

Søby – a Viking Age Settlement on Samsø

by PETER BIRKEDAHL CHRISTENSEN

Samsø consists of two raised morainic islands, forced together between glacial streams, and subsequently conjoined by marine deposits from the Tapes/Litorina Sea. The Viking Age settlement of Søby is situated in between Nordby and Mårup on the north island of Samsø, about 1 km. from the east coast and 2 km. from the west, on the gently sloping section east of the raised morainic ground on the west of the island (fig. 1).

To the east of the site is a substantial area of meadow, surrounding Søby Kær, a pool now covered up, which had a tributary to the west. The site is thus provided with water, pasture and arable lands, so that it fulfils the criteria as an ideal position for an agricultural settlement.

About 1,100 sq.m. of the site have been excavated, partly in two extensive areas, partly in long trenches (1). 19 sunken-huts were found, of which 16 were wholly or partially investigated. None of the post-holes on the site could be interpreted as the remains of larger dwellings. The site extends at least 230 m. from east to west, and a minimum of 60–70 m. from north to south, without doubt, in fact, a little more. It is believed that the main area of settlement lies around the covered water-course south of the excavated area (cf. fig. 2).

I shall concentrate here on two of the sunken-huts, because with regard to both construction and finds they display so many characteristics that they provide a good dating and characterisation of the site.

THE SUNKEN-HUTS

Sunken-hut EO was four-sided, measuring about 3.5×4.0 m., with its longer axis aligned east-west, and dug 45 cm. into the ground (fig. 3). There were 6 post-holes, one in each corner and one in the centre of either shorter side. No wall trench was discovered in the building, and therefore no inset planks, and no stake-holes or

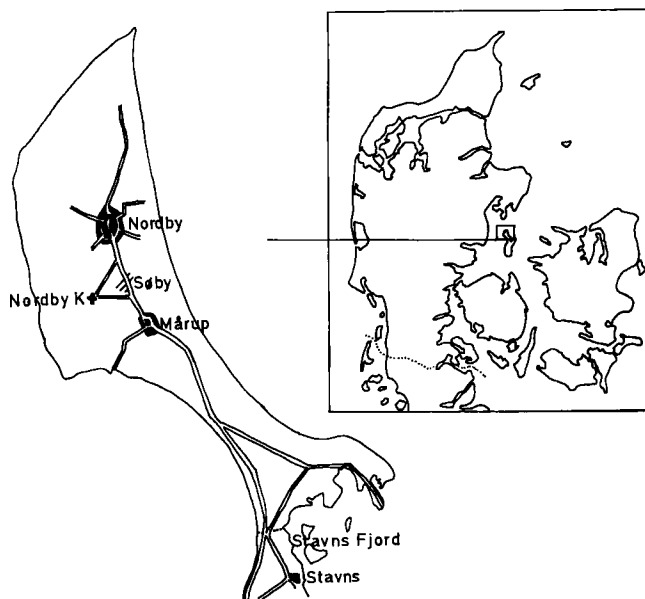


Fig. 1. The situation of Søby on northern Samsø.

wattle either. The post-holes in the corners were not especially deep, which could indicate that the posts were firmly fixed, either connected to a log-built construction or a stave-built construction with a sill. The posts in the middle of either end indicate that the building had a pitched roof. But since these posts were sunk no deeper than the corner posts, one must suppose that the roof could not have rested upon them, but upon the whole wall structure.

The building had a bench built into the ground along the north and west sides. In the south-west corner a heap of flat stones, about 20–25 cm. large, was discovered. Beneath these were several larger stones, standing on their edges. Loose stones fanned out from here into the building. Below the stone layers, a layer of soot and charcoal was observed, together with four

