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FROM ONE SEA TO ANOTHER
TRADING PLACES IN THE EUROPEAN
AND MEDITERRANEAN EARLY MIDDLE AGES

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Ribe: *emporía* and town in the 8th and 9th century

Ribe is situated in the southwestern part of Denmark, some eighty kilometres north of the present day border with Germany and about five kilometres east of the Wadden Sea (fig. 1). The modern town is situated on both sides of the river Ribe, which runs east to west into the Wadden Sea. The area west of Ribe is dominated by marshlands, which were formed by recurring high and low tides from the Bronze Age, about 1500 BC, until the construction of dykes in the early 20th century. To the east, the landscape is dominated by boggy wetlands. The areas north and south of the town are generally flat, sandy plains, no more than five to ten metres above sea level. Some ten to fifteen kilometres to the north and south-east of the town, clay soil hills rise up to thirty or forty metres. Ribe is, quite logically, placed exactly where the sandy plains from the north and south reach out towards the river, at the easiest point of cross from river to wetland.

The oldest traces of 8th-century Ribe were found in the early 1970's and since then, a large number of rescue excavations have been carried out¹. More than ten thousand square metres have been excavated on the north-eastern side of the river. Ribe is often compared with other slightly younger Scandinavian towns of the Viking period: Kaupang in Norway, Haithabu in Germany and Birka in Sweden. In contrast to these sites, the oldest traces of Ribe are completely covered by the modern town.

In the 8th century, Ribe was comprised of a three archaeologically distinct features (fig. 2, Colour Plates). First, a workshop area sits immediately parallel with the river, divided into plots on both sides of a small,

¹ M. Bencard, L.B. Jørgensen, H.B. Madsen, *Ribe Excavations 1970-76*: 4, Esbjerg, 1990; L.B. Frandsen, S. Jensen, «Pre-Viking and Early Viking Age Ribe. Excavations at Nicolajgade 8, 1986-86», in *Journal of Danish Archaeology*, 6 (1988), p. 175-189; C. Feveile, «Ribe on the north side of the river 8th-12th century», in *Det ældste Ribe. Udgravninger på nordsiden af Ribe Å 1984-2000. Ribe Studier*, 1.1, ed. C. Feveile, Højbjerg, 2006, p. 65-92.



1a – 1b. Ribe and the surroundings.

narrow street. To the rear of the workshop, we have uncovered several different areas showing occupation activity: houses, ditches, refuse pits etc. Of course, there remain some question marks regarding the spaces in between these areas. Finally, we have excavated parts of a several burial grounds – whether these were part of a larger, all-encompassing burial ground or several minor ones is up for debate. There is one very important feature that has not been excavated: the harbour. In fact, its exact location and layout is not yet known. The question is whether the ships harboured close to the banks of the river, whether there was a regular wooden harbour front, or whether bridges or platforms protruded into the water, like the harbours at Haithabu and Dorestad?

Ribe is famous for its extremely well-preserved stratigraphy, which is composed of hundreds of thin cultural layers spanning from ca. AD 705 to ca. 850 (fig. 3, Colour Plates). It is, however, very important to highlight that these detailed and complicated cultural layers are only found in the vicinity of the workshop district. In this area, the layers are between one and a half and two metres thick. The oldest layers date from ca. 704-10 to ca. 760, substantiated by dendrochronological dates extracted from preserved wood samples. Wood has not been preserved from the younger layers of the stratigraphic sequence, from ca. 760 and onwards. Despite this, a combination of detailed stratigraphy, relative chronology, and the dating of different artefacts found in those layers allows us to work with absolute dating phases as short as ten to twenty years².

If we take a look at the other parts of Ribe, the situation is completely different. Almost no cultural layers are preserved (or rather, were not established in the 8th-9th centuries), and the only features surviving in the excavations today are those that were dug well into the subsoil, such as postholes, wells, ditches etc. Almost all the more ephemeral constructions, such as floor layers and fireplaces, are no longer preserved for investigation. These differing conditions of preservation present us with a number of problems when working within Ribe, particularly when trying to combine the extremely detailed relative and absolute stratigraphy of the workshop area with the contemporary features just one hundred to two hundred metres away, where we generally have to deal with dating frames or time spans of fifty to seventy-five years or even longer.

