

A Settlement Site of the Later Iron Age at Vallensbæk near Copenhagen

by FLEMMING KAUL

In the spring of 1983 a small area about 200m. south-east of the village of Vallensbæk near Copenhagen was investigated because of the laying of a natural gas pipeline. A number of ancient rubbish pits were found. Towards the end of 1983, the Copenhagen District Museum Council learnt that a more extensive area north-west of the pipeline was to be developed for housing, and so trial excavation in this area commenced in March 1984. This trial excavation consisted of a number of strip-trenches about 2m. broad and 20m. long, regularly laid out 20m. apart. So positive were the results of this trial excavation that a wider ranging investigation of the area was considered essential. The systematic trial excavation, which covered the whole area affected, was an important basis for the effective ordering of priorities in the work (1).

The real archaeological investigation lasted about one month in March and April 1984 (2). In all *circa* 7,000 sq.m. were investigated. The area under consideration lies partly on a plateau above the broad river valley through which the Store Vejleå runs and partly on the gentle slope down towards this valley (3).

A few pits on the site produced pottery which is apparently datable to the later Bronze Age. Besides these a greater number of pits of the early Roman Iron Age were found with, amongst other things, a quantity of pottery of which the majority is of the very coarsely tempered and poorly fired material which characterizes the larger pots of this period on Sjælland.

The more interesting finds from the site, however, are from the later part of the Iron Age. These comprise in all 13 buildings of various sizes from just two pairs of roof-bearing post-holes upto seven pairs of these. In addition, several lengths of fencing have been identified, amongst which the most significant are a pair of parallel courses which link the valley of the Vejleå with the settlement up on the plateau.

Two complete farm-complexes and a possible third

could be isolated. In such a cluster of buildings, the contemporaneity of individual structures could not be demonstrated perfectly, but the relative placement of the buildings together with their “clear” appearance makes this perfectly possible.

FARM-COMPLEX I

One farm-complex lies on the plateau close by the edge of the slope down towards the valley to the south-west. It comprises three buildings, two orientated NW-SE and one orientated NE-SW. The largest building is composed of seven sets of roof-bearing post-holes, and at 22.5m. long is in fact the largest building on the site. (This, and all other dimensions for the buildings, are measured on the roof-bearing posts.) The posts of this building had almost all been renewed, and with this refurbishment the building has shifted almost a meter. In the north-western end of the house a distinctly-bordered area with charcoal remains was observed, presumably what is left of the fire-place. In the other half of this house, crossing the long axis, an oblong feature was found which may represent an internal partition. A few meters to the south-west, and lying parallel to this building, is another building, composed of four sets of roof-bearing post-holes, 12.25m. long. About 16m. south-east of the large building lies a building orientated the opposite way (NE-SW), again with four sets of roof-bearing post-holes, and with a smaller number of wall-post-holes, 12m. long. The wall-post-holes preserved from this building appear to indicate that it had the roof-bearing posts actually in the gable, and that the walls were slightly bowed. The large building is regarded as the principal one. The building on a cross alignment is interpreted as a stall, because the long double-fence leads to it up from the meadow.

About 14m. beyond the south-western end of this



Fig. 1. General plan of the excavations with the buildings and droveway. A greater part of the area was covered by a system of 20m. long strip-trenches.

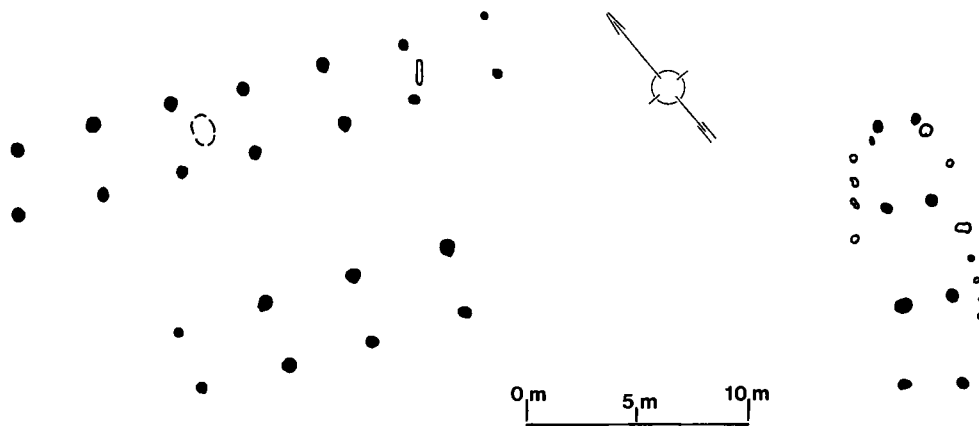


Fig. 2. Farm I. The post-holes of the roof-bearing posts in relief.

