

Elite Rulership in Southeast Scandinavia c. 350–1100 A.D. – A Case Study

Bengt Söderberg

Elite; power; hall; cultural space; ritual practice

Introduction

In this paper I will discuss some perspectives on a recently investigated early medieval elite setting in Scania, the southern province of Sweden. The Järrestad-project was initiated in 1999 by the National Heritage Board, Archaeological Excavations Dept. UV Syd, in connection with a roadwork in south-east Scania (fig. 1). The analysis is not yet completed, and further fieldwork will be carried out.

The village name Järrestad is earliest recorded 1322 as *Jarlllestatha*, which is also the name of the hundred unit, recorded in 1182 as *Ierstedt herrit* (fig. 1). The name refers to the settlement of the Jarl, a high ranking person, and it is considered reasonable that the village at some point held a prominent position in relation to the larger unit. The centre of a hundred is associated with functions of a military, juridical and religious kind (KL, 488 f). In Järrestad this is supported by village names such as *Karlaby*, the village of a Carl connected to the retinue (Brink 1999b) and *Viarp*, the new settlement at the old cult-site, and, in particular by the place name *Galgabacken*, gallows hill, (fig. 2) which is attributed to a hill partly enclosed by streams, situated where no less than four parish borders meet. This is most likely the Early Medieval thing place, closely connected to the elite settlement but still at neutral ground.

An analysis of land survey documents from c. 1800 show a large geometrical area in the fields between the village nucleus and the stream. Within this space, an impressive settlement with halls and a palisaded enclosure was investigated. The hall area is thought of as a focal point of the pagan cosmos, an arena

where attempts were made to combine and integrate the main sources of social power, e. g. ideology, economy and military might, and thus enhance elite power (Mann 1986). It was a centre for social action, and thus of great potential to manipulate belief and cultural values.

The hall has been considered the major vehicle for aristocratic self-realisation during the Early Medieval time (Herschend 2002). The problems treated here rather concerns the nature of the rulership in terms of power relations in a social organisation. In order to extract more specific social knowledge from architectural features and ritual practice we have to consider the broader context; landscape, settlement pattern and fields of contacts. Furthermore, the renewed use of Edda poems, Saga literature and myths, have proved to be valuable sources of information on Early Medieval elite settings and cultural values in general (for example Herschend 1997; Lönnroth 1997).

Landscape and settlement

The southeast corner of Scania is characterised by the beautiful, varied landscape. The variations are due to the bedrock, which is made up of several layers as a result of a major fault and several fissure zones. Järrestad is situated on a large glaci-fluvial sediment, at the junction of communication routes. Outside the sediment a clayey moraine dominates (Liljegren 1999). The coast is situated at a distance of some 3 kilometres, with natural harbours at the mouth of the Tommarp stream.

A phosphate mapping has been carried out in combination with surface surveys in identified

Early Medieval settlements in the Järrestad hundred, a part of a dissertation work by Tina Thurston (Thurston 1996). Her aim was to study the transformation of the cultural landscape and relate this to sociopolitical and economic change. The general idea was to estimate settlement area and construct rank/size curves for the settlements. The analysis showed that the settlements in Järrestad was generally large, close in size, with a few smaller neighbouring settlements. These characteristics created a curve of a convex shape, which is indicative of a system without any one site being distinctly dominant in economic, social or political terms. In locational theory a convex curve indicates a poorly integrated system, which means that the powers of the local élite were very loose and decentralised (Thurston 1996, 284).

This data largely corresponds with the distribution of imports and objects of precious metals in the preceding period. They are found at several locations, indicating the presence of a competitive local élite, which took active part in international networks (Helgesson 2002). The late 4th century burial of a richly equipped woman in Järrestad is thought to mark a shift in the foci of the local landscape. The burial is

close to a neighbouring grave field in Simris, famous for its warrior graves (Stjernquist 1955), which ceased to be in use towards the middle of the 4th century. At the moment we do not, however, know much about the 5th and 6th centuries in Järrestad. The hall area and settlement was established c. AD 600. Returning to the wider area and the next period of pronounced change, the hall area ceased to exist in the course of the 11th century, which largely coincided with the establishing of a power structure related to the Danish royal sphere. In Tommarp, a royal demesne was established and in Simris, a magnate manifested his relation to this sphere through runestones (Moltke 1985, 265). It can be safely assumed that power structures were transformed during the 11th century, resulting in – for example – a relatively strong urbanisation process at local level.

