

Concluding comments: Some problems and comparisons

By Peter Sawyer

The 'critical and provocative' comments that I have been asked to make will not be on the separate papers but on the conference as a whole.¹ After some observations on the problems that can be encountered when experts in different disciplines use each other's results, I will draw attention to some aspects of the wider background that are relevant to, and cast some light on, urban development in northern Europe.

Although the participants in this conference, drawn from various parts of Scandinavia and around the Baltic, represent many of the disciplines that are needed in the study of early urbanization, there are at least two major omissions; numismatics and law – topics recently illuminated respectively by the *Sigtuna Papers* edited by Kenneth Jonsson and Brita Malmér, and by Carsten Müller-Boysen's book *Kaufmannsschutz und Handelsrecht im frühmittelalterlichen Nord-europa*. That is not a criticism. Limits have to be drawn and there will, we hope, be opportunities to include specialists in these subjects in future conferences.

This conference has been a valuable opportunity to exchange information about new discoveries and investigations, and the publication of the papers will make this current research more widely known. It has, in addition, helped towards a better understanding of different types of evidence by allowing speci-

alists in different fields of study to learn about each other's methods and assumptions, although such lessons are not often presented so bluntly as by David Robinson. As he emphasized, it is useful to know what questions can be given sensible answers; it is no less useful to know what the answers mean. It is, for example, desirable that anyone using dates determined with the help of Carbon 14 should know that they can lie anywhere within the range of two standard deviations before and after the stated central date. Ignorance or neglect of this can lead to misleading results.

It is obvious to most people that the interpretation of archaeological evidence requires training and experience. It is less obvious that the same is true of written evidence, a truth that Christian Radtke has clearly demonstrated here. Texts are, regrettably, too often used as though the only skill needed is the ability to read. To make matters worse, early medieval texts are often 'studied' in translation, and are rarely treated as a whole. It is, moreover, worth emphasizing that the texts for this period were all written by hand and that the printed versions we normally use are the result of editorial decisions that may be questionable. The authenticity of some texts is uncertain and if we have to rely on copies we must be on guard against misreadings or deliberate alterations. The purposes and sources of authors also

need to be taken into account. Of course, historians do not always agree, but any rational discussion of their differences must pay due regard to these, and other, commonplaces of textual study.

Although this conference has been concerned with the medieval towns of Scandinavia and the Baltic region it is worth giving some attention to the wider background. The towns of northern Europe did not develop in isolation; it was the demand in western Europe for northern produce that was largely responsible for their creation; many of their institutions were modelled on those of towns in other parts of Europe – the law of Lübeck, for example, was a modified version of the law of Soest in Westphalia. Later in the Middle Ages a significant proportion of the inhabitants of the major Scandinavian towns as well as of all the towns along the southern coast of the Baltic were Germans.

The first stage in the urbanization in the north, the establishment in the eighth century of trade and craft centres from Ribe to Staraja Ladoga was itself an extension of the process that began in the late seventh century with the creation of *emporium* in the Frankish and English kingdoms, the most important and best known being Dorestad and Quentovic in Frankia; London and York in England.² *Hamwic*, the precursor of Southampton, began a little later – at much the same time as Ribe.³ It has been argued that the commercial activity evidenced by these *emporium* was a result of developments in the Islamic world but there is little, if any, support for that claim.⁴ One of the main causes should, in fact, be sought in Frankia itself. As Ian Wood has shown the civil war that followed the assassination of the Merovingian king Childeric III in 675 was exceptionally disruptive and made communications within Frankia hazard-

ous.⁵ Sea-transport thus became more attractive and the trade along the coast of Gaul and with the British Isles, that had continued on a small scale since the collapse of the Roman Empire in the west, intensified. Another factor in this commercial expansion was that shortly before the year 700 there was a sudden increase in the amount of silver available in Frisia and the lower Rhineland, making possible the production of huge quantities of silver coins in that region.⁶ Many were exported across the Channel thus enabling English mints to produce larger numbers of coins. These silver coins, known as sceattas, from Continental as well as English mints, were widely distributed in England and concentrations of them reveal the existence of local markets and fairs, some of which survived to provide the nucleus of 'new towns' in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁷ Some of the silver also reached Scandinavia, indeed, more loose or scattered sceattas have been found at Ribe than in any other *emporium*; the only larger concentration is from Domburg, a site of uncertain status.⁸

