

Vorbasse

The Development of a Settlement through the First Millenium A.D.

by STEEN HVASS

Between the towns of Grindsted and Kolding in central Jutland lies the village of Vorbasse. It was near this that the National Museum carried out extensive excavations from 1974 to 1978. The investigations were initiated in 1974 by the Archaeological Settlement Committee set up by the National Research Council for the Humanities, in collaboration with the National Museum. Since 1979 the excavations have continued as a collaboration between the National Museum and Vejle Kulturhistoriske Museum.

The total area excavated is now ca. 150,000 m². The original intention was to excavate in full a well preserved settlement of Late Roman and Early Germanic date (Hvass 1979), but in the course of this work remains of Late Germanic and Viking age also turned up. The excavation was extended to include these as well, as total excavation could be expected to produce the clearest plan to date of a Viking village as well as of a settlement from the transition to the ensuing Middle Ages (Hvass 1980b). Incidentally there have appeared settlement remains from other prehistoric periods, of which the most important are from the Single Grave Culture (Hvass 1977). In 1981 five Late Bronze Age houses were dug under the eastern part of the Viking

settlement. They were found on the central part of a low hill named Lille Bavn, and consisted of two 22–24 m long long-houses and three smaller houses of similar construction. The houses are of the usual Late Bronze Age type, fig. 1.

There were remains of settlement from many different sections of the Iron Age in the large area cleared. To acquire a more complete knowledge further trial trenches were laid out in 1980. With their help it was established that there within an area measuring 900 × 700 m were villages from the first century B.C. to the 11th century A.D. From the information available there appeared to have been continuity of settlement throughout this period, and the Iron Age occupation probably continued as the present village of Vorbasse, the oldest building of which is the Romanesque church. During these 1200 years there had existed 8 villages, which replaced one another after being moved a few hundred meters. It seems clear that it was the same rural community throughout.

In the same area there have been found 5 small cemeteries. One is from period IIIb of the Pre-Roman Iron Age and the early part of the Early Roman Period. A second is from the later Early Roman Period (2nd cen-

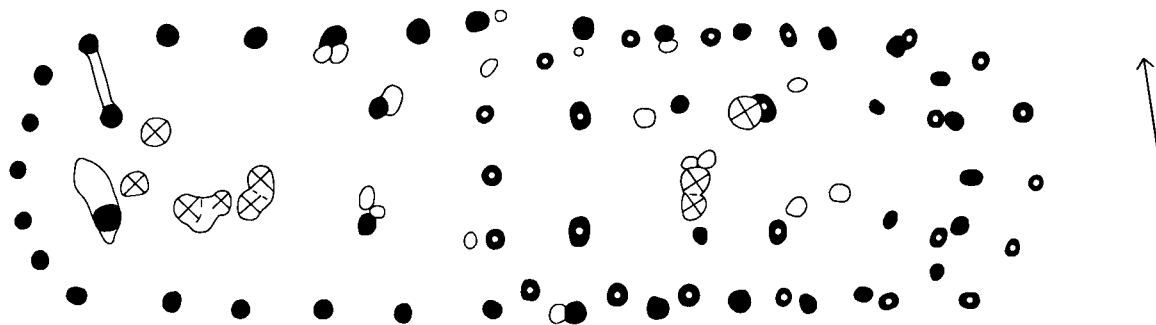


Fig. 1. A long-house from the Late Bronze Age at Lille Bavn, Vorbasse. 1:200.





Fig. 2. Aerial photograph taken in 1970 of the Vorbasse area. The 1974–82 excavations have been added (black). Air photo by the Geodætisk Institut (flight no. D380 E no. 283). Reproduced with permission (A. 339/83) of the G.I. Copyright.

ture), and three small cemeteries are from the Later Roman Period.

The earliest Iron Age settlement found is from period IIIa of the Pre-Roman Iron Age, 1st century B.C. The village covered an area measuring at least 80×20 m, and 9 long-houses and 7 smaller houses have been excavated. The long-houses lie in two close rows with the

smaller buildings near the long-houses. Fence remains were only found at the two ends. This was in the most easterly of the large excavated areas.

From about the time of Christ and the first century A.D. have been excavated two separate but contiguous farmsteads (fig. 3). Each farmhouse is a 16 m long building of the usual early Iron Age type with dwelling

