

Early medieval waterscapes

Risks and opportunities for (im)material cultural exchange



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Rica Annaert

Agentur für das Kulturerbe Flanderns

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Erritsø – new investigations of an aristocratic, early Viking Age manor in Western Denmark c. 700-850 AD

Mads Ravn, Christian Juel, Charlotta Lindblom and Anne Pedersen¹

Introduction

The Little Belt in central Denmark is the narrowest of three waterways that divide present-day Denmark into the three main lands of Jutland, Funen and Zealand. In 2006 and 2007, a few hundred metres from the present older bridge connecting the Jutland peninsula with the island of Funen, remains of an extraordinary aristocratic-looking Viking Age settlement came to light during a rescue excavation (CHRISTENSEN 2008; 2009) (Fig. 1 and 2). Preliminary dates and house typology place it in the Late Germanic Iron Age and Early Viking Age, around 650-900 AD². There were traces of several buildings, and as something special in Denmark, a moat and palisade within which a prominent main hall building in two phases appeared. The hall was connected with an inner fence and a smaller building. This layout closely resem-

bles the manors at the east Danish and Scanian aristocratic sites Lejre, Tissø and Järrestad (CHRISTENSEN 2015; JØRGENSEN 2009; SÖDERBERG 2005). The surrounding 110 x 110 m square moat and palisade are unique features, not previously recorded in an Early Viking Age context. West and east of the manor were traces of several buildings from the Late Germanic Iron Age and Early Viking Age as well as a few pit houses. The surrounding settlement was, however, only partly excavated. The settlement is situated at one of the highest points of the Elbo Herred (Shire) with a good view to the north to the 'funnel' of the waterway in the northern end of the Little Belt. Visible to the south, is the opening of the Kolding Fjord, which leads to the shallow bay of Gudsø Vig – a perfect natural harbor.

The discovery of a highly unusual settlement type in this part of Denmark begs the question as to which role – cultur-

