

Contextualizing an early medieval village: An aristocratic family in Southern Jutland, its landed wealth, and its connection to a central Danish *thing* place

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ABSTRACT

The remains of a 12th to 14th century village, Petersborg, were recently excavated at the foot of Urnehoved Bank in Southern Jutland near the famous regional Urnehoved Thing, known from the 12th century onwards. It is suggested that a large farm in the village was inhabited by a bailiff, and that the settlement was owned by an aristocratic family named Urne. One of the members of this family is documented by an inscription on a tombstone in the church of Bjolderup, 5 km from the site. The family and its surname can be followed for centuries, and a high medieval seal matrix with their arms, found in St Clemens Church in the town of Schleswig, indicates that they were close to royal power. Written sources show that they had land in mid- and west-Schleswig. We point to a number of high-medieval settlements with the suffix 'bøl' in the parishes of Uge and Bjolderup near the site and suggest that the Urne family founded these clearance villages. In conclusion, we argue that Petersborg, the Urne family and the Urnehoved Thing should be seen together, thus contributing to our understanding of aristocratic elite groups in the early and high Middle Ages.

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The focus of this article is the excavation of a deserted and unnamed village in Southern Jutland, dating to the period c.1100-1300. We place this settlement excavation, which we here name Petersborg after the nearest present-day farm, in its broadest possible context, focussing on an aristocratic elite group, which presumably owned the village.

The questions of who lived in the village and how it was established are explored taking inspiration from the work of the Swedish archaeologist Anders Håkansson. By applying a model in which the size of the farms is combined with the material evidence, Håkansson suggests the existence of a social hierarchy within the rural settlements from the Viking Period to the high Middle Ages in Haland, Sweden (Håkansson 2012).

We identify the elite group of founders and owners of the village as a family associated with the area west of the present-day town of Aabenraa, in particular to the parishes of Bjolderup and Uge. In contrast with previous research, which has described early medieval Southern Jutland as dominated by a large group of relatively free farmers with farms of

equal size (Poulsen 2003a, 424; Søvsø 2020), our analysis of the archaeological material suggests that our aristocratic family was not the only elite family in Southern Jutland in the 12th and 13th century, thus contributing to further understanding of the inequality of the social landscape of early medieval Denmark (Poulsen 2023).

In this article, we also place our investigation in a wider regional and national context. The members of the family in question had the surname 'Urne', as documented by a runic inscription on a tombstone in the church of Bjolderup and by a number of written documents presented below, and the fate and identity of the Urne family was evidently closely connected to the large Urne Wood, which covered the Urnehoved Bank between Bjolderup and Uge. We argue that the central north-south road in Jutland, the so-called *Hærvej*, went across this marked barrier of moraine clays and that central assemblies, *thing*, were held at the Urnehoved Bank.

We further argue that the position of the Urne family was achieved exactly through the possession of this central place. The site of the Urne-



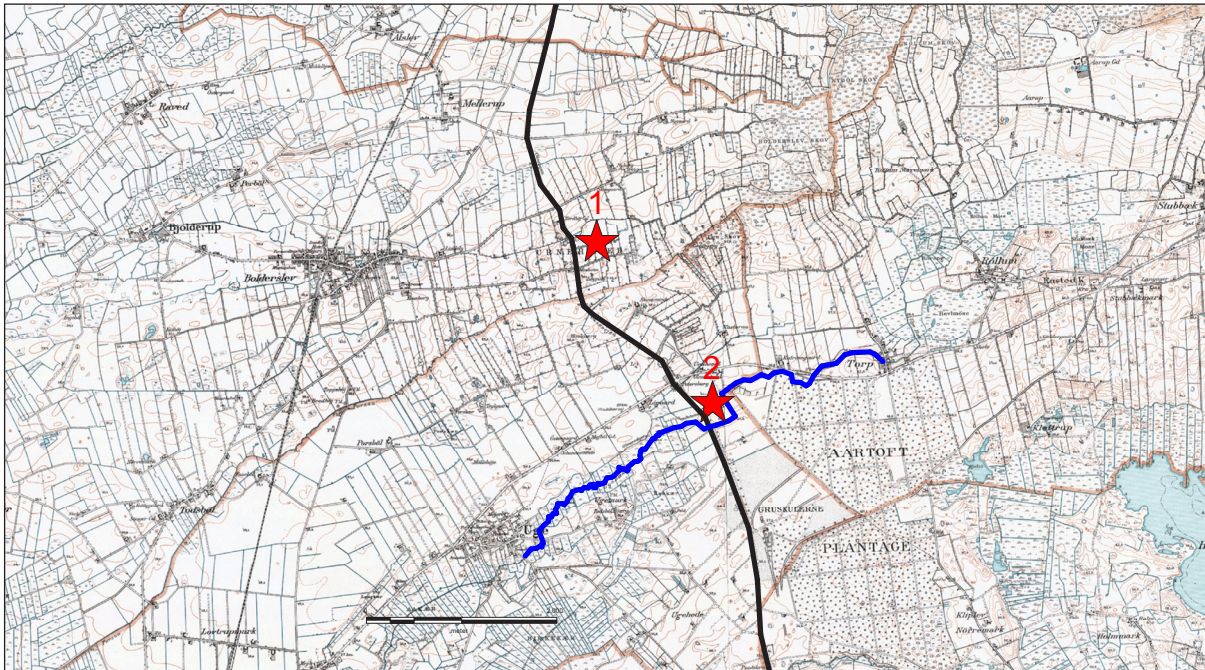


Figure 1. The presumed location of the Urnehoved Thing (1) and the excavation site of Petersborg (2). The central route of Jutland, the so-called *Hærvej*, is outlined in black, and the brook, Uge Bæk, in blue (Reproduced with permission, Styrelsen for Dataforsyning og Effektivisering (De lave målebordsblade). Additions by the authors).

hoved Thing ties our case study to national Danish history in the 12th and 13th centuries and to the government of the Danish kingdom. In this way, we hope to contribute to the general North European debate on the nature of Viking Age and early medieval regional assemblies, the development of landscapes and manorial structures, as well as the rise of early Danish aristocratic families and their transformation from magnates to knights.

The deserted village at Petersborg

First, we present the excavated settlement, which we argue was owned by the aristocratic Urne family. During excavation campaigns spanning several years, Museum Sønderjylland – Arkæologi has excavated the remains of a deserted village situated at the foot of the Urnehoved Bank in Southern Jutland, some two kilometres south of the modern memorial site of the Urnehoved Thing (Figure 1; HAM5318 Petersborg, Uge sogn Sb. 95, Hartvig unpublished). The village is not mentioned in written sources, and its name is therefore unknown. We employ the name Petersborg here as the archaeological case name.

The oldest phase of the village dates to the 12th century, and it was deserted or moved during the 14th century (Hartvig and Sørensen 2021). The village was situated in the eastern part of Uge Parish. Today – and assumedly also in the Middle Ages – the so-called *Hærvej* runs just west of the settlement. The brook Uge Bæk runs south of the excavated area, but it had a different course originally. On the oldest map of the area, the *Videnskabernes Selskabs* map from 1805, we can see that Uge Bæk runs east-west through the excavated area. The map details a small crescent stream of the Uge Bæk running north of the area. During the excavation, it became clear that the Uge Bæk originally had the same course as on the oldest map – but also that it had been moved when the village was founded. Perhaps the crescent-formed stream to the north was established at that point in time. The excavations have revealed the remains of two settlements: an older, northern settlement dating to the 12th century, which was replaced by a younger settlement further south dating to the 13th-14th century (Figure 2).

In the beginning of the 12th century, ‘the founder’s farm’ was erected on the highest elevation in the landscape (Hartvig unpublished; Hartvig and Sørensen 2021). This farm (G1)



Figure 2. General plan of the Petersborg excavation, shown on the Prussian map from the 1880s. Medieval buildings consisting of rows of postholes are marked in black. The dark green shades indicate ditches, the dark blue shades wells; red shades indicate fireplaces (Reproduced with permission, Styrelsen for Dataforsyning og Effektivisering. Additions by the authors).

consisted in its first phase of a relatively large main building with slightly curved walls and had an aisled section along the northern wall. The building was 24 m long and its maximum width including the aisled section was 7.5 m. One or two secondary buildings belonged to this farm with a ditch and a fence marking the farm's croft. The remains of the ditch and fence structure were

recorded during the excavation: from the brook northwest of the farm, it ran straight south, parallel to the present-day course of the *Hervej*. After some 250 m, the ditch turned east, ending after another 260 m at the brook Uge Bæk. How and where the farm was enclosed towards the east is unknown (Figure 3).

