

Viking Settlements and Viking Society

*Papers from the Proceedings of the Sixteenth Viking Congress,
Reykjavík and Reykholt, 16–23 August 2009*



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The Viking Age Graves from Hedeby

SILKE EISENSCHMIDT

ABSTRACT

At Hedeby, approximately 1350 graves have been excavated between 1812 and 1970. They are spread out over six cemeteries. The most important are two cemeteries with more than 300 graves inside, and approximately 1000 burials south of the semicircular rampart. The article discusses the chronological and spatial development of each cemetery. There are both cremation and inhumation burials. Most of the graves contain none or only a few grave goods. Only a few burials are richly furnished chamber graves. The graves date from the 8th to the 10th century, suggesting a horizontal stratigraphy from west to east. At last, questions concerning the ethnic and social division in the population of Hedeby, as well as their religious beliefs in a time of profound change, are discussed.

Keywords: Hedeby, graves, burial customs, ethnicity, social division, Christianization.

Between 1812 and 1970, approximately 1350 graves have been identified and investigated in and around Hedeby. The graves represent a small fraction of the burials from the 300 years of Hedeby's existence. H. Steuer (1974, pp. 19f.) estimates that there may be as many as 10,000 burials in the area. Geomagnetic investigations in 2002 suggest that the whole south-western area of Hedeby has been used for burials (Hilberg, 2007, pp. 198f.). If so the number of graves is probably significantly higher than 10,000.

Most of the finds have been unavailable to researchers until now. U. Arents from the University of Kiel used the material for her PhD thesis, which has only been available on microfiche (Arents, 1992). During the last year this PhD has been updated and supplemented (Arents & Eisenschmidt, 2010).

The 1350 graves are spread out over six cemeteries (Fig. 1):

- North of the semicircular ramparts, on a distinct hill named Hochburg, which means Hillfort, about 60 small burial mounds have been identified. South of Hochburg burials with well preserved coffins were found.

- Within the semicircular rampart, three cemeteries have been identified, containing approximately 350 graves: Chamber graves were found in the western part. In the centre as well as near the harbour, inhumation graves with or without coffins were discovered.

- The largest coherent excavation was carried out south of the semicircular rampart. Here nearly 1000 graves were found.



Fig. 1. Hedeby, Kr. Schleswig-Flensburg. Excavated areas between 1900 and 1980. 1 Burial mounds at „Hochburg“, 2 Northern cemetery, 3 Inhumation cemetery, 4 Chamber graveyard, 5 Graves near harbour (Noor), 6 Southern cemetery with the boat chamber grave (B) (Map: V. Hilberg, Archäologisches Landesmuseum Schleswig).



Fig. 2. Hedeby, northern cemetery. 1 Golden filigree brooch found in 1855/56; 2 Carolingian strap mounting found in 1812/13 (Foto: 1 Archäologisches Landesmuseum Schleswig, 2 Nationalmuseet Copenhagen). 1 M. 3:2; 2 M. 1:1.

GRAVES NORTH OF THE SEMICIRCULAR RAMPART

The graves north of the semicircular rampart have not been documented in a systematic way and very little information remains. The Hochburg rises to a level of 26 meters a.s.l. The plateau is surrounded by an earthen wall where 57 small mounds were registered in 1969. The mounds are randomly distributed in the north-western part of the plateau, whereas the south-eastern part is badly disturbed by the removal of marl. Six mounds were excavated in 1889 and 1896 by W. Splieth from the Museum in Kiel and another four in the 1930s initiated by H. Jankuhn (Loewe, 1998, pp. 51–53). The excavated burial mounds were 7–10 meters in diameter and 0.8–1.0 meters tall. The graves contained cremation deposits without grave goods. As the graves resemble the early Viking age graves in Scandinavia, it is assumed that the burial mounds on Hochburg are from the 8–9th century.

