

## CHAPTER EIGHT (6)

### ‘RIDANÆS’: A VIKING AGE PORT OF TRADE AT FRÖJEL, GOTLAND

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The Viking Age emporium ‘Ridanæs’ was one of the largest and most important ports on Gotland during that period and was situated between Fröjel church and the present coastline (Figure 8.6.1). We are concerned with an area of some 10 ha, where many traces of early buildings and several cemeteries have been found. Archaeological excavations conducted over several years have revealed a port, and a trading and manufacturing centre in use from the late sixth century to approximately AD 1180.

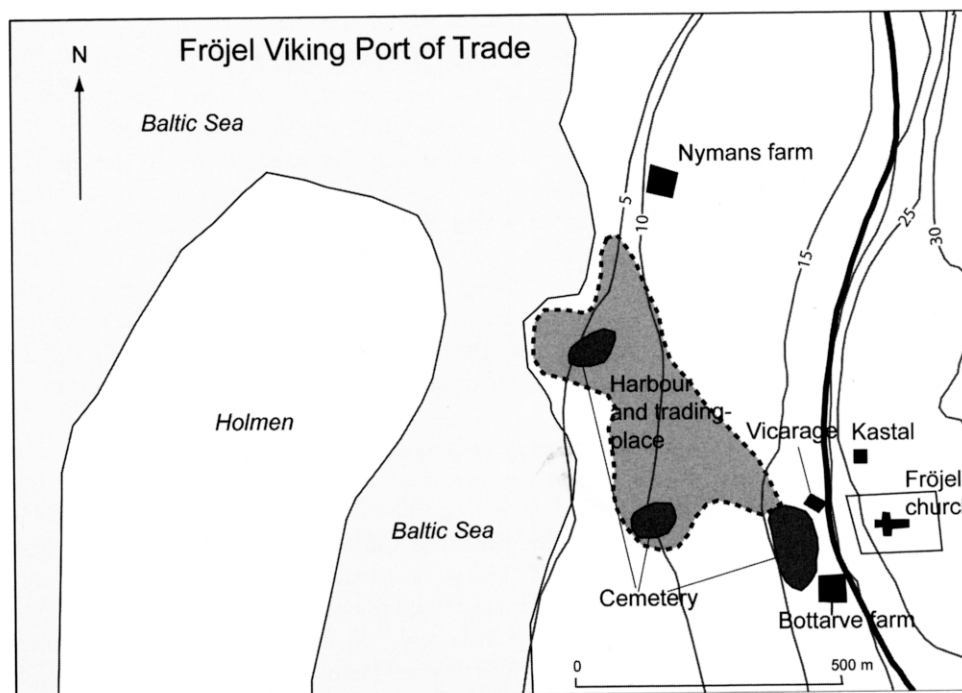


Figure 8.6.1 ‘Ridanæs’, the Viking Age harbour at Fröjel, Gotland.

The activities of the port peaked during the eleventh century and the early part of the twelfth century, but continued at a more modest level until the seventeenth century (when it was located on the present coastline). Nowadays, there are no visible signs of the activity that once took place there. Nevertheless, the parish church's position, the presence of a defence tower/storehouse next to it and a large number of Viking Age artefacts in the area are all evidence that we are concerned with an important early medieval commercial centre. The name *Ridanäs* can be found on older maps and indicates the site of the port.

In the late Iron Age/early Middle Ages the harbour site was situated close to a strait, which separated the mainland of Gotland from an outlying island. The former strait, which was well protected from strong winds, the church near to the coast and the existence of a large number of stray finds in the area were reasons to believe that a port might have existed here at an earlier period in the history of the region. A comprehensive phosphate mapping revealed that a large area in direct contact with the eastern shore of the strait had very high phosphate levels, a clear sign of an extensive settlement along the former coastline.

## EXCAVATIONS

The archaeological excavations at the site, which are still in progress, have provided clear evidence for human activity in the latter part of the Iron Age and the early Middle Ages (Carlsson 1999). They have revealed traces of settlement, early cemeteries and a large number of artefacts connected with trade and manufacturing. The settlement, which is indicated by rows of post-holes and stone remains, covers the whole area from the former coast up to the school house and the schoolteacher's house. We appear to have an urban community here with obvious parallels at Birka, Hedeby, Wolin and Ribe. The settlement was laid out in a regular pattern, with streets and alleys arranged symmetrically and with rows of houses. We are clearly concerned with early urbanisation here.

A total of some 1,500 m<sup>2</sup> has been archaeologically investigated. Up to the time of writing, the excavations have brought some 35,000 objects to light and in addition large quantities of animal bone, burnt clay, slag, flint and charcoal have been found. The finds are clear evidence for the intensive trade and industrial activity which took place here. We have imports, such as (walrus) ivory from the North Atlantic, semi-precious stones such as carnelian, rock crystal and amethyst from the Arabian peninsula and the area around the Black Sea, imported raw glass material from Italy (for making glass beads) and iron from either the Swedish mainland or from the island of Saaremaa in Estonia.

