Journal of Danish Archaeology vol. 4, 1985, pp 164–167

Ragnesminde

A Germanic – Early Viking Age House – Site in Eastern Sjælland

by DITLEV L. MAHLER

Although archaeologists have often attempted to direct the nature and chronological character of the incoming flow of source material, chance and luck are still the modern archaeologist's best friend. The site of Ragnesminde was discovered as the result of preliminary antiquarian reconnaissance in connection with the natural gas project. Field survey indicated activity typical of the Early Iron Age, and true enough evidence of activity from this period was registered (1). The site's major structures are, however, of a somewhat later date. These would not have been discovered, were it not for traces of Early Iron Age activity in the topsoil and under the preliminary excavations.

The site of Ragnesminde, placed on clay soil with a high agricultural potential, lies on a terrain that slopes evenly down in a south-eastern direction. Some one to two kilometers south/south-west, lie freshwater deposits as well as the old Litorina sea bed. Both entities must, at the time of Ragnesminde, have been large useful compact marshes and meadows. Furthermore to the east, less than five kilometers as the crow flies, lies Køge Bay. The placing of settlements on land well suited to agricultural exploitation, with stretches of marsh and meadowland in the vicinity, as opposed to placement in high terrain or on slopes facing south, is characteristic of several well known Viking – age settlements – for example Sædding (Stoumann 1980: 96).

The actual excavation of the threatened site of Ragnesminde took place over two one-week campaigns in respectively November and December 1982 (2). As there was no sign of preserved culture layer, the topsoil was removed by a caterpillar tractor. The uncovered area totalled 750 sq. meters, plus 350 meters in two meter wide test trenches placed directly in the path of the coming gas pipeline.

Wall and roof-bearing post-holes appeared faintly at first due to the heavy clay subsoil, however subsequent desiccation and oxidation caused these to later stand out fairly clearly. The main excavation area totalled 370 features, mainly post-holes, that almost all converged to produce the remains of three structures. Large and small pits could be dated to the Late Bronze Age or Pre-Roman Iron Age, but it was not possible to establish any further contemporary complexes. Besides pot-sherds, the pits contained fire-shattered stones, cindered clay, charcoal, and some bone fragments, the condition of which left much to be desired; in other words, the usual material found in these so-called rubbish pits.

The post-holes were reasonably well preserved. Between 40 to 80 cms of the roof-bearing post-holes and ca. 5 to 35 cms of the wall construction post-holes were preserved under the 45 cm. thick topsoil. The degree of attrition seems to have been moderate compared with other Iron Age sites.

House I

House I's groundplan was the most complete, and consisted of a total of 206 post-holes. The c. 24 m long house, orientated east-west, had three partitions and a total of five pairs of roof-bearing post-holes. House I has slightly convex longitudinal wall courses, the gable walls being 5 meters wide while the area between the two entrances in the middle of the house, measures 6.5 meters.

The first set of roof-bearing post-holes are placed immediately inside the west gable and are closer to one another (2.0 m.) than the other pairs, that seem to follow the curvature of the walls. The space between the roof-bearing post-holes and those belonging to the walls, is the same for all five sets: that is between 1.50 and 1.75 m. The actual span between two pairs of roof-bearing post-holes is largest between the two sets that stand symetrically on each side of the two entrances.

