

FROM EKETORP TO JÆREN. »LEADER HOUSES« IN THE COURT SITES OF SOUTH-WESTERN NORWAY

Court sites (Norw. *kretstun*) is a type of archaeological site solely found in Norway. These are the remains of houses, c. 10-15 m long, arranged side by side in an oval or linear formation around an open middle field (fig. 1). Some 28-30 locations have been identified, occurring in the coastal districts from Vest-Agder fylke in the south to Troms fylke in the north. As a group, the court sites were in use throughout the 1st millennium AD (Stenvik 2005; Storli 2010; Grimm 2010; Olsen 2014; Iversen 2017). In south-western Norway (fig. 2), the most places were in use within the Roman and Migration periods (c. 1st-6th centuries), and a few sites were also used in the subsequent centuries of the Merovingian period until the 8th century. In this article, a new feature is introduced to the discourse on the court sites. At three court sites, »leader houses« with special finds and a distinct placement in the site layout have been identified, resembling that of a house at the Eketorp ring-fort in Öland (Kalmar län/S).

COURT SITES AS THING SITES

In more than a century, the nature of the court sites has puzzled archaeologists. They have been interpreted as sites for judicial and political gatherings, for rituals and games, for production and trade, as military barracks and rallying points, or as sites combining several of these functions (e.g. Armstrong 2000; 2010; Løken 2001; Stenvik 2001; 2005; Storli 2001; 2006; Solberg 2002; Olsen 2003; 2005; Grimm/Stylegar 2004). In recent years some consensus has been formed with the court sites seen as multifunctional assem-

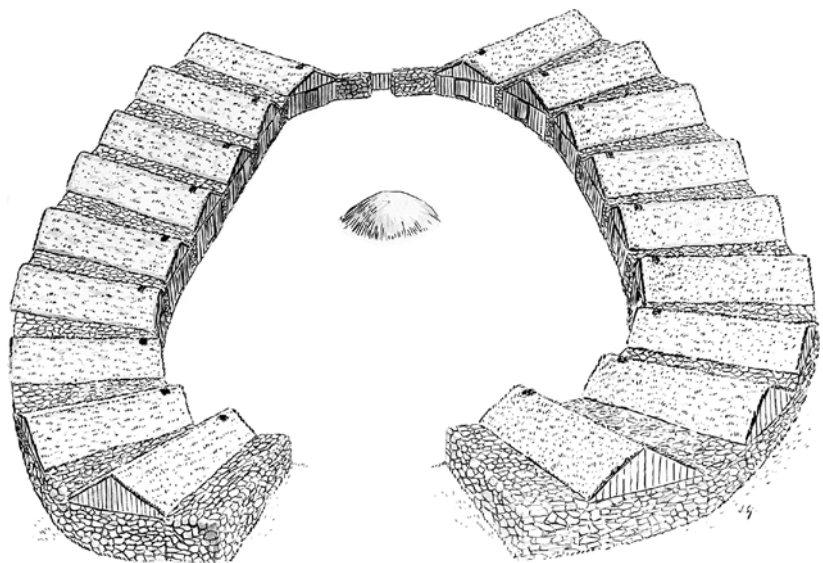


Fig. 1 Reconstruction of the Klauhauane site (Hå kommune, Rogaland fylke/N). – (Drawing J. Sjøthun © Arkeologisk museum, Universitetet i Stavanger).



Fig. 2 The four discussed sites in Norway and Sweden. – (Map H. Reiersen).

bly sites, with a judicial primary function as thing sites (Grimm 2010; Storli 2010; Brink et al. 2011; Myhre 2013; Olsen 2013; 2014; Iversen 2013; 2015a; 2015b; 2017).

The interpretation of the court sites as places for judicial assemblies was mainly inspired by written evidence ranging from descriptions of thing sites by Tacitus in *Germania* (98 AD) to the much later developments in the Icelandic judicial system in the Viking and Medieval periods. Based on the interpretation as thing sites, recent research has highlighted court sites as egalitarian structures. The site layout of similar-sized houses has been interpreted as mirroring representatives on equal terms, and the geographical placement has been considered as neutral places at some distance from elite settlements (e.g. Storli 2010; Olsen 2014; Iversen 2015b). However, during my work on elite milieus and centres in western Norway in the time span 200-550 (Reiersen 2017), I found that several of the court sites in this region, in fact, were situated rather close to elite centres. Therefore, I tried to investigate the possibility of detecting the presence of elite leaders at the court sites.

»LEADER HOUSES« FROM EKETORP TO JÆREN

The Eketorp parallel

This question was first addressed in O. Grimm's (2010) study of the south-western Norwegian court sites. Here, O. Grimm tried to identify buildings related to leaders by drawing a parallel to a special house at the Eketorp ring-fort in Öland (fig. 2). In several works, F. Herschend (1993; 2001) underlined the significance of House 03 in settlement phase II (fig. 3). F. Herschend argued that the seemingly egalitarian layout of the fort was contrasted by this special building, where weapons were found in the hall room. Within the fort context, these weapons were objects of special importance (Herschend 1993, 195). The house had a distinct position in the layout of the fort. It was facing the largest open square at the centre of the well-ordered

