

A Central Place at Stafsinge, Halland, and Some Thoughts on the Significance of the Periphery during the Late Iron Age and Middle Ages

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Abstract

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In 1998 Halland County Museums and UV Väst carried out extensive excavations on several sites around Falkenberg in Halland. On one of the sites, Stafsinge RAÄ 116, several prestige objects from the Late Iron Age were found. The objects include a bird shaped brooch, a pin, a weight, pieces of soapstone, several beads and glass pieces from beakers and raw garnets. The objects could in Halland be compared with objects from the famous chieftain's settlement in Slöinge. The objects signal the presence of a magnate's farm or central place during the Late Iron Age. This is supported by old stray finds of silver treasures, coins and weapons from the Falkenberg-Stafsinge area. At the same site the excavation of a huge farm from the 12th and 13th centuries shows that a magnate's farm survived into the Middle Ages. In the paper the author discusses some ideas concerning centrality and central places during the Late Iron Age and Middle Age.

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Introduction

In 1998 the county museum in Halmstad and the National Heritage Board, Western Excavations Department (UV Väst) carried out extensive excavations outside Falkenberg in Halland in preparation for the new railway between Göteborg and Malmö. I was responsible for the investigation of one of the major sites at Stafsinge 116, where extensive settlement remains from the Late Bronze Age and Pre-Roman Iron Age were encountered (Figs. 1, 2). During the excavation a number of high-status

objects dated to the Late Iron Age were found. We also stumbled upon a huge farm from the Middle Ages (Nicklasson 1999). It became evident that we had unexpectedly come across some kind of manor or, to use a popular term: central place. The excavation has recently been published (Nicklasson 2001, 2002). In this paper I want to explore some ideas a little further.

In Halland a Late Iron Age manor has previously been investigated at Slöinge some 10 kilometres south-east of Stafsinge (Lundqvist 1996). The finds from Stafsinge are fewer but of the same kind and quality as those from Slöinge.

Table 1. Some of the objects from the Late Iron Age/Middle Ages found by the excavation.

Find number	Object	Dating
F551	Bird-shaped brooch	7th century
F984	Gold-foil bead	4th–5th century
F1514	Bronze dress hook	5th–6th century?
F2223 (DO5)	Glass	14th century
F2301	Sherd from glass beaker	400–700
F2463	Bronze scrap?	
F2465	Iron ring	
F2469	Sherd from glass beaker	
F2470	Sherd from glass beaker	
F2471	Sherd from glass beaker	400–700
F2474	Rim Funnel beaker	700–900
F2476	Glass bead, turquoise	
F2477	Glass bead, small	5th century
F2478	Glass bead, white	700–900
F2481	Dress pin	Late 6th century
F2483	Gold-foil bead	750–900
F2484	Part of tortoise brooch	10th century
F2485	Button	
F2486	Lead weight	
F2622	Piece of soapstone	
F3149	Spur	12th century
F3792	Sherd from glass beaker	
F4203	Sherd from glass beaker	
F5153	Sherd from glass beaker	
	About 15 garnets, some worked	

the sudden appearance of rich manors in Halland that I want to discuss in the present paper. Most central places seem to disappear during the late Viking Age. I also want to see this in an international context. The manors were founded during a period when most archaeologists and historians assume that the Nordic countries were formed. The relationship between the central places and the emerging royal power is another important question for understanding the manors. The chieftains, magnates (*stormän* in Swedish), or whatever you wish to name the inhabitants of the manors, must have been one of the pillars of society.

One of the most interesting features of the finds from Stafsinge 116 is that it is now possible to trace the presence of a central place or some

kind of special settlement over almost 1,000 years from around 400 AD to 1300 AD. During this time span the functions must have changed radically several times. Often the central places have been discussed within a regional or, at most, a Nordic framework. I want to emphasize the international character of the places. At both Slöinge and Stafsinge most of the finds that make the settlements special and different from normal Iron Age settlements in Halland and elsewhere are imported. Thus the inhabitants of these places, in certain respects, had more in common with the aristocracy in Anglo-Saxon England, Merovingia and other parts of Europe, than with the farmers in the surrounding countryside.

