e.g. Chapter 13, 14), and household production of textiles (Chapter 18), for instance, does not point towards a 'high

status' community, but a well-connected society of artisan families living rather mundane lives. Far less spectacular than the Viking Age emporium often imagined.

Emporia emerged, Sindbæk concludes in Chapter 22, as places to facilitate sea traffic. Originally, in the case of Ribe, sea traffic from Frisia, but then expanding both north and east. They are nodal points in a social network around trade and movement, serving both long-distance and hinterland, easing and driving the expansion and development that became characteristic for the Viking Age.

These volumes are not for a lay audience, and the dry report-like writing style might be criticized. However, they are clearly designed by researchers with further research in mind, and as such they are extremely useful, far more so than a glossy popular version would be. The granularity and extent of data made available from such a significant key-site excavation is commendable, and I hope will serve as an example for similar key-site excavations in the future. Surely there are many more intriguing stories to be told about Ribe – and with the aid of these volumes, they will be.

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