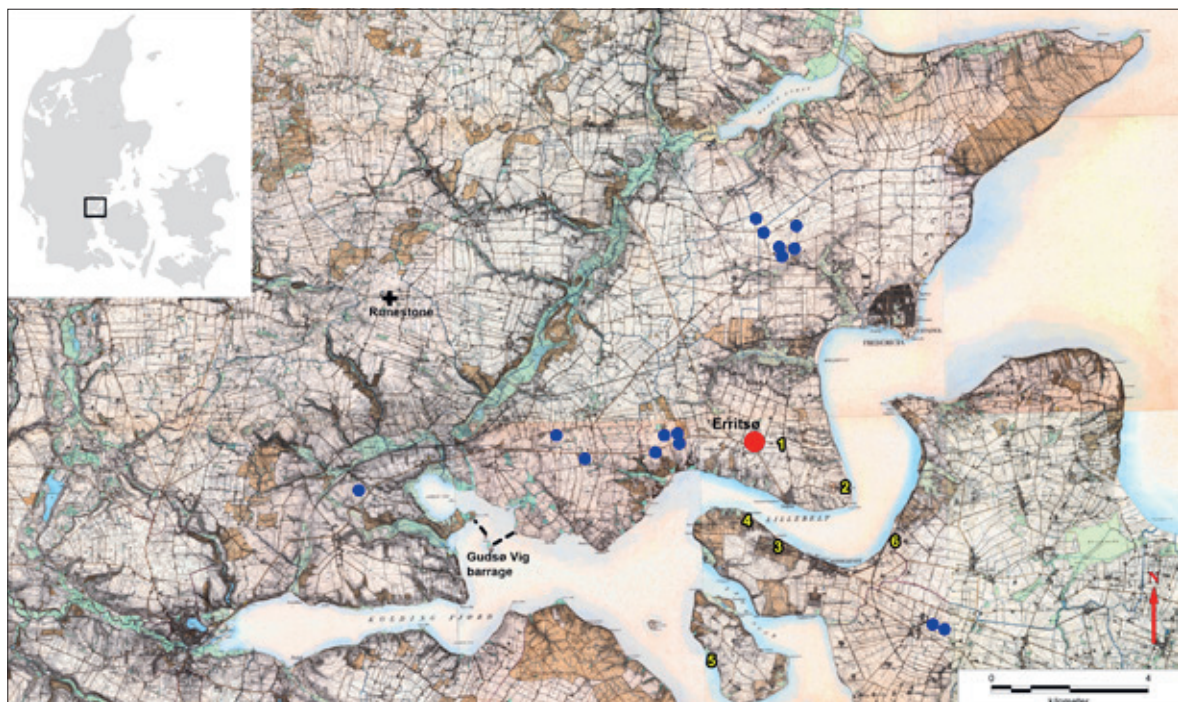


Figure 1. Location of the Erritsø site in South East Jutland near the Little Belt that separates Jutland and Funen. The topographical background map from 1842-99 shows the general topography of the area before major commercial development and road construction in the 20th century. Excavated settlements from the Late Germanic Iron Age and Viking Age are shown with blue dots. The Gudsø Vig sea barrages are marked in black. Yellow numbers show important hoards and single finds from the Viking Age described in the text: 1: Erritsø silver hoard from ca. 800-900 AD. 2: Gold ring. 3: Silver ring. 4: Buckles for horse mounting. 5: Moulds for Bronze casting. 6: Cult place. Sites on Funen and Fæne adapted from HENRIKSEN 2015.

ally, strategically, politically and administratively the Little Belt played in the period between 700 and 1000 AD in general and this fortified site in particular. We know from archaeology and scarce written sources that in this period the organization of power of Danish society changed several times (NÄSMAN 2006; ROESDAHL 2016) and written sources reveal that there was substantial competition between several royal dynasties in what the Frankish sources call 'Denmark', especially in the 8th and 9th centuries (MYHRE 2015, 148). A question that is imminent is whether the Little Belt was a barrier or bridge between the lands of present Denmark? According to recent research, there were deeply rooted regional differences between eastern and western (present) Denmark before King Harald Bluetooth 'won all of Denmark for himself'³ and erected the famous rune stone in Jelling around 965 AD (HOLST 2010, HOLST et al. 2013). Exactly how these local and cultural differences should be interpreted remains to be assessed in a larger perspective⁴. Here we will explore the preliminary answers to this question by focusing on the recent investigations of the Erritsø fortified Viking settlement, and its similarities and differences to similar settlements in Eastern Denmark and Scania that by others have been termed aristocratic manors (JØRGENSEN 2002; 2009; 2010; SÖDERBERG 2005). In this paper, we will present the his-

tory of research of this site in general and the results of an excavation conducted in October 2016 in particular⁵.

The Erritsø early Viking Age manor

From 2006 to 2007 around 12.000 m² were excavated due to commercial development (CHRISTENSEN 2008; 2009). Among the main features were the remains of an impressive hall building, constructed with two rows of roof-supporting posts and slightly curved walls. The walls and gables were supported on the outside by slightly inclining posts. Three entrances could be identified, two opposite each other in the eastern part of the building and one in the southwest wall. Low levels of phosphate in the layout of the structure indicate that no stable section existed (CHRISTENSEN 2009). The main hall had at least two phases. In the oldest phase, the building was 34 metres long and 12 metres wide at the centre. In the second phase, there was an extension to the east end by 5 metres, where postholes from the older phase were largely reused. The postholes for the roof-supporting posts measured between 0.60 metres and 1.00 metres in depth and were packed with stones, indicating that the building had robust long-lasting posts and possibly a considerable roof-height.