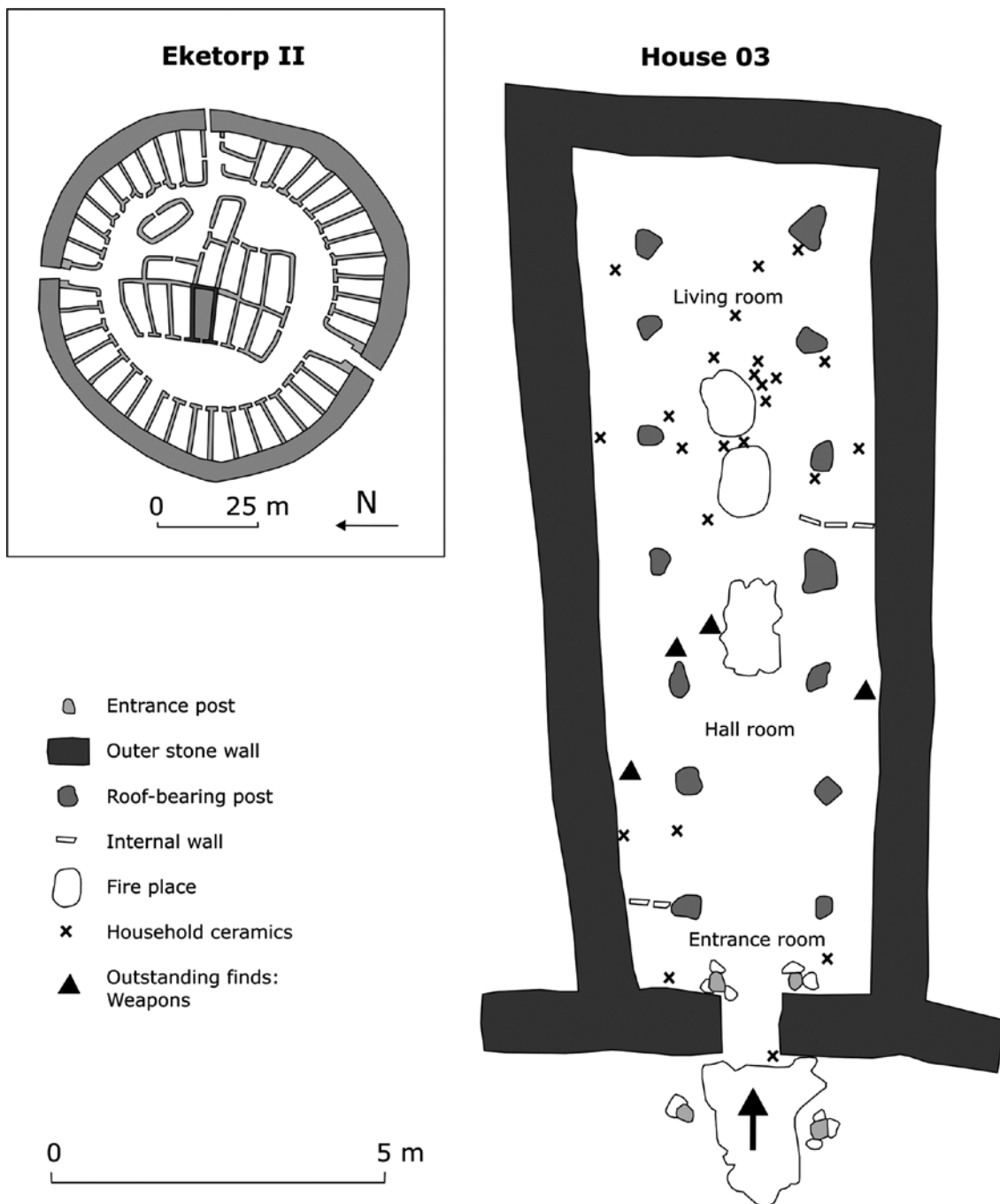


Fig. 3 House 03 at Eketorp, Öland (Kalmar län/S). One structure in the living room has been omitted to simplify the plan drawing. – (After Reiersen 2017, fig. 6, 14; modified after Herschend 1993, fig. 15 and Grimm 2010, fig. 26).

western part of the settlement. F. Herschend interpreted the building as belonging to the *primus inter pares*, the »first among equals« of the fort (Herschend 1993, 193-195). O. Grimm suggested that similar houses might have been present for instance at the large court site Dysjane (Klepp kommune, Rogaland fylke/N) in the Jæren lowland district. However, this proved hard to verify, as this site had only been partially and roughly excavated in the 19th century. O. Grimm (2010, 60) therefore concluded: »Theoretically speaking, one cannot rule out the existence of an Eketorp-style House 03 at Dysjane, but this remains highly hypothetical.«