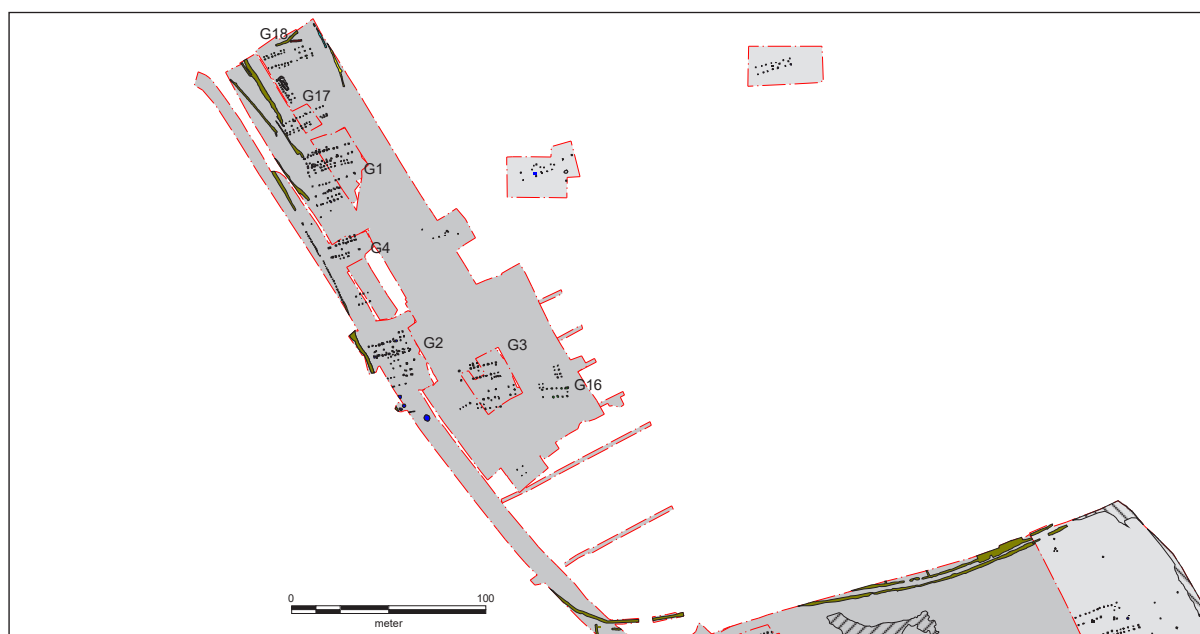


Figure 3. Detail plan of the northern and oldest village at the Petersborg site. The large ditch is seen west and south of the village.

The excavation of 'the founder's farm' (G1) revealed three main buildings reflecting three phases. The main building was rebuilt on almost the same spot, *i.e.* the western gable was facing the large ditch. Shortly after the construction of G1, another six farms were built around it (G2, G3, G4, G16, G17, and G18). The farms G2 and G17 existed in two phases, while the remaining farms existed in one. All these farms were situated along the present course of the *Hervej*, indicating that the road had its present-day course. Furthermore, it is clear that the layout of the village in this phase was a road village, situated along a road (Hastrup 1964, 175).

That the farms existed in one, two, or three phases may be the result of the division of farms, or of a successive establishment of new farms. We believe that what is seen here is the division of a farm. In this way, farm G1 was divided into three after one generation, *i.e.* G2, G17, and a second phase of G1. After another generation, G1, G2, and G17 were divided again, and the remaining four farms (G3, G4, G16, and G18) were erected. Whether the division of the farm is a result of division of inheritance or relocation is not clear. In this way, these four farms existed at the same time as the second phases of G2 and G17, and the third phase of G1. The large enclosure may be interpreted as a demarcation of the settlement's infield.

In its last phase, the northern settlement consisted of seven farms all placed along the present-day course of the *Hervej*. During all phases, the main building of G1 was larger than the main buildings of the other contemporary farms. The difference in size shows that G1 retained a certain superior position towards the other units, which we will come back to. Assuming that a post-built construction on sand lasts some 25-30 years, the oldest settlement would have been abandoned during the period 1175-1190 (Sørensen 2011, 229). After this first phase, the settlement moved *c.* 200 m further south (Figure 4). Its layout changed in this phase, and the farms were now arranged in a horse-shoe-shaped layout around an open central area. Towards the south and the east, the extent of the settlement was confined by a wetland, whereas the already mentioned ditch marked the northern limit, and the present-day course of the *Hervej* marked the western.

The excavation of the southern settlement revealed the remains of eleven farms. Several of these farms existed in only one phase, whereas other farms existed in up to five phases. The farm with five building phases (G12) also stands out in terms of its size: the croft and the main buildings belong to the largest of the settlement's farms. Differences in the building phases of the individual crofts re-

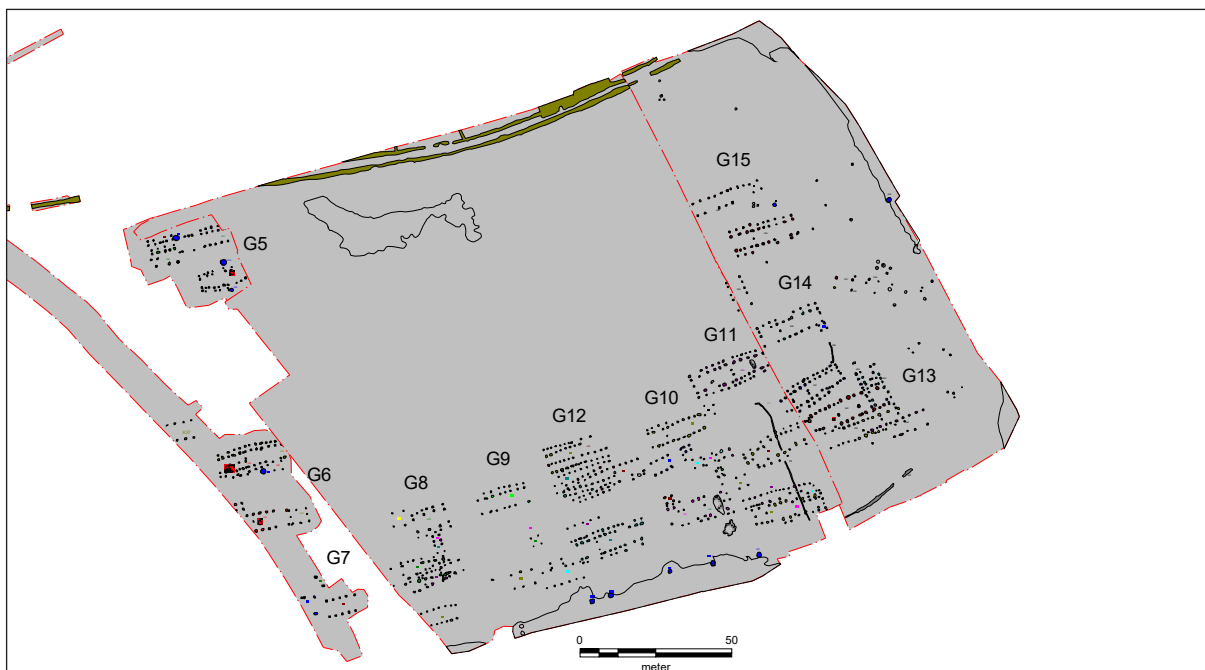


Figure 4. Detail plan of the southern and youngest village at the Petersborg site. Wetlands are situated south and east of the village. They must have functioned as natural boundaries for the settlement.

veal that not all crofts were in use at the same time. Instead, some crofts must have been left unsettled. It is uncertain whether this reflects a successive process of settlement, or whether some farms relocated away from the settlement or were deserted earlier than others. The farms consisted of a main building, one or two secondary buildings, and a well. Despite the lack of fences or ditches, the set position and orientation of the main buildings, of which the gables respected that of the predecessors and the neighbours, suggest the presence of a set structure of the village croft. The east-west orientation of the main buildings was almost identical. Five main buildings, each on their individual croft, stood out by their slightly southwest/northeast orientation, thus infringing on the 'invisible' border of the croft. This change in the location of the buildings represents a new phase and implies a change of the layout of the crofts and of the settlement's overall structure. These five main buildings all belonged to farms with a long continuity. The abandonment or resettlement of the village is assumed to have taken place during the 14th century. This date is based on four radiocarbon dates from wall posts of the main building K63, which has been dated to the period 1269-1381 (Table 1).

The date is supported by evidence from farm G12 for which the main building existed in five phases. Assumedly, each phase lasted 25-30 years, and the last phase must have been constructed around 1300 and abandoned 25-30 years later. The disappearance of the settlement fits very well with the comprehensive regional changes and contraction of the settlement structure which took place during the difficult years of the 14th century (Poulsen 2003b, 493f).

Turning to the artefactual evidence, the pottery constitutes a homogeneous group of locally produced wares consisting of almost exclusively globular grey ware pots; only very few glazed sherds from jugs were found (Figure 5a). No other imported wares were found. Other large groups include slag



A



B



C



D

Figure 5. Selected finds from the Petersborg excavation. A. "Kugeltopf" ritually placed upside down under the floor of farm G2. Height 18 cm. B. Gold plated ring, detector find at farm G1. C. Pfennig (denar) minted around 1180 in Aachen by Emperor Friedrich Barbarossa. From farm G12. D. Pfennig (denar) minted 1168-1175 in Cologne by Archbishop Philipp von Heinsberg. From farm G12.