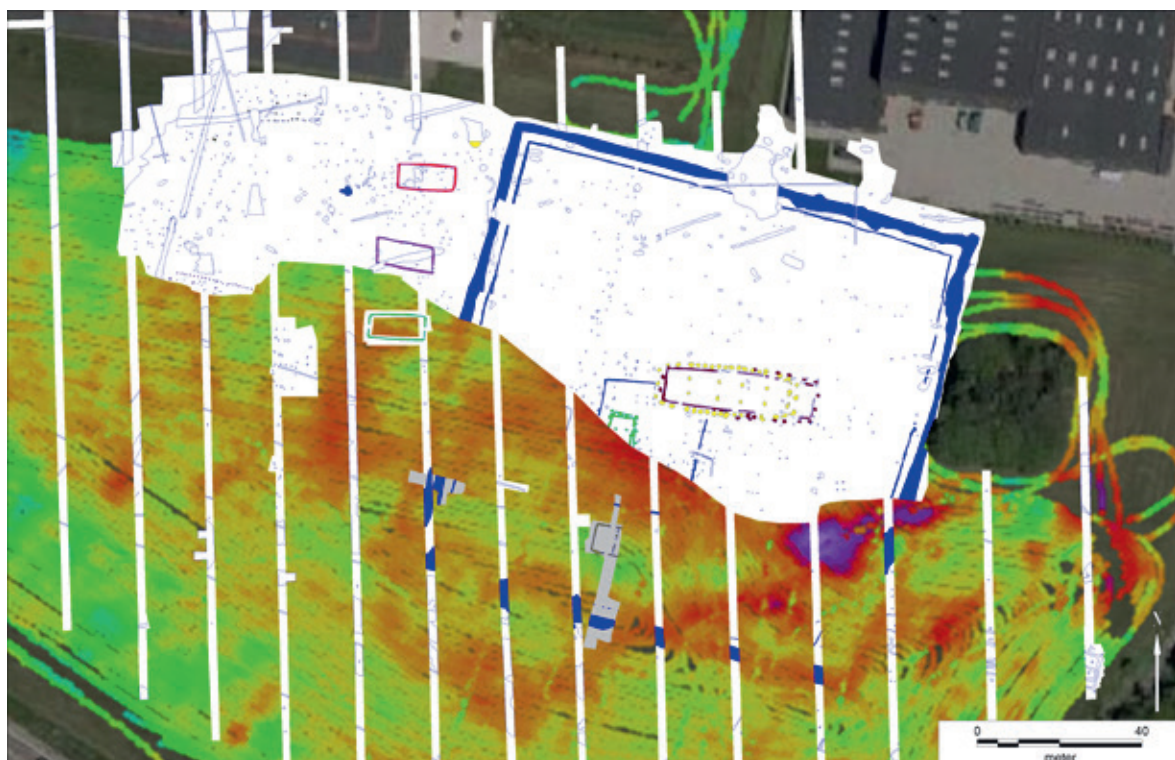


Figure 2. Plan of the excavation in 2006 and 2007 (white background) and the small investigations in 2016 (grey background). The central house is marked with yellow (phase 1) and brown (phase 2). The moat and palisade are marked with blue. The north-south lying building associated with the hall is marked with green. The background outside the excavated area indicates further features based on data from a so-called *Frequency Domain Electromagnetic Induction Survey* in 2015. The DUALEM-421 is a single-frequency, multiple-coil EM instrument, optimized for detailed mapping of the electrical conductivity of the near subsurface to a depth of approx. 6 meters. It clearly shows where to expect the rest of the moat (Illustration compiled by Christian Juel, VejleMuseerne).

To the southwest of the hall, a rectangular fence extended towards the south. Within this “inner court”, the northern part of a smaller north-south oriented building in two phases was partly uncovered. The described layout closely resembles the layout of the aristocratic sites Lejre, Tissø and Järrestad, especially phase 1 and 2 in Tissø (Fugledegård), phase 2 in Lejre (Mysselhøjgård) and phase 2a and 2b in Järrestad. These phases in Tissø, Lejre and Järrestad are dated to the 8th and 9th Century (JØRGENSEN 2009, 342; CHRISTENSEN 2015, 136f; SÖDERBERG 2005, 78). As something unique in Viking Age Denmark, the central hall area at Erritsø was surrounded by a V-shaped moat measuring up to 1.60 metres in depth and forming a square of 110 x 110 metres in plan.

The settlement outside the moat was only partly excavated. West of the moat three frame houses were uncovered. The function of these houses is unknown but they resemble the row of smaller buildings at Tissø, phase 3 (JØRGENSEN 2009, 341). In Tissø, the plough soil around these buildings comprised several finds related to metal working, possibly jewelry manufacture (iron bars, melts, small hammer, matrices) (CROIX 2012, 88). In Erritsø, a large pit inside the northernmost frame house contained slag and heavily burned clay, again suggesting activities related to metalworking. In addition, several buildings, preliminarily dated by typology to the Late Germanic Iron Age and Early Viking Age, were partly excavated as well as two pit houses, fences and wells.

Recent investigations

In 2015, a *Frequency Domain Electromagnetic Induction Survey* was conducted over the entire area of 18.500 m² in order to assess whether expected and new structures could be traced from the surface. The survey was conducted by courtesy of the Rambøll engineering company⁶. In short, the survey was successful. It showed clearly the remaining parts of the expected moat that have so far not been excavated. It also suggests some activity within in the inner court just south of the central house. Moreover, it suggests that there is more to find in the western part, where the first excavation revealed Viking Age frame houses as well as Late Germanic Iron Age farms. Generally, but more hypothetically, it seems possible that workshops, which may be expected on such a settlement will lie towards the south, west or east. Red areas on the survey map west and south of the moat correspond well with observations from the trenches made in 2006 and show the approximate extension of culture layers outside of the enclosure.

