

# Margrethehåb

## A Settlement Site of the Early Middle Ages at Roskilde, Zealand

by TOM CHRISTENSEN

In the last 10 years the source material from a series of Danish medieval towns has been thoroughly examined in the grandly named 'Projekt Middelalderbyen' (Nielsen and Schiørring 1982). The results of this are now coming in in the form of publications which can form a basis for further investigations.

The importance of the town for medieval society was naturally great. It is worth remembering that far and away the greatest part of the population still dwelt on the land, and medieval rural settlement forms have not been made the object of systematic investigations to the same extent as the towns. In the years 1984–86 Roskilde Museum had the opportunity to excavate two such sites of the early Middle Ages in an area west of Roskilde, called Margrethehåb (Roskilde Museum j.nr. 623/84) (Fig. 1–2).

Typical of the terrain at Margrethehåb are small banks surrounded by meadow and bogs cut by minor watercourses. To the north the land falls sharply towards a larger bog area which is connected to the nearby Roskilde fjord. The sites lay upon heavy clay which offered good conditions for preservation of, for example, bone, but which, however, as far as excavation was concerned, was hardly so pleasant in the dry summer months.

### MARGRETHEHÅB I

On the western side of a small banked plateau about 2,500 sq.m. of a settlement including three buildings and a fence were excavated (Fig. 3).

Two of the buildings were longhouses (building I and II), one a little outhouse of 7 × 4 m. with three sets of roofbearing posts, the other a rather larger building at least 12 m. long and 5 m. broad. The latter must certainly be interpreted as a dwelling house as trial trenches showed that other buildings which could be associated with this settlement were not found in the area.

Building I was connected to a minor sunken hut (building III), 2.5 m. square, by a 20 m long fence. This had no visible timber structure but traces of a hearth were found in the north-western corner of the pit.

The buildings reported here must represent the greater part of an integrated farmstead. The artefact material is no more than a few sherds of Baltic ware and the local coarser ware. From the sunken hut, further, came a simple comb (Fig. 4) and a fragment of a loomweight. An archaeological dating to the late Viking Period is therefore probable. This is supported by a C-14 dating of bone material from the sunken hut (building III) which places the settlement in the 11th century (K-4692, Fig. 19).

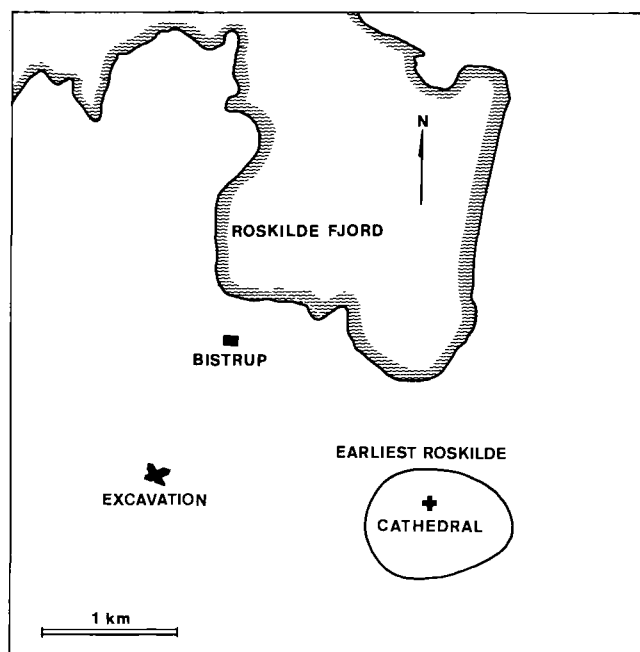


Fig. 1. Map showing Roskilde, Bistrup and the excavations at Margrethehåb.