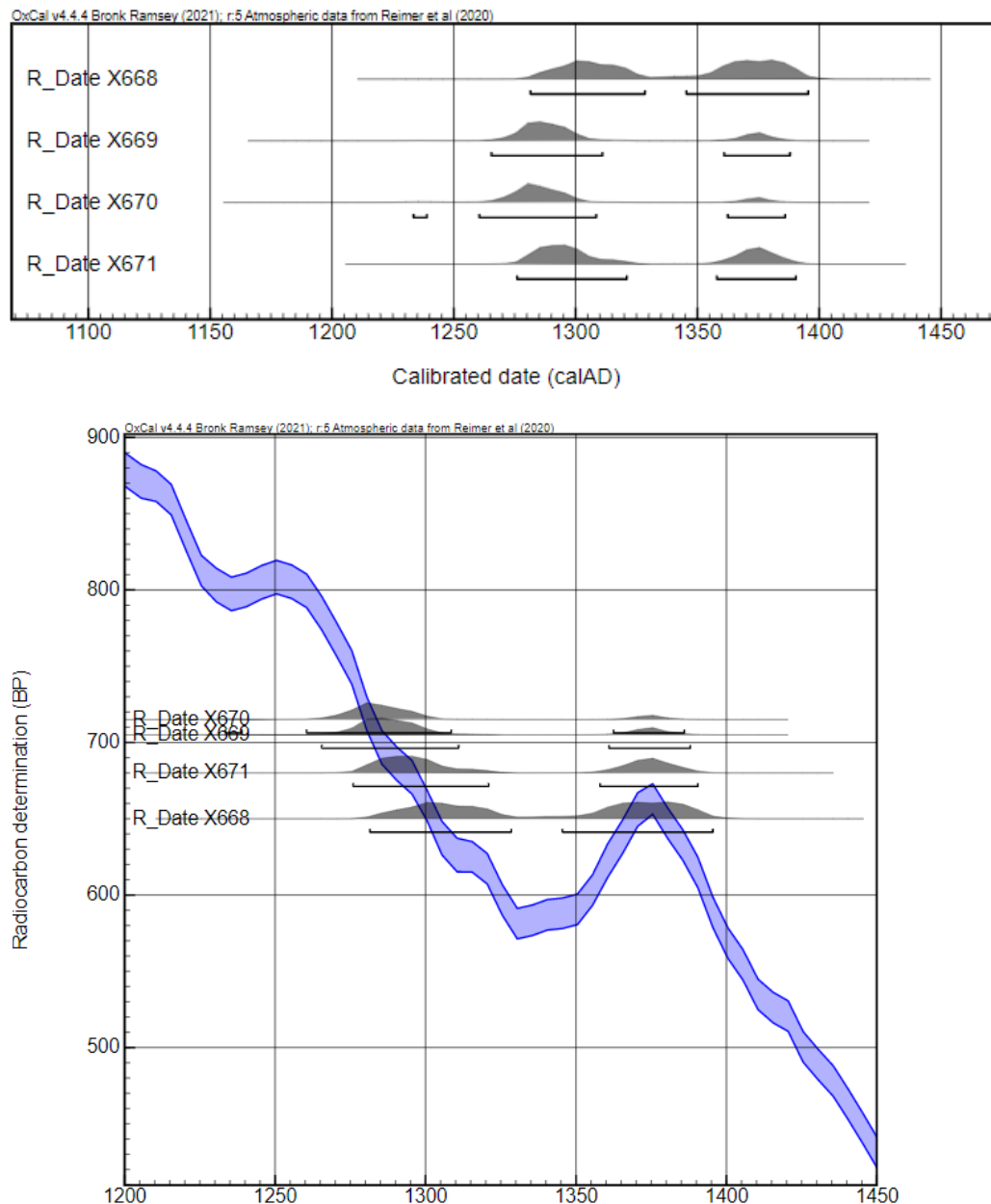


Table 1. Data for the four radiocarbon dates from house K63.

from smithing and fragments of basalt quern stones. In collaboration with Museum Sønderjylland, intensive metal-detecting campaigns were carried out during the excavations resulting in a large amount of metal finds. The exact location of each metal find was recorded with a GPS, and it appears that the majority of the finds derive from the plough-soil above the farms. This suggests that the finds may be related to the underlying buildings, and that they are not the result of redeposition in relation to the manuring of fields. Apart from iron and copper alloy fragments, spindle whorls of lead and differ-

ent D-shaped belt buckles constitute a large part of the small finds. Two find groups stand out: one group of finds relates to trade, such as the arm of a set of scales and four weights; another group is made up of a twisted, gilded silver finger ring, two horse-harness fittings of which one is gilded, and a coin hoard consisting of German coins (Figure 5b-d). This latter group indicates the presence of persons belonging to the elite. The finger ring is found ten meters west of the 'founder's farm', G1, and may thus be related to its inhabitants. This type of twisted finger ring is known from hoards

dating to around 1100 (Lindahl 1992, 57-76). The hoard consists of fifty-two coins, partly fragmented, minted in the towns of Cologne and Aachen during the years 1175-1181. All the coins were found within the plough-soil in a concentration above farm G12, suggesting that the coins were deposited or lost near this farm (Table 2).

In his analysis of farms in Halland, Sweden, Håkonsson divides farms into five groups according to size (Håkonsson 2012). Some very large farms appear besides smaller farms, which is interpreted as reflecting a system where the owner's bailiff (Danish *bryde*, Latin *villicus*) lived in large farms, while the smaller farms were inhabited by dependent tenants (Danish *landboer*). The bailiff system was common throughout Denmark during the 12th to 14th centuries (Christensen 1963-66). Compared to the results from Halland, where a clear difference in size between farms can be seen, there is no marked difference in the size of the farms at Petersborg. However, the two farms G1 ('the founder's farm') and G12 differ from the other farms in terms of size and number of phases. As mentioned, the silver ring and the coin hoard were found near these two farms. Based on this, it may be suggested that farm G1 was inhabited by a bailiff who was the first settler of the village. The village grew over time and, as it was moved south, the farm G12 became the bailiff's farm, possibly with a reduced status in this phase. This interpretation is supported by the fact that G12 existed throughout the southern settlement's period of use.

Three members of the Urne-family: Ketil, Mads, and Jens

We now move to the question of who owned the farms of the Petersborg settlement and who might have dominated the region around it. Most important here is the occurrence of the family surname Urne. It is documented on a tombstone or coffin lid (convex stone of granite, 186 cm long) in the church of Bjolderup, about 5 km from the Petersborg excavation (Figure 6). At the top of the stone, an inscription shows that this is a grave, 'ketil urnæ ligir hir' ('Ketil Urne rests here', our translation). The motif on the stone depicts a flowering cross, a so-called tree of life, with three roots and four leaves (Mackeprang 1941, 58-59). Originally, it must have been placed on the churchyard of Bjolderup, or inside the church. The tombstone is dated to around 1200.

Urne is a family name. Family names identify people who have the same ancestor and gives them an identity. In general, it was only in the last part of the Middle Ages that Danish noble families had fixed surnames (Dahlerup 1971; Nielsen et al. 1899). Some families, however, achieved fixed names earlier. During the 13th century, Holstein noble families named after settlements in the southernmost part of Schleswig (Southern Jutland) spread in the Duchy of Schleswig and became vassals of the duke. Certain Danish families had fixed family names from an early date, amongst others the aristocratic family of Abildgaard. The first known man of this family, Tyge Abildgaard,

Frederik Barbarossa (1152-90), mint Aachen. Denars

The emperor sitting with sceptre and orb / Building with four towers. Menadier 1891-1898, no. 33, 1 pc.

The emperor sitting with sceptre and orb / Building with four towers. Krumbach 1995, no. 22.1, 1 pc.

The emperor sitting with sceptre and orb / Building with four towers. Krumbach 1995, no. 22.3, 1 pc.

The emperor sitting with sceptre and orb / Building with four towers. 3 curves. Krumbach 1995, no. 24.3, 1 pc.

The emperor sitting with sceptre and orb / Building with four towers. Krumbach 1995, no. 30.2, 1 pc.

The emperor sitting with sceptre and orb / Building with four towers. Krumbach 1995, no. 30.?, 2 pcs.

Philipp I von Heinsberg, archbishop of Cologne 1167-1191, mint Köln. Denars and obols.

Bishop sitting with crosier / Building with three towers. Denar. Hävernicks 1935, no. 506, 16 pcs.

Bishop sitting with crosier / Building with three towers. Obol. Hävernicks 1935, no. 509, 3 pcs.

Bishop sitting with crosier / Building with three towers. Denar. Hävernicks 1935, no. 541, 22 pcs.

Non-identified denars.

4 pcs.

Table 2. Coin hoard from the plough soil around farm G12 at Petersborg. Identification of the 52 coins.