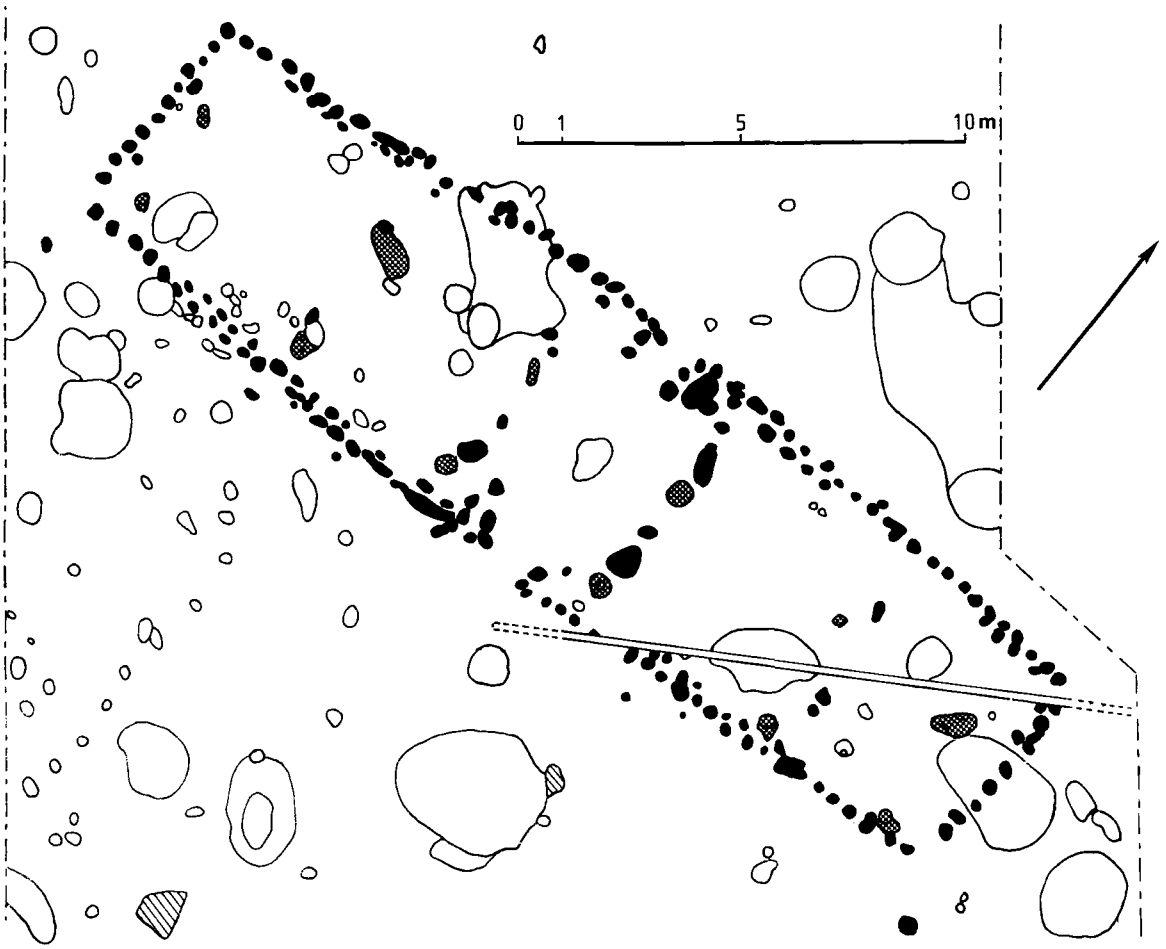

Fig. 1. Ragnesminde. House I (dark) and II (shaded). Only the roof-bearing posts of house II are preserved.

The easternmost set of roof-bearing post-holes seemed to be missing, with the result that House I's supportive structure appears slightly assymetrical. On the whole though the impression is one of symmetry and regularity. The southern post in the easternmost set, and the northern post in the third set from the west end, appear to have been replaced.

Of the wall courses, the northern wall is the most irregular, however this irregularity does not appear to have been caused by reparations or replacements. The southern wall, on the other hand, curves evenly although part of it's west end has been repaired. The walls consist mainly of a double row of post-holes, although traces of a runnel appear for a short length of the southern wall, just west of the entrance area.

The two entrances are placed in the middle of each longitudinal wall course, and thus symetrically opposite one another. Both entrances measured at one time 1.50m, though later reparation reduced the width to 1.00 m. In both cases, seen from the outside, it is the left side that has suffered reparation, presumably because this side was the supportive element in the entrance structure.

Aside from the roof-bearing post-holes, the interior structure consisted of sporadically scattered post-holes following the wall courses, the function of which we cannot reconstrue. However two of the post-holes were placed directly opposite one another, between the two pairs of post-holes at each side of the entrances. These seem to suggest a triple partitioning of the house; so that to the west we have a 10 m. long room including the third pair of roof-bearing posts, hereafter an almost 4 m. long room spanning the area between the above mentioned third set to the next pair of roof-bearing

posts, and finally a room consisting of the east end of the house.

A rather singular feature worth mentioning was the presence of a fragmentary layer of charcoal, interpreted as the bottom of a hearth, placed right in the middle of the house, directly between the two entrances. This symetrical placement within House I could be a coincidence, and there is no proof of contemporaneity, however it cannot be excluded that a hearth was placed here by the inhabitants of House I.