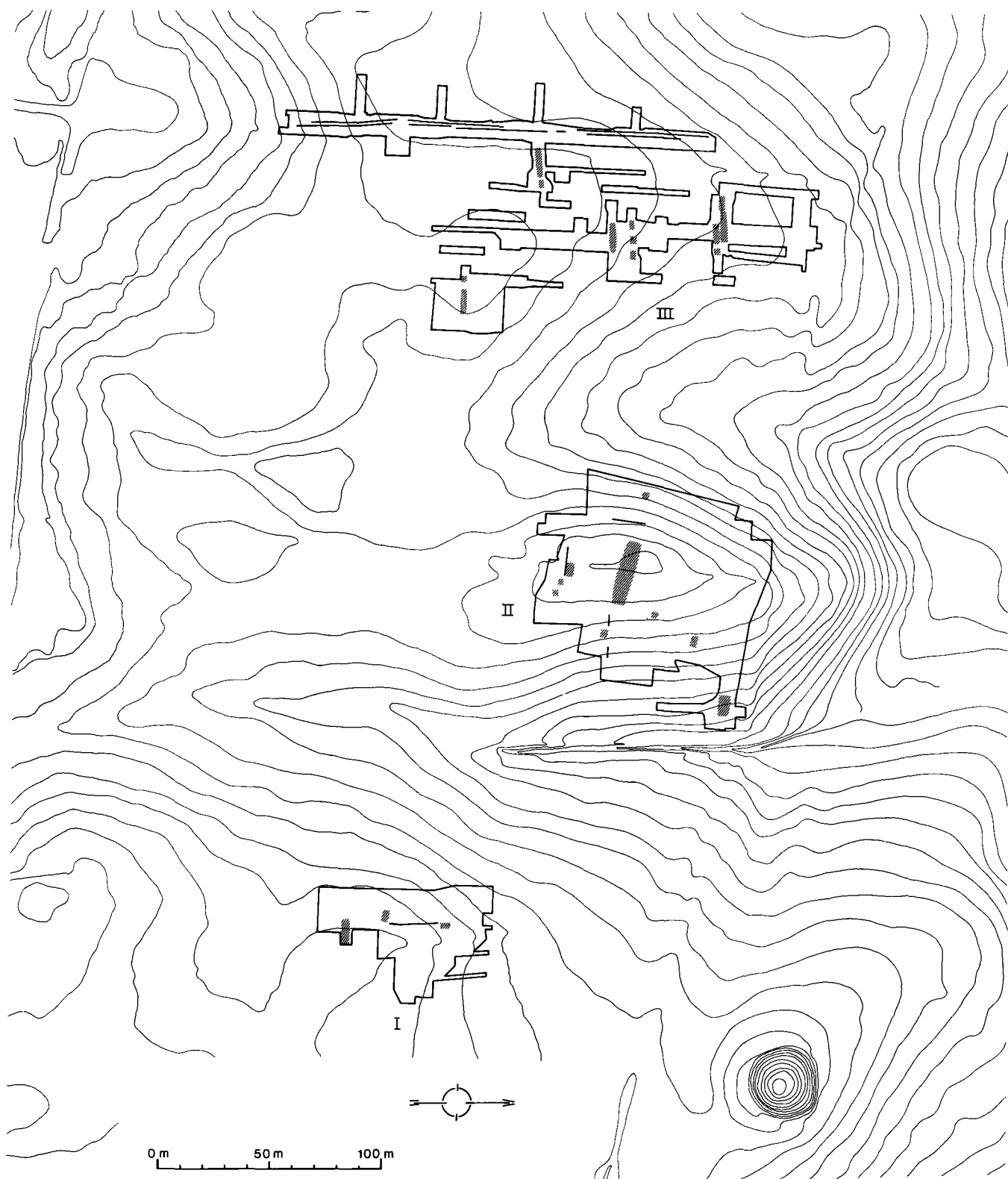


Fig. 2. The Margrethehåb area with the settlement complex (III is not mentioned in the article).

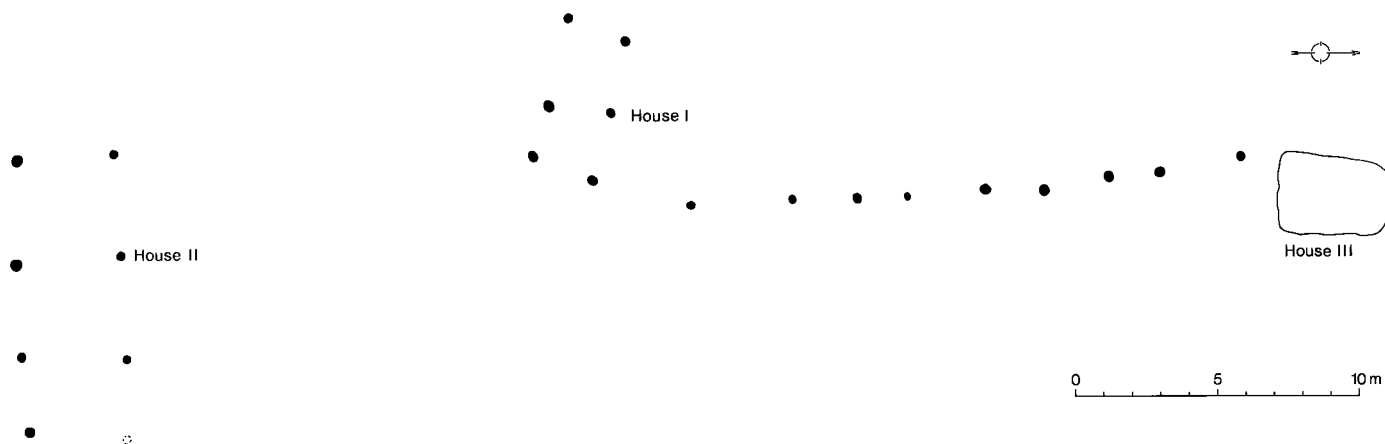


Fig. 3. Plan of Margrethehåb I, showing the late viking/early medieval settlement.

#### MARGRETHEHÅB II

On a clear bank about 100 m. west of Site I and separated from it by a minor watercourse lay Site II (Fig. 5). In the area of about 10,000 sq.m. excavated a few neolithic and early Iron-age pits appeared, but the majority of the structures, including all the buildings and fences, could be dated to the 11th and 12th centuries.

#### *Small buildings*

Scattered across the excavated site were found three minor buildings between  $5 \times 2$  and  $9 \times 4$  m. large (buildings IV-VI). These were usually simply constructed with three sets of roofbearing posts. How far these were located in the wall line or were internal roofbearing posts cannot in all cases be determined. Some of the buildings could be dated to the 11th-12th centuries by finds of Baltic ware in the postholes. The postholes in the buildings which could not be dated directly were filled with a light grey fill with fire-crazed stones. This was a general characteristic of the postholes of the early medieval structures.