² C. Feveile, S. Jensen, «Ribe in the 8th and 9th century. A Contribution to the Archaeological Chronology of North Western Europe», in *Vikings in the West. Acta Archaeologica supplementa 2*, eds S.S. Hansen, K. Randsborg, København, 2000, p. 9-24.

The plotted area with workshops

The tenemental area can be divided into three main structural phases. In the first decade of the 8th century, the marketplace was established partly on top of a layer of naturally blown sand dating back to around the beginning of the first millennium. In earlier interpretations, this sand layer was thought to have been artificial, suggesting that it was a local chieftain or king who was the acting force in the establishment of the town. Among the very earliest features of the excavation area are irregular ditches with patches of cultural layers in between. This phase is not well understood and it lasted for a rather short period, no more than a few years and by no means more than five to ten years. The second structural phase begins somewhere between 704 and 710 (dendrochronologically dated), when a regular system of plots was established on both sides of a narrow street (fig. 4). We do not know the exact number of plots at both ends, but an estimate of at least some forty to fifty plots is plausible. From the period at which this system of plots was established, it was maintained with only small changes throughout the 8th century and into the final phases of the workshop area in the middle or second half of 9th century. During the first three quarters of 8th century, we believe that the workshop area was only in use on a seasonal basis, as no permanent structures (i.e. houses) have been found directly on the individual plots. The only structures on the plots are believed to have been tents, a few small huts, fences etc. The first half of 8th century is one of the best-understood periods at Ribe because wood is preserved in the layers from this period.

At some time late in the 8th century, the composition of the layers in the plots with workshops changed. To date, our excavations in Ribe do not reveal any clear answer as to what was happening and how exactly it looked. But when we compare Ribe with Haithabu and Birka and to some degree also with Kaupang, there is no doubt that from around 780-90 at the latest, regular buildings were built directly on the plots. Ribe, in the late 8th century and first half of 9th century, must have looked like Haithabu and Kaupang. As I will discuss later, this does not mean that permanent occupation in Ribe did not exist before the late 8th century, on the contrary, I am sure that regular, year-round occupation took place in Ribe from its beginning, in the early 8th century.

The situation with a workshop area divided into plots on both sides of a small street is completely unparalleled in 8th century Scandinavia. Of course, it makes sense to ask exactly who had the original idea and initiative to establish the marketplace of Ribe. The town is situated close to the bor-

der of the Scandinavian cultures and the area under Frisian influence. There is no doubt that one has to look outside the local area to find any plausible answer. Some have claimed that a Danish king, ruling over the southern part of Jutland, must have been the founder of Ribe. Although any hypothesis will be hard to prove, I believe that we have to look southwest of Ribe toward the area of Frisian influence – the coastal region in the southern area of the North Sea. During the late 7th century, a number of trading places came to light – and Ribe can be seen as one of the youngest and northernmost trading stations within this system of trading places around the North Sea. I believe that this initiative and the wish for a new trading station/*emporium*/town came from abroad.

The important cultural layers in 8th-to 9th-century Ribe must be seen as more than just stratigraphy and relative or absolute chronology. The layers also give us important insight into the roles of a trading place: to produce artefacts, to control trade, to act as a nodal point for goods passing in and out of the area.

One of the most decisive methods of excavating the complicated layers is water sieving, which was applied to every single layer in all excavations from 1990 on. For some groups of artefacts, this method has multiplied the numbers of finds ten-fold compared to excavations without water sieving, giving us new information on the level of production and facilitating intra site analysis etc (fig. 5).

Among the many thousands of finds, the crafts of a number of tradesmen and artisans are documented.

The crafts include: antler working, using antlers from reindeer; combs were mostly produced among other items such as needles and spindle wools³.