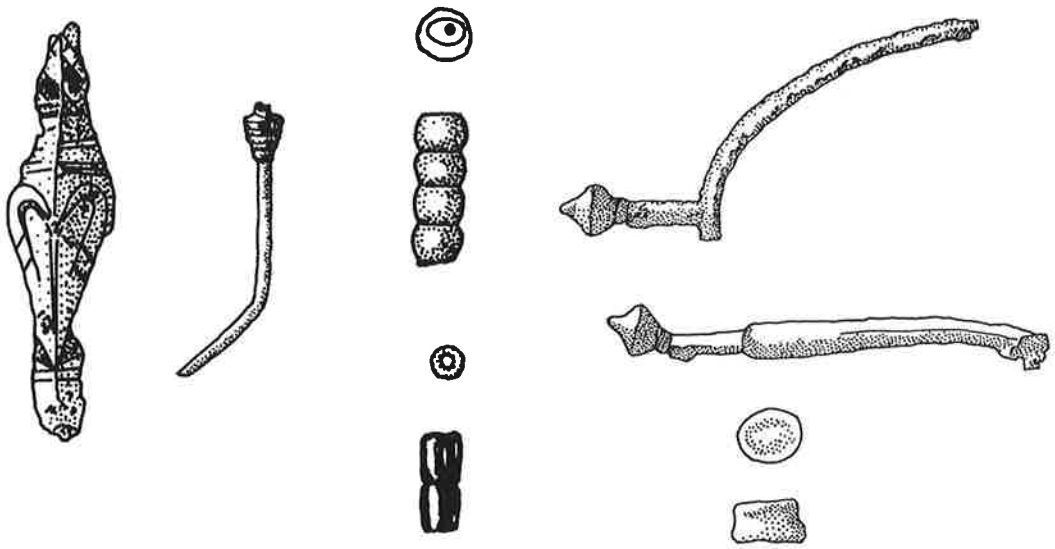


Fig. 3. Some of the objects from the Late Iron Age/Middle Ages found by the excavation. Drawings by Viveka Rönn.

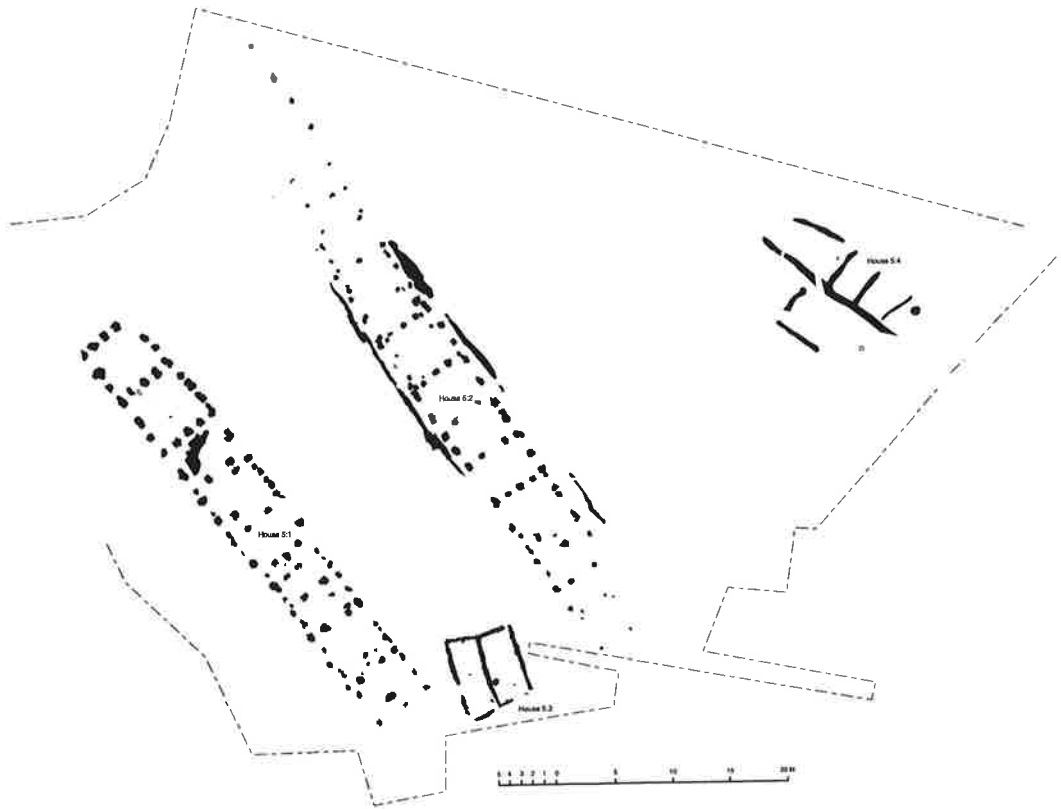


Fig. 4. The huge medieval manor at Stafsinge. It should most probably be dated to the late 12th century and was in use into the 14th century.