The hall area in Järrestad

A succession of halls were identified close to sloping terrain, which reinforced the volume of the buildings from a distance. A spring in the marshy ground close by, provided a suitable place for wells. The interior in the best pre-



Fig. 1: South Scandinavia and Järrestad.

served hall, c. AD 800–950, was elaborated, with a large central room flanked by entrance rooms and separate rooms at the gables (Fig. 3). The hearth in the central room was supplemented by an oven. Rows of postholes parallel to the outer walls of the central room are interpreted as long-benches, which also functioned as supports of the roof and perhaps a gallery. The palisade was connected to the facade of the hall (Fig. 4). A house was situated along the west palisade inside the enclosure. Sunken floor huts and post-built houses surrounded the area; in several huts ovens were unearthed and many of the post-built houses were small. A very large house was situated about 100 meters to the west of the halls. The spring was also characterised by a continuous utilisation. The ground was covered by a massive layer of fire-cracked stones which could not be delimited. The investigated part of the layer contained about 50 cubic metres of stones and the upper layers contained even

more. Seven wells were excavated in the periphery of the stone layer, most of them dug into one another.

The hall area in Järrestad resembles other contemporary élite settings in south Scandinavia (Christensen 1991; Lundquist 1996; Tornbjerg 1998). The most striking parallel is no doubt the hall area at lake Tissø, situated in western Sjælland (Jørgensen 1998), with a similar layout of halls and enclosure. At Tissø a large area was investigated, including halls and parts of a market place. The find material is vast, compared to Järrestad. The resemblance of the hall areas can be interpreted as a direct connection in the élite strata, for example a family- or a power relation. In this context it is rather viewed as a sociocultural concept, a way to structure social space in élite settings. There are several examples of ideas and innovations that were communicated rapidly over large distances within élite strata in polities sharing similar cultural values.

