

Stengården, an East Jutland Occupation Site from the Early Germanic Iron Age

The Problem of Settlement Continuity in Later Iron Age Denmark

by STIG JENSEN

In spring 1979 a settlement pit from the Early Germanic Iron Age was excavated at Tåstrup, 15 km west of Århus, after being discovered during spring ploughing in a field belonging to the farm Stengården (1). It showed first as a 4,5 × 6 m dark area, sharply delimited to the north and east, more diffuse to the south and west, which was found to be a flat-bottomed pit about 0,5 m deep filled with black-brown clayey sand with charcoal, pottery, burned daub, iron slag, and stones up to a size of ca. 25 cm. Most of the finds came from the upper layers. No actual structures were observed connected with the feature, which was situated on a relatively steep south-western slope.

The largest find-category was the pottery. Altogether 282 sherds and parts of pots were found, including 37 rim sherds, 6 base sherds, 3 handles, and 236 body sherds. Only 12 of the sherds were ornamented (4,2%).

Some of the sherds show characteristic features. There had been large jars with slightly curved profile in three sections (fig. 1: 1–3). These were usually unornamented, but a body sherd (fig. 1: 4) with grooved ornament is probably from one of these vessels. There were also unnecked, unornamented pots with nearly vertical sides. (fig. 1: 5).

Four bowls can be distinguished among the sherds (fig. 1: 6–7, 10–11), three of them ornamented. It is characteristic that the ornament extends down over the widest diameter of two of them. There are two strap lugs (fig. 1: 9) and one pinched vertical lug with horizontal perforation (fig. 1: 8). This lug and the bowl with high carination date the material to the Early Germanic Iron Age (S. Jensen 1978, 109ff).

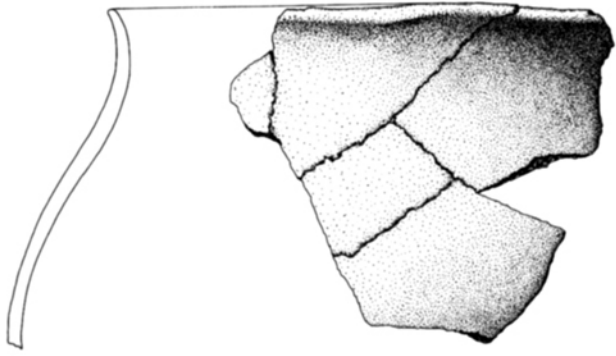
The sherds appear to be fired harder than Early

Iron Age pottery, but whether or not this is a general rule for Early Germanic period pottery must be decided by more objective means. It is worth mentioning that none of the sherds had split apart. The pottery from Stengården was made of clay gritted with sand, and colours range through brown, grey, and dark-grey shades. A few sherds are red, probably as a result of secondary burning.

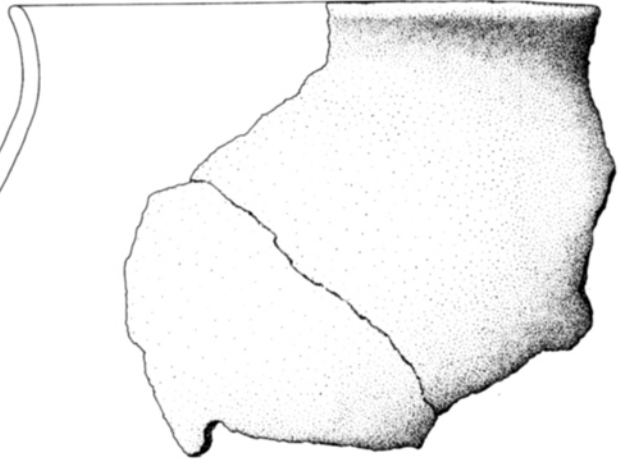
The pit also held 72 fragments of clay daub. On some of them can be seen impressions of posts and branches. The daub must come from a nearby house, which presumably stood to the east of the pit. The immediate vicinity of the pit slopes so steeply that it is difficult to imagine that the actual settlement was here.