building lies one end of a structure composed of two double fences, with supporting posts, running parallel. Both fence-lines run unbroken to a length of 47.5m. The distance between them is 7.25m. The fence-posts proper are fairly evenly spaced, although the intervals may vary from 1 to 2 meters. Most post-holes are double, although some single ones appear. The outer, supporting posts are at more regular intervals of 2.5–3m. They are always found outside a set of fence-posts. In several cases the post-hole of the supporting post slopes, and in one case the traces of a post showed that the support post stood at a marked angle towards the fence so that it would apparently have met it about 1m. above the ground. This structure, with the two parallel and identical fences, runs south-westerly from the occupation area down the slope towards the valley, and ends just where the slope becomes steeper where the meadows begin. The fence-post-holes are especially deep at the end towards the river valley, and on both sides here there is an extra post-hole.

Since there are no other buildings than the farm-complex just described up on the level ground from where this structure runs, and since there are no great discrepancies in the fill of the post-holes, it is reasonable to suppose that these two fences and the farm are contemporary. As the fences thus form a passage-way between the meadowlands of the Vejleå valley (Vallensbæk Mose) and the settlement, their most obvious interpretation is as a droveway, bringing the cattle up to the farm from the meadowlands. The extra set of post-holes by the end of either fence down by the river-valley may have carried some form of gate.

Two further buildings were found to the north-west of this farm-complex up on the plateau, one composed of four sets of roof-bearing post-holes, orientated NW-SE, and the other orientated NE-SW, similarly with four sets of roof-bearing post-holes, but in this case with the middle of the three intervals between the roof-bearing post-holes double the length of those at the ends of the building. A length of fencing, which cannot be contemporary with one of these buildings, was also identified in this area. But it was not possible here to reconstruct a true farm-complex from these buildings and post-holes; the post-holes in this area indicated, however, that settlement here probably continues towards the north-west, under the south-easternmost of Vallensbæk village's farmhouses.

FARM-COMPLEX II

In an excavated area further north, further in on the plateau, another farm-complex was discovered. The individual houses cannot be associated with fences here, but in the relative positioning of the buildings and their "clear" appearance they have all the features of a farm-complex. The principal building of this farm-complex is one with five sets of roof-bearing post-holes. There are also a large number of wall-post-holes here. The building is 17.5m. long. The wall-posts show that the outermost set of roof-bearing posts stood in the gable, and that the long sides of the building were slightly bowed. 5m. north-east of this building lies another one, orientated NE-SW, with three sets of roof-

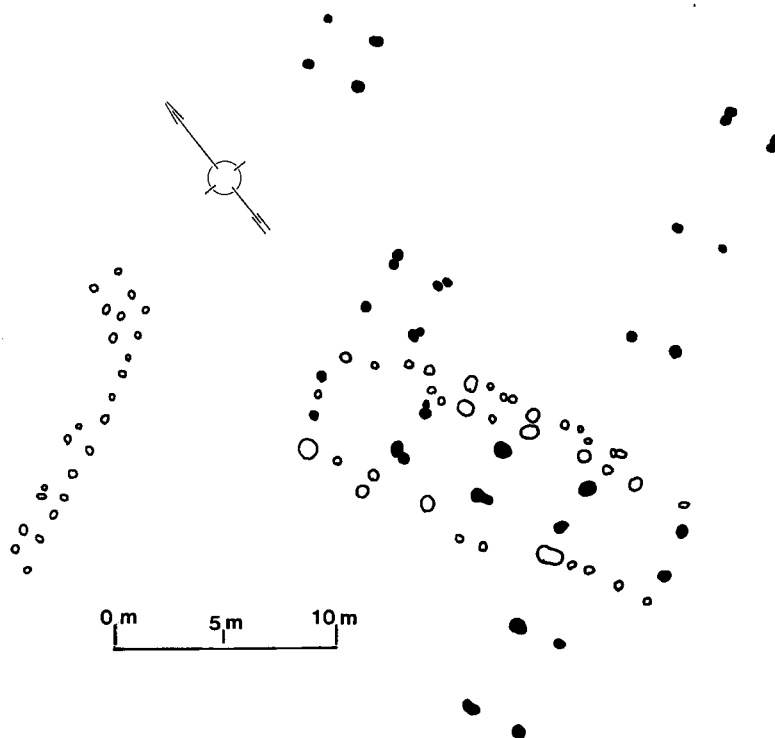


Fig. 3. Farm II. The post-holes of the roof-bearing posts in relief. A segment of fencing can be seen north-west of the largest building, possibly marking the boundary of the farm.