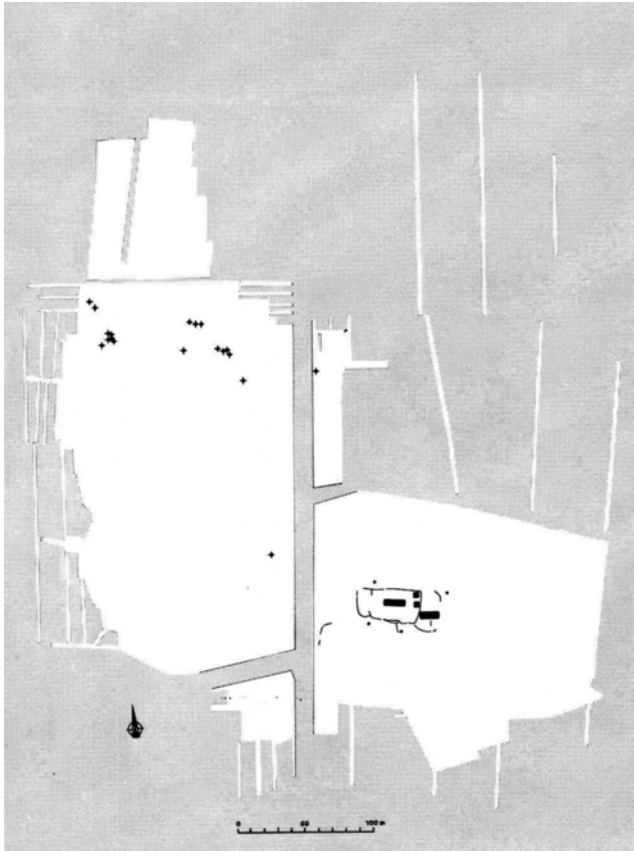


Fig. 3. Plan of the excavated area with the two separate farms and the graves from the time of Christ and the 1st century A.D.

room at one end and byre with stall partitions at the other. One of them had two smaller buildings as out-houses. Each was surrounded by its own fence of closely-placed vertical stakes. The arrangement of the fences shows that one farm was built first and the other added shortly afterwards. There are openings in the fences opposite the doorways of the houses. Outside the fence were found four iron-smelting furnaces, among the oldest so far found in Denmark.

About 70 m NW of the western farmstead was found a burial urn with the cremated remains of a man, and 130 m beyond it a further 18 urn burials of the same age. The eighteen were all female according to both grave goods and the anthropological determinations, and had died at ages of from 20 to 60 years. They fall into three groups, probably showing three separate cemeteries in simultaneous use.

Probably contemporary with these two farmsteads

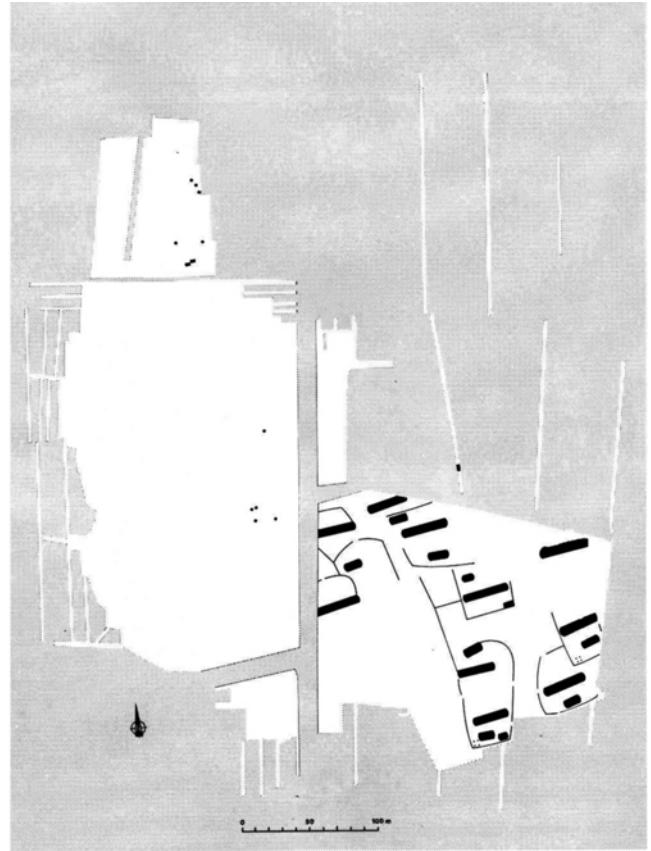


Fig. 4. The village in the 3rd century A.D.

was a settlement with houses and fences found ca. 600 m further east. It is not yet clear whether this was just a number of scattered farmsteads or a sizeable village.

The next following settlement was not at the same place, but a settlement of the 2nd century A.D. has been found ca. 300 m to the north. It occupied an area of about 150×150 m with a number of groups of houses. These probably represent several farms conglomerated as a village. The cemetery belonging to the settlement is known too. Its remains were excavated in 1939 by P.V. Glob, and it lay about 200 m south of the settlement (unpublished).

In the third century the village was moved back to where people had lived in the first century (fig. 4). Unfortunately its buildings are not very well preserved as they are obscured by later remains. There was a row of farms, consisting each of a long-house and 1–2 smaller buildings surrounded by a fence. At one of the souther-