Also in 2015, five charcoal samples from the 2007 excavation of the hall were submitted for AMS dating, since the dating of the hall had so far relied on typology and was placed quite widely between 650 and 950 AD. The AMS results grouped around 700-850 AD (Fig. 3). Because most postholes of the hall were reused in the second phase and

therefore difficult to separate from the first building phase, this time span should be regarded as the general time span of the hall sequence. Typologically, the best parallels to the halls at Erritsø are the hall sequence at Lejre consisting of House III and IVab. As at Erritsø, sections of the postholes of the Lejre halls reveal that they have been reused to a large extent, and indeed the six ¹⁴C-dates fall within the same time span c. 650-900 AD (CHRISTENSEN 2015, 359ff). Another sample of charcoal from the Erritsø palisade falls between 618-684 AD⁷, which is slightly earlier than the dates from the hall. Since the charcoal is from oak with an unknown own age, the result could be biased. Furthermore, samples of oak timber from a well just North of the fortified manor were submitted for dendrochronological analysis. The felling year of the timber was estimated to be around 745 AD⁸. In this area, the level of ground water is very high due to natural springs. These springs were used as a water supply as late as the middle of the 20th century and may have served as an important source of fresh water in the Viking Age.

In order to get a higher resolution of dates and a better understanding of the site and its function we conducted new investigations in October 2016. The darker shade of grey in Fig. 2 shows the extent of the additional small-scale excavations. We concentrated the effort to the moat and palisade with the objective of getting more dates from these. Judging by the layout, these structures are contemporary within one or both phases of the main hall.

Nine samples from the new excavation were submitted for AMS dating. Despite the collection of a large amount of

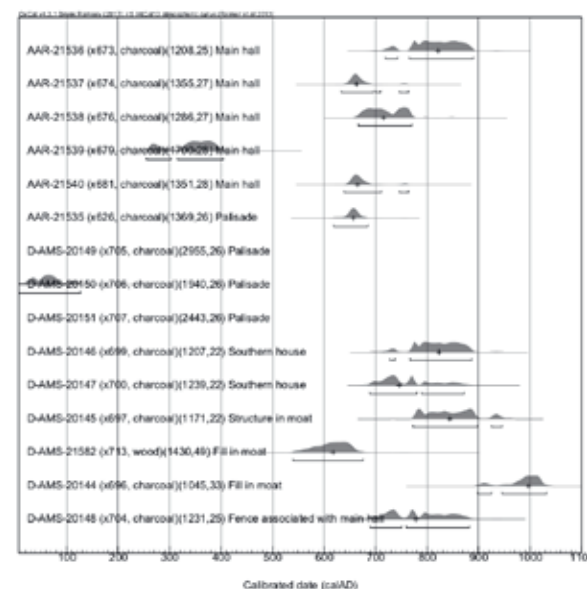


Figure 3. AMS dates from Erritsø. All dates are calibrated in OxCal v. 4.2.4 Bronk Ramsey (2013): r:5 IntCal13 atmospheric curve REIMER et al. 2013. For each date are noted lab. ID, lab. No., find number, sample material, uncalibrated date BP and archaeological feature. Captions under each calibration plot show the 95.4% range probability, + marks the median value.



Figure 4. Left: Section of the moat after removal of c. 20 cm of fill with machine. The small inner trench is clearly visible in plan against the lighter subsoil to the right. Right: Section of the moat showing the characteristic V-shape. At least two phases could be observed. The inner trench is visible in section to the upper far right.

soil samples from the palisade trench, a surprisingly small amount of organic material was available for dating. The results of three AMS dates from the palisade ditch clearly show a contamination of older material, as results are scattered in the Bronze Age or early Iron Age.

A section of the moat revealed, as also observed during earlier excavations, that the moat had a distinct V-shape in section with traces of having been dug at least twice. Sections of the moat show that it has been – at least predominately – dry. In addition, a smaller trench on the inner side of the moat was identified (Fig. 4). This feature can also be identified on photos from the 2006-2007 excavations, but it was not recognized as a construction detail at this time. This phenomenon we interpret as the foundation of a timber structure preventing the steep inside of the moat from collapsing. Additionally, it could have been from a row of posts, preventing the crossing of the moat. Charcoal from this structure is dated between the late 8th and early 9th century.

