

Kaiserzeit und Völkerwanderungszeit sowie des Frühmittelalters bei Tinnum auf Sylt. In: B. S. Majchczack / M. Segschneider / T. Scholz, Archäologische Siedlungsforschung auf den nordfriesischen Inseln. Offa-Bücher 89 (Kiel 2015) 119–136.

REICHSTEIN 1986

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**MADS RUNGE / MALENE REFSHAUGE BECK / MIKAEL MANØE BJERREGAARD / TORBEN BIRK SARAUW (eds), From Central Space to Urban Place. Urbanisation Processes in Viking Age and Medieval Odense and Aalborg, Denmark.** Kulturhistoriske studier I centralitet – Archaeological & Historical Studies in Centrality volume 5. Research Centre Centrum – Odense City Museums, University Press of Southern Denmark, Odense 2021. 318.00 DKK. ISBN 978-78-7-90267-51-3 (Hardback). 367 pages.

This 367-page thick book provides the reader with a detailed insight into the project “From Central Space to Urban Place. From the central areas of the Iron Age to Medieval cities”, undertaken 2017–21 by Odense City Museum. The project has turned out to be one of the largest in Scandinavia with the ambitious aim to “... provide a new perspective on the earliest urbanisation in southern Scandinavia...” (p. 20): Two Danish urban medieval towns, Odense on Funen and Aalborg in northern Jutland, are studied throughout a period from about AD 400, when the first signs of “growth centres” emerged in their respective regions, to the time they ended up as *civitates*, royal and ecclesiastical urban centres around AD 1000. The main idea behind the project has been to study the early urbanisation process in South Scandinavia by broadening the geographical context to their hinterland and to follow the development prior to, during and after their establishment as towns. The towns were chosen according to their common characteristics: 1) they are both located on central land- and water routes, and 2) they are surrounded by metal-rich sites. A central objective has been to investigate the importance of the regional conditions for the urbanisation process, of particular interest for the pivotal question whether towns have developed from internal conditions or because of external impact and actions. Because of this, the different economic and subsistence conditions offered by the landscape have been particularly in focus for the investigation.

A productive methodological approach has been to add time and spatial depth to the overall investigation, which render a possibility to detect and analyse differences in the two towns’ course of development in a broader chronological and geographical outlook. Another creative move has been to develop a set of coherent theoretical guidelines for how the spatial and chronological course of development should be subjected to investigation and what to particularly search for of structures in the landscape and findings which can generate relevant and useful data for the overall synthesis. A theoretical point of departure was to establish a defined division between *space* as something abstract and without an a priori specific meaning, and *place*, a significant and meaning-loaded structure in the landscape. Within this conceptual framework, a town is a *place* because of its concentration of many functions, meaning-loaded and organised physical structures. This is opposed

to *space*, which is defined as a more open organisational structure, e. g. like a magnate's residential area (Tissø, Gudme-Lundeborg, Uppåkra etc.). The idea behind this distinct use of the terms space and place was to make them analytically more available in order to describe and connect landscape elements, finds, place names, settlement etc. with "urban development".

This theoretical design is close to Walter Christaller's Central Place Theory, but adds dynamics to this theory by focusing on what resources and functions are encompassed in the "growth centres". From this the project established the overall hypothesis that the development in the chosen regions led to a gradual concentration of central functions which ultimately led to the formation of the towns. This hypothesised process reflects (hopefully) a mixture of internal and external factors (p. 22). To this hypothesis the project has raised several false notions which also are tested during the investigation, but which we will not go into in detail here.

The book closely follows the project's theoretical outline and practical organisation in the division of three subprojects covering the actual fields of research: After the introductory chapter "Topography" of landscape and seascape in the hinterland of Aalborg and Odense (pp. 23–35) follows in Part I (subproject 1 "Centrality and central places in the landscape", pp. 37–129), first the chapter "Place names and centrality around Odense and Aalborg in the Iron Age and Viking Age" (pp. 38–49). In this 92-page long sequence criteria chosen for centrality in the landscape are described and discussed. The fields of research chosen as criteria for centralisation tendencies in the landscape are placenames, the road network, and metal-rich sites. The overall conclusions point out an interesting fact: in both areas there are indications of "growth centres", respectively in the northeastern part of Funen and in the eastern part of the Limfjord region, but they seem to have backgrounds in different social structures: less centralised in the Limfjord region and rooted in Early Iron Age village organisation, while at Funen the growth centres are rooted in a Late Roman Iron Age warrior aristocracy. The structure of these "growth centres" is, though, not very well understood: Did they overlap in time? Were they connected? Regardless these differences and uncertainties, a main conclusion is that the landscape in both regions offered particular but separate conditions for the development of towns. This conclusion seems to outline some crucial trajectories for the overall analysis following in Parts II and III. In Part I, however, no plausible explanations based on the sub-project's own research are given for why the towns were located as they were, and why they emerged, but a former theory is referred to that the towns stand out as new organisational forms based on new needs and requirements, and as such they, at least Aalborg, might be a result of a bottom-up process (p. 129).