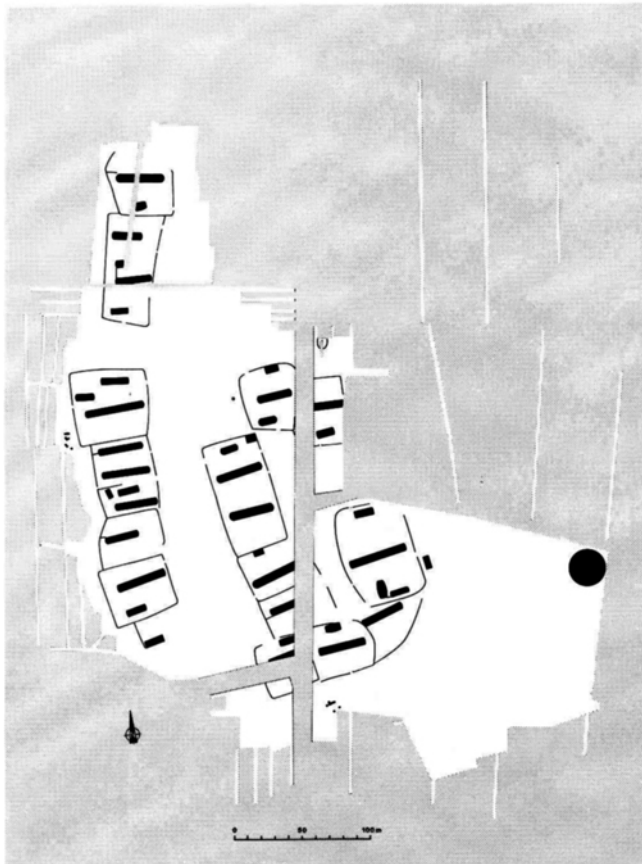


Fig. 5. The village in the 4th century A.D. The black dot indicates the position of the cemetery.

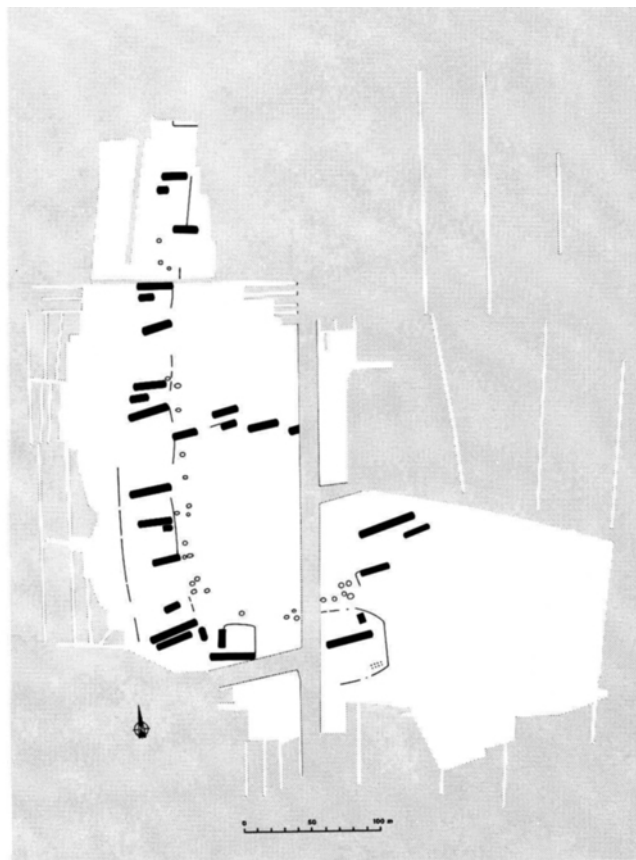


Fig. 6. The village in the 5th century A.D.

ly farmsteads a fence surrounded two separate farms.

Compared with the earlier farms a number of changes can be observed in the third century. The most important was that the long-houses became considerably longer, with a length of 20–48 m, but with the same width as before, 5,5 m. Sometimes the new houses are divided by internal partitions, and it is common to find up to five rooms, with dwelling quarters occupying 2–3 rooms at the western end, doorways in the middle of each side, and byres with accommodation for between 15 and 30 beasts in the eastern third of the buildings. In the longest houses there is often a further room at the east, but nothing can be said about its use.

Another difference compared with earlier is that the individual compounds are on the average considerably larger in the 3rd–4th centuries. Their average area is about 2000 m², or about four times that of even the largest farm at Hodde.

Also a new type of building appeared. The sunken »pit-house« is first seen in the 3rd century. These various developments in settlement structure can be followed in this area up into the 5th century.

The third century settlement covers an area of 250 × ca. 300 m, and about 10 farms have been excavated, all of different sizes. The placing of the farms in relation to one another seems not to indicate any definite plan.

This 3rd century settlement was succeeded by a large village in the 4th century, which gradually – one or two farms at a time – was moved westwards (fig. 5). Finally it came to cover an area of 400 × 250 m with a fixed plan. The farms were placed in three rows with entirely free areas between. Most of the farmsteads had separate fences, but also in this village there were signs of agricultural co-operation as two of the farms shared a compound. A particularly large farmstead is distinguishable in the eastern part of the village. In this

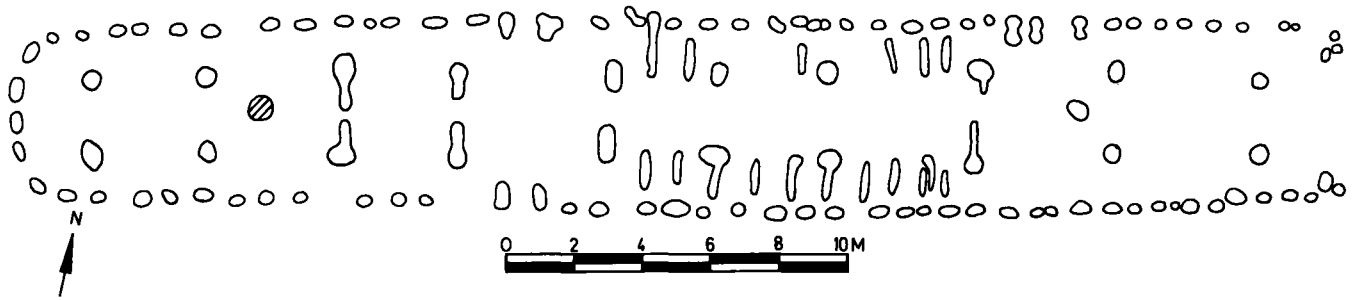


Fig. 7. Plan of a 38 m long-house of the 4th century A.D.

period about 20 farms existed at one and the same time.

