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ARTICLE

A short comment on the early development of Odense

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ABSTRACT

In a recent overview of the material from eighth to twelfth century Odense, Runge and Henriksen propose to move the date of the town's foundation by a hundred years, to the early tenth century. In this brief comment we challenge their interpretation of the earliest Odense, and point to some problems with their definition of what constitutes towns and proto-towns, as well as the analysis of the material they present.

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Mads Runge and Mogens Bo Henriksen's article 'The origins of Odense – new aspects of early urbanisation in southern Scandinavia' in the latest issue of the Danish Journal of Archaeology contains an analysis of the material from the earliest phases of Odense, along with an eminently useful overview of the material in the form of an extensive appendix. There are, however, several propositions in the article that warrants further discussion.

Terms such as urban, urbanity, urban factors, emporia, early towns, towns and 'proto-towns' appear frequently in the article, though only town and proto-town are attempted defined. The definition of proto-town proposed by Runge and Henriksen is, except for some very slight alterations, quite conventional for medieval towns. In their paper, the following criteria are considered to be important: towns should have a certain population density, a permanent settlement of a certain size, and a majority of the population subsisting by trade and craft production (Runge and Henriksen 2018, p. 12, 17). This fits well with both medieval towns and the earlier emporia – though it is naturally an arbitrary definition where one can debate what a 'certain size' indicates, as well as what constitutes a sufficiently high population density. In this regard the last criterion is the least ambiguous of the three, as it is difficult to establish a threshold for when the other two describe a town rather than a village. The differences they seize upon between towns and proto-towns are the necessity of towns having two or more churches (following Andrén (1985), though this is less of a universal town marker than a way to quantitatively evaluate the hierarchy of settlements within the specific socio-economic context of the Middle Ages), a different fiscal structure, and the presence of minting (Runge and Henriksen 2018, p. 11, 17). As only a minority of the medieval Danish towns actually had a mint – and then often only for a limited period – it hardly seems to be a defining criterion, nor are different fiscal structures always easy to prove even in the Middle Ages.

After chastising researchers for focusing on the year 1000 as a turning point in the history of urbanisation, when Christianity seriously begins to 'define the king's position, both mentally and physically, in the urban space, and urban characteristics consequently become clearer and more -numerous', Runge and Henriksen claim that 'it is obvious that if the definition of a town is to be based on these factors, then no settlement predating AD 1000 – apart from emporia such as Ribe, Haithabu, Kaupang and Birka – will be able to meet these requirements' (Runge and Henriksen 2018, p. 21). There are two problems with this. First, if researchers were so

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blinded by Christianity and all that brought with it – especially churches, which Runge and Henriksen describe as 'crucial' (Runge and Henriksen 2018, p. 12, 17) – it is difficult to understand how they have identified Ribe, Haithabu, Kaupang and Birka as towns (and some researchers have been careful to not label them towns, and rather use the term emporia to signify precisely that these differ from the later medieval towns). In their critique of the 'inflexible professional preconceptions and traditions' (Runge and Henriksen 2018, p. 20), they seem to have forgotten that neither Olaf Olsen nor Susan Reynolds – whose research they base their definitions on – seem to consider churches crucial in their definition of what a medieval town is, and the more recent and updated *Danmarks byer i middelalderen* (2016) considers it an indicator rather than criterion – and not something that is useful before the medieval period in Scandinavia (Poulsen and Kristensen 2016, p. 15). Second, Runge and Henriksen seem to forget that the function of these definitions is to do precisely what they accuse them of doing: helping researchers separate sites that do not match the proposed criteria from sites that do, in order to consistently analyse both the sites and the society in which they existed. Interestingly, herein lies the greatest potential for the study: to bring to our attention a new type of sites that can meaningfully be examined through the lens of urbanisation.