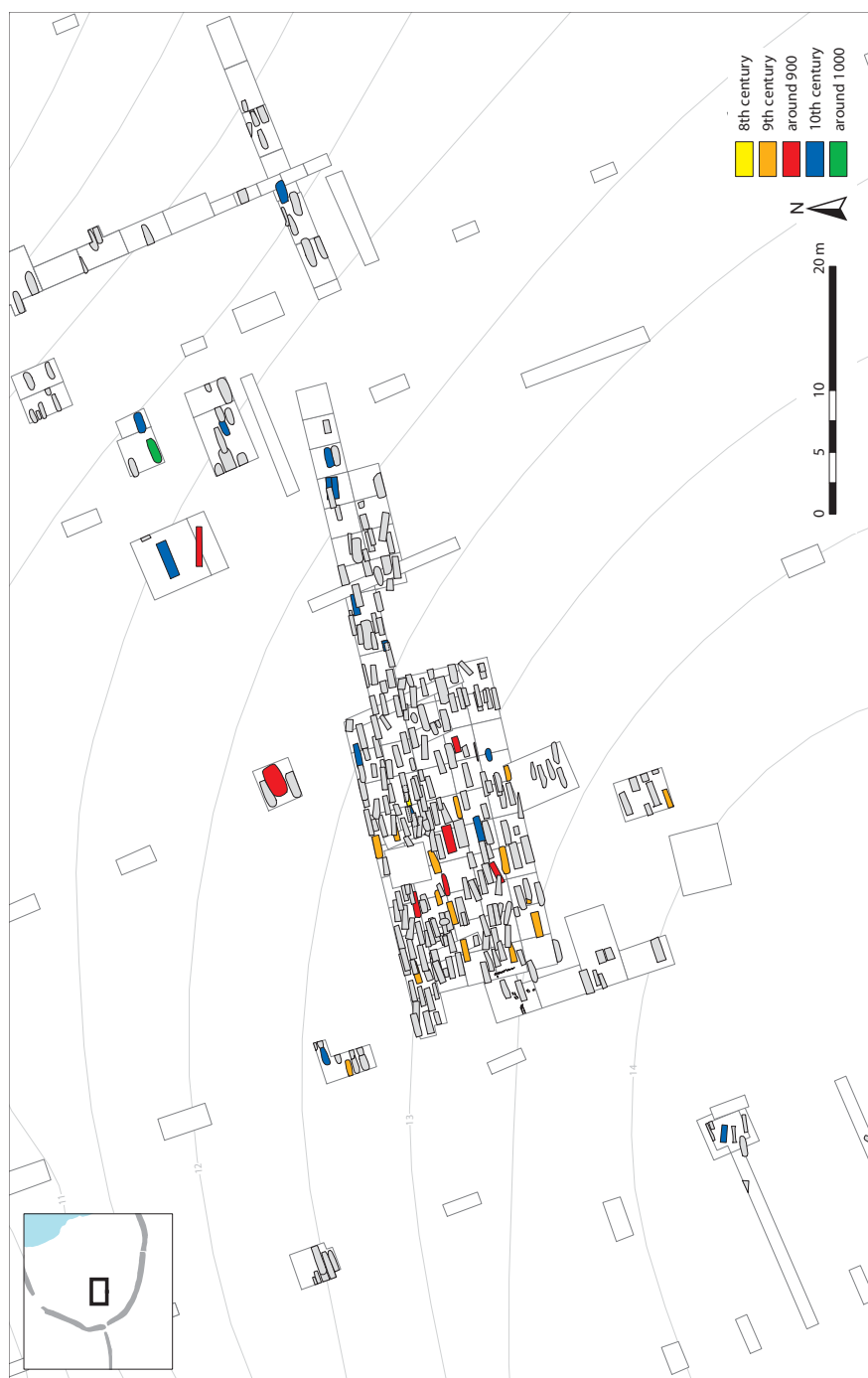


Fig. 3. Hedeby, inhumation cemetery inside the semicircular rampart. (Drawing: J. Schüller, Archäologisches Landesmuseum Schleswig, after Arents & Eisenschmidt, 2010, p. 220).

The wet area south of the Hochburg has clay suitable for making bricks. The removal of clay has disturbed the area since the 17th century. This has continually revealed burials and single objects such as two oval brooches – type JP 37 and 51, a golden filigree brooch, a Carolingian strap mounting and sword type JP V (Fig. 2). The finds can be related to individual inhumation graves, some of which still had remnants of a burial mound. Also a row of six coffins in a west-east direction have been reported. The few descriptions and preserved finds suggest that the area between the Hochburg and the semicircular rampart was used as a cemetery from the mid 9th to the mid 10th century.

GRAVES WITHIN THE SEMICIRCULAR RAMPART

Within the semicircular rampart excavations carried out between 1900 and 1969 three large sections of cemeteries were revealed with a total of 353 graves.

The majority were found between 1900 and 1912 in a 900 m² area south of the creek. This excavation revealed approximately 320 inhumation graves, mostly oriented westsouthwest-eastnortheast (Fig. 3). Many of them had traces of coffins. The graves were so tightly spaced that there was no room for burial mounds. 21% of the graves contained grave goods, but rarely more than one item. The most common grave goods were brooches and knives. Only two female graves contained more than six grave goods, one of which was a chamber grave. More than half of the 39 datable graves were dated to the second half of the 9th century and the first half of the 10th century. A coin – an Otto-Adelheid-Pfennig – dates the youngest grave to around 1000. The earliest burials were probably in the south western part of the area around mid 9th century and later expanding to the east, north and west. The area has been reused over time. Contrary to the opinion of H. Jankuhn (1986, pp. 105–108) the alignment and the type of graves (inhumation graves with or without coffins, with and without nails) gives no clue to their chronology. The oldest graves to the west were covered by a later culture layer. The younger graves to the east lay on top of an earlier settlement layer.

About 50 meters southwest of the inhumation cemetery, a group of nine chamber graves, a simple inhumation and a cremation grave were discovered in 1930–1931 at the highest point east of the rampart. A further 40 meters east, another chamber grave and an inhumation grave were found (Fig. 4). The chamber graves were established in two rows. Segments of circular ditches suggest that some graves were originally covered by small burial mounds. Almost all the chamber graves contained grave goods unlike the majority of inhumation graves with and without coffins. Nine of the 13 graves contained datable

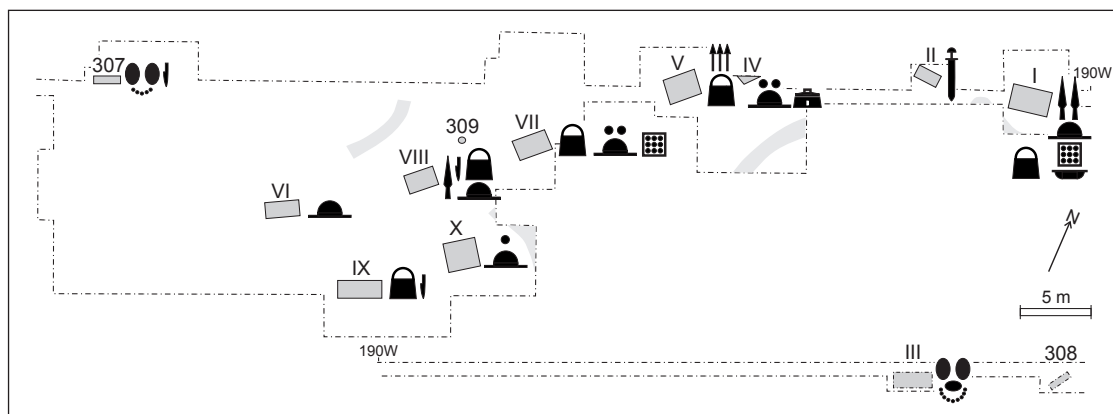


Fig. 4. Hedeby, chamber graveyard (Symbols: H. Dieterich, University of Kiel).