There are large quantities of refuse from glass bead making, mainly from the 8th century. Among other lumps of glass, we have thousands of glass *tesserae* in all kinds of colors, imported directly and indirectly from Northern Italy (fig. 6, Colour Plates), as well as different kinds of semi-products, refuse and the product itself: glass beads. We would be more than happy to find whole, hollow glass vessels, but instead, we have found hundreds of glass sherds from different types of vessels – some bearing traces of use. This at least shows that some of the sherds were brought to the glass bead maker as raw material⁴. From the late 8th to the 9th century

³ K. Ambrosiani, *Viking age combs, comb making and comb makers in the light of finds from Birka and Ribe*. Stockholm Studies in Archaeology 2, Stockholm, 1981.

⁴ L. Feveile, «The glass-vessel sherds from Ribe marketplace, ASR 9 Posthuset», in *Det ældste Ribe. Udgravninger på nordsiden af Ribe Å 1984-2000. Ribe Studier* 1.1, ed. C. Feveile, Højbjerg, 2006, p. 195-256.



4. The market place in Ribe, ca. AD 725.

we have a whole range of imported Islamic glass beads and different types of semi-precious stones⁵.

Metal casting is quite common among the finds. It is important to note that the produced items all are in the local Danish or Scandinavian style, with no apparent Frisian or Carolingian influence. We have found the raw materials necessary for metalworking, such as scrap metal, ingots, lead weights to control the alloy, crucibles to melt the metal and lead models of the objects to make the clay moulds. From the mould fragments themselves, it is possible to give an exact picture of the jewellery produced and the changes of fashion over time.

Nordic gold – amber – is found in vast amounts and production can be followed from raw material to the finished product (i.e. beads and gaming pieces).

One very important group of imported artefacts are items in daily use, such as quernstones. Quernstones were manufactured south of Cologne on

⁵ T. Sode, C. Feveile, U. Schnell, «An investigation on segmented, metal-foiled glass beads and blown, mirrored glass beads from Ribe, Denmark», in *Zwischen Fjorden und Steppe. Festschrift für Johan Callmer zum 65.*, eds. Theune, C. *et al.*, Geburtstag, Internationale Archäologie – Studia honoraria, Rahden, 2010, p. 319-328.

Organics	Comb making waste	16956	
	Leather	924	
Glass	Beads	4998	
	Tessera	4063	
	Waste and semi-manufactured items	7546	
	Glass sherds	2970	
Moulding	Mould fragments	9820	
	Crusible, fragments	3377	
Amber	Raw material, waste and products	12935	6,615 Kg
Stone	Basalt quernstone, fragments	2057	152,615 Kg
Ceramic	Local 8-9 th century	38038	
	Local, wheelthrown	475	
	Imported, 8-9 th century	2189	
Coins	Sceatta 8 th century	204	
	Pennies 9 th century	10	

5. A number of selected finds from the marketplace.

the river Rhine and transported to Ribe, probably via Dorestad, and redistributed to a wider area, mainly in western Denmark⁶.

Some 10% of the ceramics are composed of imported types: Tating, Badorf, Reliefband, Mayen and Muschelgruss. Most of the vessels are too small to be considered containers for goods (wine, spices etc.). It is quite clear that the main function of foreign ceramics was as ordinary cooking pots etc., which were brought to the marketplace and probably used by foreign merchants and tradesmen. We seldomly find these types of ceramics at other places in Denmark, outside of Ribe.

From Scandinavia and Norway came vessels made of soapstone, and artefacts made from whalebone.

Finally we have found a large number of coins, the so-called *sceatta*. In Ribe – and, for the first time ever in Scandinavia – the finds show us that a regular coin economy was adopted in the marketplace throughout the 8th century (fig. 8). Among more than two hundred coins found, the so-called

⁶ C. Feveile, «Mayen Basalt from the Ribe Excavations 1970-76», in *Ribe Excavations 1970-76*: 6, eds. M. Bencard, H.B. Madsen, Højbjerg, 2010, p. 133-156.



8. *Sceattas* from Ribe (left). Wodan/Monster (right). The original size is ca. 10-11 mm.

Wodan/Monster *sceatta* represents more than 85%⁷. Some numismatists believe it to be from a mint in Ribe and as such, the oldest coin originating in Scandinavia, while some still believe it to be of Frisian origin, minted somewhere in the modern Netherlands⁸. In the early 9th century, the Wodan/monster *sceatta* used in Ribe was replaced by a similar looking coin minted on a larger flan and clearly influenced by the older *sceatta*. This coinage is normally considered to be from the first half of the 9th century.