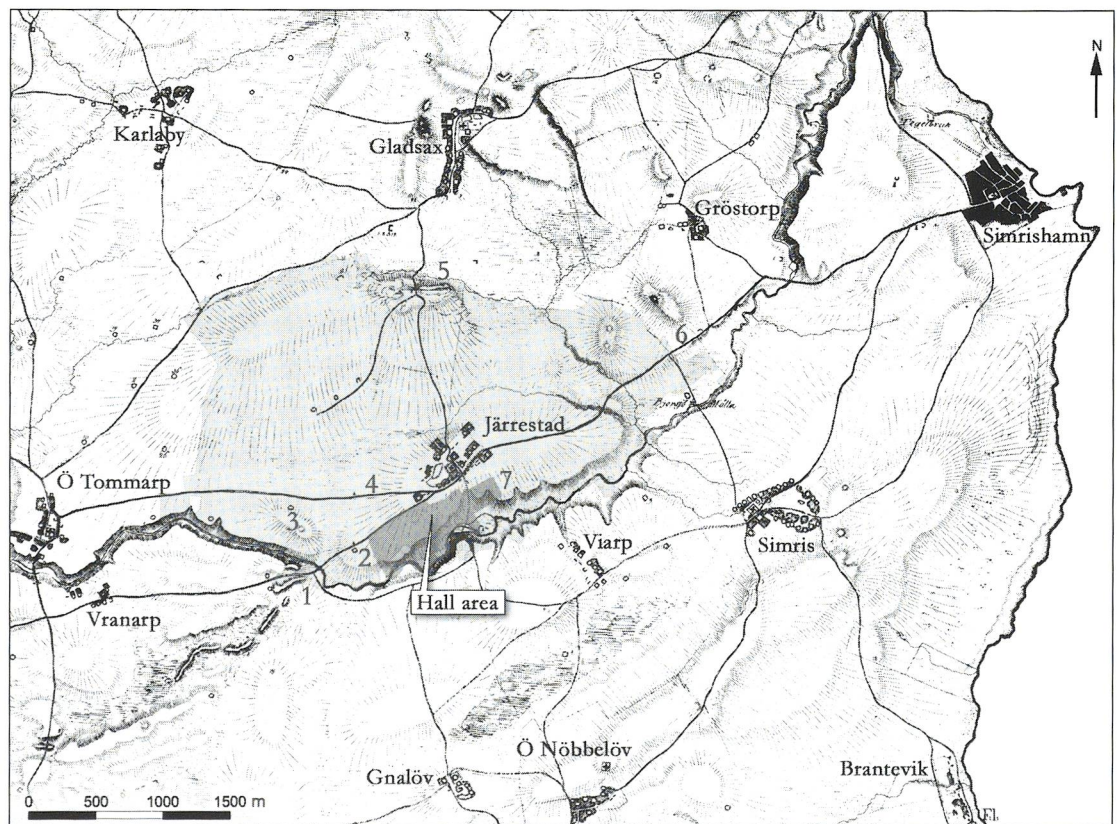


Fig 2: Light shaded area – inlying land to the village of Järrestad. Dark shaded area – Reconstructed toft of élite setting. 1 Gallows hill, the presumed place of Early Medieval thing; 2 Indicated Early Medieval graveyard; 3.4 graves of the Jarl and the Jarl's wife, according to folk tradition (Stone Age passage grave and dolmen); 5 The holy mountain; 6 The dead giant, according to folk tradition. (Head – Bronze Age mound; Heart – Stone Age passage grave; Penis; Early Medieval erected stone; Feet; River valley wetland; 7 The richly equipped women's grave c. AD 350. The Scanian reconnaissance map, c. 1815.

Kings, Jarls and *Godar* are some examples of many known titles of leaders in early medieval society. We do not know much for sure about their functions, but they are generally thought to integrate roles as leaders of religious and worldly matters. There is no strong evidence for the existence of a special class of priests in the pagan societies of Scandinavia (Sundquist 1998). In the old Icelandic literature a *hov* is characterised as a sort of 'private-owned' cult-place, situated at farms owned by *Godar*. Participants in cult activities performed at these places paid some sort of tribute to the cult leader, taxes, military services or loyalty. In short, a *hov* is either thought to refer to an élite multi-functional building where ritual practice took place, or denoting a building exclusively intended for social interaction involving cultic activities (Brink 1999a). The enclosed buildings in Tissø have been pointed out as possible examples. The name of the lake Tissø, refers to the war god Tyr and depositions of weaponry in the lake supports the idea (Jørgensen 1998).

Cultural space and ritual practice in Järrestad

A more thorough discussion of the hall area in Järrestad is based on the opinion that human built environment in general is organised and functions in a cognitive structure which relates its inhabitants to aspects of the outside world. In structuralist method, sociocultural space is analysed through the construction of a grammar built on oppositional pairs. Basic oppositional pairs such as culture/nature, private/public and internal/external have been applied to pagan cosmology (Doxtater 1990; Burström 1995). The setting is thought of as a conceptual explanatory model of cosmos and constitutes the centre of the world. Settlement boundaries separate us from them and culture from nature, legally as well as in a mental sense. This existential situation is mirrored in Norse mythology where *Midgård*, the cultured home of mankind, was situated in the middle of the cosmos. This is also where *Asgård*, the home of the gods, was. Outside *Midgård* there was outlying land, *Utgård*, where chaos and nature reigned, and where giants and monsters dwelled (Haastrup 1985).

The most characteristic architectural feature in this context is the enclosed space connected

to the hall. The hall could be entered from two directions, but the southern entrance was reached from the enclosure. Enclosures and entrances are highly significant features in the structuring of social space (Hillier/Hanson 1984, 143 ff.). Separate entrances ensured that the highest ranking individuals could enter key positions, for example the high settle (Herschend 1998, 37 ff.), that social rank could be upheld, and the scheme made it possible to further develop the role of the leader. The layout of the hall with entrances and its relation to the enclosure, is divided. The west part of the hall is a closed structure in opposition to the east, open part; artefacts of a domestic character were found to the east. The same divided scheme can be applied to the enclosed space, a separate entrance was possible from the closed upper hall, and a public entrance was situated to the east.

A fascinating resemblance in the layouts of Järrestad and Tissø is the facade connection of palisade and hall, which is no doubt significant. This point of connection coincides with the place of the high settle by the hearth in the upper hall, thus emphasising its transcending qualities and defining main border zones of the overall layout. The architecture refers to the layout of *Asgård* and to *Hlidskjalf*, the high settle of Odin. The cultural importance of the hall area was emphasised not least through depositions in post holes. A variety of smithing refuse, the head of a blacksmith's hammer and a socketed axe were found in the post-holes of the enclosed building. There is also evidence of high quality smithing within the enclosure, involving the welding of quenched carbon steel (martensite), phosphorous Iron and ferritic Iron.