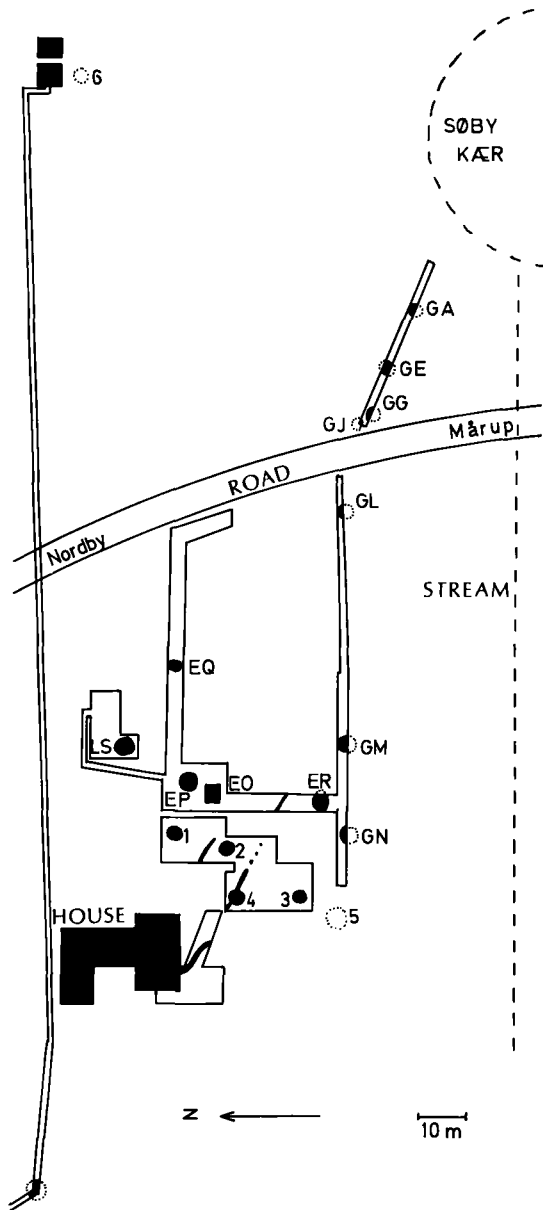


Fig. 2. Excavated areas. Sunken-huts are shown with numbers and letters.

small post-holes. The ash layer and the stone construction make an interpretation of the feature as an oven probable.

Four-sided sunken huts with three post-holes along the gables are known from north-western Germany and Jutland. Examples with ovens are known from Århus, Hedeby, and South Hedeby. Huts DAQ and DKR at Århus Søndervold had stone-built ovens in the southern

corner, while hut CJR had an ash layer in the same corner (Andersen, Crabb and Madsen 1971). Building EO is closely related to sunken-hut DAQ at Århus Søndervold. On the basis of this similarity, a dating of sunken-hut EO to the 10th. century, the date of Århus Søndervold's sunken-huts, appears reasonable.

Sunken-hut EP, situated immediately to the north of hut EO, was round, about 3.5 m. in diameter, and dug about 45 cm. down into the ground (Fig. 4). To the WNW and ESE of the base were found the holes of two roof-bearing posts. A further two large post-holes appeared about 40–50 cm. on either side of the eastern of these post-holes, but these were shallower. Small stake-holes bordered the whole of the north side, probably remains of a wattled wall. On the south side was a single wall trench and two stake-holes. But construction features were lacking in most of this section. Small stake-holes were found scattered across the middle of the floor. These holes were seen in several of the sunken-huts at Soby, but here is the evidence that they were associated with a construction or activity in the building. A bone comb (1651, fig. 6,a) was placed vertically in one of them.

The building was filled with several light layers of sand, alternating with darker layers containing humus and clay (fig. 5,A). Tom Ohlsson has interpreted this phenomenon as seasonal use of a single building (Ohlsson 1976: 92). He believes this to be several floor layers alternating with blown sand layers. Märta Strömberg notes the phenomenon from Hagestad no. 19, where the floor layer is gradually raised, probably for reasons of hygiene (Strömberg 1963: 7f.). Ingrid Stoumann mentions thin, washed out sand layers and thick blown sand layers (1977). She reckons this as evidence of the building filling up in several stages. The phenomenon was observed in several contexts at Soby. In the southern part of hut EP was a layer of daub, lying within that part of the building (fig. 5,B). This layer was covered by several of these 'seasonal floor layers'. A supplementary point is that many of the dark and light layers were deposited only by the sides of the pit (fig. 5,A). This rejects Märta Strömberg's 'hygiene theory' of layers lying on the base. An interpretation of these as back-filling layers, where partly the sand that was dug up during the construction of the building, and partly earth and rubbish, was thrown into the hole, seems reasonable. This could perfectly well have happened in several stages, as Ingrid Stoumann believes (1977).