The European background to the manors in Halland

The winter of 406 was very cold. The Rhine froze and made it possible to wage war during the cold season. Several tribes from across the river grasped the opportunity. The western part of the Roman Empire was invaded and pillaged by hordes of barbarians (Harrison 1999, pp. 41 f.). This could symbolically be taken as the beginning of the end of the western part of the Empire. During the preceding century the military defences had been constructed as a defence in depth. Fortified towns and refuge points granted the population cover during wartime. They also served the purpose of supplying the army and as bases of operations when the invading forces were driven back. The army units became more and more local, and no central striking force was posted centrally inside the Empire. This means that the army was recruited locally and to a large extent from friendly barbarian tribes. The system was expensive. The lack of a central reserve made reaction times long and the ability to repulse attackers limited. Deep into the Empire the countryside was pillaged repeatedly. The localized army units also meant that the burden of supply rested on local resources (Luttwak 1976).

The Empire reacted by diverting troops from other fronts. England was abandoned. The Britons had to arrange their own defence. England had been subject to attacks and piracy for several hundred years and the Romans had organized the Saxon Shore guard for the protection of exposed coastal areas. Their departure opened up the country for barbarian invasions.

The result was the deterioration of central government and control. War leaders pillaged the country and hired themselves out for protection. The armies were more or less privatized. The situation was not unique for England; it happened everywhere the Roman Empire gave way to invading Barbarians

(Liebeschuetz 1993). Central government and the professional Roman army disappeared. The civilians had to arm themselves to be able to protect their property from being plundered. The European economy became based on plunder and pillage, which lasted for several centuries (Duby 1981; Reuter 1985). The concept of central government and centrality gave way to private entrepreneurship and local rule.

How could this be of any significance for Halland? There is a chronological agreement between the invasions of the Western Roman Empire and the appearance of manors in Halland. The Saxons were among the fiercest invaders of the Western Roman Empire. The term Saxon was in these days used for a nasty person from the North Sea area (Higham 1994, p. 39). The Saxons were not the only invaders. There were Jutes and Angles as well. These peoples should be seen as an ethnic mix of peoples settled along the North Sea shores in a way that was the common opportunistic and inexact way of describing ethnicity during these days (Harrison 1994). One could imagine contingents from Halland participating in the ravaging of England and the coasts of Gaul. The appearance of manors with shiploads of imported (stolen) objects give testimony to the participation of the Hallanders in European history.

In this way one could begin to discuss the significance of the periphery during the period 400–800 AD. When the concept of centrality became at best a legend the world could be visualized as a tumbler-drier (I want to express my gratitude to Mikael Dahlgren, Lund who invented this metaphor and made it spin in my head). Anyone who has bothered to leave the study and go down to the laundry room will have noticed that the centre of the tumble-drier is empty and that the laundry is pressed towards the walls of the machine. The same thing happened in Europe during the Migration Period. The centre of Europe, the old Empire, was extremely turbulent and emptied of centrality. The matter in the form of glass beakers,

beads and other precious objects were pressed towards the edges of the world and ended up in Slöinge and Stafsinge in Halland.

Perhaps one should divide the period 400–900 into two phases. This could not be done from the finds from Halland. Instead the finds from Uppåkra in Scania may be used for this purpose. In the 5th and 6th centuries there are most of the magnificent imported objects that could be interpreted as booty from looting. During the 7th and 8th centuries there are far fewer of these objects and more objects of domestic manufacture. (I thank Birgitta Hårdh for this information.) It is thus possible that a period with more emphasis on trade succeeded a period of plunder. From the relatively small material from Halland it is not possible to discern such a break. One could even suppose that the development in rich Scania was different from that in the somewhat peripheral Halland and the age of plunder survived for a longer time in Halland. Even though I view plunder as a major source for the acquisition of foreign objects during the Migration Period, the option of more peaceful trade should not be ruled out. Warlike contacts could have opened up routes of commerce and contact, and gifts of precious objects were an important way of maintaining one's allies.