In the 5th century the settlement plan was again completely altered (fig. 6). The houses stood at the same place and were of the same size as before, but now there was a large central open area measuring 150 × 120 m. Just as in the 4th century the largest farm lay furthest to the east. This was certainly the same farm continuing on into the 5th century.

To judge from the large byres in the 3rd to 5th centuries production was probably based chiefly on cattle, as nearly every farm had stall partitions giving space to between 15 and 30 animals (fig. 7). Also the topographical placing of the village suggests stock farming, as it adjoins what would then have been lowlying meadow areas; but of course there was also the possibility of some agriculture on the slightly more clayey areas south of the village.

The inhabitants must have been self-sufficient with respect to iron. Every settlement had one or two smithies, and smelting pits were found outside every one of them (fig. 8). It can be seen that the smith was not an independent craftsman, but was attached to a larger farmstead, as the smithy was always one of the smaller buildings belonging to one of the large long-houses with byre.

Also the stonecutter can be distinguished. At two places in the open central area there were found concentrations of roughouts for rotary querns.

From the systematic placing of the farms in the 4th century and the changes made in the 5th it can be seen that there at that time anyway must have been a fixed authority or organization in the background, and the big farm in the eastern part of the settlement can be seen as the instance possibly organising the village plan.

The biggest change took place during the last phase

of the village in the 5th century and is best understood as a major planned rearrangement of nearly all the farms (fig. 6). They were given a very definite arrangement with a large open area in the middle.

Also the examination of the individual farms shows that important changes took place at the start of the final phase. The farmsteads became smaller in area, and it is particularly important to note a decline in the number of stalls in the byres. This must show that the village faced an agricultural crisis in the 5th century, and perhaps the re-arrangement of the farms was part of a wider structural change connected therewith.

Three cemeteries have been found belonging to the 3rd and 4th century settlements. One of them lay immediately east of the 4th century village and had 16 graves. It has been excavated in full. To judge by the size of the graves both adults and children were buried. In all the

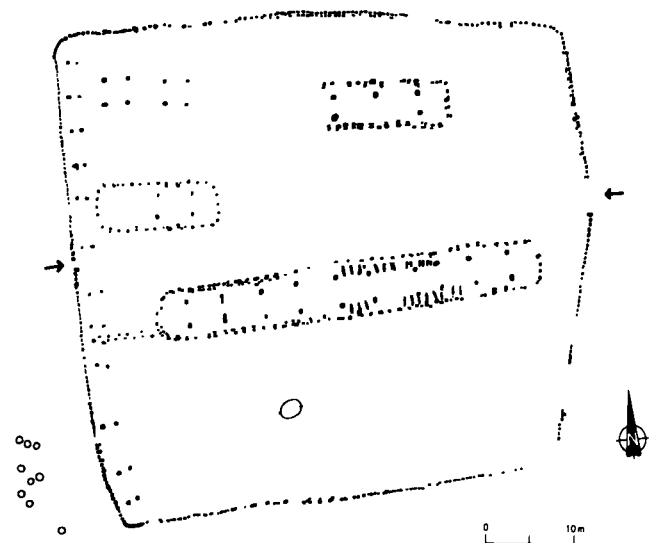


Fig. 8. Plan of a 4th century farm. Bottom left a concentration of slag-pits.