One of these minor buildings, building VI, had a rather peculiar construction (Fig. 6). The building measured  $9 \times 4$  m. and was placed at the foot of the bank at the edge of a little watercourse. The walls were composed of two quite irregular rows of posts which were paired across the building. To the east the end seems to have been rounded, but the structure was open to the west. In the eastern end two postholes/-pits were found filled with crushed chalk. A post in the middle of

the house was possibly part of the structure, if so as a roofbearing post.

The dating of this building is based upon finds of Baltic ware in the postholes together with a C-14 dating of bone material from a pit which cut the north-western corner of the building (K-4695, Fig. 19).

#### *Longhouse*

In the centre of the settlement and on the highest point of the bank a longhouse was found, 27.5 m. long and 6 m. broad (5 m. at the ends), with curved sides, building VII (Fig. 7). There was a clearly distinguishable entrance at the west end of the northern side of the building. This lead into an end-room which was divided from

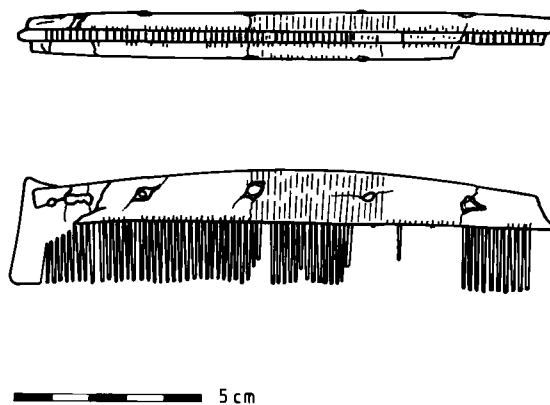


Fig. 4. Comb found in the pithouse (House III).



Fig. 5. Plan of Margrethehåb II, showing the medieval farm.

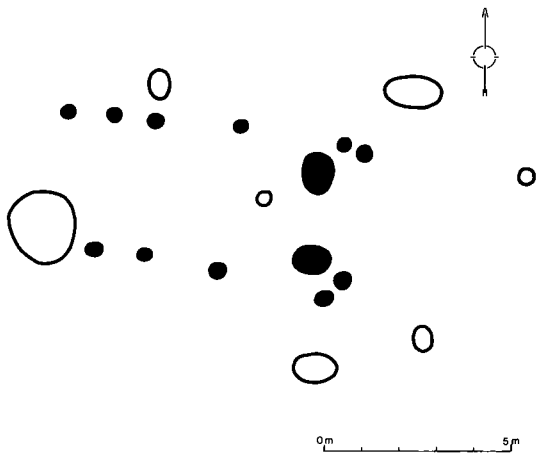


Fig. 6. House VI at Margrethehåb II.

the remainder of the building by a partition visible as two wide plank traces in the ground. The building had no internal roofbearing timbers, so that the walls alone carried the roof. The wall posts were very strong, on the whole of the same dimensions as one would expect of internal roofbearing posts. In some of the wall posts,

which were of very varied depths, a sill-like construction was used where large stones were placed as packing for the posts. One was placed above a flat boulder (Fig. 8).

The walls were probably constructed in log-technique with 3.5 m. intervals in the south side. In the middle of this line is a 6 m. gap between the posts: there was perhaps another doorway at this point. Thus the wall posts in the building are not placed in pairs opposite one another, which must mean that they were not internally linked by tie beams. No traces of a hearth or further room divisions were found in the building.

The building can be dated by finds of Baltic ware in the postholes. A C-14 dating of bone has come from a pit which cut the east end of the building (K-4694, Fig. 19).

#### *Other structural types*

Small structures consisting of two pairs of posts forming a square ground area of between 5 and 10 sq.m. are often identified in the literature as raised granaries. At