Life on the fringe

When the centre was strong during the first centuries AD, very few imported objects found their way to the periphery. When the centre collapsed the periphery suddenly gave the impression of being central. Thus the emerging manors in Scandinavia have often been called “central places”. During the last decade these places have been seen as hosting central societal functions such as trade, manufacture, cult, military and juridical power. This appears strange to me from the European background sketched above. Should one speak of trade when plunder was the way objects regularly changed hands? Should one speak of the importance of

manufacture when the artisans mostly worked with insignificant projects like animal art for the grandeur of their masters? Should one speak of central religious functions when the only centralized cult of the Roman emperor had been abandoned? Should one speak of central military power when the masters of the halls could be likened to a band of brigands? Should one speak of central juridical functions when the mighty could rob the poor? I doubt it.

Instead these places should be understood as peripheral, situated in an economic system that went through a breakdown and restructuring that allowed the periphery to act as if it had a central significance.

The large number of the peripheral places, and how close to each other they are, stress their insignificance. In Halland central places have been found at Slöinge and Stafsinge in the Falkenberg area (Fig. 5). There are indications of possible peripheral places in the form of rich stray finds and remarkable ancient monuments at Köinge, Abild/Vessige and perhaps Faurås and Heberg (Lundqvist 1996, map p. 41). In all of Halland the peripheral places should probably be counted in dozens. This could be compared to Seiler's conclusions about the presence of a great many places like Vendel and Valsgårde in Uppland (Seiler 1999, pp. 74 f.).

The life and death of the free entrepreneur

Nowadays there are many places in Scandinavia for which scholars have claimed the status of central place. Sometimes such places have been discussed in isolation and not as a part of a bigger system of social or economic conditions. This could be due to the many beautiful objects from the sites that easily lead to the exaggeration of the significance of the place.

I want to emphasize some structural similarities between the central places. First of all there is an overall chronological agreement between most of the places. I have tried to date

some of the central places discussed in the books "...*Gick Grendel att söka det höga huset...*". *Arkeologiska källor till aristokratiska miljöer i Skandinavien under yngre järnålder* (Callmer & Rosengren 1997) and *Centrala platser, centrala frågor. Samhällsstrukturen under järnåldern* (Larsson & Hårdh 1998). Since several of the places discussed in the volumes only have been partially investigated, the dates given could be questioned in particular cases, but the overall tendencies should be clear. The normal central place emerges around 400 BC and disappears during the 10th century (Table 2). I have completed the table with some atypical central places: Vittene and Himlingøje. Together with Dankirke/Ribe and Uppåkra/Lund these are among the few places with a different chronological profile. Vittene is under publication and no conclusions should be drawn prematurely. It seems, however, that the settlement is not spectacular, but the find of the gold rings is. Himlingøje is not a central place, no manor has been located. Instead the area around Himlingøje totally dominated the trade

with Roman imports to Scandinavia during a short time span in the Late Roman Iron Age, as suggested by Lund Hansen (1987, 1995). During this brief period Himlingøje dominated southern Scandinavia politically. The imports have mostly been found in graves and it would be very interesting to know what kind of settlement the buried individuals inhabited. Dankirke/Ribe and Uppåkra/Lund are the only central places that survive into the Middle Ages, transformed and geographically moved, into medieval towns. In a sense one could see the deviating places as real central places. Thus centrality is concealed in the abnormal.

The other central places disappear. This is the case of Slöinge. Before the first stray finds were recovered, there was no indication of an Iron Age manor. The place is marked as meadowland for 12 different farms on the oldest surviving maps. No place-names give testimony to the once magnificent halls (Lundqvist 1996, pp. 44 f.).

Stafsinge survived as some kind of central place into the 14th century. During the 10th

Table 2. The life cycle of some of the places presented in Callmer & Rosengren 1997 and Larsson & Hårdh 1998. The dating of a single place could be debated in some cases. The trend should however be clear. The central place is most often dated to the period 400–900. ERIA = Early Roman Iron Age; LRIA = Late Roman Iron Age; MIG = Migration Period; MER = Merovingian Period; VIK = Viking Age; MID = Middle Ages.