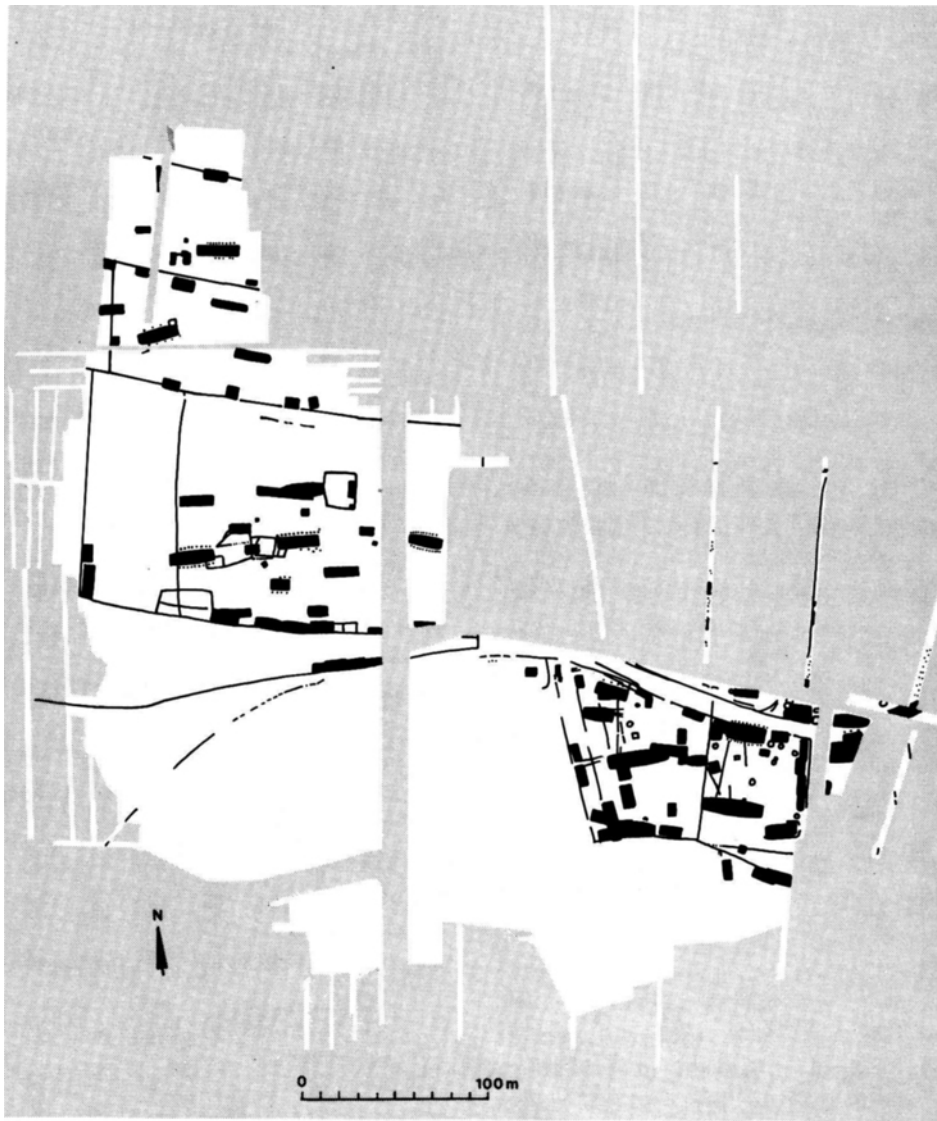


Fig. 9. Buildings and fences from the Viking period, excavation 1974–79.

graves there were 3–5 pots, and in all but one there were also 1–5 fibulae. In the middle lay two weapon graves. In one of them two spearheads stood point downwards at the side of the grave, and a shield had stood on edge. Its remains showed that it had originally had a diameter of 1,30 m with central boss. There had been a pot at the end of the grave beyond the head. At the neck was a silver fibula, and across the corpse lay a large sword with remains of a suspension belt with ornamental tin nails. There were two belt buckles, two belt-end pendants, and several small rods. At the foot of the grave was found a Hemmoor pail. The other weapon grave had li-

kewise two spearheads point downwards at the side and a shield standing on edge. In this case there were 4 pots near the head of the corpse. In the thoracic region were found silver rivets and in the pelvic region a large iron dagger and several objects that are still undergoing conservation treatment.

There were also 4 very rich female graves with very similar equipment. Over the upper part of the chest they had a large plate fibula of bronze with applied silver and gold sheeting and cloisons with stones. There were strings of 150–250 glass and amber beads, and at the chest and neck 3–5 fibulae. In addition there was a

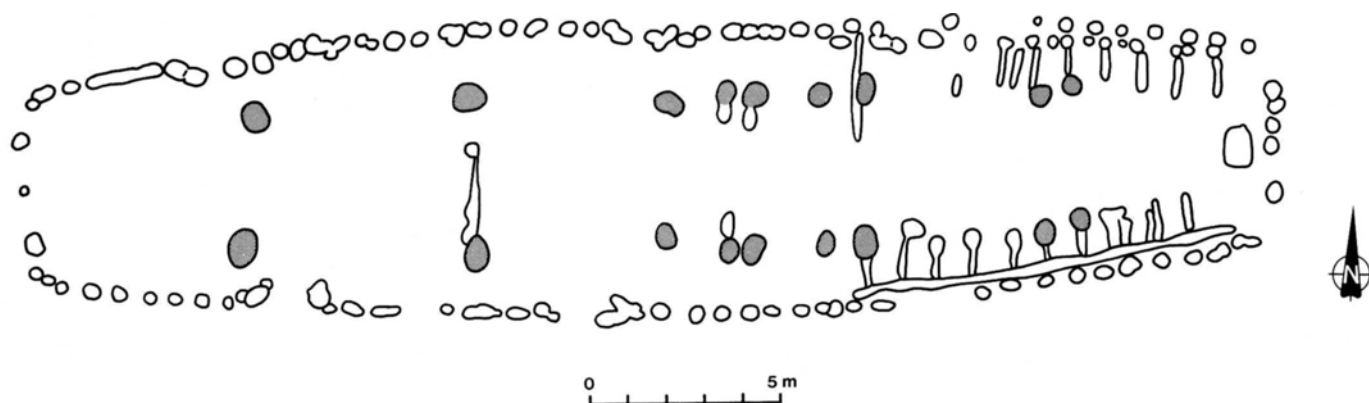


Fig. 10. Plan of a long-house with byre from the 9th and 10th centuries. 1:200.

knife and a little ornamented pot in each grave. At the head of each there was also a single small vessel and at the foot two or three others. One of the graves also contained a little thick-walled beaker of clear glass. All the graves are from the 4th century. From its character this is probably the cemetery belonging to a particular farm in the village, and as the grave goods are richer than normal in Jutland in this period it probably belonged to the large dominating farm.