The permanent settlement

Turning away from the workshop area, let us take a short look at the permanent settlement of the 8th century. Strictly speaking, we cannot prove that there was a permanent settlement in Ribe in first half of 8th century.

⁷ C. Feveile, «Series X and Coin Circulation in Ribe», in *Two decades of discovery. Studies in Early Medieval Coinage I*, ed. T. Abramson, Woodbridge, 2008, p. 53-68.

⁸ D.M. Metcalf, *Thrymsas and Sceattas in The Ashmolean Museum Oxford 2*, London, 1993, p. 275-293; B. Malmer, «Münzprägung und frühe Stadtbildung in Nordeuropa», in *Haithabu und die frühe Stadtentwicklung im nördlichen Europa*, eds K. Brandt, M. Müller-Wille, C. Radtke, Neumünster, 2002, p. 117-132.

The excavations in the area lack cultural layers, as mentioned earlier, giving us fewer opportunities to date the structures as was possible within the workshop area. From the period ca. 750 to around 800, however, we have excavated a number of regular, permanent buildings. These look like the houses excavated in the last twenty to thirty years in rather large numbers in the west Danish agrarian settlements of the same period. It is not possible from the limited extent of the excavations to say anything precise about the structure of the settlement. If, for example, the settlement had a looser, open structure, reminiscent of an agrarian settlement, or if it was a much more densely settled area, as in Haithabu? How many houses actually belonged to one household? We really don't know.

The burials

Some thirty-five to forty 8th-century graves have been excavated. The prevailing religion was pagan – they believed in the northern gods, such as Odin and Thor, and in an afterworld known as Valhalla. There can be no doubt that Christianity was known in the 8th and 9th centuries; but it was not, generally speaking, the religion of the populace until the late 10th or early 11th century. Burial customs were dominated by cremation graves, sometimes in clay urns and sometimes with grave goods and personal belongings. Only two inhumation graves are known from the 8th century. The dates of all the graves span from the early to late 8th century.

9th century

There were no great changes as Ribe transitioned from the late 8th century into the 9th century. Remnants of regular buildings are found both in the workshop area and to the rear of the workshop area; manufacturing and trading activities remained at a high level; the burial grounds were active and new burials were added. However, at some point during the first half of 9th century, a completely new element to Scandinavian archaeology was added to the town: a ditch clearly demarcating the boundaries of the town. Where it's possible to date the burials, it's clear that those contemporary with the ditch are placed on the outside, to the east, of the ditch (fig. 9, Colour Plates).

The town ditch and the moat

The ditch itself is by no means an impressive feature – a dry ditch only one and a half to two metres wide and no more than one metre deep. A small rampart, composed of soil from the ditch was placed on its inner side.

A running soldier could easily have jumped over the ditch and, thus, it could not have played a defensive role. On the other hand, it is quite clear that the ditch represented a boundary. There are hardly any finds or structures on its exterior, with the exception of the burials. The ditch is thus interpreted as an important element in the control of the town. The king or a king's representative in the town was hereby guaranteeing the market peace within the town. It is possible that there was some form of tax or duty collection on crossing the ditch. In other words, special rules were enforced within the boundaries of the town.

It is possible that the ditch only lasted for a short space of time, some five to ten years. It was then replaced by a regular moat and rampart. As for the town ditch, we only know of its eastern course. Whether both courses stopped at the low lying area to the north or continued on back towards to the river – thus forming a semi-circular enclosure as in Haithabu – is not known at the present time, but it is likely. The replacement of the town ditch by the moat is important, as it must be considered as a regular fortification. The moat was seven to eight metres wide and one to one and a half metres in depth, but still dry at the bottom. Additionally, on the inner side of the moat there are known remnants of a six metre wide rampart of unknown height.

The dating of the town ditch and the following fortification are somewhat uncertain. The town ditch can be dated to the first half of 9th century. It may have lasted only a few years before being rapidly succeeded by a regular fortification, or there could have been a certain time gap between the two.

