

Sven Kalmring

Towns and Commerce in Viking-Age Scandinavia

Cambridge University Press

Cambridge 2024

277 pages (26 figures, three maps and four colour-plates)

ISBN: 978-1-009-29809-4 Paperback

Review by Christoph Kilger 

The phenomenon of Viking Age towns has been a central topic in Viking Age research for a considerable time, with various approaches employed by both archaeologists and historians, resulting in a vast body of literature. The biographies of Viking Age towns such as Ribe, Birka, Kaupang, and Hedeby span a period of 250 to 300 years, starting across Scandinavia after 750 and ending with the demise of Hedeby, the largest and most powerful of them all, after 1050. In this monograph, the author Sven Kalmring aims to delve into the inner core of the research problem: – What was their specific purpose, why did Viking Age towns emerge, and why did they disappear? The primary objective is to explore the very essence of Viking-Age urbanisation. A hypothetical baseline that runs throughout the book is to view these sites with their urban communities as special economic and legal zones, which create unique social environments that were distinctly novel to earlier Iron Age central places, but also different from later high medieval towns. The book is structured both chronologically and thematically, with eleven chapters and a final summary.

Department of Archaeology, Ancient History and Conservation, Uppsala University, Campus Gotland, Sweden
christoph.kilger@arkeologi.uu.se

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons 4.0 International licence (CC BY 4.0) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Chapter two presents a comprehensive historiographic overview of scholarly approaches to Viking-Age urbanism that goes beyond the constraints of definitions and terminologies that have often limited earlier approaches. Kalmring traces the evolution of thought from Jankuhn's concept of *See-handelsplätze* in the 1950s to the economically anthropological notion of elite-controlled trade hubs in the 1960s and 1970s, which informed Richard Hodges' influential Emporia model for interpreting early medieval urban sites. He further engages with Scandinavian scholarship on early urbanisation, and incorporates theoretical frameworks such as central place theory and network theory. The chapter also broadens the discourse on urbanism by integrating a broad range of perspectives and researchers.

What is not addressed in this overview, however, is how concepts within economic and social anthropology significantly shaped urban and Viking Age studies in the 1980s and 1990s. Theories such as gift exchange, substantivism and notions of the social embeddedness of trade challenged the applicability of market exchange models in premodern societies. Until recently, these frameworks have offered powerful alternatives to economic determinism and have been instrumental in reframing economic relations in the early Middle Ages as socially embedded and politically regulated.

A crucial aspect of Viking Age urbanism, developed in chapters three to five, involves examining rural Iron Age society – its farmsteads and villages – as well as regional variations in territorial organization, cultural norms, and religious practices. Viking-age society tended more toward social seclusion than inclusion, which hindered foreigners from engaging with rural populations. Within this context, the author emphasizes the importance of legal protections for trading networks, which expanded globally during the Viking Age period, highlighting the growing need for safeguarded spaces. He argues that the legal capacity of towns to offer secure environments for foreign merchants and craftsmen – situated on the fringes of a potentially hostile rural society – was likely a key factor in their establishment.

Another innovative approach to understanding Viking Age urbanism is presented in chapter four, "Cult, Jurisdiction and Markets", where Kalmring explores the role of legal systems and things in rural society. This chapter effectively highlights recent studies on the social and political significance of thing assemblies in Scandinavian societies. Thing assemblies, which also had a clear religious and cultic component, provided social arenas for regular gatherings. Like Viking Age towns, thing assemblies were pivotal points in society, where large numbers of people gathered in a confined space and engaged in ritual, judicial, and, importantly, economic activities. The author presents a vast number of sources from Medieval Scandinavia and wider Europe, which connect things with markets and traders in different constellations. In this context, he also discusses reli-

giously charged centres of power and the cult, such as Old Uppsala, as well as royal or manorial estates like Jellinge or Tissø, and the connections between religious festivals and seasonal fairs.

In chapter five, “Local Society and Viking-Age towns”, Kalmring develops further the idea that emerging Viking Age towns presented a novelty in Scandinavia, with reference to Augé’s concept of super modernity. As neutral zones, Viking Age towns developed outside rural agrarian society and existing power structures. A peculiar feature is that royal estates or manors were located outside the towns. A famous example is the royal palace Hovgården on the island of Adelsö, within eyesight of Birka; this opposition is accentuated as Birka also had its own thing assembly. Another feature of Viking Age towns, which is discussed further in this chapter, is their liminal placement in border zones between ethnic and political formations, transport zones or landscape units.

