

Studies in settlement archaeology in the parish of Vendel

A preliminary report

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This paper deals with some aspects of the settlement and the economical and social structures in the parish of Vendel during prehistoric times. Vendel was probably permanently inhabited already during the Bronze Age, but it was not until the Migration Period that a massive colonization took place and that the central plain was taken into possession. The settlement established at that time was of varying nature, with both manors and possible village structures. During the Iron Age, the landscape consisted of large wet-meadow and forested areas. Its potential to make cattle-breeding possible on a large scale may have been the reason or one of the reasons both for the colonization and the upswing of the area during this period.

Introduction

In Eastern Middle Sweden, monumental and rich graves are evidence of the establishment of centres of power during the Iron Age. In this context, the parish of Vendel distinguishes itself with one big mound and one boat-grave cemetery, and it is undoubted that this district constituted a key area in northern Uppland during this period. The aim of this sub-project is to throw light upon the society which was responsible for the famous graves, by studying landscape, settlement structures and social organization.

Prehistoric remains and colonization

As usual in traditional settlement archaeology, the source material in this study mainly consists of permanent remains (sw. *fasta fornlämningar*), in other words vestiges that human activities have left over time in the form of graves, settlement remains and different kinds of fossil agriculture traces (Broberg 1990:16).

In the parish of Vendel, the main part of the known ancient monuments are graves. About 1200 are registered today, but a further 200 can be discovered owing to old inventory records and other sources. Because of gravel digging, agriculture, roadworks and settlement, many cemeteries show damage but very few seem to have disappeared totally. Consequently, the ancient monuments which are preserved in our days should give a quite good idea about the location of the prehistoric settlement units, especially during the late

Iron Age. In some cases, cemeteries are so destroyed that it is almost impossible to get an idea about their original size or about the time during which they were used. Because of that, the visible vestiges don't always make settlement analyses in farm-/village level possible.

About 10% of the 1400 known graves have been excavated, almost only in the central part of the parish. Since both the finds and the building details in these graves are identical with other graves in Uppland, it is possible to make comparisons and to date them. However, in the main the graves have to be dated in other ways, namely by studying the topographical situation, location in relation to other vestiges and historical settlement and morphology.

Some of the cemeteries, composed of few cairns/stone settings on the brow of hills, but also several heaps of fire-cracked stones and cup marks, are evidence that sedentary settlement existed already during the Bronze Age/Earliest Iron Age. These kinds of remains often lie at the 35/30-meters a.s.l. contour, on bouldered moraine hills near areas of glacial clay. Distinct concentrations can be seen in the southern and south-eastern parts of the parish and a few locales exist north of the central flat land (fig. 1). These vestiges are not isolated phenomena but lie on the periphery of the large Bronze Age settled area around Enköping and Uppsala (see Jensen 1984:47-48). A connection between Bronze Age settlements and glacial clay has often been noticed, a connection which could depend of the adequacy of this type of soil for agriculture of that time (e.g. Jensen 1986:26). This statement and the fact that heavy post glacial clay dominates in the central flat land of Vendel

may explain why this part of the parish seems to have been uninhabited during the Bronze Age/oldest Iron Age.

In the investigated area, very few remains seem to belong to the Roman Iron Age. In Gryttby and Brunnby, some square and triangular stone settings with corner stones indicate that some cemeteries could have their roots in the first centuries of our era.

Remains from the late Iron Age are much more numerous than those which belong to earlier periods (fig. 1). About 50 cemeteries on the esker and on both sides of the lake are evidence that the central flat land was colonized during this period.

Graves and other vestiges from the time before the late Iron Age are often invisible in today's topography or lie on hardly accessible areas and subsequently, they are underrepresented in the inventoried material. Anyway, this can barely explain the noticed imbalance. An important development of the settlement seems to have taken place at the beginning of the late Iron Age. One could reasonably admit that this change in settlement structure is only in part due to development of already existing farms and is also due to a colonization from the outside. In this context, colonization is synonymous with new settlement and the cultivating of new areas, in other words to consciously take possession of a virgin or already used place. When exactly this colonization began and how fast it was is still unknown, but the grave material and emergence of pollen from cultivated plants around AD 500 (Atkinson 1994) shows that the process began at the latest during the second half of the Migration Period.