artifacts. Seven graves contained weapons, especially shields, rarely spears and only once a sword or a set of arrows. Coins were found in three of these graves. Two female graves were furnished with oval brooches. The majority of the graves were established in the first half and middle of the 9th century and not in the 10th century, as previously suggested (Aner, 1952, p. 99). The only exception is chamber grave X, dated to or shortly after 900. During the 10th and 11th century, a few pit-houses were built in the area (Jankuhn, 1986, pp. 93–95).

Near the harbour, the 1963–1969 excavations revealed a disturbed cemetery (Fig. 5). Apart from 18 more or less intact skeletons, a number of skeletal remains were found spread over a larger area. Eight graves were closely spaced, presumably in rows. The wet soil has preserved organic material. In one grave enough details of the coffin were preserved to illustrate how the coffin was built (Schietzel & Ulbricht, 1977, pp. 61f.). Also a maple staff – the only grave goods – was preserved. The stratigraphy is complex (Schultze, 2008, pp. 72ff.), but a re-evaluation of the documentation shows that all the skeletal remains were situated in, or connected to, the upper layers¹. Dendro dates from the layers beneath suggest that this cemetery was established after 900 and not as previously suggested before 900 (Schietzel & Ulbricht, 1977, pp. 60f.).

¹ Joachim Schultze has been very helpful introducing the digitized excavation documentation and discussing the stratigraphy.

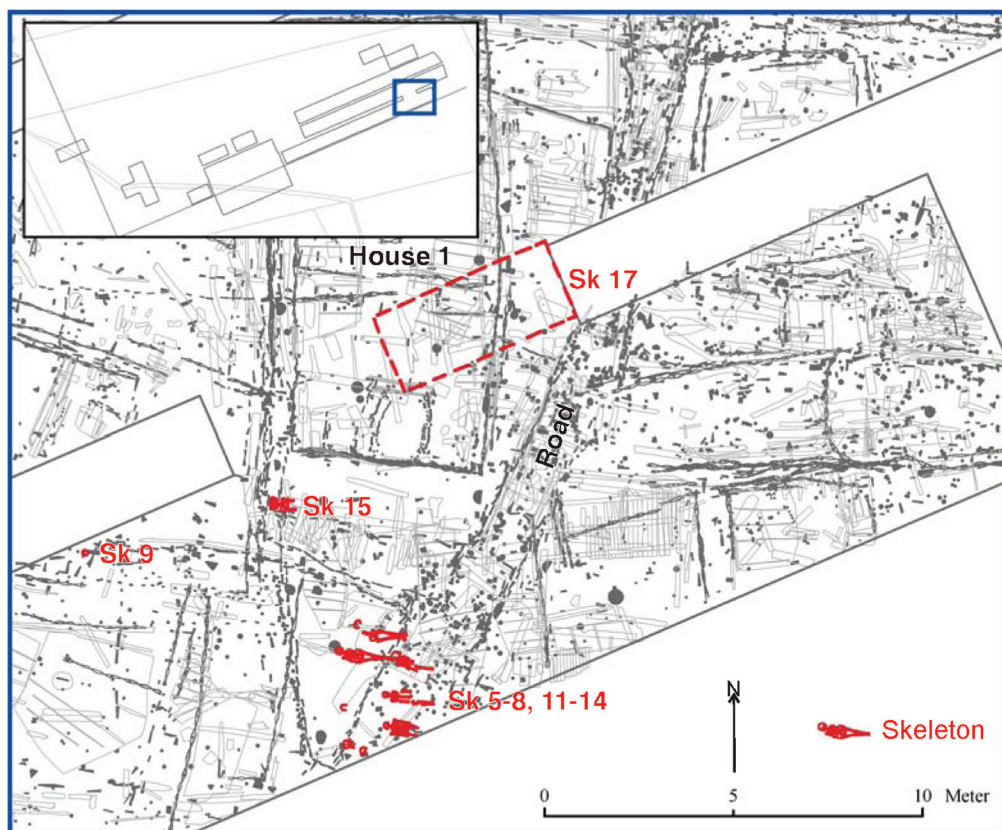


Fig. 5. Hedeby, graves near harbour (Noor). Area with skeletons 5–9, 11–15 and 17 above settlement structures (Drawing: J. Schultze, Archäologisches Landesmuseum Schleswig).

GRAVES SOUTH OF THE SEMICIRCULAR RAMPART

The largest cemetery was excavated south of the ramparts. In the years between 1957 and 1970 a 16.600 m² large area was excavated, revealing approximately 1000 graves. The western limit of this large cemetery is undetermined. To the south a creek defines a natural border. Today the cemetery is bisected into an eastern and a western area by the so-called Church road.

