Towards the Kingdom of Denmark

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In this paper I will try to sketch out some lines of development within the first millennium AD that may illustrate the formation of the kingdom of Denmark, using early historical sources, archaeological analyses of social processes, and scientific datings of important structures. I am not offering a strictly structured analysis, but rather an eclectic essay presenting some pieces of the puzzle.

It thus lies outside the scope of the paper to discuss the theory of state formation, apart from mentioning that the word ‘state’ appears to be anachronistic for the Danish Iron and Viking Age and should be reserved for the Middle Ages (Steuer 1994, 35f.). Nor will I go into any sort of detail concerning what military, legal or religious roles Iron Age kings may have had, or the economic basis for their activities. Obviously, any assumptions about the existence of ‘kings’ will have implications for our concept of the structure of Iron Age society, including not only the authority to order the levy necessary for the building of large defence structures as well as for active defence itself, but probably also the control of substantial landed property and other ways of gathering a considerable surplus – such as looting, controlled trade or perhaps even some sort of taxation – to explain the display of wealth, status and power that is mirrored in the finds. My aim is to present some of these finds together with some interpretations of the find material which may help to illuminate developments preceding the historically known kingdom of Denmark.

If, to start with, we go back to the Pre-Roman Iron Age, the early part of this period looks rather egalitarian when we look at the graves and the settlements. But social organization obviously went above village level, as evidenced by the Hjortspring bog find, now radiocarbon-dated to the fourth century BC (AUD 1987, 240). The weaponry found here is estimated to represent a troop of at least sixty men, needing three boats of the type found for their transportation; their defeat must also have demanded the combined forces of several villages (Kaul 1988, 22). A naval barrier at Gudso Vig in southern Jutland has also been dated to the Pre-Roman Iron Age (AUD 1988, 219, 225; Rieck 1991, 93f.; Nørsgård Jørgensen 1997, 202). The moated Borremose settlement in northern Jutland has recently been reinterpreted as a centre for the surrounding Himmerland in the fourth to second centuries BC on the basis of the unique character of the village, with its weak rampart and ditch appearing more symbolic than defensive, and a concentration of bog bodies and the exceptional finds of the Gundestrup and Mossekov cauldrons within a few kilometers of the site (Martens 1994).

Towards the end of the Pre-Roman period social differences become more visible (Hedeager 1992a, 242ff.; Martens 1996, 238). A well-known example is the village at Hodde where one farm is larger than the rest, has its own fence and a concentration of the best pottery (Hvass 1985). Rich graves appear, for instance at Langå in eastern Fyn, with gold rings, a wagon, and imported Etruscan bronze vessels (Albrechtsen 1954, 29ff.; Henriksen 1994). More recently a cemetery with rich graves of both the Late Pre-Roman and the Early Roman Iron Age has been found at Hedegård in central Jutland. Amongst the finds are weapons and imports, including outstanding bronze vessels, chain mail and a Roman officer’s dagger with an enamelled sheath. A large associated settlement surrounded by a strong palisade has been found too, with thick culture layers (Madsen 1992; 1993; 1994; 1995; 1997).

In the Roman Iron Age the diversification of grave furnishing increases, culminating in the rich graves of the central place located in the area of Himlingøje in eastern Sjælland in the second quarter of the third century (Period C1b). It was the elite who displayed their wealth in the graves, and who controlled the connections with the Roman Empire and used the imports in a redistributive system to maintain their influence. Even early in the Roman Period there seems to have been a pattern wherein the richest graves may roughly correspond to a chieftain, leading an area like a modern herred and followed by a retinue of warriors. Detailed analysis suggests a social differentiation within these leading groups (Hedeager 1992a, 243; Kaldal Mikkelsen 1990, 185–191). The personal loyalty of a retinue, independent of older family ties, would have been of great importance, breaking up the earlier clan-based society (Hedeager 1992a, 248ff.). The Germanic peoples also developed their own status symbols, like snake’s-head rings and Kolben armrings,
apparently with the oldest finds in eastern Sjælland. Ulla Lund Hansen has demonstrated how, in its heyday, the Himlingøje area was not only able to ‘filter’ Roman imports and keep the unique items to itself, but was also the centre of a network covering the eastern part of present-day Denmark and possibly including Skåne too, with a concentration of the most valuable items in eastern Sjælland, surrounded by a zone of dependent areas with weapon graves and less prestigious imports (Lund Hansen et al. 1995, 374ff., 385ff.). But the systems based on redistribution were unstable, as demonstrated by the changing patterns and centres of wealth through the Roman Iron Age (Lund Hansen 1988).