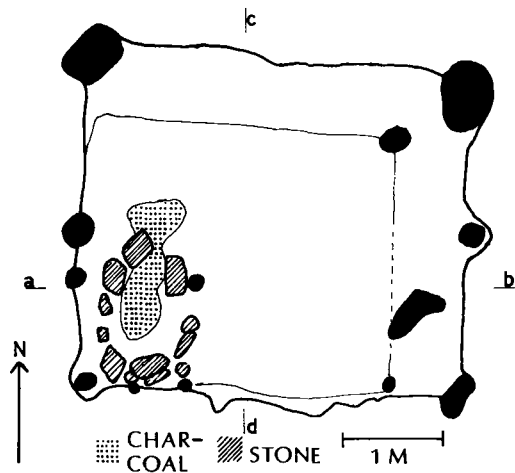


Fig. 3. Plan of sunken-hut EO.

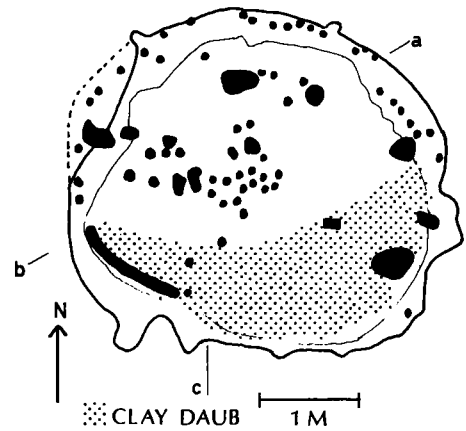


Fig. 4. Plan of sunken-hut EP.

FINDS

Combs

The find-material includes three decorated bone combs (nos. 1594, 1651, and 1655, fig. 6) all from hut EP. These therefore combine to date this building. Concurrently they provide some evidence concerning comb-making in general, in that each of them is of a different type.

The first comb, no. 1651 (fig. 6,a), is typologically the oldest. It was found standing in one of the stake-holes in the bottom of sunken-hut EP. It is a comb of the composite type, i.e. with two side-plates and middle plates.

The comb was originally about 21 cm. long, but one end is broken off and it now measures only 19.4 cm. The surviving end is formed into an animal's head, with an iron nail marking the eye. The decoration of the side plates consists of a vertical central panel and two

wedge-shaped side panels filled with interlace. Both the central and the side panels are bordered by a groove, which follows the contours of the side plate around the side panels. The areas between the interlaced ribbons are also hatched with a single line, giving a clearer ornamental effect. This is the most common form of ornament on combs with animal-head terminals. Combs of this type are found in the whole area of Viking settlement. The type is dated to the 9th., and possibly into the 10th., centuries. It is known from a 9th.-century grave from Barre in the Hebrides (Brøgger 1930:231). It was found at the settlement site of Jarlshof on the Shetlands, with a dating of the first half of the 9th. century (Hamilton 1956: 124, 134, & pl. XXII). In York it was found in a context dated to the late 9th. or early 10th. century (Waterman 1959: 87). It is also known from the Oseberg grave from Norway, dated to the middle of the 9th. century (Brøgger and Shetelig 1928: 205; cf. Peter-

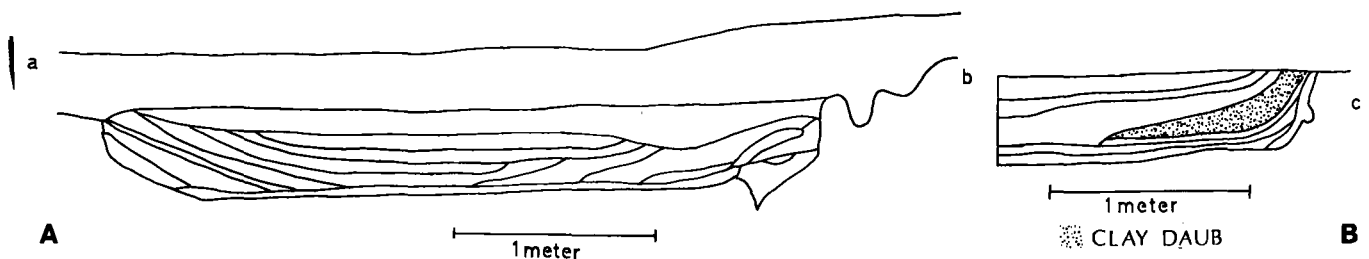


Fig. 5. A: Cross-section of sunken-hut EP, showing layers of fill. — B: Cross-section of the southern part of sunken-hut EP, showing the daub layer.