The landscape of the Iron Age

As shown above, a colonization from the outside certainly occurred during the Migration Period. An important moment in the analysis is to reconstruct the landscape at this time and to follow its development during the late Iron Age to form an idea about people's environment and economical conditions.

Fossil remains of agriculture are rare in Vendel, but with retrogressive studies on old maps, pollen analyses (Atkinson 1994) and studies of geological and topographical conditions, it is possible to reach knowledge about the prehistoric landscape. In order to make a reconstruction possible, the following premises have been used:

- The arable land lay near the settlements (the cemeteries), on areas with good natural qualities for drainage. During the Iron Age, this was an important requirement because primitive tools (e.g. ard) restricted agricultural working of the land to light soils (Myrdal 1985:76–82).
- The heaviest clays in the area's lower parts were not arable before people were able to drain them, i.e. during the 13–14th centuries, when the iron-edged spade was introduced and ditching was practicable on a large

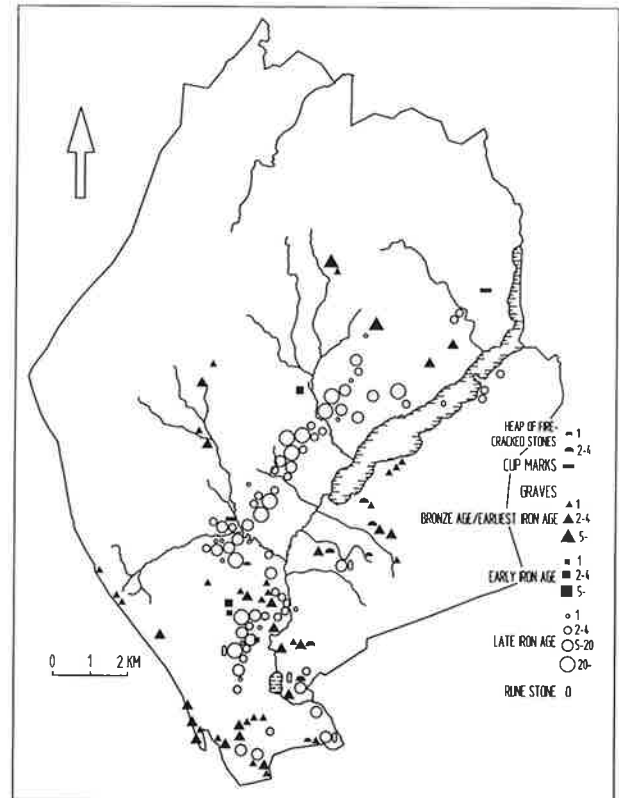


Figure 1. Map showing the distribution of the known prehistoric remains in the parish of Vendel.

scale (Myrdal 1995:60–63). West and south-west of the lake, the areas which were arable land and meadows during the 18th century were during the Iron Age natural wet meadows and fen.

- The areas used as dry meadows and wooded pastures during the 18th century were used for the same purpose during the Iron Age if they lay quite near the settlement.
- The areas which according to the prehistoric vestiges and place names were colonized first during historical time were *utmark*, which means woodlands and swamp, depending on topography and geological ground-conditions.

The result of the investigation is visualized in fig. 2. During the Iron Age, an extensive forested area of both hardwood and conifer stretched itself on the western, northern and south-eastern parts of the parish. During the period, the share of hardwood increased. Moist lands extended on both the lake's sides, south of it along the valley of the Vendel river and west of Husby and Karby. From the beginning, these areas were certainly covered with bush and grass and gradually became more open in character, as the fall of alder pollen around AD 450 indicates. The arable land lay like small islands near the settlement units and was not very extensive.

First of all, this result should be seen as an attempt to show the landscape's potential from an economical