The question remains, however, whether the material supports the idea that Odense in the tenth century can be characterised as a proto-town according to Runge and Henriksen's definition. As noted earlier, the strength of the article lies in the comprehensive overview of the material; however, this also makes it easy to spot just how little there is. From phases 1 and 2 there are four pit-houses, a possible dwelling house, a pit, two to three longhouses, either a house or a fence, and possibly a house (Runge and Henriksen 2018, p. 12–14). Some structures are dated to the older phase (700–900), others to the younger (900–1000) and some are broadly placed between 700 and 1000. The data is – as they acknowledge – limited and it is fair to question what it really represents. Particularly interesting are the longhouses which are also commonly associated with contemporary rural settlements. Unfortunately, they do not discuss this in depth, simply mentioning that similar longhouses in agrarian settlements are classified as permanent structures (Runge and Henriksen 2018, p. 17). With regard to how the data is used and held up against their previously discussed definition of proto-towns there are several problems.

First, there is the question of population density. Either there is a misunderstanding of what the term means or the study attempts to use the size of the settlement as a stand-in for density without explaining the relevance. Runge and Henriksen estimate that the proto-town of Odense covered *c.* 500 × 100 m^2 in phases 1 and 2, but there is no discussion of how they arrived at said estimate (Runge and Henriksen 2018, p. 17). In the appendix, they refer to a hypothesis of the placement of a Viking Age ditch, which they subsequently admit has never been shown archaeologically despite a small excavation in the relevant area (Runge and Henriksen 2018, p. 46). A better approach would perhaps have been to ignore population density, as there are simply too many issues when it comes to measuring this. Second, there is the issue of what constitutes a permanent settlement of a 'certain size'. In the paper, no indication is given of how many people would presumably live in Odense at around, say, the year 900. This is fair enough as population size is generally difficult to establish, though of course this means that it is not a criterion that can be examined in this context. Since both of these criteria are difficult to investigate based on the archaeological record, and as both size and population have been considered arbitrary terms when defining urbanity (Wirth 1938, p. 4), the argument hinges on whether the third and most important criterion – that the majority of the population subsist by trade and crafts – can be established. Unfortunately, it quickly becomes confusing, and at one point they instead pose the question of 'whether *any form of trade* took place in Odense in the centuries prior to AD 1000' (Runge and Henriksen 2018, p. 17, our italics). This – which does not satisfy the criterion of a majority of the population subsisting by trade and crafts outlined above – is left uncertain, though they argue that the pit-houses at Mageløs/Klaregade and Vestergade 70–74 are indications of some form of trade, finding that 'the finds assemblages from the pit-houses at Mageløs/Klaregade and Vestergade 70–74 is of an extent and a character that make it seem likely that these items were not exclusively intended for self-sufficiency', and goes on to

state that 'there are no other known indications that, in phases 1 and 2, the inhabitants subsisted primarily by craft production – and perhaps trade' (Runge and Henriksen 2018, p. 17).

There is, in other words, no compelling argument to be made that this site fulfils any of the criteria they themselves list for what a proto-town should look like. Nonetheless, the most significant lack is their failure to specify what separates a proto-town, such as they observe in Odense, from a village. This becomes obvious in their conclusion when they write that 'the hiatus in the finds and the sporadic archaeological record should perhaps not be interpreted as a break in development but more an indication that towns from the ninth and tenth centuries *cannot be expected to stand out and differ markedly from agrarian settlements'*. (Runge and Henriksen 2018, p. 23, our italics)

If the material remains cannot be distinguished from those of an agrarian settlement, then is it not likely that what we are looking at is a village rather than a town, as it is continually alluded to throughout the article? Similarities with villages are referred to with regard to the estimated settlement size and the placement of the church (Runge and Henriksen 2018, p. 17, 20), and the evidence they present (longhouses, pit-houses, production debris), seems similar in nature to what is found on contemporary rural settlements, such as the latest phases of Vorbasse (Hvass 1979, pp. 381–91). Odense should perhaps be seen in connection to the stationary villages which were established on Funen from the 7th century onwards (Hansen 2011). The decision to call the settlement a proto-town seems to come about because it is located in the same place which later became a medieval town – not surprisingly the same area which defines the geographical boundaries of the study (Runge and Henriksen 2018, p. 3).

While Runge and Henriksen's study contains an impressive overview of both the material from Odense and the landscape it was situated in, it fails to provide a convincing argument that what we are looking at in the ninth and tenth century is an urban site. A discussion not of criteria but of what makes a place urban might have led to a more nuanced view of Odense in the ninth and tenth centuries, as would an open discussion of the possibility that it can be classified as a village rather than a town.

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