House II

Only the roof-bearing post-holes of this east-west orientated house were preserved, in all six pairs. Their depth varies from 40 to 60 cms – the middle set being the deepest. The actual span varies by half a meter, so whilst the eastern and western-most sets have a span of 2.5 m, the rest have a span of 3.0 m. The distance between the pairs of roof-bearing post-holes varies, too, the span separating the westernmost pairs being 5.0 m while being 3.5 m in the east end. This building must have had much the same length as House I, and being stratigraphically older, it would be natural to interpret House II as House I's immediate precursor.

An additional fragmentary structure was uncovered on the site, and consisted of a north-south orientated construction south of House I's western wall. It was not possible to determine the character of this structure, or its chronological relation to the two house complexes, however it seems logical to include it as part of a whole. It is possible that we here have the remains of a fence, eventually equipped with a half-roof, running at right angles to house I or II.

South of House I and east of the north-south orientated "fence" was found an oval pit 2.5 × 3.5 m in diameter, and bearing a certain likeness to the well known Late Iron Age / Early Viking-age pit houses. In spite of the immediate resemblance to these pit houses, we found no sign of a bearing structure within or around the pit. A comparison with material from Skåne, shows that pit houses without any sign of bearing structures do exist, although they are exeedingly unusual (Ohlsson 1976: 78 and Strömberg 1971: 198 Abb. 3). It is important to be aware of this problem while excavating Late Iron Age sites, as indeed is being done in for example, the northwestern Slavonic areas (Donat 1977: 119ff). The pit contained morever, the usual settlement site domestic refuse, within which Early Iron Age potsherds were found. This dating is supported by two TL-dates (3): 40 A.D ± 150 and 220 A.D ± 150, and is thus also consistant with the interpretation of the pits' function as a rubbish pit.

Dating

An absolute dating of Houses I and II is rather difficult as none of the finds were of a datable character. As mentioned above, both Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age activity could be registered on the site. An analysis of the remaining pottery provided no specimen that could be definitely dated to later than the Early Iron Age (compare with Jensen 1982: 119 ff). This situation mirrors the general picture in relation to the lack of finds on Late Iron Age settlements, and, in the light of the limited area excavated, there is nothing strange in the lack of specimens younger than the Early Iron Age. A dating of Houses I and II and the fence-like structure must thus be based on the typological position of House I.

Convex long-walls are a structural element characteristic of Viking Age houses, but cannot be used as a firm dating criterion. The newly excavated house-sites from Vallensbæk lack archaeologically datable material, too, thus any close chronological comparison to Ragnesminde House I must include certain reservations. There are, however, certain similarities between structures from the two sites. Some of the house-sites from Vallensbæk seem to have had convex long-walls judging from the position of the roof-bearing post-holes, as well as owning a set of roof-bearing post-holes close to the gable wall. The Vallensbæk house sites are tentatively dated to the Germanic Iron Age or the Viking Age (4).

At Bellingegård near Køge (Tornbjerg 1983: 61 ff, and this volume) a recent excavation unearthed major house structures consisting of convex rows of roof-bearing post-holes indicating a house type with convex long-walls. The Bellingegård houses are archaeologically dated to the Early Germanic Iron Age (5). Ragnesminde House I shares certain characteristics with Foulum House VIII (Iversen 1982: 24), which also has slightly convex walls and straight gables. Foulum House VIII is dated to the Early Germanic Iron Age or Late Early Germanic / Early Late Germanic Iron Age. It

is precisely the straight gables that dissociate Ragnesminde House I from the Early Germanic Iron Age houses with their characteristic rounded corners, without this being a firm dating criterion either (see Høgsbro house, Jensen 1980: fig. 3 and Nr. Snede, Hansen 1982: 180 ff). The positioning of the first set of roof-bearing posts immediately within the west-gable points to the Viking Age. However there are no structural details that definitely date the house to this period, just as none of the characteristic Viking Age finds turned up on the site.

It would seem thus that on an archaeological basis House I must be placed somewhere in the period between the beginning of the Germanic Iron Age and the end of the Viking Age – and possibly more precisely in the period from the Late Early Germanic Iron Age to sometime in the Early Viking Age.