The source of this silver is unknown. It may have come from the Harz mountains. Recent investigations have shown that silver was being produced there already by the fourth century A.D.⁹ Whatever the source, the supply apparently diminished and may even have ceased by the middle of the eighth century, for the sceattas being produced then were lighter and heavily debased.¹⁰ In the seventh century coins were produced by moneyers for magnates and churchmen as well as kings; minting was not a royal monopoly. The gold coins produced in Dorestad, Quentovic, London and York earlier in the seventh century may well have been royal, but most of the silver sceattas struck in these places and in other *empo-*

ria in the early eighth century were not.¹¹ They were, rather, mercantile coins produced for and used by traders, much like the coins produced in Gotland from about 1140 that were used widely in the Baltic region.¹²

There is no direct evidence to show who was responsible for the development of the *emporia* in western Europe. The Carolingians have been given credit for the expansion of Dorestad but that cannot be right, for it began when the Franks had temporarily lost control of Frisia.¹³ The huge production of coins in Dorestad happened in the first years of the eighth century before Charles Martel restored Frankish authority there. The most likely patrons of the expansion were the Frisian rulers Aldgisl and Radbod, but whether they took the initiative or simply responded to initiatives taken by traders or others is not known. It is likely that traders and craftsmen in all the *emporia* looked to local rulers for protection but the extent and form of their authority is uncertain. It was, however, not long before more powerful rulers gained control of many of these *emporia* and began to collect toll in them. In the 730s the Mercian overlords of southern England began to grant toll privileges in London and Kentish *emporia*.¹⁴ It was at much the same time that the Carolingians, emerging successful from the Frankish civil war, gained control of Dorestad and other Frankish *emporia*.

In northern Europe powerful overlords may similarly have 'taken over' trading places. That seems to have happened at Hedeby. Its foundation involved not only the removal of merchants from the tributary trading place *Reric* but also the abandonment of *Südsiedlung* in favour of the site chosen by King Godfred. It is perhaps worth considering whether the shifts of the sites of other trading places in the

Baltic discussed by Dieter Warnke may have happened in similar circumstances.

The goods imported to the north from western Europe, the most durable and best preserved being mill stones and pottery, were distributed in Scandinavia through the local markets and fairs in which Scandinavian produce had long been exchanged.¹⁵ It is, however, likely that new markets were established as the volume and variety of imports, and of internal exchanges, grew.¹⁶ The most important of the traditional markets were associated with religious festivals, some, perhaps most, of which were held in the winter when overland travel was easiest. Some of these cult centres, such as Odense and Viborg, developed later into medieval towns, but they did not become *emporia* in the eighth and ninth centuries, for those had to be in places and held at times suitable for trading ships.¹⁷ Visby is an apparent exception but it did not become a centre for overseas trade until the late tenth century.

There are, therefore, indications that in northern as in western Europe the *emporia* were in effect grafted onto older trading networks. They were new institutions, very different from the places that had earlier served as markets and craft centres. Recent studies of the material found at York and *Hamwic* suggest that although luxurious and valuable goods passed through these *emporia*, few if any people of high status and great wealth lived in them.¹⁸ The diet was monotonous and the craftsmen working in them used a limited range of low value materials to make a limited range of goods. They are therefore very different from the so-called elite sites, commonly religious communities, such as Whitby, Flixborough and Brandon, in which craftsmen and craftswomen worked with precious materials to

make high quality objects.¹⁹ The small concentrations of sceattas found in several of these places (Flixborough and Brandon have each yielded over 20) suggest that they were also the sites of markets or fairs.²⁰ One very well documented Frankish example is the abbey of St Riquier. A survey of 831 shows that the abbey was the focus of a town with perhaps 7000 inhabitants. There were 2500 secular *mansiones* each paying 12 denarii and a food rent to the abbey. Many crafts were represented, including smiths, saddlers, dyers, fullers, cobblers, and butchers, and there was a market rendering 40 *solidi* a week.²¹