	ERIA	LRIA	MIG	MER	VIK	MID
Slöinge	–	–	X	X	X	–
Stafsinge	–	–	X	X	X	X
Varla	–	–	–	–	X	X
Lejre	–	–	X	X	X	–
Boeslunde	–	X	X	X	X	–
Fjällkinge	–	–	X	?	X	–
Ravlunda	–	–	X	X	X	–
Toftegård	–	–	–	X	X	–
Tissø	–	–	–	X	X	–
Dankirke	–	X	X	X	–	–
Ribe	–	–	–	X	X	X
Gudme	–	X	X	X	–	–
Uppåkra	X	X	X	X	X	–
Himlingøje	–	X	–	–	–	–
Vittene	X	–	–	–	–	–

century there are several silver hoards from the Stafsinge/Falkenberg area which signals the presence of a rich settlement (Fig. 6). The huge medieval farm we excavated is difficult to date but it was most probably built during the late 12th century and was not abandoned until well into the 14th century. This means that the central place at Stafsinge has a lifespan of almost 1,000 years, and if one sees Falkenberg as the continuing central place in the area, the central place is still present.

Why did most of the manors and central places vanish during the 10th century? An obvious explanation is to link the disappearance of the central places to the kings of the emerging Nordic countries. In Denmark we have rich testimony of the importance of the Jelling dynasty. In Sweden matters are not so clear – there are even fewer written sources than in Denmark – but there were certainly more powerful kings now than ever before. One could see the kings as a new actor who sweeps the old locally based aristocracy off the board and establish new power structures.

I do not think that this explanation is enough, however. It is questionable if the early medieval kings were so potent during the 10th century as to be able to change the whole power structure of their realms. It is also doubtful whether one should see an opposition between the kings and the aristocracy. Hermanson (1998) argues that the royal dynasties and the aristocracy were closely related and shared the same values and interests during the 12th century. I do not see any reason to believe that kings built their power with radically different means a century earlier. There also seems to be a small, but significant chronological gap between the latest objects at Slöinge, dated to the first decades of the 10th century and the emergence of the Jelling kings, which should be dated to the period 959–1035 as argued by Svanberg (1999, pp. 111 f.).

I want instead to see the decline of the manors and central places and the emergence of powerful kings as related to each other, but not dependent of each other, but as results of developments outside of Scandinavia.

The Franks – the Vikings of Europe

During the 8th century the Carolingians came to power in France. The new royal dynasty should not be seen as something new and revolutionary. The Carolingians most certainly continued the plunder-based economy of their Merovingian predecessors (Reuter 1985). The Vikings may have plundered the Franks but the Franks plundered the rest of Europe. Instead one should see the differences in a changed attitude towards the central power. In the preceding centuries, following the breakdown of the Roman Empire, Europe had been divided into numerous small lands, most of which did not last long. Very few of these have survived into modern times. They were based on charismatic leaders, who financed their kingdoms with loot. As long as the looting was good the aristocracy and warriors stayed put. If the leader was not fortunate it was time to replace him or seek another employer. A problem arose when the leader wanted to stop plunder and instead stabilize the gains. The moment he did so he drained himself of the most lucrative source of income. This of course led many of his followers to abandon him and his kingdom dissolved as swiftly as it had been constituted. In Dick Harrison's words, one could speak of centrifugality, when the aristocracy look for their own good and do not strive for a strong central power (Harrison 1997).

During the Carolingian era there were important changes in this attitude. An example of this was that the empire was indeed divided following the death of Charlemagne, but it did not collapse into a myriad of small states with short life expectancy, as did the Roman Empire. Instead the different parts of the Carolingian Empire could be said to have constituted the embryos of the modern nation states of Germany and France. This means that there was a more centripetal behaviour on the part of the aristocracy. Obviously they gained from the existence of a central power, even if this was at times very weak. This could possibly be explained

by the worsening of the climate of affairs and the difficulty of finding new people to plunder. It was no longer possible to find good plunder nearby, and expeditions against the Saxons and to Italy demanded more force than a landlord or a couple of brave men could muster. It was necessary to be able to equip bigger armies under a single leader.