In addition there were found three loom weights, of which two are so well preserved that the wear of the suspension cord can be seen (fig. 2). All the other finds were scattered throughout the pit, but chiefly in the upper levels, while the three loom weights lay together (fig. 2), presumably as a single deposit. There is nothing to suggest that a loom ever stood at this place.

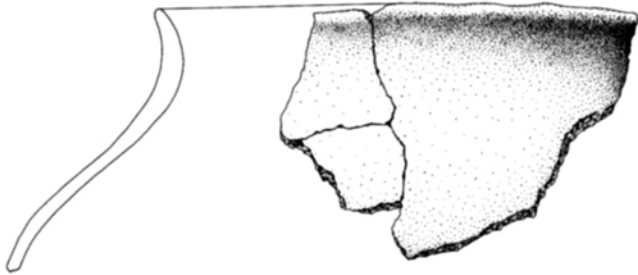
The finds are just what one would expect to discover in an Iron Age rubbish pit – pottery, daub, charcoal, and loom weights. Also the blacksmith had left traces of his work, as is quite usual at the settlements of the period. There were 12 pieces of slag or cindered clay. Six of them were hard-fired, porous, grey fragments with greenish vitrification on one side. Similar finds come from an Early Germanic Iron Age settlement at Enderup in SW Jutland (S. Jensen 1980) and from the Viking Age layers at Ribe. Their purpose was made clear by finds from Lindholm Høje (M. Bencard 1979, 121 f). They appear to be from *tuyères* protecting the bellows. The *tuyère* must have been made as a protec-