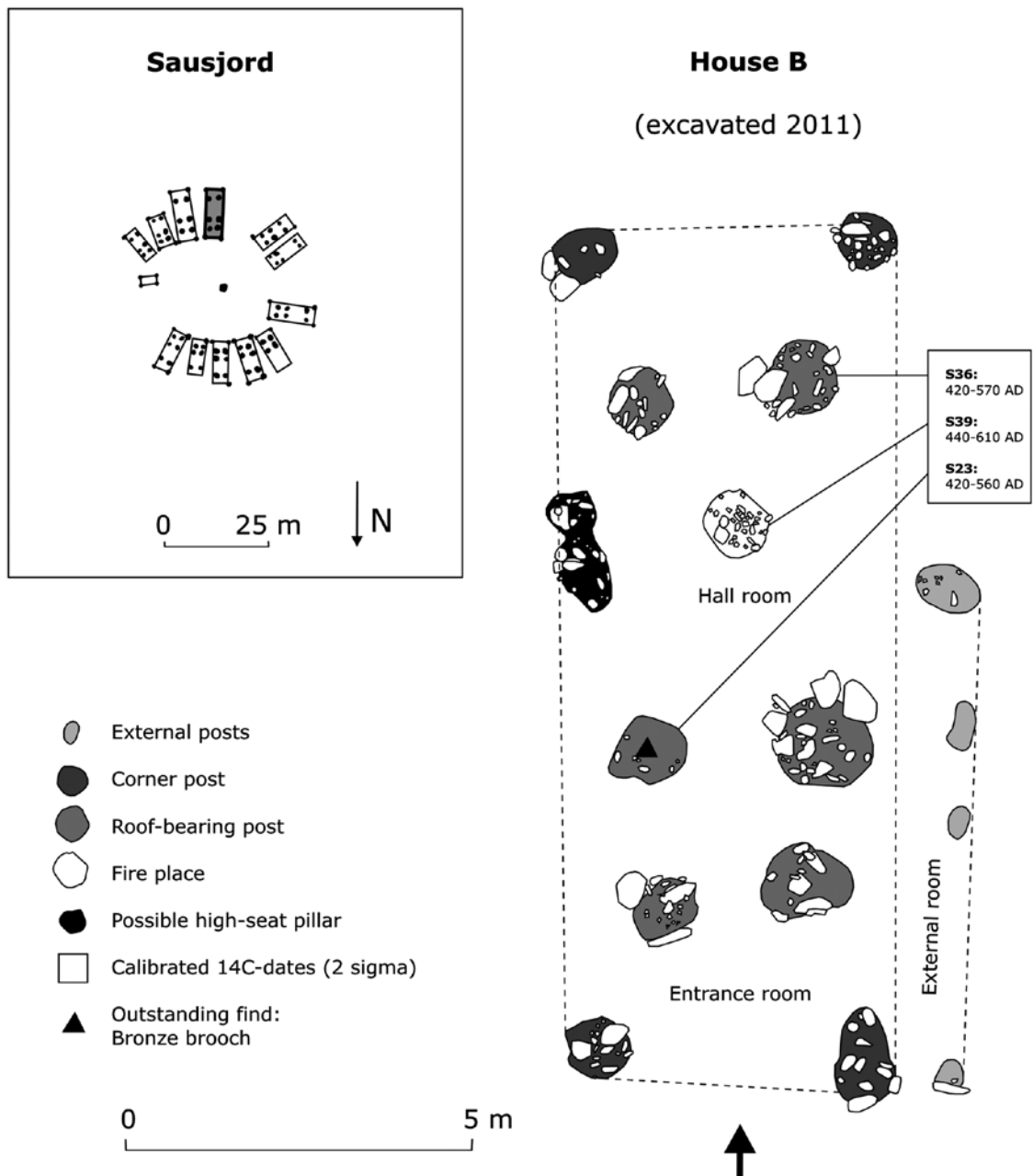


Fig. 4 House B at Sausjord (Voss kommune, Hordaland fylke/N). Four uncertain structures have been omitted to simplify the plan drawing. – (After Reiersen 2017, fig. 6, 15; modified after Hatling/Olsen 2012, fig. 10).

The Sausjord site

The year after Grimm's study was published, a new court site was excavated by the University Museum of Bergen at Sausjord (Voss kommune, Hordaland fylke/N; Hatling/Olsen 2012; Olsen 2013). This was the first court site to be fully investigated by modern standards, also including the use of metal detectors. The Sausjord site had a classical oval court site layout (fig. 4). Radiocarbon dates indicate that the houses were built simultaneously and were used in the Migration period (Olsen 2013). The layout of Sausjord has similarities to the western part of the contemporary Eketorp II settlement, i. e. the area surrounding House 03.

By using the well-documented Sausjord site as a key locality, Grimm's hypothesis that buildings resembling Eketorp House 03 existed also at court sites might be reconsidered.

At Sausjord, one special object was found, a rather rare bronze fibula, Rygh (1885) type 244. It was discovered in House B at the bottom of a post-hole on top of a horizontal stone, probably a post-slab (Hattling/Olsen 2012, 18). Its placement seems deliberate, and it might reflect a house offering. In Scandinavia, house offerings seem to have been a common ritual practice in the Roman and Migration periods (Beilke-Voigt 2007). While artefacts of gold and silver are rarely found in the surrounding Voss and Vossestrand districts, bronze fibulas occur in the more richly furnished graves (Næss 1996). The bronze fibula might therefore have been a valuable object in this district and might have been chosen as a powerful item well suited for filling the particular house with a special energy.

The location of House B within the Sausjord site strongly resembles that of House 03 in Eketorp II. House B was among the largest buildings at Sausjord. It was entered from the open field in the north, and the northern part of the house was probably an entrance room. The two southern pairs of roof-bearing posts formed a larger, open room in the house with a central fireplace. It is possible that this should be considered a hall room. The bronze fibula was deposited below a roof-bearing post related to this room. It might have been a special house offering initiating the house and its hall room to a prominent role within the court site. The Eketorp ring-fort thus proved to be a surprisingly good analogy for understanding important features at the well-documented Sausjord site. The question is then, if the same pattern is observable at the larger court sites in the Jæren district, Rogaland fylke.

The Klauhauane site

In his description of the most outstanding finds from the Rogaland court sites, O. Grimm (2010, 32) writes: »The most notable finds are a golden finger ring from Klauhauane and a silver fibula with a long catch plate that was found in Dysjane.« These are clearly exceptional finds, as such status objects rarely occur in settlement contexts in the Norwegian archaeology. Klauhauane (Hå kommune, Rogaland fylke/N) and Dysjane are the two largest court sites in the region, with a regular, oval layout comparable to the smaller Sausjord site.