The other cemetery connected with the settlement of the 3rd to 4th century was found on a rise in the land 300–400 m east of the village. Here there were six cairns from the Early Bronze Age, and adjacent to them 4 inhumation and 2 cremation graves. One of them was richly furnished like the rich female graves of the other cemetery. The third Later Roman cemetery lay right to the north, immediately outside the fences of some farms. This and the farms will be excavated in 1983.

Close to this third cemetery and ca. 100 m north of the 4th–5th century village, fig. 5 and 6, the trial trenches have revealed a new settlement covering an area of about 400 × 100 m and having very well preserved buildings and fences. This one could be from the 6th and perhaps 7th centuries. The eastern part of it will be excavated in 1983. A pollen series extending from the 4th–5th to the 11th centuries shows that there must have been continuous settlement during that time with the existence of much grazing land and rough pasture (Brorson Christensen 1981).

Inside the large total area of the excavation there have also been found well preserved remains of Viking date, fig. 9. There are really two Viking settlements. The first is found in the southern excavated area and

begins in phase 2 of the Later Germanic Iron Age, continuing throughout most of the Viking Age; the other extends over the whole of the excavation and is from the end of the Viking Age continuing into the Early Middle Ages – the 11th century (Hvass 1980b).

In 1983 and 1984 excavation will be completed of the 8th–10th century settlement, whose southern part has

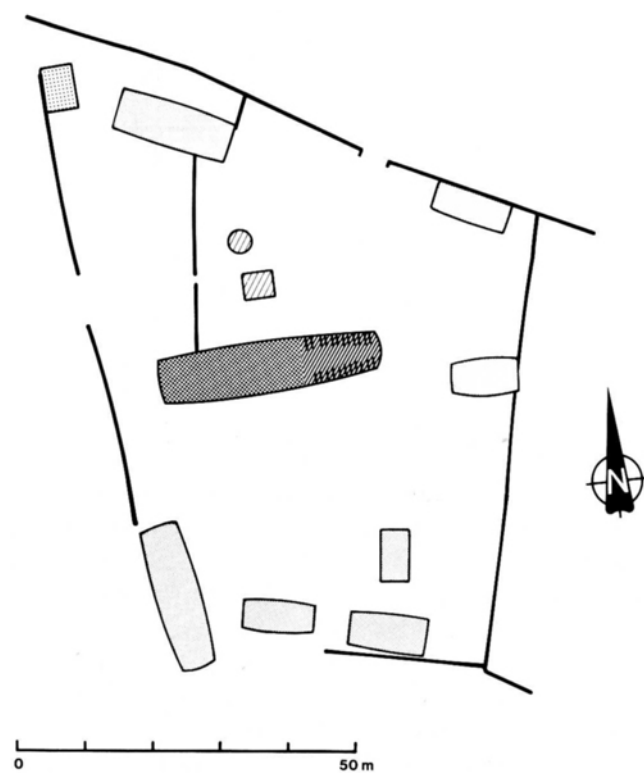


Fig. 11. Plan of a 9th–10th century farm. The smithy is at the top left. North of the main building in the middle are two sunken-huts.