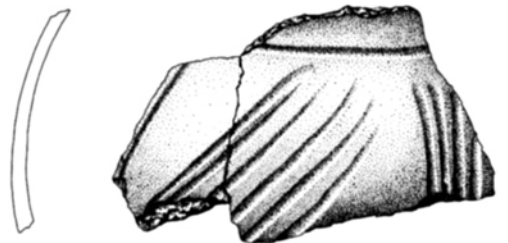
1



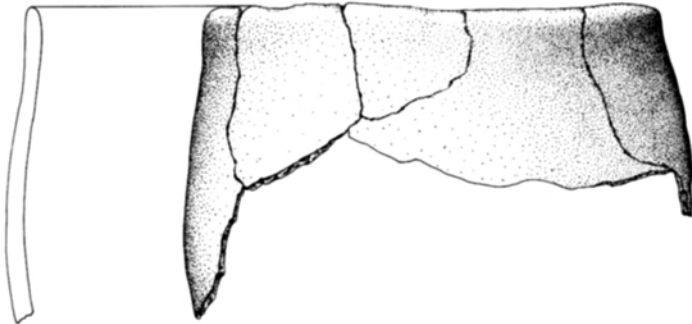
2



3



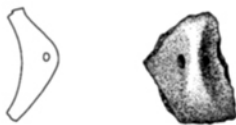
4



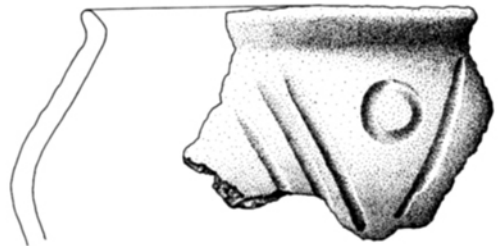
5



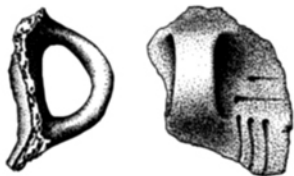
6



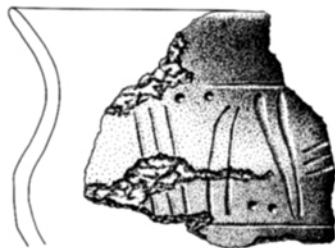
8



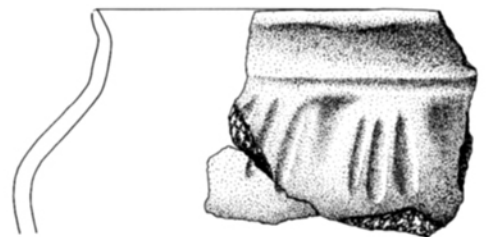
7



9



10



11

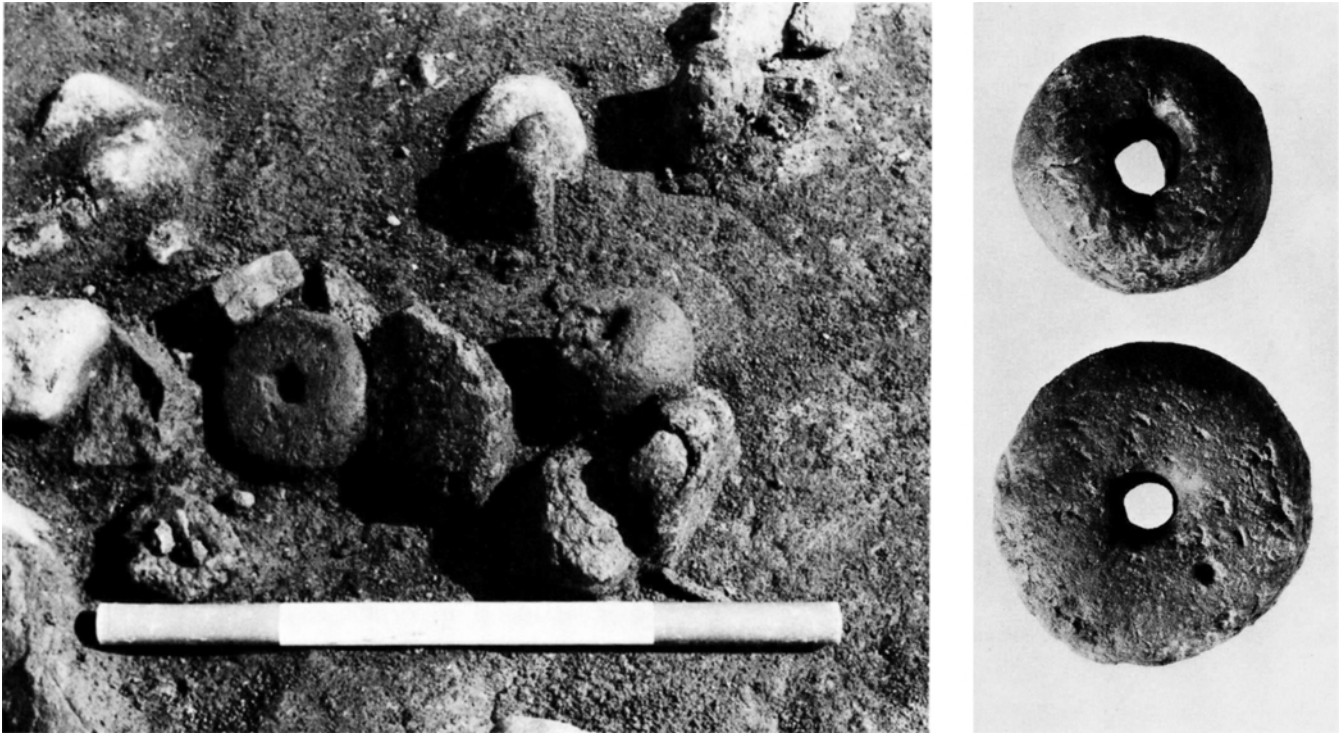


Fig. 2. Left: loom weights and clay daub in situ. Right: Two loom weights of burnt clay showing wear from suspension (Photo Preben Delholm) 2:5.

tive clay coating separating the hearth from the bellows. The Stengården finds also include a plano-convex or calotte-shaped slag.

Further evidence of smithing activity was provided by a sample of earth brought home from the pit. The presence of hammer scale was demonstrated with the help of a magnet. Hammer-scale is the oxidation layer that forms on the surface of iron when it is annealed. The layer is magnetic and when hammered breaks off as black scales.