Most of the houses at the court site Klauhauane was excavated by J. Petersen 1939-1950 (Grimm 2010, 170-181). This was a complex, multi-phased court site, and the available radiocarbon dates suggest that the location was used from the 3rd to the 8th century (Iversen 2017, 734). Although the excavation methods differed from those applied at Sausjord, all objects and structures identified within each house were spatially recorded with some precision.

The mentioned gold finger ring was found in House 5, which has a similar position in the court site layout to that of House B at Sausjord (**fig. 5**). The gold finger ring is an object type very characteristic for the elites of this area (**fig. 6**). With a total of eight rings, Hå kommune has the largest concentration in western Norway of simple gold rings mainly from the Roman period (Andersson 1993, 153-155). House 5 had the highest documented number of structural features at Klauhauane, not forming any clear patterns and indicating several phases of use. To utilize the original plan drawings, I have made some reinterpretations, where some uncertain structures have been left out.

Five of the documented post-holes seem to indicate the common pattern of pairs of roof-bearing posts, and I have reconstructed the posts interpreted as missing. Although four fireplaces were documented, only the central one clearly refers to the same phase as the roof-bearing posts. Interpreting then the remaining plan pattern, an entrance room might have been situated in the north, with an inner hall room around the fire-

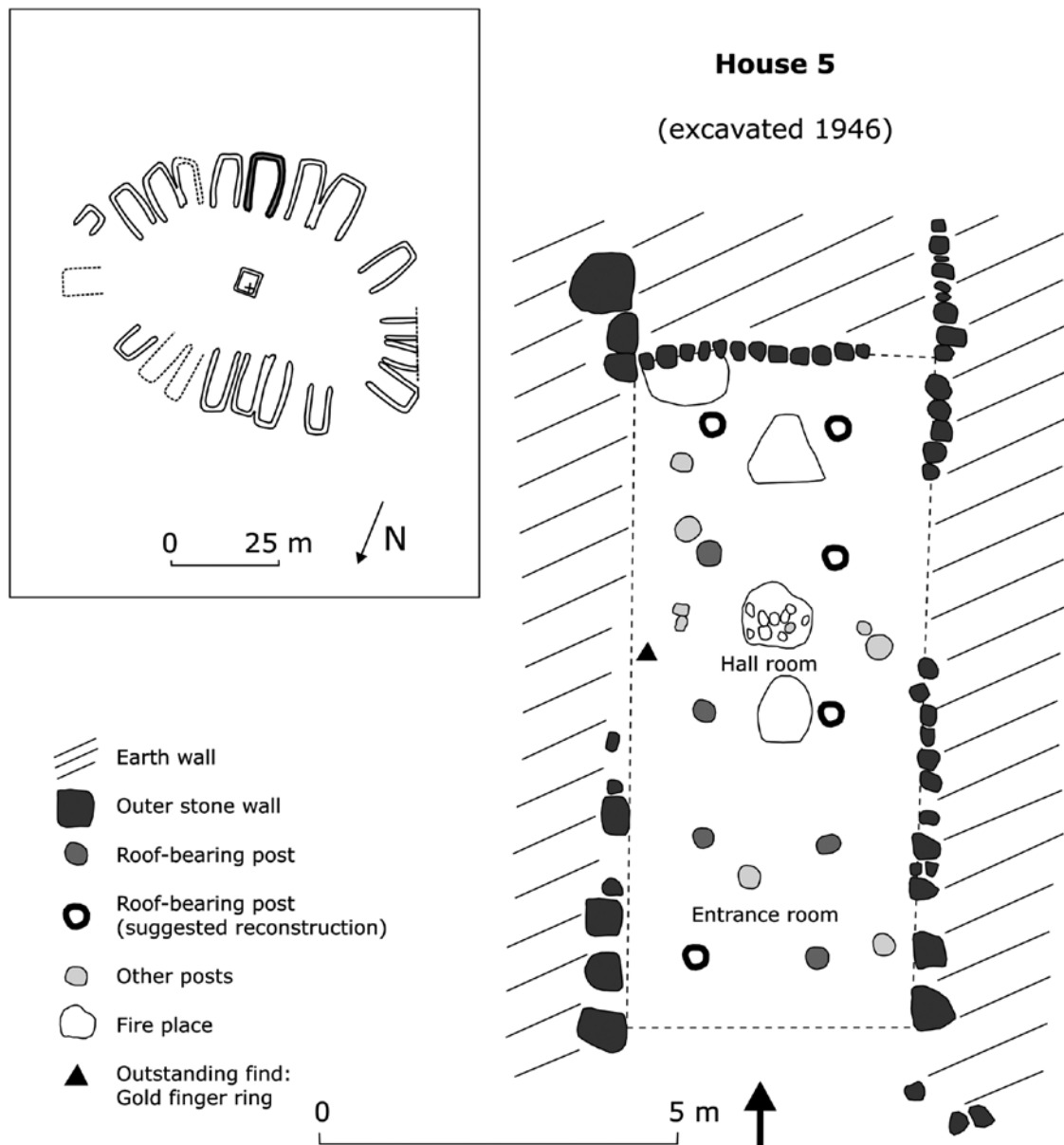


Fig. 5 House 5 at Klauhauane (Hå kommune, Rogaland fylke/N). Five roof-bearing posts have been reconstructed. – (After Reiersen 2017, fig. 6, 16; modified after figure in Petersen 1946 and Grimm 2010, 174).

place. The gold ring was found close to the wall near this fireplace. In this manner, the gold ring might have been discovered in a hall room resembling the find context at Sausjord. Although there is little specific context information about the findspot for the gold ring, it seems reasonable to assume that such a special object should likewise be regarded as a house offering.