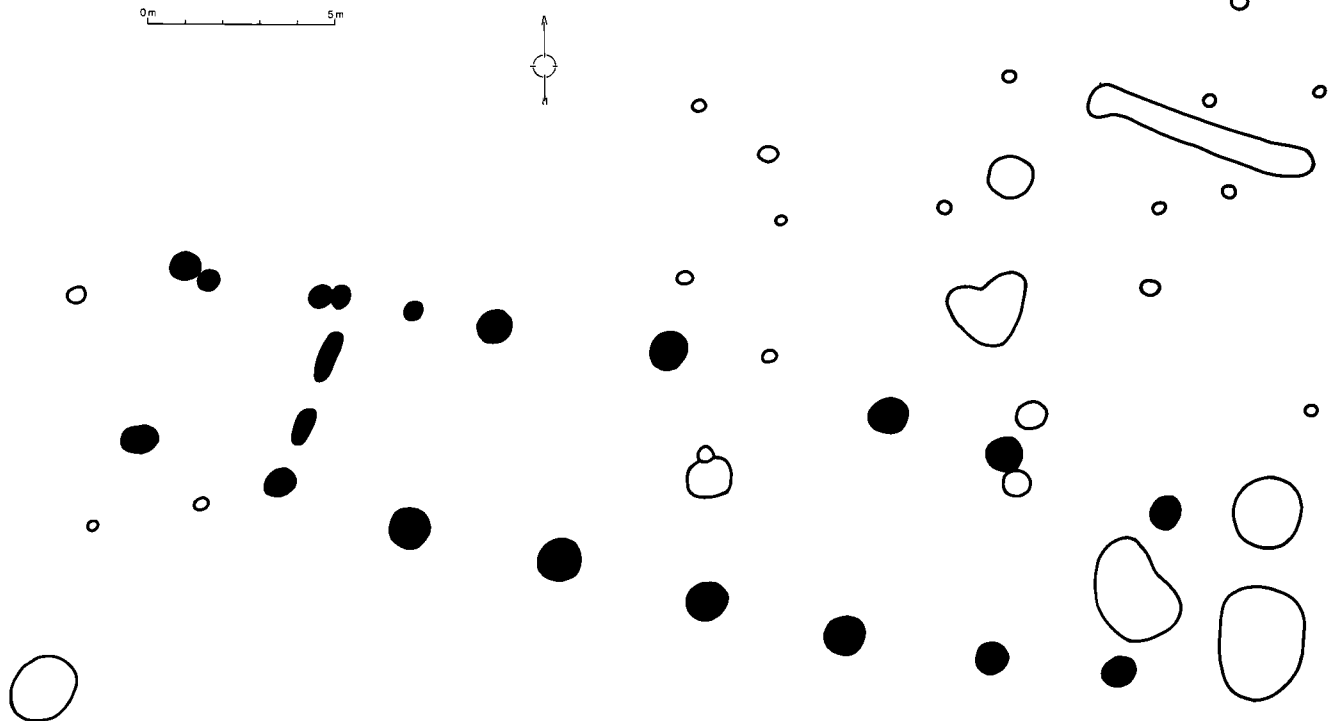


Fig. 7. House VII at Margrethehåb II.



Fig. 8. Wall post with boulder from house VII.

least five structures of this kind were found spread across the excavated area (buildings VIII-XII).

Naturally a large number of pits were found – usually common rubbish pits. One type distinguished itself clearly from the others. These were stone-filled features up to 6 m. long and 50–75 cm wide, varying in depth between 20 and 50 cm. The few finds in these pits can be assigned to the 11th and 12th centuries. The function of this particular type is not immediately obvious but that it is a specifically determined structural type is beyond doubt.

### *Artefacts*

The artefacts from Margrethehåb II are rich and varied and include pottery, bone and metal.

### *Pottery*

The material consists apart from one single piece entirely of sherds classifiable as Baltic ware. Out of a collection of fully 300 sherds it has only been possible to collect two vessel profiles (Fig. 9). These and the other classifiable sherds can be attributed to Dagmar Selling's group AII:3: flat bottomed vessels with raised, rounded shoulders and inturned rim-sections (Selling 1955, 89 ff.). In the contemporary material from Sjælland vessels with inturned mouth rims, Dagmar Selling's type AII:3a (Liebgott 1979 and 1982), dominate, often forming two-thirds or more of the sherd material. The same seems to be the case with the rather sparse

material from Margrethehåb, when 28 of 47 rim sherds (57%) can be attributed to this group. The remaining rim sherds are of various types: most however come from vessels with vertical mouth rims.

In by far the majority of cases the decoration comprises horizontal grooves which cover greater or lesser parts of the vessel. The rim zone may be undecorated, or the grooved decoration carried right up to the rim. Wavy lines are the second most commonly occurring decorative element and always appear round the shoulder and rim and often together with horizontal grooving. Other elements such as comb and nail impresses, and diagonal slashes, appear in some cases, always around the shoulder of the vessel.

Besides the Baltic ware just one single rim sherd of grey-fired ware was found.

### *Bone artefacts*

Five bone artefacts were found: two pins, half a knife handle, two bone splints riveted together and a comb case (Fig. 10).

The 16.5 cm long comb case is held together by bronze rivets and undecorated apart from a groove running along the mounted splint. An almost identical example from Lund is dated to the first half of the 12th century (Mårtensson 1975, 325, fig. 292.37B), a dating which fits the period of use of Margrethehåb II.

The other bone artefacts are not dated of themselves, but were found together with other artefacts which belong to the period.

### *Metal objects*

In all 38 iron artefacts could be collected, of which the majority are identifiable as nails, rivets and horseshoe nails. Ten knives or knife-fragments were found, all small, one-edged knives with pointed tangs.