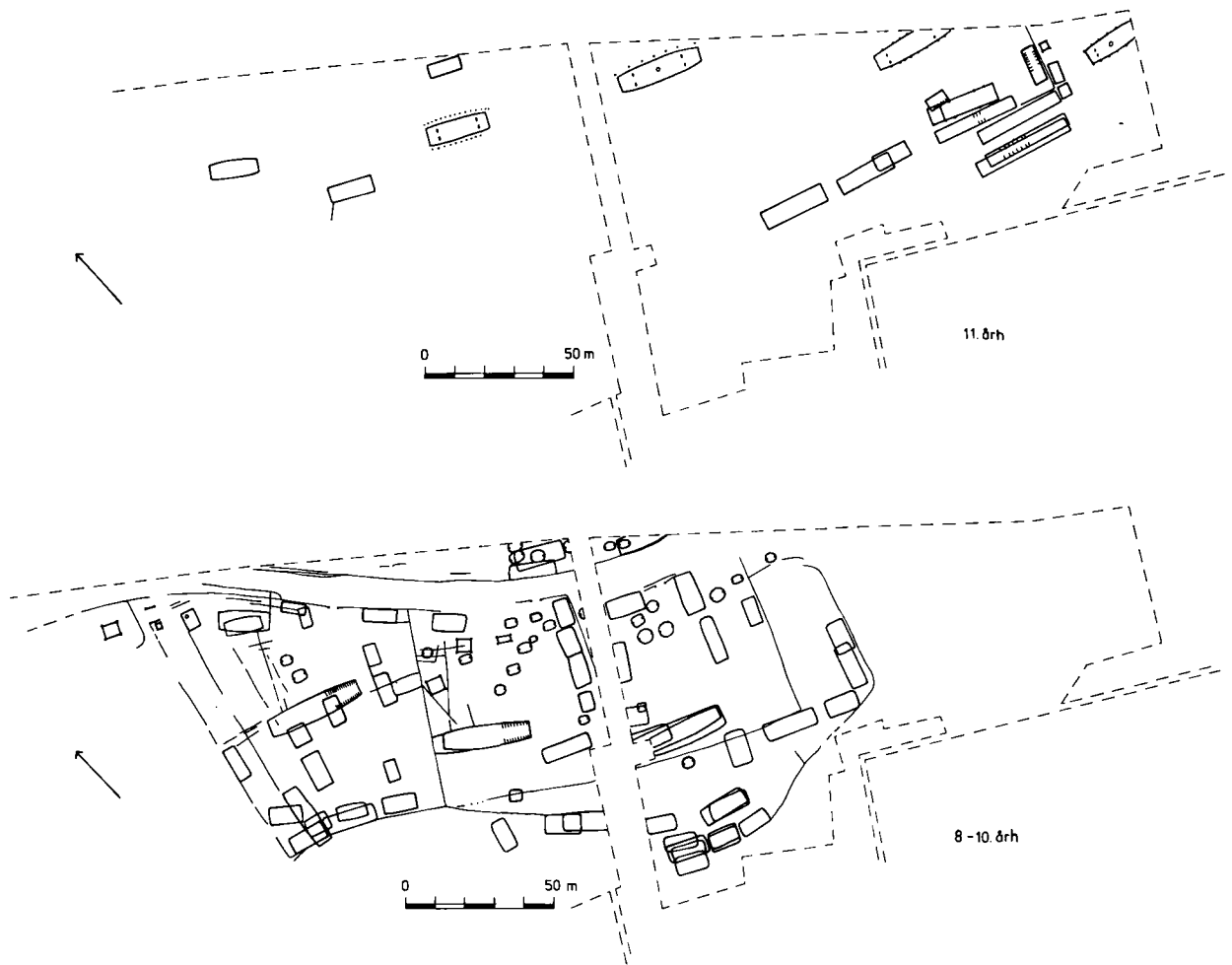


Fig. 12. The southern excavation area: below the 8th–10th century settlement, above the 11th century settlement. 1:2500.

already been dug. It was composed of farms placed along both sides of an 8–10 m wide roadway enclosed by fences. South of this roadway three complete farmsteads have been uncovered, each consisting of numerous buildings. In its middle each had a main building about 32 m long, divided by internal partitions into three rooms of nearly equal size (fig. 10). Two had byre at the eastern end with stall partitions along both the north and south sides exactly as in Early Iron Age houses. They had room for about 22 beasts. Probably the rest of the house served as living quarters. These long-houses differ from earlier ones in their massive curved sides. The two long-houses with byre in the eastern part are the only ones known so far from the

Scandinavian Viking Age with byre and living quarters under the same roof.

Surrounding each main building were several smaller houses, placed about the inside of the fence, which enclosed an area measuring ca. 80 × 80 m (fig. 11), but none of the smaller buildings had byre. In the free space north of the long-house was an open yard, near the edge of which there had been a number of pit-houses, nearly all of which yielded loom weights. A gap in the fence leads from this open space to the village street. One of the small houses in the corner of the farmstead was a smithy with finds of slag and hammer scale.

How many of the buildings in the three 8th–10th century farms stood at one time is difficult to say before the

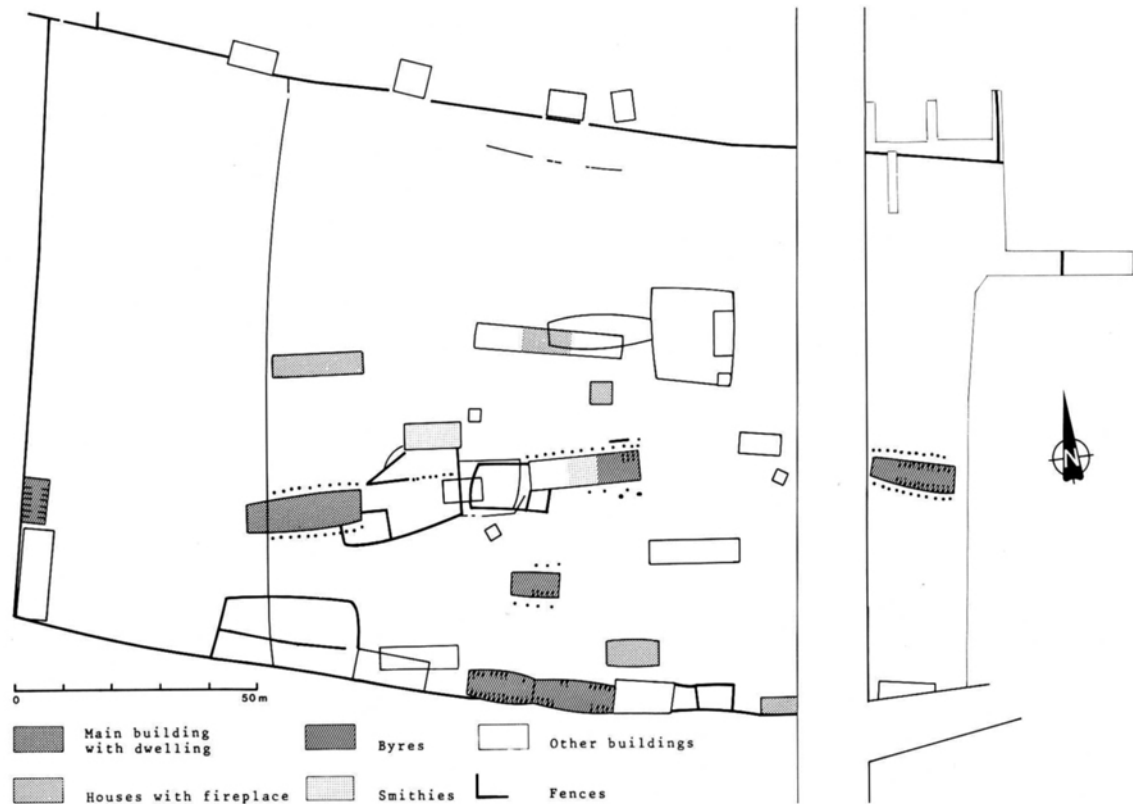


Fig. 13. A large farm from the 11th century.

finds have been studied further. Both the size of the farmsteads and the construction of the houses had changed since the 5th century. The farms are now considerably larger and both the large and the small buildings are in a distinctive new building style.