The rubbish pit reflects, as has been said, traces of the activities that would normally be expected at a settlement of the Iron Age. Whether iron smelting actually took place at the site is not shown by the slags, but it is worth mentioning that bog iron ore was found only 25 m west of the pit on a later visit to the site in March 1980 (2).

Fig. 1. Selected pottery from Stengården
(Drawings by Lars Hammer) 2:5.

THE PROBLEM OF SETTLEMENT CONTINUITY IN LATER IRON AGE DENMARK

Settlements of the Germanic Iron Age have for many years been one of the gaps in our knowledge. However the large settlement excavations of more recent years have done much to change matters (3), and a certain amount of information about Early Germanic period settlement is now available, though the number of known sites is still very small compared with the Early Iron Age. For the latter Germanic period information is still very poor indeed as hardly any settlement sites are known. To consider the causes of this lack of sites we must first ask how settlement from these periods is established at all, and then by what means it is dated and thereby separated from that of other periods.

The decline in the number of known settlement sites goes back to the beginning of the later Roman Iron Age, and is a continuing problem throughout the later Roman and Germanic periods. An examination of the data shows that a considerable majority of the settlement sites of the early Roman period were found

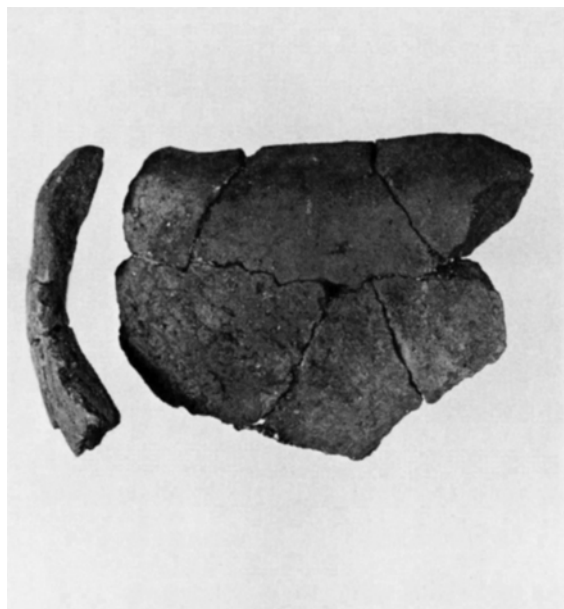


Fig. 3. Sherds from grave 1202 at Lindholm Høje. 1:2.

when a clay floor, a hearth, or a stone pavement were encountered in the course of agricultural work. This does not apply for the known later Roman and Germanic settlements, as important survey criteria such as clay floors and stone pavements disappear. Moreover the occupation layers of these periods are often thin and easily removed by cultivation. There are therefore grounds for reservations about the said reduction in the number of sites.

The problem in locating late Iron Age sites at all is undoubtedly one of the explanations for the annoying lack of knowledge of settlement. But it should also be emphasised that Iron Age settlements are dated almost exclusively from the pottery found. It is therefore important to remember that the pottery of the Germanic period – and especially its later part – has not so far been very thoroughly studied, and is therefore difficult to identify. It is particularly necessary to bear this in mind in connection with field surveys, for example in advance of major building projects, where one can only expect to find a few sherds revealing a settlement.

The question therefore arises whether one would not – in a routine exercise – have assigned most of the sherds from Stengården in the pre-Roman Iron Age (fig. 1: 1–3, 5, 6). Only 13% of the sherds are rim

sherds, and 89% of these were of forms habitually assignable to that period. Furthermore only 4,2% of the pottery from Stengården was ornamented – so small a proportion that one would not expect to find it in a sample collected on the surface. When the culture-layers of later Iron Age occupation sites are also normally thinner and have fewer finds than equivalent layers from the Early Iron Age, it will be understood why our knowledge of settlement in the Germanic period is so limited. For example the Stengården pit is the first settlement find of the period recorded in the Århus area, where several hundred Early Iron Age sites are already known.