The 14.5 cm long artefact in Fig. 11 may look like a spearhead but a corresponding find at Trelleborg is identified as an arrowhead (Nørlund 1948, pl.XLI.1). The lock cylinder in Fig. 12 is also best compared with a find from Trelleborg (Nørlund 1948, pl.XXXII.1) but only the central cylinder is preserved of the copper-inlaid piece from Margrethehåb. A 15 cm long pointed oval firesteel with a suspension hook has a rather special form, but corresponds essentially to firesteels from Trelleborg (Fig. 13) (Nørlund 1948, pl.XXIX.14). The 4.5 cm long padlock (fig. 14) is a close parallel in

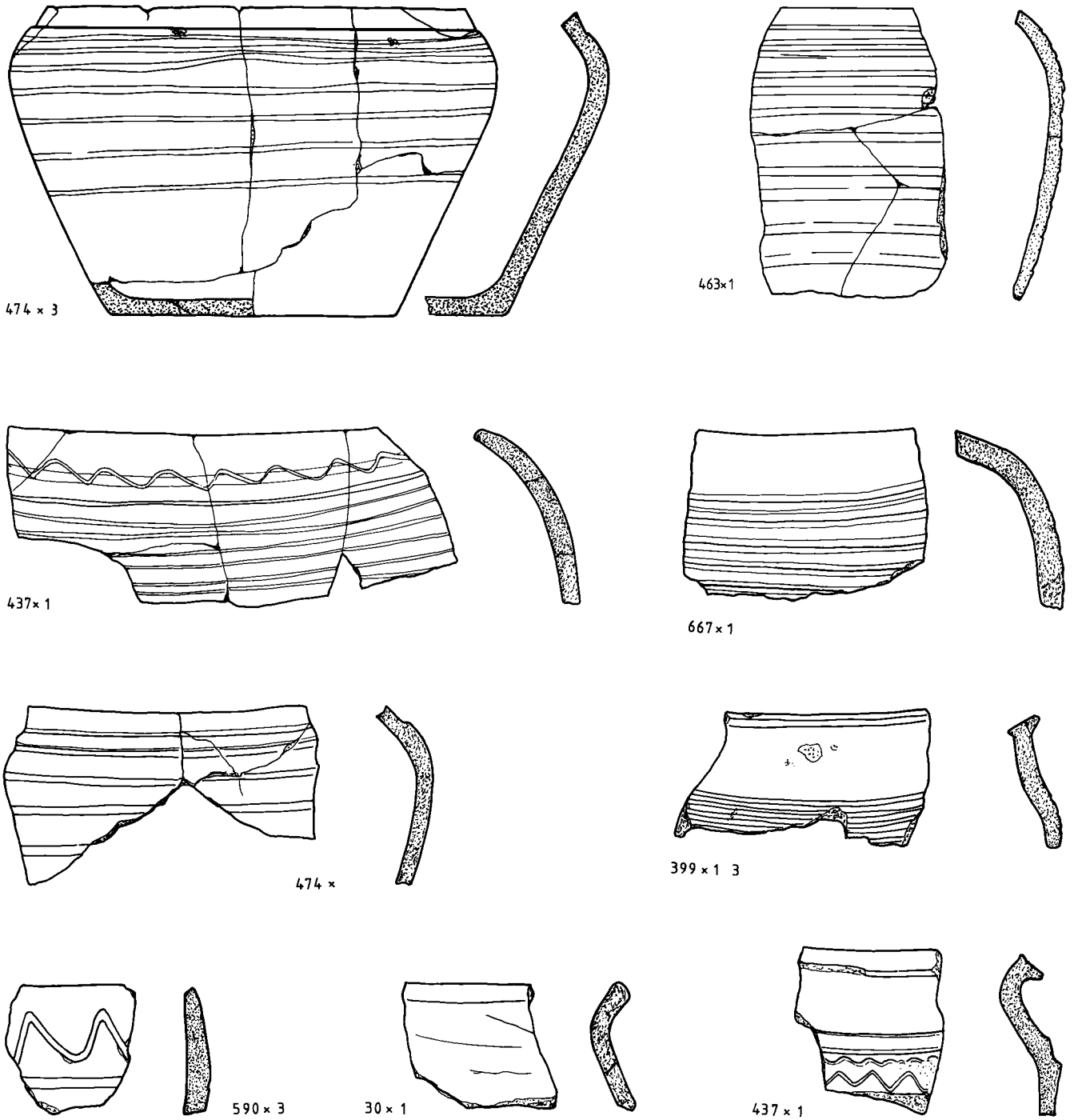


Fig. 9. Pottery (Baltic ware) found in postholes and pits at Margrethehåb II.

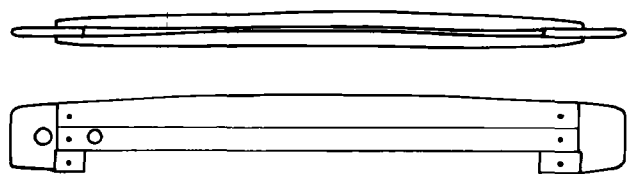


Fig. 10. Combcase made of bone.

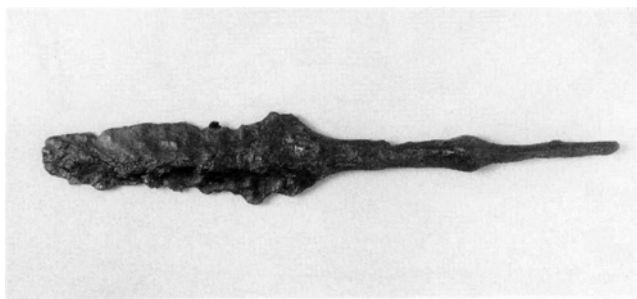


Fig. 11. Arrowhead of iron. Length 14,5 cm. Photo by Fl. Rasmussen.