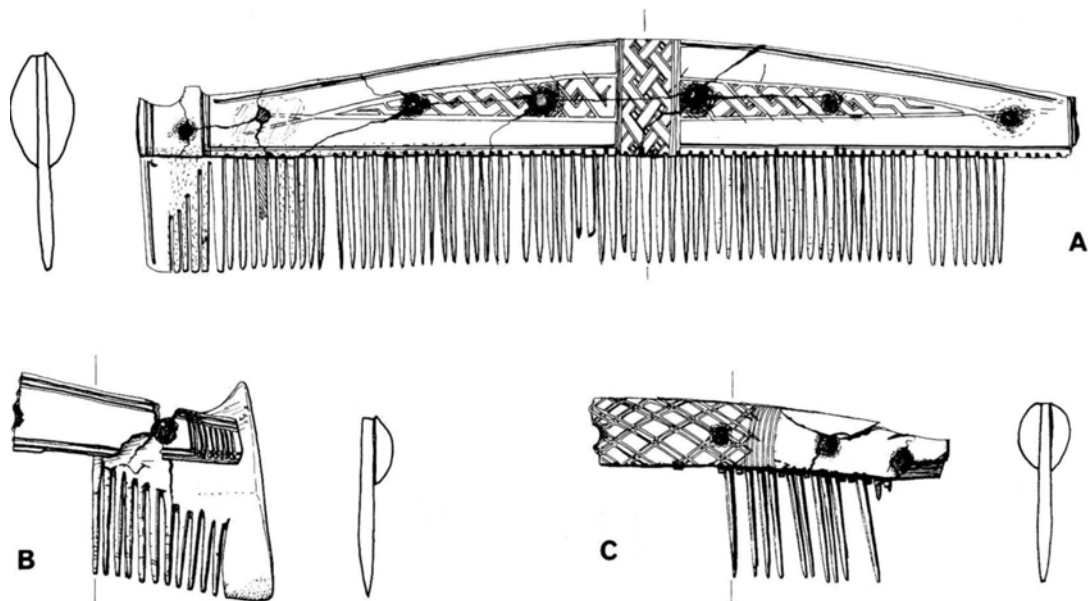


Fig. 6. Bone comb and bone comb fragments from sunken-hut EP (drawn by Jette Bang). 2:3.

sen 1951: 486). It appeared in graves at Birka dated to both halves of the 9th. century (Arbman 1939 pl. 159). Hedeby and Wollin have produced examples (Jankuhn 1943; Wilde 1953: 67–83). Finally, two fragments have been found in Århus (Andersen et al 1971: 146f.). One of these has animal head terminals, and the other has the terminals broken off, but is decorated with a central panel and two wedge-shaped side panels. The combs here are typologically dated to the 9th. century, and perhaps down into the 10th. century. This dating seems satisfactory. A dating to the 10th. century too is supported by a comb with broad, flat side plates from Trondheim (Moen 1971: 82). According to provisional results, dates here go back no further than around the year 1000 (Long 1977).

Comb-fragment 1594 (fig. 6,b) was found in the fill of hut EP. As far as the side plates are concerned this comb is connected to the group with broad, flat side plates, which nearly always have the contours emphasized by one or more grooves inside the edge. The middle plate has a characteristic upward-projecting point. This type has been found, *inter alia*, at Trelleborg (Nørlund 1948 pl.XXX: 2), Okholm (Andersen 1968: 25), Hedeby, and Wollin. At Hedeby it was dated to the first half of the 10th. century (Jankuhn 1943: 156), and at Wollin to the second half of that century and down into the

11th. century (Wilde 1953). The broad, flat side plates draw it to the 9th. century, and perhaps down into the 10th. (see the dating of comb 1651). Thus the dating of the comb lies from around 900 some way down into the 10th. century.

One detail on the comb tells us something of the production technique. By the side of the last tooth-slot, and at the same distance as between the other teeth, a thin line may be seen: a marker for a further tooth. Above the last slot a similar line is visible. Thus the distance between the teeth and their number were determined before the sawing began.