Another date from the inner fence associated with the main hall falls within the 8th and 9th century frame, which is within the lifetime of the hall. Also in the 2016 excavation, the west end of a larger three-aisled building with wall trenches was uncovered. Two dates place this building within the 8th and 9th centuries too. The function of this building is unknown. In size, it cannot be compared to the hall, but similar smaller buildings, contemporary with the hall building are known from both Tissø and Lejre. The last two dates are from an uncarbonized twig and a piece of charcoal from the fill of the bottom of the moat. One date falls within the second half of the 6th century or first half of the 7th century and another in the second half of the 10th century or early 11th century. These dates clearly illustrate that the moat has been re-dug several times and that material has been re-deposited. However, the youngest date may reflect the abandonment of the settlement and the filling of the moat.

Finds

Very few datable finds were recovered during the early excavations. Metal detector surveys conducted in and around the excavation area after the discovery of the site in 2006 include a square brooch with animal style B2 found in 2007 (Fig. 5) and a bird-shaped brooch found in 2014. These finds can be dated to the later half of the 6th century and later half of the 7th century respectively (ØRSNES 1966, 40ff; JØRGENSEN and NØRGÅRD JØRGENSEN 1997, 28ff). Volunteer metal detectorists participated in the 2016 excavation, screening systematically both the top soil and the exposed surface excavated by machine. They also screened the top soil in the eastern part of the area. Metal finds were surprisingly few but consisted of lead weights, one broken piece of smelted bronze waste and some pieces of iron slag. In addition, one round piece is quite likely from a Button-on-Bow brooch⁹. The metal objects found with metal detector so far date within the Germanic Iron Age and early Viking Age



Figure 5. Square brooch with animal style B2 found with metal detector in 2007.

Indications of power from topography, place-names and older finds

The site is located at one of the highest point of the Erritsø parish. A view-shed analysis (Fig. 6) demonstrates that the site was placed at the most strategic point for monitoring all passage into the funnel of the Little Belt, the narrow waterway (*Snævringeren*) dividing the peninsular of Jutland from the eastern islands of Funen and Zealand. At the same time, the site is located at the historical east-west road corridor, leading from the interior of the Jutland peninsula to one of the natural crossing points of the Little Belt. The landscape in the immediate surroundings falls towards the south and east where a relatively steep cliff marks the beginning of the waterway of the Little Belt that by nature is very deep. It is not clear if there were any landing facilities close by. So far, none has been found. However, towards the south, around seven kilometres from the Erritsø settlement, there is a natural landing site in Gudsø Vig, a shallow bay and perfect natural

harbor (RIECK 1992). The view-shed analysis clearly demonstrates that all access to the Kolding Fiord/Gudsø Vig by sea can be monitored from Erritsø. Rows of posts blocking the entrance to the Gudsø Vig have previously been radiocarbon-dated to the 8th and 9th century AD (NØRGÅRD JØRGENSEN 2009, 86; CRUMLIN-PEDERSEN 2010, 135f). These dates lie within the time frame of the Erritsø settlement. From the Gudsø Vig, the deep and narrow Elbo valley runs north and effectively creates a natural separation of the Elbo Herred from the rest of the Jutland peninsula.

A significant discovery in 1871 of a silver hoard of four Permian rings and six other silver rings 700 metres east of the *Erritsø* settlement may underline the significance of the *Erritsø* site as having a special, ritual status. The silver rings date between 800 and 900 AD¹⁰. In addition, on the Funen side of the belt, finds of silver mounts and a silver ring, dating to the Viking Age (HENRIKSEN 2015, 209) indicate that an aristocratic environment was present near the fortified settlement in the Viking Age (Fig. 1).