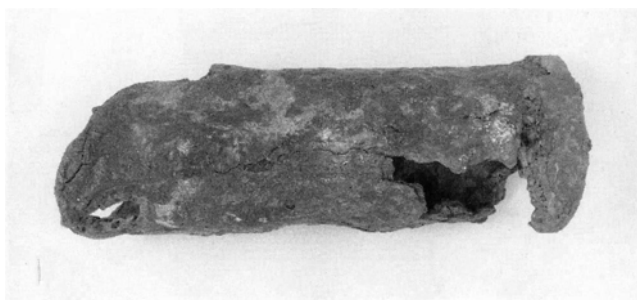


Fig. 12. Lock cylinder from a horsechain. Length 20 cm. Photo by Fl. Rasmussen.

form and decoration to a piece from Lund dated to the 11th century (Mårtensson 1976, fig. 359).

Other metal finds consist of just two mounts of bronze foil with stamped decoration. A gilt medallion with an incised cross was found in the ploughsoil, but must be contemporary with the settlement site.

#### Decorated bone plates

The excavation produced one find quite unique in the broader context. Scattered in the fill of pit were whole and fragmented parts of decorated bone plates and splints (fig. 15). After conservation the material could be assessed: 15 pieces of millimetre-thin bone plate, the largest measuring  $8.4 \times 8.3$  cm and the smallest  $5.2 \times$

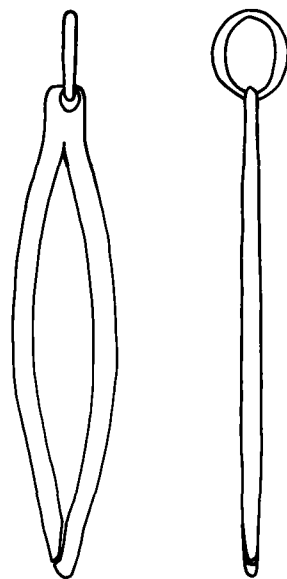


Fig. 13. Firesteel.

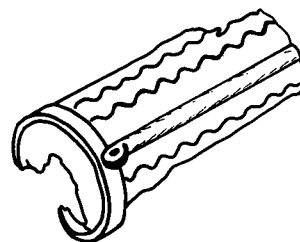


Fig. 14. Small iron padlock.

3.9. Bone plates of this size probably come from the lower jaw of horse, which is suitably flat and of the necessary size. By removing the back of the bone piece the desired thickness is obtained. Are all bone splints and shafts formed from rib bone? The decoration on both plates and splints comprises a complete covering of ring motifs which are varied in such a way that no two pieces are quite the same. All bone plates have perforations in the form of small nail holes for fastening the plates on some underlay, and some round ornamental holes through which the backing material showed (Figs. 15–16).

The most probable explanation of this enigma is that the plates and splints come from a house-shaped shrine



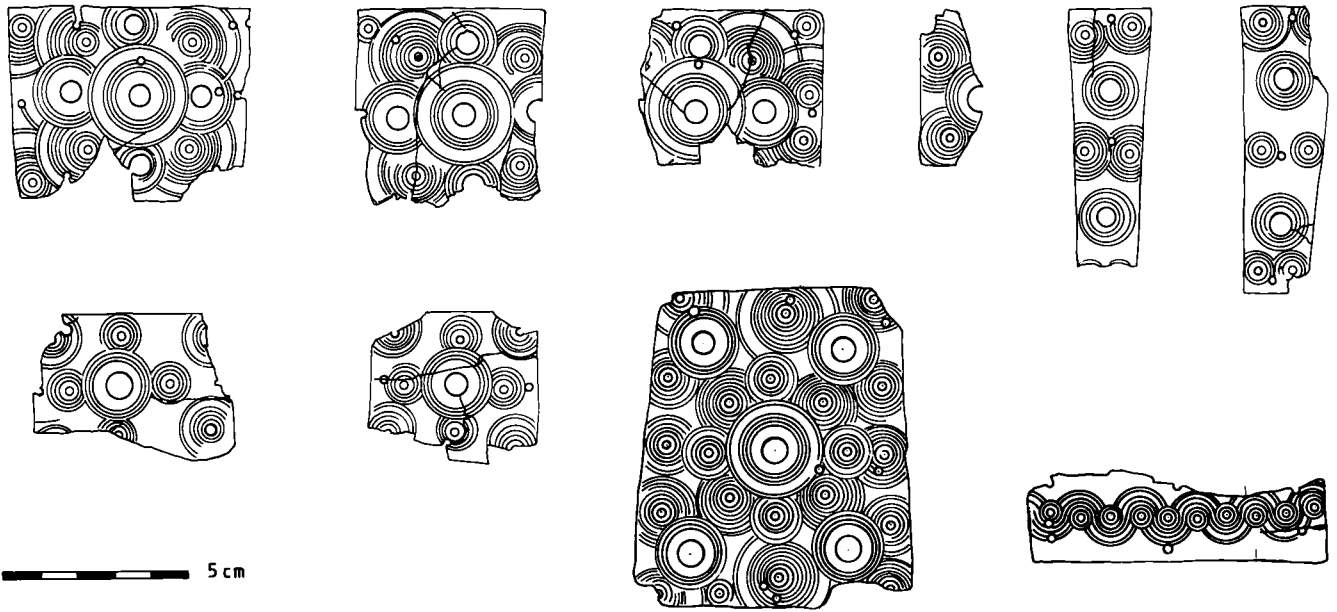


Fig. 15. Some of the decorated bone plates.