bearing post-holes, 10.25m. long. On the other side of the presumed principal building, in an almost symmetrical configuration, is a third building, also orientated NE-SW. Only two sets of roof-bearing post-holes from this building were found – unfortunately the excavation could not be extended here because of a trackway, and so it is not possible to say if the building was longer. But the fact that the span of one of the pairs of post-holes was lesser than the other indicates that the building was longer, because such narrowings at the gables are found on other larger buildings on the site.

Two smaller buildings are apparently associable with this farm-complex, both of them composed of only two sets of roof-bearing post-holes. One of these lies very close by the farm's principal building, the other further towards the north-west. About 10m. beyond the north-west end of the principal building a line of fencing running NE-SW was found, apparently with single supporting posts. The fence probably makes a substantial turn towards the north-west, and may represent the farm-complex's boundary in this direction. Thus this farm-complex comprises one principal building, orientated NW-SE, with two subsidiary buildings,

orientated NE-SW, close by; two smaller buildings can probably also be associated with these.

Further towards the north-west in this area, several lines of fencing were found, running NE-SW, together with three smaller buildings composed of only two sets of roof-bearing post-holes, one of which was connected to one of the fences. In the north-west we have probably hit upon one or more farm-complexes. Parts of these farm-complexes presumably lie underneath the present village of Vallensbæk, which defines the boundary of the site in the north-west.

In the two excavated farm-complexes, the recutting of the roof-bearing post-holes was most consistent in the buildings interpreted as principal buildings. Most of the other buildings also showed signs of a certain amount of renovation.

DATING

Since no sherds yielding clear dating evidence other than being obviously ancient were found in the post-holes of either the buildings or the fences, our dating

must be based upon the form of the buildings. A large number of buildings of the Iron Age and Viking Period, forming a basis for comparative study, have been found in Jutland in recent decades (e.g. Hvass 1979, 1980; Nielsen 1980). However it is not yet entirely clear how great regional variation in building construction may be, which, since so few Iron-age buildings have been excavated on Sjælland, renders such comparisons problematic. But the recently investigated settlement site of the Later Iron Age at Bellingegård near Køge demonstrates that observations made on Jutish excavations can be used on Sjælland (Tørnbjerg, this volume). A couple of more recent excavations, with buildings dated to the later Roman Iron Age and Viking/early Medieval Period, in mid- and western Sjælland (Siemen 1983; Holm & Nielsen 1983) corroborate this.

On the basis of comparisons with the Bellingegård and the Jutish material it is reasonable to conclude that, at the earliest, the buildings near Vallensbæk village should belong to the Later Iron Age: the Vallensbæk buildings have for instance many examples of a noticeably long distance between the roof-bearing post-holes relative to the width of the building (about 2:1), a feature which begins to appear during the Later Iron Age. Furthermore, the roof-bearing posts in the gables, often however only at one end, have a shorter transverse span than the other pairs of posts, indicating bowed side-walls which appear to be a common phenomenon during the Later Iron Age (cf. Bellingegård). A feature visible in the principal building of the northerly farm-complex, and apparently occurring in one of the subsidiary buildings of the other complex, is that the roof-bearing post-holes are found in the gables, something which first and foremost characterizes Viking-age buildings. The wall-posts in the same buildings show the walls to have been slightly bowed. A building which is not part of either of the two farm-complexes, the building orientated NE-SW with four sets of roof-bearing post-holes and the doubled interval in the middle, also indicates the Viking Period, in which such large intervals in the middle of a building are common.

Thus in sum, the construction of the buildings indicates a dating to the Late Iron Age or Viking Period. Since no great amount of comparable material of the later Iron Age is known, apart perhaps from Bellingegård, a dating to this period can certainly not be ruled out. On the other hand the position of the settlement, hard by and conceivably under the medieval village,

indicates that we ought to be in a not particularly early part of the Viking Period, since investigations in our present villages locate the start of subsequently unbroken settlement there in about the second half of the Viking Period (4). A closer dating of the buildings at Vallensbæk will depend upon the future development of a greater grasp of the typological chronology of buildings.