Although coins facilitated trade, they were not essential. The sceattas contributed to the expansion of commerce in western and northern Europe, but internal trade had happened earlier without coins. What is more, commerce, both long-distance and local, continued when coins were in short supply. To judge by the numbers found scattered in the *emporia*, coins were used much less in the ninth and tenth centuries than in the early part of the eighth century. That may be partly due to a general shortage of coins after about 750, but even in the twelfth century and later, when there were large numbers of coins circulating in England, they do not seem to have been much used in towns. For example, only 12 coins struck between 1100 and 1500 have been found loosely scattered in Southampton (with four others that are unidentifiable). That is a remarkable contrast with Southampton's eighth-century predecessor, *Hamwic*, where 127 sceattas have been discovered as scattered finds.²² This suggests that craftsmen and merchants had less need to use coins after the Norman Conquest than in the eighth century. The most likely explanation is that in medieval Southampton, thanks to the supervision of efficient

royal agents, credit could be granted, or payments deferred, while in the eighth century settlements had to be made without delay, if necessary in cash. It may, therefore, have been thanks to the Mercians and the Carolingians that the use of coins diminished in the *emporia* in the course of the eighth century. The fact that relatively more coins of the eleventh century and later have been found in Scandinavian than in English towns may be because royal authority and royal agents were less effective in Scandinavia than in England.

The combination of archaeological, numismatic and written evidence shows that from the eighth century to the eleventh there were in the English and Frankish kingdoms various opportunities for buying and selling, or exchanging, goods. Some were under the control of royal agents; others were supervised by churches. Merchants may themselves have organized some trading places, while others were traditional occasions for local or regional exchanges. There were also itinerant traders and craftsmen. The incompleteness of our record is revealed by incidental references in Domesday Book for Lincolnshire, showing that otherwise unrecorded coastal havens were visited by numerous ships in the mid- eleventh century, implying a lively coastal traffic about which our sources are virtually silent.²³ We do not even know what the ships were carrying, but can guess that they collected salt and wool. We may expect similar complexities in Scandinavia, although with many differences of detail. The process of urbanization cannot be understood by only studying towns. That is as true in Scandinavia as anywhere else, despite the paucity of evidence. Rural markets and other aspects of the economic networks in which Scandinavian towns even-

tually came to have a central place are exceedingly obscure, but more attention needs to be paid to them.²⁴

Notes

1. This paper was written in 1992. It has not been possible to revise it thoroughly, but a few references have been added.
2. For this and other *emporia* see Clarke and Ambrosiani 1991.
3. Morton 1992 pp. 26-8.
4. The arguments of Bolin 1952 and of Hodges and Whitehouse 1983 on this topic will be discussed in detail in my forthcoming book, *Wealth in Anglo-Saxon England*.
5. Wood 1993 pp. 271-2.
6. Grierson and Blackburn 1986 pp. 149-54, 184-9; Metcalf 1993.
7. Metcalf 1993; Sawyer 1986 pp. 66-7; Sawyer 1998, pp. 176-7, 253-61.
8. Michael Metcalf (1996, pp. 403-9) has argued convincingly that the so-called 'Wodan-monster' sceattas, many of which have been found in Ribe, were produced there.
9. Klappauf, Linke and Brockner 1990.
10. Grierson and Blackburn 1986 pp. 97-102.
11. Grierson and Blackburn 1986 pp. 158-9. Metcalf 1993 argues that English sceattas were produced for kings.
12. Lagerqvist 1970 pp. 75-81.
13. Wood 1993 pp. 298-301.
14. Kelly 1992.
15. Sawyer 1986.
16. Resi 1987; Näsman 1990.
17. Sawyer 1986.
18. Morton 1992 pp. 55-8; Bourdillon and Coy 1980; O'Connor 1991.
19. Webster and Backhouse 1991 pp. 81-8, 94-101, 141-6.
20. 53 eighth- and ninth-century coins have been found at Flixborough (Sawyer 1998, p. 255).
21. Lot 1984 pp. 306-8.
22. Hinton 1986; Andrews 1988.
23. Sawyer 1986 p. 63; Sawyer 1998, pp. 21-2, 182-3.
24. Howard Clarke (1998, pp. 339-40, 363-4) questions the common assumption that archaeologically identified early trading centres can usefully be described as towns, or even proto-towns. See also Lilja 1996.