Helped by a number of SW Jutland settlement finds we now have a fair knowledge of the early Germanic period's pottery (S. Jensen 1978 and 1980), but what was the pottery like in the later Germanic period? Here the large cemetery at Lindholm Høje in northern Jutland is important, as the pottery development can be followed there through the Germanic and Viking periods (T. Ramskou 1976). In the present paper only certain aspects of this development will be touched upon (4).

The find combinations at Lindholm Høje show that the hemispherical vessel, which is normally dated to the Viking period, in several cases occurs in graves of the later Germanic Iron Age. Those in question are four pots (figs. 3–6) found with datable objects – all of them plate fibulae. The vessels in graves 1202 and 1502 (fig. 3–4) were both found together with plate fibulae ornamented in Style C, and must therefore date to phase 2, which is customarily placed between 650 and 725 A.D. (M. Ørsnes 1966: 60, 224, 256). The interlace ornament on the fibulae from graves 1714 and 1721 must date the other two hemispherical bowls (figs. 5 and 6) to phase 2 or 3. It may be added that sherds of a hemispherical bowl were found in a pit-house at Karby on the island of Mors together with a rectangular plate fibula from phase 3 (S. Nielsen and P. Noe 1977: 8).

The above find combinations show clearly that the hemispherical bowl made its appearance in western Denmark at latest in the middle of the Later Germanic Iron Age. The question of absolute dating has been further elucidated by the recent excavations of the Viking Age layers at Ribe. It has been found that objects which in relative-chronological terms belong to the Viking period – for instance tortoise brooches of



Fig. 4. Vessel from grave 1502 at Lindholm Høje, height 12 cm.



Fig. 5. Vessel from grave 1714 at Lindholm Høje, height 17,5 cm.

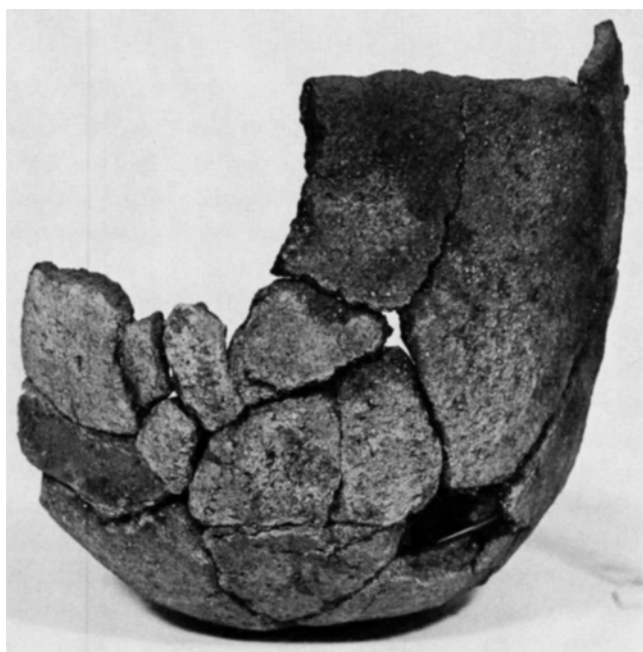


Fig. 6. Vessel from grave 1721 at Lindholm Høje, height 22,5 cm.



Fig. 7. Vessel from grave 1505 at Lindholm Høje, height 11 cm.

Berdal type – should be dated to somewhere in the 8th century (M. Bencard 1979, 120). This change must require a corresponding re-dating of the late part of the Germanic Iron Age. It is outside the scope of the

present article to consider this complicated set of problems further, but it is clear that the "gap" between the Early Germanic Iron Age and the Viking period is less than supposed.



Fig. 8. Vessel from grave 1697 at Lindholm Høje, height 11 cm.



Fig. 9. Vessel from grave 1697 at Lindholm Høje, height 18,5 cm.

The fact that the hemispherical bowl occurs as early as the Later Germanic Iron Age probably means that a part of the settlement activity that hitherto has been dated to the Viking period ought instead to be placed in the Later Germanic Iron Age. In this way the boundary between the Germanic and Viking periods does not emerge very clearly from the pottery. There is the same difficulty with the boundary between the Early and the Later Germanic Iron Age. Two hemispherical bowls from Lindholm Høje with nearly vertical sides (figs. 5 and 6) considerably resemble the unnecked Early Germanic pots from Stengården (fig. 1: 5).