Sample material was collected for both Carbon – 14 and Thermoluminescence analysis. The ^{14}C sample was collected from a roof-bearing post-hole belonging to House II, and consisted ostensibly of a single cohesive charcoal fragment. The charcoal was dated to 250 B.C. ± 75 yrs. (4), a date that is much older than expected and in no way compatible with the archaeological date based on our knowledge of the evolution of house-types during the Iron Age. It is possible that we here have a case of contamination stemming from much older settlement remains on the site.

The TL-dating of House II (5) points towards some time previous to 400 A.D, and of House I to 340 A.D ± 100. Both dates are from samples extracted from roof-bearing post-holes. The TL-dates point to the Late Roman Iron Age or possibly to the Early Germanic Iron Age for House I, and combined with the archaeological dating place House I within the Early Germanic Iron Age.

However, there is still a clear disrepancy between the archaeological dating and the TL-dates, a disrepancy that may mirror our incomplete and fragmentary knowledge of East Danish house types. If the archaeological dating of House I is correct, Ragnesminde joins a small group of Late Germanic Iron Age house sites, of which there are relatively few in Southern Scandinavia.

However, further speculation must wait until we have a firmer chronological basis. It would be extremely interesting if we knew more about the context in which these houses were placed. Are they the remains of a single farmstead, or do the excavated houses belong to a village settlement – in which case what was the character of the settlement?

Translated by Susan Holten Dall

Ditlev L. Mahler, Søllerød Museum, Søllerødvej 25, DK-2840 Holte.

NOTES

1. The site of Ragnesminde was discovered by cand.mag Birgit Andersen while reconnoitring for *Fredningsstyrelsens* 5th department, under the Ministery for the Environment. Ragnesminde is registered under *Søllerød Museum*, journal nr. 133 Brøndbyvester Parish, Smørum Herred, Copenhagen Amt.
2. The author was competently assisted by stud.mag Kirsten Hvenegård Lassen and stud.mag Merete Christensen. A special thanks to Kirsten Hvenegård Lassen who, during both excavation periods, and in spite of the difficult and uncomfortable weather, was the perfect assistant.
3. Risø TL nr. 823920 on clay 40 A.D. ± 150
   Risø TL nr. 823922 on stone 220 A.D. ± 150
4. See Kaul in this volume.
5. See Tornbjerg in this volume.
6. K-4134 on charcoal, roof-bearing post-hole House II – 2200 ± 75 pre 1950 equal to 250 b.c. equal to 290 – 350 B.C Cal.
7. Risø TL nr. 823923 on clay from roof-bearing post-hole, House II, pre- 400 A.D
   Risø TL nr. 823932 on stone from roof-bearing post-hole, House I, 340 A.D ± 100.

REFERENCES

DONAT, P. 1977: Die uregelmässigen Gruben und der Hausbau bei den Nordwestslawien. *Slavia Antiqua* XXIV (Poznań 1977).

HANSEN, T.E. 1982: Nørre Snede. *Journal of Danish Archaeology*, Vol. 1, 1982, p. 181 No 52. (Odense).

IVERSEN, M. 1982: Udgravningerne ved Foulum. *MIV* 11, 1982 (Viborg).

JENSEN, S. 1980: To sydvestjyske bopladser fra ældre germansk jernalder. Jernalderbebyggelsen i Ribeområdet. *Mark og Montre. Fra sydvestjyske museer*, 1980.

JENSEN, S. 1982: Stengården, an East Jutland Occupation Site from the Early Germanic Iron Age. The problem of Settlement continuity in Later Iron Age Denmark. *Journal of Danish Archaelogy*, Vol. 1, 1982 (Odense).

OHLSSON, T. 1976: The Löddeköpinge Investigation I. The settlement at Vikhögsvägen. *Meddelanden från Lunds Universitets Historiska Museum* 1975–1976.

STOUMANN, I. 1980: Sædding. A Vikinge-age Village near Esbjerg. *Acta Archaeologica* vol. 50, 1979 (Copenhagen).

STRÖMBERG, M. 1970: Grubenhäuser in Valleberga. Unterschugen 1965–1970. *Meddelanden från Lunds Universitets Historiska Museum* 1969–1970.

TORNBJERG, S.Å. 1983: En boplads fra yngre jernalder ved Køge. *Historisk årbog fra Roskilde amt* 1983.