Beads of glass or semi-precious stone were also deposited in some postholes. Most of them were imports, but one of the handicrafts performed just outside the hall area was the making of beads out of local minerals like calcite and fluorite. Refuse was found in a pit close to the palisade and a deposition of five unfinished fluorite beads was discovered in one of the halls. This find will be explored somewhat closer, as an example of one of the links that can be established between the hall area and a 'sacred topography' (c.f. Hedeager 1999). North of Järrestad, the fertile river valley is succeeded by barren rocky hills. There are splendid views over the river valley and the

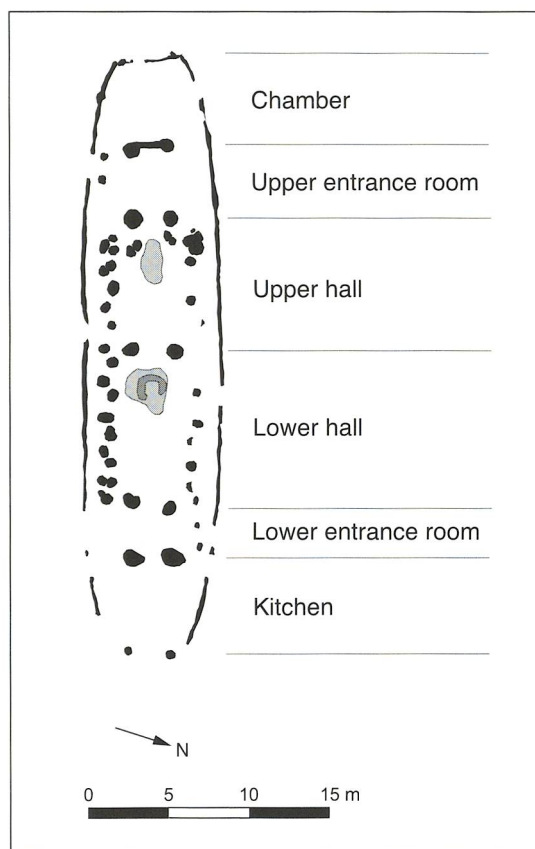


Fig. 3: The best preserved hall, phase 3 (of 4), c. AD 800–950, with tentative division.

sea from the hills, and a famous Bronze Age rock carving site shows that this suggestive environment was incorporated in cultural space at an early stage. It is outlying land (Fig. 2) and different minerals are embedded in the rocks at both sides of a fault depression, for example galena, calcite, fluorite, and, to some extent, silver. Large amounts of galena were easy accessible for open cast mining. Mining is recorded back in the 17th century (Liljegren 1999, 24 ff). The deposition constitutes a link between the hall and a holy mountain in the outlying land of the “all-dominating direction of north” (Doxtater 1990, 187). A reoccurring motive in Norse mythology is the relationship between Asa-gods and Giants. The gods repeatedly cheated, murdered and stole various kinds of natural resources from the giants and their domains, in order to transform the loot to cultural assets, an art which the giants themselves were not capable of performing (Clunies Ross 1998, 155 ff). Giants occur in many of the local traditions in Järrestad, which can be connected to hall cosmology and specific monuments from different periods, located near the border zones of in- and outlying land (Fig. 2). According to Doxtater, cultural space was structured in accordance with the hierarchical