Troubled times are also evident from the weapon sacrifices, and from ring forts, ramparts and naval barriers, some of which can be dated to the Roman or the Migration Periods. Johan Engström has estimated that the known weapon sacrifices of southern Scandinavia bear witness to around forty-nine battles during the Roman Iron Age (Engström 1997, 248). Twenty-three of these are recorded in the diagram in Figure 2 together with some Migration-period sacrifices (Ilkjaer 1990, 333–339). It can be seen that twenty-one cluster within Periods C1b and C2: in other words within something like one hundred years from the early third to the early fourth century. According to the current interpretation we thus have evidence of a period of battles, won by the local defenders every four years on average. It is seldom asked what happened if the attackers...
were victorious — what would they give their war gods in return, and where may we find it? Taking this and the generally fragmentary character of archaeological evidence into consideration, it must be accepted as evidence of a period of high military activity in Southern Scandinavia.

Best known is Illeup A of early C1b. The weaponry found here could equip at least about 350 men. But the force was probably larger than that; only about 40 per cent of the find-yielding area of the bog has been excavated, and, though the total annihilation of the attackers — as in the Varus-battle — cannot be excluded, a defeat would normally be considered serious if as much as 30 per cent of the force perished (Lund Hansen et al. 1995, 416 note 5; Albrethsen 1997, 216). So, although hypothetical, estimates of one, two or even three thousand attackers may be argued for, of course implying a defending force of at least the same size.

The strategies and logistics of prehistoric warfare is a subject of growing interest in Scandinavia (see Albrethsen 1997 and other papers in the same volume). Even the minimum Illeup force of 350 men could not have just been called together at short notice and sent abroad, nor could a defence be successful without proper training and organization. One standard weapon of the period was the lance, a weapon which demands intensive training for a closed unit to use without chaos as the immediate result (Engström 1997, 248). Similarly both archers and mounted warriors are represented in the bog finds, and a successful interplay between them and the infantry depends on discipline and training. The shields found at Illeup A seem to indicate a hierarchy: 5 silver bosses probably belonged to commanders, 30–40 bronze bosses to middle ranks, and about 300 iron bosses to common warriors (Ilkjaer 1997, 58).

Ilkjaer interprets the weapon sacrifices as the result of organized series of attacks from outside of present-day
Denmark (Fig. 3; Ilkjaer 1993, 374–386; 1997). The focus and origin of the attacks vary with time, not like a shifting ‘front-line’ but rather as struggles between different regions, where both attackers and defenders had the strength and the organization for recurrent fighting.

Further evidence of organization involving larger areas are the ramparts in Jutland, too few of which have been dated hitherto. In the present context it is not particularly important whether they were built as actual defence structures or more as territorial border markers. The oldest phase of Olgerdigt in southern Jutland, which, interspersed with marshy areas, covers a distance of some 12 km, was built in 219 AD. It is thus broadly contemporary with Illelup A, but situated too far south for any direct strategic connection between the two to be necessary. The latest phase of Olgerdigt is dendro-dated to 278 or 279 AD, exactly the same year as the rampart Æ Vold some 20 km to the north (Ethelberg 1992, 93; pers. comm. Steen W. Andersen. See also Wulff Andersen 1993; Axboue 1995, 223). Vendeldigt in western Jutland, a ditch 3.5 km long, has been radiocarbon-dated to 210–380 AD (cal., ± 1 standard dev., AUD 1994, 296; Mikkelsen and Helles Olesen 1997), while the 12 km-long Trældigt in southern Jutland can at present only be shown to postdate the early Pre-Roman Iron Age (AUD 1994, 203). Even more sparsely dated are the Danish ring forts, though some of them can be dated to the Roman Iron Age or the Migration Period (Andersen 1991). The fortification of the Early Roman-period village of Priorslukke seems to demonstrate how a temporary fortress could be established in an emergency (Kaul 1997).

Finally, like the repeated sacrifices in the bogs, the naval barriers in Haderslev Fjord also demonstrate that substantial areas had to defend themselves against substantial enemies again and again; Dronning Margrethes Bro was built ca. 370, enlarged in 397–98 and repaired in 418–19 (AUD 1991, 260), while Æ Lei was built in 403 (AUD 1988, 233f.). It thus seems perfectly possible that the barriers played a role in delaying the attackers whose equipment was finally sacrificed in the Ejsbøl bog (Ørsnes 1988).