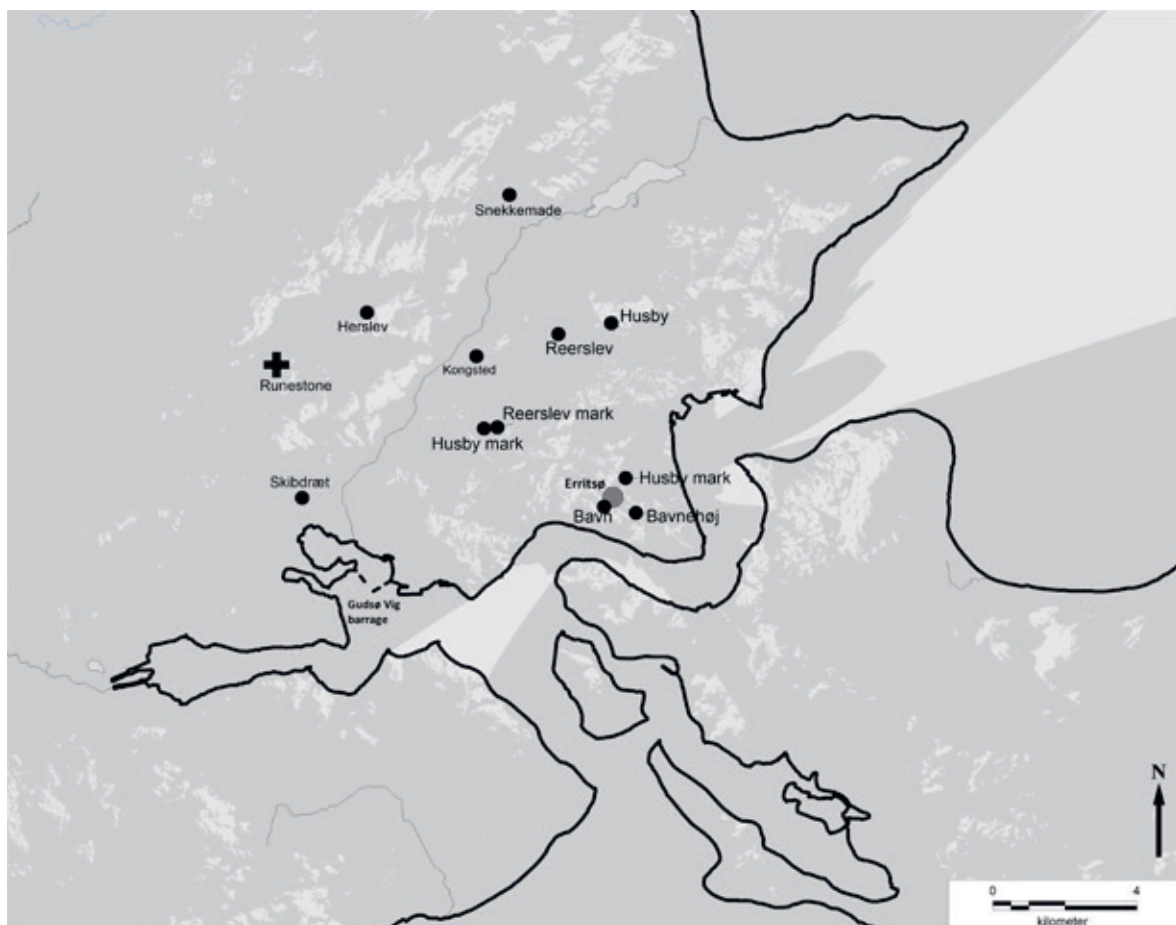


Figure 6. View-shed analysis of the site of Erritsø based on the 2008 LIDAR scan, with line of sight calculated from the Erritsø hall 2 metres above ground surface. White areas indicate areas visible. Significant place-names relating to power, armies and ships are added on the map. It shows that, given the trees were not too high it was possible to spot enemies and friends from afar in good time towards the north and south. The dikes constructed for the present Little Belt bridges (1935 n-s and 1972 e-w), make the view towards the North East and East less obvious on the view-shed than it actually was in the past (Courtesy of L. E. Christensen (2015) and the IT department of Moesgaard Museum and Aarhus University).

Place-names suggesting the presence of centrality, power and armies also indicate that this shire was not just any shire in the Viking Age¹¹. About five kilometres to the north of the fortified *Erritsø* settlement is the present village of *Kongsted* (literally King's place). In this area, we also have rich detector finds from the Late Germanic Iron Age as well as evidence of an abandoned medieval church (ENGBERG 2002). The name and other names such as *Herslev* (literally army's place) eight kilometres to the north-west point to a network of power in this region in the Germanic Iron Age and most likely in the Viking Age.