A total of 450 inhumations and 90 cremation graves were found to the west of the Church road (Fig. 6). The famous boat chamber grave, excavated in 1908, situated only 20–30 m southeast of the field, is associated with this cemetery (Müller-Wille, 1976; Wamers, 1994). Unfortunately, parts of the area have been disturbed by deep plowing and road tracks. Only 12% of the 540 burials contained grave goods, mainly knives and whetstones. Jewelry is

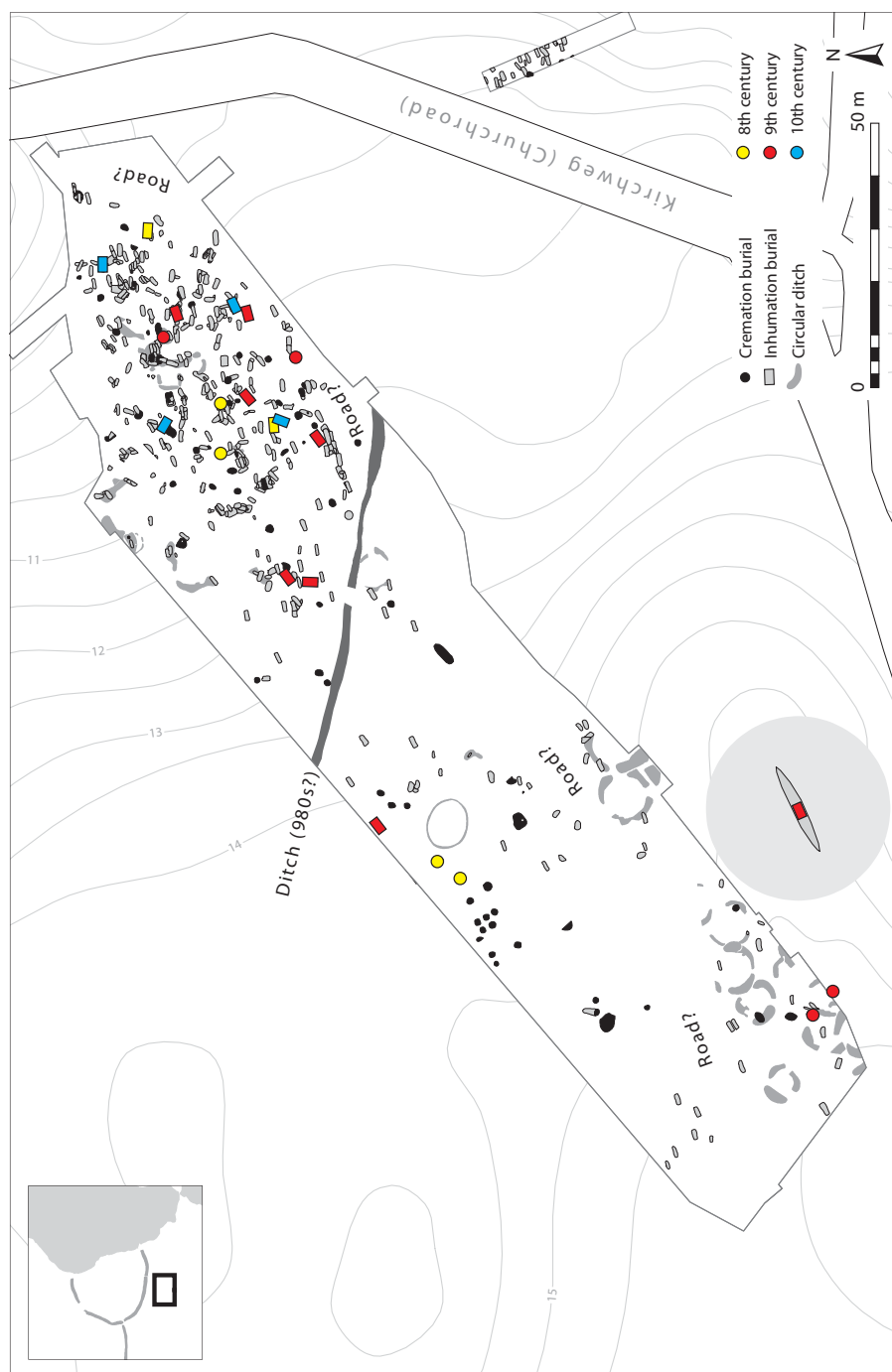


Fig. 6. Hedeby, southern cemetery, western part (Drawing: J. Schüller, Archäologisches Landesmuseum Schleswig, after Arents & Eisenschmidt, 2010, p. 250).