In the Late Roman Iron Age we thus find the Himlingøje/Varpelev area organizing Sjælland for one or two generations in the early third century, and defence structures in Jutland and weapon sacrifices scattered over the country as indications of battles throughout the period. But although the attacks appear to have come from outside, there is still nothing of a scale to suggest that the whole area of what was to be Denmark already had been united as one polity. Although eastern Sjælland was dominant in Period C1b, it soon declined, and even in the heyday of Himlingøje eastern Fyn was already establishing itself, at Gudme and Lundeborg, from ca. 200 AD. Interestingly enough, in Period C2 the centres on eastern Sjælland and Fyn seem to some degree to have different connections with the Continent, while Himlingøje/Varpelev also had marked influence in eastern and northern Jutland (Lund Hansen et al. 1995, 392).

For the time being, any comparison between the centres of Himlingøje/Varpelev and Gudme is distorted by the different finds. From eastern Sjælland we only have the graves, while the Gudme area offers a more complete cultural landscape with settlement areas, sacrificial place-names, gold and silver hoards, the graves of Mølle-gårdsmarkten and the coastal site of Lundeborg.

Unique to Gudme is the complex of halls which were found in 1993 (Østergaard Størensen 1994). One of them is amongst the largest houses known from the Danish Iron Age, 47 x 10 m, surpassed by a few metres only by the eighth-century Lejre halls, mentioned below. The Gudme hall apparently stood for some generations before it was taken down around the middle of the fourth century. South of it stood a successive series of six smaller, but still extraordinary houses, the first of which is dated to the first half of the third century and thus seems to be older than the great hall. The next of the smaller halls are contemporary to the great one, while the latest continue after it into the second half of the fifth century. Both the large and most of the smaller halls were unusually massively built, with roof-bearing posts reaching 80 cm in diameter, and the finds from the site include glass fragments, hackgold and silver, 115 denarii, and delicate jewellery, some of which was imported.

In the sixth century, the area formerly occupied by the halls appears to belong to a farm of quite usual type and dimensions for its date. The ‘royal’ functions may have moved to some other part of the settlement area, for Gudme as such continued and flourished with the many gold finds of the sixth century. These hoards exemplify an important change in the status display of the elite. In the Roman Iron Age it was important to demonstrate one’s wealth at burials where it served to legitimize the power of the living through their connection with their ancestors. In the Migration Period wealth was displayed in the form of golden prestige objects like rings, bracteates and scabbard mounts, and it could be sacrificed within the elite settlements. This has been taken to indicate that the elite had now consolidated its status and was sacrificing to the gods as the maintainers of the established world order (Hedeager 1992a, 80ff., 176ff., 251). The Migration Period also saw a cessation of the collective weapon sacrifices (Pabec 1994).

Gudme is also an example of a special type of settlement with several groups of contemporary farms forming a cluster much larger than the normal rural villages of the period. Such places are known also from Stentinget and possibly Bejsebakken in northern Jutland, Nebbe/Boeslunde in south-western Sjælland, and the Sorte Muld/Sylten complex on Bornholm (Axboue 1991 = Axboue 1993; Watt 1991; Jørgensen 1994, 60ff.). That such settlements are not just normal villages shifting in time (like Vorbasse) is demonstrated at Gudme, where a single farmstead has been shown to have been in continuous use through twelve to fifteen phases covering the third to
After Miller 1993. C2, with indication of the culverts' origin (hatched).

Fig. 3. Weapon sacrifices of Periods B2/C1a, C1b and C1a.
ninth centuries AD (AUD 1995, 153; Kjer Michaelsen and Østergaard Sørensen 1996). The large sites also stand on account of their many metal detector finds, and they are interpreted as ‘central places’. Outside of present-day Denmark the settlements at Vä and Uppåkra in Skåne appear to be of this type, and at Uppåkra recent metal detector surveys have added richly to the finds previously known (Stjernquist 1994).

