

Authors: Matthias Maluck, Luise Zander

Collected Information for students

Topic: Trade

As an outstandingly well preserved archaeological landscape, Hedeby and the Danevirke are manifestations of the development of political and economic power in old Denmark and bear witness to its conflicts, and to exchange and trade between people of various cultural traditions in the Viking Age. Because of its unique situation in the borderland between the Frankish Empire in the South and the Danish kingdom in the North, Hedeby became the essential trading hub between continental Europe and Scandinavia as well as between the North Sea and the Baltic Sea.

With its strategically situated location, Hedeby and the Danevirke were part of this transnational trading network.

By means of Hedeby and the Danevirke it was possible to mark out and control the isthmus not only as the nodal point of important trading routes of the eighth to eleventh centuries but also as the crossover point between different domains. Thus, the border landscape of Hedeby and the Danevirke manifests political power and cultural interaction. The importance of the border landscape is showcased by large quantities of imports among the rich find assemblages in Hedeby. The remains of structures of a notably defensive character, buildings, harbour jetties, burials and settlement infrastructure of Hedeby and the Danevirke are well preserved. The archaeological evidence, including large amounts of organic finds, provides an outstanding insight into the significant political power exercised by Danish kings, the expansion of trading networks and cross-cultural exchange over several centuries in the Viking Age.

As a result of planned development and the sub-division of the flats on the shoreline, Hedeby developed during the Viking Age from an unfortified eighth-century settlement to the south of what was to be the Semicircular Wall into a trading and crafts centre for several regions. Hedeby began to serve as a nodal point for long-distance trade and mass production between the North Sea and the Baltic Sea, playing an increasingly important economic and political role in the Nordic region. The development of the settlement in Hedeby intensified and the harbour facilities were expanded in the 880s. Landing stages for heavy merchant ships served as a market area. The mass production of goods was as important for the new economic developments as trade. Specialised craftsmen produced items for the home market as well as for export. Thus, the production of craft goods from Hedeby grew considerably. This prime time for Hedeby lasted throughout the tenth

century. Further inland, other areas were developed for settlements, workshops and graves. Around the middle of the century, the centre was surrounded by ramparts and structurally connected to the Danevirke. When changes in around the year 1000 put an end to the old emporia in many parts of Northern Europe, the focus of the settlement on the Schlei also successively shifted to the opposite north bank. However, there are only clear archaeological traces of the subsequent settlement at Schleswig from the 1070s on. The shore areas served as hithes (i.e. small havens/landing places for boats) with an associated market. The intensive development of the settlement in the boggy zone by the water's edge eventually coincided with an expansion of the harbour facilities in the 880s. Landing stages, where heavy merchant ships could also berth, were built extending far out into the water. They also served the trading centre as a market area, which is shown by the large number of finds of items lost during trade activities on the landing stages. Besides scales, balance weights, coins and pearls, 41 press dies used for modelling golden pendants were among the most notable objects. Besides long-distance trading, economic life was also characterised by the intensive and highly specialised production of craft items made both for the home market and for export.

In the eighth century, economic structures in Northern Europe began to change together with the early development of trading centres, known as emporia. These "emporium" (a re-used term from Antiquity) were situated in borderlands or along coasts and along key trade routes. The trading centres can be described as gates between different cultural and economic traditions. The local inhabitants consisted of gateway communities of trade specialists coming from different trade systems. Often administered by a central or royal power, the emporia provided a safe place and the necessary infrastructure for exchange between faraway places and the hinterland enabling long-distance trade. Among the earliest examples of medieval emporia were Quentovic and Dorestad, Frankish emporia established in the sixth and seventh centuries at the main shipping routes in the North Sea. In Scandinavia the earliest of these trade settlements were established in Ribe in Denmark and in Birka in Sweden as far back as the eighth century, but a small settlement also emerged in Hedeby in the second half of that century. Fundamentally to this development, the Schleswig Isthmus constituted the narrowest land bridge between navigable waterways leading to the Baltic Sea and the North Sea. Serving as a trans-shipment centre, Hedeby evolved in the Viking period from an unfortified eighth century settlement into an international hub for trade and crafts which today provides us with excellent insights into the development of urban settlements in Northern Europe.