Of course this had consequences for Scandinavia. Scandinavia had been part of the international plunder economy. An enterprising man could earn a fortune pillaging in England or France. He could then establish himself in grand style in Stafsinge or Slöinge. This was no longer possible. The growing central power made it possible to organize strong defences along the European coasts the like of which had not been seen since the Saxon Shore guard. During the early Viking Age there were a lot of small expeditions with a lot of so-called kings or warlords who left no traces of themselves in history. During the 10th century the Viking raids were led by high-ranking members of the royal houses and were bigger and better organized. The Scandinavians began to organize themselves along the same lines as the peoples they wanted to plunder. There was no longer room for an enterprising young man to earn a fortune. The whole culture of the hall builders came to an end. Perhaps one should see the entire phenomenon of the so-called Viking Age as triggered first in the 9th century by the weakness of the Carolingian kingdoms upon the death of Charlemagne, and the changes with bigger armies, as a result of the restructuring of the Carolingian and Ottonian kingdoms in the 10th century. The periphery in Scandinavia is allowed to have a central role only in times of weakness on the continent.

The new central places – *kungalev* and *köpingar*?

It is during the 10th century most scholars agree that the Nordic countries emerged. They were in one way or another transformed from Iron

Age barbarian societies into medieval kingdoms. In Denmark the Jelling dynasty united Denmark by more or less bloody means. Much of what happened is uncertain and the precise events which transformed the Nordic countries from Iron Age barbaric societies to medieval European states are impossible to establish. New central or administrative places have been discussed: *kungalev* (royal manors) and *köpingar* (market places).

Stafsinge is nowhere mentioned either as a *kungalev* or a *köpinge*. The huge farm must nevertheless be viewed in this context. It is very unlikely that such a manor, near the important river route along the Ätran, could have been built without the knowledge or even consent of the king. One must also imagine that the manor must have housed a powerful master who influenced politics both in Halland and in the Danish kingdom.

The research on the Danish *kungalev* is a very complicated field. Several scholars have given their views on the subject. One of the most influential papers for the debate among Swedish archaeologists is "Städer och kungamakt – en studie i Danmarks politiska geografi före 1230" (Andrén 1983). By using other sources than the few contemporaneous sources, which discuss the organization of the early Danish state, Andrén comes to the conclusion that the *kungalev* system was established as early as around 1000 AD. In the western part of Denmark the system was built on the property of the Jelling dynasty. East of the Öresund the system was more uniform and one could suppose that *kungalev* were introduced at the same time over the whole country as a result of the conquest by the Jelling kings.

One should contrast the optimistic views of Andrén, who reconstructs an advanced and early system of *kungalev*, with the critical paper by Leegaard Knudsen (1988), who draws attention to the fact that the term *kungalev* (Danish *kongelev*) is mentioned in only one contemporary source, *Kong Valdemars Jordebog* (King Valdemar's Cadastre, KVJB). For this reason we have very

little information on the character of the places and how, and even if, they were used by the kings to establish their power in different parts of the kingdom. Leegaard Knudsen is also critical of Andrén's early dating. KVJB consists of several documents written at different times during the 13th century. Leegaard Knudsen finds no support for an earlier dating of the obscure *kungalev* than perhaps as late as the middle of the 12th century.

My own view is that the system as described in KVJB is not much older than the documents themselves. Since there are signs that some of the *kungalev* had been abandoned or transformed before the ink in the KVJB had dried (Söderberg 1995), one could perhaps suppose that the different lists in KVJB show an idealized picture of royal power in the late 12th or early 13th century. I do not believe the introduction of the system was as uniform or contemporaneous as Andrén claims. Halland is perhaps the best example. The royal property in this part of the kingdom is mentioned in several lists. The most detailed is the Halland list, which regulates the amount of tax from the different hundreds (*härader*). It is probable that the different lists were composed on different occasions reflecting specific historical circumstances. One such occasion that could have led the king to become eager to make written claims on property was internal wars during the 1170s, when Saxo says that the king took possession of property belonging to traitors (Skoglund 1992, p. 31). This would have been a good opportunity to strengthen the royal influence in this part of the realm. Is the Halland list in KVJB in fact referring to conditions as late as after 1179? By coincidence, the huge farm at Stafsinge was built at the same time. The farm and the nearby church could be seen as a new manifestation, perhaps with royal sponsorship, to succeed and to end the local central place dating back to the Iron Age.