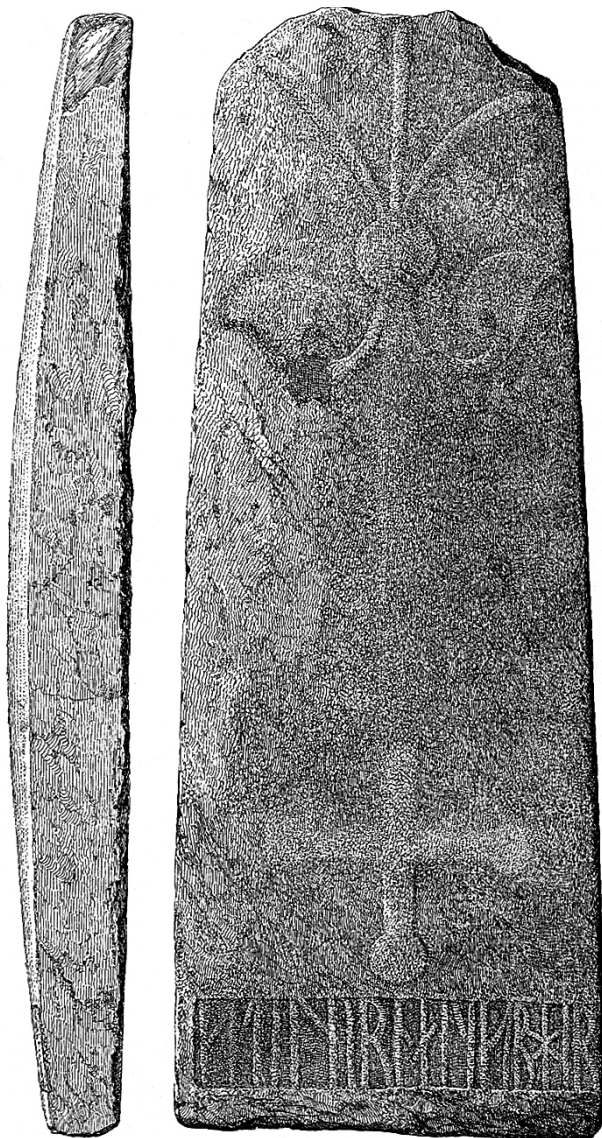


Figure 6. Tombstone or coffin lid of stone from the church of Bjolderup. The runic inscription reads 'Ketil Urne rests here' (Drawing by Magnus Petersen, 1892).

served the Danish king in 1230 (DD 1 ser., vol. 6, no. 109). The name Urne on the Bjolderup stone was also carried on as family name: documents from 1238 and 1245 mention a Mads Urne, while Jens Urne appears during the period 1279-1290. The family and its surname can be followed in the following centuries (Thiset 1904, 463ff).

The first appearance of Mads Urne is in 1238, where he participated in giving a verdict from the court, *thing*, of Slogs Herred. He was then member of a board of six men who were termed 'the best of the *herred*' (DD 1. ser., vol. 7, no. 13). The *herred* was a local territorial unit, and this role means that Mads Urne evidently belonged to the most highly

regarded men in his community. In the document, he, alongside the five other members of the board, was termed *dominus* (lord), a title that among lay people was generally reserved for knights (Ljung 1981). In 1245, we meet him again in a document written in western Schleswig, this time negotiating a settlement between a local lord and the rich Løgum Abbey (DD 1. ser., vol. 7, no. 184).

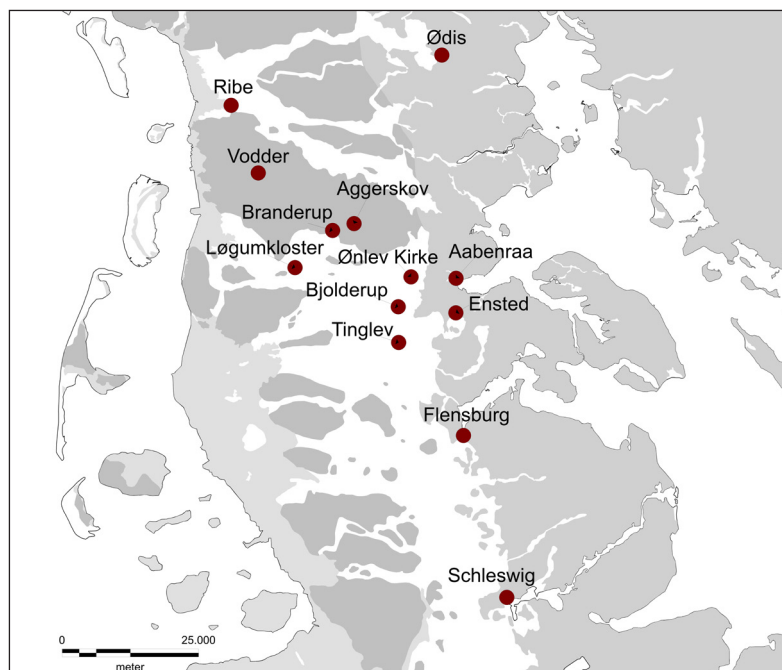
In the year 1279, the knight Jens Urne travelled to the Jutland town of Vejle because the archbishop of Lund passed a judgment in a case between Jens and the bishop of Ribe. The case was won by the bishop of Ribe (DD 2. ser., vol. 2, no. 375). In May 1288, Jens Urne functioned as arbitrator in a court case between Løgum Abbey and the owners of a west-Schleswig village (DD 2. ser., vol. 3, no. 290). A compromise was found, and Duke Valdemar II, who stressed that it was he who had appointed Jens Urne and other 'good men', affirmed the settlement so they could solve the conflict (DD 2. ser., vol. 3, no. 292).

The case of Knud Snubbe's will

Another case, in which Jens Urne became involved, moves the focus towards the parishes of Bjolderup and Uge – the area of the excavated Petersborg village. This case, documented by a will, gives us some interesting insight into Jens Urne's family and their internal discussions about land possession, but also renders very concrete knowledge on high-medieval land reclamation in the local Urnehoved area. This includes documentation of the actual local existence of the bailiff (*villicus*) system, used above to interpret the excavated settlement structure of Petersborg.

At a time between 1279 and 1283, two men of the west-Schleswig parish of Vodder, the parish priest and a man named Knud Degn (Dean), attested a will together with Kristine, widow of Knud Snubbe, and the son of the same Knud, Mads (DD 2. ser., vol. 2, no. 389; Gregersen 1975; 1978, 41; 2000). It was confirmed that Knud Snubbe had the will read to him on his deathbed in the presence of the abbot of Løgum Abbey and a monk from the same monastery. The will itself, cited in the preserved document, was composed and sealed by Knud together with the priests of Bjolderup and Uge (DD 2. ser., vol. 2,

Figure 7. The geographic world of Knud Snubbe as revealed by donations in his preserved will from 1279-1283. Marked are the churches and institutions, which received gifts from the aristocrat Knud Snubbe (Drawn by the authors).



no. 389). Here, we are clearly at the core of the world of Knud Snubbe (Figure 7). The will confirmed that 29 marks had to be given to the Holy Land, *i.e.* to the papal collection for the crusade (Jensen 2000, 42-45). Among the local churches, Bjolderup and nearby Tinglev received the most, namely two marks and further monetary gifts for the priests. A number of churches received smaller monetary donations, namely in the towns of Schleswig, Ribe and Aabenraa, and in six vil-lages in the area. In addition, priests and acolytes received their share together with church insti-tutions and mendicant houses in Ribe, Schles-wig and Flensburg. Finally, there were donations to the leprosy hospitals in the local towns. In this way, the donator, Knud, secured masses for himself for a sum of 60 marks. The abbey of Løgum, never-theless, was the most important recipient of the will: its monks were given land in the field of Bolderslev. They received shares in two so-called *bol* (cor-responding to the English hides): three eight-parts (Danish *ottinger*) in ‘Haldensbol’ and three eight-parts in ‘Ættebol’, which were situated ‘to the west’. To this was added ‘all the wood in Urne belonging to me [Knud Snubbe] with the excep-tion of three eight-parts which is possessed by my bailiff (Latin *villicus*, Danish *bryde*) Ketil Streng, and which shall be passed to my son Mads as pa-ternal inheritance’. It is also clear from the docu-ment that Knud Snubbe owned more land (DD 2. ser., vol. 2, no. 389).

It soon became apparent that Lord Jens Urne in no way accepted Knud Snubbe’s land donations to Løgum Abbey. A fight broke out, which is charac-teristic for the period and its perception of landed wealth possession as loaded with honour and as something that could be negotiated (Esmark 2004; 2013). In 1283, Jens Urne had taken control of the land in the field of Bolderslev and Urne Wood by use of violence (DD 2. ser., vol. 3, no. 78, 79). Therefore, the abbot of Løgum Abbey complained to the Danish archbishop, who installed the bishop of Ribe as judge in the case. As the bishop of Ribe was a close friend of Løgum, it was evident that Jens Urne would lose the case, but he managed to secure another judge, namely the bishop of Schles-wig. After negotiations, Jens achieved a favourable judgment that stated that he should either have 100 marks from Løgum Abbey and refrain from persecuting this institution – or he could give the monastery 500 marks and then the land was his (DD 2. ser., vol. 3, no. 410). Jens Urne paid the full amount, and the fight was over.