The Dysjane site

We might then move on to test Grimm's hypothesis of »an Eketorp-style House 03 at Dysjane«. The large court site Dysjane was partially excavated in the late 19th century (Grimm 2010, 138-139). The antiquarian

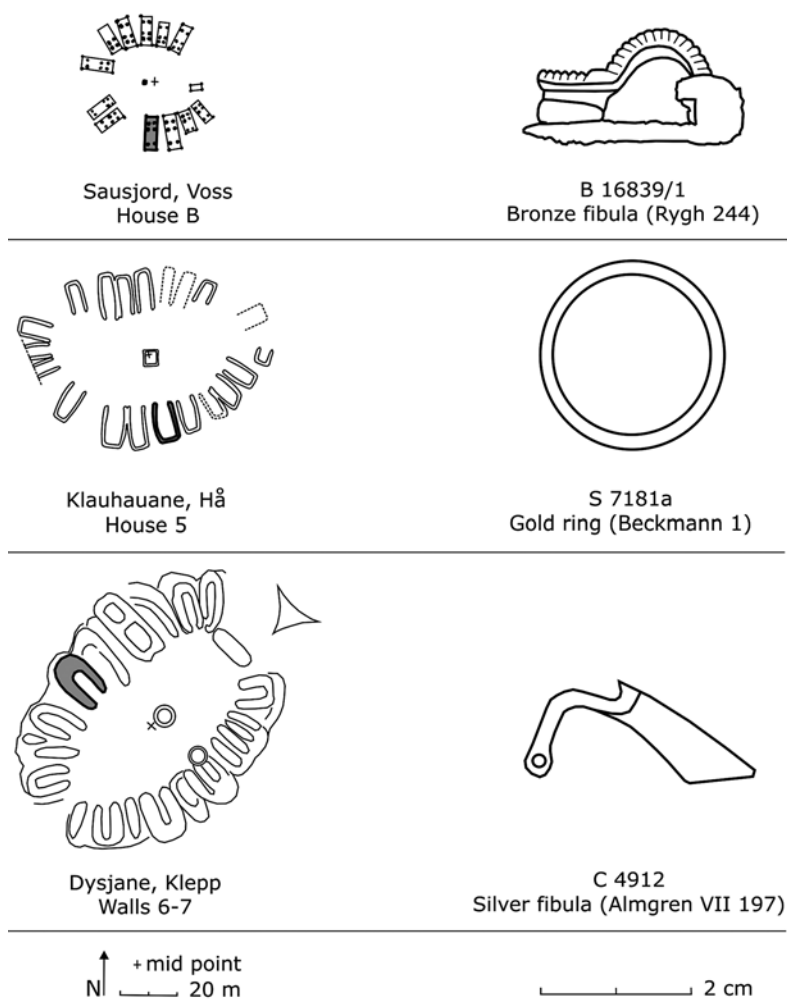


Fig. 6 »Leader houses« and associated status objects at the Sausjord, Klauhauane and Dysjane court sites. The Dysjane site was redrawn after a sketch by A. Lorange during the 1879 excavation. – (After Reiersen 2017, fig. 6, 17).

N. Nicolaysen's test excavation (1869) at Dysjane was the first investigation of a court site, at a time when these were assumed to be burial mounds. His excavation only included what he probably thought were burial mounds with a high potential of finds, including a triangular monument, a central mound, and four house walls interpreted as long burial mounds. These walls were probably among the most visible house walls at the court site. Near a central, inner stone wall connecting house walls 6 and 7, he found a silver fibula (**fig. 6**). In 1879, B. E. Bendixen continued the excavation of a third part of the court site, but no other status finds were unearthed (Grimm 2010, 138). The objects discovered at Dysjane indicate usage at least within the Roman period (Hauken 2014, 144-145).

The silver fibula is a relatively rare object type. Silver fibulas of Almgren's (1897) group VII are known from four late Roman period graves in Rogaland fylke (Straume 1998, 499). Among these are the only rosette fibula from the region and one grave that also included a serpent-head arm ring (Reiersen 2010, fig. 5d; 2012, 16). To my knowledge, no other Roman period silver fibula came to light in a settlement context in Norway. The fibula was found in a house with a position in the court site layout resembling that of the »leader houses« at Sausjord and Klauhauane. Although the house was positioned on the middle of the northern side of the court site, rather than on the southern side as in the other two sites, the house with the fibula seems to be structured by the same spatial norm as the other.

Although Dysjane has not been fully excavated, with the distribution at Sausjord and Klauhauane in mind, Nicolaysen's limited investigation seems to have identified the most important house at Dysjane. Consider-

ing the available evidence from the two better-documented court sites, this house might be understood as a parallel to the house of the *primus inter pares* at Eketorp II. Although the Eketorp weapon finds might be interpreted as unintentionally »lost« artefacts and the status objects found in the »leader houses« at the court sites are interpreted as intentional house offerings, they all indicate the presence of people with some elevated status situated in these special houses. Through a chain of analogies from Eketorp to the court sites in Voss and Jæren, Grimm's hypothesis thus seems validated.

LEADERS AT THE THING SITES

Building on the interpretation that court sites were thing sites, a new aspect has been identified: »Leader houses«. The parallel to Eketorp II House 03 has thus provided us with new insights into the organisation of the court sites in south-western Norway. The similarities between Eketorp House 03 and the »leader houses« in several of the court sites further indicate the existence of similar ideals for the social organisation of space in Öland and in south-western Norway. Using the well-excavated, yet somewhat peripheral, Sausjord site as a key locality, »leader houses« have been identified at the two largest court sites in Jæren: Klauhauane and Dysjane.