Comb-fragment 1655 (Fig. 6,c) was found in the bottom layer of hut EP. Both side plates have terminals at one end, but the middle plate's end is broken off. The appearance of the end of the comb can not therefore be reliably determined. The side plates are narrow, rounded, and lightly curved. The decoration consist of six lines across the plates, followed by a network of double lines.

The decoration is identical with that found on combs PN and DQR from Århus Sønder vold (Andersen et al 1971: 147, 149) and the comb from matr. no. 264 in Randers (Velley 1977: 119, fig. 17). It is also known from Wollin and Hedeby. Fragments of a similar comb were found in Lindholm Høje grave 1446 (Ramskou 1976).

An incision towards the end of one of the plates could show that this comb, like no. 1594, had an upward-projecting point on the middle plate. Such an incision appears on comb 1594. Five of the seven combs from Århus Sønder vold with narrow, rounded side plates showed some form of excrescence on the end of the side plate (2). Combs with excrescences are found from the first half of the 10th. century at Hedeby (Tempel 1970: 40). A rather feeble example from post-980 is from Trelleborg (Nørlund 1948 fig. 76). There are five combs from Wollin, dated 900–950, but one further example dated to the 11th. century (Wilde 1953). Altogether the comb seems to have had a long period of life.

Pottery

A comparison with the pottery from Århus Sønder vold shows that the pottery from Søby can entirely be grouped in ceramic horizon I. Sherds from Søby which can be grouped with Århus Sønder vold's characteristic groups comprise 18.12%; the corresponding figure for Århus Sønder vold is 18.31% (3). These two figures are so close that a comparison of the individual groups can be made immediately. As far as rims are concerned the proportions are the same, except for groups d and e, which are not found at Søby. These two groups are dated late in ceramic horizon I at Århus Sønder vold, i.e. to the 11th. century, and their absence from Søby can be attributed to this date. One might expect that flat bases, an eastern characteristic, should be more common at Søby than at Århus Sønder vold, but that is not the case.

Slavic influenced pottery (fig. 7) comprises a slightly smaller percentage of the material at Søby than at Århus Sønder vold. It is concentrated in sunken-hut EO to the extent that it is predominant in the bottom layer. The models for this pottery are to be found in the ceramic groups Teterow and Vipperow south of the Baltic, and dated on this basis to *circa* 1000. This is the latest dating from Søby. At Århus Sønder vold Slavic pottery is especially associated with rim forms d and e, and therefore placed in the 11th. century. Here again the difference between Søby and Århus Sønder vold can be attributed to their relative dates.

Otherwise, Jutish hemispherical vessels are predominant in the pottery material. The comparison with Århus Sønder vold makes it clear that Søby is associated with Jutland as far as the pottery goes.

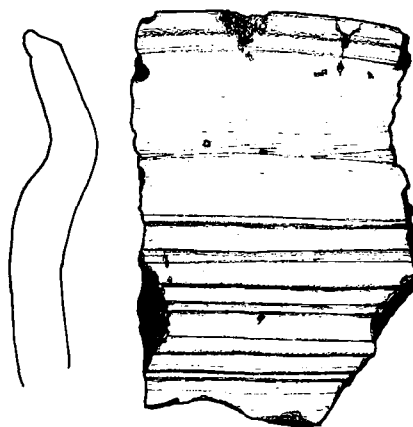


Fig. 7. Rim-sherds of Slavic influenced pottery from sunken-hut EO (drawn by Jette Bang). 2:3.

Other finds

Amongst other finds from the site should be mentioned articles employed in textile production: loom-weights, spindle-whorls, and a weaving-comb.

A great number of *loom-weights* were found, both burnt and unburnt. Two from sunken-hut EO were decorated by stabbing with a comb-like instrument. This is a north-west European feature, also found in several Jutish Viking Age settlements, especially to the south. These have also been found at Trelleborg (Nørlund 1948) and Menzlin (Schoknecht 1977 pl.34).

The *spindle-whorls*, with one exception, are of the conical Jutland-Fyn type. The exception is a spindle-whorl of thin burnt clay, not well-bodied like the others. It was found in sunken-hut ER. It is most reminiscent of the bee-hive-shaped sandstone spindle-whorls known *inter alia*, from Trelleborg.