As the will shows, parts of the villages of Bolderslev and Uge were not in the possession of the Urne family, but of Knud Snubbe. It is reasonable to as-sume that Knud had achieved his land here through marriage with a woman from the Urne family, Kristine. The name of their son, Mads, could well have been given to him after Mads Urne, who then was perhaps Kristine’s father – and Jens Urne her brother. It may also be the case that Knud Snubbe

gave his land in the Bolderslev region to a local monastery because his other landed estate was situated elsewhere in Denmark. Part of it was, as the will states, cultivated by a bailiff, not by Knud directly. On the other hand, Knud dictated his will in the presence of priests from Bjolderup and Uge: we might therefore reasonably assume that he died on a manor in the parish of Bjolderup. In addition, Jens Urne, presumably contemporary with Knud Snubbe, held land in Bolderslev and the surrounding area.

Close to king and duke

The documents in which Mads and Jens Urne appear show that the two had their landed possessions in mid- and west-Schleswig. Parts of their land around Bjolderup, Uge and the Urne Wood were in their lifetime given to Knud Snubbe and his wife, but there was something special with this possession. The central Urne Wood, with ‘urne’ meaning uncultivated land/outfield, had given the family its name (*Danmarks Stednavne* 6, 349; Jørgensen 2008, 317). A family identity must have been built up around it, and it was clearly important to Jens Urne to get the land back.

It is impossible to state with absolute confidence that Ketil (c.1200), Mads (-1238-45-) and Jens (-1279-1288) constituted three generations of the same family, but this is very likely. Ketil and Jens are tied together by their connections to Bjolderup, and Mads and Jens are connected in several ways, including their titles as knights. Moreover, as mentioned above, it is quite likely that Kristine was the sister of Jens.

The tombstone in the church of Bjolderup demonstrates that Ketil was an important man in the parish, presumably the owner of the church and most probably its founder. The knight titles of Mads and Jens are certainly interesting and indicate their positions. They represent some of the earliest documented knighted Danish men. Already in 1187, the Danish king knighted Duke Valdemar (later King Valdemar II) (Heebøll-Holm 2009). However, knighted Danish aristocrats that were not royals or princes do not appear in the sources before the reign of Valdemar II (1202-41) (*Sønderjyllands Historie* 1937-39, 450). In 1232,



Figure 8. Seal matrix found during excavations of St Clemens Church in the town of Schleswig. It shows an eagle leg standing over waves, and the legend reads SIGILLUM HAQUINI DE SLESWIC (seal for Håkon of Schleswig) (Photo: Linda Hermannsen, Archäologisches Landesamt Schleswig-Holstein).

Abel became duke of Schleswig and among his knights were Mads Urne. It seems only natural that the succeeding duke of Schleswig, Valdemar IV also knighted Mads's son, Jens (DD 2. ser., vol. 3, no. 292).

From seals from the 15th century onwards, we know the coat of arms of the Urne family: an eagle leg with claw (Thiset 1898, 33, XLV, 1). This sign is much older as shown by a seal matrix found in 2003 during excavations of St Clemens Church in the town of Schleswig (Figure 8). The matrix, found in the chancel, is of bronze and with an eye on the back. Its picture is an eagle leg standing over waves, and the legend is SIGILLUM HAQUINI DE SLESWIC (seal for Håkon of Schleswig). Radtke has attempted to identify the Håkon mentioned. Firstly, he assumes that with the title ‘of Schleswig’ and the distinguished resting place in the chancel, Håkon must have been lord of Schleswig – *i.e.* after the murder of Duke Knud Lavard of Schleswig in 1131 (Radtke 2019). The possession of this title, according to Radtke, is underlined by the waves on the matrix, which he interprets as parallel to the town seal of Schleswig and the guild seal of the town's Knud guild. Here it is

a symbol of the inlet Schlei. Somewhat more speculative, Radtke proposed that Håkon is identical with Håkon Jyde (the Jutlander) who lived in the first part of the 12th century and died sometime after 1131. He is also named Normand (the Norwegian) as he was grandson of the Norwegian King Magnus (died 1047), and his mother was daughter of a Norwegian aristocrat. He was married to the daughter of a king, moved in royal circles, and participated in the preparation for the killing of Knud Lavard in 1131. His son became king in 1137 under the name of Erik III Lam.

If the interpretation of Radtke is correct, then the Urne family – in line with other aristocratic ‘collectives’ in the 12th century – was of royal descent. The Urne family thus constituted a parallel to the wealthy Jutland family of Thrugot and the famous Hvide family (Hermansson 2000). It enjoyed its golden moment after the murder of Knud Lavard, where one of its members achieved the highest office of the realm: he was elected king (Radtke 2019). We cannot be sure that the seal matrix points to Håkon Jyde of the Urne family (buried around 1140 with his wife, the princess, in the chancel of a church which he had presumably founded). One of the problems is that the seal is not earlier than 1180, predating the death of Håkon Jyde. Radtke solves this problem by interpreting the seal as a memorial seal later deposited in Håkon’s grave. If the identification proves false, it remains certain that members of the Urne family were active in the largest town of the area, Schleswig. They were not only rural aristocrats but acted in urban contexts. If the members of the Urne family were not members of the royal family (or even kings), the connection to the towns of Schleswig shows that they were close to kings and sons of kings. The development of the family from magnates to knights, and its constant proximity to princely power, therefore forms part of our interpretation that its members must have exercised control over the Urnehoved Thing.

Urnehoved Thing in history

The early and high medieval *things*, where all armed men met and debated and decided in matters of public interest, as well as carried through

court sessions, have been the subject of significant research. In Denmark, the judicial procedures have been described and it has been documented how the *things* were central for the king’s acclamation. The regional *thing* of Viborg was clearly the most important and in the 11th century appears as the normal place for the election of kings (Snorri, 21, 67; Saxo, book XIV. 16.4.). This rule was, however, not without exceptions, and Urnehoved could also be used for the same purpose. The general lines are well-known, but new Danish research is limited (Christensen 1969; Hansen 2019; Hvidtfeldt 1941; Jørgensen 1974, 238-251; Jørgensen et al. 2010).

On a North European level, however, there is considerable interest among both archaeologists and historians in such Viking Age and Early Medieval assemblies (Bornfalk 2021; Iversen 2017; 2020; Sanmark 2017; Sanmark et al. 2020; Semple and Sanmark 2013). Research has proved that the *things* frequently moved geographically during the constitution of kingdoms. The importance of interplay between the large regional assemblies and the smaller local ones, in Denmark corresponding to the difference between the *thing* of regions (*lande*) and local districts (*herreder*), has also been underlined. New research on the *things* of southern Norway shows that accessibility was not the sole explanation for their location. Other factors also played a role and, of interest in our context, it is clear that kings built a more robust basis of power by delegating power to local elites in the *thing* districts (Ødegård 2018). There is no doubt that the *things* functioned as means to strengthen royal power. On Gotland, for instance, the central *thing* was seemingly linked to the royal residence of the island (Östergren 2005), which is of note in relation to Urnehoved Thing.

Urnehoved Thing was situated in Urne Wood. A longstanding debate centres on the exact place of this *thing* (Clausen 1949; Matthiesen 1961, 97). There is now at least some agreement that this was not the locality of Løgpold where, in the 1940s, a memorial park marking the *thing* was laid out. Gregersen, instead, reasonably points to a locality in the eastern part of Bolderslev field. Here, on a hill 54 m high, is located the so-called Hestehaven or Baldersborg to which a direct road from the church of Bolderslev leads. As documented by

Gregersen, Bolderslev Church owned this demarcated area in 1443 (Gregersen 1951; 1978; 2000; Gregersen and Iversen 1951). The connection of the *thing* to a church may be relevant to the ongoing debate on the relation between cult and the *things*, but we do not have textual sources to follow that trail.

In relation to the dating of Urnehoved Thing, Andersen has argued that the creation of this special *thing* place in Southern Jutland as a counterpart to the central *thing* of Viborg did not take place before a royal decree was issued at some point during the years 1192-1197 (Andersen 2005, 53, 70). To date the Urnehoved Thing so late, however, necessitates ignoring a number of sources. It is often mentioned that King Svend Estridsen attended Urnehoved Thing just before his death in 1074 in nearby Søderup (Gregersen 1978, 37; Olrik 1968, 39). This is, however, uncertain as it is derived from the late 13th century *Knýtlinga saga* (trans. Ægidius 1977). In 1134, Urnehoved Thing appears in more reliable sources. According to Saxo, Harald Kesja, the son of King Erik Ejegod, was elected king at 'Urne' in 1134; however, he only benefitted shortly from this as Erik Emune soon liquidated him (Saxo, book 14, 1, 4). In 1137, an aristocrat named Sorte Plov killed the same Erik. *The Chronicle of Roskilde*, which was written at the time of the murder, simply states that it took place at a *thing* outside Ribe; however, not much later, Svend Aggesen states that the place was Urne Thing (Geertz 1917-18, 31, 136-7). The murder was followed by the election of King Erik Ejegod's soldier Erik Håkonsen as king. As mentioned, this man might have been from the Urne family, but it remains unclear if his election took place at Urnehoved Thing. In 1182, however, Saxo describes how, after the death of his father Valdemar I, Knud rushed to Jutland to take oaths from his father's soldiers. The royal homage at the regional *thing* of Viborg was without problems but apparently, events were less smooth at 'the gathering at Urne Wood', where there was a revolt, which was ultimately pacified, and Knud achieved the throne (Saxo, book 16, 1, 1). There seems to be no reason to doubt that from the early 12th century Urnehoved Thing was a meeting place between king and people.