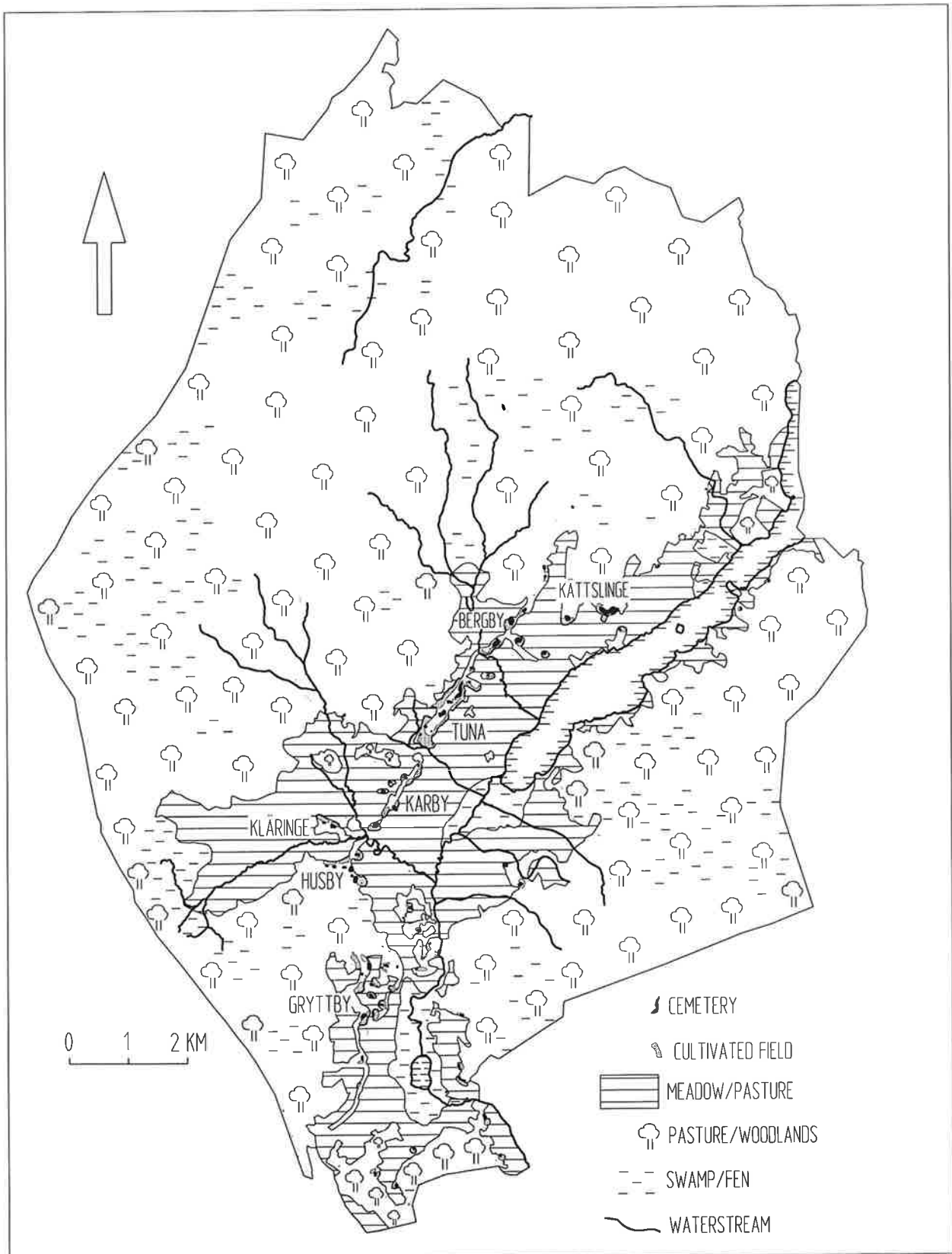


Figure 2. The landscape in the parish of Vendel during the Iron Age.

point of view and also to show how it could have been exploited with the technology of this time. Anyway, it may also give a good idea of the real conditions (cf. Sjöbeck 1947; NVV & RAÄ 1985:96–97), even if some divergences are unavoidable, especially concerning arable land and dry meadows.

Settlement during the Iron Age

The Tuna-unit

In his work concerning the manors and estates in northern Uppland during early Medieval Times, Sigurd Rahmqvist (1996:136–162) has convincingly shown that there was one estate in the central part of Vendel and that its territory extended over the presbytery and its environs. By means of meticulous analyses of the archaeological remains, it is possible to reconstitute the precursor of the medieval manor, i.e. the Iron Age settlement.

The boatgrave cemetery is of course the most famous archaeological vestige at this place, but not the only one. On the same esker, there are at least 220 cremation graves, spread over several places (fig. 3–4). Some researchers claimed these graves to be remnants of a large, damaged cemetery (e.g. Arne 1932:7, 13), but a closer analysis of the horizontal stratigraphy shows that they represent different cemeteries separated already at the beginning (Seiler 1994:31; Seiler 1998). The largest ones, RAÄ 27 to the west of the church, RAÄ 28 near the belfry and RAÄ 32 at Hovgårdsberg were used during the same time, from the Migration Period and forward.