Research on the *köpinge* places is a vast field too. A recent summary of the *köpingar* in southern Sweden has been made by Söderberg (2000). From his paper it is obvious that we do not know

much about these places either. There are very few conclusions to be drawn about chronology and the kind of activities that took place at these places, even if the element *köp* in the word denotes trading. It is not even possible to accurately date most of the places. In this context it could be interesting to speculate on the character of Stafsinge, even if it is not a real *köpinge*.

One of the oldest narrative sources that specifically mention conditions in the lower Ätran valley is *The Saga of Hákon the Good*, which mentions that the Hákon the Good burnt a place called Kaupstadh in 1256. This is earlier than the earliest date of the town of Falkenberg in both the archaeological and the written record. It is thus possible that the information in the saga relates to another place nearby. Since Stafsinge is the closest place with known high-status medieval settlement, it could be possible to identify Stafsinge with Kaupstadh. The name Kaupstadh could be compared to other names containing the element *köp*, trade, such as Köpvik (Kivik). These place-names are somewhat similar to the *köpinge* places. The geographical location of Stafsinge along a river a few kilometres inland is fully in accordance with how the *köpingar* in Scania were located (Tesch 1983).

The presence of a settlement at Stafsinge with some trading functions could account for the concentration of silver hoards from the late Viking Age in the Stafsinge/Falkenberg area. The silver in the region corresponds to finds of silver in western Scandinavia in the early 10th century (Hårdh 1996). The more regularized finds of silver could mean that trade and control of trade routes had become important during the Viking Age. The attack on Kaupstadh by Hákon the Good shows that plunder and war was still a fully possible option for acquiring wealth well into the High Middle Ages.

Söderberg draws the conclusion that it is during the 10th century that the *köpingar* most probably begin to attain prominent positions (Söderberg 2000, p. 295). It is thus possible that there is at least one phase between the central

place or chieftain's farm established by stray finds of high quality and the huge farm from the Middle Ages. This hypothetical manor is still hidden beneath the fields of Stafsinge.

Conclusions

This study shows that some form of central place or special settlement was present at Stafsinge for nearly 1000 years, from AD 400 to AD 1300. It is improbable that the functions of the settlement remained the same during all this time. From the archaeological evidence consisting of the finds from Stafsinge 116 and old stray finds from the Stafsinge/Falkenberg area, it is possible to trace at least three distinct phases.

1 The Iron Age manor. This was established around AD 400 and is only traceable through stray finds. The manor at Stafsinge coincides with the establishment of the better-known manor at Slöinge some 10 kilometres distant. There are several more places in Halland, which could have housed similar manors. It is thus possible to begin to discuss a system of manors that must have dominated the landscape and power structure in Halland during much of the Late Iron Age. These places should not primarily be seen as "Nordic" but as peripheral extensions of a European economic system based on plunder which came to existence in the wake of the Roman Empire.

2 A trading post identified by the name Kaupstadh and perhaps similar to the south Swedish *köpingar*. Silver hoards in the Stafsinge/Falkenberg area could date the foundation of the trading post to the first half of the 10th century. The 10th century is in many ways a "black box". Before this the society was a barbaric Iron Age one. Afterwards we find the three Christian Nordic kingdoms much more similar to the rest of the European realms. Here only some regional features in Halland should be mentioned. The central place in Slöinge seems to be abandoned and there are no stray finds to indicate that similar manors were still in use in other parts of

Halland. The exception is certain places along the coast there trade and most probably other functions were concentrated. The places should be seen as parts of a network of trading posts stretching from Hedeby to southern Norway and even beyond.

3 A medieval farm was most probably built during the late 12th century and was in existence well into the 14th century. It is possible that this farm was part of the Kaupstadh on the River Ätran that was pillaged in *The Saga of Hákon the Good*. It is thus possible to see this phase as a continuation of the preceding phase. There are, however, several new features too. The farm must be seen as connected to the church a couple of hundred metres away. The lord of the farm should be seen as patron for the church. It is also possible to connect hypothetically the building of the new manor to internal struggles between the Danish king and local aristocracy in Halland during the 1170s.

A possible fourth central place in the area is of course the town of Falkenberg that was founded during the late 13th century, but never really developed into a significant place during the Middle Ages (Redin 1983).

It is important to see the different phases of centrality succeeding each other as offspring of international developments, not as special "Nordic" places lacking parallels but as participants in international networks of trade, warfare and administration.

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