Ribe ca. AD 850-1050

From some point in the mid-9th century – or maybe a little later (but no later than ca. 900), most settlement traces and finds in Ribe come to an abrupt end. There is no doubt, that dramatic changes took place. The massive growth of cultural layers in the workshop area fades away. The next features we find in that area are traces of a 12th- to 13th-century settlement directly on top of the 9th-century layers. No regular buildings or dendrochronologically dated wells from the second half of 9th century to the mid-11th century are known. No single finds of jewellery of the late 9th or 10th century have ever been found. The town seems to disappear from the archaeological record for no clearly defined reason. It seems as if the fortification from the 9th century stands alone in the landscape, long after activity ceased, leaving a gap until the 1070s at the latest when large-scale activity began again – now on both sides of the river.

This does not mean that the areas on both sides of the river are completely devoid of finds from the mid-9th century to the mid-11th century (fig. 10, Colour Plates). At two places, one on each side of the river, small burial places or grave fields have been partially excavated. The eastern one is dated to somewhere between the late 9th and 11th centuries, while the western one, excavated in late 2008, seems to date from the early 10th century to the 11th century. The graves on both burial grounds are inhumation graves, with hardly any grave goods. Indeed, both burial grounds might belong to some of the earliest Christian graves in the area.

These finds are very important, as they cast light on the period between the rich finds of the 8th to 9th century and the high medieval town from the mid-11th century and onwards.

Ribe is mentioned in the written sources for the first time in the mid-9th century, when the missionary Ansgar, at that time archbishop at Hamburg-Bremen, was given a plot in the city by the Danish King Horik to build a church and the king allowed a priest to take residence in the town. Whether this actually ever happened, we do not know. If it indeed took place, on which side of the river was it? Was it on the northeastern side, within the Viking period town? Or was it on the southwestern side of the river where the 12th-century cathedral is located today?

In 948 a bishop of Ribe, Leofdag, is mentioned at a meeting at Ingelheim in Germany. The question is, whether the graves close to the existing cathedral on the southern side of the river relate to the community of Leofdag and his successors? If this is the case, why aren't there any substantial finds from that period? Did the Christian church lie more or less alone, with only a minor settlement, a single farmstead or magnate farm beside it?

It is worth underlining the fact that there are finds from the 10th and 11th centuries in the environs of Ribe. Indeed, there is no general lack of settlements in the area.

Whatever the situation was in the 10th and 11th centuries, the town was re-established in the 1050s. The town rapidly gained momentum and expanded on both sides of the river to become the most important town of western Denmark from the 11th to the 13th century.

The lingering question is what exactly happened in Ribe in the middle of the 9th century? Why did such dramatic changes take place? There is no doubt that the majority of the activity in Ribe ceased to exist. The formation of cultural layers in the workshop area comes to a halt and the town's major fortification was not maintained or rebuilt. The minting of coins and the use of coins as payment stopped. In Scandinavia as a whole, the hack-silver economy was predominant for the next century or so. This

was also the case around Ribe, which in the 8th and 9th centuries used regular coins as payment, at least in relation to foreign trade.

As I see it today, the reasons behind all of this must be sought outside of Ribe. The 9th century in northwestern Europe was a period of great unrest. We know that the Carolingian empire, at the death of Louis the Pious in 840, was divided between his three sons and a nephew, resulting in an intense rivalry between them. We know from written sources, that there were also rivalries within the family of the Danish kings – some fought each other, others made alliances with the Carolingian emperor – who was otherwise normally the enemy. All groups were trying to get to the throne by any means. Viking attacks gained momentum beginning in the 830-40s. Dorestad was burned down, Hamburg and Paris attacked. The organisation of international trade in the VIII and the first half of the 9th century, centred as it was around a few large trading hubs spread around the North Sea, simply could not survive these great changes.

Ribe, however, somehow survived. The town may have been drawn into the sphere of the Carolingian church during its attempt to Christianise the Danish in the mid-11th century, shortly before the trading activities of the workshop area and the town in general faced the Viking period's financial, economic and social crises.