Through the rest of the Middle Ages, Urnehoved Thing functioned as an important assembly. In 1254, King Christoffer gave Valdemar III the Duchy of Schleswig as a fief, and it was laid down 'that from Urne Thing there could be appealed to the realm' (DD 2 rk., 1, 151). In 1306, King Erik VI Menved entered into a compromise with Duke Valdemar IV of Schleswig and his brother. It was determined that the duke should not persecute the peasants of the king in the Duchy – and if it did happen, that the peasant should be able to obtain royal protection and judgement at Urne Thing (DD 2. ser., vol. 6, no. 35; Gregersen 1978, 39; Windmann 1954, 151).

From the last decade of the 14th century, there is evidence of two high political meetings at Urnehoved Thing, proving that the *thing* still functioned. On 18 October 1393, the Duke of Saxony met here with the Dukes Claus and Albrecht of Holstein and Duke Gerhard VI of Schleswig (DD 4. ser., vol. 5, no. 85). From 1397, we have documents issued at Urnehoved Thing, '*op deme landesdinghe to Vrenhouede*', in which Duchess Elizabeth gave up her rights to the Duchy. The documents prove that the Schleswig elite was present: all important men of the clergy, nine knights and 26 squires as well as representatives from the towns of Sønderborg, Schleswig and Flensburg (DD 4. ser., vol. 6, nos. 385, 386, 387). Later on, little is heard of the *thing*, except that in 1460 the newly elected Duke (and King) Christian I promised that he would meet the Schleswig nobility annually at Urnehoved (von Rumohr 1960, 39).

Urnehoved Thing is at the centre of three medieval districts, *herreder*: Slogs, Rise and Lundtoft (known as Klipleve in the 13th century), each with their own *things* (Figure 9). Urnehoved Thing was more than such local *things* and possessed a special elevated character, which actualized when the entire territory of Schleswig met. The large 14th century meetings document that the *thing* marked the unity of the Duchy of Schleswig, while important exercise of justice had been taken over, presumably already by the 13th century, by the duke (Windmann 1954, 152-155). It is an interesting question whether the existence of the Urne Thing during the 12th century could mark an early Schleswig territoriality, predating the creation of the Duchy in 1232.

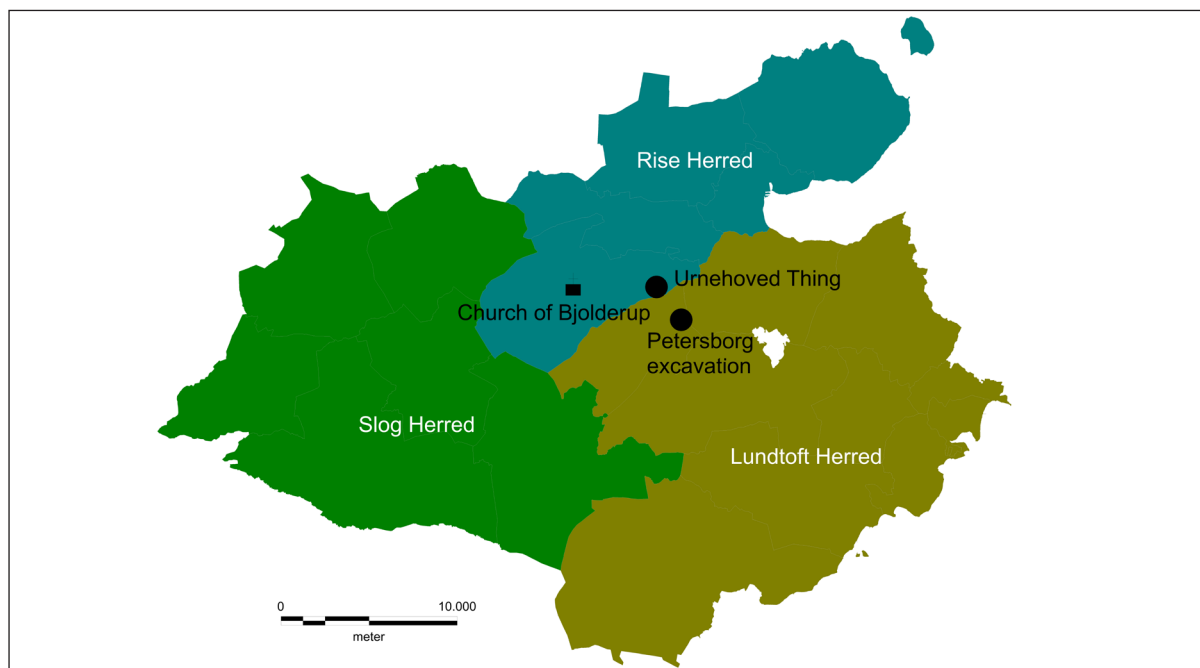


Figure 9. Map of the three territorial districts, *herreder*, of Lundtoft, Rise and Slog with the location of the assembly site of Urnehoved Thing, the church of Bjolderup and the excavation at Petersborg (Drawn by the authors).

Urne-thorps

We can now ask if medieval clearance villages, so typical for the ongoing clearance and enclosure of North European woodland during the 11th to 13th centuries, and which probably are related to our Urne family, can be found in the wooded region around the Urnehoved Thing. First, the excavated village at Petersborg has a peripheral location, behind the *Harvej* and on the border of the parish of Uge – and between the *herreder* of Rise and Lundtoft. This must mean that it was a settlement placed in the outfield. As mentioned earlier on the oldest reliable map of the area from 1805, it is evident that the brook Uge Bæk was in its natural bed. However, today we can also see a bed north of the deserted settlement. It seems likely that this replacement of the brook was made in connection to the establishment of the village, and this points to a founder with considerable resources at his disposition (Hartvig unpublished). As already made clear, in the area, only the members of the Urne family mastered this: it seems to have been absolutely dominating in the parishes of Bjolderup and Uge. Based on this, it is our thesis that the foundation of Petersborg village – and all early medieval colonization in the area – were directed by the Urne family. No written sources mention the de-

serted Petersborg settlement, and it is not possible to know how farms here were operated. Inspired by the model of Håkansson (2012) – and in light of the fact that the Urne family employed a bailiff on one of its farms in the parish of Bjolderup – it is, however, perhaps reasonable to assume a similar situation in Petersborg.

It has been argued that in the early medieval period the Urnehoved Bank was still a no man's land, covered by the woods stretching from the east coast (Gregersen 1978, 15). Apart from the excavation at Petersborg, our archaeological knowledge of the two parishes of Bjolderup and Uge is limited to four minor investigations and a handful of detector finds. The detector finds are mostly late medieval, even if a Viking Age trefoil brooch has been found near Bjolderup Church.¹ In 2022, a small excavation at Uge Mark, some 500 m east of the village of Uge and only 150 m from the hamlet of Todsøl Bjerg, revealed three wells and two buildings.² The pottery finds date the site to the 13th century. There can be good reasons for the lack of Viking Age finds, but much indicates that the theory of an early medieval wood-covered area is correct. The fact that the village of Torp, just east of Petersborg, was termed 'Urnetorp' when it appeared first in 1543 (Trap 1967, 933) supports this assumption. This name could derive from the location in the wood, but