In addition, place-names of the *Husby* type is recorded four kilometres north of the *Erritsø* settlement. Judging by the nature of *Husby* sites and their interpretation elsewhere in Scandinavia, the *Husby* name near *Erritsø* indicates that this area had significant meaning in terms of power and kingship. L. E. Christensen (2016, 63) has presented a hypothesis that the *Erritsø* settlement could have been part of a larger *Husby* demesne. This means that the *Erritsø* manor is a predecessor for the later *Husby* settlement that may have separated off. In that case, *Erritsø* may have functioned as the center of a network of power and control both towards the land and the sea with a hinterland of supportive (and possibly dependent) settlements. A better dating of the surrounding *Husby* localities, by means of detector finds or by actual archaeological excavations may in the future clarify whether the sites were contemporary or which one followed from the other. T. Lemm (2016) suggests from his investigations in the Angeln area that the *Husby* sites are a late Viking Age phenomenon (LEMM 2016, 71ff).

There are also a number of maritime names worth noting, that are however very difficult to date. The place-name *Skibdræt* (literally places where ships are dragged) at the bottom of the Gudsø Vig as well as *Snekkemade* (literally ship meadow) in the central part of the *Elbo* valley, may indicate that at least part of the *Elbo* valley was navigable for ships in the Viking Age, but this remains to be investigated further.

Rescue excavations carried out by Vejle Museum in the area over the last decades have resulted in a number of known settlements from the Late Germanic Iron Age and Viking Age. Especially the contemporary *Henneberg Ladegård* with several large, early Viking Age farms and *Rugballegård* with a large number of pit houses should be emphasised here, because they are located just two kilometres west of *Erritsø*.

Discussion and future research

Excavations have clearly shown that *Erritsø* is a key site for understanding not only the importance of the Little Belt area, but also the development of elite power in the early Viking Age. However, more research is needed before the full potential of the site can be explored. Fieldwork in 2016 aiming at extracting a higher resolution of dates from the site has provided a chronological frame for the fortified manor

within the 8th and 9th centuries AD. The settlement therefore clearly predates King Harald Bluetooth's extraordinary complex in Jelling from the late 10th century by 50 to 150 years. Moreover, the date of the filling of the moat at *Erritsø* coincides with the consolidation of the royal complex at *Jelling* (HOLST et al. 2013). With more dates, it may be possible to validate the so far unsubstantiated hypothesis that the *Erritsø* fortified settlement as such phased out when the *Jelling* complex phased in. In addition, the micro-chronological relationship between the hall, moat, palisade and surrounding settlement needs to be further established, as does the size and character of production on the site. Here a focus on the similarities with *Tissø* and *Lejre* are obvious. So far, the most obvious similarities are the similar typological details as regards the hall, the inner court and the inner building. However, the differences should also be considered. Particularly the poverty of metal finds stands out here in comparison to *Lejre*, *Tissø* and *Järrestad*. One reason for this may be that the area around the *Erritsø* site has not been cultivated the last ten years, and therefore not systematically surveyed by metal detectorists. In addition, the lack of a large compiled group of ritual stones and the lacking remains of craft production in general is striking.

A stronger focus on systematic metal detector surveys and further excavations south and east of the site could potentially clarify whether this lack of similarity is because the site has not been investigated the last 10 years or whether it indeed is different. Another feature worth considering is the fact that a moat has not been found in neither *Lejre* nor *Tissø* nor *Järrestad*. V-shaped moats are known from *Danevirke*, especially the *Kovirke* wall which, however, judging by ¹⁴C-dates and the evident similarity with the Trelleborg fortresses was most likely built in the late 10th century. In *Danevirke* the moat is clearly for defensive purposes. No similar moat around a hall has so far been found in Denmark. In contrast, there are numerous examples of fences or palisades, among them the 10th century palisade at *Jelling*. Strikingly, the palisade ditch around the *Erritsø* settlement is as deep as that in *Jelling*, around 0.70 metres, both suggesting that the palisades had a substantial height, at *Jelling* possibly even a superstructure (JESSEN et al. 2014).

So far, the previously mentioned place name sites cannot be dated, but independent indications are strong, suggesting a special area of aristocratic power. Only future explorations may confirm the hypothesis of centrality of the *Erritsø* manor as a potential royal seat of control of the region and the Little Belt. Certainly, the topography of the Little Belt substantiates such a hypothesis and fits well with the later medieval transport node of *Middelfart* (literally meaning the middle transfer point) on the Funen side, which gained importance as the main passing point of the belt by boat during the Middle Ages.