Among the Danish ‘central places’ Gudme stands out through its many rich finds, including gold and silver hoards. This superiority will hardly be challenged by new finds, though the other sites are still insufficiently known for a detailed comparison. It is, however, becoming more and more evident that there is a precedence, or a range of specialization, amongst Iron Age settlements, and the diversity seems to grow towards the Viking Age. Single farms may have ‘central’ functions, like Dankirke and Dejbjer in Jutland with their Migration-period imports (Jarl Hansen 1991; Jensen 1991a; Egeberg Hansen 1996), or Tøfftagård at Strøby in eastern Sjælland with glass, gold-foil figures (guldgubber), and metalworking from the Vendel and Viking Periods (AUD 1995, 137f.; Tønnesen 1997). At Hørup in northern Sjælland a settlement with a thick culture layer of the Late Roman Iron Age has been found, with antler and horn processing along with bronze and iron smithing, possibly including the working of bog iron (AUD 1995, 109, 1995, 118; Sørensen 1997). An important settlement complex is being excavated at Tissel in western Sjælland, with several farms, metal workshop areas, gold and silver hoards and high-quality detector finds of the sixth to tenth centuries together with weapons apparently sacrificed in the lake (Jørgensen and Pedersen 1996). Though it is difficult to estimate the representativity of the finds from sites only or mostly known from detector finds, there also seem to be significant differences between these (Axboe 1991 = Axboe 1999). Finally, there are the coastal sites, ranging from small temporary settlements of only local importance to internationally oriented sites like Lundeborg of the third to eighth centuries or later Sebbersund of the eighth to twelfth centuries (Ulrikc 1994, 1997).

Sites with trading and artisans’ activities on more than a local scale would have been tempting targets for plundering and thus in need of protection and possibly also of the regulation of their functions. In return, the protecting magnate was able to tax the activities.

So the existence of ‘central places’ and sites with specialized functions point to kings/magnates as initiators and protectors of the activities, as generally assumed for the later foundations of Ribe and Hedehy. The contemporary existence of sites like Stentinget, Bejsekakken, Nebel/Boeslund, Uppåkra and Vä may indicate the existence of several realms, perhaps with Gudme as primus inter pares because of some religious precedence, but this is not the only possible conclusion. At some time kings will have been forced to a degree of itinerancy within their realm, both to consume the surplus from their landed property and for the enforcement of justice and other functions; consider the Merovingian kings traditionally travelling by ox-cart to be available to petitioners (Wood 1994, 102 and 119). Thus a king might have several ‘seats’, some of which may appear archaeologically as ‘central places’ while others may not, and it may be a misunderstanding to speak of ‘Levre kings’ vs. ‘Jelling kings’ as is seen in discussions of possible Viking-period dynasties. On the other hand, we cannot be sure of distinguishing archaeologically between royal seats and seats of magnates like the members of the Hvide family in the twelfth century.

Some military sites can be dated to the Migration Period. These include weapon sacrifices (Fig. 2), though these seem to change character and finally disappear during the period. A few ring forts have more or less secure dates to this or the Vendel Period, including Gamleborg in Ilskør parish on Bornholm (Klindt-Jensen 1957, 152–155), the small fortresses of Trelleborg and Troldeborg in eastern Jutland (Andersen 1992), and the immense Søholm/Hejrede Vold on central Lolland, some five times the area of Torsbergen on Gotland, with a radiocarbon-dating pointing to the period around AD 550 (Thorsen 1993; AUD 1995, 145f.; Løkkegaard Poulsen, in press).

Finally, in the sixth century we have the first historical sources mentioning the Danes, who are said to derive from the Swedes and to have driven the Heruli from their ancient homelands, and a Danish king was reportedly killed attacking Merovingian Gaul. No matter how we actually should interpret this information, the Danes by then had apparently established themselves as a power of some importance in northern Europe (Hoffmann 1992, 159ff.; Axboe 1995, 217ff.).

Then, in the seventh century, both the historical and the archaeological sources seem to let us down. The central settlements seem to continue, while graves and hoards are sparse or next to non-existent respectively (Näsman 1991), except on Bornholm, where both male and female graves are well furnished throughout the Vendel Period (e.g. Jørgensen 1990; Jørgensen and Nørgård Jørgensen 1997). One possible explanation is that after the turmoil and status-display of the preceding centuries, the winners were consolidating their power in the central part of southern Scandinavia. Lotte Hedeager has tried to illustrate this by a comparison with the historically known Merovingian realm (Fig. 4). Here it is evident that indicators of rank like ring-swords and crested helmets were deposited in graves only in the fringe zone of Merovingian influence, where personal status was uncertain and had to be demonstrated, but not in the heart of the realm where conditions were stable. The conspicuous lack of such finds in Denmark may be due to a similarly settled authority in Denmark, with areas of social and political competition on Gotland, in Uppland and in southern Norway (Hedeager 1992b). Similarly, Karen Holund Nielsen’s studies of animal art have led her to see southern Scandinavia as predominant in
Scandinavia with a stable political structure, as opposed to the Mālar region (Høllund Nielsen 1991).