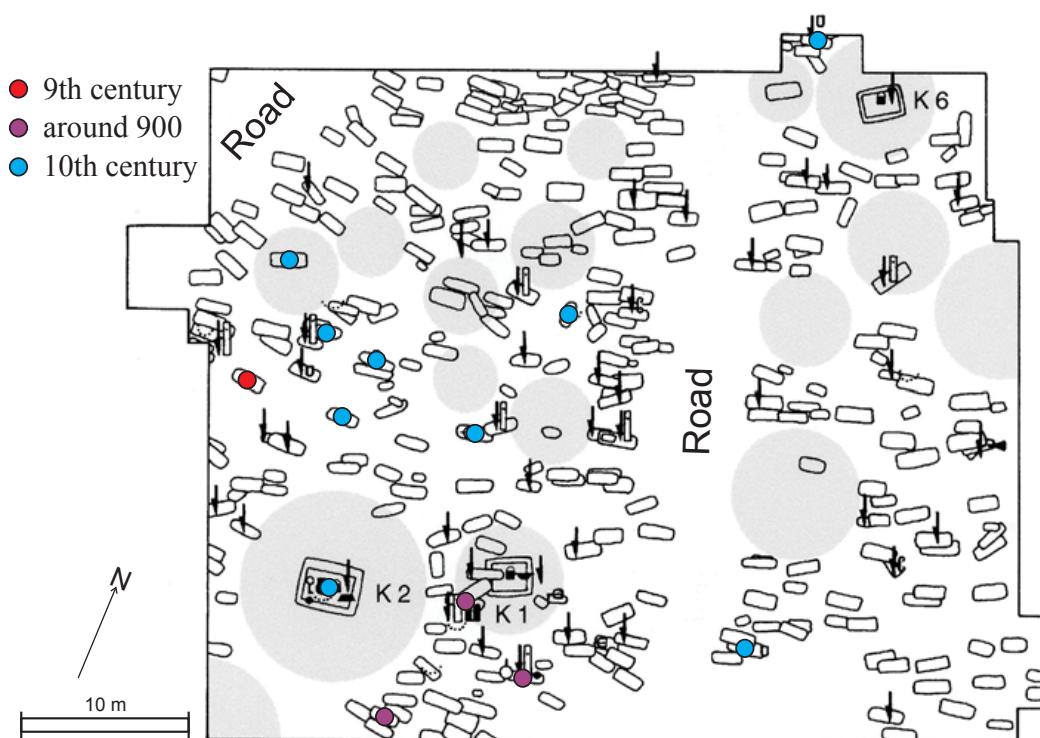


Fig. 7. Hedeby, southern cemetery, eastern part. Excavated area near shore (Noor) with chamber graves (K) 1, 2 and 6 and burial mounds (after Steuer, 1984b, p. 356).

infrequent compared to the cemetery inside the rampart. The only exceptions are the boat chamber grave and a coffin grave with a female (grave 497). These were both furnished with tableware, as well as riding gear in the boat chamber and jewelry in the female grave.

East of the Church road the excavation revealed approximately 430 inhumation graves and five chamber graves (Fig. 7). Artifacts were found in 18% of the graves. The number of grave goods was usually restricted to one, most often a knife, more rarely jewelry. Only one weapon grave with an axe was found. Better equipped graves with tableware and jewelry were restricted to the five chamber graves. Notably, chamber graves 2 and 5 were the largest and best furnished. The chamber graves were covered by small burial mounds. The younger inhumation graves in between the burial mounds were oriented approximately east west. The direction of the roads, which already existed when the area was occupied by pit-houses, seems to have influenced the position of the graves.

Only 39 graves revealed datable artifacts. The graves are evenly distributed over the investigated area which makes it possible to describe the evolution of

the cemetery. The oldest burials – cremation pits and urns – were established in the 8th century west of the church road, in the central and northeastern part of the excavated field. Circular ditches indicate the former presence of small burial mounds covering cremation graves. Also, contemporary north-south and to some extent, west-east oriented inhumation graves were found. During the early 9th century the cemetery expands to the southwest towards the vicinity of the boat chamber grave. At the end of the 9th century, the areas around the roads going south and southwest from Hedeby were covered by small burial mounds. Later, inhumation graves, largely west-east oriented, were placed in between the burial mounds, especially in the northern section. The youngest grave is dated to around the mid 10th century.

After abandoning the pit-house area at the Noor in the late 9th century, this area was also used for burials (Steuer, 1974, p. 161). As before the roads leading away from Hedeby seem to have influenced the positioning of the graves, marked with small burial mounds along the roads. Some of these graves were well-equipped chamber graves. Shortly thereafter, the space in between the mounds was used for inhumation graves with or without coffins. These are now dominantly west-east orientated. The defense system of Hedeby was strongly reinforced during the second half of the 10th century (Steuer, 1974, p. 23; Andersen, 1998, p. 146). Parallel to the semicircular rampart, two ditches were dug that cut several graves in the southern cemetery. It is not possible to determine if the area continued to be used for burials after the defense system was expanded because of the lack of grave goods. The youngest datable graves are late 10th century.

BURIAL CUSTOMS IN HEDEBY

An overview of the Hedeby graves suggests a horizontal stratigraphy going from west to east (Fig. 8) although some parts of the cemeteries were used for centuries. In general, the older graves from the 8–9th century are located in the west, several hundred meters away from the settlement, and the shore of the Noor, while the youngest 10th century burials were found near the shore in the east. The southern cemetery is a good example of older graves found to the west on higher ground, while the younger graves were found in the lower area to the east towards the Noor. This area close to the shore had previously been occupied by pit-houses dating to the 8th and 9th centuries (Steuer, 1974, p. 161). A horizontal stratigraphy can also be observed within the semicircular rampart. The oldest graves are the chamber graves on the plateau close to the rampart. In the 10th century houses were built here. This is also visible in the relatively small excavated area of the inhumation cemetery, with the