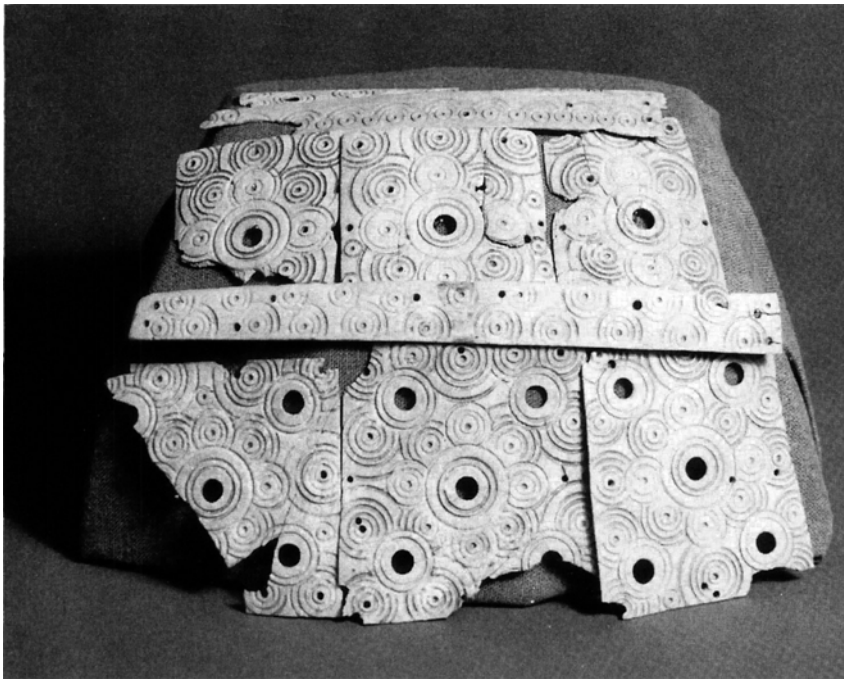


Fig. 16. Tentative reconstruction of the shrine.  
Photo by Fl. Rasmussen.

of the same form as those known from Cammin and Bamberg, albeit in a less ambitious version. It may also be noted that in some European cathedrals there are shrines which without being direct parallels are strongly reminiscent of the Margrethehåb find (Andersen 1987, Gabriel 1988 p. 151 ff.).

#### DISCUSSION

The most interesting peculiarity from Margrethehåb is the bow-sided building. Buildings of this type have been discovered at a series of sites in the present area of Denmark in recent years. This includes the principal

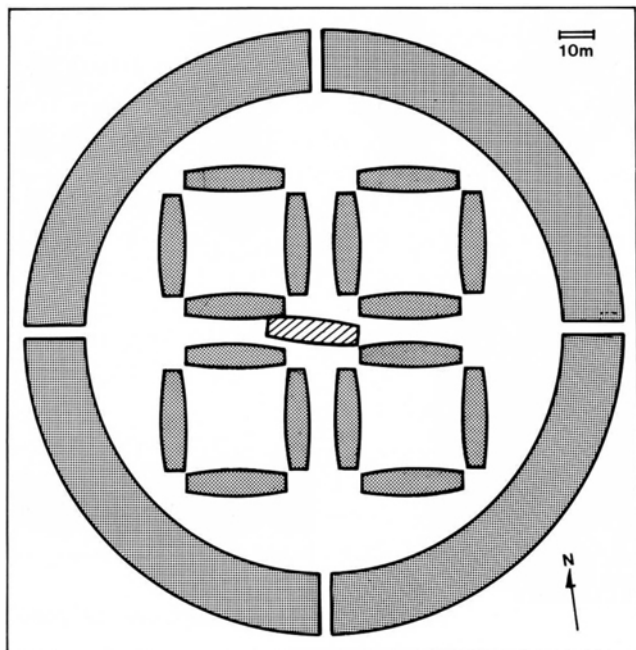


Fig. 17. Trelleborg with the central building outlined.

buildings of the latest farmsteads at Vorbasse, some of the buildings from a newly discovered site at Vilstrup by Ribe and Hampegård on Lolland (Hansen 1983, Jensen 1987, Hvass 1980).

The best parallel however is a building which was found in the excavation of Trelleborg (Nørlund 1948, 25, fig. 26). Sited in the middle of the site, between the four barrack blocks and thus in the centre of the ring-shaped rampart was a building which corresponds clo-

sely in dimensions and construction to that from Margrethehåb. The Trelleborg building was 25 m long and about 6 m broad with seven sets of roofbearing posts in the wall line (Figs. 17–18). The dimensions and varying depths of the postholes correspond well with the observations at Margrethehåb. At Trelleborg too large stones seem to have been used in the postholes' fill. The Trelleborg building was considered by the excavator to be earlier than the fort but there is no stratigraphic evidence for this, as the building respects the barrack blocks. It may however appear that the bow-sided building's postholes removed some of the foundation-stakes of the fortress's roadway. With the well-dated Margrethehåb building it might be reasonable to redate the Trelleborg building to the early Middle Ages, to the second half of the 11th or 12th centuries. It is possible that other such structures with their foundations in the soil are hidden elsewhere in the fortress area, contemporary with the central building. It is tempting to interpret the building as the principal building in a high-status settlement, with the ring rampart still in use.