The oldest known boundaries, reproduced on old maps, are certainly the ones which were created when the medieval estate was split up (see Rahmqvist

1996:142). These boundaries cut through the northern cemeteries and do not follow the topography, which certainly means that they are not older than medieval. No trace of any older territorial division can be found and it is uncertain if one existed. The place names support this statement: Hovgårdsberg does probably not have a prehistoric origin, but instead has a relation to the medieval manor (sw. *hovgård*).

Since it's very unusual that a place gets a new name (Pamp 1988:20), it is quite implausible that Hovgårdsberg at the beginning had another, prehistoric name. All the above mentioned cemeteries certainly belonged to one and only one settlement unit, whose territory included at least the part of the esker between the church and Hovgårdsberg, and also the areas east and west of it (fig. 3). The name of this settlement unit was probably Tuna (Eriksson 1938:53–54) and as indicated by the boatgrave cemetery, it was certainly an aristocratic manor.

To understand why several cemeteries were used during the same time, a study of the size of the population can be helpful. Without counting destroyed graves, it is possible to count that at least 20 individuals lived at the manor, i.e. more than one household. It is plausible that it was a large family, with several households each with its own cemetery. It is also probable that there were several social groups in the population, such as servants, peasants and artisans, and that they also had their own cemeteries (Seiler in press).

During medieval times, Karby, or at least a part of it, seems to have belonged to the estate around the church (Rahmqvist 1996:162–171). Boundary indicating graves in both Tuna and Karby (the mound of Vendla, RAÄ 7 and 26) (Isaksson & Seiler 1997:69) show that the two settlement units had two completely different territories during the Iron Age. However, if

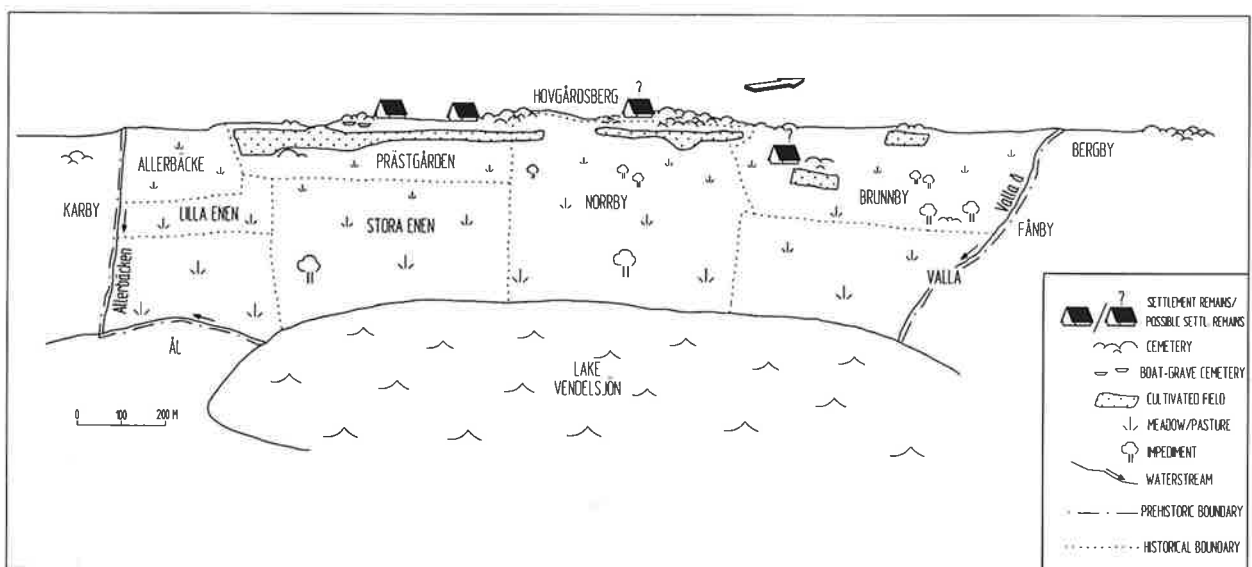


Figure 3. The Tuna-unit and its territory seen from the east.