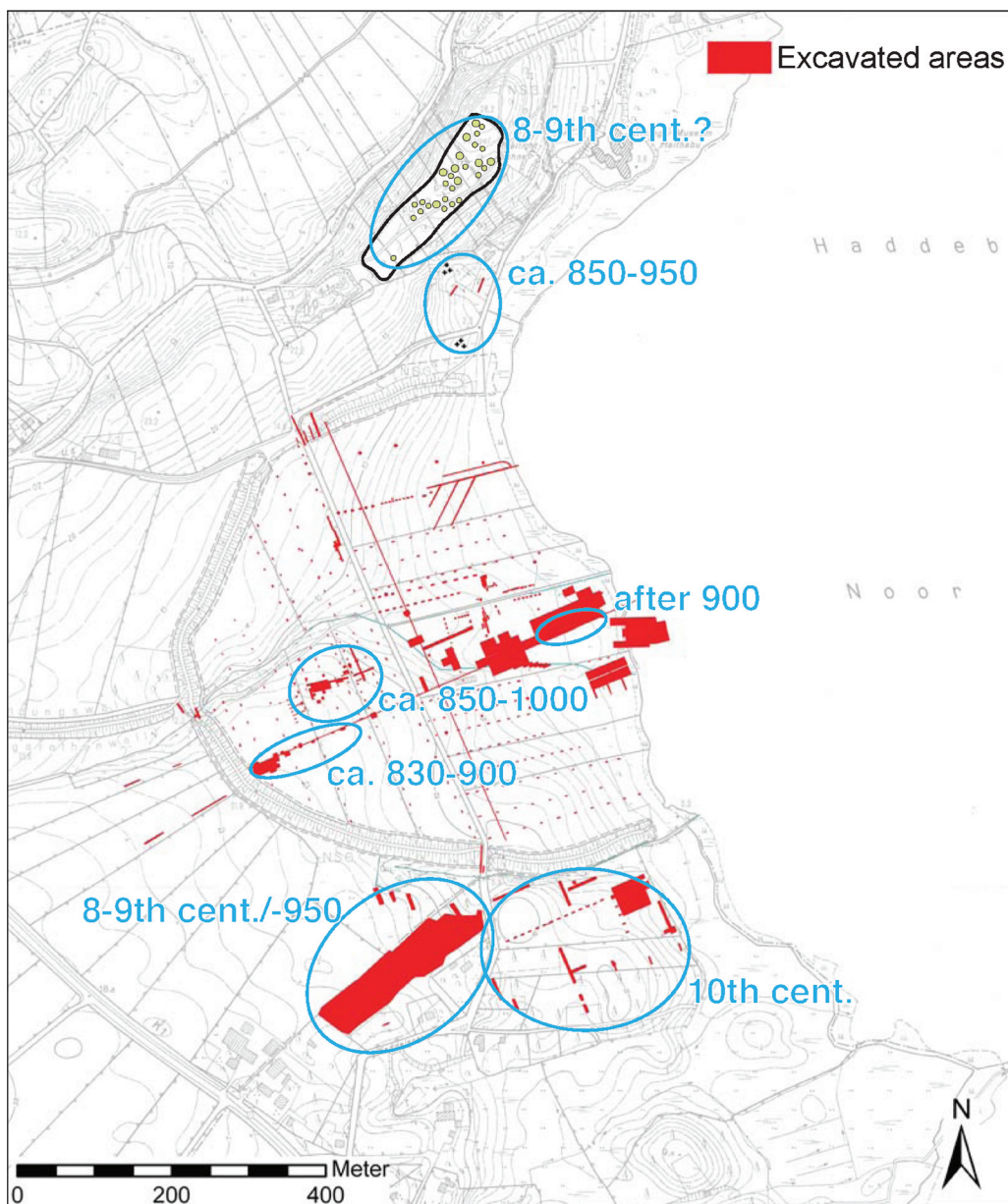


Fig. 8. Hedeby. Dating of the individual graveyards (Map: V. Hilberg, Archäologisches Landesmuseum Schleswig).



Fig. 9. The political situation in Central-Europe in the Viking age.

older graves in the west and the slightly younger to the east. According to the excavator, F. Knorr, the older graves in the west are partly covered by 10th century settlement deposits while the graves to the east overlie earlier settlement layers. This development ends close to the Noor where inhumation graves without grave goods are found. The underlying settlement has been dendro-dated to the very late 9th century. North of the semicircular rampart there are cremation burials, presumably early Viking age on the Hochburg and the well equipped inhumation graves dating to the second half of the 9th and 10th century near the Noor.

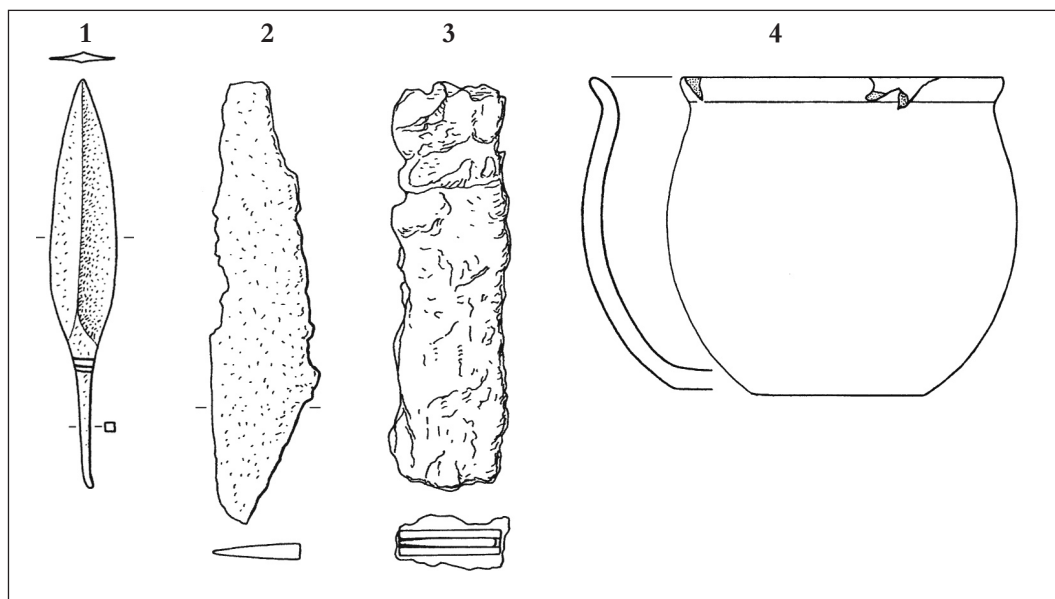


Fig. 10. Hedeby, southern cemetery. Cremation grave 320 with a typical Frisian egg-shaped urn, pocketknife and knife (after Arents & Eisenschmidt, 2010, pl. 60). 1–3 M. 1:2, 4 M. 1:3.