It could have been from the *Erritsø* manor that one could monitor the passage east and west between the lands of

Jutland and Funen, and north and south along one of the major sea routes through the Danish Islands, a route joining *Kaupang* in present southern Norway with Hedeby in present Germany. By having a number of satellite outposts from the landside one could be warned in good time. As D. Skre (2015) points out, the west coast of Norway had a string of nodules of sea-bound royal farms that controlled the seafaring at key points, while the more important aristocratic seats were safely placed within the inner fjords. In western Norway, he claims that a sea king (*sjókonung*) was present; furthermore he suggests that:

'The land of the Danes has many of the same characteristics as the Scandinavian west-coast. To move about between Jylland, the islands and Skåne one has to go by sea, so here too the lord of the sea is the lord of the land' (SKRE 2015, 245).

Skre's hypothesis is strong if it is compiled with all the other circumstantial evidence. In this light, an early written account of the tradesman *Ottar* gains renewed actuality (ENGLERT 2007). *Ottar* travelled around 890 AD from *Kaupang* in Southern Norway to *Hedeby* in present Northern Germany, and it is likely that he chose the passage of the Little Belt. As noted by Skre (2015, 244ff) *Kaupang* dates between 830 and 930 AD. *Kaupang* was at times within the zone of royal Danish interests, at least between 700 and 850 AD, and again in the 10th century¹², a period of which the early phase corresponds with the dates that we so far have reached from the recent investigations at *Erritsø*. To this, we should add that the Skagerrak to some is seen as the '*mare nostrum*' of the Danish Kings between at least c. 900-1035 AD (SIGURÐSSON 2015; PEDERSEN and SINDBÆK 2015). Control at access routes such as the Little Belt would be highly desirable.

Conclusions

The processing of excavation results from 2007, surveys in 2015 and new excavations in 2016 have shown that the *Erritsø* manor is a key site in the early Viking Age. New dates underline that the fortified manor was in use in the 8th and 9th centuries. Thus, the settlement predates King Harald Bluetooth's extraordinary complex in Jelling from late 10th century by 50 to 150 years. Although it is too early to jump to any conclusions yet, it should be noted that the date of the filling of the moat of the *Erritsø* manor coincides with the increase in activity at *Jelling* (HOLST et al. 2013).

Similarities with aristocratic sites such as *Tissø* and *Lejre* on Zealand are striking, but there are also a number of differences. Especially, the well-defined moat and the deep-set palisade structure, the latter being more similar to that in Jelling, stand out. Also, the scarcity of metal finds and the lack of workshop facilities should be emphasised. The *Erritsø* site is placed strategically, close to the sea, whereas the

immediately comparable sites, *Lejre* and *Tissø* are placed more retreated from the sea. This difference suggests that the *Erritsø* manor had other functions than the comparable aristocratic sites in Eastern Denmark. Future questions to answer is whether the *Erritsø* manor formed part of a string of special defensible sites covering sea routes from *Kaupang* via the *Kanhave* channel in the island of *Samsø*, *Erritsø* in the *Little Belt* along to *Hedeby*, along which the travel could be monitored, protected and controlled as outlined for the coastal region of Western Norway by Skre (2015). Certainly, the contemporary dates point in that direction.

- 1 CJ, MR and CL are from VejleMuseum and AP is from the National Museum of Denmark.
- 2 AAR 21536-AAR 21540, see Fig. 3. Thanks to the National Museum Jelling Project for dating the samples.
- 3 As to the interpretation of the word 'won' see ROESDAHL 2015 with references.
- 4 See however SINDBÆK 2008a and 2008b who suggests an east-west divide line in the *Great Belt*.
- 5 We thank Kulturministeriets Forskningsudvalg, the Beckett Foundation and the National Museum Jelling Project for financial support.
- 6 Thanks to Peter Thomsen at Rambøll, who kindly provided and processed the data.
- 7 95.4% probability, see Fig. 3.
- 8 Dendro.dk Report no. 34, 2017.
- 9 K. Høilund Nielsen, personal communication.
- 10 C. Hedenstjerne, personal communication.
- 11 Place name studies by L. E. Christensen will be published as part of the National Museum Jelling Project.
- 12 For a discussion of this see MYHRE 2015, 153ff.

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Mads Ravn
VejleMuseerne
Spinderigade 11E
DK 7100 Vejle
marav@vejle.dk

Christian Juel
VejleMuseerne
Spinderigade 11E
DK 7100 Vejle
chjue@vejle.dk

Charlotta Lindblom
VejleMuseerne
Spinderigade 11E
DK 7100 Vejle
chlin@vejle.dk

Anne Pedersen
The National Museum of Danmark
Ny Vestergade 10
DK 1471 København K
Anne.Pedersen@natmus.dk