The *weaving-comb* (fig. 8) was found in sunken-hut GG. Only one half was recovered. There were four nail holes at the top. The comb now has four 4 mm. long, worn teeth; the original number was seven or eight. On

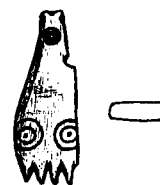


Fig. 8. Bone weaving-comb, no. 1154, from sunken-hut GG (drawn by Jette Bang). 2:3.

both sides the comb is decorated with a dot at the centre of two concentric circles. There are now one and a half of these motifs on either side, but there were originally three. Comparable weaving-combs with handles have been found at Oseberg (Brøgger and Shetelig 1928: 193, fig. 126c), Birka (Geijer 1938: 57), and Sigtuna (Floderus 1941: 89). The comb from Søby is most reminiscent of that from Birka.

Two decorated *bone pins* were found, one each in sunken-huts EP and LS, no. 1641 (fig. 9,a) from the former, no. 1656 (fig. 9,b) from the latter. The latter can be placed under Schwarz-Mackensen's type 4: 'Pins with an eye or a marked-out plate at the head' (Schwarz-Mackensen 1976: 9). They compose a small group of pins only known from Birka (5 examples) and Hedeby (10 examples). The decoration of the cross-hatched belt is also known on those pins.

Other finds to be mentioned are *glass beads, soapstone vessel fragments, iron knives, iron nails and bolts, and whetstones*, of which one had a suspension hole.

Altogether the finds provide a date range from the end of the 9th. century to shortly after the year 1000.

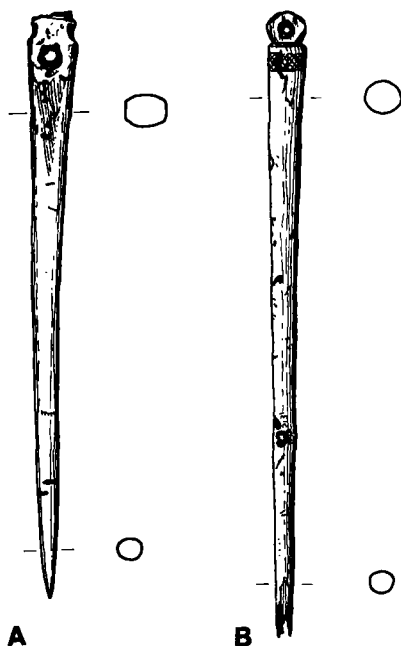


Fig. 9. a: Bone pin 1641 from sunken-hut EP. b: Bone pin 1656 from sunken-hut LS. (drawn by Jette Bang) 2:3.

VILLAGE ECONOMY AND TOWN ECONOMY

If we accept that Søby is a village, then the possibility of comparison with Århus, interpreted as a town, presents itself (Andersen et al 1971: 267).

If we compare the different artefact groups, we find, for a great part of the material, that they are divided between Århus and Søby in a proportion of 6:1. Groups which diverge from this proportion on the side of the town are goods associated with crafts, such as glass beads, bone combs, bone pins, nails, and moulds. The groups which are relatively more common in the village are loom-weights and spindle-whorls. This indicates that weaving is not a town occupation, but something that dominates in the village. It is an occupation for which the raw material, wool, is ready to hand, unlike the raw materials for the town's craft products, which in themselves are trade goods. In the urban communities we know from Viking Age Scandinavia, craft articles were produced from imported materials and subsequently exported. The village, indeed, exported goods, but not goods produced from imported raw materials, only goods produced from home-produced raw materials.

Translated by John Hines

*Peter Birkedahl Christensen,
Rigsantikvarens Arkæologiske Sekretariat,
Prinsens Palais,
Frederiksholms Kanal 12,
DK-1220 København K.*

NOTES

¹ One area was published in Nancke-Krogh 1978. The remainder was excavated for Fortidsmindeforvaltningen, partly by the author, and partly by Jette Bang, whom I thank for permission to use the material, and for drawing figures 6-9.

² Andersen, Crabb, and Madsen 1971: 147. Combs PN, TA, ADU, BTE, and CXM with excrescence; AOJ and DMY without.

³ Søby 125 from 690, Århus Søndervold 1300 from 7100.

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