The interpretation of »leader houses« provides an explanation for the gold ring and the silver fibula from the two latter sites. These object categories have otherwise not been found in settlement contexts, but rather in burial, hoard or sacrificial contexts. This unusual deposition of status objects confirms both the special status of these houses and the special role of the court sites in the society.

Like at Eketorp, the »leader houses« did not stand out much architecturally, and the houses seem in principle to be organised in a similar manner as the other houses at the sites. However, the extraordinary finds and their placement centrally in the court sites, in the middle of one of the long sides, indicate that they had a special role in the court sites. We do not know just how the »leader houses« actually worked in the court site organisation, as the presence of these houses only indicates that one or several people with a special position resided in the house. What I have tentatively termed »leader houses« might be explained in different ways and could open up for new understandings of the tension between leaders, the thing community and society in general.

If we assume that the court sites were rather egalitarian structures, with Herschend's (1993) interpretation as a parallel we might infer that these houses belonged to the »first among equals«. Similar to the *principes* mentioned by Tacitus (Germ. 11) among some continental tribes in the early Roman period (Iversen 2013, 8-9), one could imagine that these were elected leaders with limited power. Although the court sites might have been »egalitarian« institutions, this might have been more so in districts with weak elites like the Vossstrand district surrounding the Sausjord court site (Olsen 2014, 48 fig. 4, 3; cf. Reiersen 2017, fig. 7, 5). It seems plausible that the leader at the peripheral Sausjord site could have been elected from a rather egalitarian group of representatives at the thing.

However, the spatial proximity between the large court sites in Jæren and defined elite milieus could suggest some active involvement by elites in the establishment and use of these sites. Elite leaders could well have led the construction of court sites, and directly or indirectly, elected or not elected, have controlled the thing sites. In their »leader houses«, they might have gathered allies for counsel, perhaps before public voting held in the middle field (Reiersen 2017, 201). Many court sites are located in settlement areas identified as important elite centres, and this is particularly true in the Jæren district (Grimm 2010; Myhre 2013; Reiersen 2017). On a micro scale, these court sites tend to be situated at some distance from the actual elite settlements, perhaps evoking a sense of neutrality that might not have been real (Iversen 2015b, 14). M. Olsen

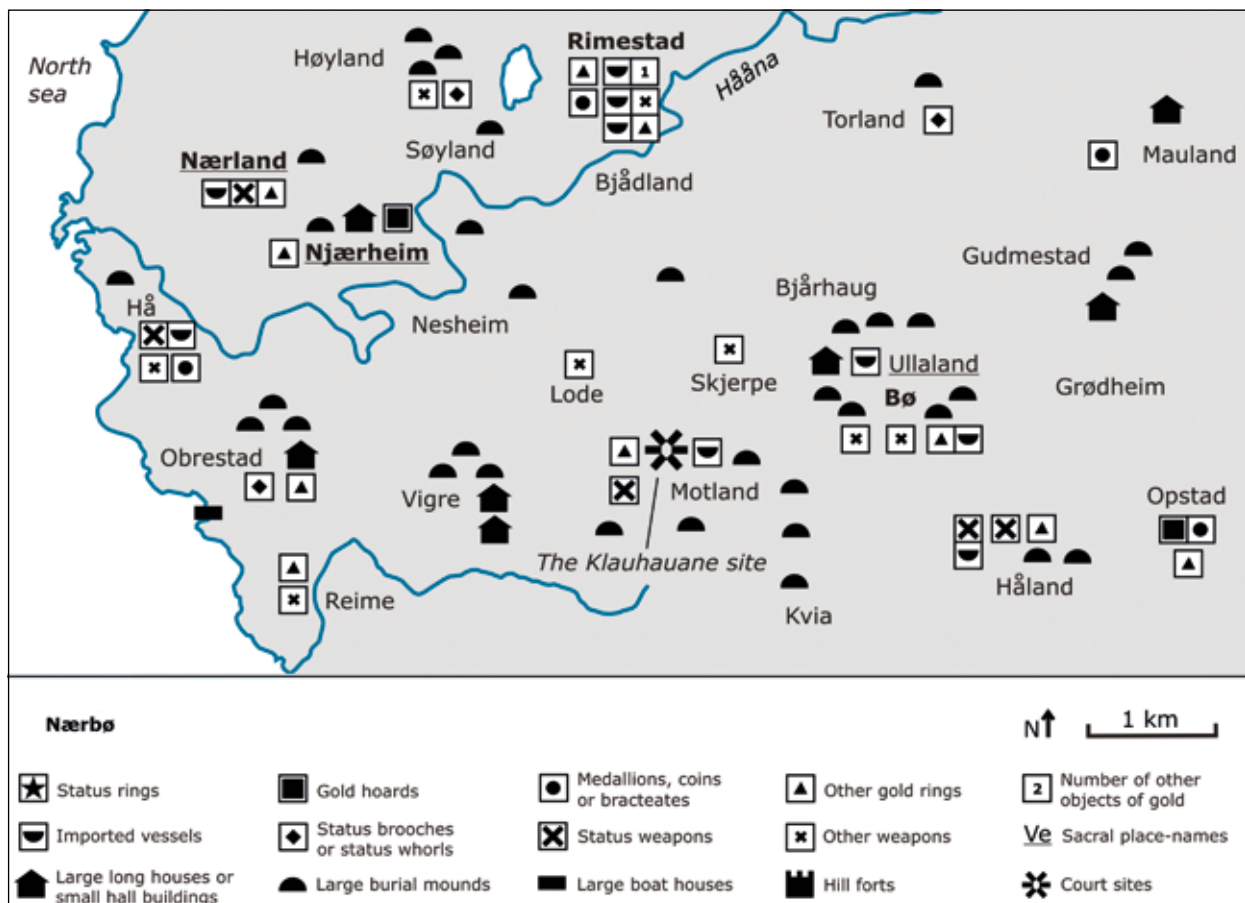


Fig. 7 The Roman and Migration period centre Nærbo (Hå kommune, Rogaland fylke/N) with the Njærheim milieu in the north-west and the Bø milieu in the south-east. – (After Reiersen 2017, fig. 7, 35; data on finds in Reiersen 2017, 392).