With the findings at Margrethehåb and the other settlement sites longhouses of this construction may be placed within an early medieval context, in which they supersede the classic 'Trelleborg halls'.

The settlement site at Margrethehåb was not fenced in but the natural, topographical bounds – the watercourse and wetland on three sides – confirm that the settlement has effectively been fully excavated. The site is hardly a part of a larger village but must be viewed as an individual major farmstead.

The site of Hampegård, mentioned above, which is dated to the early Middle Ages, seems to involve a settlement structure corresponding to Margrethehåb, al-

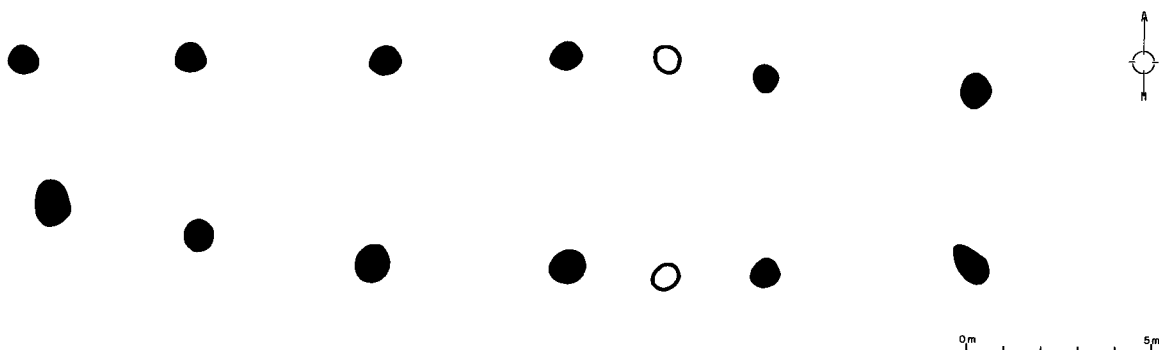


Fig. 18. Plan of the longhouse from Trelleborg (after Nørlund 1948).

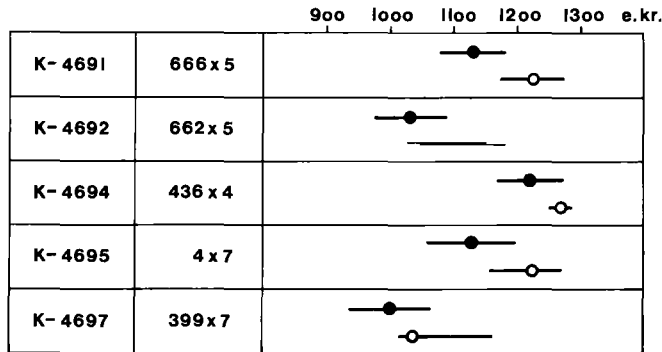


Fig. 19. Radiocarbon datings from Margrethehåb I and II. Filled signature: conv. C-14 years, unfilled signature: callib. C-14 years (Stuiver and Pearson 1986).

though in this case with several building phases. One of the major buildings – IIA – corresponds in a rather less imposing manner to the central longhouse at Margrethehåb. The large number of granaries and small buildings in three sections fit closely with the situation at Margrethehåb (Hansen 1983, fig. 20).

One form of specialization at Margrethehåb can be inferred from the location and finds of the site. The large meadowlands and wetlands which surround the settlement must have been ideal pastureland. That animal husbandry was the essence of the economy is underlined by the 26 kg of animal bone which were recovered. These were found some in 'common' rubbish pits and some closely packed in large pits which only held animal bone. How far this reflects butchery detritus cannot be decided before a detailed study of the bone is undertaken but it seems clear that the quantity of bone is greater than one can expect to find on a settlement site of this size and length of life.

In the remaining find material the absence of certain categories is noteworthy. This includes all sorts of raw materials and half-products: only two bones had preparation marks and no smithing slag was found. Nor were there tools for production such as spindle-whorls and loomweights. Many of the objects found, such as the padlock, comb case and decorated bone plates testify to specialized craftwork which has hardly been undertaken at the farmstead.

Just 2 km east of Margrethehåb is Roskilde (Fig. 1) which at this time was one of the nation's largest towns. An obvious interpretation of the finds from Margrethehåb is as a sign of a relationship, in which the farmstead

marketed its products – meat – in the town and bought there ready-made goods.

The farmstead itself lies just 1 km south of the palace of the Bishop of Roskilde, Bistrup (first mentioned in 1277 but certainly older) and may have belonged to it. The Bishop of Roskilde was without rival as the country's largest landowner and one of the most powerful men in the kingdom. In the 12th century the position was held by the famous Bishop Absalon. It was under him that the construction of one of the nation's first brick building, Roskilde cathedral, began: a building project the residents of Margrethehåb would have been able to follow at the closest hand.

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The artefacts were drawn by Anne Pedersen.

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