Part II reports and summarises the results from sub-project 2 "Central place, city, and hinterland – structure interaction and specialisation" (pp. 131–287). In this 158-page long sequence the focus is on settlement, trade and craft, the military expression and organisation of power, cult and religion. The overall aim has been to detect and describe central aspects of early urbanisation trends and to compare when and how they appear in each region. Focus is set on specialisation, volume and internationalisation of commodity production, the spatial organisation of rural and urban landscape, land privileges, and religious activities. Of particular interest are the results from the investigation of archaeobotanical and zooarchaeological material from Aalborg, which show that there is a considerable difference in range of species of grain in the material from the rural sites in the hinterland compared to the "proto-urban site" Aalborg: The grain from the rural sites are mainly hulled barley but also some rye, both typical for this time, in contrast to the "remarkably wide range of species" which is thought to represent different preferences compared with the rural areas due to a different social environment (p. 194). When coming to military activity, the Viking fortress Nonnebakken, in the outskirts of Odense, was strategically located in relation to both land

and water transport and represented the royal power in the region. Also, in the Limfjord region, the military was present in the Viking fortress Aggersborg west of Aalborg, and the town itself was defended by low earthen embankments and a waterfilled trench. Other “military structures” have also been revealed in the early phases. The overall assumption is that in both regions the military activities have stimulated centralizing through attracting people and resources. Religious activity has also been investigated in the two regions. Not surprisingly religious life was proven from the earliest phase right up to the millennium shift, identified from various types of finds and physical structures in the landscape. Odense is said to have had the most evident roots in regional pre-Christian religious activities, which in turn has been pivotal for the development into a *civitas*. A separate chapter is devoted to “Crown and Church in early Aalborg and Odense” by Stig Bergmann Møller (pp. 254–267). Here the four early churches of Aalborg and the two phases of the archaeologically confirmed St. Alban’s church and the cult of St. Canute in Odense have been subjected a thorough review; the cult of St. Canute is, not unexpectedly, assigned a substantial role in the development of urban Odense as part of the royal strategies to anchor power in fundamental Christian values. The establishment of the urban monasteries in the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries are thoroughly discussed, with interesting conclusions: 1) As architectural monuments they must have added significant Christian symbolic value to the urban landscape, which was important in the present historic context of internal struggles, 2) their direct impact on the town’s development are surprisingly heavily scaled down: Jacob Tue Christensen concludes that “... there is very little evidence of the four monastic institutions having had any direct impact on the development of the towns” (p. 284). In a broader perspective, as pointed out by Mads Runge (p. 285), the monasteries played an important role in legitimizing the king’s power and identity as a Christian prince, but they played a minor role in the overall urban economy. The overall conclusion is that the impact of religious activity was evident as a growth factor in both regions during the whole period, and became fundamental in the establishment of both towns, but the ecclesiastical impact was more present in Odense, with its cathedral raised as early as in AD 988, compared to Aalborg, which became an ecclesiastical centre much later. These observations and interpretations are significant contributions to the discussion about the establishment of Christian royal kingdoms in Denmark, Norway and Sweden at the turn of the first millennium and the role the church organisation played in this process: What was the role of the early missionary kings and their collaboration with the church in the transformation of central places to towns? This question has still no definite answers, but, according to M. Runge “... the ecclesiastical institutions became obvious growth generators, which reinforced and supported the transition that had previously take place from space to place” (p. 285). This gives at least some positive support to the church as pivotal in the early urbanisation process in southern Denmark.

Part 3 “From central place to town – dynamics and drivers in the early urbanisation process” (pp. 290–315) is the synthesis chapter where the results from the sub-projects, presented by the 22 contributors, are brought together, and given a comprehensive outline based on the project’s overall objective, previously mentioned in this review. The “growth factors” selected as the dynamic forces behind the development of the two towns are the landscape, agrarian economy and settlement, trade and craft, military, and religion activities. These factors are systematically compared, and the results are used as source for a division of the course of development into three main phases, AD 400–600, AD 600–900 and AD 900–1100. According to Runge these phases reflect the “... marked developmental stages within the study’s range of topics and across the various spheres it examines” (p. 290). This chronological grip is rational and corresponds with the project’s wish to comprehend the becoming of the two towns in a long-term perspective. But in practice it does unfortunately not work very well: The presentation of the overall process is based on so many areas