(2014, 53) argues that in areas where elite milieus had a strong position, they probably had »a monopoly on the recruitment of leaders elected at the assemblies«. In the Jæren district, there might well have been more power and prestige connected to the position as a leader than in Vossestrand.

Among the many centres of power in south-western Norway in the time span 200-550, two of the most prominent were Nærbo (Hå kommune, Rogaland fylke/N) and Tinghaug (Klepp kommune, Rogaland fylke/N), the settlement districts surrounding the large court sites Klauhauane and Dysjane (Reiersen 2017, 278-289). At the centre Nærbo (fig. 7), one elite milieu had its core around the farmstead Njærheim on the north side of the Hååna river, another one had its core around the Bø farmstead in the south-east. The Klauhauane site was situated only a short distance from Bø and might well have been intimately related to the elites of the Bø milieu. At the centre Tinghaug (fig. 8), one elite milieu was found in the northern part around the farmstead Anda, another one had its core further south at the farmsteads Hauge and Tu. The Anda milieu seems to have been active mainly in the late Roman period, at the time when the Dysjane site was in use, with the court site slightly withdrawn from the elites at Anda. When the powerful Hauge-Tu milieu was established near Dysjane in the early Migration period, they might have used traditions associated with the old thing site when building up their power.

A final question is whether the house dwellers were local or regional leaders. The position of the court sites in relation to defined centres and elite milieus could well reflect leaders representing local districts. However,

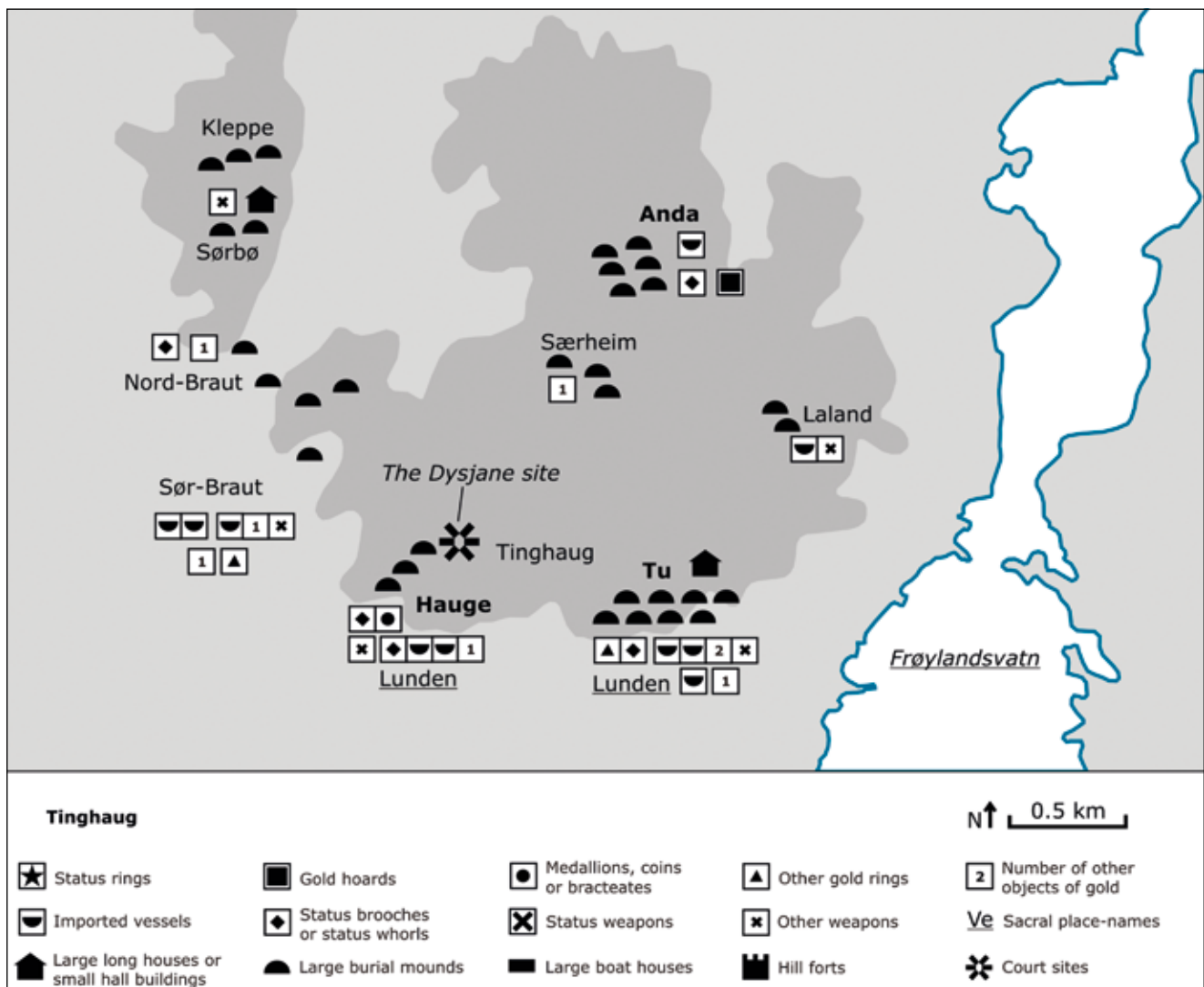


Fig. 8 The Roman and Migration period centre Tinghaug (Klepp kommune, Rogaland fylke/N) with the Anda milieu in the north and the Hauge-Tu milieu in the south. – (After Reiersen 2017, fig. 7, 33; data on finds in Reiersen 2017, 391).