Later, probably in the 11th century, this settlement was radically altered, fig. 12, above. The existing buildings must have been razed to the ground. The new settlement on the site had a quite different arrangement and community structure. Probably at the same time occupation was extended westwards to co-incide with the whole of the excavated area, fig. 9. This late settlement apparently only lasted for a short time and came to an end about the year 1100.

The eastern part of the late settlement, fig. 12 above, had in the middle three houses of the same type as found in the strongholds of Trelleborg, Fyrkat, and Aggersborg (Olsen and Schmidt 1977). Around the most easterly of them was an enclosing fence and several buildings whose function must have been outhouse or stable. They probably stood successively, as they are

absolutely alike. They were 30 m long and about 4.5 m wide with partitions indicating altogether 50 beasts. In the same corner were found a further two smaller byres or stables.

In the western part of the excavated area was built a very large farm (fig. 13). Its fenced area measured 120×210 m. The main central building was a 24 m long »Trelleborg house« (fig. 14). At its eastern gable was a small closed yard leading to a building that was both smithy and bronze foundry. Around about were further houses of different sizes. Five buildings had stalls along both sides, i.e. they were byres. If the 5 byres all stood at the same time there would have been accommodation for altogether 100 beasts. Other buildings have a single fireplace and must have been dwellings. Finally there were buildings of indeterminate function. There were altogether twenty buildings in the fenced area belonging to this farm, but it is still difficult to decide whether any of them were replacements or not. North of this 11th century farm were found two similar farms, also each with its »Trelleborg house« as main building. The fenced

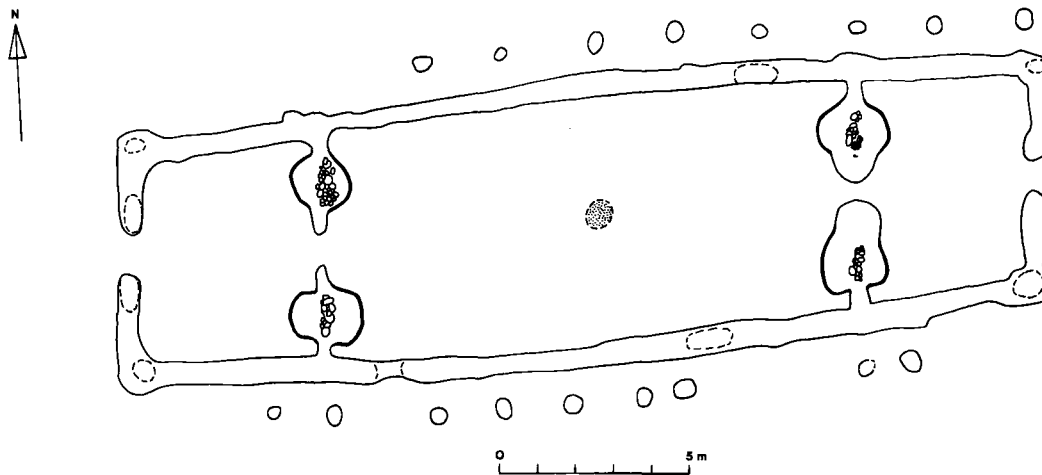


Fig. 14. Plan of the main building of the large 11th century farm, a house of the so-called 'Trelleborg-type' with sloping external posts. 1:200.

area of each was exactly half the size of the big one just described.

These Viking farmsteads have an arrangement that we did not earlier know. They help show that much of the domestic background of the great expansion of the Viking period was large evolved farms, whose byres suggest that stock keeping was an important factor in Viking economy.

The 9th and 10th century Viking settlement produced many finds showing connections with areas outside Denmark. There are soapstone vessels from Norway, rotary querns of Mayen basalt from the Rhine, sherds of imported pottery of Pingsdorf type, and Wendic pottery. It is remarkable that all the querns found were made of basaltic lava from the Rhine and not one was of Scandinavian granite or gneiss. In one of the houses there were found two silver coins – a half-bracteate struck in 975–80, probably at Hedeby, and a north German coin from Stade, struck between 1038 and 1040. There is also a large native material including pottery and iron ingots. The finds from the eleventh century settlement are substantially fewer – only pottery and a few slate whetstones. No graves of the Viking period have so far been found.

Research at Vorbasse has revealed settlements lasting from the last century before Christ until the 11th century. A number of them have been fully excavated and combined with their cemeteries give a unique opportunity to follow the development of a village community for 1200 years. They tell how settlement evolved

for a thousand years previous to the stationary medieval village (Hvass 1982). The excavations indicate that one can expect a single rural community to have had area-continuity throughout most of the Iron Age.

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