INTERPRETATION

When interpreting the graves one must keep in mind that probably less than 10% of the original burials are known. None of the graveyards have been completely excavated. A large part of the investigated areas were already disturbed prior to excavation and standards have changed considerably since the beginning of excavations. Only 20% of the graves contained grave goods at all, and only a few of these were well equipped with grave goods.

ETHNICITY

Hedeby was the largest Danish Viking age *emporium* or proto-town, located close to the Carolingian and later Ottonian empires and the Slavonic region (Fig. 9). According to written sources, Hedeby was inhabited by Danes, Saxons, Frisians and Slavs. A longstanding question is: can the ethnic origin of the inhabitants be detected in the burial habits? The grave goods are mostly Scandinavian, while the house types and pottery point to the Saxon area. The fact that Saxons and Frisians stopped furnishing their graves with grave goods



Fig. 11. Hedeby, inhumation cemetery inside the semicircular rampart. Only few graves have “true” grave goods like weapons or tableware (Drawing: J. Schüller, Archäologisches Landesmuseum Schleswig, after Arents & Eischmidt, 2010, p. 295).

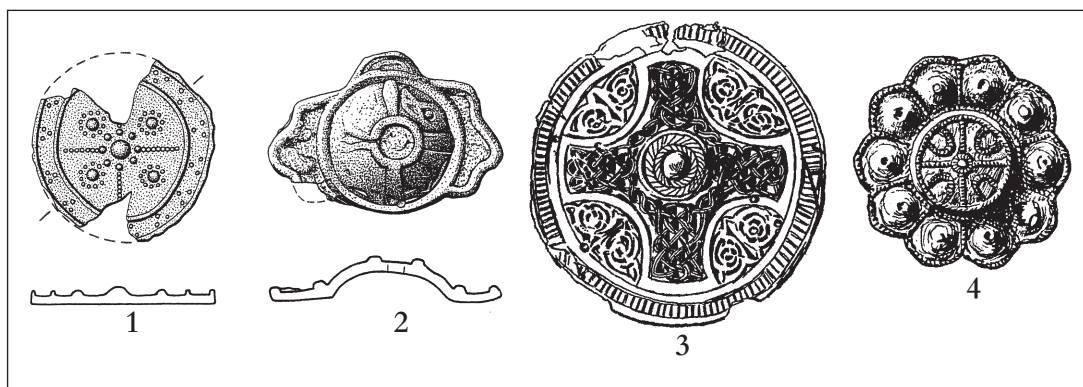


Fig. 12. Hedeby, inhumation cemetery. Brooches with cross motif. 1 grave 147, 2 grave 255, 3 grave 77, 4 grave 270 (after Arents & Eisenschmidt, 2010). M. 2:3.

in the first part of the 9th century at the latest (Kleemann, 2002, p. 345), makes it impossible to distinguish their ethnicity from the numerous other inhumation graves lacking grave goods, as is the custom in contemporary graves in the cemeteries of the rural Danish areas. In conclusion, only when it comes to graves dating to the early Viking age can the grave give information about the ethnicity of the deceased.

The 8th century urn cremations are almost certainly Frisian (Fig. 10). The egg shaped urns, knives with angular backs and pocketknives are found in abundance along the southern North Sea coast. Possibly the circular ditches and north south oriented inhumation graves can be explained by the presence of Saxons in the 8th and early 9th century. It is questionable, if cremation pits can be associated with Slavs and cremation deposits with the Danes. Since the first half of the 9th century inhumation dominates, regardless of ethnicity.

CHRISTIANIZATION

The transition to inhumation happens significantly earlier in Hedeby than in the rest of Denmark where this change is first seen in the late 9th century. This can probably be explained by Ansgars missionary attempts, which start around the year 830 in the trading places Hedeby, Ribe and Birka (Rimbert, cap. 7–8). During the 10th century more and more Christian influence can be observed in burial customs. The construction of mounds ceases during the first half of the 10th century. The majority of burials with grave goods are dated from the mid 9th to the first half of the 10th century. The decrease in the number of grave goods in the second half of the 10th century could be explained by the