References

- Andrews, P. (ed.): *Southampton Finds, volume 1, the coins and pottery from Hamwic*, Southampton 1988.
- Bolin, S.: Mohammed, Charlemagne and Ruric, *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 1952, pp. 5-39.
- Bourdillon J. and Coy, J.: The Animal Bones, in P. Holdsworth, *Excavations at Melbourne Street, Southampton 1971-76* (CBA Research Report 33), London 1980, pp. 79-121.
- Clarke, H. and Ambrosiani, B.: *Towns in the Viking Age*, Leicester 1991.
- Clarke, H. B.: Proto-Towns and Towns in Ireland and Britain in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries, *Ireland and Scandinavia in the Early Viking Age*, ed. H. B. Clarke, M. Ni Mhaonaigh and R. O. Floin, Dublin 1998, pp. 331-80.
- Grierson, P. and Blackburn, M.: *Medieval European Coinage, 1, The Early Middle Ages (5th-10th centuries)*, Cambridge 1986.
- Hinton, D.A.: Coins and commercial centres in Anglo-Saxon England, *Anglo-Saxon Monetary History*, ed. M.A.S. Blackburn, Leicester 1986, pp. 11-26.
- Hodges, R. and Whitehouse, D.: *Mohammed, Charlemagne and the Origins of Europe*, London 1983.
- Jonsson, K. and Malmer, B.: *Sigtuna Papers, Proceedings of the Sigtuna Symposium on Viking-Age Coinage 1-4 June 1989* (Commentationes de nummis saeculorum ix-xi in Suecia repertis, n.s. 6), Stockholm 1990.
- Kelly, S.: Trading privileges from eighth-century England, *Early Medieval Europe* 1, 1992, pp. 3-28.
- Klappauf, L., Linke, F.-A., Brockner, W.: Interdisziplinäre Untersuchungen zur Montanarchäologie im westlichen Harz, *Zeitschrift für Archäologie* 24, 1990, pp. 207-42.
- Lagerqvist, L.O.: *Svenska mynt under Vikingatid och Medeltid samt Gotländska mynt*, Stockholm 1970.
- Lilja, S.: A 'proto-town' stage: some tentative reflections on the historical emergence of urbanism, *The Emergence of Towns. Archaeology and Early Urbanization in Non-Roman, North-West Europe*, ed. L. Nilsson and S. Lilja (Studies in Urban History 14), Stockholm 1996, pp. 15-28.
- Lot, F. (ed.): *Hariulf, Chronique de l'abbaye de Saint-Riquier*, Paris 1894.
- Metcalf, D.M.: *Thrymsas and Sceattas in the Ashmolean Museum Oxford*, 1, London 1993.
- Metcalf, D. M.: Viking-Age numismatics 2: Coinage in the Northern Lands in Merovingian and Carolingian times, *Numismatic Chronicle* 156, 1996, pp. 399-428.

- Morton, A.D. (ed.): *Excavations at Hamwic*, volume 1 (CBA Research Report 84), London 1992.
- Müller-Boysen, C.: *Kaufmannsschutz und Handelsrecht im frühmittelalterlichen Nordeuropa*, Neumünster 1990.
- Näsman, U.: Om fjärrhandel i Sydsandinavians yngre järnålder, *hikuin* 16, 1990, pp. 89-118.
- O'Connor, T. P.: *Bones from 46-54 Fishergate* (Archaeology of York 15/4, The Animal Bones), 1991.
- Resi, H.G.: Reflections on Viking Age Local Trade in Stone Products, *Proceedings of the Tenth Viking Congress; Larkollen, Norway, 1985*, ed. J. Knirk, Oslo 1987, pp. 95-102.
- Sawyer, P.: Early Fairs and Markets in England and Scandinavia, *The Market in History*, ed. B.L. Anderson and A.J.H. Latham, London 1986, pp. 59-77.
- Sawyer, P.: *Anglo-Saxon Lincolnshire*, Lincoln 1998.
- Sawyer, P.: *Wealth in Anglo-Saxon England*, forthcoming.
- Webster, L. and Backhouse, J.: *The Making of England; Anglo-Saxon Art and Culture AD 600-900*, London 1991.
- Wood, I.N.: *The Merovingian Kingdoms 450-751*, London 1993.