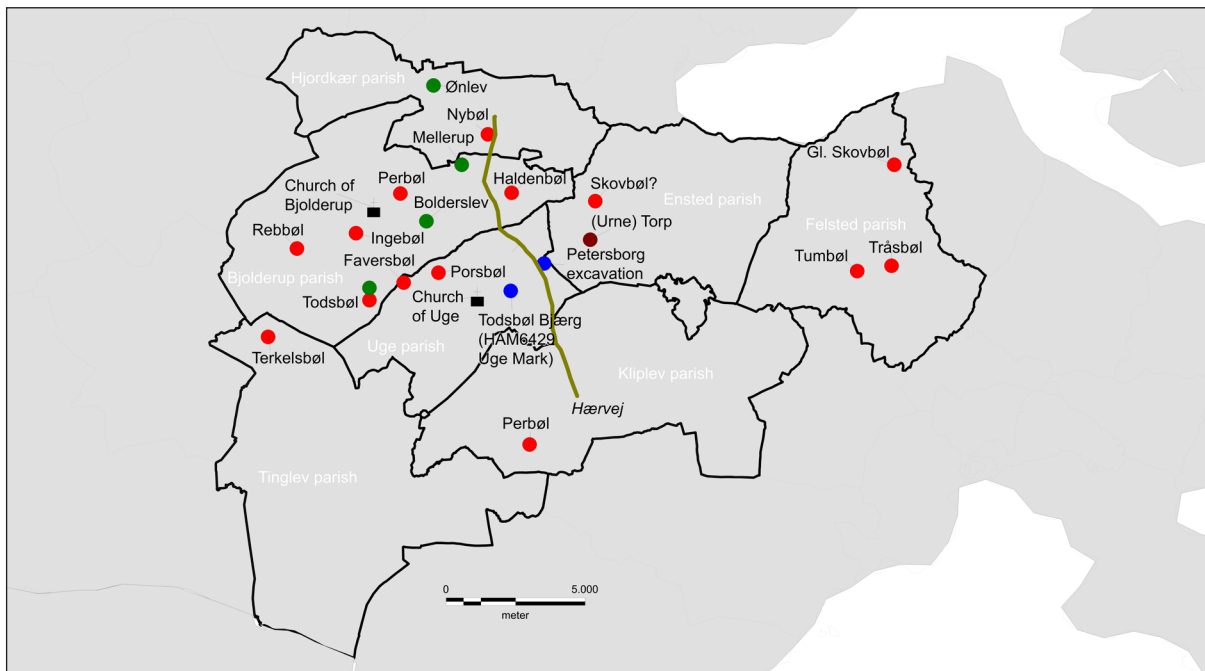


Figure 10. Map of the area around Bjolderup/Urnehoved Thing. Shown are the two churches of Bjolderup and Uge (black) as well as secondary settlements, indicated by the the suffix 'bol/bøl' (red). Further, the two excavations mentioned in the text at Petersborg and Uge Mark are marked by blue dots, and a purple dot marks the settlement of Urne Torp. The green dots show the four places belonging to the ducal district of Flensborg in 1483. The main road, the *Hærvej*, is shown by a green line (Drawn by the authors).

it may also be that it came from the Urne family – and, if so, it is a marker of the 12th-13th century land-clearance and spatial dominance by the Urne family in the area. The sources cited above made it clear that, in the 13th century, the Urne family had shares in so-called *bol* (hides) in the Urne Wood and that these had names: Ættebol and Haldensbol. The suffix *bol(le)* in Danish place names is the same as *bol*, meaning dwelling or farm (in the outfield) and dating to the last part of the Viking Age or the early Middle Ages (Jørgensen 2008, 87; Poulsen 2003a, 378-80). It is interesting that we find a number of settlements with the suffix *bol* in the two parishes of Uge and Bjolderup (as well as a few in the surrounding parishes)(Figure 10). Among the *bol*-names around Bjolderup, only Porsbøl is not formed with a personal male name. Two of the remaining six have a Christian name (Peter) and thus must date from after the year 1000. The concentration and distribution of *bol*-settlements must be said to indicate a large-scale colonization in uninhabited areas, presumably by clearance of the Urne Wood.

It is not possible to prove that the Urne family was behind this project, but we believe it to be highly plausible given the background of the family's later documented dominance in the area

and our assumption that the family did establish the settlement of Urnetorp. On the background of this colonization, we can explain the existence of a large complex of land around Bjolderup that enters the sources in 1483. At that time, according to a tax register this complex was sorted under the ducal district of Flensborg Amt (and not Aabenraa Amt as one might think), and it consisted of 19 farms in Bolderslev, five in Todsøl, five in Mellerup and one in Ønlev (Falkenstjerne and Hude 1895-99, 223-224). We suggest that this complex was once the property of the Urne family (which had been confiscated by the duke, perhaps around the year 1300) and note that here we have a centre (Bolderslev) with satellite settlements (Todsøl, Mellerup). Such a pattern of clearance villages around the manors of aristocrats is typical in 12th and 13th century Denmark (Poulsen 2023; Ulsig 1968).

A landscape of power

A picture of a landscape which, during the period 1000-1200, was created by working people led by an elite thus emerges. A manor, presuma-

bly in Bjolderup, sent out settlers in its vicinity, a manor at the central road in Denmark, *Harvej*, and the key to a place of central political decisions, Urnehoved Thing. A family with high status, the Urne family were owners of the manor. While this building has not yet been located, the gravestone in Bjolderup Church shows that the family was connected to it – presumably as its builders.

The church of Bjolderup is situated high in the landscape on the south bank of Søderup River. In terms of size, it is larger than other village churches of the area. The church was built around 1200 in stone with the later addition of a tower. Investigations have shown that before the erection of the standing tower, the church had a west gallery from where it was possible to overlook the nave (DK vol. 22, 1833). Interpretations of such 12th to 13th century western towers have been published in previous research, with most authors agreeing that towers with galleries are an indication of a church built by aristocrats (Hansen 2013, 179; Søvsø 2011, 119; Wienberg 1994, 82). We assume that a manor lay near the church of Bjolderup, quite isolated and thus marking spatial and social distance to villages and hamlets, including to the large village of Bolderslev which the Urne family presumably owned totally (Falkenstjerne and Hude 1895-99, 223-224; Hansson 2006). It was a dominant factor in the area and became the core of the parish from the late 12th century onwards.

South of Bjolderup Parish, in the parish of Uge and at its border, we find the excavated Petersborg village. According to the will of Knud Snubbe from around 1280, the two most important churches in his world were Bjolderup and Uge: the two priests who signed his document came from here. Uge Parish, compared to Bjolderup, is small and with its few and small villages it must be secondary. Uge Church is also small, and its early medieval parts are built of rough-hewn stones (DK vol. 22, 1845-1853). This leads us to the conclusion that at least part of the population growth, which made the parish and church of Uge possible, came after land reclamation deriving from the old Bjolderup Parish in the north.

The north-south road of *Harvej* which went through Jutland up to the Limfjord and through the parishes of Uge and Bjolderup without doubt constituted the reason why the Urne family resided

here, where a crossroad led directly to the old town of Ribe to the west. Certainly, such a place could generate contributions and tolls from travellers, as we know from early modern sources. It has been stressed that it was generally dangerous to build settlements near the *Harvej* due to the threat of plunder and war (Gregersen 1978, 15). The very fact, therefore, that a village such as the Petersborg settlement was situated so near the much-trafficked road must indicate that it had protection. Again, we must think of the aristocrats and knights of the Urne family who no doubt could supply military assistance.

The roads conditioned the Urne Thing. The *thing* took place where roads from south, north, east and west met. However, this was not the pre-historic situation as there is general agreement that the course of the *Harvej* changed at some date. In the Bronze Age, the road was much more western and went via Bolderslev as indicated by the place of burial mounds (Becker-Christensen 1981, 150; Gregersen 1978, 14). At that early point in time, the traffic did not go through the Urne Wood. It is much discussed when the road was redirected and took a short cut over the bank. Becker-Christensen, however, convincingly states that it is tempting to connect the new road course with land clearance in Bolderslev field and in the Urnehoved Wood (Becker-Christensen 1981, 158). The will of Knud Snubbe showed that such clearance had already taken place before c.1280 (DD 2. ser., vol. 2, no. 3, no. 389; vol. 3, no. 78). The excavated houses at Petersborg, situated as they are at the foot of the Urnehoved Bank and just at the *Harvej*, must be seen as a new argument here: the first houses of the Petersborg locality mark a *terminus post quem* for the road leading across the Urnehoved Bank and thus give the date for the Urnehoved Thing.

We can only speculate on the relation between the inhabitants of the Petersborg village and the travellers on the *Harvej*. The location so close to road and *thing* could have provided possibilities for monetary income by selling food. Only the coin hoard from farm G12, however, indicates such contact. As mentioned, the hoard consisted of 52 coins, denars and obols. They were struck by Archbishop of Cologne Philipp von Heinsberg (1167-1191), who was closely connected to German-

Roman Emperor Friedrich Barbarossa (1155-1190), from whom there are seven coins in the find minted in Aachen. The hoard dates to 1175-81 (Nau 1977, 92-93).

Coin circulation in this period was dominated by Danish coins. Only coins produced by Danish mints were legal and, consequently, finds of German coins are extremely rare (Grinder-Hansen et al. 2013; Jensen 1980; 1988). There is little doubt that the coins of the Petersborg hoard must have belonged to a German traveller and that they represent a selection of coins he brought from the Cologne area. He might have been a merchant or pilgrim, but he could also have been a person heading for political debates at the Urnehoved Thing, possibly the election of King Knud in 1182. Also in 1181, there were negotiations between King Valdemar I and the German emperor resulting in a royal marriage in the town of Schleswig (Skyum-Nielsen 1971, 185). At the time when the coins were lost, there were intense, high-level German-Danish debates that could conveniently take place at Urnehoved.

The Urne-aristocracy in a southern Jutland context

As already mentioned, early medieval Southern Jutland has been described as dominated by relatively free farmers with farms of equal size (Poulsen 2003a, 424; Søvsø 2020). Based on written sources, however, it has been documented above that a stratum of knights existed in the area in the 13th century. If we move back in time, it becomes clear from the archaeological material that the Urne family was not the only elite family in Southern Jutland in the 12th and 13th century.