THE DROVEWAY

As has been stated, a 47.5m. long passage formed by two doublefences with supporting posts joins one of the farm-complexes, the one nearest the valley of the Vejleå, to the meadowlands below it. No structure of this form has hitherto been excavated in Denmark, so we must see what the other Scandinavian lands have to offer. From the later Roman and earlier Germanic Iron Ages on Gotland and Öland, for example, passages in the form of stone walls linking a farmhouse with what is interpreted as a more extensively exploited pasture area are known (Stenberger 1933; Stenberger et al. 1955; Hagberg 1976 p. 21; Widgren 1984): such a passage is thus interpreted as a droveway, protecting the intensively cultivated infield against trampling by cattle on the way to the pasture. Several such droveways for leading the cattle to the pasturelands are also known from farm-complexes of Migration-period western Norway (Myhre 1980). A good example is the settlement of Vatland in south-western Norway, where a droveway of broadly the same dimensions as that at Vallensbæk leads from the farm-buildings down to a river (*ibid.* fig. 140, p. 273).

All of these Swedish and Norwegian droveways are stone-built, but their function may certainly have been the same as the Vallensbæk example. The fences at Vallensbæk, however, seem to be more regularly constructed than the stone walls in Norway and Sweden. Some droveways of stone are also known from historical times in Denmark, some of which still exist.

If the interpretation of the two parallel fences as a droveway is accepted, we have evidence of the exploitation of the ecological resources at Vallensbæk. If we assume that it protects an infield against trampling, the infield must be situated on the approximately 50m.-broad, well-drained slope between the settlement and the meadows where the cattle have been pastured.

Naturally it is not possible to say how great an area on the other sides of the settlement was under cultivation. It is difficult to assess how much the droveway has also been used as a fold at night-time or for milking, but the substantial construction with the supporting-posts could point in this direction (5). Phosphate samples taken both within and outside the droveway are unfortunately not particularly consistent (6), but it does appear that the highest phosphate levels occur some way up the slope outside the droveway (7). One can reasonably imagine that this reflects the throwing of dung out over the fence to manure the field. In connection with the possible use of manure it may be noted that in the later Bronze Age, and pre-Roman and Roman Iron Ages, especially in the early Roman Iron Age, we find many rubbish pits on settlement sites, often with a high pottery content. It is commonly on the basis of these that the settlement sites can be identified. In contrast high pottery yields and find-rich pits are rare in the later Iron Age (cf. Jensen 1982 pp. 121–122). The cause of this may be that settlement refuse begins to be used to a greater extent to manure the fields where sherds and other remains rapidly perish. This hypothetical change in cultivation strategy may be one of the reasons why it has been difficult to locate settlement sites of the later Iron Age. The Vallensbæk site is certainly very poor in finds – actually, it was the pits from the early Roman Iron Age which first drew attention to the site.

CONCLUSION

Two farm-complexes of the later Iron Age or Viking Period, and parts of more, have been excavated at Vallensbæk. The farm-complexes lie upon a plateau above a fertile river valley; a droveway connects one of the farm-complexes with the meadowlands. On the basis of this droveway one may infer that around the buildings, perhaps in a 50m. wide belt, was an intensively cultivated infield; below the infield towards the south-west are the fertile meadowlands where the cattle grazed. The settlement is thus situated so that the ecological resources in the meadowlands, on the slope upto the plateau, and on the plateau itself can be exploited with the maximum convenience. The settlement is centrally placed relative to all three topographical features. The present village of Vallensbæk, beneath which our settlement probably continues, lies in the same topographi-

cal situation, as does Vridsløselille further up the valley, both of them villages of antiquity. The same goes for another settlement of the later Iron Age or Viking Period in the neighbourhood of Vridsløselille, a few kilometers north-west of Vallensbæk, Ragnesminde (Mahler, this volume).

The settlement structure at Vallensbæk seems relatively “open”: the farms must have been relatively spread out on the level ground above the valley. This corresponds to what has been observed in Jutland, where the individual farm-complexes cover a greater area in the Viking Period than in the later Roman Iron Age or earlier Germanic Iron Age. A similar change in the individual farm or farmsteads’ size has been observed on Gotland (Carlsson 1979). However the Gotlandic settlements seem to be more dispersed farms. Thus the settlement structure too indicates a later Iron-age or Viking-period date.