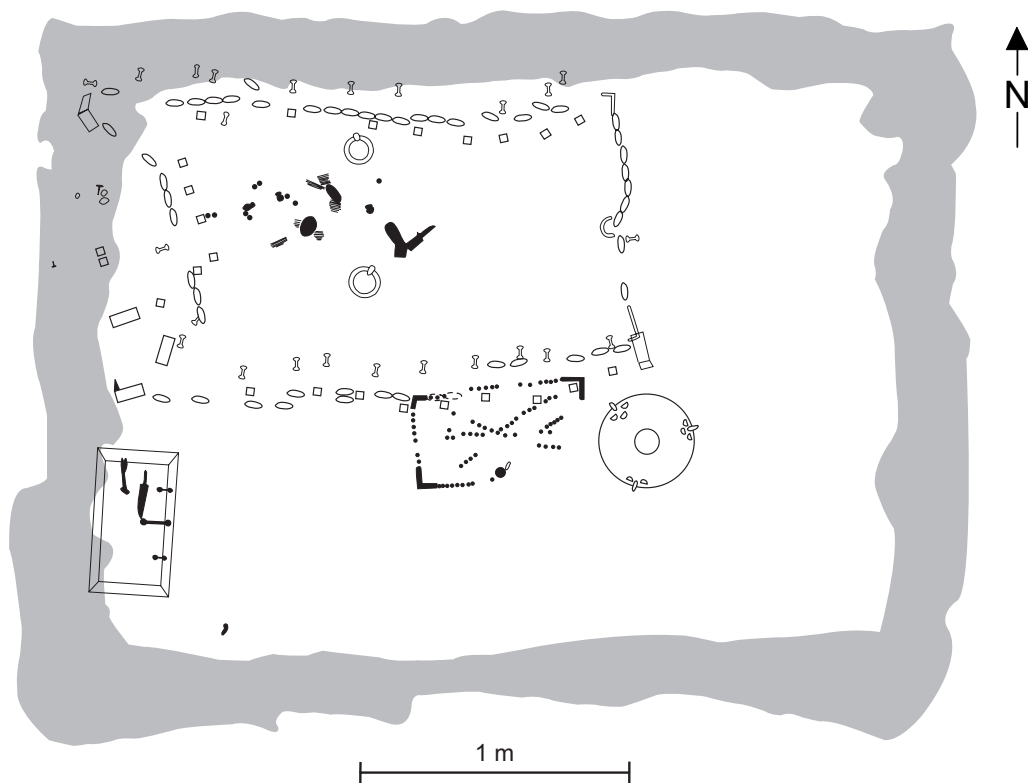


Fig. 13. Hedeby, southern cemetery, eastern part. Chamber grave 5 (Drawing: N. Kossmer, Museum Sønderjylland, Haderslev, after Steuer, 1984a, p. 204).

conversion of the Danes, announced by Harold Bluetooth around the year 965 (Skovgaard-Petersen, 1991, 324). Graves dated to the 11th century cannot be recognized with certainty. Probably more and more Christians were buried in the churchyard. In written sources, a church in Hedeby is mentioned as early as 850 (Rimbert, cap. 24; Lund, 2004, 26), but the remains of the church have not been located yet. Possibly it lies beneath the medieval church located 700 meters north of the rampart.

The cemeteries within the semicircular ramparts show several features of Christian cemeteries (Fig. 11). The inhumation burials are closely spaced, west-east oriented and are nearly arranged in rows. On the other hand, two important elements are missing: the church and an enclosure. Notable are a group of graves with brooches with a cross motif and two coffins with cross-shaped mountings (Fig. 12).



Fig. 14. Hedeby, southern cemetery, eastern part. Jewelry from chamber grave 5 (Photos: Archäologisches Landesmuseum Schleswig). 1.2 M. 1:1; 3–5 M. 3:2.

SOCIAL ASPECTS

A small number of graves in Hedeby contain a complete set of grave goods suggesting a more complex burial with chamber and an overlying mound. These graves most probably represent members of the elite in the area. The variation in grave goods and type of burial, cannot be used to make finer distinctions of social status and rank. The majority of these outstanding graves date to two periods. The first period covering the first half to mid 9th century, with the boat chamber grave and the chamber graveyard. The second period covering from around 900 and the first half of the 10th century with the chamber graves in the southern cemetery. The boat chamber grave dating 830–850 AD stands out among the graves in Hedeby and the whole of Denmark and it has been suggested that it may be the grave of a king (Wamers, 1994, p. 33; Staecker, 2005, pp. 6–9).

In Hedeby, chamber graves already appear approximately 100 years earlier than in the rural areas of Denmark. This could explain why the Hedeby chamber graves lack riding gear, unlike the numerous 10th century chamber graves known especially in the western part of Denmark (Pedersen, 1997, p. 128). At the same time, a feature of high-status-female graves is the use of wagon bodies as coffins. Chamber grave 5 in the southern cemetery and possibly grave 45 in the inhumation cemetery inside the rampart, are the only examples of this special coffin-type found in Hedeby (Fig. 13). The graves were established around 900, which make them the oldest known graves of this type.

Chamber grave 5 is also interesting because of the woman's dress. The deceased was buried with two unique oval brooches made of silver with filigree ornamentation as well as two golden pendants, showing the earliest known Terslev motif (Fig. 14; Eilbracht, 1999, p. 142). Slightly younger high-status female graves, for instance chamber grave 2 and other graves in the vicinity of Hedeby, only contain a single small round brooch made of gold or silver with the Terslev motif. The lack of 10th century oval brooches in Hedeby and the southern part of Jutland, suggest that the transition from the traditional Scandinavian women's dress with three fibulas to the continental with only one fibula takes place shortly after 900.

CONCLUSION

Contact with the southern neighbours, whether peaceful or violent, resulted not only in the exchange of goods, but also in a transfer of knowledge, lifestyle as well as rituals, and ceremonies. Specifically, the 200 years of Christianisation led to a profound change. The inhabitants of Hedeby played a key-role in this

process. This is expressed in the burial customs. The transition to inhumation is significantly earlier here, as are the high-status-graves in the 9th century. The rapid introduction of the one fibula-dress is another example.

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