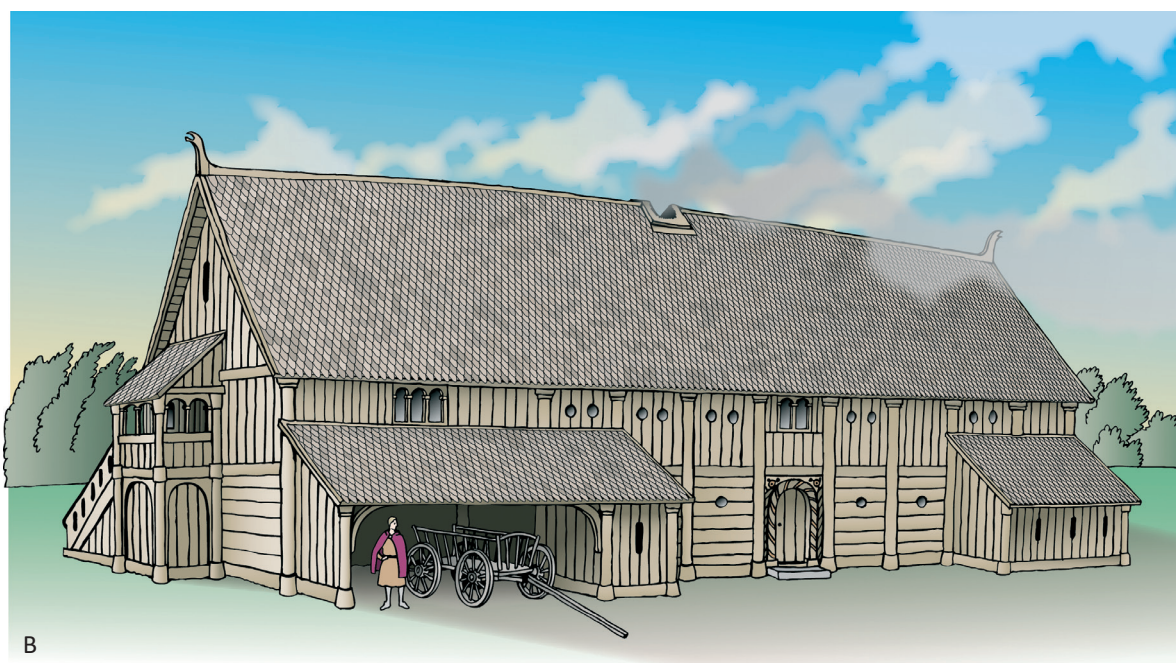
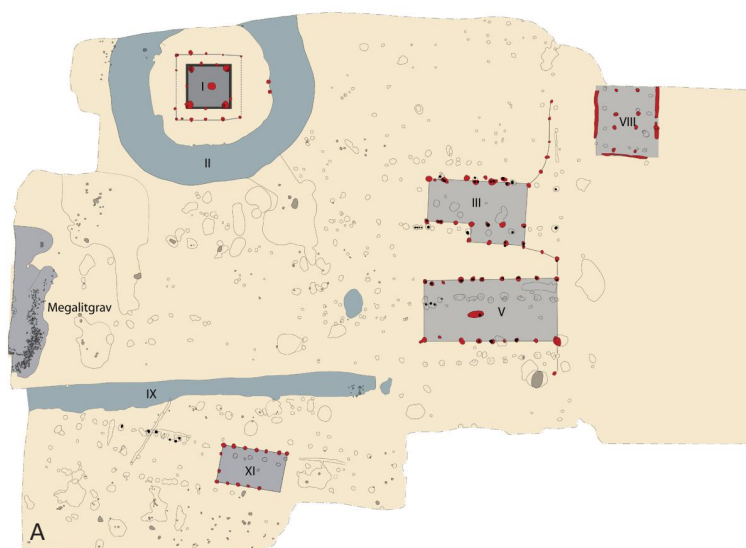
Royal manors in Southern Jutland are normally not localized, but Huseby in the area of Angeln constitutes an interesting example where field investigations point to the existence of a royal centre functioning at least in the late Viking Age (Christensen et al. 2016). Near Bjolderup, in the area on which this investigation centres, royal power was also manifest. In or near the present settlement of Søderup, northeast of Bjolderup, a royal manor was situated. The sources tell us that here King Svend Estridsen died in 1074 (Olrik 1968,

39). King Valdemar's Survey from c.1231 also mentions the king's land in Søderup, valued at two marks of silver. This is a small amount, and the text explicitly states that the settlement consisted of tenants (*Kong Valdemars Jordebog* 1, 98). It is therefore reasonable to believe that a larger royal farm had been dismissed, but that the manor in Bjolderup and the royal farm in Søderup most probably co-existed during the 12th century. As mentioned above, the Urne family was probably royal, and it is not necessary to imagine the two manors as competitors: they likely constituted a two-tiered structure, influencing the assemblies at Urnehoved Thing. It is certainly possible that several centres, *i.e.* manors, existed in the same area (Lihammer 2008, 19). The royal manor of Søderup has not been archaeologically located but, in 2008, aerial views localized 23 pit houses here.

Localities of elite character from the 11th to 13th century also exist elsewhere in the Southern Jutland area. One is at Sebbelev Mark, 800 m south of Ketting church, on the island of Als. The farm here, excavated in 2005, was presumably built in the early 12th century and fortified with a moat (Nielsen 2008)(Figure 11a). According to King Valdemar's Survey, c.1231, the king owned Ketting, so it is possible that this is a royal administrative centre (*Kong Valdemars Jordebog* 1, 117). Explicitly aristocratic is the mid-Schleswig site of Østergaard near Hyrup in the parish of Bevtøft (Figure 11b). Here, an isolated late Viking Age farm has been excavated, which in time developed into a village. Around 1100, it was divided into two farms. At one of these, in the main house, two pieces of jewellery were found. One of these was of gold with enamel and a large rock crystal, and the other was in silver filigree-work and likewise included a rock crystal (Sørensen 2005; 2011). They were made by goldsmiths working for the German emperor and can hardly be interpreted as anything other than expressing personal relations to royal Danish circles. At Starup on the south side of Haderslev Fjord, Sønder Starup Church is situated. In the church, a rune stone was found with the inscription, 'Æiriks kumbl' (Eiríkr's monument, our translation) (Englert et al. 2016, 195). The church was a three-aisled basilica with a broad west tower and presumably a gallery. Timber from the choir dates from the last decades of the 11th century

Figure 11. A. Plan of the latest phase of the aristocratic farm Lykkesgård on the island of Als (after Nielsen 2008).

B. Reconstruction of the main house (CLX-XII) of the aristocratic farm of Østergård at Bevtoft (after Sørensen 2011).



(Bertelsen 2016), and it has been established that a broad moat existed around the church. Excavations near the church have revealed a settlement with metalsmiths from the late Viking Age and the early medieval period (Hartvig 2016). With the rune stone, the large 11th to 12th century church, the gallery and the moat, Starup appears as a home for elite members of society.

Thus, the elite group in Bjolderup was apparently not alone in Southern Jutland. A broad group of aristocrats existed in the area, distancing themselves from the rest of the population with large buildings, moats, and proprietary churches with galleries. They were not just wealthy peasants. Among these elite families, the Urne family likely

constituted the group that was closest to the king as a consequence of their control of the regional *thing*, but their power and influence should always be seen in connection with other aristocrats.

Conclusion

It has been argued that the excavations at Petersborg and evidence concerning the Urne family and the Urnehoved Thing should be seen together. This, in connection with other elements such as proprietary churches with early medieval galleries, gives us an understanding of early elite groups in the part of Denmark which in the 13th century

became the Duchy of Schleswig. The Urne family probably welded power in their own right in this region in the years before 1200. This position may have been achieved in the 12th century, perhaps in part because the Urne family members were relatives of the royal family, and in part because of land ownership at a central place. Their domination of an assembly, where central decisions were taken, in addition to their control over a central Danish road, are factors that should be taken into consideration when explaining the place of the family in the social hierarchy. The *thing* lay on the lands of the Urne family and, undoubtedly, the family could guarantee peace during the negotiations here. The *thing*, the land reclamations in Urne Wood, the foundation of the village of Petersborg and other villages, as well as the establishment of the *Hærvej*

through the Urne Wood, all explain why Urne became the name of the family. Its members were not alone in belonging to an aristocratic group in Southern Jutland, but they were presumably at the top of this group. Therefore, they marked themselves as a distinct group with their own family name and heraldry.

Notes

- 1 HAM1833 Amalienborg, Uge sogn Sb. 74. og HAM5766 Almstrup, Uge sogn sb. 103. HAM2972 Bolderslev Frigård, Bjolderup sogn Sb. 99. HAM6425 Uge Mark, Uge sogn sb. 113. HAM5135 Bjolderup Kirke, Bjolderup sogn, Sb. 142.
- 2 HAM6425 Uge Mark, Uge sogn sb. 113.

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