one cannot rule out that there were ambulant, regional leaders travelling between the »leader houses« found at the local thing sites. One could perhaps imagine a structure in some way resembling the much later system of the Viking and Medieval periods when Norwegian kings moved between royal estates and thing sites (e.g. Helle 2001; Orning 2008). In the Roman and Migration periods, the south-western Norwegian society seems to have been divided into many different local centres, but with strong similarities in material culture within a larger region. It is possible that the cultural similarities could indicate that the region was tied together by a common judicial organisation at a regional level, binding together the fellowship perhaps under a single leader.

Although there are clearly methodological problems with comparing house plans from excavations carried out in the late 19th century, the mid-20th century and today, the identified »leader houses« seem to form a valid pattern which could open up for new interpretations of the court sites. Whether these houses were occupied by local or regional leaders, by elected leaders or by leaders controlling the court sites, there might have been significant tension between these leaders and the assumed »egalitarian« structure that the court

site layout in some way or another reflected. Whatever the roles of these leaders were at the court sites, the deposited status objects found at Klauhauane and Dysjane are dated to the Roman period and the fibula from Sausjord to the Migration period, indicating an organisation model lasting at least through the early phase of the court sites in south-western Norway.

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Zusammenfassung / Summary / Résumé

Von Eketorp nach Jæren. »Leader houses« in Hofanlagen aus dem südwestlichen Norwegen

Hofanlagen sind Ansammlungen von Gebäuden, die um ein offenes Mittelfeld herum angeordnet sind. Sie sind in den norwegischen Regionen an der Nordsee zu finden. Die diskutierten Anlagen in Südwestnorwegen wurden hauptsächlich in der römischen Kaiserzeit und Völkerwanderungszeit genutzt. In den letzten Jahren wurden sie als »Thingplätze« identifiziert. Obwohl Quellen wie die *Germania* des Tacitus von *principes* an solchen Plätzen berichten, gab es nur wenige Versuche, deren Anwesenheit in den Hofanlagen nachzuweisen. In der Ringfestung Eketorp auf Öland (Schweden) wurde bereits das Haus eines *primus inter pares* identifiziert. Basierend auf der Hypothese, dass ähnliche Häuser in den Hofanlagen existierten, wurden an drei Anlagen in Norwegen spezielle »leader houses« identifiziert. Diese Häuser weisen auf die Anwesenheit von *principes* in den Hofanlagen hin, wodurch die vorherrschende Sicht auf die Anlagen als »egalitär« infrage gestellt und für neue Interpretationen geöffnet wird.

From Eketorp to Jæren. »Leader Houses« in the Court Sites of South-western Norway

Court sites are collections of houses oriented around an open middle field. These are found in the Norwegian regions bordering to the North Sea. The discussed sites in south-western Norway were mainly used in the Roman and Migration periods. During the last decade, a scholarly consensus has identified court sites as thing sites. Although sources like Tacitus' *Germania* mentions leaders at thing sites, there have been only few attempts to trace the presence of leaders at the court sites. At the contemporary Eketorp ring-fort at Öland (Sweden), the house of a *primus inter pares* has previously been identified. Based on the hypothesis that similar houses existed at the court sites, special »leader houses« were identified at three court sites in Norway. These houses indicate the presence of leaders at the court sites, hereby challenging a dominant view of the sites as »egalitarian« and opening up for new interpretations.

D'Eketorp à Jæren. »Leader houses« dans les sites à cour de Norvège du sud-ouest

L'article présente des sites où des ensembles de bâtiments sont disposés autour d'un terrain ouvert. On les trouve dans les régions norvégiennes limitrophes de la mer du Nord. Les sites du sud-ouest de la Norvège présentés ont été principalement utilisés pendant les périodes romaines et des Grandes Migrations. Ils ont été interprétés comme des sites de »Thing« ces dernières années. Bien que des sources comme le *Germania* de Tacite mentionnent les dirigeants sur les sites de rassemblement, il y a eu peu de tentatives pour retracer la présence des leaders sur les sites norvégiens. Dans le fort contemporain d'Eketorp à Öland, en Suède, la maison d'un *primus inter pares* a déjà été identifiée. Sur la base de l'hypothèse que des maisons similaires existaient sur d'autres sites à cour, des »leader houses« (maisons du chef) spéciales ont été identifiées sur trois des sites examinés en Norvège. Ces maisons indiquent la présence de dirigeants sur les sites, contestant ainsi une vision dominante des sites comme »égalitaires« et ouvrant la porte à de nouvelles interprétations.

Schlüsselwörter / Keywords / Mots clés

Skandinavien / Norwegen / römische Kaiserzeit / Völkerwanderungszeit / Hofanlage / Elite
Scandinavia / Norway / Roman Principate / Migration period / court site / elite
Scandinavie / Norvège / période romaine / période des Grandes Migrations / ferme / élite

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