One characteristic common to all Viking-age towns is their pronounced connection to the sea and maritime activities. As points of contact between land and water, harbours were a prerequisite for the development of these urban centres, a theme explored in chapter six, “An Urbanisation based on Harbours”. This chapter provides an overview of how seasonal landing sites, which also functioned as coastal marketplaces, began to emerge in the North Sea and Baltic Sea regions between the 6th and 8th centuries. Recent historical scholarship and archaeological investigations present a significantly more complex picture of the establishment of emporia in the North Sea region. A consistent finding is that Viking Age towns, including Ribe, Birka, Kaupang, and Hedeby, also originated as seasonal coastal markets.

Another more contentious issue discussed concerns the role of royal influence in the founding of Viking Age towns. One conclusion is that commercial activity served as the primary driving force behind the establishment of seasonal and local coastal markets; however, political authorities – often royal – intervened and directed their development at a later stage. This so-called “heyday phase,” marked by the emergence of a limited number of dominant trading centres, occurred consistently during the second half of the 8th century.

An overarching and recurring theme in Kalmring’s work is to address legal dimensions in the governance and administration of Viking Age towns. This is excellently developed in chapter seven, “Jurisdiction and Taxes” and further explored in chapter eight “Free Trade within Narrow Boundaries”, which examines the legal protections afforded to merchant diasporas by rulers across various geographical and political contexts. Kalmring connects archaeological evidence – such as shallow ditches encircling trading sites, likely marking symbolic boundaries of marketplaces – with historical discussions on juridical zones, customs, tax revenues, restrictions, entry

fees, and time limits imposed on foreign merchants for visiting and residing in towns. There is substantial evidence for such commercial legislation in textual sources from the late Roman Empire, Byzantium, and the Frankish-Merovingian and Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Later Medieval maritime law codes in Scandinavia, such as the Bjarkey laws, appear to reflect the diversity of legal practices of towns like Birka and Hedeby, but this is not easy to prove. The author revisits and analyses these primary sources in impressive detail, convincingly arguing that they offer a valuable framework for understanding Viking Age towns as special legal zones.

Viking Age towns served as catalysts for innovation within a previously conservative and underdeveloped rural society. Chapter nine explores these towns as special economic zones and addresses the classical question of their relationship with surrounding hinterlands, particularly in the context of emerging long-distance trade between Scandinavia and Continental Europe during the 9th century.

Chapter ten examines the evolution of Viking Age towns between 850 and 1000, with a deliberate focus on identifying turning points and disruptions in the archaeological record. This chapter is the longest in the book and more challenging to summarise, as it spans 150 years and encompasses a wide array of topics. One subchapter investigates the consequences of the breakdown of global trading networks in the latter half of the 9th century, including the decline of the North Sea emporia and the subsequent recovery of Viking Age towns following the silver crisis. Another subchapter explores the decline of Birka, the transformation of Hedeby, and the second wave of urbanisation marked by the emergence of new Christian towns such as Sigtuna in the late 10th century. The chapter offers compelling archaeological evidence of conflict and crisis in urban settings.

The final chapter eleven is devoted to a discussion of the abandonment of late 11th-century Hedeby and the relocation of the town to medieval Schleswig. According to textual sources, the move occurred within a relatively short period of time between 1050 and 1075, specifically following the destruction of Hedeby in 1066 by the Norwegian king and the Slavic Obotrites. The chapter summarises earlier hypotheses regarding the reasons for this relocation. In addition to presenting recent excavation results from both Schleswig and Hedeby, as well as metal detector surveys in Hedeby that yielded an exceptionally rich assemblage of finds and new dating evidence, Kalmring proposes that the decision to move to Schleswig was made by the Danish king Sven Estridsen after 1059, in connection with the reorganisation of the Danish church and the establishment of new bishoprics in Jutland. The argument is compelling. Further evidence may lie in the dramatic decline in the import of Western European coins to Scandinavia after 1050/1055. At the same time, rulers in Denmark and Norway debased

and reorganised their coinages, which likely had far-reaching consequences for both long-distance trade and urban economies. The demise of Hedeby might also be interpreted within this monetary context.

The research effort in this book is well-grounded, with approximately 660 titles in the bibliography, out of which 50 are primary sources. The book provides not only a long-needed update of the debates on early medieval urbanisation in Scandinavia and Europe, but also a compilation of the growth of knowledge in archaeological research on Viking Age towns, excavation results, and material publications. Kalmring's achievement lies in his comprehensive approach, which connects different topics in Viking Age and early medieval research to the framework of urban studies, as well as broader questions about economic and social relations in Viking Age society.