of investigation held up against each other that the presentation becomes fragmented and difficult to follow. Also, too many unnecessary repetitions, which do not always agree with each other, mess up the presentation. For example, Runge states that “Up until the end of 10<sup>th</sup> century, activities in Odense and Alborg do not appear to have differed significantly from those in the surrounding larger villas and magnates’ residences ...” (p. 312). This should indicate (from my understanding) that none of the two towns at that time had reached the formal defined status as towns, but on the same page one can read that “After the actual founding of the towns around AD 900 ... a more typical urban way of life was presumably established ...”. This inaccuracy goes obviously back to the rather imprecise criteria used to decide when a “central place” becomes a “town”: Population density, permanent settlement “of a certain size” and “a predominant proportion of the population subsisting by trade and crafts” (p. 305) are not particularly precise criteria to be able to make qualitative or quantitative assessments about when a central place (of any kind) reaches a level of urban community and way of living. Once again, the spotlight is directed on the classical problem of defining what a “town” is, without limiting the urban phenomenon to a specific time and region. This is, however, not the place for an in-depth review, neither of the discussion on urban definition nor what the actual “growth factors” analyses showed with respect to developmental similarities and differences between the two towns. They are, however, presented in a final concluding chapter (11.6 “Synthesis and perspectives”, pp. 313–315) which contains interesting and discussable conclusions to be followed up in future investigation: 1) Aalborg was one of several local specialised trade and craft centres from the 8<sup>th</sup> century (e. g., Sebbesund) that ultimately became a town in the eastern Limfjord landscape. Its position as a town, it is suggested, was a decisive intervention carried out by political forces that wanted Aalborg as a central trading centre in the Limfjord region. Important observations which support this hypothesis are 1) that the trading place which the civitas Aalborg later succeeded became surrounded by a defence wall around AD 900 and 2) that Aalborg’s spatial organisation breaks with earlier boundaries in the landscape. Aalborg’s way towards town status is, therefore, thought to be a top-down managed process. Odense, on the other hand, appears to have been rooted in religious and administrative functions already present in the region before Odense emerged as a “town”, where the oldest St. Alban’s Church represents a decisive criterion. From this, one of the project’s main conclusions is grounded: Both towns have their origins back in regional growth factors (i. e. specialised craft, trade, and permanent settlement) which endowed both regions with “activities of urban character ... in the 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> century” (p. 309). These growth factors are suggested as main reasons for the establishment of both towns around 900 (p. 309). But there were, interestingly enough, also marked differences in this transformative process towards civitates: While Odense gradually grew into a town from internal regional prerequisites, Aalborg became a town because of external interaction taking no account of the surrounding landscape’s earlier (spatial and social) organisation. From this it is concluded that Alborg is the result of a top-down process, while Odense became a town “... as a stage in an extended process of urbanisation with a foundation in more locally rooted perspectives” (p. 309). But this is a slightly too simple presentation: It has already been stated that Aalborg and Odense became “towns around AD 900” but “civitates” only around the millennium shift. As such they exercised royal and ecclesiastical power on the hinterland and beyond, and this function of being “supra-regional” centres is an often-used criterion for when a central place transforms into a medieval town. The division made here between “towns” and “civitates” is a meaningful distinction, but I would have appreciated if this distinction had been thematised for further problematisation and discussion.

A final reflection shall be made about an interesting hypothesis put forth, whether the inland towns in Denmark are primarily oriented towards the interior of the regions and are located in places endowed with regional administrative, military and religious power, while the coast towns

were particularly linked to long-distance trade along the coasts. This division between inland and coastal towns activates once more the old discussion what a “town” is compared to emporia sites. In the extension of this issue, the book ends up with a timely reservation against being too precise about when central places become towns (pp. 315). It is suggested that the current use in Scandinavian Viking age and early Medieval archaeology of the concept of “town” probably is too extensive. A solution could be, according to Runge (p. 315) to return to the traditional division between “civitas” and “emporium”. With this, the book aims to actualise this question once more and to nourish it with new facts and findings from the many specialised fields of long term, comparative research the project “From Central Space to Urban Place” profitably has carried out.

My outcome of this book has first and foremost been the many interesting separate studies of growth factors and their effect on centralisation processes taking place (or not) in the two regions. The results and hypotheses are, however, not surprising, and do not bring any significant news in relation to the general discussion about the early urbanisation process in Scandinavia: That the formation of towns has taken place differently in regions with different landscape benefits, social and logistical conditions for trade and production is hardly new. Having said this, it is worth emphasizing how the comprehensive comparative analysis clarifies and nuances the complexities and varieties of the early urbanisation process, particularly with reference to the often discussed issue whether the early medieval towns were created in a top-down process or whether they emerged from regional and local conditions in terms of landscape qualities, settlement structure and within a social organisation which for some reasons accelerated centralisation of important functions and activities. At last, it should be remarked that the book is not easily accessible due to its fragmented structure which makes it challenging to follow the “red thread” in the interpretations: Two regions, two towns, three phases, many “growth factors” and centrality indicatives are identified, described, compared, discussed and summarised on an increasingly higher analytical level. The book would have gained better accessibility by gathering the presentation and discussion around some central observations from each region that could have shed new light on the regional development from space to place. Sometimes the editor’s work was also a little out of control (e. g., the captions for figures 188 and 189 are changed). The book is richly and appropriately illustrated with well-designed maps, graphs, photos, and plans, the bibliography is comprehensive and up to date. Despite my above remarks the book will become an often-quoted reference work when contemporary Danish urban development is discussed.

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