A possible centre in Denmark, apart from the ‘central places’ already mentioned, could be Lejre where a series of at least four great halls replaced each other on the same spot from ca. 700 to the later half of the tenth century. Besides the halls there are other buildings, including a smithy, cultural layers covering more than 100,000 sq. m. (Christensen 1993; 1996), and the nearby barrow of ‘Grydehøj’ where the large primary cremation with remains of gold-braided cloth has been radiocarbon-dated to the seventh century (Wulff Andersen 1995, 103–126).

In the early eighth century we have the foundation of the market-place at Ribe with the disputed minting of sceattas there (Jensen 1991b; Feveile and Jensen 1993 with further references; Feveile 1994); and Willibrord visiting the Danish king Ongendus (Skovgaard-Petersen 1981, 27ff.). Comparable to Ribe in date, though apparently less strictly regulated in its layout, is the non-permanent trading place at Åhus in Skåne (Callmer 1991).

The seventh and eighth centuries were not only a time of internal consolidation, however. This is shown by the new excavations at Danevirke, where the oldest phase of the Main Rampart has now been radiocarbon-dated to the middle of the seventh century. At least two more phases
are prior to the posts standing in the boulder wall, which have been dendro-dated to 737 (Fig. 5; Andersen 1993). The latter date also applies to the Northern Rampart, and possibly to the massive structure recently found in the Schlei and interpreted as a naval base (dendrochronological date ‘a few years after 734’; Kramer 1994; Nørøgård Jørgensen 1997, 207). In the first half of the eighth century we also have the Kanhave Canal, dendro-dated to 726 (Nørøgård Jørgensen 1995); and broadly contemporary is one of the stake barriers at Gudsø Vig, with radiocarbon dates indicating a time frame of 690–780 (pers. comm. Anne Nørøgård Jørgensen; cf. Rieck 1991, 93f.; Nørøgård Jørgensen 1997 Fig. 5). Both in scale and in strategic outlook these enterprises are much larger than Olgerdiger and the other early structures. They imply rulers with the power to organize large areas, and provide a background for the Danish kings who from 777 on appear in the Frankish annals.

So this would be a convenient place to stop. The annals relate how King Godfred and his successors in the ninth century ruled over a Danish kingdom proving to be an opponent of the Frankish realm worthy of respect, and which at least at times seems to have included Skåne and parts of southern Norway. This extent of the Danish realm is confirmed by the reports of Ottar and Wulfstan from the late ninth century (Lund 1983). Even when two kings shared power over the Danes the realm was regarded as one kingdom by the Franks. Regrettably the sources fail again for the later part of the ninth and the first half of the tenth century, so that it is precarious to claim an unbroken continuity from Godfred to Harold Bluetooth who declared to have won for himself ‘all Denmark, and Norway’. It is tempting to see the total dominance of one single royal family after the tenth century as having become established over a long period before that, legitimated with Odin as its divine ancestor (Axboe 1995, 232ff.), but it can of course only be a guess, in view of the sparse and ambiguous historical information.

Thus the archaeological and historical sources from the first millennium can be used to compose a picture of the emergence of the Danish kingdom, evolving from possible chiefdoms of a moderate scale to the impressive Danish power of the early Viking Age. But it should be emphasized that such a generalized picture must be taken with a pinch of salt. Evolution may have gone fast at times and suffered reverses at others which we cannot be sure to discover. A king with a charismatic personality may have successfully summoned the magnates of his realm for enterprises, which weaker kings after him would fail with. Some areas may have developed separately, as I would suppose to be the case for Bornholm which, around 900, is mentioned by Wulfstan as having its own king (Lund 1983, 24) as well as because of the island’s well equipped Vendel-period graves. Other interpretations may be put forward, for example, on the basis of enigmatic historical sources like Alfred’s Orosius with its references to ‘North-Danes’ and ‘South-Danes’, ‘Gotland’ and ‘Sillende’ (Lund 1983; 1991).

However, the most intricate problem is that we are trying to reconstruct a story, whose end we know: a Danish kingdom as found in the Late Viking Age. To the participants in the process, the end was unknown, and perhaps not at all a concept they recognized or tried to attain. We must keep in mind that what we see as a ‘process’ leading to ‘the kingdom of Denmark’ is a construct – our construct. The lords of Himlingøje hardly set out to ‘win all Denmark’ – they would not have understood what we were talking about.

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