Many of the objects discovered clearly reflect the trade and contact routes of the Viking Age. Among these objects, there are a resurrection egg from Kiev in the Ukraine, a brooch with arms of equal length from the Swedish mainland, an oval brooch from Finland and more than 150 coins from the Caliphate, Germany, England and Denmark. Most of these coins are German and were struck in the early eleventh century.

The settlement area was fringed by at least three cemeteries. It cannot be ruled out that there are more cemeteries awaiting discovery, since the graves that have been discovered are well below the surface and not visible. Many graves remained untouched by ploughing, since they were up to a metre below the surface.

## CEMETERIES

The oldest cemetery is situated at the northern end of the area and was almost entirely covered by later layers of settlement at the harbour. We have both inhumations and cremations, and the cemetery covers the period from the seventh century onwards, remaining in use into the tenth century. Most of the graves were well furnished, especially those of women. They have the typically Gotlandic type of jewellery. The grave goods suggest that most of the persons buried here were natives of Gotland, but new investigation of the DNA of the male population gives a clear indication of the extensive contacts eastwards. About 40 per cent of the male population (or their forefathers) seem to have an origin in eastern Europe, meaning nowadays the Baltic States and Russia.

A second cemetery is situated on the outskirts of the town area in the south and can be dated to the eleventh century. Almost all those buried here are men. Several of them are buried with weapons, such as axes and spearheads. One of the graves can be described as a chamber grave in which the man was put in a timber-framed hole in the ground, this then being sealed by a layer of timber. One of the graves in this cemetery contained several fragments of a bronze bowl, of a type that has been found in large quantities in the graves at the huge cemetery of Barshalder in southern Gotland.

The third cemetery (a Christian churchyard) is situated below the school house and the schoolteacher's house, just east of the harbour site (Carlsson 2000). Excavations were carried out in 1998, and resulted in the discovery of forty-three skeletons, only women and children. The deceased were buried with jewellery, mostly beads, but also an animal-head brooch, decorative brooches, a double-comb and a pendant in the form of an English silver coin struck for King Æthelred the Unready (from around AD 1000). Three of the graves were children's graves. In addition, the skeleton of an infant was discovered together with that of a woman. With one exception, the individuals lay on their backs in an east–west direction with their heads to the west. The exception was a woman lying with her legs pulled up in the same direction as the others but turned around, that is, with the head to the east. The dating of the cemetery is based mainly on the excavation finds. From the shape of the objects and the style of jewellery, it would seem that the graveyard was in use from the early eleventh century onwards, perhaps, more precisely, from around AD 1000. It is not known for how long the cemetery remained in use, but it can be assumed that it continued to be used until the new church was built on the cliff. According to art historians, this took place around 1160.

## THE VICARAGE

The remains of the vicarage have also been discovered during the excavations, situated just west of the early churchyard mentioned above. The house was built of stone, had two rooms and 1 m thick walls. The building is not visible on the surface and was discovered by pure chance. A stone stair leads down to a well-built cellar from the floor of the front room of the building. The stone-cut windows opening into the cellar are preserved under a layer of soil. The remains of stained-glass windows are among the most remarkable finds discovered here. Among the fragments, there is one with the name *Pethrus* painted on it.

The building appears to have been in use from the thirteenth century to the early seventeenth century, when it must have been demolished. It is known from written records that Fröjel became a chapel attached to Klinte parish from the sixteenth century onwards, and this could be the reason for the abandonment of the vicarage at Fröjel.

### ‘RIDANÆS’ AND ITS SETTING

All things being considered, it can be shown that the harbour and trading site at Fröjel was established in the seventh century, or perhaps even in the late sixth century, and was in continuous use until the high Middle Ages. The extensive area of the settlement, the number of culture layers and the large number of artefacts found here show the importance of the site. There was extensive production of such items as combs, beads, jewellery and other objects of everyday life. The large number of nails and rivets clearly indicates that shipbuilding and ship repair were carried on here. The objects found also reveal contacts with the outside world and show that Fröjel can be added to the early medieval emporia in the Baltic.

The main period of activity was the eleventh century, as is indicated by the coins. From the latter part of the twelfth century, activity at the port declined and around AD 1180 the site was deserted. One of the reasons for this is a drop in sea level, which meant that the strait became too shallow for ships to enter the harbour.

The farm at Bottarve seems to have played a major role in the development of the Viking Age harbour at Fröjel. The farm, which is situated close to the present church and directly above the harbour site, owned most of the land within and adjacent to the harbour in the medieval and early modern periods. Maps show that before 1700 the Bottarve farm was situated further to the north than today.

The physical location of the church, the excavated vicarage and the graveyard at the schoolteacher's house and the school, all indicate that there is a direct connection between the Bottarve farm and the church. In other words, there is much that would indicate that the first church at Fröjel, like the one existing today, was built on land belonging to Bottarve. It is also likely that there was a direct connection between the farm and the harbour that grew up just west of it during the Viking period.

One can detect a strong functional connection between farm, harbour and church, emanating from the farm and its owners. It would seem to be the case that the owner of the farm at Bottarve laid out the graveyard and built the stave church that was probably located on his property. There is every justification for regarding this first church in Fröjel as a kind of mission church. It can be suggested that an individual landowner took the initiative and built one of the first churches in the region. The present church can therefore be seen as its successor serving the whole parish.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

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