Translated by John Hines

Addendum

In the spring of 1985 further excavations were carried out under direction of the author, this time in the village of Vallensbæk itself, appr. 300 m north of the excavation dealt with above. Apart from a number of pits from the late Funnel Beaker Culture (MN V) containing a rich flint and pottery material, the excavations yielded a large building c 20 m long and 7,0–8,5 m broad without traces of roof-carrying posts. The side-walls are slightly curved. Such buildings are known from sites in Jutland and are dated to the later part of the Viking Age (Jørgensen and Skov 1980 fig. 7, Hvass 1980 p. 155 and fig. 17 and 18). Near the house was found a system of ditches, probably for fences, which, together with a couple of pits yielded some few pottery sherds of Baltic ware. The area available for excavation in the village of Vallensbæk was too small to gain a clear overall picture of the settlement pattern. Both the pottery evidence and the type of the large “hall” indicate a date to the later part of the Viking Age or early Medieval.

Flemming Kaul, Søllerød Museum, Søllerødvej 25, DK-2840 Holte.

NOTES

1. The trial excavation was directed by Ditlev Mahler.

2. The full excavation was directed by the author; Palle Schielderup, Liv Appel, and Lene Husum also took part, whom I thank for their great assistance.
3. Vallensbæk parish, Smørum herred, Copenhagen amt, Søllerød Museum journal no. SØL 180. The excavation was financed by Vallensbæk kommune.
4. The absence of any Baltic pottery could however indicate that the date is no later than 1000.
5. The cattle and calves in summer and autumn could find protection here, close by the people during the night, against predators such as wolves.
6. The phosphate levels from the settlement of Vallhagar on Gotland with droveways in the form of stone walls are not particularly consistent either (Stenberger et al. 1955 fig. 448 p. 1059).
7. The phosphate analyses were carried out by Jens H. Jönsson.

REFERENCES

- CARLSSON, D. 1979: *Kulturlandskabets Utveckling på Gotland*, Nyköping.
- HAGBERG, U.E. 1976: Öland during the Iron Age and Early Middle Ages. In NÄSMAN, U. & WEGRAEUS, E.: *Eketorp. The Setting*. Stockholm.
- HOLM, L. & NIELSEN, L. CHR. 1983: Ottestrup. En ældre middelalder landsby i Vestsjælland. *Museet for Holbæk og Omegn, Årsberetning*. Holbæk.
- HVASS, S. 1979: Die Völkerwanderungszeitliche Siedlung Vorbasse, Mitteljütland. *Acta Archaeologica* vol. 49, 1978. København.
- 1980: The Viking-age Settlement at Vorbasse, Central Jutland. *Acta Archaeologica* vol. 50, 1979. København.
- JENSEN, S. 1982: Stengården, an East Jutland Occupation Site from the Early Germanic Iron Age. *Journal of Danish Archaeology* vol. 1. Odense.
- JØRGENSEN, L.B. & SKOV, T. 1980: Trabjerg. A Viking-age Settlement in North-west Jutland. *Acta Archaeologica* vol. 50, 1979. København.
- MYHRE, B. 1980: *Gårdsanlegget på Ullandhaug I*. Arkeologisk Museum i Stavanger, Skrifter, 4. Stavanger.
- NIELSEN, L. CHR. 1980: A Settlement from the Late Iron Age and the Viking Period in West Jutland. *Acta Archaeologica* vol. 50, 1979. København.
- SIEMEN, P. 1983: Huse og gruber ved Kærup, Ringsted. *Museet for Holbæk og Omegn, Årsberetning*. Holbæk.
- STENBERGER, M. 1933: *Öland under äldre Järnålderen*. Stockholm.
- STENBERGER, M., et al. 1955: *Vallhagar*. Stockholm/København.
- TORNBJERG, S.Å. 1983: En boplads fra yngre jernalder ved Køge. *Historisk Samfund for Roskilde Amt*. Roskilde.
- WIDGREN, M. 1984: The Settlement and Farming System in Östergötland, Sweden A.D. 1 to 500. In: K. KRISTIANSEN ed. *Settlement and Economy in Later Scandinavian Prehistory*. BAR International Series 211. Oxford.