oppositions of the directions. The most powerful oppositional direction was, according to mythology, the north, which is the direction of the spirits, and the subordinate south, the home of the living and the mortal. The west/east oppositional pair is considered to be of a complementary character, attributed to male/female meanings such as culture/nature (Doxtater 1990, 186 f). The male/female division can be applied to the hall area, with meanings referring to culture/west and nature/east. When it comes to the hall area the enclosed building is oriented in a north/south direction. The enclosure could be reached from the upper hall, north of the enclosure, in the direction associated with the spirits. The public entrance to the enclosed space from the east connected this to the springs, thereby forming another significant axial direction, with the meanings west/male/culture and east/female/nature. This structuring can shed some light on the overall patterns of distribution at the site, with depositions of processed, cultural refuse and artefacts in the west/male/culture hall area and the symbolic depicting of the cooking process dominating the east/female/nature marshy area with wells. Depositions of cranial parts, mostly jaws from cattle, horse, pig and moose dominated in the wells. Attention has been drawn to the meaning of deposited animal bones in similar contexts, and Charlotte Fabech suggests that animal sacrifices were carried out in the hov, while the ritual meals took place in the nearby hall. Finally, the bones were collected and deposited at special places (Fabech 1998, 153). Large accumulations of fire-cracked stones is a characteristic feature in early medieval elite settings (for example Christensen 1991, 55) but has not been thoroughly discussed. Needless to say, fire-cracked stones can be derived from a wide range of activities. In this context the phenomenon is related to food-preparation connected to feasting (c.f. Brink 1999a, 13). In Norway, the occurrence of plowed-out layers of fire-cracked stone on early medieval farm tofts has been interpreted as a shift in the food processing, from Iron Age dry cooking in pits to wet cooking, using heated stones in water, probably reflecting a cultural change (Skre 1998, 138 f). It is considered significant that bones were totally absent in the layer with fire-cracked stones, and a hypothesis in line with Fabech’s

idea concerning a spatial separation of the sacrifice from the ritual meal, is that refuse from animal sacrifice, slaughter, cooking and feasting were displayed and deposited in different contexts, in accordance with ritual practice related to symbolic meaning of different structural entities at the site. This can also be exemplified with the 'pure' character of the layer and TL-datings of stones, suggesting that the stones were stored in cairns at first, and deposited in a massive scale at a later stage.

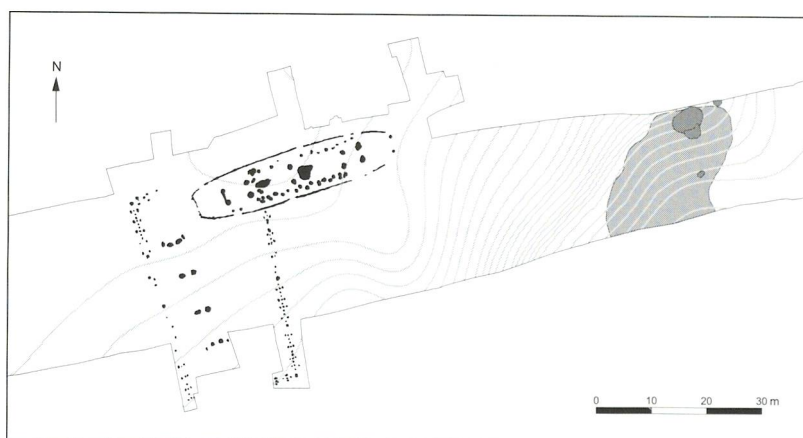
Conclusions

It is argued that elite rulership in the Järrestad region formed a corporate and fluent structure during the investigated period. Power had to be continuously negotiated at community level and within a competitive elite strata; it was certainly not given once and for all. The hall area in Järrestad, and its close spatial relationship to other institutions of importance, for example the thing, was clearly a step towards centralisation at local level. The stage was set for further development of social power, through the manipulation of belief and cultural values deeply rooted in the general human demand for existential structure and meaning. I have chosen to exemplify this with aspects related to fertility, or rather the successful transformation from nature to culture, and to emphasise the more or less consciously applied

power strategies such as the structuring of social space and feasting. Other aspects and strategies could have been chosen, for example warrior ideology and references to the past. The first mentioned phenomena are, however, not reflected in the material to the same extent as in for example Tissø, which is interesting, considering the structural similarities.

The establishing and continual utilisation of the hall area in Järrestad during four centuries indicate a rather balanced distribution of power at community level and possibilities as well as limitations in the social power integrated in the hall area. The relationship between social action in the hall area and overall settlement pattern will be examined further, in order to explore the dynamics of social power and its transformation during the 11th and 12th centuries.

Fig. 4: The hall area. Hall phase 3, enclosure and enclosed building to the west; layer of fire cracked stones (light shaded area) and wells (dark shading) to the east.



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Address

Bengt Söderberg
Riksantikvarieämbetet UV Syd

Åkergränden 8, S-226 60 Lund
bengt.soderberg@raa.se