The pottery from Lindholm Høje shows how hard it in general is to separate some elements of the pottery of the Early and Later Germanic periods from one another. However differences do exist. Neither pots with inbent rim nor with round base appear in closed finds from the Early Germanic period at Lindholm Høje, but both are present already in phases 1 and 2 of the Later Germanic period (graves 1421, 1505 and 1535). To take an example, a round-based pot with outbent rim (fig. 7) appears in grave 1505 together with a beaked fibula.

Another point is that handled bowls do not occur later than the Early Germanic period. The bowl from grave 1697 (fig. 8) was found together with a pot with markedly concave neck, likewise a trait that seems to end with the Early Germanic period.

The material shows that the development of the pottery in Jutland was continuous and steady throughout the whole Later Iron Age. With the transition to the Later Germanic period the handled bowls disappear and two new traits make their appearance – the inbent rim and the round base. These are combined in the hemispherical bowl, which first occurs at latest in the middle of the Later Germanic period and continues in use in the Viking period. One may therefore ask whether there was not a much greater degree of continuity in settlement in Jutland in the Later Iron Age than hitherto supposed. A re-assessment of the dating evidence for a number of the occupation sites that have been dated to the Viking period would presumably show that some of them could equally well be from the Later Germanic period.

It ought not, however, be thought that these new datings mean that our knowledge of Later Iron Age settlement can be greatly extended. They cannot alter

the fact that few settlement sites of the period are known. However it is important for our culture-historical interpretations for us to know whether there was a continuous development in the already known habitation finds, or whether there is a break in settlement to be explained.

Would it be contentious to close by suggesting that the 300-year long gap in settlement (from 500 to 800 A.D.), which is supposed to have taken place at Vorbasse (S. Hvass 1979: 27), has not been sufficiently established by the current pottery chronology?

Translated by Toni Liversage

NOTES

¹ Sb. 45, Harlev parish, Framlev herred, Århus amt. Excavated by the author for Forhistorisk Museum Moesgård (FHM 2121).

² FHM 2236 Stengården II.

³ See for example E. Thorvildsen 1972, O. Voss 1976, and S. Hvass 1979. Compare also the contribution by S. Hvass in this volume.

⁴ The study of the original material from Lindholm Høje would have lain outside the limits of this article. I would like to thank Hans Jørgen Madsen for calling my attention to some of the find combinations quoted, and Erik Johansen and Jan Slot Carlsen for their kindness in securing illustrations.

REFERENCES

- BENCARD, M. 1978: Wikingerzeitliches Handwerk in Ribe. Eine Übersicht. *Acta Archaeologica* vol. 49, 1978 (Copenh. 1979).
- HVASS, S.: Fem års udgravninger i Vorbasse. *Mark og Montre* 1979 (Esbjerg).
- JENSEN, S. 1978: Overgangen fra romersk til germansk jernalder. (*The Transition from Roman to Germanic Iron Age*). *Hikuin* 4 (Højbjerg).
- 1980: To sydvestjyske bopladser fra ældre germansk jernalder. *Mark og Montre* 1980 (Esbjerg).
- NIELSEN, S. & P. NOE 1977: Karby. En bebyggelse fra yngre jernalder og tidlig middelalder. *MIV* nr. 7 (Viborg).
- RAMSKOU, T. 1976: *Lindholm Høje gravpladsen* (Copenh.).
- THORVILDTSEN, E. 1972: Dankirke. *Nationalmuseets Arbejdsmark* (Copenh.).
- VOSS, O. 1976: Drengsted – et bopladsområde fra 5. årh. e. Kr. f. ved den sønderjyske vestkyst. *Iskos* 1 (Helsinki).
- ØRSNES, M. 1966: *Form og stil i Sydkandinaviens yngre germanske jernalder*. *Nationalmuseets Skrifter, Arkæologisk-historisk række* XI (Copenh.).