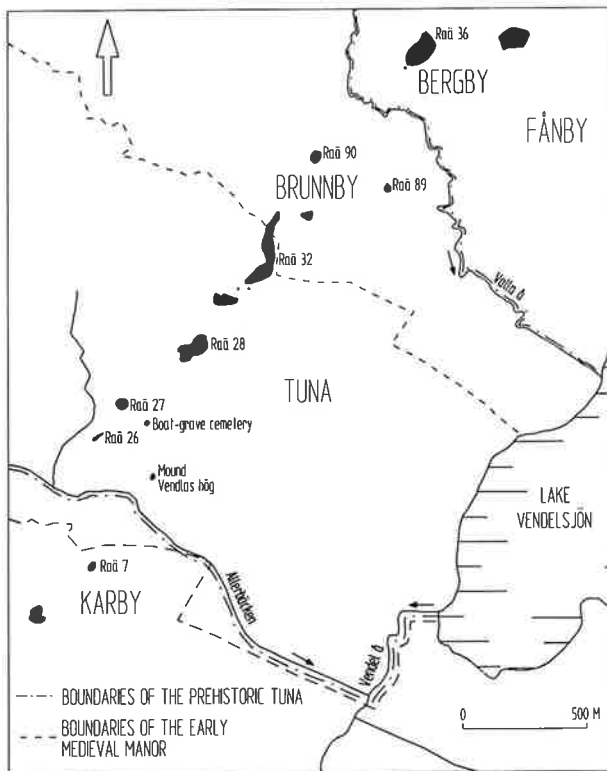


Figure 4. Map showing the boundaries of the prehistoric Tuna.

not territorially, it is probable that they had some other kind of relationship. During prehistoric times a now culverted brook, Allerbäcken, ran through the territory of the Allerbäcke village, possibly with another course than the one which is known from the old maps (Lundberg 1997). Prehistoric boundaries seem to have followed natural and topographical demarcations (Hyenstrand 1974:35) and it is possible that the watercourse was the boundary between Tuna and Karby during the Iron Age (fig. 4).

The northern boundary of Tuna is more difficult to determine. During medieval times, the estate's limit was at Brunnby (Rahmqvist 1996:138). Two observations indicate that even this village originally was a part of or had a strong relation to Tuna. The first one is that the oldest known boundary between Hovgårdsberg and Brunnby cuts the northern part of the cemetery RAÄ 32. The second one is that the presbytery's and Hovgårdsberg's pasturelands during historical times didn't lie within Tuna's old woodlands at the west but within the territory of Brunnby, a land use which is certainly a remnant of an extremely old property relationship. The prehistoric place name and the fact that the territory of Brunnby wasn't divided up like the rest of Tuna could indicate that Brunnby had become an independent unit already during the late Iron Age (Viking Period?). If Tuna's oldest northern boundary didn't lie by Brunnby, maybe it can be found in the natural boundary that the Valla river (sw. *Valla å*) con-

stitutes. Within Brunnby, the prehistoric remains near this river are two small, well exposed cemeteries (RAÄ 89 and 90), of which at least one was used during the second half of the Migration Period. On the other side of the stream within Bergby and on the top of a hill, there is a large cemetery (RAÄ 36), of which the most southerly grave is also the biggest.

This distribution of the cemeteries, with well exposed graves on both sides of the river is similar to the one south of Tuna and surely indicates where the prehistoric boundary went. One should observe that the cemeteries which indicate boundaries don't lie very close to the waterstreams but at some distance from them. This can mean that distinct boundaries didn't actually exist and that there were instead some kind of buffer areas which could be used as common lands. A land of this kind could in the southern part be equivalent with the territory of the medieval Allerbäcke village. The boundary indicating cemeteries lay near the arable parts of the area and it is plausible that they were preferably placed near the cultivated land.

As shown above, the Tuna-unit extended over a large territory already when it was established during the Migration Period. Besides Brunnby, this territory is approximately the same as that of the medieval estate (fig. 4), and it seems that the territorial bounds of the medieval complex existed already many centuries earlier.

Other settlement units

The numerous late Iron Age cemeteries indicate that the settlement during this period was important and also quite dense in the central and southern parts of the parish. It is difficult to study in detail the settlement units' internal organization and development (settlement-displacement, farm splitting...) with only the help of unexcavated cemeteries, but some observations may be done anyway.

It is not unusual that several large cemeteries lie within the same boundaries (Bergby, Gryttby, Karby, Kättslinge), often within an area which doesn't exceed 500 metres. The size and type of the cemeteries indicate that they actually don't constitute any chronological chains but have to be interpreted as vestiges of several farms which existed at the same time. The distance between these settlement units is enough to consider them as "isolated farms" but it is not impossible that they had some co-operation and in this way constituted some kind of villages (cf. Fallgren 1993:61). These groups of farms lay in well delimited (by waterstreams and forested areas) geographical niches, always near large pasture and meadow areas. (fig. 1–2). It is not impossible that this location is due to an organization based on use and maintenance of common meadow and pasture areas (cf. Fallgren 1993:82–83).

There are several cemeteries also in Husby, in fact a large one with the big Ottar mound and other smaller ones all around. The disposition of these remains recall somewhat the one within Tuna and probably indicate that a manor was situated here during late Iron Age, with a possible segregation among the population.

Compared to the other farms, the settlement units in the southern and eastern parts of the parish are more dispersed.

Discussion

The investigation has shown that an important expansion of the settlement took place in Vendel during the second part of the Migration Period. Another important result is that the landscape consisted of large wet meadow areas surrounded by woodlands. A meticulous analysis of the location of the settlements in this landscape shows that they are mainly connected to the large meadow areas. This is especially conspicuous in the central part of the parish, where settlement concentrations have been noticed and where monumental and rich graves indicate important places. The location of the settlement is certainly not a coincidence and has to be seen as the result of a conscious act. It could have a close connection to an economy where stock farming was an important part, while agriculture had a subordinate significance. This picture differs not from what is generally accepted for Iron Age (i.e. Hyenstrand 1974:153) but some aspects merit emphasis.

The large wet and moist meadows, which could be used as pasture but above all as hay-making grasslands, must have made the collection of huge quantities of winter fodder possible. At the same time, the western and northern woodlands were ideal pasturelands during the warm seasons. In the Tuna-unit described above, Karby and Husby together with Kläringe (i.e. the original "large" Kläringe), had access to at least 200 hectares of moist meadows each. Fully exploited, this is enough to feed about 120 head of cattle (Broberg 1990:106; Borgegård 1996:45). Of course, this result is exaggerated but significant numbers of livestock could be held and consequently a potential surplus production of animal products was possible. The evident settlement expansion (colonization) which happened in the 5th century may be explained by the fact that the landscape permitted cattle-breeding on a large scale. This activity may in its turn be the reason, or one of the reasons, for the upswing of the area during the late Iron Age. It is held that trade in skin and leather was of great significance for the Scandinavians during prehistoric times (Hagberg 1967:115; Sawyer 1991:25–26). With a large livestock, the inhabitants of Vendel may have produced large quantities of leather and wool, and it is possible that meat and butter production and even horse breeding were of importance.

Of course, this hypotheses has to be verified from studies on the archaeological and osteological material but some indications have already been found:

- Pollen analyses show a rise of plants which grow on wetlands and pastures at the beginning of the Vendel Period (Atkinson 1994). This may mean that some areas were cleared to increase hay-production and also that the vegetation which is typical for forested pastures appeared through permanent grazing.
- Recently, settlement remains dated to the Migration Period were found in a forested area within Husby, about three kilometres from the nearest cemetery. The exact nature and original use of the buildings is debatable, but they could anyway be settlement remains associated with pasture and the collection of hay on the *utmark* (cf. Aspeborg et al. 1995:30). If this supposition is true, these vestiges can be seen as a logical part of the suggested land-exploitation.
- In most of the boat-graves, scissors (possible wool scissors) were found and it's logical to think that they may have a connection with activities which were carried on at the manor.

Animal production does not necessarily need to be the only activity the people in Vendel, or at least in Tuna, worked with. On the contrary, it's plausible that they had other sources of income. The archaeological remains such as a goldsmith's grave, tools and residue from the settlement show that (precious) metals were probably worked up at the place (Arrhenius 1979:404). There are also some indications of iron-production with magnetite ore (Isaksson 1997). Furthermore, the proximity to large forested areas and their fauna could have made trade in furs possible.

A lot of questions, for example about the relationship between Tuna, Husby and the other settlement units or about the role of Vendel in a larger political and social context, are still unanswered. At this stage of the investigation, it seems to be clear that the analysis will throw new light on settlement and social structures during the Iron Age and on origins of the early medieval estates.

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